

Friday Times

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Why I'm choosing to vaccinate



SCRIBBLER'S NOTEBOOK

By Jamie Etheridge

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Kuwait is now gearing up for a nationwide vaccine campaign, the recently approved Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for SARS-COVID-19. The Ministry of Health has already begun registration on its website, where anyone in Kuwait can register. Most likely frontliners and other at-risk groups will be the first to receive the vaccine but both my husband and I have registered and will take the vaccine as soon as it becomes available.

Vaccines are a controversial topic and already people across the globe are gearing up to fight against taking it. The Kuwait government has not made taking the vaccine mandatory. I have seen reports some airports and airlines might require proof of vaccine before allowing passengers to fly, though so far this seems to be just rumors.

The choice, for now at least, seems to be in our own hands. I'm choosing to vaccinate.

Some people disagree. They are worried about how quickly this vaccine has been developed, that no one - including the vaccine makers nor the government and health authorities - know the long term consequences. They are right. There are a lot of unknowns. Taking a vaccine is a risk. Just like taking any drug or medication poses a risk.

But there is no denying that vaccines has served as a bulwark against a range of diseases like measles and polio that once ravaged entire communities, and especially vulnerable populations including children and those with compromised immune systems.

By taking the vaccine, I protect myself and my family and I also contribute to the accumulation of herd immunity that protects people - like those with allergies, the immune-compromised and pregnant women - who may not be able to take the vaccine safely. In other words, I protect myself, my family and my community.

Scientific advances have made in our

understanding of the universe, our natural world and ourselves incredible gains over the last few centuries.

Still a thousand years from now, if humans continue to exist, they may look back on our methods and think them ill-conceived and fueled by misunderstanding, superstition and ignorance. Future humans may look at us the way we regard once common practices like using leeches to bleed a sick person.

I am not a doctor nor a scientist. (There are plenty of clear, detailed explanations regarding the safety and efficacy of vac-



RIYADH: This picture taken on December 17, 2020 shows the first Saudi citizen receiving the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine (Tozinameran) in the capital Riyadh, as part of a vaccination campaign by the Saudi health ministry. — AFP

cines. The website CDC.gov has a very helpful FAQ that answers most common questions.) But I recognize that science is the best and only way forward for humanity. It is gradual. It is imperfect. But it is also systemic and evolving. It is the only method of understanding and living in this world that aims always to improve.

When given a choice, I choose science.

Why I am choosing not to vaccinate



JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

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It is a fact that since March, when COVID-19 caught the world off guard, until this day, many people have lost their health, lives, loved ones or jobs due to the pandemic. Since then, many pharmaceutical companies have been trying their best to find a vaccine against the coronavirus. Today, as the distribution and inoculation of the COVID-19 vaccine begins, the question is: Are we willing to take a vaccine whose timeframe is shorter than the virus itself? It is a very hot and controversial topic nowadays.

Just to be clear, I am neither a scientist

view this vaccine as a solution to many problems, according to Al-Qabas Arabic daily, 46 percent of Kuwaitis said they will refuse to take the vaccine, 39 percent said they will take it, while 15 percent are not sure.

You might ask what this vaccine is, or mRNA vaccine as it is called? According to CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), mRNA vaccines are a new type of vaccine to protect against infectious diseases. They teach our cells how to make a protein - or even just a piece of a protein - that triggers an immune response inside our bodies. That immune response, which produces antibodies, is what protects us from getting infected if the real virus enters our bodies.

When you read about it, it sounds like a fantastic and outstanding discovery and I have no problem with the method itself. I do understand that medicine nowadays has evolved, and humankind has managed to reach the Moon and Mars - but how can we trust a vaccine without thinking about the possibility of its long-term side effects? We usually get vaccines for preexisting diseases that were subjected to trials over an extended period of time.

I believe any vaccine should be tested for at least three to five years to make sure it is somehow safe. On the other hand, this vaccine has been tested for no more than four months, which leaves us to question its safety. Personally, I would not take this chance unless the government's laws

oblige me to do so.

In Kuwait, it is still not clear if the government will make the vaccine mandatory or not. Will the travel industry require passengers to have proof of a COVID-19 vaccination before allowing them to fly internationally? There are so many questions that only time can answer, but I do believe that people should be given the freedom to choose.

So, are you for or against the COVID-19 vaccine?

nor a physician, and I do not have any medical background. However, I am a very curious person who does not take anything for granted before I research, read and investigate it.

The health ministry announced last Sunday that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will arrive in Kuwait by the end of December. According to Al-Rai Arabic daily, the government is preparing to vaccinate 10,000 people a day for free, both Kuwaitis and expats. Although people

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Al-Sadu recognized as part of 'World's Intangible Cultural Heritage'



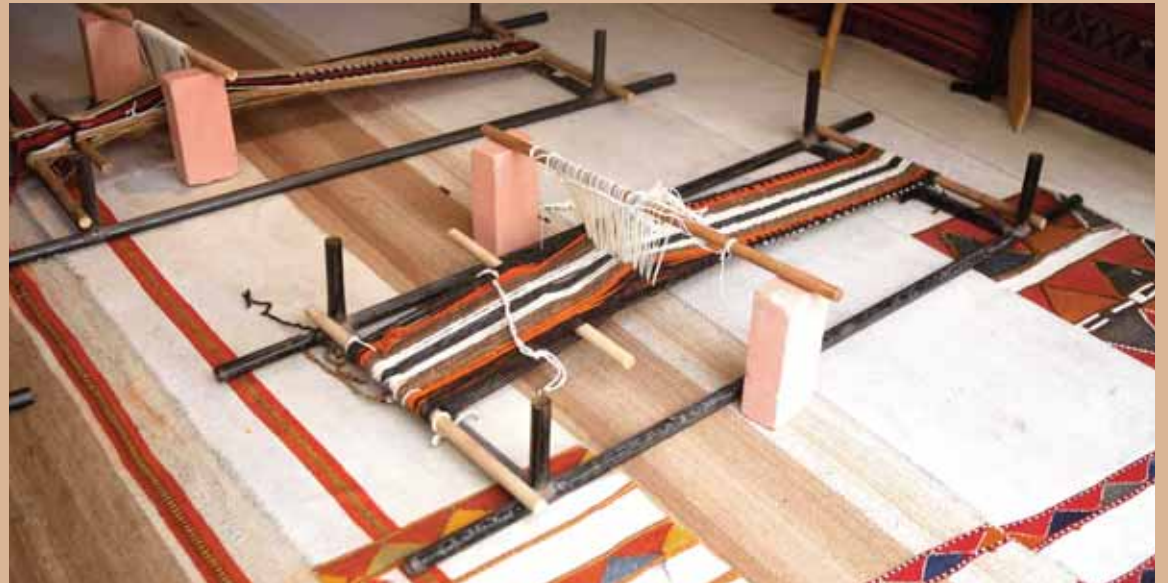
**Sheikha Bibi
Duajj Al-Sabah**

By Ben Garcia

UNESCO has placed Al-Sadu, a traditional weaving art practiced by Bedouin women in Kuwait and around the Arabian Peninsula on the list of the 'World's Intangible Cultural Heritage', a significant recognition for preserving this art form. Kuwait's Al-Sadu House and Society has worked tirelessly to preserve and promote the tradition of Al-Sadu.

"We are proud that Al-Sadu weaving has received the international recognition that it deserves. We thank the Al-Sadu team, weavers, teachers, artists, and the National Council Intangible Heritage team for their input and making this possible," Sheikha Bibi Duajj Al-Sabah, Al-Sadu Society Chairperson told Kuwait Times.

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"It has been a pleasure working on safeguarding a national treasure like Al-Sadu weaving and making sure it gets passed down to many more generations to be inspired by and appreciate it," Sheikha Bibi noted. The naming comes partly due to the effort contributed by the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters - Department of Antiquities and Museums, Kuwait's Representative to UNESCO Adam Al-Mulla said.

Al-Sadu traditional weaving is utilized to make textiles designed with geometric patterns, typically in reds, oranges, black, white and yellow. The Al-Sadu

Society of Kuwait is dedicated to preserving, documenting and promoting this rich and diverse textile art and Al-Sadu House provides workshops on Sadu weaving, exhibitions, a museum, bazaars, residences, events, lectures and a shop where handcrafted Sadu items may be purchased.

Al Sadu is the second intangible cultural activity to be recognized in Kuwait after date palm production and related cultural activities was added to the list.



KUWAIT: Traditional Sadu weaving at Kuwait's Al-Sadu House. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Local



By Ben Garcia

Having multiple pets at home, one would surely imagine a messy, noisy and chaotic scene. Kuwait Times visited a home in Kabd full of dogs of various breeds, but surprisingly, the house is a picture of calm, stability, joy and happiness. "I have 31 dogs, all of them have names, and I like them all! I enjoy playing with them. They are trained, so if you tell them to come, sit or lay down, they will obey your commands," said Jaja, the owner.

"The majority of these dogs are nice and gentle. Many of them have a story of why they ended up in my house. I got one after the owner threw her out of her car's window. We followed her and asked why she threw her dog. She simply said she doesn't like it anymore. So she threw it from the window! Thank God we saw her and rescued her," she said.

Some of Jaja's dogs feel jealous when she's too close to any of them. "If I am playing with



them, others would like to be closer to me, so they feel jealous. But these feelings are temporary and they tend to forget after a few minutes and are friends again," she said. Some of the breeds she has in her house include bulldog, German shepherd, retriever, Chihuahua, poodle, Maltese, Rottweiler, Pomeranian, Bichon Frise, terrier and French pug, among others.

Kuwait Times asked which was the most expensive dog she has bought so far. "I bought some of them, but they are not that expensive. The most expensive one I got was for KD 500," Jaja said. And how much does she spend for food for the 31 dogs? "Their food is not very expensive. I buy it from the pet market in Al-Rai. My budget is around KD 250 to KD 300 per month, and I also have to pay for grooming, shampoo and vitamins," she noted.

Despite having many dogs, Jaja says that she is not offering any of them for sale. Instead, she is willing to accept adoption requests. "No,



Kabd home turned shelter for 31 dogs

I don't sell dogs. However, I let people adopt them if they want, but I study and get to know the person to determine if they really want a dog or a toy. I do a background check, and will only give them if they have a history of caring for one or two pets. I don't give to first-time owners, as they have no idea how to care for them," Jaja said.

Dogs, according to Jaja, have feelings too, and are man's best friend. "If you want a dog, consider it as part of the family. Give them complete food, baths and walk them regularly. Here in my place I have space for them, so they can run and play," she said. "Do not adopt a pet if you have no time for them, whether it is a dog, cat, bird or fish. It needs you more than you need them," she said.

Since she was eight, Jaja has never had a year without a dog. Even after she moved to Kuwait, there was never a year when she hadn't had dogs in her house. "The first dog I had when I married my husband is still with us.

We've been married since 2009 - almost 12 years now. She is old and has no teeth, but she still plays with me. She is quiet now, unlike when she was younger," she said.

Most of Jaja's dogs belonged to people she knew, and others whose owners left for good. "When I see stray dogs, I feel very sorry for them. If they can be brought home, I bring them and give them shelter. I give them food and medical attention too if they are sick. All my dogs have names, and I have medical records for every one of them," she said.

Jaja's house in Kabd also has farm animals. There are several lambs, ducks, turkeys and chickens in her backyard. "If we need fresh meat, we get it from the farm. This place is run by my sister and all the work here is handled by her. If I need two or three dogs in my flat, I take them from here and replace them with a new set of dogs the next day," she said.

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MPs call for probe over suspected forgery in speaker election

Opposition MPs meet to draw up roadmap

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: A number of MPs yesterday called for a probe over suspected forgery in the election of the National Assembly Speaker in which Marzouq Al-Ghanem won although over 40 lawmakers pledged publicly to vote against him.

MP Musaed Al-Mutairi said he and a number of MPs submitted a motion calling to form an investigation committee into allowing supporters of a sports club into the opening session and also into a suspected forgery in the speaker election.

Mutairi described what happened as a "shame" when the sports club fans insulted MPs and acted in a chaotic way, charging that the

way the fans were issued invitations is highly suspicious and their actions were deliberate. Islamist MP Osama Al-Shaheen said in a statement that an investigation is needed in the possibility of a suspected forgery in the speaker election during the new assembly's first session on Tuesday.

MP Abdulkarim Al-Kandari charged that the speaker post was taken by "deception and through an illegal way" and this issue will not end here. He however did not say if he plans to take any action. But he said that his dealings with the presidency of the assembly will be governed by the constitution and the internal charter.

MP Mubarak Al-Hajraf said on Wednesday

that he plans to submit a motion next week calling to probe the events during the inaugural session of the assembly amid accusations that many of Ghanem supporters were allowed into the assembly gallery.

Sheikha Al-Jassem, a female candidate who failed to win an assembly seat, yesterday filed a lawsuit urging the public prosecutor to investigate a suspected forgery into the election of the assembly speaker.

She said that a number of MPs posted images of their ballots in the speaker election and those ballots were not the same which raises the possibility of forgery. A number of MPs have already submitted amendments to the assembly internal charter to end secret

voting in the assembly election and make it public by calling names.

Over 20 opposition MPs met Wednesday night to discuss plans for advancing a number of key legislation. MP Mutairi, host of the meeting, said that at least seven other lawmakers have sent their apologies for being unable to attend for personal reasons.

He said that the meeting discussed ways to press for the passage of a draft law granting amnesty to citizens convicted in freedom of speech cases. MP Hisham Al-Saleh said he submitted a draft law calling to scrap jail terms for freedom of speech violations. The legislation also prohibits prosecutors from jailing defendants during investigation and trial.

Kuwait lists 221 new COVID-19 cases, no deaths

KUWAIT: Kuwait listed 221 new coronavirus infections yesterday to raise the total 147,192, but no victims were registered over the past 24 hours as the death toll remained unchanged at 913, the health ministry said. Meanwhile, the ministry announced 204 new recoveries, which increased total recoveries to 143,113. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood yesterday at 3,166, with 54 of them in intensive care units, according to ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad. He added that 5,804 swab tests were conducted over the same period, bringing the total up to 1,202,724. He went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing in order to help limit the spread of the virus. —KUNA



Shlonik App model for state bodies' cooperation: Official

KUWAIT: The Director of the Public Health Department and head of Shlonik application committee at the Ministry of Health Dr Fahad Al-Ghamlas said yesterday that the application is a model for the cooperation of various state bodies in the service of the public. In a statement to the press, Ghamlas expressed his pride on winning the Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah Informatics award for Shlonik application.

Ghamlas dedicated this achievement to the Minister of Health, Sheikh Dr Basil Al-Sabah and the workers of the ministry, thanking them for their constant support to the staff supervising the application. He also thanked all workers in the various sectors of the application at the same time. And the price of their constant encouragement to adopt modern electronic means for all measures related to combating COVID 19, which helped medical teams to limit the spread of disease in society and mitigate its complications. He explained that Shlonik is one of the living examples of cooperation of several bodies in the country to combat the pandemic and counter its spread with the help of Kuwaiti people and harnessing electronic solutions to serve public health, as the application was established in cooperation between the Ministry of Health, the Central Agency for Information Technology and Zain Telecommunications Company.

He stated that this application is an electronic platform that saves a lot of effort and time for the medical staff and allows to follow up people in quarantine or home isolation with precision and take the necessary measures, which contributed to providing care and remote follow-up for these people and ensuring their commitment to quarantine procedures. He stated that the application provides several medical services that facilitate the quarantine period, including reporting of any symptoms and obtaining medical advice for any disease, even if they are not related to (COVID-19), in addition to obtaining exit permits for health care. He pointed out that the Shlonik app has the highest levels of cybersecurity, which maintains the confidentiality of information, indicating that the total number of those who have downloaded the application on their phones is about 650,000, while the number of currently registered for health follow-up is about 40,000. —KUNA

Campaign promotes early prostate cancer detection

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Prostate cancer is the second most common type of cancer among old men after colon cancer, a health ministry official said. The disease can affect younger people, and affects one out of 2,500 at the age of 45, while the highest risk is at the age of 70, said Dr Hani



Dr Khaled Al-Saleh

Shukri from health ministry's awareness department. He made his statements during a seminar held yesterday in cooperation with the Cancer Awareness National Campaign (CAN), as part of CAN's prostate cancer awareness campaign.

This year's campaign aims to advise youth to encourage their fathers to take the PSA test for early detection, to increase recovery chances, CAN's Board Chairman Dr Khaled Al-Saleh said. He added that the campaign succeeded in increasing awareness by 30 percent in the past eight years, thus raising recovery levels.

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Kuwait looking forward to GCC Summit in Saudi Jan 5

Foreign Minister hosts GCC ambassadors in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said that he was looking forward to the GCC Summit to be hosted by Saudi Arabia on January 5, 2021, saying that the summit reflects keenness of GCC leaders to achieve the shared ambitions of their countries. Sheikh Dr Ahmad made his statements as he hosted ambassadors of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries at the Foreign Ministry's building yesterday, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah attended the meeting, which grouped ambassadors of Saudi Arabia Prince Sultan bin Saad bin Khaled Al-Saud, Qatar Bandar Bin Mohammad Al-Attiya, Bahrain Salah Ali Al-Maliki, and Oman Saleh bin Amer Al-Kharousi, in addition to Acting Charge d'affaires at the United Arab Emirates' Embassy Khaled Rashed Al-Marshoudi.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad began the meeting by re-laying greetings to the GCC envoys from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, 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. He then reiterated Kuwait's commitment to continue on the same path that was drawn by the late Amir



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets ambassadors of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries at the Foreign Ministry yesterday. —Foreign Ministry photo

Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in avoiding interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and staying committed to Gulf unity in the best interests of the GCC people.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr Ahmad highlighted the challenges facing GCC states, including the COVID-19 pandemic, improving the health system, boosting food security and addressing the demographic imbalances. The Kuwaiti Foreign Minister also pointed out the fact that the region has lost two great leaders this year; the late Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said, and the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad, in addition to "another GCC icon," Bahrain's late prime minister

Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa. The GCC ambassadors expressed gratitude for the meeting, and congratulated Sheikh Ahmad for earning His Highness the Amir's trust and being renamed for the foreign minister's post in Kuwait's new cabinet. The meeting ended with a symbolic ceremony to celebrate national days of GCC countries.

The meeting is the latest breakthrough signal in the ongoing negotiations to end the GCC rift since Sheikh Dr Ahmad announced on Dec 4 that fruitful talks were held recently in hopes of 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 President Donald Trump of the friendly United States of America 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," Sheikh Dr Ahmad said in a public address on state TV.



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met yesterday the Lebanese Embassy Acting Charge d'affaires Hadi Hashim. The meeting was held at the Kuwait Foreign Ministry Diwan. —KUNA

KIPIC signs KD 32.5mn refinery deal

KUWAIT: Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC) announced yesterday it signed a KD 32.5 million (around \$106 million) deal with Greek Hellenic Natural Gas System Operator S.A. (DESFA) to operate and maintain Al-Zour refinery, to launch its operations in summer of 2021. A statement by KIPIC indicated that DESFA had a 50-year experience in this field. Deputy CEO of Al-Zour Refinery Hatem Al-Awadhi commended the deal, revealing that it will achieve the highest levels of operational security for the facility. He expressed confidence that KIPIC will build strong relations with DESFA to create a solid and beneficial partnership. The liquefied natural gas import facility will enable the reception of 22 million tons of gas annually, which will in turn provide enough clean fuel to current and future power stations. Zour refinery is expected to begin operations in the fourth quarter of the 2021-22 fiscal year, indicated Al-Awadhi, revealing that the daily production of British Thermal Unit



KUWAIT: Officials attend the signing ceremony. —KUNA

(BTU) will be at 3,000 billion, equaling 540,000 barrels per day. He added that Al-Zour refinery has two docks ready to receive the largest liquefied gas tankers and other important facilities. Mahmoud Abul, KIPIC's deputy CEO for financial and administrative affairs, indicated that the recently signed deal included a clause stipulated training of Kuwaiti workers and reach 60 percent of operational work force in the future. Al-Zour refinery project is part of the new Kuwait vision 2035 and within the strategy of the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) to develop the industry in Kuwait. —KUNA

KPA chief hopes to achieve KD 56mn profits next year

KUWAIT: Kuwait Ports Authority Director General Sheikh Yusuf Al-Sabah said yesterday he was looking forward to achieve KD 56 million (\$182 million) in profits for next fiscal year. Sheikh Yusuf made the remarks during a visit by Minister of State for Housing and Minister of State for Services Dr Abdullah Marafi, who said he

wanted to remove all obstacles facing KPA to achieve biggest profits possible, part of government's quest to diversify income and improve services. Marafi highly appreciated KPA's employees for their "dedication, hard work and sacrifice" during the coronavirus pandemic. Sheikh Yusuf, meanwhile, said KPA registered profits in the past five years that doubled revenues of the five years before them, or by at least 230 percent. He said total profits in the past five years was over KD 220 million (\$716 million), and "we hope to reach KD 56 million (\$182 million) in profits for next fiscal year." KPA, said Sheikh Yusuf, would continue execution of its projects despite the COVID-19 pandemic. —KUNA



Sheikh Yusuf Al-Sabah and Dr Abdullah Marafi are seen during the tour. —KUNA

Friday Times International

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2020



France's Macron tests positive for COVID-19

Tigray clamors for aid as war leaves starvation in its wake

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BERLIN: The usually bustling Breitscheid platz with the Europa Centre is nearly empty yesterday on the second day of a partial lockdown in Germany to curb the number of infections with the new coronavirus COVID-19. — AFP

Eating out increases COVID risk

As virus waves sweep across the world, researchers warn against 'socializing'

PARIS: Spending time in a bar or restaurant increases the risk of catching COVID-19, French researchers said yesterday, while having guests over for dinner also plays a key role in transmission.

