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Kuwait halts flights, closes borders over virus variant

Recent returnees from UK, EU must undergo PCR test at Jaber Hospital

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad laid to rest



KUWAIT: Mourners carry the bier of Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah during his funeral at Sulaibikhat Cemetery yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 3)

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Cabinet announced the closure of all ports and the suspended all commercial flights from 11 pm yesterday until Friday, Jan 1, 2021, after a new fast-spreading strain of coronavirus appeared in Britain. Kuwait on Sunday had banned passenger flights from Britain over the new strain of the virus.

Citizens and residents who arrived to Kuwait from the European Union and United Kingdom between Dec 11, 2020 and Dec 21, 2020 are required to undergo a PCR test on the fifth and tenth days since arrival. They are instructed to take the test at Jaber Hospital from 8:00 am to 8:00 pm, and bring evidence of their return date with them.

Late Sunday, Saudi Arabia halted international flights and suspended entry through its land and sea ports for at least a week. The kingdom is "temporarily suspending all international flights - except in exceptional cases - for a period of one week, which can be extended by another

week," the official Saudi Press Agency said. "Entry to the kingdom through land and sea ports will also be suspended for a week, which can be extended by another week," SPA added, citing the interior ministry.

The suspension does not apply to international aircraft currently in the kingdom, which will be allowed to leave, SPA said. Cargo into Saudi Arabia will only be permitted from countries where the new strain has not been identified as having broken out. The Gulf sultanate of Oman adopted similar measures. It "decided (on Monday) to ban entry and exit from the country through the various land, air and sea borders starting 1:00 am local time on Tuesday December 22 for a week", the official Oman News Agency reported.

The decision was based on what "authorities in a number of countries announced regarding the emergence of a new COVID-19 strain", it said, adding the suspension will not apply

Continued on Page 2

CONDOLENCES

KUWAIT TIMES

conveys its deepest condolences to

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 the Al-Sabah family

on the sad demise of

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah

May Allah the Almighty bestow His mercy on his soul

Local

Kuwait's Defense Minister takes oath before Amir



KUWAIT: (From left) Secretary of the Council of Ministers Abdullahif Al-Roudhan, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh. — Amiri Diwan photos



Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah takes oath before His Highness the Amir.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, who took oath as Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister. 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 attended the ceremony.

Also in attendance were Minister of Amiri

Diwan Sheikh Ali Jarrah Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh, Head of the Amiri Diwan Sheikh Mubarak Faisal Saud Al-Sabah, Undersecretary of the Amiri Diwan and Director

of His Highness the Amir's Office Ahmad Fahad Al-Fahad, Secretary of the Council of Ministers Abdullahif Al-Roudhan and Head of the Amiri Protocol and Chamberlain Sheikh Khaled Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah. — KUNA

MPs file proposal to return to four-vote election system

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Five opposition lawmakers yesterday submitted a draft law calling to amend the current single-vote election system to return to the previous system that allows voters to elect up to four candidates. In 2012, the government changed the prevailing electoral system through an Amiri decree and introduced the existing system that allows Kuwaiti voters to elect only one candidate. That amendment led to the opposition groups boycotting the polls. Some of them are still boycotting.

The five MPs: Osama Al-Shaheen, Shuaib Al-Muwaizri, Abdulaziz Al-Saqabi, Musaed Al-Mutairi and Hamad Matar called in their draft law to change article 2 of the election law to return to the old voting system. Opposition groups accuse the single-

vote system of helping the election of pro-government MPs which allowed the government to increase its grip over the national assembly. They also charge the system of promoting corruption in the country.

Five other lawmakers yesterday submitted a draft law calling to ban the appointment of any expatriate in public sector jobs if there was a jobless Kuwaiti with the same educational degree and qualification. If approved, the law is likely to speed up the process of replacing some 100,000 expatriates working in the government with Kuwaitis. The lawmakers said that the bill will help resolve unemployment among citizens.

Two lawmakers meanwhile submitted a draft law calling on the government to purchase the bank loans on Kuwaiti citizens and then forgive the entire interest on it. MPs Hisham Al-Saleh and Khaled Al-Enezi said in their proposal that debtors will then be asked to repay the principal of the loans from the KD 120 monthly cost of living allowance paid by the government to all Kuwaiti citizens. A large number of MPs have vowed during their election campaign to press the government to forgive all consumer loans for Kuwaiti citizens but

so far no one has taken any action. MP Saqabi also submitted a draft law calling to amend a clause in the assembly internal charter to prevent cabinet ministers from taking part in voting in the assembly on issues related to parliamentary questions, grillings, no-confidence and non-cooperation motions in addition to requests for debates.

Cabinet ministers, who are unelected members of the assembly, are allowed to vote like elected legislatures on almost everything except no-confidence and non-cooperation motions, giving the government a strong hand in deciding issues in the assembly.

Opposition MPs meanwhile launched a scathing attack on speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem for deciding to prevent the public from attending assembly sessions and for declaring today's session a special one to prevent opposition MPs from discussing any issue other than the election of members of committees.

Opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum, who on Sunday urged the public to attend the session, yesterday called on the people to stay away from today's session after he was informed by the assembly chief guard that no people will be allowed



The National Assembly.

at the orders of the speaker. Ghanem said that the ban on public is a decision that was introduced several months ago based on health ministry request as a precautionary measure against the coronavirus pandemic. Opposition MPs were hoping to debate a number of motions related to the events that took place at the inaugural session last week. Ghanem said that such issues can be debated in coming sessions.

Cabinet extends hands for a new approach with National Assembly

KUWAIT: The Cabinet held its weekly meeting yesterday at Seif Palace headed by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. After the meeting, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh said the following: At the beginning of the meeting, His Highness the Prime Minister welcomed Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, at the beginning of the meeting, in his name and on behalf of his sister and brothers, expressing his thanks and appreciation for accepting the responsibility of participating in this government, wishing him success in carrying out his mission and serving his country with the help of his sister and brothers the ministers. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah thanked His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince for the trust that was given to him, pledging to do his utmost efforts to achieve prosperity to the State of Kuwait.

Later, the Council of Ministers reviewed the contents of His Highness the Amir's speech at the opening of the first ordinary session of the 16th legislative term of the National Assembly, which took place last week, and the inspiring directives contained within, urging members of the National Assembly to make their practice and deliberations a testament for generations to come. The Cabinet also reviewed the contents of the Amiri speech at the

opening of the first ordinary session of the 16th legislative term delivered by His Highness the Prime Minister, in which he emphasized the government's belief that cooperation with constitutional institutions is the cornerstone in achieving sound democratic practice and its stability, as well as the aspiration of the government, with extended hands and a sincere desire for a new approach.

Meanwhile, the Council of Ministers, mourned late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the former first deputy prime minister and minister of defense, who passed away Sunday. The council mourned with grief and sorrow for the deceased, and in appreciation for his sincere efforts, vowed to assume responsibility for his work efficiently and sincerity in serving his country. The Council of Ministers also mourned the passing of Abdulaziz Mohammad Hmoud Al-Shaya, the former minister of electricity and water, recalling with pride his efforts in serving the nation, his fingerprints and national contributions in various fields.

COVID-19 update

Meanwhile, Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah explained to the Cabinet the latest developments on the coronavirus pandemic at the global, regional, and local levels, especially after the emergence of a new strain of the virus. He reassured the Cabinet about the health situation in the State of Kuwait, which is witnessing improvement and stability, citing data and statistics



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah (center) chairs the Cabinet's meeting yesterday. — KUNA

that confirm the decrease in the number of infections and those who receive treatment, and those in the intensive care units. The Cabinet also was informed on the latest preparations related to efforts to combat the coronavirus and ways to prevent it, coinciding with the approaching date of the start of the vaccination campaign against this deadly virus.

In this regard, the Cabinet examined the recommendation of the coronavirus emergency ministerial Committee and decided the following:

1- Suspending commercial flights to and from Kuwait International Airport from 11 pm yesterday until the end of Friday, January 1, 2021; however, the continuation of this decision will be reviewed in light of new developments which excluded cargo shipments planes.

2- Closing, land and sea border ports, except for shipping operations.

3- Assigning each of the Ministry of Interior, General Administration of Civil Aviation, General Administration of Customs and Kuwait Ports Authority to implement what was mentioned in the

previous decisions. The Council of Ministers called on all citizens and residents to continue to take caution and not be complacent in adhering to health requirements and instructions, and keep away from gatherings to ensure that the spread of the virus is limited in order to preserve the overall health in the country.

Public funds

Minister of Justice Dr Nawaf Saud Al-Yaseen presented to the Council of Ministers the second periodic report (October 2020) of the committee to follow up on public funds issues that included data on public funds issues and the responses of ministries, agencies and government institutions about these issues and their status before the competent authorities, and assigning the minister of justice to transfer the report to the National Assembly.

Then the Cabinet decided to accept a donation made by Ayed Hatlan for the design, licensing, establishment and implementation of a specialized health

center in South Sabahiya, with a value of KD 2.5 million. The Council of Ministers expressed its thanks and appreciation for this initiative, which constitutes a vivid embodiment of the Kuwaiti society's cooperation, solidarity, patriotism and true responsibility.

The Council of Ministers then discussed political affairs in light of reports related to the overall current developments in the political arena at the Arab and international levels. In this regard, the Cabinet expressed sincere congratulations to His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Amir of Qatar and to the brotherly Qatari people on the occasion of the anniversary of the National Day of the State of Qatar, wishing the State of Qatar and its people continued pride, progress and prosperity. The Cabinet also strongly condemned the terrorist act that targeted the Green Zone in Baghdad, affirming that the State of Kuwait stands with the Republic of Iraq and supports all measures it takes to maintain its security and stability. — KUNA

Kuwait halts flights, closes borders...

Continued from Page 1

to cargo flights and vessels. The development comes after several European countries banned travel from Britain on Sunday as the UK government warned that a highly infectious new strain of

the virus was "out of control". SPA said passengers who arrived in Saudi Arabia from Europe - or any country where the new strain was detected - starting Dec 8 will be required to self-isolate for two weeks, and undergo testing. Alarm bells are ringing across Europe - which last week became the first region in the world to pass 500,000 deaths from COVID-19 - after it appeared that a more infectious strain of the virus was raging in parts of Britain.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Jordan too said it

was banning all direct and indirect flights from the United Kingdom until Jan 3, according to a statement by Minister of State for Media Affairs Ali Ayed. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday the Jewish state had implemented a "decision to close the country's skies", by preventing arrivals by most foreigners, although diplomats would be exempted.

Over 1.69 million people have died after contracting coronavirus since the outbreak emerged in China last December, according to a tally from offi-

cial sources compiled by AFP. Several Gulf countries have in the past couple of weeks rolled out COVID-19 vaccination programs.

The six-member Gulf Cooperation Council - which includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman - have so far recorded more than one million novel coronavirus cases, including over 9,000 deaths. Saudi Arabia's death toll is highest among them at more than 6,000. But the kingdom has also reported a high recovery rate. — Agencies

Local

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad laid to rest

Amir sends condolences to Sheikh Nasser's family



KUWAIT: The coffin of late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is carried to his final resting place. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



The coffin of late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is laid to rest.



A view of people in attendance of the funeral.

KUWAIT: The late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah was laid to rest in the Sulaibikhat Cemetery yesterday. Members of Al-Sabah family and a large crowd of citizens attended the funeral procedures.

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent cables of condolences yesterday to members of the family of the late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad, in which he expressed heartfelt condolences and prayed to Allah Almighty that He rests his soul in peace. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir received a cable of condolences from Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani on the demise of Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad. The Qatari Amir expressed solace to the family of the deceased. His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf reciprocated with a letter, expressing gratitude to the Qatari Amir for his sincere sentiments of consolations on this grave occurrence. His Highness Sheikh Nawaf received cables of identical content from the Qatari Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad Al-Thani, and Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Khaled bin Khalifa Al-Thani. He also reciprocated with cables expressing deep gratitude for their sincere solidarity.

His Highness the Amir also received a phone call from former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri, expressing his utmost sorrow over the demise of late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad. In turn, His Highness the Amir expressed his gratitude and thanks to the Lebanese leader for the kind words and sentiments.

In the meantime, Kuwait's government expressed deep sadness over the passing away of Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad. The cabinet also recalled the great contributions of Sheikh Nasser to serving the dear homeland in a variety of domains. The government prayed to Allah Almighty to bestow His mercy and blessings on the deceased. Furthermore, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah eulogized the late Sheikh Nasser, expressing pride in his contributions towards Kuwait, and conveyed condolences to His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince and Sheikh Nasser's family.

tural heritage as a reference from which future generations.

Meanwhile, Kuwait News Agency Chairman and Federation of Arab News Agencies (FANA) Vice President Sheikh Mubarak Al-Duaij Al-Sabah has lamented the loss of Sheikh Nasser, describing him as a man who dedicated his life to serving Kuwait and its people. Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad was known for his "deep love for his country and great pride in its history and heritage," KUNA's chief said, recalling his "sincerity and dedication" to the nation. He contributed to the completion of several "crucial and difficult" cultural and economic projects with an "insightful vision," said the news agency head. These included the 'Silk City,' one of the largest projects in Kuwaiti history, along with his contributions to the long-term economic diversification plan, New Kuwait 2035, which he was keen to see being achieved in spite of difficult regional and global circumstances.

"He was known for good morals, boundless ambition, humility and kindness," in addition to being "trustworthy and a model for success." He picked up "extensive experience and received great wisdom growing up at the royal palaces of Kuwait, living side-by-side with its prominent rulers and leaders from whom he learned a lot," being the son and grandson of past Amirs, said Sheikh Mubarak. The KUNA chief went on to describe the passing as a "great loss for Kuwait and its people," saying the late figure will "remain etched in the memory of the Kuwaiti people as a symbol of generosity and devotion." Sheikh Nasser, the eldest son of the late Amir His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, passed away on Sunday aged 72. — KUNA



Qatari Amir sends condolences

A loyal man

Minister of Information and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Badah Al-Mutairi mourned with great sadness late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad. Minister Mutairi recalled in a press statement, the virtues of the great deceased and his many contributions and service to his country, describing him as one of the loyal men of Kuwait and spent his life serving his country in all the positions he held. The minister added late Sheikh Nasser had remarkable contributions in the cultural field, as he established since the early eighties of the last century the "Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiya", which presented a civilized, human and cul-



Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah attends the funeral.



People offer condolences to the family of the deceased.



Sheikh Sabah Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah attends the funeral.



Officials lead the funeral proceedings.



The coffin of late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is laid in his final resting place.

Local

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News in brief

Maids can use Mobile ID

KUWAIT: Director General of the Public Authority for Civil Information Musaed Al-Asousi announced yesterday the launch of a new update for the 'Hawiyati' Kuwait Mobile ID smartphone application to include domestic workers (Article 20), whose numbers exceed 765,000 according to the latest statistics. He added that domestic workers can use the app as a proof of identity, and as a digital alternative to the civil ID in order to complete transactions, as well as to enter and exit through border crossings, especially with the Cabinet's plan regarding the return of domestic workers to Kuwait. Asousi said that the number of users of the app has exceeded 1,100,000. —KUNA

Coordination for vaccine

KUWAIT: Kuwait General Administration of Customs will provide all facilities for the arrival of the COVID-19 vaccine, General Director Jamal Al-Jalawi said. This came in a coordination meeting yesterday with representatives of the Ministry of Health, Directorate General of Civil Aviation and express shipping companies. Jalawi said that the customs department will provide necessary procedures to ensure quick custom clearance through pre-release to maintain the safety and validity of the vaccines in accordance with health requirements. —KUNA

Poultry ban

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources announced placing a temporary ban on live poultry from Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Croatia, and France, due to the emergence of bird flu. "All shipments must meet the standards of the World Organization for Animal Health, as well as Kuwait and GCC procedures," it said in a statement.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Kuwait Towers from the Arabian Gulf Street's seaside. —Photo by Triana Halim (Instagram: @trianahalim)

Indian embassy to celebrate 60th anniversary of India-Kuwait ties

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: Indian Embassy in Kuwait will celebrate in a big way the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kuwait and India during 2021-22. "This is an important milestone in the history of our engagement as India and Kuwait are entering into an important phase of our relationship," said Indian Ambassador Sibi George while addressing Indian community groups during a virtual conference.