The latest study adds to evidence that socializing and eating out are far more dangerous than other activities such as using public transport or shopping. It comes as Europe and the United States in particular are grappling with surging infection rates and the start of a holiday season normally characterized by parties and family get-togethers.

Researchers from France's Institut Pasteur sought to find out which factors—like professions, mode of transport, places visited—differentiated participants who had contracted the virus from people who had not. "We saw an increased risk associated with frequenting bars and restau-

rants," said the lead author, Arnaud Fontanet, an epidemiologist and member of the scientific council guiding the government. The study, called ComCor, has not been peer reviewed but has informed France's virus response. It was carried out in October and November, during an initial period of curfew and then even tighter restrictions that saw most establishments partially or completely closed.

Fontanet told AFP that because bars and restaurants are not functioning as normal, it was difficult to gauge their exact role in transmission, and acknowledged that closing these businesses was a "sensitive" move. French cafes and restaurants have remained closed even after nationwide restrictions were eased earlier this week. ComCor researchers interviewed 3,400 people infected with COVID-19 and 1,700 others who did not have the virus.

They found that frequenting restaurants, bars or gyms was associated with an increased risk of infection, whereas using public transport and visiting shops were not.

'Friendly dinners'

Health authorities across the world have advised people to avoid crowded indoor spaces as scientists increasingly agree that the new coronavirus can travel in fine clouds of particles known as aerosols that can collect in poorly ventilated rooms. A September survey by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that adults with positive coronavirus test results were about twice as likely to report having eaten at a restaurant in the previous two weeks than those with negative results.

In November, a study in the journal *Nature* found that restaurants, gyms and cafes account

for most COVID-19 infections in the United States. Using mobile phone data from 98 million people, researchers found about 10 percent of venues accounted for more than 80 percent of cases.

The ComCor research also tried to pinpoint different circumstances of infection, with surveys of 25,600 infected individuals using health insurance data. It showed that "meals play a central role in these contaminations", as people sat close to each other without masks.

"Private meetings - families, friends—are the main source of infection," Fontanet said. "If people have friendly dinners at their homes rather than going to a restaurant, it doesn't make a difference." The researchers stressed the importance of organizing such gatherings in "the safest way possible" to protect vulnerable people over the holidays. — AFP

International

Rouhani expects US to resume commitments under nuke deal

Tehran wants Washington to return to 2015 nuclear deal and lift sanctions

TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday voiced confidence that President-elect Joe Biden will resume US commitments under the nuclear deal which Donald Trump pulled out of. Tensions between Tehran and Washington soared during Trump's presidency, especially after 2018 when he withdrew Washington from the landmark nuclear deal and reimposed punishing unilateral sanctions on Iran.

Biden, who defeated Trump at the ballot box in November, has signaled a willingness to return to diplomacy with Iran. And Rouhani's government has repeatedly signaled its openness to the incoming US administration and called on Washington to return to the 2015 nuclear deal and lift sanctions.

"I have no doubt that the perseverance of the Iranian people during these past three years will force the new US government to succumb and resume its commitments," Rouhani said in televised remarks.

"The sanctions will be broken," he added. His comments come a day after Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that Iran should bolster itself to "nullify" the effects of the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, but should "not delay" in case they can be lifted.

Rouhani echoed Khamenei, saying time should not be wasted. "We must act in order to nullify the effects of the sanctions... as the supreme leader has said."

"We should not wait, not even one hour, for the lifting of the sanctions. The government must do everything in its power to break the sanctions," Rouhani added. He said Iran will do "everything possible to achieve" what he described as a "very important instruction" made by Khamenei.

Biden, who takes office January 20, has signalled Washington would rejoin the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that was abandoned by the administration of outgoing President Donald Trump. Senior EU foreign affairs official Helga Schmid issued a brief statement following the talks she chaired.

"Participants discussed... how to ensure the full and effective implementation of the agreement by all sides in light of existing challenges," it said. While she did not say what those challenges were, the deal has unravelled steadily since Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and went on to impose crippling economic sanctions on Iran. Tehran has retaliated by progressively abandoning limits on its nuclear activity laid



This handout picture provided by the office of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei shows Iranian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri (center left) decorating the wife (center right) of assassinated nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh (pictured) with a badge of merit during a ceremony held in the capital Tehran. — AFP

down in the deal, most recently planning to install advanced centrifuges at Iran's main nuclear enrichment plant in Natanz.

Last week France, Germany and Britain—collectively known as the "E3"—condemned the plan as "deeply worrying". —AFP

Saudi Arabia kicks off coronavirus vaccination drive

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia kicked off a three-phase COVID-19 vaccination program yesterday, with the health minister among those inoculated after the first shipment of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrived in the kingdom. Along with Health Minister Tawfiq Al-Rabiah, a woman in a wheelchair and another man were among the first to be administered the vaccine at a center in Riyadh, an AFP photographer reported.

"This is the beginning of the end of the crisis," Rabiah told reporters. 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 health ministry said this week.

Everyone else will be vaccinated in the third stage, the ministry said, without specifying the dates for each phase or how long the mass campaign would take. The Gulf kingdom has a population of more than 34 million, according to official figures.

More than 100,000 people have registered so far through an online application called "Sehaty", the ministry said, adding that the vaccine would be "free for all citizens and residents". Last week, the kingdom approved the use of the vaccine developed by US pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech, becoming the second Gulf country to do so after Bahrain. Britain, Canada and the United States have also approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and have already launched mass inoculation campaigns. Neighbouring Jordan green-lighted the drug on Monday. —AFP

HRW accuses Egypt of 'collective punishment' of inmates

BEIRUT: Human Rights Watch accused Egypt yesterday of imposing punitive conditions on hundreds of inmates at one of its most notorious prisons in collective punishment for a foiled September escape attempt. The New York-based watchdog said evi-

dence including a leaked video and a smuggled letter showed authorities had deliberately exacerbated already poor conditions at Cairo's Scorpion Prison, where many political prisoners are held.

"Egyptian authorities are apparently imposing collective punishment on hundreds of inmates in Scorpion Prison," said HRW's deputy Middle East and North Africa director, Joe Stork. The interior ministry has said that three policemen were killed in September's abortive jail break in which four death row inmates were shot dead. HRW said the new measures imposed since the escape attempt almost completely "deprive inmates of adequate ventilation, electricity, and hot water".

"Because of the absence of sufficient natural light... the lack

of humane sleeping and sanitation arrangements... as well as inadequate floor space, artificial lighting and proper ventilation, the Scorpion Prison inherently violates the basic rights of prisoners," it said.

The prison houses Islamist leaders and other high-profile dissidents. Since 2015, at least 14 inmates have died in its overcrowded cell blocks, human rights groups say. Egypt holds some 60,000 detainees that human rights groups regard as political prisoners. President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who as army chief led the 2013 overthrow of elected Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, has overseen a crackdown on political dissent that has put tens of thousands behind bars. — AFP



This picture taken yesterday shows a view of a flooded street at the Jabalia camp for Palestinian refugees in the northern Gaza Strip following heavy rains. — AFP

International

An epic tale of courage, survival and love

'We made it': Iraqi refugee family is home at last

DUIVEN, Netherlands: He sought safety. She wanted freedom. They were dreams they could have died for. From a first date that ended in bloody carnage in Baghdad, to finally receiving the keys to a new home in The Netherlands, theirs is an epic tale of courage, survival and love.

In 2015, with four-month-old Adam strapped to his father's chest in a baby carrier, Iraqi couple Ahmad and Alia, now 32 and 31, joined the million migrants who crossed the Mediterranean to Europe's shores. They faced death at sea, indignity on the road and a torturously long wait for asylum—all for a chance at life in "peace and safety" for their child. One family among so many, an AFP team met them on a sunny day in September 2015 in Gevgelija, a quiet town on the border between what is now called North Macedonia and Greece.

Hundreds of mainly Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans, men, women, children, elderly people, mothers with newborns and war-wounded amputees, all squeezed into a train headed for Serbia and the European Union. Over five years, three AFP journalists in text, photo and video have followed Ahmad and Alia's every step towards their new life, travelling with them that September by train, bus, smugglers' cars and on foot across borders at night.

Later that year, they caught up with them in a migrant shelter in The Netherlands, where the couple already had family, as they filed their first asylum claim. Now, as the family settles into life in the eastern town of Duiven, they all meet up again.

Out of concern for the safety of relatives still in Iraq, Ahmad and Alia have asked to be identified by their first names only. Here is their story.

Dream come true

In August 2019, the phone rings. Alia answers and receives the earth-shattering news that she has been granted refugee status. On the other end of the phone, the lawyer who helped her make her claim explains she has won the right of residence and that her husband and son will automatically follow.

Ahmad, who has dark brown hair, and hazel-eyed Alia kiss, celebrating the news that will forever change their lives. "I shouted, wept and laughed all at once," says Alia. "It was even happier than our wedding day." It was "the moment we had been dreaming of, right from when we had set out from Iraq," Ahmad says. Within weeks, the family has residence cards and travel documents. They are no longer undocumented migrants. They have the right to a home, to work and travel.

"At last we could have everything we wanted: a normal life like any other family in The Netherlands," Ahmad says.

'I saw death'

The decision to flee Iraq came after Ahmad, then an upscale fashion store owner, took Alia, daughter of a university chemistry professor, to Mr Chicken, a Baghdad restaurant.

It was their first date since becoming engaged in February 2014. As they ate, a bomb blast tore the place apart. The shards of glass that they say killed other diners have left still visible scars on Alia's face. "I saw death that day. Had we been sitting at a different table we might not have survived," Ahmad says.

They led middle-class lives and were close to their families. "I adore my country," Ahmad says, watching a Snapchat video of Baghdad's sun-drenched streets. But "in Iraq, when you go to work in the morning, you don't know whether you will come back alive." For the couple, Adam's birth in 2015 brought everything into sharp focus: he deserved better. Ahmad sold his shop and his share of the property he had inherited to fund the journey ahead.

He had already been a refugee, having fled to Syria with his family like thousands of other Iraqis in 2006 at the height of the sectarian war, only to return six years later when Syria also descended into conflict. "But year after year, the situation in Iraq just kept getting worse. Corruption and militias took over," Ahmad says.

The rise of the Islamic State group in 2014 and a myriad of powerful armed factions sparked a new wave of displacement, the UNHCR says. In 2015, 88,757 Iraqis crossed the Mediterranean to Greece and Italy, UNHCR data shows. As of 2019, there were around 214,000 Iraqi refugees in the European Union. "We were forced to migrate. We never had a choice," Ahmad says.

'Home'

Today, the family lives in a two-bedroom house with a brown brick tile roof and a back garden in leafy Duiven, near the Dutch border with Germany. They have painted the walls white, laid dark brown floor panels, hung rose print curtains, bought Adam a loft bed with a desk and planted tomatoes outside.

For the entrance, they picked a doormat that reads "home". "We made it," Ahmad smiles, sipping coffee sweetened with condensed milk, rays of autumn light shining through the large living room windows.

Thanks to their new status, the family receives a monthly government stipend of 1,400 euros (\$1,630). Duiven town hall gave them a 3,500-euro home improvement loan which they are paying back in monthly instalments. From their stipend, they pay rent, social security, insurance, electricity, phone and internet bills.

'Half-Iraqi, half-Dutch'

Twice a week, the adults take language lessons at a nearby academy. Their textbooks are in Dutch and Arabic, which helps them learn faster. Ahmad speaks basic Dutch while Alia just about gets by, though switches into English for longer conversations. But it is their curly-haired, brown-eyed son who is most in tune with his surroundings.

Adam speaks fluent Dutch, Arabic and English, and says he feels "half-Iraqi, half-Dutch." Now five years old, he rides his bicycle every morning to the local Montessori school.

Dutch weather permitting, he plays football at a nearby park with his school friends. Duiven is safe enough to allow the children out alone. While his early childhood was far from conventional, he is doing well, head teacher Marike Ketelaars says. "Adam is a child like any other child. He wants to play outside and wants to make friends," she says.

Once he goes to bed, the parents watch Netflix shows like "Game of Thrones" — with Arabic subtitles to help them keep up. Until recently, such simple pleasures felt beyond reach.

A cold welcome

The couple will never forget the fear and exhaustion of their journey to get there, with the constant dread of failure and having to go back to Iraq. Most of the 9,000 euros (\$10,500) they carried in their backpacks went within a week, largely to smugglers who got them across the Mediterranean, the Serbian-Hungarian border and the Austrian frontier.

The scariest part was crossing into the European Union, as, that autumn, Hungary erected razor wire fences on its border with Serbia to try to stem the migrant influx. Under the light of a full moon, an Iraqi Kurdish smuggler led the pair and their companions through a field, evading police. As they followed in silence, the women and children in the middle of the group, they narrowly escaped an ambush, the AFP journalists with them saw, when some men suddenly appeared in what looked like police uniforms.

Several migrants brandished tree branches and the likely would-be thieves vanished again into the darkness. Alia was terrified every step of the way.

In Budapest, they cradled Adam to sleep in an alley when no hotel or even a brothel would accept their money in return for a room. When they arrived in The Netherlands, the relief they felt didn't last long. The next four years were lost in a soulless administrative maze, shifted from one migrant shelter to another, including a former women's prison. In December 2015, the AFP team visited them in an exhibition center-turned-shelter in Leeuwarden, in the north.



This combination of photographs shows (top): Iraqi refugee Alia, 26, holding her then four-month-old baby Adam as they travel by train from North Macedonia to Serbia on August 30, 2015, and (bottom): Alia leaves her house to go to school in the town of Duiven, The Netherlands on September 24, 2020. —AFP

Their temporary "home" was a plywood cubicle with no door or ceiling. "This isn't life. How can I explain it?" Ahmad said at the time. "It's like a bird in a cage." Their relatives in The Netherlands did not give them the welcome they expected, leaving them feeling abandoned to their fate. While they waited for asylum, they could not earn a living, rent a house or plan for the future.

Much to their shock, two asylum requests were turned down because Ahmad returned from Syria to Iraq in 2012 — an apparent contradiction with his claim that he is unsafe in his homeland. They filed appeals on the grounds that neither Syria nor Iraq is safe-but in vain. For nearly a year, they lived as undocumented migrants in a string of acquaintances' flats. "I couldn't do anything that required showing ID," Ahmad recalls. "I couldn't go to the bank, I couldn't take Alia to hospital when she was sick. Everyone I knew looked down on me, like I was less worthy than them."

The anguish of that period weighed

particularly heavily on Alia, who suffered stress-induced hair loss. "There were moments when the pressure was more than I could bear," she says.

'We are safe'

Ahmad loves the wet Dutch weather. "This is a beautiful, green country," he says, smoking a cigarette in the garden under the drizzle. They do most of their shopping at a Lidl supermarket and once a month take the bus to the nearby town of Arnhem to stock up on Arabic bread and spices. In Iraq, Alia relied on her mum to cook for the whole family. Now, she uses YouTube tutorials to learn how to make both Iraqi and Dutch meals.

Adam's favourite after-school snack is fluffy Dutch pancakes with fruit. While they are a sociable family, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced them to isolate themselves more than they would have liked. Nonetheless, they are friendly with other parents at Adam's school, greeting them every day with a smile and a "goedemorgen" (good morning). —AFP

International

Tigray clamors for aid as war leaves starvation in its wake

Conflict, chaos force people to abandon this year's crop of teff

AYASU GEBRIEL, Ethiopia: Tesfaye Berhe looked on with worry as his farmhands stripped leaves from sorghum stalks dried brown by the blaring sun, wondering how he could salvage a harvest disrupted by heavy fighting in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region. The portly, grey-bearded 60-year-old ran for cover when shells started flying around him a month ago—launched from the east by the military and from the west by forces loyal to the dissident regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

The chaos forced Tesfaye to abandon this year's crop of teff—a staple grain used to make injera flatbread—mid-harvest. Now he fears it could happen again with the sorghum, despite claims from Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed that the fighting is all but over. "We are still hearing that there are combatants in both directions. We are concerned about whether or not we can eat what we're harvesting now, if they come back," he said at his farm near the village of Ayasu Gebriel.

Tigray, an impoverished region of about six million people, faced formidable food security challenges before the conflict began, compounded this year by the coronavirus pandemic and the worst desert locust infestation in decades. Now aid agencies fear the fighting—which has reportedly killed thousands and displaced many thousands more—could tip the region into catastrophe.



Jano Admasi, whose son was reportedly killed by the Ethiopian Defense Forces during the fighting that broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region, poses with her husband at her house in the village of Bisober.—AFP

The UN says it does not have humanitarian access to Tigray, making it difficult to assess how badly the hostilities have upended the lives of civilians. But AFP recently obtained exclusive access to southern Tigray, where some residents said they were growing desperate, begging from neighbors and serving their children boiled water just to get something warm in their stomachs. The hardship could last long after the guns are silenced, especially if farmers like Tesfaye see an entire season's worth of grains wiped out. "The potential loss of the harvest inside Tigray, which was about to start when the conflict began, could have major implications for food insecurity in the region," said Saviano Abreu, spokesman for the UN's humanitarian coordination office.

Region 'not stable'

Tensions over aid access have been mounting in recent weeks between Abiy, last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, and humanitarian officials. Abiy's government has stressed its commitment to getting aid to "vulnerable communities," saying it will take the lead while coordinating access for outsiders, partly because of persistent insecurity.

But that process has not gone smoothly. A week after the UN inked a deal ostensibly allowing some access, security forces fired on a UN assessment team trying to visit a camp for Eritrean refugees, claiming

they had ignored instructions and driven through checkpoints.

On Monday UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric complained anew about lack of access, saying "we have not been able to reach people that we know are in need." Negotiations continued Tuesday in Addis Ababa between UN officials and Demekle Mekonnen, Ethiopia's deputy prime minister and foreign minister. The government, meanwhile, has been touting its own efforts to provide assistance.

In the Tigray town of Alamata on Friday, officials distributed 50-kilogramme (110-pound) sacks of wheat—branded with the Ethiopian flag—to hundreds of residents who queued outside a warehouse, some using umbrellas to block the sun. But Alamata has not seen much combat, nor is it home to many displaced Ethiopians. An official with the federal disaster commission, Solomon Admasu, acknowledged he and his colleagues were struggling to reach areas hit harder by the fighting.

"The resources are there, but there are places that are not stable and places that have security problems," Solomon said. Another issue is that many local officials in Tigray are feared to have fled their posts, potentially complicating food distribution once federal officials make it deeper into the region, said Assefa Mulugeta, a peace ministry official coordinating the government aid effort in Alamata. "The government needs help, it is obvious," he said, "because the demands are very high."