"Many of you, as residents of Kuwait, are aware of the excellent relations that we maintain with Kuwait. I thought it is important to reiterate this today in my address. Similarly, for India, 2021-22 is a very important year when we celebrate the 75th anniversary of our Independence," he said.

"We plan to organize a series of events aimed at increasing our outreach within Kuwait, to project the new India and also to further deepen our engagement at political, economic, cultural, scientific and people-to-people levels," he said. The ambassador urged Indian associations, groups and individuals in Kuwait to contribute in these efforts. George had been meeting the community in small groups since his arrival.

He said he would continue his engagement with each of the associations and groups and community members,

but in strict compliance with the COVID-19 pandemic guidelines. "As I am not able to meet our community in large numbers due to the COVID situation, I thought it is important to address all groups and associations virtually today, to brief you on what we have been doing and what we propose to do," he pointed out. He congratulated Indian doctors, nurses and other medical personnel in Kuwait who work day in and day out to save lives, in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic.

"I thank the many community members and various associations who individually and in coordination with ICSG took several steps to help our brothers and sisters in need during the most difficult days of the pandemic. The crisis is still not over. We should spread the message to people not to panic and to remain calm and confident. I urge our medical professionals, teachers and office-bearers of various associations to continue to offer their voluntary counseling services, particularly to the vulnerable segments of our society, and help them deal with the mental stress resulting from the ongoing pandemic," he said.

He also thanked the Kuwaiti government and Kuwaiti friends of India for their efforts and support in strengthening the bilateral relations between our two friendly countries. "I congratulate the leadership and the people of the State of Kuwait for a very successful elections to



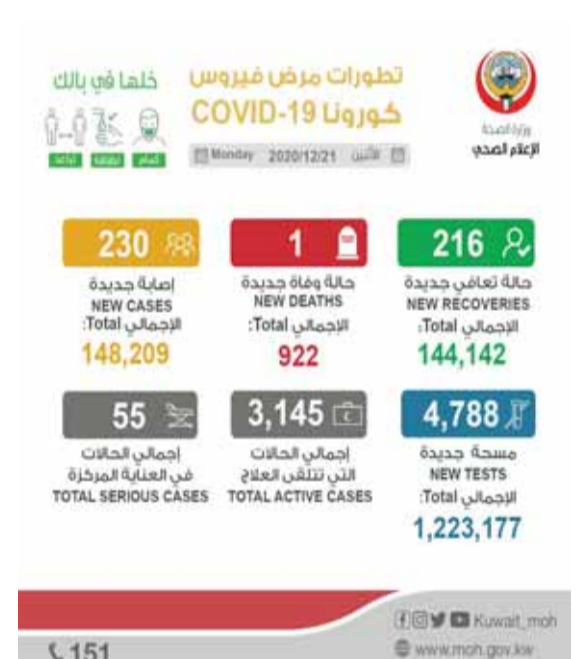
KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George addresses various Indian social groups during a virtual conference at the Indian embassy.

the pandemic situation. I had the honor of witnessing the opening session of the National Assembly on December 15. I congratulate the new government led by His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah," he said.

The ambassador said India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi had congratulated and conveyed best wishes to His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah on his re-appointment as the Prime Minister of Kuwait. He said India's External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar had also congratulated Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah on his reappointment as Foreign Minister of Kuwait.

Kuwait's COVID-19 cases jump by 230 to 148,209, one death

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MoH) registered yesterday 230 additional COVID-19 cases over a 24-hour span, increasing the total number of infections to 148,209, while one new death was recorded raising the death toll to 922. Earlier, the ministry confirmed 216 fresh recovery cases, adding to a total of 144,142 cured people thus far. Plus, active cases amounted to 3,145 with 55 of them in intensive care units, MoH's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. Health authorities conducted 4,788 swab tests in 24 hours raising the total to 1,223,177, he revealed. Dr Sanad urged everyone in Kuwait to adhere to precautionary measures against the virus and maintain social distancing. —KUNA



Magnitude 4.3 earthquake on Kuwait, Saudi border

KUWAIT: A 4.6 magnitude earthquake on Richter scale was recorded on Kuwait-Saudi Border at 6:04 am yesterday, a tweet by the National Meteorological Centre quoted the National Seismic

Network. According to volcanodiscovery.com, the quake was recorded 56 km southwest of Al-Ahmedi. United States Geological Survey (USGS) reported that the earthquake hit early morning yesterday at 6:04 am local time at a shallow depth of 10 km. A second report was later issued by the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC), which listed it as a magnitude 4.3 earthquake as well. Based on the preliminary seismic data, the quake should not have caused any significant damage, but was probably felt by many people as light vibration in the area of the epicenter.

Iraq Prime Minister pushes for closer ties with Kuwait



BAGHDAD: Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi meets Kuwait's ambassador to Iraq Salem Al-Zamanan. —KUNA

BAGHDAD: Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi said on Sunday that Baghdad is eager to establish closer relations with Kuwait across various fields, which would lead to an overall stronger relationship. Further developing a joint ministerial committee for bilateral talks, which was set up by the Arab Gulf neighbors, would be a by-product of closer ties, a government statement cited Kadhimi

as saying amid a meeting with Kuwait's ambassador to Iraq Salem Al-Zamanan. Stronger relations with Kuwait would also spark a positive ripple effect across the entire region, keeping peace and stability intact, he added, before going on to invite his Kuwaiti counterpart Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah to visit Iraq as part of a strategic cooperation framework. —KUNA

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Foot massages, tattoos and dentists for India farmers

US looking 'very carefully' at new virus variant



DOVER: A sign alerts customers that the "French Borders are Closed" at the entrance to the Port of Dover in Kent, southeast England yesterday. —AFP

Britain facing bleak midwinter

New virus strain leads to travel bans, border closures

LONDON: With Britons already locked down for Christmas due to an "out of control" coronavirus strain, the sense of isolation deepened when countries imposed travel bans, providing a glimpse into the looming chaos of a disorderly Brexit. France's decision on Sunday to prevent freight travelling through the key port of Dover caused chaos on the surrounding roads and raised fears of food shortages over the Christmas period - in a stark sign of what to expect should Britain leave the EU without a deal in 10 days.

Road signs near the Channel port, through which 10,000 heavy goods vehicles pass each day, yesterday urged people to go home, saying that the French border is closed. France's snap decision, which is initially set to last for 48 hours, caused Britain to bring forward "Operation Stack", the contingency plan drawn up to deal with anticipated freight tailbacks on roads around Dover in the event of a no deal Brexit.

"Whereas all other countries have allowed hauliers... the French went slightly further and said that hauliers

shouldn't cross either," transport minister Grant Shapps told Sky News yesterday. "The absolute key is to get it resolved as soon as possible," he added. "They're mostly European hauliers, the goods are mostly theirs, so they won't want them perishing any more than we would want the border closed."

A disused airfield will be opened later Monday to be used as a lorry park for up to 4,000 stranded drivers. Shapps reassured Britons that hauliers "anticipate" disruptions and that food supplies were not immediately threatened. UK supermarket Sainsbury's warned that prolonged disruption could lead to "gaps over the coming days" in the supply of lettuce, cauliflowers, broccoli and citrus fruit.

Chaotic scenes

The government also said the travel bans would not affect vaccines. "Virtually all of the vaccine comes by container and there are good supplies in the meantime, so this won't have an impact on the vaccination program," said Shapps. The ban on all but unaccompanied freight cross-

ing to France comes as companies scramble to shift merchandise with days to go until Britain finally quits EU trade structures.

Those hoping for a deal warned the current chaotic scenes could become a familiar sight without a breakthrough before the New Year deadline, leading to the imposition of new tariffs. But Brexit supporters accused France of exploiting the crisis to try and force trade concessions. "Restricting tourist travel from the UK seems justifiable at this stage," tweeted the anti-EU Bruges Group think tank. "Restricting freight movements, however, as the French government is added to do, appears political," it added.

'Out of control'

France and Britain are locked in heated debate about fishing rights post-Brexit, the key sticking point in negotiations. London mayor Sadiq Khan and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon were among leading politicians yesterday calling for an extension to Brexit talks to avoid disruption over New Year.

Germany, Russia, Canada, Italy, Chile and Argentina are among other countries to announce flight bans to and from the country. Britain had looked to have turned the corner in its attempt to quell the virus, with the rollout of a vaccine and falling case rates. But the emergence of a new strain has thrown the government's plans into disarray, just as it reaches the crunch finale of talks with the EU.

The government had initially announced an easing of restrictions to allow families to meet over Christmas, but changed its plans after it was presented last week with dire analysis of the new strain that is running rampant across southeast England. Instead of good cheer and reunions, Britons are now waking up to headlines about potential food shortages and rows with their closest neighbors.

"Unfortunately the new strain was out of control. We have got to get it under control," Health Secretary Matt Hancock told Sky News. Britain has been badly hit by the pandemic, with more than 67,000 deaths of those testing positive for the virus. —AFP

UK togetherness fraying between Brexit, coronavirus

LONDON: The United Kingdom has endured in one form or another for hundreds of years but between Brexit and the coronavirus, the country is creaking and some suggest it may be on the verge of breaking up entirely. England, Scotland and Wales have been joined since 1707 with Northern Ireland added in 1921 - four parts of a single country - but since the late 1990s each has won more devolved powers, including over healthcare.

"That ability to steer the most important policies in a time of emergency has seen frequent fallout with the UK's central government this year over strategies to tackle the coronavirus outbreak. Britain's departure from the European Union has largely remained on the back burner during the global pandemic. But if Brexit goes badly, it could give a boost to the governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast - and stoke calls for greater powers.

Scots away?

Scottish nationalists point out that they never wanted to leave the EU in the first place and might now try again to become an independent state and rejoin the bloc. "The pandemic is not going to help," John Springford, deputy director of the Centre for European Reform think-tank, told AFP. "So, with Brexit running into the mix, and a Conservative (UK) government that's very unpopular north of the border, I think the support for independence is likely to rise."

Support for independence was already increasing after the 2016 Brexit referendum, in which Scotland voted heavily to remain. Seventeen straight polls have now shown that a majority of Scots support going it alone. Brexit was the driving force for pre-2020 gains, pollster John Curtice told a recent Institute for Government seminar, with the rise concentrated among those who voted to remain in the EU.

But the pandemic has been the driving force this year, with support increasing across the Brexit divide, he added. "The view of the Scottish public is that the Scottish government and (First Minister) Nicola Sturgeon have handled the pandemic well and the UK government and (UK Prime Minister) Boris Johnson have handled it badly," said Curtice. Sturgeon and her separatist Scottish National Party hope the perfect storm will push them over the top if they can force a rerun of a 2014 independence referendum, in which the pro-UK side won 55 percent to 45. But Johnson has repeatedly vowed to block any attempts to hold another vote. Other large obstacles stand in the way of independence, with Curtice pointing out the lead was still a "relatively narrow" one given the "fragility of polls".

An independent Scotland would find itself without the protection of British or European might, with Brussels cautioning that rejoining the EU would not be a formality. "If Scotland decides that it wants to join the EU and the EU says that it can, then obviously we'd have to erect a border with England," said Springford. "And that border would be harder than the border between Northern Ireland," he added, suggesting economic pro-union arguments that Scotland would not be able to support itself may not be as successful as they were in 2014. —AFP

Waste shipments from Italy kick up a stink in Tunisia

SOUSSE, Tunisia: Hundreds of containers of household waste shipped from Italy to Tunisia have raised suspicions of dirty dealings in the North African country that already struggles to manage its own garbage disposal. The scandal, which saw the Tunisian environment minister sacked at the weekend, started in the summer when customs officials seized 282 containers in the Mediterranean port city of Sousse.

They were declared as carrying plastic scraps for industrial recycling - but were instead full of mixed, putrid household waste, which is barred from import under Tunisian law. The case shines a spotlight on the global trade in waste, which has grown despite stricter regulations aimed at preventing rich

countries from dumping their hazardous refuse on poorer countries.

The containers were imported by Tunisian firm Soreplast, which claimed to have government permission to import and recycle industrial plastic scraps. A copy of Soreplast's request to bring the containers into the country seen by AFP stated that the company would "temporarily" import the waste "in non-hazardous bales... for sorting, recycling and re-export operations to European territory".

AFP has also seen the contract which Soreplast signed with the Italian firm that sold the refuse, Sviluppo Risorse Ambientali Srl. It explicitly tasked Soreplast with "recovery of the waste and its subsequent disposal" in Tunisia. Neither company was available for comment despite numerous efforts to contact them by AFP.

According to a customs official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, these documents show that Soreplast made a false declaration on the nature of the imported material. As the scandal grew, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi sacked the environment minister, Mustapha Aroui, late on

of sight as several hugely consequential matters play out in the United States: from a massive cyberattack to high-stakes talks on a huge COVID-19 relief package to the rollout of a historic vaccine campaign.

But, according to accounts in The New York Times, CNN and The Wall Street Journal, the president found time Friday to oversee a turbulent White House meeting to discuss new ways to resist or overturn Biden's victory - with the idea of deploying the military to assist in his fight raised, before being shot down.

Multiple reports said Trump also considered seizing election machines to inspect them; and



SOUSSE, Tunisia: Cats wait behind men casting their lines while fishing at the port of Sousse on Nov 26, 2020. —AFP

Sunday without giving an official reason. But a government source, also speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP he was fired in connection with the waste issue. —AFP

naming Sidney Powell, a lawyer for his campaign team who has put forward outlandish conspiracy theories, as a special counsel to keep digging into Trump's unsubstantiated allegations of mass election fraud.

Present at the fractious Oval Office meeting was retired General Michael Flynn, who was briefly the national security advisor before resigning under pressure, admitting to lying to the FBI, and then, in November, being pardoned by Trump. Flynn recently told a Newsmax television interviewer that Trump could "take military capabilities and place them in those (battleground) states and basically rerun our election." —AFP

Martial-law talk in Trump meeting draws outrage

WASHINGTON: With one month to go until Joe Biden takes office, Donald Trump remains fixated on his failed bid to overturn the 2020 election - with his advisors reportedly floating the idea of invoking martial law, triggering outrage and disbelief in Washington. Trump has stayed largely out

International

Tense atmosphere for British passengers at German airports

'I was treated like a criminal', says German woman at Hanover airport

BERLIN: German national Sabrina Dinkler-Stemme said she was treated like a "criminal" as she stepped off a flight from Britain and found herself blocked at Hanover airport. "I was completely encircled by the police. I was outside in the rain. We could not move because we were blocked with another 70 passengers," she recounted her ordeal on Sunday evening.

Dinkler-Stemme had been on one of the last flights from Britain to arrive in Germany before a temporary ban kicked in from midnight stopping arrivals from the United Kingdom after a new strain of coronavirus was detected there. "There was no information given to us except a police officer who told me: 'it's your fault, you knew and you still took the flight,'" said Dinkler-Stemme.

British travellers still flying into Germany on Sunday were prevented from leaving the airport, with health officials and nurses—some dressed in hazmat suits—administering immediate COVID-19 tests.

The measures hit those arriving in Hanover from Britain, who were kept overnight in the airport and were not allowed to leave until they received a negative test result yesterday morning. The terminal's officials set up camp beds to help passengers spend the night.

Among the stranded travellers, the atmosphere was tense. "We are at Hanover airport and we are held against our will, we were tested and were prohibited from leaving the premises while awaiting the results," said Manuela Thomys, in a video shared online by German daily Bild.

Groups of people including a nine-month-old baby can be seen in the clip. "Please help us leave!" Thomys says. "We're all exhausted, many people are crying. Everyone's talking to their family members. It's really an uncomfortable situation when all we want to do is to go home," said another passenger who only gave her name as Sophie.

157 blocked in Frankfurt

Local authorities have apologized for the inconvenience caused ahead of Christmas.



British travellers still flying into Germany on Sunday were prevented from leaving the airport, with health officials and nurses—some dressed in hazmat suits—administering immediate COVID-19 tests.

"Our aim is to prevent the new variant of the virus from entering the region," Hanover health official Andreas Kranz explained to German news wire DPA. The passengers were finally allowed to leave on yesterday morning as results came in, with one person testing positive, the city of Hanover said in a statement. Further tests will be carried out to see if the positive test is of the new mutant strain.

The affected passenger and others who were accompanying the individual were taken to their residence where they are to be quarantined, the city added. Similar scenes were unfolding in other German airports, including Frankfurt where 157 people arriving from Britain and South Africa—where the mutant strain of the virus has also been detected—are blocked.

"We took care of them by distributing camp beds, drinks and food," said Christian Engel, a spokesman at the

airport. Around half of the group have been tested and are awaiting their results while tests are ongoing for the remaining passengers, said police. Germany reported a record in daily new infections on Thursday, surpassing the 30,000 mark for the first time, and has recorded a total of 24,125 deaths. Scientists first discovered the new strain of the virus—which they believe is 70 percent more transmissible—in a patient in September.

But alarm bells were set ringing across Europe last week as the strain appeared to be raging in parts of Britain. Europe last week became the first region in the world to pass 500,000 deaths from Covid-19 since the pandemic began a year ago. A spokeswoman for the World Health Organization told AFP that "across Europe, where transmission is intense and widespread, countries need to redouble their control and prevention approaches." —AFP

Not too late to curb new strain: Virus mutation tracker

GENEVA: It is not too late for Europe to contain the new variant of COVID-19 exploding in southeast England, a top coronavirus mutation tracker said. However, there is a fair chance that the strain is already circulating under the radar in other countries, said Emma Hodcroft.

The US-British molecular epidemiologist, based at the University of Bern, is a co-developer on the Nextstrain project, analyzing SARS-CoV-2 sequences from around the world to monitor variations that emerge. The expert has been tracking the current British and South African mutations.

Is it too late to contain the new mutation?

Hodcroft: "On a European level, I don't think so. There's a fair chance that there are more cases of this variant across Europe that we just haven't detected yet."

"Low levels of this variant might still be containable. If it's in a few people and those people are doing a good job, following the guidelines, wearing a mask, then it might not spread further. "So it is worth trying to keep the number of people with this variant down, because that does help us to contain it through other measures."

"If this variant has increased transmissibility, as scientists in Britain seem to really think it does, the best way to counter that is, unfortunately, with the same measures that we take now."

Can it be contained in Britain?

"Within the UK it's tougher because it's much harder to draw the lines. "Belgium can say things like 'No British flights can land here'. In Britain, it's not really possible to say, 'everyone in London, we're closing the roads, you cannot leave'. "I'm not saying that it's not still worth trying, but it is going to be hard to keep it contained just in southeast England, particularly with Christmas around the corner."

Should travel from Britain be stopped?

"Countries should be making careful considerations and really thinking hard over the next few days about what measures, if any, they want to impose on British travel. "I would hope everyone's thinking about it, what-

Nationalists win vote in Bosnia's divided Mostar

SARAJEVO: Nationalist parties have won a weekend election in Mostar, the Bosnian city that symbolizes the communal splits and broken politics that have haunted the country since the 1990s war. Sunday's vote was the first local election in 12 years in Mostar, which remains divided on ethnic lines between predominately Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks.

The main Croat party the HDZ won in the city's Croat zones and was also leading across Mostar, with more than 37 percent of the vote, according to preliminary results announced by the electoral commission yesterday. The country's main Bosniak coalition, led by the Muslim Party of Democratic Action (SDA), was trailing behind with 29 percent.

The city of 100,000 people has not had a local vote since 2008 because the two parties could not agree on the legalities around organizing an election. Contact between the two communities in Mostar—which is known for its historic World Heritage Site Old Bridge—are still minimal in what was once the former Yugoslavia's most cosmopolitan city. According to HDZ



ever decision they come to."

How does travel impact on spreading variants?

"Unfortunately, from what we know about, for example, the Spanish variant spreading through the European summer, we know that travel and holiday activities can really transmit the virus or variants of the virus incredibly effectively. "It becomes a question of how long do you wait... trying to keep that balance of not acting too early but knowing that if you wait too late, you might have missed the chance to contain the spread."

Did the mutation start in Britain?

"The UK is the world leader in sequencing. So if there's a variant and it gets to the UK, it has a good chance of being detected there. "By chance, if you were pulling sequences from Europe out of a hat, with the most probability you'd pick a UK sequence. "Even though we may not be able to say for sure that it started in the UK, it does look like it expanded there."

How does stopping the virus spreading affect mutation?

"We can never stop the virus mutating. But we can put the odds in our favor when we keep those case numbers down. "The less virus there is circulating, the less chance it has of getting into different people with different immune systems, with different vaccination history. "And so we reduce the chance that it ends up somewhere where it's able to get some mutations that maybe are bad news for humans."

What can sequencing tell us?

"The most reliable way to detect the presence of this variant is through sequencing. "It's through sequencing that we can see something start to behave differently. "The main thing is tracking these different variants and trying to identify any of these variants indicative of something worrying, like increased transmission or resistance to a vaccine or worse clinical outcomes?"

"This is almost certainly not going to be the last variant that we're interesting in knowing where it is and how

head Dragan Covic, the candidate who headed the party's election list, Mostar doctor Mario Kordic will become mayor.

"We want to transform Mostar into a European town, that is the message for all Mostar's inhabitants, regardless of their nationality," Covic said Sunday.

The new mayor will be elected by the 35-seat municipal council that should be formed after the results are confirmed, which could take several weeks. The two nationalist parties have run the city together without interruption since the end of Bosnia's 1992-1995 war which left 100,000 people dead. —AFP



MOSTAR: Voters wait in line as they arrive prior to casting their vote for local elections in Mostar, southern Bosnia and Herzegovina, on Sunday. — AFP

Russia, Rwanda send troops to C Africa after alleged coup bid

BANGUI: The Central African Republic said yesterday that Russia and Rwanda had sent in hundreds of troops after an alleged attempted coup ahead of weekend elections. The government in CAR, one of the world's poorest and most unstable countries, on Saturday accused former president Francois Bozize of fomenting a would-be putsch by three rebel groups.

The three groups on Friday started to advance on the capital Bangui along key highways after declaring an alliance, the government said. The UN peacekeeping force MINUSCA announced on Sunday that the rebels had been stopped or pushed back and the situation was "under control". "Russia has sent several hundred soldiers and heavy weapons" under a bilateral cooperation agreement, government spokesman Ange Maxime Kazagui said.

"The Rwandans have also sent several hundred men who are on the ground and have started fighting."

Rwanda's defense ministry confirmed the deployment. It said the move was in response to the targeting of its troops in the 11,500-strong MINUSCA by rebels supported by Bozize, who ruled the CAR from 2003 to 2013. No details were given about the deployment, but the ministry said it would "also contribute to ensure a peaceful and secure general elections scheduled on Sunday". MINUSCA's Rwandan contingent is notably in charge of the security of CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera and the presidential palace.

Russian role

There was no immediate confirmation from Moscow about the Russian deployment although the Kremlin said the situation in the country was "serious concern". Moscow has been leading a vast diplomatic and financial offensive in the former French colony since 2018 in return for concessions to Russian firms to exploit minerals, particularly gold and diamonds. Private security guards employed by Russian companies also provide protection for Touadera and are involved in training of local armed forces. The alleged coup was mounted by three of the country's most powerful militias. They said they had merged into a single entity called "the Coalition for Patriots for Change" and invited all other groups to join.

They began heading down the country's main highways towards Bangui, according to the government. MINUSCA spokesman Vladimir Monteiro said late Sunday they had been pushed back in several locations or blocked, and "the situation is under control."

But security and humanitarian sources said some members of the armed groups were still on the ground around Bossembele, around 150 kilometres (90 miles) from Bangui. The so-called G5+ group—France, Russia, the US, the EU and the World Bank—urged Bozize and allied armed groups to lay down their arms and called for the presidential and parliamentary elections to go ahead on Sunday. —AFP



Touadera is touted as the likely winner in the presidential election, but his government only controls a third of CAR territory

German man gets life in jail for anti-Semitic rampage

MAGDEBURG, Germany: A German court yesterday handed down a life sentence to the assailant behind a deadly far-right attack last year that nearly became the country's worst anti-Semitic atrocity since World War II. A bolted door at the synagogue in the eastern city of Halle with 52 worshippers inside marking Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, was the only thing that prevented the heavily armed attacker from carrying out a planned bloodbath.

After failing to storm the temple on October 9, 2019, Stephan Balliet, 28, shot dead a female passer-by and a man at a kebab shop. "Without that famous reinforced door, he would have committed a massacre," presiding judge Ursula Mertens said as she read out the verdict.

During his five-month trial, Balliet denied the Holocaust in open court—a crime in Germany—and expressed no remorse to those targeted, many of whom were co-plaintiffs in the case. He was convicted of two counts of murder and multiple counts of attempted murder in a case that has deeply rattled the country and fuelled fears about rising right-wing extremism and anti-Jewish violence, 75 years after the end of the Nazi era. The prosecution had demanded a life sentence for Balliet. The defense team asked Mertens only for a "fair sentence". —AFP

International

Victory for children: Philippines set to raise age of consent to 16

Child rights activists win fight against the 'culture of patriarchy'

MANILA: Manila teenager Rose Alvarez was 13 when she started having sex with a man who was more than twice her age. That would be statutory rape in most countries, but not in the Philippines. The Catholic-majority country has one of the lowest ages of consent in the world, allowing adults to legally have sex with children as young as 12 if they agree.

Child rights activists have lobbied for decades to increase the age-enshrined in the penal code since 1930 — but faced resistance from what they describe as a “culture of patriarchy” in a country where abortion and divorce are illegal. Congress now looks set to approve a bill to raise the age to 16.

Campaigners say the legislation would help protect youngsters in a nation that has become a global hotspot for online child sex abuse and where more than 500 teenagers get pregnant and give birth every day. “This is a victory for Filipino children,” Patrizia Benvenuti, UNICEF’s chief of child protection in the Philippines, said recently as the proposed legislation moved closer to a final vote. “Pegging 12 as the age of consent is really not consistent with scientific studies on brain development.”

Alvarez, who got pregnant when she was 14, says she now realizes she had been too young for a sexual relationship and the demands of motherhood. “I was still a child then. I didn’t know anything about sex,” Alvarez, now 16, told AFP at a clinic run by the Likhaan Center for Women’s Health in Navotas, one of the poorest areas of Manila.

“I was telling him to use a condom... but he

removed it. He didn’t want to use it,” said Alvarez, whose name has been changed to protect her identity. Alvarez—who until the age of 12 thought it was possible to get pregnant from kissing—said she was drunk the first time she slept with the man, who was about 29 when they met on Facebook.

“When I woke up I was shocked to see blood in my underwear and it hurt a lot,” she recalled. “I was too intoxicated to know what was happening.”

‘Victim blaming’

Child rape and sexual abuse are rampant in the Philippines, according to official data. A woman or child is raped nearly every hour, Senator Risa Hontiveros said in a document to the Senate, citing figures from the Center for Women’s Resources. Seven out of 10 victims are children and the vast majority are girls, she said. A government-backed nationwide study in 2015 showed one in five children aged 13–17 experienced sexual violence, while one in 25 were raped during childhood, UNICEF said. But prosecuting adult perpetrators in rape cases involving children as young as 12 has been difficult because they can argue the sex was consensual, said Rowena Legaspi, executive director of the Children’s Legal Rights and Development Center.

“Imagine a 12-year-old... that girl is still a minor,” Legaspi told AFP. “How could she have consented?” The proposed bill would make it automatically illegal and carry a penalty of life imprisonment, though it would not punish young couples close in age. It is expected to be approved by the Senate in the coming months before going to President Rodrigo



In this photo taken on December 2, 2020, Donna Valdez, 15, — whose name AFP has changed to protect her identity — carries her child at a health centre in Manila. — AFP

Duterte to be signed into law.

Activists say increasing the age of consent will deter sexual predators. But they caution more needs to be done to combat sexual violence against children and one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Southeast Asia. All children should have access to age-appropriate sex education “from an early age” as well as information and services to

make sex safer and avoid unplanned pregnancies, said Carlos Conde of Human Rights Watch.

Sexist and “victim blaming” attitudes among prosecutors and judges also needed to be changed, and cases needed to move faster, said Legaspi. It currently takes years for a rape case to reach court, by which time the victim may be an adult—and in some cases, the accused has died. — AFP

Foot massages, tattoos and dentists for India farmers

NEW DELHI: With foot-massage machines, a dental surgery, their own newspaper and even a tattoo parlor, it’s clear that the thousands of Indian farmers blocking roads into Delhi for almost a month are going nowhere. The farmers marched on the capital in late November to protest at new farm laws they fear will destroy their livelihoods, but police firing tear gas and water cannon stopped them in their tracks.

So now, numbering tens of thousands, they are digging in at several entry points into the city, braving the bitter night-time cold with tents, blankets and fires, as well as hot samosas and sweet chai. With music blaring from large speakers fitted to tractors, the largest such site at the Singhu border crossing north of Delhi now resembles a lively—and highly organized—festival. Sunny Ahluwalia, a dentist, drove his van fitted with two den-

tal chairs and an X-ray machine, all powered by a generator, from his home 250 kilometers away to help.

“We may have become doctors but we are sons of farmers,” Ahluwalia said after scraping one farmer’s yellowing teeth, one of around 100 patients he treats for free per day. “It is very unfortunate that our government isn’t ready to accept the farmers’ demands. How can the laws be good if they don’t like them?”

Tired feet

The main camp snakes back almost a kilometer (half a mile). Tractor trailers are stuffed with bedding, while tents are set up around makeshift stalls offering anything from toothpaste to free medicine. The makeshift settlement is a hive of activity throughout the day, as the farmers—mostly without COVID masks—weave in and out of the bustling area, chatting and getting free food from community kitchens.

In one tent, volunteers have set up two neat rows of about 20 foot-massage machines to put a fresh spring in the step of the many grey-bearded, multi-colour-turbaned farmers.

“Since many of the protesters are elderly farmers, they used to ask us for massages because of pain in (their) knees and feet,” volunteer Bhupinder



SILIGURI: Activists and supporters of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) collect funds from the shop owners in support of farmers against the central government’s recent agricultural reforms in Siliguri. — AFP

Singh said. “We felt that we could serve more people and do it better by purchasing these cheap machines.” “I told them how it feels good and they are doing a very good job,” said satisfied customer Harbans Singh.