Some international aid is getting into Tigray. Over the weekend the International Committee of the Red Cross announced that seven trucks of medicines and medical equipment had reached the regional capital Mekele—the first foreign aid convoy to make it there. Catholic Relief Services has worked with local church partners to get food aid into western Tigray and to thousands of displaced people along Tigray's border with the Amhara region, said Ethiopia country representative John Shumlansky.—AFP

EU court rules that Hungary broke asylum law

BRUSSELS: The European Union's top court ruled yesterday that Hungary had broken the law by preventing some immigrants from seeking asylum and moving many to transit camps. "Hungary has failed to fulfil its obligations under EU law in the area of procedures for granting international protection," the European Court of Justice said. In 2015, at the peak of a crisis which saw thousands of would-be migrants and refugees arriving in southeast Europe and heading north and west, Hungary stood in their way.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban's nationalist anti-immigration government corralled migrants into transit zones and limited their ability to apply for asylum. The court found Hungary did not allow asylum seekers to leave detention while their cases were considered and offered no special protection to children and the vulnerable. Where asylum claims were rejected, in some cases "those nationals are forcibly escorted, by the police, from the other side of a fence erected a few meters from the border with Serbia, to a strip of land devoid of any infrastructure". This was deemed a breach of an EU directive establishing safeguards for the removal of illegal immigrants.—AFP



BERLIN: Shops are deserted in Berlin yesterday on the second day of a partial lockdown in Germany to curb the number of infections with the new coronavirus COVID-19.—AFP

Germany to raise 471bn euros in pandemic debt

FRANKFURT: Germany said yesterday it will issue up to 471 billion euros (\$576 billion) worth of bonds in 2021, a record high, taking on massive debt to help Europe's biggest economy get through the coronavirus pandemic. "The comparatively high issuance volume is primarily a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has a considerable impact on the income and expenditures of the federal budget and its special funds," the federal agency managing German debt said.

Germany issued 406.5 billion euros in bonds this year, twice the amount of last year, to help fund efforts to combat the crisis.

Germany has a constitutional "debt brake" in place that limits net new borrowing a year to 0.35 percent of total economic output but Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet has suspended the rule to help the country cope through the pandemic. It expects to return to its traditional budgetary rigor in 2022.

More than a trillion euros have been released or pledged in help companies and employees, be it through worker salary top-ups, loans or direct handouts. The huge spending commitment means Germany is having to take on 300 billion euros in net new debt in 2020 and 2021. Some 222 billion euros of the new bond issuance would have a maturity period of between two and 30 years; 241 billion euros can be redeemed in 12 months or less, and another 6-8 billion euros will be indexed to inflation.

German government bonds or "Bunds" act as a benchmark on the international debt markets and are regarded as one of the safest investments meaning the government should be able to raise the money at very low rates. Germany yesterday reported a daily record of new coronavirus infections of more than 30,000, as it struggles to cope with the outbreak with a fresh partial lockdown. The Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases, which is managing reporting for the country in the pandemic, revised its initial total of 26,923 for the previous 24-hour period saying around 3,500 more cases had come to light. "For technical reasons some 3,500 cases from (the southwestern state of) Baden-Wuerttemberg were not reported.—AFP

International

Serbs take to their phones to raise millions for sick children

Budget for funding treatment abroad for children 'not adequate'

BELGRADE: For Serbian mother Timea Gajodi, watching her eleven-month old baby grow is a nerve-racking race against the clock to raise more than \$2 million to treat his rare disease.

Her only way to find such a sum has been to put her baby's face on a billboard in the type of fundraising campaign that has taken Serbia by storm in recent years, raising millions for medical treatments abroad. Her son Oliver suffers from spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) which makes the muscles weaker and affects about one in 10,000 births. Without treatment, it results in death or the need for permanent ventilation by the age of two in 90 percent of cases. "I never know what's waiting for me when I go into the intensive care unit. He is currently stable, but it doesn't mean he will be in half an hour," Gajodi told AFP of her son, who is on a ventilator in a hospital in the northern city of Novi Sad.

"I just want to save his life," the 28-year-old mother added. Oliver has received treatment in Serbia which his mother said helped him "immensely". But she has her hopes pinned on another drug, which he would have to go abroad to receive but, she believes, would "halt the disease's progression altogether".

Known as the "world's most expensive drug", Zolgensma is a one-time gene therapy. Pharmaceutical giant Novartis which produces it says the cost reflects the fact that gene therapy is a transformative new type of treatment and is 50 percent cheaper than current alternatives.

Selling homes

Gajodi's fundraising campaign is powered by text messages, allowing people to donate 200 dinars each, around 1.7 euros (just over \$2). Oliver is one of five babies in Serbia suffering from SMA whose parents have turned to the public in this way since May.

Their campaign has attracted near-daily media coverage. Within half a year, the poor Balkan country—where average wages are under \$600 (483 euros) a month—has raised some eight million euros to secure the treatment for four of the babies. More than 100,000 people have also signed an online petition demanding local municipalities divert the budget for this year's coronavirus-plagued New Year's Eve celebrations to helping the five infants. Seven municipalities have done so, though not big cities like Belgrade and Novi Sad.

Oliver is the last of the five babies and has so far received around 300,000 text donations, amounting to more than 150,000 euros. According to local media, some donors have gone as far as selling their summer homes to help or auctioning off other assets online. Earlier this month, half a million viewers logged on to watch Serbian pop star and 2007 Eurovision winner Marija Serifovic's online fundraising concert for 14-month old Minja Matic, also suffering from SMA. "I will sing as long as I have a voice, until we collect the money for Minja," Serifovic said. Shortly after, the family announced it had met its target.

Billboards with children's faces have become a reg-



ular sight across Serbia and even refugees have organized fundraising in four migrant reception centers. Not all the campaigns are for such costly treatments. Healthcare in Serbia is free but has limited reach when it comes to innovative or consistent treatments, humanitarian organizations say. Katarina Danojlic, of the Podrzi zivot fundraising foundation, said that parents contact her organization daily, often in a panic because

they have been shrugged off by the state. "If the health system did its job, our organization wouldn't have to exist," she told AFP. Serbia has a budget for funding treatment abroad for children with rare diseases but, according to humanitarian organizations, it isn't enough. Slavica Vasiljevic, whose six-year-old son Jovan has cerebral palsy, raised almost 60,000 euros for him to be treated in neighboring Croatia. —AFP

US intel agencies warn cyberattack on govt 'ongoing'

WASHINGTON: US intelligence agencies have warned a "significant" cyberattack on several federal departments uncovered over the weekend remains ongoing as the government rushes to assess the extent of the breach. "This is a developing situation, and while we continue to work to understand the full extent of this campaign, we know this compromise has affected networks within the federal government," the FBI, the director of national intelligence and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said in a joint statement late Wednesday. The March attack on software created by Texas-based IT company SolarWinds—in which hackers installed malware—continued for months until it was discovered by cybersecurity company FireEye.

Both companies have pointed the finger at hackers linked to the Russian government. Hackers reportedly breached software used by the US Treasury Department and the Commerce Department, allowing them to view internal email traffic. The agencies did not confirm the targets of the cyberattack. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also pointed to Moscow on Monday, saying the Russian government had made repeated attempts to breach US government networks. —AFP

Snowstorm blankets US east coast, threaten vaccine rollout

WASHINGTON: A major snowstorm hit the US east coast during yesterday's early hours, creating extra challenges in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic and a mass vaccination rollout taking place across the region. The winter storm, moving over New York, Pennsylvania and other northeastern states, leaves millions facing more than a foot of snow a week before Christmas, potentially disrupting coronavirus testing and delaying holiday deliveries. It also left more than 60 million people under bad weather warnings from Maine to South Carolina. New York City, if hit as badly by the storm as predicted, would be facing the most snow from one storm in more than four years, after it was hit with two feet in January 2016. Officials in New York state and Pennsylvania said they were prepared to deal with the bad weather to ensure that vaccine delivery schedules went ahead as planned.

Delivery companies FedEx and UPS said they had also put measures in place to mitigate the storm's effects. Snowfall rates in both states were two inches per hour, with more than 12 inches in total, according to the US National Weather Service (NWS).

It said snow could reach up to two feet in some parts of the states, which both dispatched plows to keep the roads clear. Boston, the most populous city in Massachusetts, imposed an emergency and issued a parking ban on key roads for workers.

"Confidence is high that this major winter storm will result in significant impacts including travel disruptions and power outages across much of the



NEW YORK: A man removes snow in Times Square yesterday in New York, the morning after a powerful winter storm hit the US northeastern states. —AFP

northern Mid-Atlantic, southern New York and southern into central New England," the NSW said in a tweet late Wednesday.

Despite the potential disruption, people rushed to play in New York City's famous Times Square—some dressed as characters such as Elmo and Batman and others having snowball fights—as it became blanketed in white. While the snow brought joy for some, restaurants stacked chairs and tables and shuttered after a snow alert effectively put an end to outdoor dining, the last hope of custom for some business owners because of social distancing rules.

In Pennsylvania, the transport department told drivers to limit journeys and introduced new speed restrictions to prevent accidents. Hundreds of schools announced they would close and again retreat to online learning, bolstered by the experience of the pandemic. Airlines also canceled hundreds of flights on Wednesday, preventing many—some returning home for Christmas—from traveling. —AFP

International

France's Macron tests positive for COVID

Two fellow leaders, top French officials go into self-isolation

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron yesterday tested positive for COVID-19, the presidency said, sending at least two fellow leaders as well as other top French officials into self-isolation. He is one of several world leaders who have contracted COVID-19, including British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Donald Trump.

Macron was tested after the "onset of the first symptoms" and will now, in accordance with national regulations, "self-isolate for seven days," his office said in a statement.

"He will continue to work and carry out his activities remotely." The result comes at a tricky time for Macron as he seeks to handle the pandemic crisis in the own country while keeping a close eye on talks for a Brexit trade deal and a host of other international issues. Macron had notably attended an EU summit in Brussels last week and also on Monday was personally present at a conference in Paris organized by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The president of the European Council, Charles Michel, who was also present in Paris for that meeting, has entered self-isolation, his spokesman said. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who was also there, is going into quarantine, his office said. As result of the diagnosis, a trip next week by Macron to Lebanon—where

the president had been pressing for far-reaching political change after the giant Beirut port explosion in August—has been cancelled, his office said.

'Defeat pandemic together'

French Prime Minister Jean Castex will self-isolate after contact with Macron, his office said. It said the premier shows no symptoms but will no longer be going to the French Senate yesterday to outline his government's vaccine strategy to combat COVID-19. Macron's wife Brigitte will also be self-isolating but also shows no symptoms, her office said. Parliament speaker Richard Ferrand is also self-isolating after contact with Macron, his office said.

Fellow world leaders rushed to wish Macron a speedy recovery. "Sorry to hear my friend @EmmanuelMacron has tested positive for coronavirus. We are all wishing you a speedy recovery," tweeted Johnson, who has locked horns with Macron in recent months over the Brexit talks. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, said she was with Macron "with all my heart". "We are going to defeat this pandemic together," she said on Twitter. "We will continue to work hand in hand to immunize and protect our citizens."

France earlier this week eased restrictions imposed to battle the second wave of the coro-



PARIS: In this file photo, French President Emmanuel Macron (left) welcomes European Council president Charles Michel prior to a meeting marking the 60th anniversary of the creation of the OECD at the Elysee Palace in Paris. — AFP

navirus but infection rates remain high. There is still a nationwide overnight curfew from 8 pm to halt the spread of the virus while restaurants and cafes as well as theatres and cinemas remain closed.

Over 59,300 people have died in France of

coronavirus since the start of the pandemic, according to official figures. The recording of over 17,000 new cases on Wednesday alone has also generated concern as people shop and travel more intensely ahead of the Christmas holidays. — AFP

US to unseal charges against Lockerbie bombing suspect

WASHINGTON: The United States plans to unseal charges soon against a Libyan man suspected of assembling the bomb that blew up a US airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, US newspapers have reported. But in Britain, the father of one of the victims of the disaster called the development "unwelcome" and cast doubt on the involvement of the suspect, Abu Agila Mohammad Masud.

"I can't see the connection between these new allegations and the Lockerbie story," Jim Swire, whose daughter Flora was killed in the bombing 32 years ago, said yesterday. Masud is currently being held by the Libyan authorities, according to The Wall Street Journal, and US authorities are seeking his extradition to stand trial in the United States. The New York Times said Masud's exact whereabouts are unknown but that he was imprisoned in Libya at one point for unrelated crimes.

The Journal said Masud, alleged to have been a top bomb-maker for the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, is suspected of assembling the device that blew up Pan Am Flight 103. The newspapers said US prosecutors are expected to unseal charges soon against Masud.

'Horrific attack'

The case against Masud is reportedly based largely on a confession he gave to Libyan authorities in 2012 as well as travel and immigration records. Monday is the 32nd anniversary of the bombing which killed a total of 270 people, including 190 Americans and 11 people on the ground.

In a statement, the FBI said that while it "cannot comment on any upcoming announcement, we can assure the public and most



In this file photo taken on December 22, 1988, the scene is seen of devastation caused by the explosion of a 747 Pan Am Jumbo jet over Lockerbie, that crashed 21 December on the route to New-York, with 259 passengers on board. — AFP

importantly, the families of the Pan Am 103 victims, that we have worked tenaciously for 32 years to investigate this horrific terrorist attack." "Domestic and foreign partners alike have been focused on identifying who was responsible for the bombing," the FBI said. "Just as in any investigation, the FBI is persistent in our investigations with a dedicated focus on the victims of crime and terrorism."

Scottish appeal

Five judges at Scotland's highest court of criminal appeal are currently considering a posthumous appeal by the family of the only man convicted of the bombing. In 1991, the American and Scottish courts announced the indictment of two Libyan intelligence agents, Abdelbaset Mohmet Al-Megrahi and Amine Khalifa Fhimah, for their role in the attack. — AFP

Self-harm rises in Greek migrant camps amid lockdown

ATHENS: A major increase in self-harm and mental health conditions has accompanied the coronavirus lockdown in Greece's migrant camps, a prominent aid group said yesterday. The International Rescue Committee said data from three islands with the largest migrant populations—Lesbos, Chios and Samos—showed that three quarters of more than 900 people assisted since 2018 had such symptoms. As of the end of October, 41 percent had reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, 35 percent reported suicidal thoughts and 18 percent reported having attempted to take their own lives, IRC said.

And immediately after Greece imposed a virus lockdown in March, there was a 71 percent increase in psychotic symptoms and a 66 percent increase in self-harm, the group said. More than 15,000 people live in camps in the three islands, and over 17,000 in Aegean camps overall, according to government data. On Lesbos, more than 7,000 people are staying in a makeshift tent camp set up after the permanent facility burned down in September.

On Monday, a three-year-old Afghan girl was found semi-conscious and bleeding in the camp lavatory, with authorities saying she was likely raped. "The mental health of refugees has been decimated this year, in the wake of devastating fires in Lesbos and Samos, Covid and the lockdown restrictions brought with it, and the move to a new temporary reception centre on Lesbos, which is yet to provide dignified living conditions," said IRC Greece director Dimitra Kalogeropoulou. Only a few thousand refugees have been allowed to relocate to other EU states this year, despite repeated requests by Athens and the European Commission. These include around 1,300 ailing or unaccompanied minors. — AFP

International

US set to execute woman who cut newborn from mother's womb

Experts still studying the case, seek to prevent it in future

CHICAGO: In 2004, Lisa Montgomery strangled a pregnant woman to death and used a kitchen knife to remove the unborn baby from the victim's uterus so she could kidnap the girl. Sixteen years on, the United States is preparing to execute her, and experts are still studying the case so they can understand what prompts such a crime—and how to prevent it in future.

"It's such a horrific act to do and it takes a lot of planning," says Ann Burgess, a professor at Boston College who has studied the rare phenomenon of fetal abduction since the 1990s. John Rabun, a senior consultant on infant abductions to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), says the crime has been more visible in the last 15-20 years.

The organization has documented 21 fetal abductions in the United States since 1964, 18 of them since 2004. That year, Montgomery was 36 years old and the mother of four children. She had undergone a procedure years before that made pregnancy impossible, but those close to her didn't know.

Prosecutors say she carefully identified her victim online—dog breeder Bobbie Jo Stinnett.

Under the guise of buying a puppy, Montgomery went to Stinnett's home, where she strangled her to death, and cut the baby from her body. She left Stinnett dead in a pool of blood. Montgomery crossed state lines with the child

and told her unsuspecting husband, who believed she herself was pregnant, that the baby was hers. In 2007, she was convicted of federal kidnapping resulting in death and handed a death sentence.

The US Justice Department called the crime "especially heinous" in announcing an execution date, which has been pushed back from this month to January 12, 2021. Montgomery's lawyers never contested the facts, but asked that her sentence be commuted to life in prison, saying she had been the victim of repeated violence including rape in her youth. She will be the first woman executed by the federal government in nearly 70 years if the lethal injection goes ahead at the federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana.

'They really plan'

Experts say cases like Stinnett's murder—the most recent such incident happened in Texas in October—bear certain similarities. "The person wants a baby, usually to correct or help in a partner relationship that is not doing well," Burgess explains.

Rabun, who has been with the NCMEC since its creation, agrees. "She has a male in her life and that's really the sole reason she steals a baby," he told AFP. His organization also says the women have compulsive, manipulative personalities. Another hallmark of a fetal abduction is the careful preparation.

Burgess notes that many attackers gain weight, organize baby showers for themselves and even set up nurseries in their homes—all to facilitate their false narratives. "They plan to cut a woman open. They really plan. They read medical texts," adds Rabun, saying that assailants are often unaware that the mothers are fatally wounded.

"None of these women seem to get the notion, even after having babies of their own, that if you cut somebody open, they may die." In the 21 cases documented by the NCMEC, 19 mothers have died of their wounds. Meanwhile, the attackers care for the babies as if they were their own. Thirteen of the 21 babies have survived.

Victims 'vulnerable' at outset

For Elizabeth Petrucelli, a former hospital security director who advises parents on childbirth and bereavement, pregnant women should learn to recognize several key warning signs. In 2015, a post in a Facebook breastfeeding education group set off alarm bells—a woman said her friend was two months late in delivering.

"If she is desperate, she may do the unmentionable," Petrucelli said. She was called an alarmist, but two months later, her fears were borne out—Dyrel Lane attacked a pregnant woman, after pretending to be selling her baby clothes. The woman survived, but the baby did



This handout photo provided by the Wyandotte County Sheriff's Department, Lisa Montgomery appears in a booking photo. —AFP

not. Lane was sentenced to 100 years in prison. "Even though the signs were there, you don't want to believe that someone would actually do that," Petrucelli said. "It's one of those things that no one wants to talk about for obvious reasons, but more people need to be aware." — AFP

Biden names Pete Buttigieg to 'cabinet of firsts'

WILMINGTON, United States: Joe Biden boasted of a "cabinet of barrier breakers" Wednesday as the US President-elect introduced his transportation secretary pick Pete Buttigieg, who if confirmed would become the first openly gay head of a cabinet-level department. Buttigieg, whom Biden called "a policy wonk with a big heart," is one of several trailblazing picks by the veteran Democrat who appears to be following through on his pledge to name the most diverse US cabinet ever.

"A cabinet that looks like America" is how Biden, 78, described the inner circle that he is putting together. "We'll have a cabinet of barrier breakers, a cabinet of firsts," he told reporters in Wilmington, Delaware, noting that eight "precedent-busting appointments" were already made.

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris is among the historic picks, being the first woman and first person of color elected to the post. Others include retired general Lloyd Austin, who would be the first Black secretary of defense, and Janet



WILMINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden speaks as he announces former South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg's nomination to be secretary of transportation while Vice President-elect Kamala Harris watches via video link, during a news conference at Biden's transition headquarters in Wilmington On Wednesday. —AFP

Yellen, the first woman to lead the Treasury Department.

"And today a ninth, the first-ever openly gay nominee to lead a cabinet department (and) one of the youngest cabinet members ever," Biden said. Buttigieg, a former small town Indiana mayor who turns 39 one day before Biden is inaugurated on January 20, was like Harris a rival of Biden's on the 2020 presidential campaign trail. When he

dropped out of the race he quickly endorsed Biden, who at the time compared Buttigieg to his own late son Beau Biden.

The President-elect hailed Buttigieg—who put his mayoral duties on hold to serve as a US Navy intelligence officer in Afghanistan—as a "next-generation leader" who will bring critical problem-solving skills to the challenge of improving the country's ailing infrastructure. — AFP

US experts meet ahead of Moderna vaccine approval

WASHINGTON: US experts met to decide whether to recommend approval of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, potentially paving the way for rollout early next week. The meeting comes after the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine received an emergency use authorization and the first three million doses were distributed in the world's worst-hit country this week.

Today's meeting will be live-streamed to the public, and will end with a vote by the two dozen independent scientists and industry representatives. Should the panelists vote in favor, as is widely expected, the Food and Drug Administration is expected to issue its green light soon after, which could make the US the first country to approve the Moderna vaccine.

The small Massachusetts-based biotech firm teamed up with scientists from the US National Institutes of Health to produce the product, and began work in January just days after Chinese authorities shared the SARS-CoV-2 virus genome. Moderna has received more than \$2.5 billion from the US government for its efforts, and has promised six million doses in the first wave.

A clinical trial of 30,400 people found it was 94.1 percent effective in preventing Covid-19 compared to a placebo, performing slightly better in younger adults compared to the elderly. An FDA review of all available data found there were "no specific safety concerns identified that would preclude issuance of an EUA (emergency use authorization)." Moncef Slaoui, chief advisor of Operation Warp Speed, told reporters on Wednesday that he was impressed by the level of protection against disease the vaccine provided 10 to 14 days after even the first of two doses. — AFP

International

Chinese craft returns to Earth with rocks and soil from Moon

China completes another chapter in its effort to become a space superpower

BEIJING: An unmanned Chinese spacecraft carrying rocks and soil from the Moon returned safely to Earth early yesterday, completing another chapter in China's effort to become a space superpower. The mission was the first in four decades to collect lunar samples, emulating the feats of the United States and the Soviet Union from the 1960s and 1970s—and going a few steps further.

Scientists hope the samples will give insights into the Moon's origins and volcanic activity, though a more immediate focus was on how the mission showcased China's technological advances.

"China has been preparing for this for a long time," Jonathan McDowell, a Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics researcher, told AFP. "This was very important to them—and still risky, as the automatic rendezvous, docking and sample transfer in lunar orbit had never been done before, by anyone. It's a sign of the maturity of the Chinese space effort that it went off so flawlessly."

In images broadcast on state television, the blackened capsule landed on snow-covered grasslands in darkness in the country's remote north. A Chinese flag was quickly placed next to the capsule, reflecting the nationalist pride that the multi-billion-dollar space program engenders.

Balochistan: Pakistan's land of the disappeared

KARACHI: Hani Baloch and her fiancée Nasim never thought of themselves as dissidents, but one day in May—just weeks before their wedding—the students were snatched by armed and hooded men she says were from Pakistan's security services. The men accused the couple of being part of a terrorist organization from Balochistan, the vast, mineral-rich southern province where the military is fighting a low-level insurgency, Hani said.

Speaking from her small apartment in the megacity of Karachi—just 25 kilometers (15 miles) from the province's border—Hani told AFP how they were whisked off to a secret jail. "They tortured us, they electrocuted us... they hit me in my head with a rifle butt," the 27-year-old said.

The couple comes from Balochistan, but Hani denies they had any links to anti-government groups. "All our students, teachers, lawyers, doctors—all those who are educated, all our intelligent youngsters—are being picked up," she added. Hani was released after three months, but no-one has heard from Nasim.

"They took everything from me," she said of her uncertain future. Activists say similar des-

Space dream

China launched its first satellite in 1970 but human spaceflight took decades longer—with Yang Liwei becoming the country's first "taikonaut" in 2003. Under President Xi Jinping, who took power in 2012, China's "space dream" has been put into overdrive.

A Chinese lunar rover landed on the far side of the Moon in January 2019, a global first.

The official Xinhua news agency described the latest mission as one of the most challenging and complicated in China's aerospace history. Chang'e-5 — named after a mythical Chinese Moon goddess—landed on the Moon on December 1.

During two days on the Moon, it collected two kilograms (4.5 pounds) of material in an volcanic area called Mons Riemer in the Oceanus Procellarum—or "Ocean of Storms"—which was previously unexplored, China's space agency said. While there it also raised the Chinese flag, according to the agency.

The probe's departure was also the first time China had achieved take-off from an extraterrestrial body. The module then went through the delicate operation of linking up in lunar orbit with the part of the spacecraft that brought the samples back to Earth.

The probe comprised separate craft to get to

perate accounts are common in Balochistan where they accuse shadowy security agents of kidnapping or "disappearing" thousands of people over the years.

The military refused to comment, referring AFP to a commission set up to investigate disappearances, which did not respond to requests for interview.

Resentment and bombings

Home to roughly seven million people, Balochistan is poor despite its natural resources—a source of great anger to residents who complain they don't receive a fair share of the gas and mineral wealth. While some groups back negotiations with the government to gain more rights, a separatist movement—including militant groups—is fighting for independence.

Resentment has been fuelled by billions of dollars of Chinese money flowing into the region through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) — a key part of China's Belt and Road Initiative—which locals say gave them little benefit as most new jobs went to outsiders.

Disappearances have increased in recent years, activists say, at the same time as militants have launched a string of attacks aimed at undermining Chinese investment—including an assault on Beijing's consulate in Karachi in 2018. Last year gunmen stormed a luxury hotel overlooking a flagship CPEC project—the deep-water seaport in Gwadar that gives China strategic access to the Arabian Sea—killing at least eight people.



BEIJING: Deputy director of the National Space Administration and deputy chief commander of the lunar exploration project, Wu Yanhua answers questions during a press conference in Beijing yesterday after an unmanned Chinese spacecraft carrying rocks and soil from the Moon returned safely to Earth. — AFP

the Moon, land on it and collect the samples, get back up and then return the rocks and soil to Earth. The return capsule entered the Earth's atmosphere at an altitude of about 120 kilometers (75 miles). When it was about 10 kilometers above land, a parachute opened and it landed smoothly, the space agency said.

"With this successful mission, China will be

And in June, Baloch insurgents targeted the Pakistan Stock Exchange, which is partly owned by Chinese companies. All the attacks were claimed by the Balochistan Liberation Army.

Mama Qadeer, whose group Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, has offices across the province, said when Chinese interests were attacked it provoked a particularly strong reaction. "In retaliation, they kill the ones they have in their jails—even if they have nothing to do with the insurgency," he said. "We start finding more mutilated bodies."

Thousands missing

Qadeer said his son disappeared in 2010 and his body was found a year later on a vacant lot near the Iranian border, covered with burn marks and his arms broken. His group claims some 55,000 people have been kidnapped and 18,000 bodies later found since 2000 — figures Pakistani officials dispute.

Only 155 people are missing in Balochistan, according to a recent federal government inquiry into enforced disappearances. The commission's president did not respond to multiple interview requests.

The findings were "insulting", said lawmaker Akhtar Mengal, who described how almost every Baloch family has a missing relative. "Women don't know if they're married or widowed. Children don't know if they still have a father," said the politician, whose older brother went missing in 1976. — AFP

more confident of its own technologies," Chen Lan, an independent analyst at GoTaikonauts.com, which specializes in China's space program, told AFP. Thomas Zurbuchen, a top official at NASA's science mission directorate, also congratulated China on the safe return of the capsule. "The international science community celebrates your successful Chang'e 5 mission," he tweeted. — AFP

Taleban kill 13 Afghan policemen

KUNDUZ, Afghanistan: At least 13 Afghan policemen were killed when Taleban militants attacked two checkpoints overnight in the north of the country, officials said Wednesday. The militants stormed and briefly held the checkpoints on the outskirts of Pule Khumri, capital of northern Baghlan province, officials said. The dead, and five wounded, had been taken to the provincial hospital, said Ainnuddin Sayad, the director of the facility. Provincial police spokesman Ahmad Jawed Basharat confirmed the attack.

The Taleban claimed responsibility for the attack, the latest in a wave of violence to rock the country in recent weeks. In a separate incident Wednesday, five security personnel and 17 Taliban militants were killed when government forces countered an offensive in southern Uruzgan province, another official said. Violence has surged across several provinces of Afghanistan even as the Taleban and Afghan government engage in peace talks to end the war. — AFP

International

Super cyclone Yasa hits Fiji bringing floods, landslides

Govt warns over 850,000 Fijians are in the direct path of the cyclone

SUVA: Super cyclone Yasa slammed into Fiji's second-largest island yesterday, tearing roofs off buildings as it triggered flash floods and landslides in the Pacific island nation. After days of dire warnings about widespread destruction, Fiji's Met service said the top-of-the-scale Category Five storm made landfall on Vanua Levu late yesterday packing winds gusts of up to 345 kilometers an hour (210 miles an hour). It said the cyclone, one of the most powerful ever recorded in the South Pacific, would be accompanied by monster waves exceeding 10 meters (33 feet). Yasa, which is expected to move out to sea early today, landed in the sparsely populated Bau province. There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties but social media posts showed flooded villages and corrugated sheeting blown off homes.



SUVA: A Fijian family takes refuge in a temporary shelter from the strong damaging winds in the capital city of Suva yesterday. — AFP

But Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama earlier warned the storm was so big that its impact was likely to be felt across the entire country. He feared destruction from Yasa would be worse than a cyclone four years ago that killed dozens. "Over 850,000 Fijians are in the direct path of the cyclone—more than 95 percent of our population," he said.

"Everywhere in Fiji, we can expect the rains will get worse, the winds will become more destructive. "In low-lying areas, we anticipate flash flooding and severe coastal inundation, including waves up to 10 meters (33 feet) in height." He said Yasa "could easily surpass" the de-

Japan man probed over insults tied to Netflix star's suicide

TOKYO: Japanese police said yesterday they have referred a man to prosecutors over online abuse he directed at Hana Kimura, a reality television star who took her own life earlier this year. Tokyo Metropolitan Police referred the suspect in his 20s to prosecutors for further investigation after the May death of Kimura, a cast member on Netflix's internationally popular "Terrace House".

The man has not been arrested and his identity will not be disclosed until prosecutors decide whether to indict him on charges of public insult, a police spokesman said. "The suspect... in May posted messages on a social media account of the victim, including 'You have such an awful personality. Is your life worth living?' and 'Hey, hey. When will you die?'" the spokesman said.

He "posted these insults for many random individuals to view and

struction wrought by Cyclone Winston in February 2016, which killed 44 people and destroyed tens of thousands of homes.

The Fijian leader, a long-time campaigner for climate action, blamed global warming for such super storms, which were once rare but have become relatively common. "As the world is getting warmer, these storms are getting stronger," he said. "Every one of us must treat these climate-fuelled catastrophes with deadly seriousness."

Lessons learned

Fiji has opened evacuation centers and people living near the coast have been advised to flee to higher ground. Housing in Fiji's villages is largely made from timber and corrugated iron, making them vulnerable to high winds. Sheltering in schools, church halls and even shipping containers offers better protection but runs the risk of health issues if people stay longer than a few days.

All schools and public transport were closed, with non-essential public servants told to stay home and a curfew in place for last night. Authorities also declared a state of natural disaster for the next 30 days, which gives sweeping powers to emergency services. "We don't want anybody losing their lives out there," assistant police commissioner Abdul Khan said. "We will be here to protect you. Please take this seriously and let us prepare for a worst-case scenario." New Zealand-based meteorological service Weatherwatch said Yasa was of capable of cutting a swathe of destruction 300 kilometers wide. "This storm has the ability to swamp entire islands, inundate entire coastal communities, wipe some small islands off the map entirely," Weatherwatch managing director Philip Duncan said.

Save the Children said lessons had been learned from Winston in 2016 and Fijians were taking cyclone preparation seriously. "We've seen people stocking up on essential food items and supplies," the aid agency's Fiji chief Shairana Ali said. "People are stocking up on water because there is a warning from the Fiji Water Authority that people will not have proper water supply for at least 10 days."

Fiji's borders remain closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, which Ali said could present a challenge for international relief efforts. Aid agencies have pre-positioned supplies across the country in anticipation of a major disaster during cyclone season, which runs until May next year. The most recent Category Five storm to hit Fiji was Cyclone Harold, which killed 31 people as it tore through the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga in April this year. — AFP

therefore he publicly insulted" Kimura, the spokesman added. Kimura, a confident pink-haired professional wrestler, was a fan favorite on "Terrace House", in which six young people share a home while looking for love. But she was targeted by a torrent of abuse online, reportedly including comments such as "everyone will be happy if you're gone".

The television show was cancelled after Kimura's death, which also prompted Japanese ministers and lawmakers to do more to tackle cyberbullying. In a statement reported by Japanese media, Kimura's mother Kyoko welcomed news that the man had been referred to prosecutors. "I pray this will deter people from slandering others so that fewer people will face this kind of hardship," she said. She also asked that those involved in cyberbullying her daughter not be publicly identified or attacked. "Hana would not have wanted to see a tragic chain reaction which turns the perpetrator into the next 'victim'," Kyodo news agency quoted her as saying.

Kimura's suicide made international headlines and brought renewed social attention to the problem of cyberbullying in Japan and other countries. In South Korea, for example, the deaths of K-pop stars have prompted calls for strong punishment for abusive online comments. And a huge online campaign against cyberbullying, using the hashtag #BeKind, took off after the suicide in February of Caroline Flack, who hosted British reality show "Love Island". —AFP

Eight HK activists charged over security law protest

HONG KONG: Eight prominent Hong Kong democracy activists were charged yesterday with taking part in an "illegal assembly" the day after Beijing imposed its broad security law, bolstering an already sweeping crackdown on dissent. Those charged included veteran activist "Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung, the former chief of Hong Kong's Democratic Party Wu Chi-wai, ex-legislator Eddie Chu and Figo Chan, the organizer of an annual July 1 rally marking the British handover of the city to China in 1997.

Both Chan and Leung chanted slogans inside the court after the charges were read out, an AFP reporter said. Chan shouted "Release all political prisoners" while Leung chanted "Peaceful assembly is not a crime. Shame on political persecution."

The group, who were later bailed and ordered to surrender their passports, have been hit with various "unlawful assembly" charges—namely organizing, inciting or taking part in an illegal gathering. The charges stem from protests that broke out on July 1 this year. The date has traditionally witnessed large pro-democracy protests in a city where millions have taken to the streets in recent years.

During months of protests that swept the city in 2019, the legislature was stormed on handover day by crowds in an unprecedented challenge to Beijing's rule. The day before this year's handover anniversary Beijing enacted its draconian national security law, bypassing the legislature and keeping its contents secret until the moment it was imposed.

The law enhanced Beijing's control over the city, outlawed certain political views and deepened the crackdown against democracy supporters. Tens of thousands defied the law and hit the streets that day in protests that were swiftly broken up by riot police.—AFP




HONG KONG: Former lawmaker Leung Kwok-hung (left), also known as 'Long Hair', convener of civil human rights front Figo Chan (center left), former lawmaker Eddie Chu (center right) and district councillor Tsang Kin-shing (right) arrive at West Kowloon court yesterday to face charges of illegal assembly for a protest on July 1 this year. — AFP

Friday Times Lifestyle

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2020

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A person wearing a Batman costume stands under the snow in Times Square in New York City. — AFP

Mexico celebrates Christmas against backdrop of Covid

See Page 20

The posada must go on: Mexico celebrates Christmas against backdrop of Covid



A woman sells Pinatas and poinsettia plants (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) - commonly known as Christmas Eve flower - at a street store in Xochimilco, Mexico City. —AFP photos



View of poinsettia plants (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*).



View of typical Pinatas for sale in a market at Xochimilco.



View of typical Pinatas at a workshop in Xochimilco, Mexico City.



A florist sells poinsettia plants.



View of typical Pinatas for sale in a market at Xochimilco.

In Yuridia Torres' workshop, the sale of pinatas is non-stop. Despite the Mexican government's warning against traditional posadas-celebrations which began Wednesday and play a huge role in the country's Christmas season-people in the capital's Xochimilco neighborhood continued to buy the festive party item. Posadas traditionally bring people into the streets and into the homes of neighbors across Mexico and in other parts of Latin America over the course of nine nights. The holiday custom involves going door-to-door singing Christmas carols, sometimes dressed as characters from the biblical Christmas story.

Even with a spike in coronavirus infections and hospital occupancy at 82 percent in Mexico City, orders for pinatas are still coming in. "The posadas have been postponed, but there are people who will celebrate the holidays with their family," 47-year-old Torres, a neighborhood factory administrator, told AFP. President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador reiterated Wednesday his call to "only go outdoors for essentials" during the end of the year. Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum's warning was more explicit: "No parties, meetings or posadas." The tradition, which mixes Christian beliefs with indigenous customs, can lead to giant fiestas, bringing together thousands of people.

Although posadas are not expressly prohibited, authorities in the capital are considering fining those who throw parties of more than 10 people. Brightly decorated pinatas are a central element of the holiday. The hollow cardboard creations are generally shaped as stars, animals, or characters and stuffed with candy or fruit. Participants then beat them with a stick until their contents fall to the ground. In Xochimilco, a community closely linked to tradition, some like Hilda Varela are trying to find a middle ground. The 66-year-old doctor will hold a celebration on Facebook after preparing for 10 months. "By tradition, you cannot close the door to God. Even if online, we will



An employee works making typical Pinatas at a workshop in Xochimilco.



A man sells typical Pinatas and poinsettia plants.



View of poinsettia plants.

go forward," she told AFP.

Apart from pinatas, sales of poinsettias, a red flower indigenous to Mexico used for Christmas decorations, are also doing well this year. Some 16 million plants have been

sold in Mexico, according to the Agriculture ministry. "We feared that sales would fall, but thanks to local consumption we sold almost 30,000 plants," Edgar Lopez who manages the San Marcos greenhouse told AFP. But Julieta

Lopez, who sells both pinatas and poinsettias, said she fears sales will decrease if more restrictions are put in place. Mexico has recorded 1.27 million Covid-19 cases and 115,099 deaths since the start of the pandemic.—AFP

Nativity scene lights up Italy's Cinque Terre coast



The Manarola Nativity Scene is pictured on the hill of Manarola, Cinque Terre, Northwestern Italy. —AFP photos

One of the world's largest nativity scenes lights up the hilltop town of Manarola in Italy's famed Cinque Terre, joined this year by a statue honoring medics who battle coronavirus. More than 150 figures depict shepherds and fishermen, sheep, camels and angels gathered around Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Lit up with eight kilometers of electricity cables, they are visible from the sea as well. A new addition this year is a statue of a nurse with a heart next to it, a tribute to the medics working in the Covid-19 pandemic. Italy has been hard hit by the virus, which has killed more than 65,000 people so far.

Watching the lights go on, local school

teacher Elisabetta Colarusso said it was a welcome reminder of normal life. "We need signs of hope and at least an appearance of normality," she told AFP. The nativity scene dates back to 1961, when local railway worker Mario Andreoli placed a cross onto the hill opposite the town to fulfill a wish by his dying father. He had the idea of lighting it up with a car battery, and was delighted with the result. He used iron bars and recycled materials to create many more figures over the years, each weighing up to 20 kilograms. At first, Andreoli—now 92—had to carry them up the steep hill himself, but now there is a whole team putting them up each Christmas.—AFP



The Manarola Nativity Scene shines from a hill next to Manarola, Cinque Terre, Northwestern Italy.



Stefano Cassigoli, member of "Associazione Presepe di Manarola" (Manarola's Nativity Scene association), checks the illumination of the statues during the night on the hill of Manarola, Cinque Terre.



Stefano Cassigoli a member of "Associazione Presepe di Manarola" (Manarola's Nativity Scene association), sets a figure of a doctor, dedicated of healthcare personnel, on the hill of Manarola.



In this file photo an employee of Swiss watchmaker H Moser & Cie assembles a wristwatch at the “Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie” (SIHH) professional fair in fine watchmaking in Geneva. — AFP photos



An employee of Swiss watchmaker Audemars Piguet checks a wristwatch during the opening day of the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie (SIHH), a professional fair in fine watchmaking, in Geneva.

Decorating with antiques

By Engineer Yousef Al Samhan

Antiques are a beautiful and themed way to decorate for a particular style of home, it may be that they are placed within a modern home or the house itself is old and antique.

Many antiques are used as art only and displayed as such however, the real beauty of antique furniture is that it can still be used. Whether it is a Georgian mahogany sideboard or a 19th century chest of drawers, items of furniture that can be used especially for storage are obviously valuable in two ways.