Spick and span

A team of 50 volunteers wielding brooms and dustpans have split themselves into two teams to keep the bustling place clean. “While everything else is in good supply, we felt that we could clean it better since we may be

here for long,” Sukhwinder Singh said. The government has said the new laws will mean farmers do not just have to sell their produce at state-run bodies that guarantee a minimum price.

But the protesters, who are mostly from northern states, fear that with the minimum price taken away, they will be squeezed dry by large corporations. To spread their message across India and abroad—there have been solidarity demos in Canada and Britain—a common social media platform is managed by a 36-member IT cell. — AFP

Women on the frontlines of Thai movement

BANGKOK: Denouncing sexual violence, demanding abortion reform and destigmatizing sex work—once-taboo issues are finding public expression in Thailand as women take up leadership roles in a youth-led pro-democracy movement.

On the protest frontlines, they are urging for gender equality in a kingdom where workplaces and politics are still dominated by men. AFP met some of them.

Chief negotiator

On the night police tried to stop protesters from marching to the Thai parliament, activist Chonticha Jangrew remembers rallying them to push past the barricades. “We cut the barbed wire, we approach the parliament as close as we can. We won’t back down,” she recounts herself saying during the November rally.

Moments later, police fired tear gas and water cannon at the marchers—a turning point for a movement that has brought thousands onto the streets since July. Chonticha, 27, is a familiar face at demonstrations and is often the only one trusted to negotiate with police, but her visibility has also led to a spate of criminal charges—including sedition. She said she received death threats and “sexual insults” from ultra-royalists who oppose the protest movement but insisted the struggle must continue.

“We must do as much as men if we want equality,” she said. Like the majority of protesters, she is demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha, reform to the monarchy and a rewriting of the military-scripted constitution.

She is also fighting for better representation of women in politics—so far, they make up only 14 percent of lawmakers in parliament and 10 percent of the cabinet. Chonticha was raised by a military father in a conservative environment. “I needed to emancipate myself. Today, I don’t hide my opinions from my family. They accept them, but they are afraid of me,” she said.



Chonticha ‘Lookkate’ Jangrew (center) is a familiar face at demonstrations and is often the only one trusted to negotiate with police. — AFP

Star attraction

A star of Thailand’s silver screen since her teenage years, Inthira Charoenpura—better known by her nickname “Sai”—says she has had movie contracts cancelled since joining the protests.

“In show business, nobody dares to talk about politics for fear of ruining their career,” she says.

She faces criminal charges for allegedly insulting the monarchy under Thailand’s tough royal defamation laws. The 40-year-old actress has nearly half a million fans on social media and is one of the few celebrities in Thailand to publicly acknowledge her financial support for the movement, earning her the moniker “Sugar Mama” from young protesters.

She collects donations and distributes meals, helmets, gas masks and inflatable ducks—which have emerged as a symbol for the movement. “The demonstrators are so courageous. In our country, protest movements often end in deaths,” she says, referring to civil unrest in 2010 that ended in a bloody crackdown. The protests today have been largely peaceful, with young students coming together demand social change—including an end to sexual harassment and gender discrimination. — AFP

HK reels after the year that free speech died

HONG KONG: Hong Kong faces no respite from Beijing’s crackdown on dissent after a year that saw its status as a free speech bastion collapse under a security law that has radically transformed the city. China’s authoritarian leaders guaranteed Hong Kong would maintain key freedoms and autonomy after its 1997 handover by Britain in a model dubbed “One Country, Two Systems”.

But a historic retreat from that promise is underway in response to the huge and often violent democracy protests that convulsed the business hub a year ago. Hong Kong is now a place where Beijing increasingly calls the shots and where voicing certain opinions can now carry up to a lifetime prison sentence. Dozens have been arrested under the new national security law China imposed in June, which bypassed the city’s legislature, its contents kept secret until it was enacted.

Supporters say it was needed to end unrest. “Whether you like it or not, it has succeeded in restoring peace and stability to Hong Kong,” Regina Ip, a prominent pro-Beijing politician, told AFP.

But critics say it has forever altered the DNA of a free-wheeling city used to speaking its mind. “It’s the kind of stability you get in a graveyard,” said Philip Dykes, the outgoing chairman of the city’s Bar Association. “The national security law offences are, many of them, directed to what people said instead of what people did.”

Even without the security law, Hong Kong changed dramatically over the course of 2020. Street protests have been effectively outlawed and court docks are filled with the prosecutions of opposition figures.

The city’s half-elected legislature is now devoid of dissenting voices after pro-democracy lawmakers resigned en masse when authorities disqualified four of their colleagues because of their political views. Other opposition figures were simply banned from standing for local elections. But the national security law has had the most profound impact. — AFP

News in brief

Record jump in Russia virus cases

MOSCOW: Russia yesterday reported a new record increase in coronavirus infections, as some experts said the pandemic had hit the country harder than government statistics suggest. Health officials reported 493 new virus deaths and 29,350 cases, bringing total infections to 2,877,727 — the fourth-highest in the world. Total fatalities stood at 51,351. Moscow and the second city of Saint Petersburg were the hardest hit, recording 7,797 and 3,752 new cases. Russia has reported a much lower death rate compared to other badly hit countries, raising concerns that authorities have downplayed the figures. — AFP

South Korea tightens Seoul curbs

SEOUL: South Korea banned gatherings of more than four people in the capital and surrounding areas yesterday as the country recorded its highest daily coronavirus death toll since the epidemic began. While South Korea has suffered relatively lightly compared to other nations, officials said a surge in infections had left hospitals in the capital region with a chronic shortage of intensive care beds. The country reported 926 new coronavirus cases Monday, and the death toll was now at 698 after 24 people died in the past 24 hours—a record high since the emergence of the epidemic. — AFP

Hawaii’s Kilauea volcano erupts

HONOLULU: The Kilauea volcano on Hawaii’s Big Island erupted late Sunday, authorities said, warning of a possible “significant emission” of volcanic ash into the atmosphere. “An eruption has commenced within Kilauea’s summit caldera,” shortly after 9:30 pm local time (0730 GMT), said the United States Geological Survey (USGS). “The situation is rapidly evolving and HVO (Hawaiian Volcano Observatory) will issue another statement when more information is available.” Images posted by the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park showed billows of red smoke rising into the night sky. — AFP

HK upholds ban on masks at protests

HONG KONG: The Hong Kong government’s decision to use a colonial-era emergency law to ban face masks at protests last year was both proportionate and legal, the city’s top court ruled yesterday. The ruling is a blow for democracy supporters who had been hoping the Court of Final Appeal would side with a lower court and overturn the order. It also confirms that Hong Kong’s chief executive—a pro-Beijing appointee—has the power to enact any law in a time of public emergency without needing the approval of the city’s partially elected legislature. — AFP

Japan approves record budget

TOKYO: Japan’s cabinet yesterday approved a record budget proposal for the next fiscal year from April, including stimulus for the pandemic-hit economy and another hike in defense spending to counter China. The budget proposal totals 106.6 trillion yen (\$1.03 trillion), a 3.8 percent rise from the current year and the ninth straight annual increase. Once again the government is seeking a record defense budget, for the seventh year running, this time of 5.3 trillion yen, up 0.5 percent from fiscal 2020 as Japan faces threats from an assertive China and unpredictable North Korea. — AFP

Business

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2020

COVID travel chaos leaves Brits stranded for Christmas

Countries around the world slap travel bans on UK over new virus strain

ROME: Alison is normally an optimistic person but she cried when her Christmas Eve flight home was cancelled with just a few days' notice. "I had built this up in my head to be a much-needed break and I have been feeling a bit homesick," said the 30-something Briton, who works as a live-in nanny in Rome.

She is one of many left stranded when countries around the world slapped travel bans on the UK after its admission that an infectious new strain of COVID-19 was spreading out of control.

Alison, who asked that her surname not be published, had booked the trip home despite having to self-isolate for 10 days on arrival in the UK, and take a test before returning to Rome. "It was still worth it for me to see my family for a couple of days. My parents are elderly and have some health problems which worry me," she said. She is now resigned to staying in Italy, and accepts her situation could be worse. "My employers have been lovely—they even offered to find someone to drive me back!" she said. "But it's awkward for them too, having an unexpected guest at what should be private family time."

My bad luck

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced new restrictions Saturday, blaming the quick spread of the new COVID variant—a decision that swiftly triggered a wave of travel bans. There were chaotic scenes at German airports as arrivals on the last flights from Britain were stopped and held while



FRANKFURT: Police escort a group of passengers from the airport's COVID-19 testing center to their gate at Frankfurt International Airport in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany, yesterday, amid the ongoing novel coronavirus / COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP photos

they were tested for coronavirus.

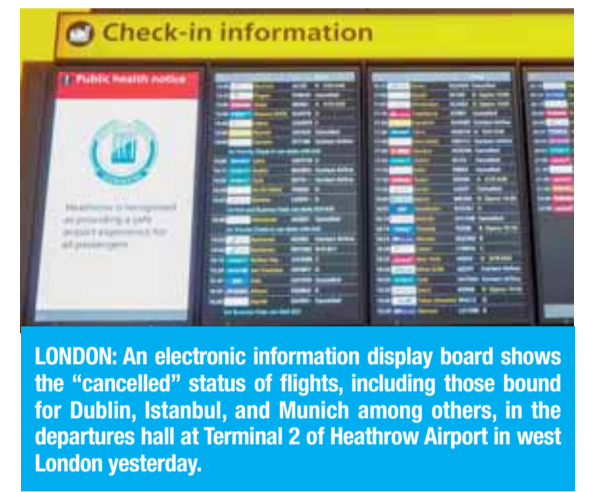
Many other European nations also brought in flight bans, as well as countries from Hong Kong to India, Israel to Turkey. Beth Gabriel Ware, a Briton who lives in Turkey, flew home earlier this month to surprise her parents in Kent, south-east England—but is now stuck. "It's all gone wrong!" the 23-year-old told AFP by telephone.

"I hadn't been in the UK for about 10 months, because I was so scared of this happening. I

thought it was safe. "It's just my bad luck." While accepting that travelling in a global pandemic brings its risks, she is annoyed at how quickly the restrictions were brought in. "It's inhuman not to give people more notice. My boyfriend is out in Turkey. I want to get back to him," she said.

Extreme reaction

Julian Elliott, a British travel photographer based in France, is also angry after being stuck fol-



LONDON: An electronic information display board shows the "cancelled" status of flights, including those bound for Dublin, Istanbul, and Munich among others, in the departures hall at Terminal 2 of Heathrow Airport in west London yesterday.

lowing a trip home for his grandmother's funeral. "It's just ridiculous," he told AFP from his father's home in Salisbury, south-west England. "It's an extreme reaction. Why don't they just test people at the airport? There are so many better ways to handle this."

Evelina Macpherson, who has British and Polish nationality, is due to fly home to Edinburgh from Poland today and still holds out hope she will make it. So far, she has not heard from the airline and Polish authorities have said they are only banning flights from the UK, not to the UK. "My mother is terminally ill. Her time is very limited," she told AFP. But "everything is up in the air". — AFP

Pakistan signs \$1.7 billion debt relief deal

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has secured a \$1.7 billion debt relief agreement to help offset the financial headwinds sparked by the coronavirus pandemic, officials said yesterday. The deal, following months of negotiations with creditors, will provide a moratorium on debt payments for large swathes of the current fiscal year and help ease the cash-strapped country's massive financial obligations.

"The Government of Pakistan has successfully negotiated and concluded rescheduling agreements with 19 bilateral creditors, including members of the Paris club," the country's ministry of economic affairs said in a statement. The ministry went on to describe the deal as "timely" that will help save the "lives and livelihoods of millions". Pakistan's economy was already on life support before officials began shuttering large segments of the economy in the spring as a range of lockdown measures were rolled out to fight the spread of the coronavirus. Prime Minister Imran Khan has repeatedly called for debt forgiveness from



ISLAMABAD: Secretary of Economic Affairs of Pakistan, Noor Ahmed (left) and Yves Manville (right), Deputy Head of Mission of the French embassy to Pakistan, exchange agreement copies of the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), in Islamabad yesterday. — AFP

international donors as tax revenues cratered, inflation soared, the currency was devalued, and fiscal deficits widened.

Earlier this year the G20 and the Paris Club agreed to waive most debt payments for the world's poorest countries in 2020, as sweeping virus lockdowns upturned the global economy. In June, Pakistan was named as one of a handful of countries to secure a moratorium on debt repayments from the Paris Club in an effort to ease the

economic impact of the coronavirus crisis.

To add to the country's woes, Pakistan has also been facing growing questions about the massive amount of debt it has taken on in recent years through Chinese-financed infrastructure projects. Beijing has been steadily pouring cash into Pakistan, investing more than \$50 billion as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that has upgraded infrastructure, power and transport links across the country. — AFP

Brexit talks flirt with failure as deadline blown

BRUSSELS: EU and UK trade talks inched onwards under renewed pressure yesterday as transport chaos triggered by the emergence of a more contagious variant of the coronavirus in Britain complicated efforts to reach a Brexit deal. Only 10 days are left until January 1 when Britain will leave the EU single market and customs union and hopes of securing a new arrangement suffered a blow as another deadline went by.

EU and British negotiators remained in Brussels, with talks still blocked over the right of European crew to continue fishing in Britain's rich waters, as well as concerns over fair trade rules. Without a deal, Britain's links to the European Union end at midnight on December 31 (11 pm UK time) with a new tariff barrier that will sharpen the big shock of unravelling a half-century of EU membership.

A Sunday deadline set by the European Parliament, which could refuse to approve the agreement, passed without an agreement being found, leaving no time for MEPs to ratify an eventual deal before January 1. "Political games from Westminster have wasted too much time," said German MEP Manfred Weber, who leads the conservative group in parliament, warning that members would take their time and not "rubber stamp" a text.

But Weber also said parliament "will remain constructive partners" and that "alternative procedures are possible"—though what they were was not yet agreed. As long as a deal is found in the next hours or days, European sources said this could involve a provisional implementation

of a pact with MEPs having their say in January.

Brexit 'tragedy'

The talks in Brussels continued as Britain was effectively cut off from the world, after Prime Minister Boris Johnson said a highly contagious mutation of the virus was spreading in the UK. The emergency left holiday travellers stranded and blocked goods crossing the Channel, presaging the potential effects of a failure to secure a last-minute trade deal.

"It's a tragedy what's happening in Britain, and this Brexit is a tragedy, we see it more and more every day," France's EU commissioner Thierry Breton told BFM Business, when asked about the new outbreak. If Britain "had chosen to remain in the European Union... today we could have helped them," Breton argued.

With just days before negotiators should head home for Christmas—assuming the border reopens—a senior UK government source on Sunday said the talks remained "difficult and significant differences remain". "We continue to explore every route to a deal that is in line with the fundamental principles we brought into the negotiations," he said.

Britain intends to assume control over its waters on January 1, but is ready to allow continued access to EU fishing fleets for a transitional period under new terms.

UK negotiator David Frost wants Britain to take back more than half the fish currently assigned under the EU quota system, under a three-year agreement. The European side insists the UK accept getting back only a quarter of the fish quota—and that the transition period should last six years.

Hubert Carre, head of France's top commercial fishing lobby, said that this was already too much.