Choosing a piece is quite a specialist task. I do believe that the most important aspect of an antique is that you really enjoy it either visually, practically or both. I have seen some homes filled with antiques that are so overwhelming that the items are lost within the clutter. Other homes I have seen have items that seem to have lost all sense of proportion. Of course, design is subjective so each to their own but as a designer I believe it is extremely important to have balance.

Be very careful when using anyone who claims that they are able to restore the furniture or artwork. Ensure that written testimonials are checked or that the company is well established and recommended by the dealers. There have been cases of items being devalued as a result of poor or incorrect work and others that have substituted artwork. Not that this is common when dealing with these companies but these are very valuable items and should be treated as such.

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

Art of watchmaking gets UNESCO heritage status

The craftsmanship of Swiss and French mechanical watchmaking on Wednesday won UNESCO intangible heritage status, casting the spotlight on an art practiced for centuries in the Jura mountain region straddling the two countries. Inclusion on the prestigious global list highlights “a living and emblematic tradition in the French-Swiss Jura Arc,” the Swiss cultural ministry said in a statement. The craftsmanship getting the UNESCO nod sits at a “crossroads of science, art and technology,” the UN agency said.

UNESCO annually announces a list of cultural artefacts that encapsulate the spirit and heritage of their countries. Switzerland and France had last year presented a joint application for their centuries-old cross-border watchmaking craft to be included on the list. Their listing covers the skills related to the craftsmanship of mechanical watchmaking and art mechanics, which are used to create watches, clocks and other objects designed to measure and indicate time. But the manufacture of automatons, music boxes and mechanical songbirds are also included.

And techniques range from the manual and traditional to the cutting-edge and innovative. “Though generally hidden, the mechanisms can also be visible, which contributes to the aesthetics and poetic dimension of the objects,” the UNESCO listing said. The Swiss-French Jura Arc, stretching from Geneva to Basel, is considered the cradle of the European time keeping industry, with the craft practiced there for centuries.

French theologian Jean Calvin, the influential reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, actually played a role in embedding watchmaking in the region. By banning the wearing of ornamental objects in 1541, he “in effect forced goldsmiths and other jewelers to turn to a different art: that of watchmaking,” the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry explains on its site. The



File photo taken in Geneva at the “Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie” (SIHH) professional fair in fine watchmaking shows the MB&F Balthazar clock.

fact that numerous Protestants fleeing prosecution in France also fled into the city, bringing their watchmaking skills with them, also helped embed the craft in the city. Today, the Jura region remains bustling with watchmaking companies, big and small, with highly qualified craftspeople and a multitude of training options.

In Switzerland alone, 57,500 people are employed in the sector, which counts a broad range of professions that are needed to assemble the casings and internal mechanics of a precision timepiece. Watchmaking is the third largest export sector in the Alpine country, with exports ticking in at nearly 22 billion Swiss francs (\$25 billion, 20 billion euros) last year. — AFP



Rebuilt Prussian palace, scarred by history, opens in Berlin

A reconstructed Prussian palace opened in Berlin on Wednesday as a museum complex housing colonial artifacts, just as debate is gathering pace around the return of treasures plundered from abroad. The opening ceremony for the Humboldt Forum, which will house attractions including the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, will take place virtually due to restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Launched in 2013, the huge renovation project in central Berlin has been plagued by delays, controversy and spiralling costs—much like the capital’s ill-fated new international airport that opened in October.

Critics have seized on the new building being home to a museum housing nearly 20,000 artifacts from Africa, Asia and Oceania, mostly from the former colonies. In an oblique reference to the controversy at a media presentation Wednesday, Berlin Mayor Michael Mueller said the Humboldt Forum would be “a place to reflect on our history and our place in the world”. Until the fall of the German Empire at the end of World War I, the palace was the main residence of the Hohenzollerns, instigators of German colonialism. The construction has also cost some 677 million euros (\$823 million) — almost 100 million more than originally planned.

The original palace was a victim of Berlin’s history, including World War II and the division between East and West. Partly destroyed by bombing during the war, it was then completely razed to the ground by communist East Germany after the defeat of the Nazis. It was replaced by the Palace of the Republic, an austere modernist slab with reflective orange windows that housed the regime’s parliament and a cultural and leisure centre. In the new palace designed by Italian architect Franco Stella, three-quarters of the facades are replicas of the Baroque originals. — AFP



A picture shows a mysterious metal monolith, similar to others appearing in Europe and USA, which was discovered in the nature reserve area Tiendeberg, in Riemst. — AFP photos



2020: What a funny old year it was...

The coronavirus has not given us much to laugh about in 2020. Yet the year still had its fair share of the weird and the wonderful. Here is our pick of some of its wackiest stories:

Mystery monolith

A mysterious shiny monolith found in the Utah desert that sparked wild rumors of alien visitations disappeared a week later. "All that was left was a message written in the dirt that said 'Bye b****' with a fresh pee stain next to it," said Riccardo Marino, who trekked to the remote spot to see it. Days later, a spookily similar monolith popped up in the Carpathian Mountains in Romania. It too disappeared mysteriously as it had appeared only for other monoliths to appear in Warsaw, the Netherlands and the Isle of Wight in England.

No bull

India's National Cow Commission unveils a new smartphone chip made of cow dung which it claims protects users from radiation. "All this has been approved by science," the head of the official body set up by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party said. Hindus hold the cow sacred with several ruling BJP MPs touting cow dung and urine as cures for the coronavirus.

Lockdown capers

Police were called to a supermarket in Sydney, Australia to separate three women fighting over toilet rolls as the country went into lockdown in March. A knife was pulled over the last maxi-pack in another shop. A week earlier robbers held up a lorry loaded with toilet paper in Hong Kong and made off with its precious cargo worth \$150 (120 euros) in normal times.

Wiped out

The lack of something to wipe with was a real emergency for many in the US where Oregon police were forced to post this on Facebook: "Do not call 9-1-1 just because you ran out of toilet paper." Instead they helpfully suggested alternatives such as "old rope soaked in sea water" or the "Sears Christmas catalogue, which can get a family of three from December through to Saint Patrick's Day" in March. The Newport cops also pointed out that hardy "Mayans used corn cobs".

No child throwing

A school in Avignon, France, put a sign asking parents to stop throwing their children over a six-foot (1.8-metre) gate when they were late in the morning. "I do not throw my children over the gate," it warned.

Pork barrel politics

Taiwanese MPs pelted each other with pig innards in a row over imports of US pork. The offal scenes over animals fed with the additive ractopamine ended with a brawl as opposition MPs emptied bags of innards on their opponents' heads or lashed out at them with pig intestines.

All official

A French man caught outside by police during a lockdown curfew had written that he was going out to "smash a guy's face in" on his official exemption form. "He had put his real name and the time he had left home," police who fined him told AFP. "We told him it wasn't a valid reason for going out."

Bananas

Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro-known for making an obscene arm gesture known as "the banana" to journalists—further infuriated them by sending a stand-up comedian in his place to a press conference in March. The politician dubbed the "Tropical Trump", who

dismissed Covid-19 as a "little flu", sent out the comic dressed in his presidential sash carrying an armful of bananas.

No brainer

A British violinist played throughout an operation to remove a tumor from her brain so surgeons could avoid areas which might affect her playing. Dagmar Turner hoped to quickly rejoin her orchestra after leaving hospital.

What a tail!

A giant sculpture of the tails of two whales saved a runaway Dutch metro train from disaster, stopping it falling 10 meters (30 feet) into a canal near Rotterdam. Their creator, architect Maarten Struijs, said the train suspended in mid-air by the tail was a work of art in itself.

Emus get the bird

Two tame emus were banned from a pub in the Australian outback town of Yaraka after they learned how to climb the stairs, get behind the bar and steal sandwiches as soon as they popped out of a toaster. "We put a sign up, but we're not sure whether they're able to read," said hotel owner Gerry Gimblett.

Nice little earner

A Swiss couple named their baby daughter after an internet provider because it offered free wifi for 18 years to anyone who named

their child Twifia. And in India a little boy was named "Lockdown" by his parents while another child born in the southwest of the country—Corona Kumar—will forever bear the mark of the pandemic.

Deadly error

An American man who tried to fake his own suicide to avoid a jail sentence was caught because he spelled registry wrong on a bogus death certificate. Robert Berger, 25, now faces four more years behind bars.

Fugging had enough

An Austrian village is changing its name from F**ing to Fugging on January 1 after years of being ridiculed by tourists taking selfies with—or even stealing—its signs. Villagers, known as Fu**ingers, "have had enough of visitors and their bad jokes", mayor Andrea Holzner said. Nearby Petting, however, is sticking with its name.

Transparent toilets

Japan—famous for its heated musical thrones—made another major leap in toilet technology when it unveiled see-through public lavatories in a Tokyo park. The loos allow people to inspect their cleanliness from the outside before using them. The smart glass then goes opaque.

Snakes on a bus!

A passenger on an English bus who didn't have a mask wrapped a python around his face instead. While other passengers near the city of Manchester "did not bat an eyelid", authorities said their loose definition of face coverings "does not extend to the use of snakeskin—especially when still attached to the snake".

Drink up

French winemakers in the Loire region celebrated in September after forcing local authorities to take down road signs warning drivers not to drink too much of their tipples.

Moon dust

While astronauts can pee and poo in their space suits, NASA has asked inventors to come up with a proper toilet for their next moon mission, with waste being stored or flushed out into space in "a shower of sparkling frozen crystals". — AFP



FIJI TOURISM HIT WITH CLIMATE, PANDEMIC DOUBLE WHAMMY

Fiji dive operator Ashwin Pal was living his dream until the global pandemic hit, guiding tourists around an underwater wonderland of dazzling Pacific coral reefs. Now the 35-year-old hunts the neon-hued fish he once proudly showed off to international visitors, forced to kill the creatures he loves to feed his wife and four children. And the coronavirus-induced shutdown of Fiji's tourism industry is not the only crisis facing Pal's Coral Coast paradise, with climate change posing a longer-term threat to the region's marine environment. "Lots of coral's been bleached, lots of corals are dying-soft coral, hard coral-to be honest," Pal told AFP.

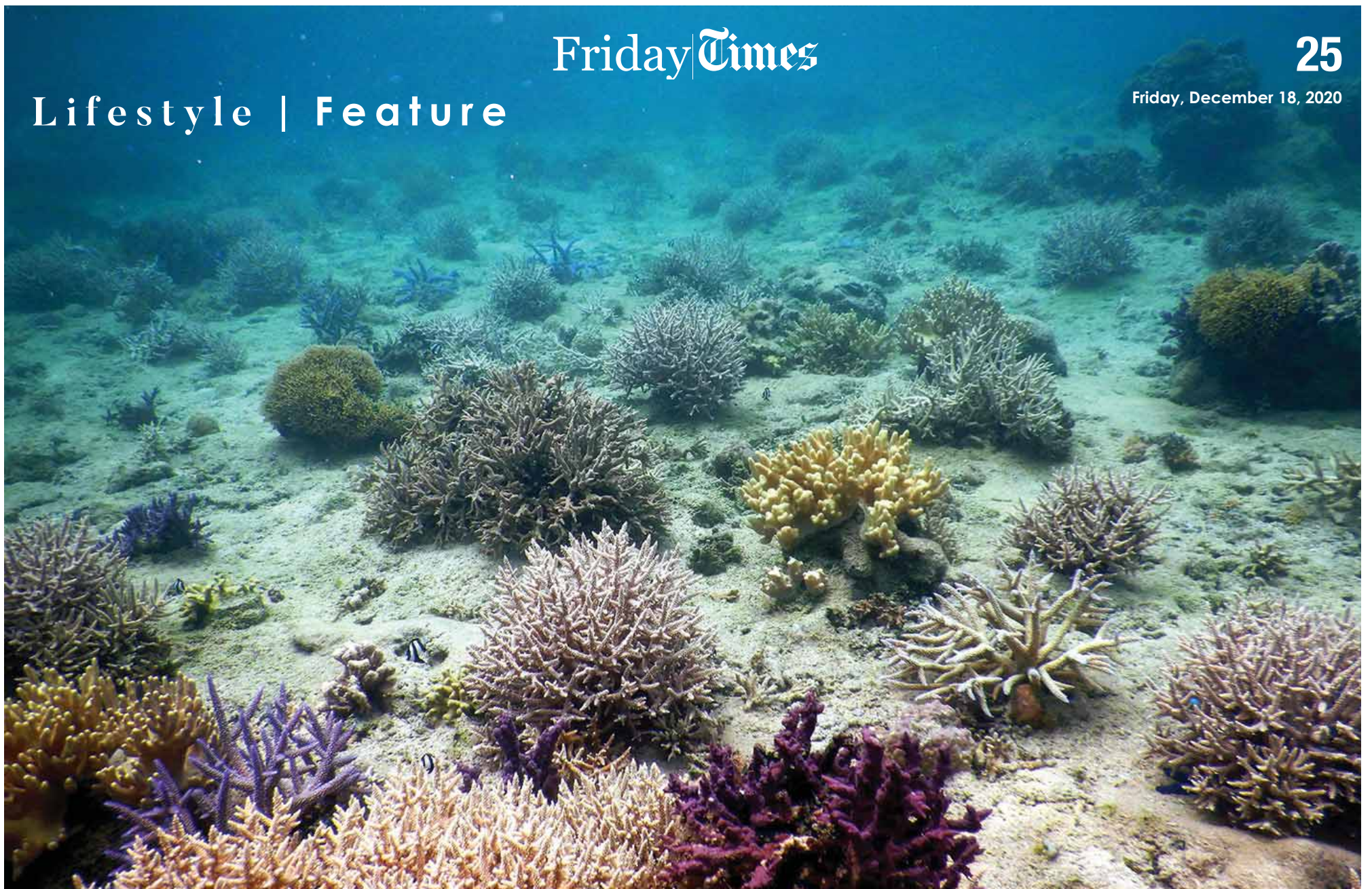


Sun light is falling through water on coral on Fiji's Coral Coast.

Fiji is also regularly pounded by category five super-storms, with Cyclone Yasa the latest to menace the island nation of 900,000 this week. Such top-of-the-scale monsters were once rare, but many scientists and Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama blame their increased frequency-and the accompanying damage to coral and tourism infrastructure-on climate change. It has created an uncertain future for Pal and many thousands like him across the Pacific, who rely on tourism and a climate-vulnerable environment for their livelihoods.



Lifestyle | Feature



This photo shows fish swimming through the coral on Fiji's Coral Coast.— AFP photos

'Life's pretty tough'

The Manila-based Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities said the pandemic had exacerbated climate challenges facing Pacific island nations that were not of their making. "Tourism has all but evaporated, remittances have shrunk to a trickle, and disruptions to international trade have come as a hammer blow," executive director Red Constantino told AFP. "And no help

seems to be forthcoming from their wealthy neighbors," he added, pointing the finger at Australia and New Zealand which have both been accused of lagging on climate. Pal opened his dive shop three years ago, fulfilling an ambition created when he first took scuba lessons as a teenager.

But with no overseas visitors in Fiji, the beachside hut he operates from a high-end resort is shuttered and all staff have been

laid off as Pal scrapes by on his savings. "I've been at home for the past eight months, there's been no income coming in," said Pal, a father of four boys. "Life's been pretty tough. To make a living I switched from diving into farming and, since I love the ocean, fishing. "Once, twice, three times a week we go out (fishing), do a bit of vegetable farming to keep my family running."



A diver swimming through the coral on Fiji's Coral Coast.



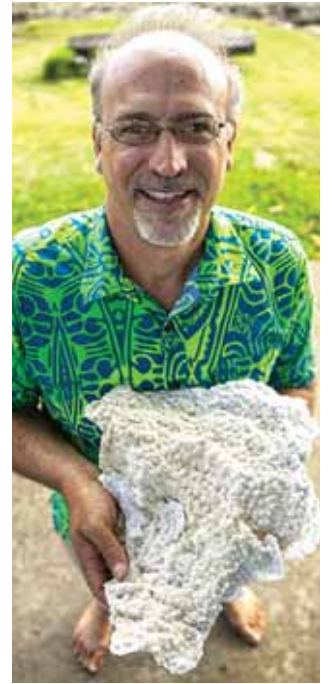
Fish swimming through the coral on Fiji's Coral Coast.



An aerial view of the Fiji's Coral Coast



An aerial view of the Fiji's Coral Coast.



Marine biologist Victor Bonito displaying coral on Fiji's Coral Coast.

Reefs 'first to go'

On a palm-fringed beach a few kilometers from Pal's dive shop, marine biologist Victor Bonito outlines his decades-long struggle to preserve Fiji's coral reefs. The frustration evident in his voice as he explains the scale of the challenge and the need for urgent action. "In 2014, 2015 and 2016 we experienced coral bleaching on reefs all around Fiji, mainly shallow, near-shore reefs," he said. "Here on the Coral Coast we lost 30-60 percent of the reef area in a matter of weeks-there are the

reefs where tourists would be snorkelling, just off the beach." Bonito's Reef Explorer Fiji has been farming strains of heat-tolerant coral to replenish the reefs, but he says it will not be enough without meaningful action to address climate change.

"Stop with the talking and planning," he said. "If we don't have a global commitment and we don't take serious action on a global scale, our coral reefs-not just in Fiji but around the world-are going to be one of the first ecosystems to go." Bainimarama warned this

month that the Pacific's environment was a bellwether for the health of the planet as a whole and a way of life would be lost without concerted action to save it. "We Pacific nations owe it to our people, and to humanity as a whole, to raise our voices more to demand that major emitters step up their climate actions and commitments," he said. "Without this, we will lose our homes, our way of life our wellbeing and livelihoods-it's past time to get serious. — AFP



People are swimming on Fiji's Coral Coast.



Suelen da Silva - who lost her job in April, shortly after the coronavirus pandemic arrived in Brazil - checks a doll at her 'Doll Hospital' located in her house in Niteroi, Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil. — AFP photos



Suelen da Silva checks a doll at her 'Doll Hospital' located in her house in Niteroi.



A doll's head is seen close to the house of Suelen da Silva where is located her 'Doll Hospital' in Niteroi.



Suelen da Silva checks a doll at her 'Doll Hospital' located in her house in Niteroi, Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil.

AS BRAZIL REELS FROM PANDEMIC, DOLL HOSPITAL MAKES KIDS SMILE

Wearing a traditional white coat and a surgical mask, "Doctor" Suelen da Silva uses a stethoscope to listen to her patient—a black doll that she is healing at her home on a hillside near Rio de Janeiro. Da Silva does not have a medical degree, of course, but the 62-year-old Brazilian certainly has ingenuity and spark. After losing her job as a housekeeper in April at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, she has transformed her hobby into a way to earn a bit of money during hard times. Da Silva, a small woman with a big personality, has created her "lifelike" hospital for dolls in a poor area of Niteroi, which overlooks Guanabara Bay.

If frontline health care workers are the superheroes of the fight against COVID-19, Da Silva is perhaps a worthy sidekick, helping children endure the crisis by healing their ailing toys. The black woman, who wears glasses with thick frames, regularly updates her "clients" with pictures of their recovering dolls via WhatsApp—and a medical chart. The patients at her hospital rest in tiny white beds illuminated with mini multicolored lights. "I give them updates day after day. The children act like parents whose babies are hospitalized," she tells AFP. "One day, a five-year-old girl was in tears as she left me her doll, and said, 'Make sure she doesn't suffer too much, don't give her too many needle jabs!'" she recalls.

Perola is the shabby doll she is currently treating, her legs bent at odd angles. She inserts a thin IV to her wrist with adhesive tape.

Secret formula

Da Silva started fixing broken dolls when her daughters were little girls—today, they are 35 and 22. "I raised them as a single mother and I never had money to buy them dolls. So I repaired the ones I found in the trash," she explains, adding she also donated refurbished toys to community groups. "But when I lost my job, this became my new job." Da Silva's eldest daughter Lydiane helped get the word out about the hospital via Facebook. "When she told me there had been more than 3,000 views, it scared me a little bit," she said. The unexpected job has allowed Da Silva to make ends meet, even if her income can be "very fluid."