"We're wondering whether a no deal is better than a bad deal," he told BFM, accusing the British of being "very greedy". — AFP

EU gives green light to PSA, Fiat Chrysler merger

BRUSSELS: The European Union yesterday gave conditional approval to the mega-merger of car giants Fiat Chrysler (FCA) and Peugeot Citroen (PSA), after the firms promised to address competition fears. The tie-up, which was announced late last year and planned to be completed in early 2021, will create Stellantis, set to be the world's fourth-largest automaker in terms of volume, and number three in terms of sales.

The combined company unites brands such as Peugeot, Citroen, Fiat, Chrysler, Jeep, Alfa Romeo and Maserati into a global giant, each of which will continue under its own marque. The European Commission said the decision to approve the deal came after it had carried out an "in-depth investigation" over concerns it might stifle competition.

"The approval is conditional on full compliance with a commitments package offered by the companies," the commission said in a statement. Brussels was worried the merger could affect Europe's lucrative market for vans, which are technically easy to manufacture but sell at good prices. To assuage those concerns, the commission said PSA would continue an agreement with Toyota to manufacture vans to be sold under the Japanese



This combination of file pictures created shows the logo of Italian auto maker Fiat (left) and the Peugeot logo. — AFP

brand in Europe.

The statement said that the new firm would also facilitate access for competitors to its van repair and maintenance networks. "We can approve the merger of Fiat Chrysler and Peugeot SA because their commitments will facilitate entry and expansion in the market for small commercial vans," EU competition chief Margrethe Vestager said.

"In the other markets where the two automotive manufacturers are currently active, competition will remain vibrant after the merger." Italian-American FCA and France's PSA said they "warmly welcomed" the decision by the European authorities.

The merger must still be approved by

shareholders at a meeting on January 4, the companies said, with the aim of finalizing it by the end of the first quarter. The tie-up is seen as crucial for the two groups in light of heavy investments that must be made in electric cars as the global car market undergoes a major shift. Massive global disruptions caused by the coronavirus this year had at one stage cast doubt over the merger as automakers saw sales and share prices slump.

Fiat Chrysler in October said it returned to profit in the third quarter, doing better than expected as the market recovered from the steep downturn. PSA reported its sales had stabilized over the same period, after a plunge of almost 35 percent in the first half of the year. — AFP



A spokesperson wears a safety vest during a press tour of an overflow parking lot for trucks after the Brexit transition period, in Hook of Holland, near Rotterdam harbor yesterday. — AFP

Business

US lawmakers reach deal on \$900bn stimulus package

Pandemic batters economy, jobless numbers rising in past two weeks

WASHINGTON: US lawmakers agreed on a nearly \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package for millions of Americans on Sunday, in a deal that follows months of wrangling and comes as the nation battles the world's largest coronavirus outbreak.

The package includes aid for vaccine distribution and logistics, extra jobless benefits of \$300 per week, and a new round of \$600 stimulus checks—half the amount provided in checks distributed in March under the CARES Act. Months of partisan debate and finger-pointing, as well as last-minute negotiations, culminated in a deal lawmakers said they hoped to formally approve on Monday.

Talks had taken place amid a highly contentious campaign for the US presidency and Donald Trump's subsequent refusal to concede defeat to Democrat Joe Biden. "We've agreed to a package of nearly \$900 billion. It is packed with targeted policies to help struggling Americans who have already waited too long," Republican Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell said in a statement. Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer confirmed an agreement had been reached with Republicans and the White House on a deal that "delivers urgently needed funds to save the lives and livelihoods of the American people as the virus accelerates."

The agreement also contains \$25 billion in housing aid to prevent evictions and nearly \$100 billion to help schools and childcare facilities re-open, a statement from Pelosi and Schumer said. Congress was working under a deadline of midnight Sunday, needing to reach consensus to avoid a government shutdown. Number two House Democrat Steny Hoyer said he expected the deal to pass on Monday and then head to the Senate.

That meant it required passage of a stopgap measure—which was signed by Trump late Sunday—to keep the federal government funded an extra 24 hours and avert a shutdown. The House and Senate approved the stopgap measure earlier Sunday. "The House will move swiftly to pass this legislation immediately, so it can quickly be sent to the Senate and then to the president's desk for his signature," Schumer and Pelosi said in a statement.

"With the horrifying acceleration of daily infections and deaths, there is no time to waste."

In the wake of the deal, president-elect Biden—who has promised to pass another cash injection when he takes office in January—welcomed the agreement but said more will need to be done. "Immediately, starting in the new year, Congress will need to get to work on support for our COVID-19 plan, for support to struggling families, and investments in jobs and economic recovery," he said in a statement.

Battered economy

Democrats and Republicans have traded blame for months over the failure to reach a deal on this second relief plan—and continued to do so even after the deal was agreed on Sunday. As the pandemic takes a record toll in US cases and deaths, the economy has been gravely battered, with jobless numbers rising in the past two weeks. Making matters worse, millions of Americans were poised to lose jobless benefits after Christmas, and federal moratoria on evictions and repayment of student loans are set to expire at the end of the month.

New assistance for struggling businesses and the unemployed is seen as critical to getting the world's biggest economy back on its feet, while new vaccines offer hope that an end to the pandemic may be in sight. The initial \$2.2 trillion package passed in March was credited with preventing a much more severe economic downturn. It included huge amounts to rescue American companies, including \$377 billion in grants to small businesses to pay workers and rent, \$500 billion for loans to larger businesses and states and nearly \$600 billion in tax breaks and deferrals.

But critics said too much assistance went to big corporations and not enough to ordinary Americans and small businesses. On Wednesday, Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell stressed the high risk that countless small businesses could go bust in the absence of new federal aid. The Fed has estimated that the jobless rate will end the year at 6.7 percent before dipping to 5 percent next year—still a long way from the 3.5 percent registered in February. — AFP

Lebanon parliament clears way for forensic audit of central bank

BEIRUT: Lebanon's parliament yesterday approved a bill that suspends banking secrecy laws for one year to allow for a forensic audit of the central bank, a key demand of international donors, state media said. "Parliament approved a draft law... that suspends banking secrecy for one year," the official National News Agency reported.



WASHINGTON, DC: Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer speak after a press conference on Capitol Hill on Sunday in Washington, DC. Republicans and Democrats in the Senate finally came to an agreement on the coronavirus relief bill. — AFP

The vote came in in accordance with a November decision by parliament to clear hurdles obstructing a forensic audit of the central bank and public institutions, the NNA added.

The International Monetary Fund and France are among creditors demanding the audit as part of urgent reforms to unlock financial support, as the country faces a grinding economic crisis. But the central bank has claimed that provisions including Lebanon's Banking Secrecy Law prevent it from releasing some of the necessary information. "After approving a law that lifts banking secrecy... we can begin a forensic audit," said Hasan Fadlallah, a lawmaker affiliated with the powerful Shiite Hezbollah movement.

But lawyer and activist Nizar Saghih argued that Monday's decision would only be "window dressing"

in the absence of a clear intention from government to carry out the audit.

"Implementation is a whole separate matter," he said. New York-based Alvarez and Marsal, a consultancy firm formerly tasked with the audit, scrapped its agreement with the government in November because the central bank had failed to hand over required data.

The move sparked widespread criticism of Lebanon's authorities. The country, which defaulted on its debt this year, is experiencing its worst economic crisis in decades and is still reeling from a devastating explosion at Beirut's port that gutted entire neighborhoods of the capital on August 4. The dire economic straits and the explosion have both been widely blamed on government corruption and incompetence. — AFP

Opinion

LNG's future will be a greener one

By John Roper

A large box must be ticked before LNG can be considered a cornerstone of the 21st century energy basket - and that is its decarbonization. LNG has fairly been heralded as a coveted jigsaw piece in the global energy transition: an energy market to bridge the traditional fossil fuel industry of the past with the renewables portfolio of the future. But it can do more.

The environmental microscope on LNG will only intensify. Momentum driven by agreements like the National Visions of Arab Gulf governments, the EU's Green Deal, Singapore's Carbon Act, and more, have been joined by net zero targets by some of the world's biggest economies and companies. We, for one, plan to neutralize the carbon footprint of our entire European operations by 2035.

Sense of urgency

Decarbonizing LNG has always been a point on the business agenda, but this backdrop means it is now a pertinent issue that needs immediate attention. Inaction risks dulling the environmental competitiveness of the LNG market as other and cleaner energy sources - solar, wind, biomass, and hydrogen, for example - gain traction in the 2020s. And even if renewables are not as competitive as firms and governments would like - the returns are not as fruitful as fossil fuels when oil prices are higher, for example - we nonetheless have a social responsibility to protect the planet.

LNG is considered the 'greenest fossil fuel' with 117 pounds of CO₂ produced per million British thermal units (MMBtu) equivalent of natural gas, detailed the Energy Information Administration (EIA). This is versus 200 pounds and 160 pounds for coal and distillate fuel oil, respectively. But LNG is still a fossil fuel market, which has polluting supply chains clashing with the global push for a net zero future. Our collective goal should be reducing the emissions (both methane and CO₂) along the value chain with 'carbon neutral' LNG, which would make this already highly attractive market even more relevant for the 21st century climate agenda.

Balancing the books

So, what is the 'carbon neutral' LNG of the future that industry must achieve? Carbon neutral LNG does not mean that a cargo does not cause emissions, but that GHG emissions can be offset through the purchase of credits from carbon removal projects. Examples of such projects - many already tried and tested via clean development mechanisms

(CDM) - include renewable and reforestation projects. For true carbon neutrality, methane emissions must also be mitigated - another journey that LNG stakeholders must embark on.

But there is a catch: offsetting is not cheap. The price tag could particularly sting in today's economic environment of depressed oil prices and a 6.5 percent retraction in the global growth outlook for 2021, flagged the International Monetary Fund (IMF). For example, when investing in reforestation projects to offset the carbon footprint of a cargo, the cost can easily rise to \$10/TCO₂e or more. At this cost, if one assumes the total GHG emissions of a conventional LNG cargo at around 250,000 TCO₂e, offsetting GHG emissions for one LNG cargo amounts to \$2.5mn per cargo, according to the International Group of Liquefied Natural Gas Importers (GIIGNL).



John Roper

But seeing this from a cost perspective only risks being narrow-minded. Firstly, companies will increasingly want - and need - to be able to show they have premium LNG that boasts carbon awareness and neutrality, especially as climate-related finance gets more support. Plus,

proactivity now will keep propelling the attractiveness of LNG - already considered a greener fuel by many - as its fossil fuel cousins grapple for relevance with financiers. Illustrating the shift in sentiment, more than 1,200 institutions worldwide managing \$14.5trn in assets have committed to divest from fossil fuels, up from 181 managing \$50bn five years ago, said international movement Fossil Free. LNG wants to be on the right side of this conversation - and it can easily be if it accelerates decarbonization.

Next 3 steps?

The first step is to improve measuring, monitoring, verifying, and reporting, including an accounting methodology for the life-cycle assessment (LCA) emissions of LNG and the carbon footprint per LNG cargo. The second move focuses on reduction, which includes assessing and ranking abatement options, implementing emissions reduction actions efficiently, and reporting emission reductions. The third step is to increase offsetting. This encompasses originating green certificates, designing offsets per customers' requirements (quantity, quality, origin, and so on), and creating a premium LNG product. All three steps are needed, each tying into one another: one cannot offset CO₂ emissions if monitoring has not been done effectively, and one cannot monitor efficiently if there is no accounting methodology, and so on. Clearly, there is no silver bullet to carbon neutral LNG, but as the proverb goes: 'What comes easy won't last and what lasts won't come easy.'

Note: John Roper is CEO Middle East, Uniper Global Commodities SE

Four Steps Towards Building ICT Talent for Kuwait's Digital Future

By: Rico Lin, CEO of Huawei Technologies Kuwait

As digitally developed economies around the globe continue to make larger investments in ICT, digitally developing economies are also accelerating growth by investing strategically in ICT capabilities and their digital transformation journeys, yet the gap between the technology advancements and talents is widening.

Countries with sufficient access to skilled and educated ICT professionals are able to compete better, boost income and GDP, and increase quality of life. Those without access to such professionals are likely to be left behind even further.

One of the primary reasons driving this shortage is a lack of synergy between education and the requirements of the labor market. According to the World Economic Forum, Europe will see a shortage of around 1.1 million ICT professionals this year. In less developed regions, the shortage is expected to be even more acute. In a recent PwC poll, eight out of 10 private businesses in the Middle East have already acknowledged that digitization will impact the long-term viability of their business. Yet even with this recognition, there is still a shortage of talent to fulfill the needs of an increasingly digital world. In Kuwait in particular, it is considered difficult to find digital professionals who have been trained locally. This need was outlined in another recent Strategy& study that found 75% of Kuwaitis are employed in sectors that are at high risk of disruption by new technologies development.

This denotes the need to increase educational opportunities for Kuwait talent to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge required to drive the country's digitization ambitions as part of the wider New Kuwait 2035 vision. Developing skills that align with the flourishing information and communication technology (ICT) sector is, therefore, imperative in order to keep up with the growing ecosystem and changing work environment.

Providing more opportunities for Kuwaiti nationals within the ICT sector is crucial, and the first step is to drum up more interest in digital careers. At present, business and economics remain the most popular university courses, with information and technology studies lagging behind considerably. With the current rate of digitization in Kuwait and around the world, more youth need to be encouraged to see the



immense potential in this exciting and dynamic field.

After generating interest, it is important to create ability and put that into practice. There are several ICT academies, talent programs and educational and training initiatives throughout Kuwait in association with top local universities, which are available to provide world-class education and certification in the most relevant topics for the field. This includes training in cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and much more - all of which can prepare talented minds to pursue a career within the ICT sector.

Putting their newfound skills to practice is a natural next step. Not only does it build confidence, but it opens new horizons and provides invaluable experience for newly-qualified ICT professionals. Internships and competitions on a local and international level offer great opportunities to enhance skillsets, gain recognition, while also offering knowledge exchange and exposure to international best practices.

Regardless of the career path they choose, stimulating students' interest in the ICT sector and providing more ICT education resources for them to participate in, will only support and possibly accelerate Kuwait's digitization. As a long-term partner of both the public and private sectors in Kuwait, we are committed to training 1,000 new ICT talents for the country in the coming three years, and look forward to collaborating with local partners to achieve this goal. Not only will this bring digital to every person, home and organization, but it will also enable a fully connected, intelligent Kuwait that thrives on the power and potential of technology.

Business

Markaz successfully closes its KD 35 million 5-year bond issue

Demand exceeded offered bonds, emphasizing investors' trust in Markaz

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre K.P.S.C. "Markaz" announced the successful close of its KD 35 million 5-year bond issue through private placement. The bonds, which were issued on 20 December 2020 and were oversubscribed affirming investors' trust in Markaz, are equally allotted between fixed rate and floating rate tranches. The fixed-rate tranche has a coupon of 4.75 percent per annum payable quarterly, while the floating-rate tranche offers a coupon of 3.00 percent above the Central Bank of Kuwait discount rate, capped at 5.50 percent per annum and payable quarterly. Gulf Bank, Ahli Capital Investment Company and Markaz were the joint lead managers and subscription agents. The subscription period for the issuance lasted from 24 November to 10 December, 2020.

"Capital Intelligence", an international credit-

rating company, rated the bonds at (BBB) with a stable outlook. This rating reflects Markaz's sound financial standing in terms of liquidity, solvency and the sustainability of its management fees and commission income. Other supporting factors include Markaz's consistent track record of meeting its debt service obligations, its access to unsecured financing, and its diversified lender base.

Diraar Yusuf Alghanim, Chairman of Markaz, stated: "We are pleased to announce that Markaz's latest bond issue was received positively by the capital market. The strong demand for our fourth issue reflects the continuing trust that investors place in Markaz, its solid creditworthiness, and the capital markets' confidence in the quality of our bond issues. The Capital Intelligence rating also confirms Markaz's status

as a well-established franchise with a sound reputation in the region, particularly in Kuwait. Our experienced management team has succeeded in effectively guiding the company through this year's challenges, while always ensuring that we fulfill our responsibilities to our stakeholders."

Markaz CEO, Ali H Khalil commented: "These bonds were competitively priced and attracted extensive participation from institutional investors; reinforcing their trust in our credit risk. He added that Markaz has always been an active participant in the debt capital markets as an issuer, lead manager, and investor, and will continue to work with regulators and the public and private sectors to create an efficient and liquid bond market in Kuwait. We always seek to maintain and reinforce these relationships, and entrusted Gulf



Diraar Yusuf Alghanim



Ali H Khalil

Bank and Ahli Capital in view of their strong market positions, as well as our confidence in the their distribution networks."

A profile of 3 professionals

NEW YORK: Being Black on Wall Street has often meant entering a crowded room and seeing nobody else who looks like you. This is changing, but not that fast. Here are three accounts that shed light on the challenges and benefits of that experience.

Experiencing 'social acclimation'

Before starting his own consulting firm, Dale Favors worked for leading financial giants including Morgan Stanley, CIBC, Royal Bank of Canada and Piper Jaffray.

One critical element in his early career was the magazine "Black Enterprise" and its list of the top 25 Blacks on Wall Street. In 1992, "I read that magazine from cover to back cover probably 200 times," recalled Favors, who proceeded to call the names, one by one.

"That article there allowed me to identify the names and pictures of people who looked like me working on Wall Street. And I knew I could do it." He enjoyed the work in his first role in fixed income securities at Morgan Stanley. He had the technical skills for the job, but went through a process of "social acclimation," he said. "I had to get properly socialized into an environment that was very much Caucasian," he recalled.

Favors has had white mentors, but says knowing other African-American colleagues has been essential. One of his mentors at Morgan Stanley was Craig Robinson, brother to former First Lady Michelle Obama. "We all go through unique experiences being people of color on Wall Street," he said. "To have other people to talk to about that, that's so important." He appreciates that banks are hiring more from public universities and historically black colleges, but notes that recruits may still need a hand learning the office lingo or getting used to meetings where everyone else is white. "To make change, you have to be very deliberate," he said. Favors praises some recent steps, such as a Goldman Sachs requirement that clients seeking to go public include a woman or minority board member. "Now that there's data showing that if you have diversity, it can turn into more money, people pay attention," he said.

Navigating two worlds

Life on Wall Street as a Black woman can be enriching but also be "isolating," according to Johnita Walker Mizelle. "Every day in the office, I have to conform to your norm, because it's the norm of the majority," she said. "I didn't grow up learning how to ski. I did not grow up going to a big university with a large football team. I did not grow up with an uncle who was a stockbroker. Going for a beer after work just wasn't part of my culture."

Black employees must manage a juggling act not required of white workers. "I show my colleagues that I can relate to them in their cultural norms, whereby there's never the case where they have to do that for me," she said. When she began her career in 1996, Mizelle was the only Black woman on the trading floor of her firm who wasn't a secretary. "It's isolating," said Mizelle, who values working for the venture capital firm Anthemis, which is led by a woman. Wall Street is not a pure meritocracy and career trajectories can be affected by economic cycles or the presence of a well-placed mentor. In such a hyper-competitive environment, there can be advantages to fitting in-by musical taste, food preferences, or fashion sense-which can penalize minorities, according to Mizelle.

Mizelle credits a stint at Black-led Williams Capital with opening her eyes to possibilities, saying "I really do believe you cannot be what you can't see."

Mizelle studied chemistry, but came to Wall Street following a chance introduction and visit to Goldman Sachs, her first Wall Street job. "I fell in love with the markets," Mizelle said. She still feels that way, although being Black on Wall Street means "your work ethic becomes that much stronger," she said. "Every project you get is an opportunity, not just for you but for the Blacks and Hispanics they're going to hire behind you."

Battling stereotypes

Harold Butler is far from a lifer on Wall Street. He didn't arrive at Citigroup until 2006 near the end of his 40s, after a trajectory that included working at Microsoft and elsewhere in finance. His role today involves managing the bank's relations with public entities, including the Federal Reserve. "It's common for most African Americans to have experienced some sort of racism, whether it's being made to feel like the other, individuals asking me whether or not I was here because of a quota, or having to disprove stereotypes" like African-Americans' supposed oversized love for watermelon or fried chicken. "Some people just do it unconsciously. They don't really understand their words or their thoughts, and how it impacts people."

But at Citi, Butler has felt supported in efforts to diversify the bank's staff and larger impact. The bank has stepped up efforts to recruit from underrepresented groups and bolstered mentoring and other initiatives to try to retain staff and better understand the roadblocks that sometimes drive promising African-Americans out of the field. —AFP

New Mercedes-Benz S-Class: Automotive luxury experienced in a new way

KUWAIT: The S-Class stands for the fascination of Mercedes-Benz: legendary and traditional engineering expertise which defines the luxury segment in the automobile industry. The new S-Class can be experienced with all the senses - seeing, feeling, hearing, and smelling - while offering numerous innovations in the areas of driver assistance, protection, and interaction.

Mercedes-Benz is shaping the next generation of individual mobility with innovations that place the focus on people. The new S-Class uses digitization for a car that responds empathetically to the needs and wishes of its driver and passengers.

The S-Class is the world's best-selling luxury sedan. With the latest generation offering customers innovation, safety, comfort and quality as never before. The 2021 new S-Class will be available soon in Kuwait exclusively from Al Mulla Automobiles Co.

Modern luxury attains the next level in the interior of the S-Class. The designers have created a feel-good ambience with lounge character marked by elegance, high quality and lightness. The dashboard with its new architecture, modern surface design and ergonomic display arrangement is a particular highlight. But the feel-good aspect goes even deeper: with high ride quality and low noise levels as well as an extensive range of ENERGIZING Comfort programs, the S-Class looks after the well-being of its passengers. They also stay fit thanks to the effective air filtering system, which signals its newly gained capability with the new name ENERGIZING Air Controll.

The new Mercedes-Benz S-Class has become more intelligent in many areas, and the driving experience is at the next level. Digital innovations such as in MBUX (Mercedes-Benz User Experience) are joined by innovations that increase driving enjoyment while making driving even safer: among

them are rear axle steering with a large steering angle and safety innovations such as the rear airbag. As a new function of PRE-SAFE Impulse Side, the active E-ACTIVE BODY CONTROL suspension can raise the vehicle body (on both sides) just before an impending side impact. Following systematic further development, the driving assistance systems are a further step towards autonomous driving. Thanks to improved environmental sensors, for example, the parking systems give the driver even better support when manoeuvring at low speed. The integration into MBUX means that the level of visualization has now entered a whole new dimension.

The designation "S-Class"

More than 98 kg of components made from resource-conserving materials are used in the S-Class. The number of components containing recyclates is now 120 - more than twice as many as in the preceding model. Another 40 kg or so are made from renewable raw materials.

The S-Class is the centerpiece of the brand: legendary engineering expertise and a heritage of craftsmanship meet progressive digital innovation. The S-Class combines artificial intelligence with the experience gained from 135 years of automobile engineering. Around 70 years ago, Mercedes-Benz laid the foundations for this model series with the model 220. Since its market launch in 1951, more than 4 million S-Class Sedans have been delivered to customers around the world. The designation "S-Class" was officially introduced with the 116 series in 1972. All in all, since the launch of the generation that is now in its runout phase, more than 500,000 S-Class Sedans have been sold.

The loyalty rate for this model series is especially high. For example, in the region, more than 80% of cus-



tomers who previously drove an S-Class once again opted for a Mercedes-Benz model. Around the world the S-Class Sedan is predominantly sold in the long wheelbase version: Around 9 out of 10 customers opt for the long version of the S-Class Sedan, which is standard in the region.

The Mercedes-Benz S-Class follows a long tradition that extends back to the beginnings of the Mercedes brand in the early 20th Century. Each model has decisively influenced the automotive engineering of its era. Well before the official designation S-Class, the models in the executive and luxury class were the mainstay of the Stuttgart-based company's portfolio and have always stood for luxury, comfort, safety and

lifestyle. The continuous ancestry of the S-Class begins with the model 220 (W 187) of 1951. The designation "S-Class" was officially introduced with the 116 series in 1972.

The new 2021 S-Class will be available soon at Al Mulla Automobiles Mercedes-Benz showroom in Al-Rai.

Gulf Bank announces winners of Al-Danah weekly draw

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank held its weekly Al-Danah draw on 20th December 2020 announcing the names of the winners for the week of 13 - 17 December 2020. The weekly draw consists of five winners who receive KD 1,000 each, every week.

The winners this week are:

Fatemah Hassan Abdulateef Almarhoun
Latefa Abdulkareem Hussain Aljredan
Mishari Essa Matuq Alabassi

Black on Wall St: Slow progress in building numbers

NEW YORK: In a more than two-decade run in finance across five countries, Troy Prince came across just one other Black person on a trading desk. In 2018, he founded Wall Street Bound because "after 20-plus years, I felt something has to be done, because it's not changing," Prince said in an interview.

The non-profit trains young talent from underrepresented populations on the combination of "hard" number-crunching competencies and "soft" skills on corporate culture to help them navigate Wall Street. "Of course, no one will overtly say trading desks are reserved for white men," Prince told

Hessa Ramadan Obaid Sharaaf
Radheya Abdullah Ahmad Hhareeb

Al-Danah is now offering its biggest prize yet, with an annual draw prize of KD 1,500,000. The annual draw will be held on 14 January 2021. Gulf Bank encourages customers to increase their chances of winning with Al-Danah by depositing more into their Gulf Bank accounts using the new ePay (Self-Pay) service, which is available on Gulf Bank's online and mobile banking services.

Al-Danah offers a number of unique services to customers, including the Al-Danah Deposit Only ATM card, which allows account holders to deposit money into their accounts at their convenience. Account holders can also calculate their chances of winning the draws through the 'Al-Danah Chances' calculator available on the Gulf Bank website and app. Furthermore, loyal Al-Danah customers are

rewarded with loyalty chances. Loyalty chances are the total chances accumulated from the previous year, which are added to the customer's chances the following year. Therefore, the total chances earned by Al-Danah customers in 2019, have been added to their 2020 chances, and the same process will take place in 2021, and so on. Terms and conditions apply.

Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account is open to Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti residents of Kuwait. Customers require a minimum of KD200 to open an account and the same amount should be maintained for customers to be eligible for the upcoming Al-Danah draws. If the customer's account balance falls below KD 200 at any given time, a KD 2 fee will be charged to their account monthly until the minimum balance is met. Customers who open an account and/or deposit more will enter the weekly draw within two days.

AFP. "But on the trading desk, in investment banking teams, troops are recruiting from the same schools, from the same fraternities, the lacrosse team."

This insularity means Wall Street recruiters are "not waking up one day and saying, let's go recruit at Howard (University), let's go recruit at City University of New York," he added.

Prince says he knows of no instances where he was denied professional opportunities because of his race, while acknowledging that he would "not ever really know" for sure. The son of immigrants from the Caribbean and the oldest of five siblings, Prince understood that after his family bought a house in upmarket Westchester County, he should put that address on a resume, rather than the one in the Bronx, a much less white neighborhood. "I'm not a complainer," Prince said. "I want to present practical and scalable solutions to this problem."

Addressing double standards

African-Americans comprise about 13 percent of the US population. At JPMorgan Chase, the biggest US

bank in terms of assets, Black staff account for 13 percent of headcount but just four percent of managers.

Only about 1.3 percent of the \$69 trillion asset management business is currently managed by firms led by women or minorities, even if their performance is comparable to those led by white men, according to a study by the Knight Foundation. Earlier this year, the head of Wells Fargo raised hackles when he pointed to a lack of available Black talent as a factor in the bank's slow progress on diversity.

Four hundred years after the arrival of the first slaves, the United States continues to contend with significant discrimination against African-Americans. Mass racial justice protests following the killing of George Floyd by a white police officer in May has shone a light on inequality, forcing America to contend with a difficult legacy of racism. President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, the first Black woman to serve in the role, have stressed diversity in their appointments, which include the first-ever Black Defense Secretary. —AFP

Classifieds

Tuesday, December 22, 2020

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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Rather cold with light variable wind to light to moderate north westerly wind with speed of 08 - 28 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

BY NIGHT: Cold with light to moderate north westerly wind to light variable wind with speed of 08 - 30 km/h with a chance for fog forming over some areas.

WEATHER WARNING			No Current Warnings		
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.	SFC. CHART 21/12/2020 0000 UTC		
KUWAIT CITY	18 °C	12 °C			
KUWAIT AIRPORT	18 °C	07 °C			
ABDALY	18 °C	05 °C			
BUBYAN	18 °C	09 °C			
JAHRA	20 °C	08 °C			
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	21 °C			
SALMIYAH	18 °C	13 °C			
AHMADI	- °C	- °C			
NUWASIB	20 °C	09 °C			
WAFRA	21 °C	06 °C			
SALMY	17 °C	06 °C			

4 DAYS FORECAST						
DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Tuesday	12/22	Fair and some scattered clouds will appear	20 °C	09 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 26 km/h
Wednesday	12/23	Warm and Partly cloudy to cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery later on	24 °C	10 °C	VRB-SE	10 - 42 km/h
Thursday	12/24	Fair and Cloudy to partly cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times	22 °C	15 °C	SE-NW	15 - 45 km/h
Friday	12/25	Rather cold by day and cold by night	16 °C	13 °C	NW	15 - 45 km/h

PRAYER TIMES	
Fajr	05:13
Sunrise	06:38
Zuhr	11:46
Asr	14:36
Sunset	16:54
Isha	18:16

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT	
MAX. Temp.	18 °C
MIN. Temp.	10 °C
MAX. RH	95 %
MIN. RH	54 %
MAX. Wind	N 25 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Narayanasamy s/o Subban, Indian passport holder No: R8107010, I am requesting my son Indian passport holder No: R8108595 issued at Kuwait on date: 16/07/2017. My son given name: Jeevadarshan, surname: Subban shall henceforth be known as Jeevadarshan, surname: Narayanasamy.

I, Narayanasamy s/o Subban, Indian passport holder No: R8107010, I am requesting my son Indian passport holder No: S9733945 issued at Kuwait on date: 16/09/2018. My son given name: Oli Amudhan, surname: Subban shall henceforth be known as Oli Amudhan, surname: Narayanasamy.

(C 5825)) 22-12-2020

I, Ameena, D/o Esa Amir Perwaz, holder of Indian Passport No. Z3827496 issued in Kuwait on 3/7/2017, R/o 16-3-528/B, Chanchalguda, Hyderabad, Telangana 500024, have changed my name to Ameena Esa Amir Perwaz for all purposes vide Affidavit dated 17/11/2020.