She charges hospital fees starting at five reais (about \$1) for minor symptoms—meaning minor repairs—and going up to 70 reais

for dolls in a more "critical condition." "In a good week, I get about 20 of them," for stays of three to four days on average, she says. The dolls, which arrive in a variety of states—twisted limbs, bald, some even decapitated—are fixed, pampered a bit, cleaned up and sometimes even given a new outfit made by Da Silva herself. She boasts of a secret formula—a mix of cleaning products—that she uses to wipe away pen marks often believed to be permanent. In a bucket at her home, several dolls are getting a bath to scrub away the unwanted marks.



New hospital on way

But just like many hospitals in Brazil with precarious infrastructure, Da Silva's clinic is at the mercy of Mother Nature. After torrential rainfall the night before, she had to move her hospital from her patio, which was flooded, to a small space near her kitchen in her tiny red home. She dreams of one day being able to open her real hospital, which is being built on land next door and will be bigger. For now, there is only a cornerstone and a pile of red bricks. She hopes it will eventually be a lovely little spot with a huge window to admire the bay and the view of Christ the Redeemer. "I pray to God that he will help me heal enough dolls so I can finish this construction project," she says, hope glistening in her eyes.— AFP

Suelen da Silva shows the site where she plans to build a 'Doll Hospital' in Niteroi.

Kids Page

Word Search



CHRISTMAS TREATS

P D T M F M S S A H P H L K N
 Q A A U F I U M Z H Q F Y M Q
 G E E E A N O U C O O K I E S
 S R S K O C I L C L O V E S L
 E B O A M E T P E G D U F E E
 G R O C S M P R E H E P L I O
 N E G T M E M A N H A U A R N
 A G U I M A U G A G M M T R E
 R N J U O T R U C R I P B E D
 O I F R I B C S Y A Y K R B E
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 G O N G G E W R N Y K N A A C
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 E T A L O C O H C B U I G C B
 X X S E O T A T O P T E E W S

BUCHE DE NOËL
 CANDY CANE
 CHOCOLATE
 CLOVES
 COOKIES
 CRANBERRIES
 EGGNOG
 FLAT BREAD

FRUITCAKE
 FUDGE
 GINGERBREAD
 GOOSE
 GRAVY
 HAM
 MINCEMEAT
 NUTS

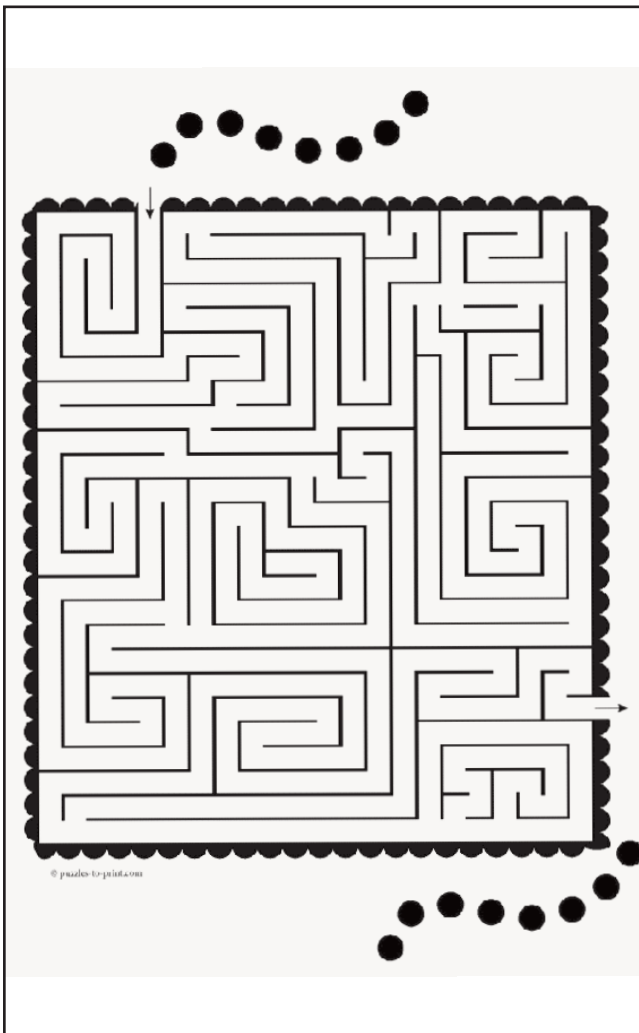
ORANGES
 PUMPKIN PIE
 SCRUMPTIOUS
 STUFFING
 SUGARPLIMS
 SWEET POTATOES
 TURKEY



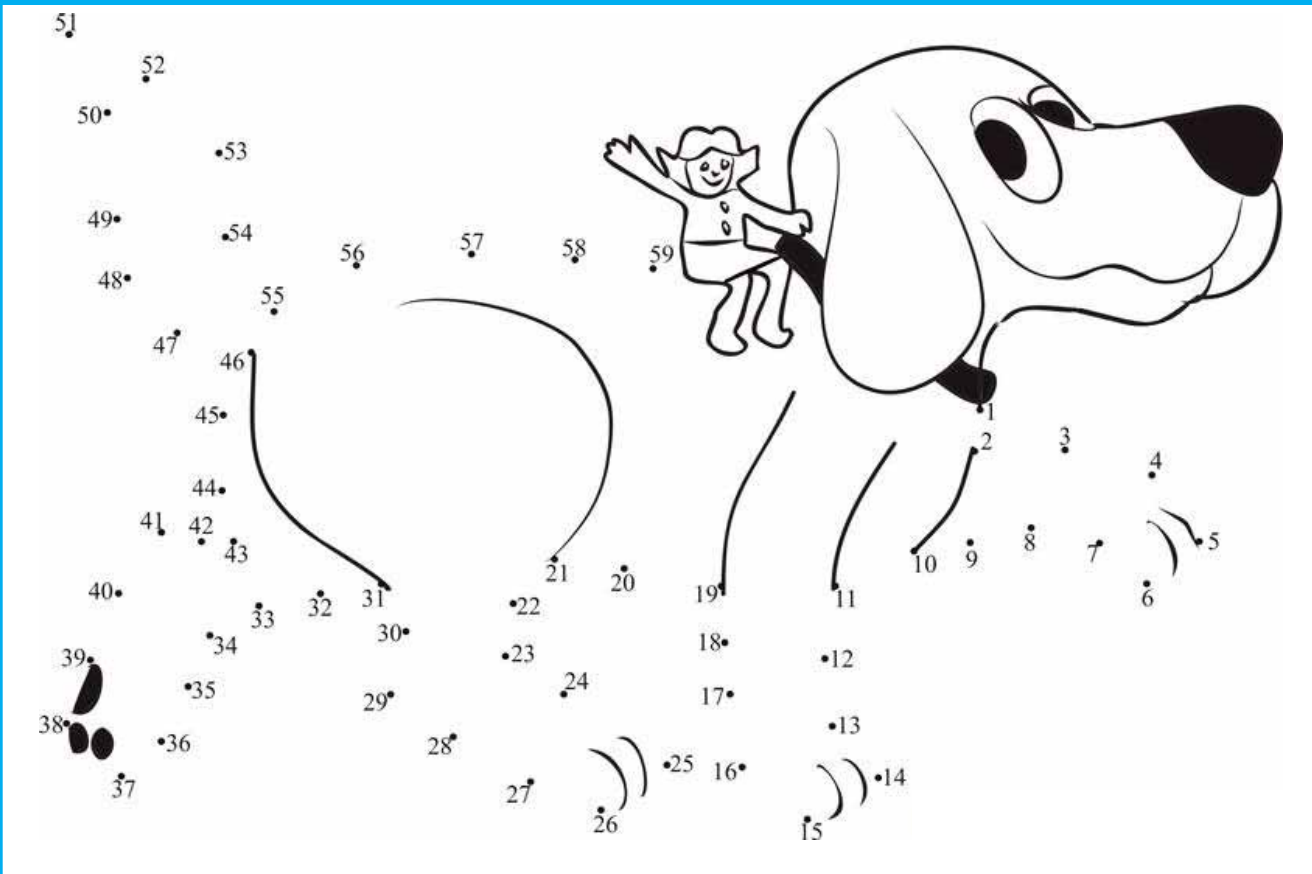
Color It



Kids Mazes







Join the dots



Word Scramble

Fall Word Scramble

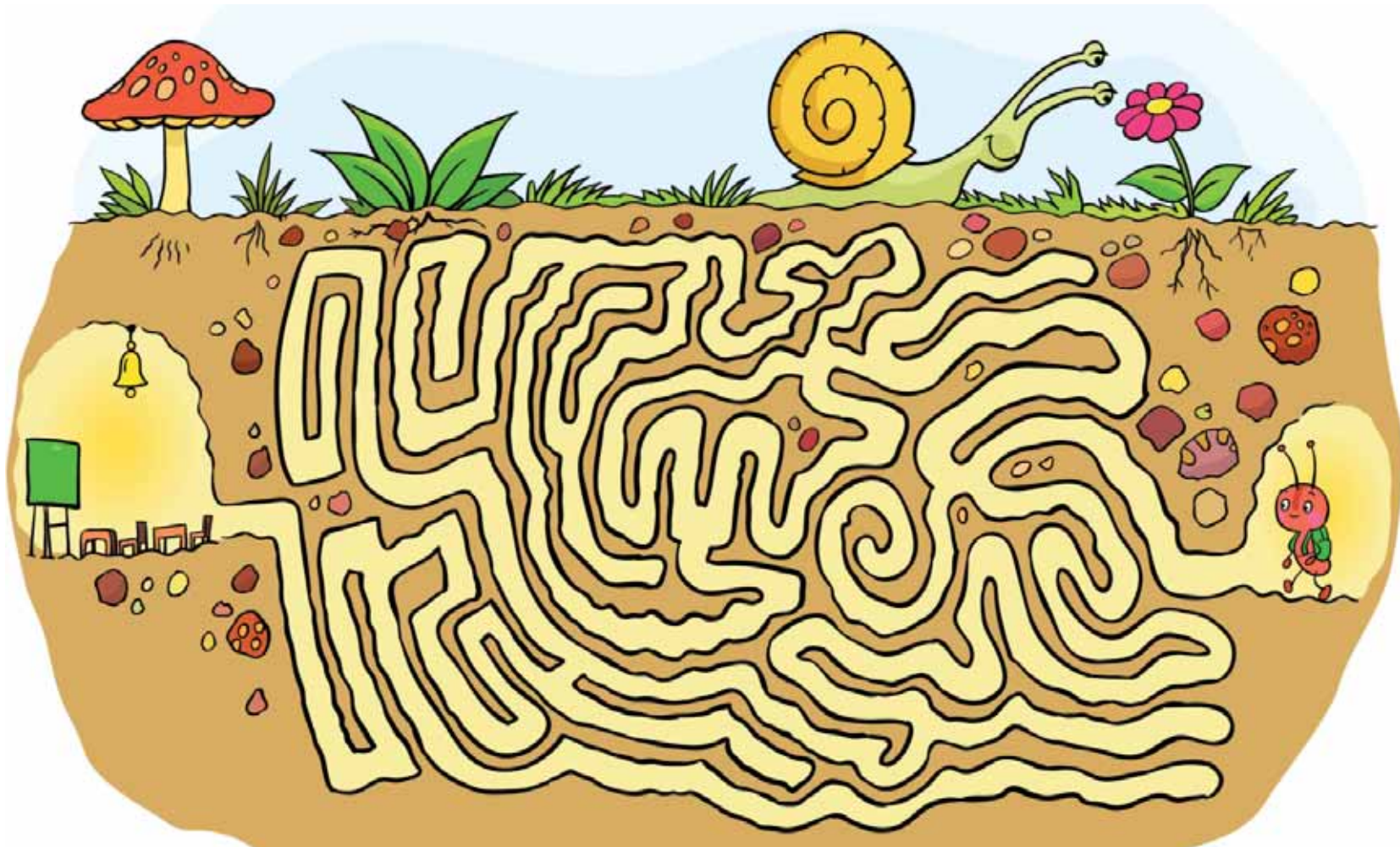
Unscramble the words and write the letters in the boxes. Use the letters in the shaded boxes to form a new word that answers the riddle.

ULQIT	<input type="text"/>	
LAVEES	<input type="text"/>	
BEEESTRMP	<input type="text"/>	
SVRTAEH	<input type="text"/>	
TECTHUNS	<input type="text"/>	
AUMUTN	<input type="text"/>	
ATOLFLOB	<input type="text"/>	

Q. What do you get when you drop a pumpkin?

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Virus hunters delve into Gabon forest

ZADIE CAVES, Gabon: The scene looks like something out of a science fiction movie, or maybe some dystopian TV series. Six men in yellow biohazard suits clamber in suffocating heat towards a cave in the heart of the Gabonese jungle. Their quest: to unlock new knowledge on how pathogens like coronavirus leap the species barrier to humans.

In the cave is their goal — a colony of bats. “Our job is to look for pathogens which could endanger humans and understand how transmission happens between species,”

explained Gael Maganga, a professor at the University of Franceville.

Bats can be hosts to viruses that do not harm them but can be dangerous to Homo sapiens, often crossing via other animals. COVID-19 is just the latest microbe believed to have taken the zoonotic path from animals to humans. It notably follows three other respiratory viruses, MERS in 2012, SARS in 2003 and H5N1 flu in 1997; the haemorrhagic virus Ebola in 1976; and AIDS, which is believed to have crossed over from chimps

about a century ago, possibly through hunters who handled infected meat.

Bat cave

Getting to the cave is hard work. The team have to almost wade through thick soil, pieces of bark and russet-colored leaves that exhale the musky perfume of the forest. The environment here — hot and humid and filled with natural hazards — is tough for humans, but perfect for viruses.

Bit by bit, the scent of damp earth yields

to the smell of bat droppings, which eventually becomes suffocating in the sticky air. Bees and silvery butterflies dance around the heads of the virus hunters, their faces dripping in sweat beneath their goggles. Above them, the tree tops seem to lose themselves in the sky, and gnarly creepers hang down, as if suspended from the heavens.

The mouth of the cave suddenly rears up ahead, and a stream of bats flies out. A thick white bedding of bat droppings spreads across the ground and the rocks. — AFP

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Stars

STAR TRACK

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

It's important to take a hard look at yourself and know where you're going, Aries. A little self-analysis never hurt anyone, especially when you feel like you aren't getting anywhere. But you tend to go a little overboard with self-criticism. Take today to try and ignore that little voice in your head, or even prove it wrong!

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

Taurus, you tend to run away from confrontation, but today you might not be able to avoid it. Your partner or a family member may be putting pressure on you. It's possible you've already worked out a solution to this problem. Tell your partner what he or she wants to hear so you can do what you want later.

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

You may feel a little weary today, Gemini. It's a good time to take stock of your life. You may have gotten some news about someone that has caused you some pain. This is a good time to rely on the support of your relationship in order to reenergize yourself. Take the time to let others take care of you.

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

You have the gift of being able to get your great ideas across to others. In your family, you may be the one who teaches your children about life and its responsibilities. Today someone might teach you something you didn't know. You should never forget that education means communication, and communication is the exchange of ideas.

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

There may be tension in the air as you go about your day, Leo. The leftover fatigue from the past few days is starting to wear on you. You may have managed to get into an argument with someone close to you, but there might be a reason for this. Take advantage of the situation to clear the air with your friend.

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

You don't live your life by society's rules, Virgo. Your freedom is what is most important to you. But despite your independence, there are days when you have the sudden, sinking feeling that you could wind up alone in this world. Today you should really begin to think about what the word "commitment" means to you. Is it really so scary?

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

Libra, life around you today almost seems like a (bad) dream. It's almost as if people are talking, but nothing intelligible is coming out of their mouths. Perhaps two people close to you are having problems getting along. You feel like stepping in and telling them to calm down and really listen to each other. Days like these are when people need you the most.

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

You can't spend all your time running from one activity to the next, Scorpio. You need to take a break from time to time. You have all the energy you need, but you should think about relaxing yourself as a whole. Your body may need its batteries recharged. Pretty soon you will be in the thick of the action and you will need all the energy you can get.

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

Today's planetary configuration has you wondering about an aspect of your life that causes you a good deal of hardship, Sagittarius. Maybe your partner is often away, and this is particularly hard on you. You'd like your sweetie to be there through thick and thin. This may be causing some tension in your relationship. Have you talked to your partner about your feelings? If not, you really should.

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

Capricorn, you may have been a little difficult to be around lately. You like to treat yourself to a little moodiness from time to time, but the people around you might appreciate a little cooperation. There are days when you don't want to grow up, when it's time to play. Do you get enough time to play? Think about it.

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

One thing is for sure, Aquarius, you'd rather be in bed with a good book than out in the stressful world. But you may be feeling like you're missing out on some of the good things in life. How much time do you spend with other people? Why not try to find someone who shares your taste for good books and bed? Think about it!

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

Your greatest quality is generosity, Pisces. Your nature isn't to give to others in order to get something back but for the pleasure of giving. This is how you get power and light. Think of all the people in the world who give of themselves without expecting anything in return. You don't have to make much effort to be one of those people - just give it a try.

Country Codes

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

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EU and UK close to Brexit deal

MEPs set new deadline, but last stumbling blocks remain

BRUSSELS: EU negotiator Michel Barnier told MEPs that it was “difficult but possible” to strike a post-Brexit trade deal with Britain by today, sources in the European Parliament said. Separately, political groups in the European Parliament warned that if they do not receive the text of a deal by Sunday they will not be able to ratify it before Britain leaves the single market on December 31.

“Good progress, but last stumbling blocks remain. We will only sign a deal protecting EU interests and principles,” Barnier tweeted after meeting leading MEPs.

According to three sources, Barnier told the leaders of the parliament’s main political groups that a deal by today was “difficult but possible”. He said Britain had accepted a mechanism to allow Brussels to respond if worker and environmental standards diverge in a way that affects fair competition.

But he said Britain had not yet said how it would monitor its state subsidies for business—with the EU wanting stricter independent oversight. And fisheries remain a point of dispute. Brussels has accepted that Britain will have sovereignty over its waters, and that London will set up a structure to assign quotas to EU boats. But the sides are arguing over how much fish Britain will gain and Europe insisting it improve its offer.

After briefing the heads of the European parliamentary groups, Barnier sat down once again with his British counterpart David Frost to press on with talks. Separately, EU Vice President Maros Sefkovic and senior UK minister Michael Gove were to hold a videoconference on the implementation of the existing Brexit withdrawal agreement. But time is running short to find a trade agreement for the future. Britain leaves the EU single market in just two weeks after an 11-month post-Brexit transition. If there is no follow-on trade agreement, tariffs will be imposed on cross-Channel commerce, fuelling the economic disruption caused by London’s departure. Any trade deal



Cranes are seen at the quay at the harbor CuxPort at the North Sea in Cuxhaven, northern Germany. As most of the trade handled here is with the UK, Cuxhaven is perhaps the most sensitive port on the German side affected by post-Brexit-trade. — AFP

reached by Barnier and Frost will have to be approved by the EU and UK parliaments, and special sessions may have to be held in the final days of this year.

‘Intolerable’ uncertainty

The British parliament is to go into recess yesterday, but a UK government spokesman said it could be recalled to endorse a deal. But MEPs in Brussels warned that they must

see the text of a deal by midnight on Sunday.

If that is the case, they could hold an extraordinary session “towards the end of December”, according to a statement from the leaders of the main political groups and parliament’s committee on UK relations. Dacian Ciolos, head of the Renew centrist group said that the MEPs had given Johnson until Sunday to make a decision.

“The uncertainty hanging over citizens and

businesses as a result of UK choices becomes intolerable,” he said. Iratxe Garcia Perez, head of the center-left Socialists and Democrats bloc, warned: “We will not be rushed into a consent vote of the Brexit deal before the end of the year if we don’t have access to the text by Sunday.” “After that we cannot reasonably scrutinize the deal before the end of the year,” warned Manfred Weber, leader of the conservative EPP bloc. — AFP

Business

BoE keeps rate at record low, awaiting Brexit talks outcome

US, UK discussing tariffs before trade deal: Lighthizer

LONDON: The Bank of England kept its key interest rate at a record-low 0.1 percent yesterday and maintained the huge amount of cash stimulus it has been pumping around the economy. Following its final monetary policy meeting before the end of the Brexit transition period on December 31, the BoE said it stands ready to carry out "whatever additional action is necessary" as the coronavirus pandemic slashes economic growth.

The central bank said the start of vaccine rollouts "is likely to reduce the downside risks to the economic outlook from COVID".