Airlines

Kuwait Airways	171
Jazeera Airways	177
Turkish Airlines	1884918
FlyDubai	22414400
Qatar Airways	22423888
KLM	22425747
Royal Jordanian	22418064/5/6
British Airways	22425635

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| CARRYON | LOUNGE | PILOT |
| CHECK IN | LUGGAGE | RESERVATION |
| CLAIM | MASK | SEAT |
| CREW | MEAL | SEATBELT |
| CUSTOMS | MOVIE | SECURITY |
| ECONOMY | OVERHEAD | TAKE OFF |

Join the Dots



STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)
Initiate a deep, meaningful conversation with someone you've lost touch with, Aries. It could be that a long and ugly point of contention is on the brink of resolution. All you need to do is make the first move. There's a great deal of heartfelt, loving energy in the air that will help you foster a sensitive, tender approach. Find a connection with someone that you didn't know was there.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)
It might seem like someone has dumped a bucket of water on your head today, Cancer. It seems like your fire is out. Keep in mind that this is only temporary and that your internal flame will be rekindled soon. For now, you may want to take this time to slow down and relax. Use this as an opportunity to reflect and tune in to your sensitive, caring nature. Let someone else take the reins.

Libra (September 23-October 22)
You will find strength in your inner reserves today, Libra. Don't hesitate to let your deepest thoughts shine through. Keep your antenna up. You will find that there's an electricity in the air that keeps people's emotions at peak level. Follow your instincts and keep in mind that this is probably your best defense against the challenges of the day. Rational thinking is overrated.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)
You may feel a bit confused today. It might seem as if the wind has suddenly been taken out of your sails. Don't get discouraged by the slow weightiness of the day. Take the opportunity to relax and recharge your batteries. Do a bit of inward reflection as opposed to outer-directed movement. The most valuable lesson to learn is patience. Remind yourself of this throughout the day.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)
Your transmission may be stuck in reverse today, Taurus. This doesn't mean you can't be productive. You may need to change your approach. Carefully assess a situation before you proceed. Someone may be trying to cross you. Be smart about your rebuttal. Head-on combat isn't the best approach. Try reasoning. You may discover that there are pieces of the puzzle you didn't know about.

Leo (July 23-August 22)
Tension may run high today as things come to a great emotional climax. It might seem as if everyone is out to get you, Leo, but more than likely this paranoia is a figment of your imagination. Don't get carried away with crazy scenarios that have no basis in reality. People may be acting irrationally, so don't be surprised if reason and logic are nowhere to be found.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)
You may feel a bit sluggish today, Scorpio. Your warrior spirit would rather stay home on the couch than get up and fight. This is fine. You may simply need a break from your quest for world domination. Remember that a good leader also takes the time to sit back and reflect on recent events in order to make better plans for the future.

Aquarius (January 20-February 18)
Today is an excellent day for you, Aquarius. You will be a welcome addition to any crowd. Your delightful nature is at its most active. You have the unique capability to be aggressive about getting what you want without disturbing the flow of the energy around you. People respect and honor your sensitive, nurturing qualities. This will win the game for you.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)
Things should go well for you today, Gemini. There's an added serenity in the air that will help calm your nerves. There's no need to make things more complicated than necessary. The answers to things are actually quite simple. Everything you want is probably right at your fingertips. You don't need to go far to find what you seek.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)
More than likely you will be caught up in a wildly intense emotional drama if you aren't careful, Virgo. Try to stay calm and collected. Find a quiet, solitary place where you can relax. Your energy is there, but it may be more reserved and subtle on a day like this. Be the stable oasis in the raging turmoil. Make peace with the people around you.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)
Your sensitivity is strong today, Sagittarius. You will find that your perception of situations is right on target with the truth of the matter. Keep in mind that in order to be successful, you won't need to strong-arm anyone into doing what you want. More than likely you will be able to accomplish more just by tuning in to your receptive, gentle nature.

Pisces (February 19-March 20)
The world probably isn't going to revolve around you today, Pisces, so get used to it. Even though this may not be the news you want to hear, it's probably the news you most need to hear. Use your incredible passion to nurture others. Think less about yourself and more about the people around you, especially your family. Stick close to home and take care of chores.



Syrian-Armenian potter Misak Antranik Petros uses an ancient pottery wheel to churn different types of pots at his workshop.



Syrian-Armenian potter Misak Antranik Petros arranges pottery vases at his workshop.



Syrian-Armenian potter Misak Antranik Petros watches his son Anto molding a clay vase at his workshop.



Syrian-Armenian potter Misak Antranik Petros uses an ancient pottery wheel to churn different types of pots at his workshop located inside an ancient mud-brick house near the city of Qamishli in Syria's northeastern Hasakeh province. — AFP photos



Syrian potter preserves centuries-old craft

Inside a dusty and dark workshop on the banks of the Jaghjagh river in northeast Syria, Misak Antranik Petros uses an ancient pottery wheel to throw different shapes from clay. The 85-year-old Syrian potter of Armenian origin said his family has practiced the craft for more than 450 years. "The profession was passed down from one generation to another like an inheritance," he said. "Now, my son is taking it up." His workshop is located inside

an ancient mud-brick house near the city of Qamishli, administered by Kurdish authorities who control much of northeastern Syria. It is cluttered with pots, tools and classically shaped vases, mostly covered in dust. Petros and his two sons spend most of their time in the humid space, heated by an old wood-burning stove. "I don't like to clean the clay off my hands because I like the texture," he told AFP from his workshop.

Petros was only a teenager when he had to take over for his sick father and become the main potter of the family. He has since become a master of the craft, and is keen to pass his skills on. "I am happy when I see the door of the workshop open and my son working inside," he said. "This craft deserves to be preserved." Syria's nine-year-long war has killed more than 387,000 people and displaced millions from their homes. Petros

and his family were largely spared with their home and workshop dodging damage. Of Petros's two sons—Anto and Yerevan—the former is likely to follow in his footsteps as a professional potter, especially after receiving training from his father. "His hands need to be balanced," Petros said of his son, like a trapeze artist "walking on a tight rope". Sitting at the pottery wheel, Anto, 43, moulds a clay vase with expert hands

while his father watches. The young man said he is just as enthusiastic about the craft. "I can't stop pottery for even two days because my hands miss it," Anto said. "If God blesses me with a child, I will teach them this craft the way my father taught me." — AFP



Children work on Arabian Ouds at a workshop belonging to Khaled Azzouz, a veteran oud-maker.



A man stacks Arabian Ouds at a workshop belonging to Khaled Azzouz, a veteran oud-maker at the Al-Marg district on the outskirts of the Egyptian capital Cairo.



A man works on Arabian Ouds at a workshop belonging to Khaled Azzouz.

IN EGYPT, PANDEMIC INSPIRES PASSION FOR OUD

While he waits for his lesson at an Egyptian music school, Maissara Mohammed plays his oud, its soothing tones dissolving the stress of daily life during the coronavirus pandemic. "I play four instruments, but the oud is certainly my favorite," the 27-year-old Sudanese engineer says, hunched over the pear-shaped body of his instrument. The oud, a stringed instrument popular in the Middle East whose origins date back thousands of years, is a

key element of classical Arabic music. Its tuning and practice is based on a complex system of Oriental melodic modes known as maqamat.

Long an instrument of accompaniment, it has slowly come out of the shadows since the end of the 19th century. Mohammed arrived from Khartoum in September to learn the oud at the Kipa music school in Giza, west of the Egyptian capital. While he could have studied elsewhere, he

said he chose Egypt because it was renowned for oud players like Mohammed Al-Qasabgi, who composed and performed some of Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum's greatest hits. The oud "is an instrument that has its own sentiments and is capable of translating everything inside you," he said.

Coronavirus lockdown measures in Sudan helped him focus on practicing, he added. Kipa opened earlier this year, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, and has attracted music lovers from all walks of life, according to founder Romani Armis. Students can learn instruments including the guitar, the violin and percussion, he said, but the oud has been the most popular, with 25 enrolments. Though the oud has long been dominated by men, teacher Hagar Aboul Kassem said her students included several young women. Lessons are also held online, and group classes at the school are limited to two students per room, Armis said. "Playing music has helped students channel their worries to overcome" this difficult period, he said.

'Unprecedented interest'

In the Al-Marg area north of Cairo, Khaled Azzouz, a veteran oud-maker, bustled around his workshop. "The problem with the oud is that it requires long hours of practise and people usually don't have time," he said. Azzouz heads the biggest oud

workshop in Egypt, producing 750 instruments monthly. Occasionally, children from the neighbourhood earn pocket money by doing odd jobs at the workshop, such as removing staples from the unfinished oud bodies, Azzouz said. It supplies the Cairo branch of Beit al-Oud, a specialised school with branches across the Arab world, and exports to 12 countries, from Sweden and the United States to Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.

Azzouz, who has been crafting the musical instruments for 25 years, said he had observed "unprecedented interest" in the oud during the global health crisis. But he said a pandemic-related disruption earlier this year of wood imports—including rosewood from India and ebony, mahogany and beech from elsewhere—had slowed down production. "We make the oud from A to Z... but Egypt has no forests, so all the wood here is imported," he said. Egypt has officially recorded around 125,000 cases of Covid-19 and over 7,000 deaths. Azzouz said an upside of the virus-related restrictions was that it had helped people find time to practice. "With the coronavirus, everyone is bored at home," he said. "People are contacting me online for orders." — AFP



A woman works on Arabian Ouds at a workshop belonging to Khaled Azzouz.



A man sprays varnish on an Arabian Oud at a workshop belonging to Khaled Azzouz.

Lifestyle | Features



Santa Claus, also known as Father Christmas, speaks with visitors through a plexiglass screen as a protection against the coronavirus at his office at Santa Claus Village in the Arctic Circle, Rovaniemi, Finnish Lapland. — AFP photos



Tourists enjoy a reindeer ride organized by Santa's Reindeer company at Santa Claus Village in the Arctic Circle.



Tourists wearing face masks to protect against the coronavirus walk outside the Arctic Circle Info Tower and Safari Center at Santa Claus Village.

LONELY CHRISTMAS IN SANTA'S HOMELAND AS TOURISTS STAY AWAY

In Finland's snowy far north, international visitors normally flood the Santa Claus Village amusement park, in search of reindeer rides, snow castles and a meeting with the jolly man himself. Under the pandemic travel restrictions, however, crowds in the Lapland town of Rovaniemi have dwindled to just a trickle and the joyful winter wonderland feels ghostly and abandoned. "It's been an exceptional and difficult year," Santa tells AFP from behind a plexiglass screen installed in his grotto, adding that his visitors have appreciated being able to forget a tough year and enjoy the Christmas cheer. Those who can't make it to Lapland can still purchase a remote one-on-one with Santa, at 79 euros (\$97) for five minutes, and the service has proven popular.

"People this year have most of all asked me for happiness, health and then a bit more happiness," although the children still want toys and games, he says. "Santa actually had time to chat!" Andrea Karjalainen, on a short break to Rovaniemi from southern Finland with her family, tells AFP. "You would expect that there are thousands of people now, but we're more or less alone," adds Teppo, her partner.

Livelihoods in danger

Since the 1980s, tourism chiefs have marketed the Arctic Circle town of Rovaniemi as the "real" home of Santa Claus, helping Finnish Lapland attract a record 2.9 million overnight stays last year, especially from Europe and Asia.

This year, however, visits have plummeted to half a million, most from early 2020 before the virus hit. "The local livelihoods are really in danger," Sanna Karkkainen, CEO of Visit Rovaniemi, tells AFP. "We've already got news of the first bankruptcies and there's going to be more." With Finland effectively

ground tourists, and the snow here has started bringing people in the south to Lapland," chief of operations Kristian Erkkila tells AFP over the noise of 90 huskies barking. Behind him, a Finnish family is being helped into a sled, lined with warm reindeer fur, which is then pulled away by twelve huskies follow-

ground theme park, owners Ilkka and Katja Lantinen have opted to cut their losses and reopen in winter 2021. Their staff of 400 seasonal and permanent workers has been slashed to just 36. That number will now be cut even further as the pair's luxury hotel, the Arctic Treehouse, will also close for the sea-

son after the government's promised lifting of travel restrictions did not materialize. "We had the team in, everybody was in really high spirits about opening the season," Ilkka tells AFP.

'Stressing doesn't help'

Half an hour away on the shore of a frozen lake, Ville Haavikko and his team are putting the final touches to the Arctic Snow Hotel, using chainsaws to carve steps and stacking thick blocks of clear ice into a wall. "We've tried to keep the business running and people at work because we have permanent employees with their own families and mortgages," Haavikko tells AFP. Usually there would be "hundreds of customers every day" who also stay in the glass igloos hoping to glimpse the northern lights. But all rooms are currently empty and only a handful of bookings await.

With only the domestic market available they designed a half-size snow hotel with 11 rooms—each carved with intricate ice sculptures on themes ranging from Arctic forest to circus. Back at his grotto, Santa and his elf, Vanilla, are reading through some of the many thousands of Christmas wishlists that, despite the pandemic, children around the world have sent him. Won't the border closures make it difficult to deliver all those presents? "I have brilliant news for you," Santa laughs, "Christmas is happening this year too." "So remember to be good, and enjoy it safely." — AFP



The Arctic Snow Hotel is pictured in Rovaniemi.

shut off to international tourists, the impact on Lapland has been stark: 5,000 jobs and 700 million euros in revenue have already been lost, a drop of up to 70 percent, Karkkainen says.

Many businesses have tried to stay open, such as the family-run Husky Park, whose current footfall is nothing like the normal 600 international visitors a day. "But we've been positively surprised that there have been home-

ing the shouted commands of the musher. "We're delighted to welcome everyone, but the whole time we're thinking what we need to do differently to be able to survive next summer," Erkkila says, but adds that the vaccine provides "some light at the end of the tunnel".

Waiting for decisions

At the nearby Santa Park under-

ground theme park, owners Ilkka and Katja Lantinen have opted to cut their losses and reopen in winter 2021. Their staff of 400 seasonal and permanent workers has been slashed to just 36. That number will now be cut even further as the pair's luxury hotel, the Arctic Treehouse, will also close for the sea-

son after the government's promised lifting of travel restrictions did not materialize. "We had the team in, everybody was in really high spirits about opening the season," Ilkka tells AFP.

"It seems our government is only capable of making decisions one month at a time. Unfortunately, we can't live like that," Lantinen says. Although the Lantinen's takings are down 98 percent this year, winter 2021 bookings

Dancing, singing out in Sydney as virus cluster grows

Dancing, singing and chanting were banned across Sydney in a fresh round of restrictions introduced Sunday as Australian authorities raced to control a growing coronavirus outbreak in the city. As hundreds of thousands of people on Sydney's northern beaches awoke to the first day of a snap lockdown, authorities announced another 30 coronavirus cases had been detected in the area. That brings the COVID-19 cluster in Australia's most populous city to 68 cases since it emerged Thursday, causing alarm among health officials, who issued stay-at-home orders for several beachside suburbs. New South Wales state—which incorporates Sydney on Sunday announced bans on dancing, singing and chanting at indoor venues across the city except at small weddings and religious services.

"It is the season when we all love to be singing," state health minister Brad Hazzard said. "But for the moment, it is probably one of the most dangerous exercises you can do, dancing and singing." Sydney restaurants, bars and cafes will be forced to limit patron numbers to 300 people while caps have also been placed on visits to homes. Mask-wearing is being encouraged but has not been made compulsory. Officials have promised to review the rules Wednesday in the hope some restrictions can be lifted before Christmas Day.