"Financial markets worldwide, and some surveys of businesses and consumers, have reacted positively to these developments which are likely to support future UK and global activity," it added in minutes of its regular meeting held on Wednesday. The bank has pumped out £450 billion under its QE-Quantitative Easing-stimulus program since March, when Covid-19 prompted Britain's first coronavirus lockdown. The pandemic led the BoE to also slash its main interest rate to 0.1 percent. Prior to this, it pumped hundreds of billions of pounds into the UK economy over the past decade in the wake of the 2008-09 global financial crisis and the 2016 Brexit referendum. Britain leaves the EU single market in just two weeks after an 11-month post-Brexit transition.

The BoE last week said that while UK banks were "resilient" to the risks of Brexit and coronavirus, financial services could face "disruption" when the transition period ends.

Britain left the EU on January 31 this year but remains under its rules until December 31 while it tries to establish the terms of its new relationship with the bloc. The country has meanwhile been one of the worst hit by the pandemic with the most deaths in Europe and an 11 percent contraction to its economy.

Meanwhile, Britain and the United States are holding talks to cut trade tariffs imposed in a transatlantic spat with the EU over subsidies for aerospace giant Airbus, US trade representative

Robert Lighthizer said yesterday. At the same time, he played down expectations of a major UK-US free trade deal promised by President Donald Trump and sought by Prime Minister Boris Johnson. "I'm talking to (UK international trade secretary) Liz Truss about trying to work out some kind of a deal," he told the BBC in an interview.

"I'm hopeful we can get some kind of an agreement out you know, we don't have a lot of time left."

The talks come after Britain last week announced it would drop tariffs on US products which the EU imposed after the United States hiked duties on European produce because of state support for Airbus. The change will come into force from January 1, when Britain leaves the European Union single market and customs union as a result of Brexit.

In doing so, London is hoping to curry favor with Washington and pave the way for a wider trade deal.

Lighthizer suggested the United States could lower its punitive tariffs, notably on Scotch whisky. "We have the advantage in that both the US and the UK—particularly the current government of the UK—are not big subsidizers, where some other countries are more inclined to subsidize," he added. "So it would be helpful if we could come to some kind of agreement." Trump is in the dog days of his turbulent presidency, just as Britain gears up for Brexit and is in the process of finalizing free trade deals around the world. A deal with the world's biggest economy would be a huge prize but is controversial in Britain, with fears Johnson could sign away access for US companies to the state-run National Health Service.

There are also lingering doubts about food standards, including imports of US chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-injected beef. Lighthizer said it was "extremely likely" a deal will be signed "before long" but said "tough compromises" were needed, par-



LONDON: A pedestrian wearing a mask because of the coronavirus pandemic walks past the Bank of England in the City of London. — AFP

ticularly on agricultural issues. Much would depend on Britain's future relations with the EU, which is its largest single trading partner, details of which are still being thrashed out in talks in Brussels. "The nature of our relationship is going to be affected by the nature of the relationship between the EU and the UK, right," he said.

"They're a much bigger trading partner to you than we are, so that has an impact... I've always had the view that there's just an awful lot of trade between the UK and the EU and it was hard to see there weren't going to be any rules to that." London has already announced a number of trade deals with countries including Japan, largely based on existing accords with the EU. — AFP

EU approves Google's Fitbit acquisition

BRUSSELS: The European Union yesterday approved Google's \$2.1 billion purchase of smartwatch maker Fitbit, after the tech titan agreed to conditions including not using health data from European users for advertising. "We can approve the proposed acquisition of Fitbit by Google because the commitments will ensure that the market for wearables and the nascent digital health space will remain open and competitive," EU competition chief Margrethe Vestager said, in a statement.

"The commitments will determine how Google can use the data collected for ad purposes, how interoperability between competing wearables and Android will be safeguarded and how users can continue to share health and fitness data." The green light from the European Commission comes after it conducted an "in-depth" probe into the takeover over concerns that it would give Google access to users' health details and an unfair market advantage.

In November last year the tech titan an-

nounced it had reached an agreement to buy Fitbit, which produces wearable fitness trackers and watches that communicate with a health monitoring app.

The firms said they hoped to conclude the deal by the end of 2020, subject to regulators signing off on it. The EU said Google had agreed to a raft of commitments for an initial 10 years to protect personal data and ensure that the acquisition did not squeeze out other smartwatch manufacturers.

"Google will not use for Google Ads the health and wellness data collected from wrist-worn wearable devices and other Fitbit devices," the Commission said. Further conditions included allowing other manufacturers to keep accessing Google's Android operating system and any future updates without it "degrading users experience". "The Commission concluded that the proposed transaction, as modified by the commitments, would no longer raise competition concerns," the statement said.

Google had already promised not to use Fitbit health and wellness data for Google ads, but the acquisition attracted concerns from consumer groups and competition authorities.

Regulators and competitors feared that Google's own smartwatch performs a similar function and acquiring Fitbit's user data will strengthen its already powerful position in targeted advertising. — AFP

US jobless claims rise for second week to 885,000

WASHINGTON: New applications for US jobless benefits increased for the second week in a row, according to government data released yesterday, with 885,000 applications submitted last week.

The rise in seasonally adjusted claims was much worse than expected and 23,000 above the previous week's upwardly revised level, the Labor Department reported. It was also the fourth week of increases over the past five, indicating layoffs are rising amid prolonged and ongoing negotiations in Congress over a new stimulus package to aid the economy's recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Claims skyrocketed after business shutdowns to stop COVID-19 started in March, and have remained above the worst single week of the 2008-2010 global financial crisis

ever since. The data for the week ended December 12 also showed another 455,037 people, not seasonally adjusted, filed claims under a program for workers not normally eligible. "Recent weeks data are signaling a deteriorating trend in the labor market," Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said.

"The health crisis is likely to get worse after the upcoming holiday which will translate into even wider limitations on activity, business closures and mounting job losses." About 20.6 million people were receiving benefits through all government programs as of the week ended November 28, an increase of around 1.6 million. Congress passed the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act rescue package in the pandemic's early days, which created a number of programs to expand the unemployment safety net.

That included the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program for the long-term unemployed, and as of the end of November more than 9.2 million people were receiving benefits from that program, up 688,793 from the prior week. But that safety net will expire at the end of the month if Congress does not act. — AFP

Business

Well drilling thrives in Caracas as city's water supply flounders

Crisis-struck Venezuela struggles through hyperinflation, recession

CARACAS: Alfredo Araya used to dig wells on farms or out in the countryside, but due to a failing water supply he says demand for his services has recently exploded in Venezuela's capital Caracas. Using a huge drill to perforate the soil, Araya struck the underground aquifer below an apartment bloc in Caracas' comfortable Los Palos Grandes neighborhood so that residents now have access to water that jets out of a hose.

Drilling down 90 meters (295 feet) to find a water supply can cost \$20,000 in a country where the minimum wage—including a government food stamp—is worth just over \$2 a month. But in Caracas—a city of seven million people—neighbors have been pooling resources and “paying together” to fund wells, said Araya, a 68-year-old engineer.

Dalila Escalona put \$400 of her savings into one such fund. “We’re making a great sacrifice... the collection hasn’t been easy,” the 59-year-old architect said.

“Although we’re all committed, we’re not all able to pay.” After five months of negotiations via a WhatsApp group, her building’s residents were finally able to pool the necessary money to build the well. It’s a scenario being repeated all over Caracas and the numbers are growing exponentially, Araya says.

Crisis-struck Venezuela has struggled through three years of hyperinflation and been

in recession for seven years, with a water supply that has suffered badly. The independent Public Services Observatory estimates that almost nine out of every 10 Venezuelans suffers from interruptions in their water supply, with some communities going months without receiving a drop.

The reserve that supplies Caracas has seen output decrease by 40 percent in the last 20 years. More than 55 percent of Venezuela’s 30 million people have to store water in pots and bottles, according to the observatory, while 18.5 percent pay for water to be delivered by tankers.

Fierce competition

Caracas is sitting on “a huge water deposit” that is supplied by rain and streams that run from the El Avila mountain to the north of the capital, Jose Maria de Viana, the former president of the state water company Hidrocapital, said. Several parts of the capital were supplied by this reserve in the 1950s and ‘60s but wells were gradually replaced by water mains completed in 1980, de Viana said.

Reservoirs located miles away from the capital are used by Hidrocapital to supply Caracas.

Water was provided almost free of charge under late former president Hugo Chavez who came to power in 1999 but that took huge public investment and the pumping stations have fallen

market analyst at IG trading group.

“Market watchers move on from the non-event of last night’s... (Fed) meeting to the BoE meeting, which is likely to be equally dull in terms of any policy decisions. “But with Brexit just days away the bank’s view of the situation will be of great interest, providing a useful counter to the cycle of briefing and counter-briefing from the UK and EU sides.” EU negotiator Michel Barnier yesterday said talks with Britain on a post-Brexit trade deal were progressing but that there had been no breakthrough.

“Good progress, but last stumbling blocks remain. We will only sign a deal protecting EU interests and principles,” Barnier tweeted. Regarding US stimulus, lawmakers said they were hopeful of passing a much-needed rescue package for the economy as they haggled over details of a bipartisan proposal that appeared to have broken months of deadlock.

With the two most contentious items removed from the plan, which is said to amount to around \$900 billion, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said leaders “made major headway”.

As the stimulus talks continued, the Fed held its final policy meeting of the year at which it gave an upbeat assessment of the outlook for the world’s top economy next year and pledged to maintain its huge bond-buying, monetary-easing program until it is back on an even keel.

But bank chief Jerome Powell reiterated the need for US lawmakers to reach a stimulus agreement. —AFP



CARACAS: People fill plastic containers with water from a spring water tank at the Chacao neighborhood in Caracas. The drilling of wells in the Venezuelan capital gained strength during the pandemic, in view of the deficient service of drinking water. —AFP

into disrepair under his successor Nicolas Maduro. Whereas 20 years ago Caracas received 20,000 liters (5,280 gallons) of water a second, it now receives only 12,000.

Altogether, the factors have created fierce competition between drilling companies in the capital.

Requests have multiplied during the coron-

avirus pandemic as many people began to see “the necessity” of having a well, Araya said. But it’s not all smooth sailing. These companies need state permits to operate, which can take time.

And when drilling on public land, security services can ask for “contributions,” said Araya. The bribes, he added, are simply “a toll you have to pay.” —AFP

Stock rise on US stimulus, Brexit hopes

LONDON: Stock markets mostly gained yesterday as investors kept an eye on US stimulus progress and the rollout of vaccines but surging infections and new lockdowns tempered gains.

The pound held around 19-month highs against the dollar on Brexit optimism and ahead of a monetary policy update from the Bank of England due at 1200 GMT. The strengthened pound though weighed on London’s benchmark FTSE 100 stocks index featuring multinationals earnings in dollars.

Eurozone equity indices climbed after gains across much of Asia, while the dollar struggled after a Federal Reserve update.

Bitcoin extended gains to a fresh record above \$22,000. The unit, which was wallowing around \$5,000 in March, has soldiered higher since online payments giant PayPal said it would enable account holders to use cryptocurrency. “Markets overall are still in a positive frame of mind, managing to find the good news in an otherwise dull Fed statement and looking forward to some progress on a US stimulus deal, the major narrative behind this market bounce,” said Chris Beauchamp, chief

EU court raps ‘Dieselgate’ car companies

BRUSSELS: The European Court of Justice ruled yesterday that it had been illegal for car companies to install devices to defeat emissions tests and mislead motorists about diesel pollution levels.

“A manufacturer cannot install a defeat device which systematically improves, during approval procedures, the performance of the vehicle emission control system and thus obtain approval of the vehicle,” the court said. The statement identified the manufacturer subject to the complaint as “Company X”, but the case is understood as relating to the “Dieselgate” scandal at German car giant Volkswagen (VW).

The VW group—whose subsidiaries include Porsche, Audi, Skoda and Seat—admitted in September 2015 that it had installed software to rig emissions in 11 million diesel vehicles worldwide.

The so-called “defeat devices” made the vehicles appear less polluting in lab tests than they were on the road. Two VW employees have been sentenced to jail in the United States, as cases linked to the scandal spread around the world, and four former executives and engineers from the group are now on trial in Germany. In the latest case, French prosecutors conducted an investigation



and referred their findings to the ECJ, seeking clarifications of EU law.

The court found that the company had installed software in the cars that only recorded emissions levels in the vehicle when it was being driven in similar conditions to those when it was initially tested and approved. It rejected the argument that the device could help protect the engine from wear and tear over time, since its main purpose was to skew emissions readings.

“In order to be justified, the presence of such a device must allow the engine to be protected against sudden and exceptional damage,” the statement said. “A defeat device which systematically improves, during approval procedures, the performance of the vehicle emission control system... and thus obtains approval of the vehicle cannot come within the scope of the exception to the prohibition on such devices provided for by the regulation.” —AFP

Business

British hauliers fear bumps in the road as Brexit looms

Situation prompts companies to stockpile on both sides of the border

CHOBHAM, United Kingdom: “It’s an absolute mess,” said Terry Goodwin, whose haulage company is one of many British businesses racing against time to prepare for Brexit.

Goodwin feels bitter about all the work needed to prepare for the “D-day” when Britain leaves the EU single market, as his company, Conference Haul International, is only just beginning to recover from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. At its headquarters in Chobham, southwest of London, rows of yellow HGVs (heavy goods vehicles) are standing idle—a visible sign of the economic slowdown due to the pandemic and of the uncertain future for companies on both sides of the Channel.

“I feel sick in the stomach,” said Goodwin, who is managing director of the firm, which specializes in transporting conference equipment and usually has lorries criss-crossing Europe. Two weeks before the end of the Brexit transition period, in which EU rules still apply while both sides thrash out terms of their new relationship, the company has an “overload of problems”, he told AFP. “In the meantime we’re trying to prepare for Brexit, what paperwork we will need to go to Europe.”

One thing is sure: hauliers know that whatever the result of negotiations on post-Brexit relations, they will face a lot of red tape. The situation has encouraged companies to stockpile

on both sides of the border, particularly those involved in industrial and food production.

Inevitably this caused long tailbacks in the area around the Channel port of Dover, with lorries crawling along at walking pace for miles (kilometers). Knowing the situation could get worse on January 1, the government is building huge lorry parks in southeast England, and will even introduce an access permit for heavy goods vehicles wanting to enter Kent, where Dover is located.

“Deal or not, a customs border that functions effectively for road freight is IMPOSSIBLE to deliver by 1.1.21. UK processes way behind, EU businesses nowhere near ready too”, Duncan Buchanan, policy director of the Road Haulage Association, warned on Twitter at the weekend.

Across the Channel in Calais, France has recruited dozens of customs officers and invested in infrastructure and a “smart border” system. Lorries departing Britain will show a barcode in Dover that French customs will immediately receive and use to place them into the right line on arrival.

“Keeping things fluid was our main concern, due to the nature of this border: firstly the volumes handled... secondly because of the short crossing time, and finally because there are no shipping containers here,” said Benoit Rochet, general manager of the port of Calais.



Trucks queue on the A20 road to enter the Port of Dover to board ferries to Europe, in Dover, Britain in this file photo.

So much paperwork

Yet British companies reliant on haulage firms are also breaking out into a cold sweat as the final date looms. “My biggest fear is tariffs”, to be put in place in case of ‘no deal’, said Michael Allen, whose company MJ Allen is based in Kent and supplies auto components to Europe.

“You can’t prepare for what you don’t know”, he said, raising the prospect of opening warehouses in Europe and foreseeing an inevitable

drop in economic activity involving the bloc.

For now, haulage companies are trying to familiarize themselves with the intricate rules of Brexit, set to end nearly 50 years of unrestricted travel to and from the continent. They are having to relearn skills: dealing with paperwork, filling in a customs declaration in advance, acquiring the right software, requesting an international HGV license and being ready for border controls to stop every lorry. — AFP

Bitcoin’s rollercoaster ride

PARIS: Virtual currency bitcoin—which broke the \$20,000 barrier in trading for the first time Wednesday—morphed from an academic paper to one of the world’s most closely-watched crypto currencies. Here is a look at its tumultuous rise, fall and rise again.

Mysterious beginnings

As the world reels from the 2008 financial crash, a nine-page paper called “Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System” is published on October 31 by someone called Satoshi Nakamoto. The mysterious Nakamoto—whose real identity still remains a mystery—proposes creating a system where payments can be sent “directly from one party to another without going through a financial institution”. It is a master plan for an alternative to currency not controlled by any central bank and that could be accessed by anyone.

‘Genesis block’

The first 50 bitcoins were born on January 3, 2009. These were bunched into a single unit called a block, the first of which was called the “genesis block”. From then on, every new block was attached to the one that came before it, creating what is today commonly known as a block chain. The first transaction between two accounts occurred nine days later, when Satoshi Nakamoto sent 10 bitcoins to computer scientist Hal Finney as a test.

0.00076 dollars

Bitcoin’s first value was deduced on October 5, 2009 from its cost of production — .076 US cents. At the time, the best way to get bitcoins was to “mine” them by using computers to solve difficult puzzles that release bitcoins from a block.

The electricity costs were offset by bitcoin’s real-world value.



ISTANBUL: People pass in front of a crypto currency “Bitcoin Change” shop near the Grand Bazaar yesterday. — AFP

The puzzles get more difficult with the rise in the number of users, making their mining progressively more expensive.

The \$100 million pizza

On May 22, 2010, a virtual currency developer in Florida got a delivery man to accept 10,000 bitcoins for two pizzas. It was the first known bitcoin payment, worth about \$41 at the time. Those bitcoins are now worth in excess of \$200 million. May 22 is now known as “Bitcoin Pizza Day”.

Nakamoto vanishes

Nakamoto announced his withdrawal from the project on December 12, 2010, ceasing all bitcoin operations four months later. The identity and number of bitcoins owned by Nakamoto remains a mystery. — AFP

Shareholders back Norwegian Air rescue plan

OSLAO: Shareholders of struggling low-cost airline Norwegian Air Shuttle yesterday backed a rescue plan that includes debt conversion, a new share issue and reduction of the fleet.

Hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on travel, having already been in financial trouble before, Norwegian recently applied for bankruptcy protection in both Ireland and Norway, in order to buy time to work out a solution with its creditors. In early December, the company’s management presented a plan to stay afloat involving a large-scale conversion of debt into equity, a new rights issue to raise up to four billion Norwegian kroner (\$466 million, 381 million euros), and the selling of an unspecified number of aircraft.

During an extraordinary general meeting yesterday, shareholders overwhelmingly agreed to back the plan, granting management the mandate to begin negotiations with creditors. The company, a pioneer in the low-cost long haul sector, has been in the red since 2017 and its debt amounted to 48.5 billion kroner at the end of September, in part the result of a major expansion by the company.

Just six of the 140 aircraft it had in service at the start of the year are still flying, on Norwegian domestic routes, while only 600 employees among a formerly 10,000-strong payroll are still at work. Shares in Norwegian were up over 10 percent after lunch on the Oslo Stock Exchange, though over the past year, they have lost 98 percent of their value. — AFP

Sports

Australian Open gets February start as virus hits second Slam season

MELBOURNE: The Australian Open was pushed back to February 8 yesterday after weeks of negotiations as coronavirus disruption hits a second Grand Slam tennis season. Men's qualifiers will be held in Doha but Australia will host a series of build-up events including the flagship ATP Cup, the men's ATP Tour said, announcing its early 2021 schedule.

The three-week delay to the season's opening Grand Slam comes after this year's Wimbledon was cancelled — for the first time since World War II — the French Open was postponed and the US Open was played behind closed doors. Fans are expected to be allowed at Melbourne Park, the tournament's venue, as the coronavirus is under control in Australia, but players will need to undergo 14 days of quarantine.

Confirmation of the February 8-21 dates follows protracted talks between Tennis Australia and state authorities in Melbourne, which emerged from a months-long lockdown in October following a second wave of COVID-19.

Originally due to start on January 18, players will now arrive in Australia from January 15 to serve two weeks in a bio-secure bubble, many of them coming from countries where the pandemic is still raging. Earlier reports said they would stay at designated hotels but would be allowed to practice and exercise for up to five hours a day,

shuttled between their accommodation and Melbourne Park.

There was no immediate confirmation of the arrangements from Tennis Australia. The ATP said men's qualifiers for the Grand Slam would be held from January 10-13 in Doha, before players and limited support staff travel to Australia.

A slimmed-down, 12-team ATP Cup, the relocated Adelaide International, and an ATP 250 tournament will all be held in Melbourne ahead of the Slam which is now scheduled from February 8-21. There was no word on where the women will play their qualifiers, with the WTA yet to announce its early-season schedule. But WTA tournaments are also expected to be played in Melbourne before the Open.

'Health and safety paramount'

"The reconfigured calendar for the start of the 2021 season represents a huge collaborative effort across tennis, under challenging circumstances," said ATP chairman Andrea Gaudenzi. "Health and safety will continue to be paramount as we navigate the challenges ahead, and I want to thank everyone involved for their commitment to finding solutions to launch our 2021 season," he added.

World number one Novak Djokovic is expected to be back and

aiming for a ninth Australian Open title after overcoming Austria's Dominic Thiem in a five-set final earlier this year. But there is doubt over Swiss great Roger Federer, 39, who revealed this week he was in a "race against time" to be fit as his recovery from two rounds of knee surgery takes longer than expected. American Sofia Kenin is expected to defend her maiden Grand Slam crown after defeating Spaniard Garbine Muguruza in three sets in this year's women's final.

Australian Open boss Craig Tiley had been hoping that Melbourne Park crowds would be between 25 and 50 percent of normal capacity. But with coronavirus now under control in Australia there are hopes that number could be raised, if there are no more community transmissions of COVID-19.

The men's season will start with the ATP 250 Delray Beach Open alongside a new single-year ATP 250 event in Antalya, Turkey before moving to Doha for the Australian Open qualifying. Details of weeks eight-13 will be announced separately, the ATP said, but the clay-court season from week 14 is due to remain unchanged at this time.

Events cancelled in 2021 due to the pandemic include the ASB Classic in Auckland and the New York Open, while the Maharashtra Open in India is under a cloud. The Rio Open will not take place as originally scheduled, with alternative dates being considered. —AFP

Cavani charged by FA over social media post

LONDON: Edinson Cavani has been charged with misconduct by the Football Association for a now-deleted social media post containing a Spanish phrase that is offensive in some contexts and for which the Manchester United star apologized.

The 33-year-old Uruguayan striker's Instagram post thanked a friend for his congratulations after scoring twice as United came from 2-0 down to beat Southampton 3-2 last month and included the Spanish word "negrito" (small black person). He later deleted the post and apologized when it was pointed out the meaning that could be attached to it.

Both United and the player said at the time that the word was clearly used in an affectionate manner and has different connotations in South America. "Edinson Cavani has been charged with misconduct for a breach of FA Rule E3, in relation to a social media post on Thursday 29 November 2020," read the FA statement.

"It is alleged that, contrary to FA Rule E3.1, a comment posted on the Manchester United FC player's Instagram page was insulting and/or abusive and/or improper and/or brought the game into disrepute. It is further alleged that the comment constitutes an 'Aggravated Breach', which is defined



SOUTHAMPTON: In this file photo taken on November 29, 2020 Manchester United's Uruguayan striker Edinson Cavani celebrates scoring their second goal during the English Premier League football match between Southampton and Manchester United at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton, southern England on November 29, 2020. —AFP

in FA Rule E3.2, as it included a reference, whether express or implied, to colour and/or race and/or ethnic origin."

The striker — who has been out of action for the past two matches due to a muscle injury though he has now returned to training — has until January 4 2021 to provide a response to the charge. United said they and Cavani would consult over their response to the charge. The striker could potentially be suspended for more than three matches under rules relating to offences of discrimination brought in by the FA this season. —AFP

Wednesday as the Los Angeles Lakers scored a 112-107 victory over the Phoenix Suns. James, who barely two months ago led the Lakers to their NBA Finals triumph in Orlando, bagged 11 points with two rebounds and two assists during 15 first half minutes in Phoenix.

Davis added 10 points with four rebounds in 18 minutes on court. Both James and Davis were rested for the second half. New Lakers

Ex-Barcelona star Iniesta vows to play on after surgery

TOKYO: Former Barcelona star Andres Iniesta has promised his glittering career won't be cut short by the thigh injury that has left him facing four months on the sidelines. The World Cup-winning Spanish midfielder, 36, said he planned to be back for his Japanese club Vissel Kobe next season after undergoing surgery in Barcelona on a ruptured tendon.

Iniesta suffered the injury in the knockout stages of the Asian Champions League, where he helped Vissel reach the semi-finals before they were knocked out on Sunday. "The surgery has been a success and I am feeling very well," Iniesta said in a statement posted on Twitter, with a photo of himself giving the thumbs-up from his hospital bed. "My objective is to get back on track as soon as possible and enjoy what I like doing the most. All my energy is already put into the recovery and the work that lies ahead." The Spanish maestro was injured and substituted during Vissel's round-of-16 victory over China's Shanghai SIPG in Doha, a match in which he scored. He made a telling cameo appearance in the quarter-final against South Korea's Suwon Bluewings, coming on as a 113th-minute substitute and scoring Vissel's first penalty in a 7-6 shoot-out victory.

Iniesta clutched his thigh and grimaced immediately

signing Marc Gasol added three points in a 21-minute appearance. Kyle Kuzma led the scoring for the Lakers with 23 points.

The coronavirus-interrupted 2019-2020 campaign — which shut down for four months between March and July — eventually wrapped up in Florida in October. With the new season tipping off on December 22, it means teams will have the shortest off-season



AL-WAKRAH, Qatar: Kobe's midfielder Andres Iniesta reacts in pain after scoring his penalty during the shootout in the AFC Champions League quarter finals football match between Japan's Vissel Kobe and Korea's Suwon Samsung Bluewings on December 10, 2020 at the al-Janoub Stadium in the Qatari city of Al-Wakrah. —AFP

after slotting his kick past Suwon goalkeeper Yang Sang-min, and did not appear in Vissel's 2-1 semi-final defeat by Ulsan Hyundai three days later. Iniesta joined Vissel in 2018 after making 442 appearances for Barcelona, where he was the midfield dynamo in some of the club's greatest ever teams. Barcelona wished Iniesta a speedy recovery in a Twitter post on Wednesday, as did Spanish side Albacete, where Iniesta began his youth career. Spanish basketball star Pau Gasol, a six-time NBA All-Star and winner of two Olympic silver medals with the Spanish national team, also sent a message of encouragement. —AFP

in NBA history.

Lakers head coach Frank Vogel had opted to rest both James and Davis for the team's first two pre-season games against the Los Angeles Clippers. The Lakers have been installed as favorites for the upcoming season, strengthening their squad with the addition of Gasol, German point guard Dennis Schroder and center Montrezl Harrell. —AFP

James, Davis make pre-season bow as Lakers edge Suns

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James and Anthony Davis eased into the NBA's pre-season on

Sports

Barcelona's 'best game of season' as fightback reignites title bid

MADRID: Barcelona reignited their La Liga title push on Wednesday when they came back from a goal down to defeat Real Sociedad 2-1, with veteran defender and goal scorer Jordi Alba claiming it was the team's "best game of the season".

The win allowed Barcelona to move six points off the top of the table whereas defeat meant Sociedad lost their spot as leaders to be replaced by Atletico Madrid. However, Barca did it the hard way. Sociedad, without a point at Barcelona in 25 years, took the lead through Willian Jose in the 26th minute.

Spanish international Alba leveled four minutes later with Frenkie de Jong adding the second just before the break. "It was our best game of the season. We came into it knowing very well what we had to do," said left-back Alba. "We put pressure on them, especially in the first half. Tonight I saw a very good Barca. We are happy with the attitude. We knew how to suffer. This should give us more confidence for the rest of La Liga as there are a lot of games left."

Under-siege Barca coach Ronald Koeman played in the team which last yielded a home point to Sociedad in 1995. The Dutchman was fearing the worst when Willian Jose scored with his right foot from close range after a Portu corner.

Alba's equalizer arrived on the half-hour mark after a fine interchange of passes be-

tween Antoine Griezmann and Pedri. French star Griezmann hit the bar six minutes later after taking the ball past Sociedad keeper Alex Remiro.

De Jong then gave Barca a 42nd-minute lead with a right-foot drive for his first goal since February. The goal, however, was only allowed after a VAR consultation for a possible offside. Griezmann had back-to-back chances to increase the lead early in the second period. Lionel Messi required treatment on a calf injury as the second half wound down before Barca goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen denied Willian Jose from long range and then Alexander Isak.

On Tuesday, Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane hailed Karim Benzema as the best centre-forward in French history after his match-winning double against Athletic Bilbao put them into third place, level on points with Atletico and Sociedad.

Bilbao's Ander Capa had cancelled out Toni Kroos's thumping strike before Benzema, 32, struck twice late on, heading home a cross with 16 minutes remaining and finishing clinically in stoppage time from Luka Modric's pass.

Afterwards Zidane had no hesitation in declaring Benzema as France's best ever centre-forward, putting him at the top of a list that includes Thierry Henry, Kylian Mbappe, Jean-Pierre Papin and Just Fontaine.

The forward, sporting a striking new blue hairstyle, stepped up to power the spot-kick into the bottom corner. It took Tuchel's men 10 more minutes to secure victory, with Rafinha setting up Kean to grab his eighth goal since joining PSG on loan from Everton in the close season.

Yazici strikes again for Lille

Earlier, in-form Yusuf Yazici scored the winner as Lille eased to a 2-0 victory at Dijon, despite uncertainty behind the scenes at the table-toppers. Lille president and owner Gerard Lopez revealed earlier on Wednesday that he could sell the club to foreign investors, against the backdrop of a difficult financial situation exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. "I'm analyzing the takeover offer I received," Lopez said, adding that if a sale took place he would "completely withdraw" from the club.

But Lille continued their serene progress on the pitch this season, as Turkish international Yazici gave them a 19th-minute lead with his fifth league goal of the campaign on only his third Ligue 1 start this term. The 23-year-old calmly slotted home compatriot Zeki Celik's cutback to net for the 11th time in all competitions in a breakthrough season. Lille thought they had been awarded a late spot-kick for a trip on Burak Yilmaz, but the decision was overturned following a VAR review.

Christophe Galtier's men did double their advantage in injury time, though, wrapping up the three points as Timothy Weah, son of former Ballon d'Or winner George Weah, grabbed his first Ligue 1 goal since scoring for PSG in August 2018.

"We'll next host PSG in a massive match in an empty stadium (on Sunday)," said Lille coach Galtier. "The two teams will be tired and the Parisians might be slightly superior. But in one match, there is everything to play for."

Lyon were a goal down at half-time against Brest after goal-



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Spanish defender Jordi Alba celebrates his goal with Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi during the Spanish league football match between FC Barcelona and Real Sociedad at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Wednesday. —AFP

"For me, he's the best — it's very clear," said Zidane, the French midfield legend who won the 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 with Les Bleus. "He's proved it — he's played at

Real Madrid for a very long time, he has more than 500 appearances, all his goals... his record, all he's accomplished here speaks for itself," Zidane added. —AFP

Blue-haired Mbappe helps PSG keep pace with Lille ahead of Sunday clash

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe scored a penalty as Paris Saint-Germain cruised to a 2-0 win over 10-man Lorient on Wednesday, keeping the reigning champions just one point behind Lille ahead of their visit to the leaders this weekend.

Mbappe's second-half penalty, when Andrew Gravillon was sent off, and Moise Kean's strike helped PSG to victory after Lille, who host the Champions League runners-up on Sunday, beat Dijon by the same scoreline.

Lyon dropped to third place, a point behind PSG, after a dramatic 2-2 draw with Brest. Marseille, who have two games in hand on the top three, slipped five points behind the leaders after a 2-1 defeat at Rennes.

PSG coach Thomas Tuchel after the game said that Neymar, who sprained his ankle last Sunday against Lyon, could return this weekend. "For Neymar we will do everything — that is the good news," said the German. "I can't say 'No, he's not playing against Lille'. It is possible. We can try, we will try everything."

PSG had 81 percent of possession in the first half against struggling Lorient without creating many clear-cut chances, with Lorient's Teremas Moffi wasting the best opportunity of the opening period when he fired wide when clean through on goal. But the match was effectively decided less than five minutes after the break, as visiting full-back Gravillon was harshly sent off for a nudge on Mbappe in the box.



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe celebrates after scoring during the French L1 football match between Paris-Saint Germain (PSG) and FC Lorient at The Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris on Wednesday. —AFP

keeper Anthony Lopes's own goal, but Memphis Depay's penalty and a goal for Maxwel Cornet looked to have seen them keep pace with Lille. But Romain Faivre scored a re-taken spot-kick in the 93rd minute after Brendan Chardonnet's initial effort was saved by Lopes, who was off his line.

Marseille led at Rennes through Pape Gueye, but the midfielder was sent off in the 36th minute and goals from Hamari Traore and Adrien Hunou ended the home team's nine-match winless streak. Elsewhere, fifth-placed Montpellier slipped six points behind Lille with a 2-0 home defeat by Metz, while Monaco fell to a third straight league loss, beaten 3-0 at home by Lens. —AFP

Sports

Firmino sinks Spurs as Liverpool go top, 10-man Arsenal held

LONDON: Furious Jose Mourinho had a heated exchange with Jurgen Klopp after Roberto Firmino's last-gasp header sent Liverpool to the top of the Premier League with a 2-1 win against title rivals Tottenham, while troubled Arsenal were held to a 1-1 draw by Southampton on Wednesday.

Tottenham boss Mourinho was incensed with the antics of Liverpool manager Klopp and his coaching staff, claiming they set out to influence the decisions of the officials with constant complaints on the touchline.

After Klopp's wild celebrations of Firmino's 90th minute goal, Mourinho exchanged angry words with the German coach on the pitch at full-time. It was an incendiary end to an explosive clash that saw Mohamed Salah put Liverpool ahead, only for Son Heung-min to equalize before the interval.

Asked about his animated conversation with Klopp, Mourinho said: "I told him the best team lost and he disagreed, but that's his opinion. 'If I behave the same way he does on the touchline, I do not stay there. That's animated? For some reason I am different.'"

Claiming he took off Giovanni Lo Celso because he feared the midfielder would be sent off due to Liverpool's pressure from the bench, Mourinho said: "With Gio's yellow card and the incredible pressure these guys on the touchline put on the officials, I was afraid of another yellow card and I had to take him off. Everything is fine between us. The referees let him behave the way he does. It's not my problem. I feel sad for it because I cannot do it but it's just the way it is."

Klopp tried to play down the row, saying: "Nothing serious, he said it himself so I don't have to repeat it. No argument." Injury-ravaged Liverpool are now three points clear of Tottenham after extending their unbeaten run to nine league matches with a result that showed they will not surrender the title without a fight.

"A good game against a counter-attacking monster, the possession we had we did incredibly well," Klopp said. "Yes they have scored a goal, had two chances, apart from that we controlled the game and it is a massively deserved three points."

Tottenham were defeated for the first time since the opening

weekend of the league season, ending their 11-game unbeaten run. Glaring misses from Tottenham forwards Steven Bergwijn and Harry Kane proved costly in the second half. "A very unfair result. We played against the champions in their stadium and we had the best chances to win," Mourinho said. "A draw would be a bad result, so you can imagine how we feel with a defeat."

Arsenal frustration

At the Emirates Stadium, defeat would have seen Arsenal lose five consecutive home league games for the first time in the club's history as the pressure mounts on manager Mikel Arteta. The Gunners could not have got off to a worse start as Theo Walcott opened the scoring on his return to the Emirates with a fine chipped finish over Bernd Leno from Che Adams' pass.

Third-placed Southampton failed to build on their lead and were made to pay soon after the break as Arsenal scored just a third goal in their last nine league games and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's first from open play since the first day of the season.

Bukayo Saka's burst opened up the Saints defense and when Eddie Nketiah freed Aubameyang inside the area, the Arsenal captain curling an excellent finish into the far corner. Arsenal's joy was short-lived as they again found themselves a man down as Gabriel picked up two quick bookings.

"It's very difficult to compete in this league when you play for so long with 10 men," Arteta said. "It makes it more complicated, but the boys stood up to it, they showed their character and resilience and they never gave up."

Fifth-placed Everton won 2-0 at fourth-placed Leicester thanks to goals from Richarlison and Mason Holgate. Leeds won a seven-goal thriller against Newcastle 5-2 to move level on points with the Magpies, eight points clear of the relegation zone.

Fulham moved out of the relegation zone after a 0-0 draw with Brighton at Craven Cottage. West Ham's Sebastien Haller equalised with a superb overhead kick in a 1-1 draw against Crystal Palace, whose goalscorer Christian Benteke was sent off in the second half. —AFP



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's German manager Jurgen Klopp (R) remonstrates with the linesman during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England on Wednesday. — AFP

Inter close gap on leaders AC Milan, Ronaldo penalty miss stalls Juve

MILAN: Romelu Lukaku scored from the penalty spot as Inter Milan battled past title rivals Napoli 1-0 on Wednesday to move one point behind Serie A leaders and city rivals AC Milan who were held at Genoa.

Defending champions Juventus sit three points behind Inter after Cristiano Ronaldo missed a penalty in a 1-1 home draw with Atalanta. Napoli — who played the final quarter of an hour a man down after captain Lorenzo Insigne was sent off — drop to fourth, a further point adrift.

Insigne saw red for arguing with the referee after goalkeeper David Ospina fouled Inter's Matteo Darmian to concede the crucial spot-kick. "Only in Italy players are thrown out for this stuff," fumed Napoli coach Gennaro Gattuso, blasting "a dubious penalty".

Napoli also saw club record scorer Dries Mertens limp off with an ankle injury in the first half. Lukaku stepped up to slot in on 73 minutes for his 10th league goal this season, joining Ronaldo and Zlatan Ibrahimovic at the top of the Serie A

goalscoring chart.

Inter could also thank goalkeeper Samir Handanovic for their clean sheet, denying Insigne and Giovanni Di Lorenzo late on. For Antonio Conte's Inter it was a fifth consecutive league win as they target a first Scudetto since 2010, with their European hopes now over. "It was a painful victory that can do us good," said Conte. "These are three important points because against a rival and a great team like Napoli they are worth double."

AC Milan, playing a fourth consecutive league game without the injured Ibrahimovic, came from behind twice to secure a 2-2 draw as Mattia Destro scored a double for Genoa. The Italian striker tapped in a rebound after Milan goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma denied Eldor Shomurodov just after the break.

Five minutes later, Davide Calabria's long-range effort pulled Milan level before Destro headed in a second on the hour. But French defender Pierre Kalulu nodded in from close range to rescue a second consecutive draw for Milan, who stay unbeaten in Serie A since March and are looking to deny Juventus a 10th straight league triumph this season.

"We had six players out and had to grit our teeth but those who played proved to be up to par," said coach Stefano Pioli. "Our club has not been in the Champions League for many years and that is our goal."

Sixth Juventus stalemate

In Turin, unbeaten Juventus were held for the sixth time in Serie A this term. Federico Chiesa curled in a powerful shot to

put Juventus ahead before the half-hour mark. But Atalanta hit back with Remo Freuler grabbing the equalizer 12 minutes into the second half, shortly after captain Papu Gomez came off the bench.

The build-up to the game had been overshadowed by tensions between coach Gian Piero Gasperini and Gomez, left out of their last two league games amid speculation he could leave the Bergamo club in January.

Ronaldo, who had fired over the target in the fifth minute, had a rare penalty miss after an hour following a Hans Hateboer foul on Chiesa. The Portuguese striker's weak effort was easily saved by Atalanta keeper Pierluigi Gollini.

Spaniard Alvaro Morata had missed a golden chance after 12 minutes, sending a weak back-heel flick wide in front of an open goal. At the other end of the pitch, Juventus goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny saved a Cristian Romero header with a quarter of an hour to go.

"You have to take these games home," said Juventus coach Andrea Pirlo. "We had many opportunities and we weren't able to close it. When you leave the game in the balance anything can happen."

Atalanta, who also held Juventus the last time they played in Turin last July, are eighth, 10 points behind AC Milan, after a slow start to the campaign. "It's a great result," said Gasperini. "We were very good, at one point we were convinced of winning it. 'We played with personality against a team that are one of the favourites for the Scudetto.'" Fifth-placed Sassuolo drew 1-1 at Fiorentina, whose winless run stretched to seven games. — AFP



Firmino sinks Spurs as Liverpool go top