The latest outbreak has thrown Christmas plans into disarray, as many Australians who hoped to reunite with family after long separations were forced to cancel travel after new domestic border closures. On Sunday, Victoria and South Australia became the latest states to announce Sydney residents would be subject to mandatory hotel quarantine for 14 days on entry. Australia has largely been successful in containing the virus, taking an aggressive approach centered on imposing early and often far-reaching restrictions in response to new outbreaks.—AFP

Like so much else, visits with Santa go virtual due to COVID

As the pandemic rages, children's visits with Santa Claus are going virtual to protect both them and the men in high-risk groups who dress up as old St. Nick. "I'm not fooling around with the pandemic," said Joe Harkins, an 87-year-old Santa from Jersey City, New Jersey. "I'm not going to risk my life for any family or public events. It's just too risky." Harkins, like many of his brothers-in-red, as many Santas refer to each other, has taken his winter gig online, opting to swap in-person visits for virtual ones. He has even gone so far as to start a company called Santa Encounters where prospective Santas can sign up to make personalized videos for children.

"By definition, most Santas are in the most high-risk category either by age or underlying medical conditions," said Ric Erwin, head of the California-based Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas. "This is further compacted by the fact that our target demographic is young children, who are notorious vectors for all things infectious," Erwin added. John Sullivan, an 81-year-old Santa from Streamwood, Illinois, has shifted to all virtual visits. This is the first year in his 30-year Santa career that he will not see children in person. But this comes with the advantage of learning, in advance from the parents, about the kids he will



John Sullivan, 81, dresses as Santa Claus before recording a virtual message for a client at his home in Streamwood, Illinois.

speak to. "I learn their names, the names of their siblings, what they want, the name of their pet, things like that. So, when I start talking to the kids they are like, 'Hey, this Santa knows all about me!'" said Sullivan. "If you're in a mall where there's a big line of kids, you don't know anything about them."

Contactless Santa

The pandemic hasn't wiped out all mall Santas, although it has altered the way many visits are conducted. Cherry

Hill Programs, which runs Santa visits at more than 700 retail locations throughout the US, has made visits with Santa a contactless experience this year. Guests need to wear masks and make reservations to eliminate lines, Santa and staff have daily health screenings and temperature checks, and children are not allowed to sit on Santa's lap.

Instead, Santa sits on his high chair with a plastic shield over his face and a plexiglass sheet in front of him while guests are seated on a bench six feet in front of him, facing a masked photographer who then takes a picture. Additionally, the company has rolled out a virtual option as well this year. Many Santas' decisions to go virtual seem wise.

'I miss the hugs'

A recent appearance by a mask-less Santa and Mrs. Claus in Georgia turned into every parents' nightmare. On December 10, approximately 50 children were exposed to Covid-19 after having their pictures taken with Santa and Mrs. Claus at a Christmas parade. The individuals who served as Santa and Mrs. Claus were not symptomatic at the event but tested positive a few days later. Keeping the tradition of seeing Santa alive while keeping everyone safe was the motivation for Kathryn Burgess, a

photographer from Richmond, Virginia, when she created the "Snow Globe Santa." A children's book explained why Santa is inside a snow globe this year, along with real snow globes that Santas can get inside and see children while keeping safe.

Burgess, who has three children, ages 2, 4 and 6, said she created the story and product in order to save the experience for families. "I thought if we could get creative, there would be a chance that we could save this tradition," Burgess said. Some believe the virtual visits will still appeal to families even after the pandemic is behind us. "I think virtual visitation is here to stay," Erwin said. "There will always be people who want to see Santa at the mall or invite them to their home, but the sheer convenience of virtual visitation, plus the fact that you could invite far-flung family members from all over the world is going to remain an attraction. And let's face it, even young children are accustomed to interacting online now." Yet, for all the things technology enables, there's something that can't be made up for, at least until the pandemic is over. "I miss the hugs and the look on their faces when they are talking to me," Harkins said. "I miss that a lot. Nothing can replace that." — AFP



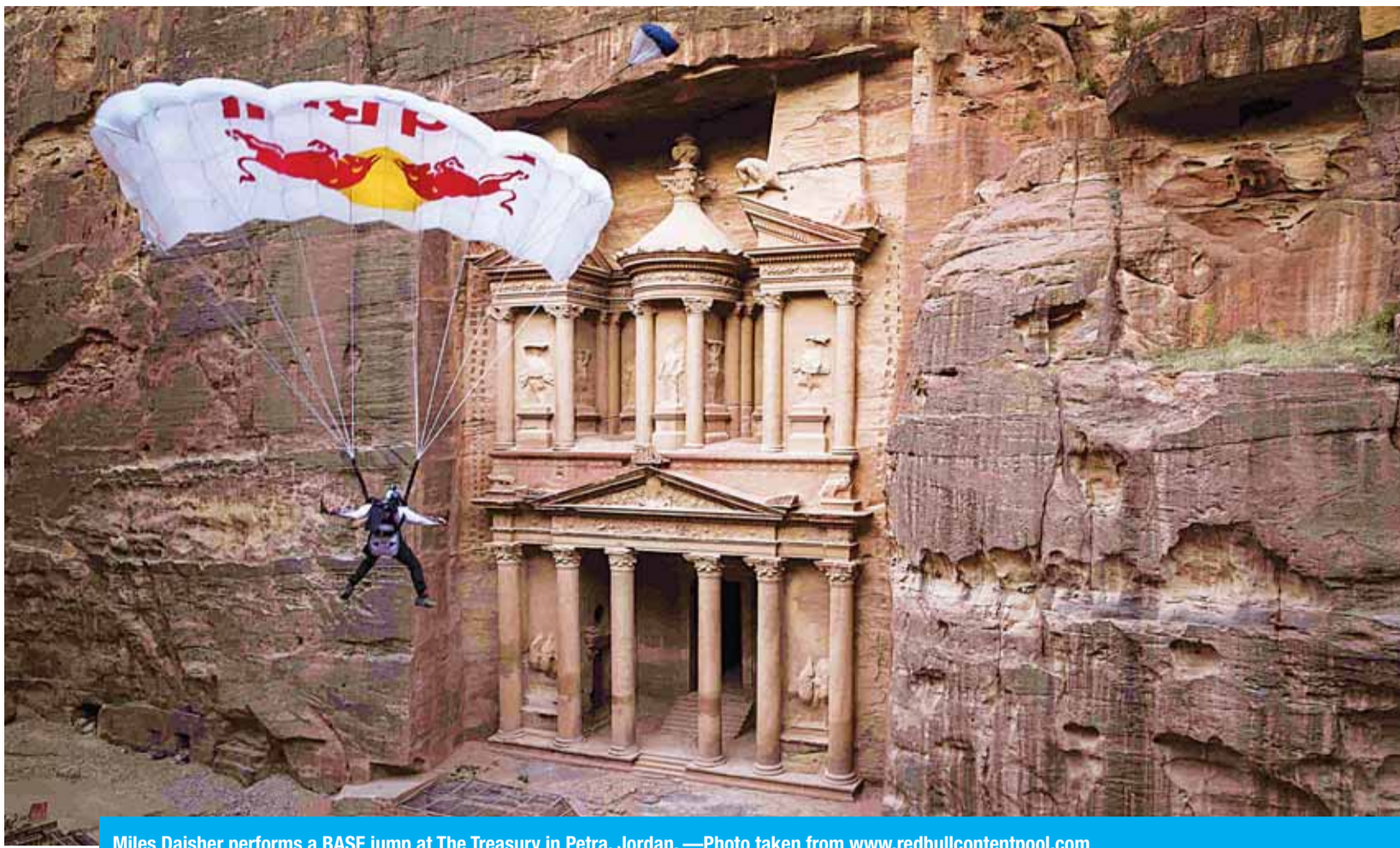
Andre Russel dressed as Santa Claus speaks to his client during virtual appointment in the basement of his home in Chicago, Illinois. — AFP photos



John Sullivan, 81, dressed as Santa Claus records a virtual message for a client at his home in Streamwood, Illinois.

Sports

Photo of the day



Miles Daisher performs a BASE jump at The Treasury in Petra, Jordan. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

'Phenomenal' Benzema stars as Real Madrid beat Eibar 3-1

Real move level with Atletico at La Liga summit

MADRID: Karim Benzema was described as "phenomenal" after scoring the opening goal and creating two others as Real Madrid won 3-1 at Eibar on Sunday to move level on points with city rivals Atletico at the top of La Liga. Benzema and Luka Modric scored inside the first 13 minutes in the Basque Country to put Zinedine Zidane's men on their way to a fourth straight league win, with Lucas Vazquez scoring a late third after Garcia Kike pulled one back for Eibar.

"He is decisive. What he does is phenomenal," said Real coach Zinedine Zidane in praise of French compatriot Benzema. "Not just in terms of goals. I'm repeating myself on Karim, but he doesn't just score goals. Karim brings clear-sightedness to our game, that's very important. "When he scores it's even better, but beyond that he is very important to us."

Real sit behind Atletico on goal difference, but have the better head-to-head record, which is how level teams are split at the end of the season. Diego Simeone's Atletico have two games in hand, though, after Saturday's 3-1 success against Elche. Fifth-placed Barcelona are eight points adrift of the Madrid pair following their 2-2 draw this weekend with Valencia. Eibar started brightly, but fell behind in the sixth minute as Rodrygo fed Benzema to slot in his seventh league goal of the season.

Benzema, who was also hailed by Zidane as the greatest ever French centre-forward earlier this week, created the second goal seven minutes later, cutting inside and picking out Modric who fired home right-footed. The striker should have doubled his tally in the 16th minute, but he headed Modric's cross past the post. Real went close to a third goal again when home goalkeeper Marko Dmitrovic kept out Rodrygo's close-range effort, but Eibar got themselves back into the match in spectacular style before the half-hour mark. Kike collected the ball outside the area before curling a fine finish past Thibaut Courtois.

Tsunoda aims for instant F1 impact at AlphaTauri

TOKYO: Yuki Tsunoda said yesterday he was confident his attacking driving style would give Japanese fans plenty to cheer when he makes his Formula One debut for AlphaTauri next season. The 20-year-old will become the first Japanese driver to compete

in Formula One since Kamui Kobayashi in 2014 after the team last week announced he would replace Russia's Daniil Kvyat.

Tsunoda was named FIA rookie of the year on Saturday after finishing third in his debut season with British team Carlin in the Formula 2 championship, and the Japanese driver wants to make a similar impact when he steps up in class next year. "My strong point is my attacking style, and I'm confident that people who see me driving will be impressed by it," the 20-year-old, who won three Formula 2 races in 2020 with seven

podium finishes and four pole positions, told reporters during an online press conference.

"I'm a rookie, so for the first half of the season I want to double down on my attacking style and take it as far as I can, even if I make mistakes," he added. Tsunoda, who is backed by the junior program of AlphaTauri's engine supplier Honda, will join France's Pierre Gasly at the Italian team next season. "My teammate has a lot of experience and I want to absorb as much as I can from him while also seeing how far my potential can take me," said Tsunoda.

"Then, for the second half of the season, I want to use everything I've learned and try to improve with every race."

The diminutive 1.59 meter Japanese admitted he will have to hit the gym over the winter to cope with the Formula One car's superior power and downforce after driving 123 laps during his Formula One test in Abu Dhabi earlier this month. "In Formula 2, I didn't really notice my neck moving forward when I braked, but when I drove an F1 car and hit the brakes for the first time, I really felt the G-force on my neck," said Tsunoda. —AFP

Price, Sunderland and Walkner keen to regain bike title in Saudi

KUWAIT: Former Dakar Rally champions Toby Price, Sam Sunderland and Matthias Walkner are ramping up their Red Bull KTM Factory Racing preparations for the 2021 Dakar Rally as the world's most fearsome off-road race returns to Saudi Arabia. Here is all you need to know:

- The team were denied a 19th consecutive bike race win 11 months ago in the first Saudi Arabia edition and are focused on regaining their Dakar crown by coming up with a fresh looking KTM 450 Rally bike.

- With the route now revealed, preparations have gone into overdrive for these serial winners as 4,800 gruelling kilometres split across 12 timed special stages awaits them in the Middle East.

- The first of these 12 stages gets underway on January 3, 2021 with the finish line crossed by the winner back in the port city of Jeddah by the Red Sea on January 15.

- Australian Price wasted no time in achieving legendary status at the Dakar with his two wins and three third places including a 2019 victory earned racing with a broken bone in his hand for most of the race.

- The 33-year-old Gold Coast native revealed: "The landscapes we got to ride through in Saudi Arabia last time out really blew me away. At times it felt like you weren't really on Earth, there were red rock mountains that had you feeling like you were cruising through Mars. I was expecting lots of dunes, but on that first week we



got a lot of hard-pack piste and stony roads."

- Briton Sunderland made a rapid start in the 2020 race, unfortunately a crash on stage five ended his bid for a second Dakar title to add to his victory in 2017.

- The 31-year-old explained: "During my first experience of the Dakar in Saudi Arabia I was really amazed by the terrain and the scenery that we passed. I didn't realise before that they had that much variance in terrain. Once you've tasted victory, your only goal is to try and rematch that. I think there's now about 10 guys who can win the Dakar. May the best man win."

- The 2018 Dakar champion and 2015 FIM Cross-



Country Rallies World Championship winner Walkner wants to see the Austrian flag flying high again.

- The 34-year-old added: "I'm working towards our goal of bringing KTM back to first place at the Dakar. When the superstar veterans like (Marc) Coma were gone it was pretty hard for my generation to fill their shoes. Honda did a great job at the last Dakar and Ricky (Brabec) deserved the win. Now it's coming closer and I'm getting more and more excited."

- Australian rookie Daniel Sanders has graduated from the KTM Factory Racing Junior Rally Program and will line up for the curtain-raising prologue on January 2.

Top-ranked Ko powers to victory in LPGA Tour Championship

MIAMI: World number one Ko Jin-young pulled away from second-ranked Kim Sei-young with five back-nine birdies Sunday to win the LPGA's season-ending Tour Championship by five strokes. Ko, who was playing just her fourth LPGA event of the pandemic-disrupted season, had only squeezed into the elite field with a tie for second at the US Women's Open. But the 25-year-old South Korean made the most of her opportunity, firing seven birdies in her six-under par 66 at Tiburon Golf Club in Naples, Florida. She rolled in a final birdie at the 72nd hole for an 18-under total of 270 and a convincing win over Kim and Australian Hannah Green, who shared second on 275.

The \$1.1 million winner's prize-down from \$1.5 million last year but still the biggest in women's golf in 2020 - put Ko atop the money list for the year. Her \$1.66 million in earnings in 2020 saw her top the \$5 million mark for her career. It was the payoff for the lonely weeks since she returned to the United States in November, leaving family and friends back in South Korea. "I just wanted to play CME," she said of her determination to make the season finale sponsored by CME Group. "Last week I had really good round and then I finished top two, so and then I can play here."

Kim, whose two victories since LPGA play resumed after a pandemic shutdown included a first major at the Women's PGA Championship, had come into the day with a one-stroke lead. Unable to build momentum in an even par round that featured three bogeys and three birdies, her share of second was enough to overtake veteran South Korean compatriot Park In-bee for Player of the Year honors under the points system used by the LPGA. Park finished in a tie for 35th. —AFP

News in brief

Genoa sack coach Maran

MILAN: Rolando Maran was yesterday sacked as coach of relegation-threatened Serie A club Genoa after four months in the job. The north-western port side fell to their eighth defeat of the season against promoted Benevento at the weekend. "Genoa Cfc announces that they have relieved coach Rolando Maran from his post. The club thanks the coach and his staff for their commitment," the team said in a statement. Former Chievo and Cagliari boss Maran was appointed in August after the team secured top-flight survival with a 17th-place finish. But the 57-year-old had a complicated start when more than 20 members of the squad were infected by COVID-19. They won their season-opener 4-1 against promoted Crotona on September 20, but have not won since and are now second last in the table with seven points from 13 games. —AFP

Napoli slump at Lazio 2-0

ROME: Coach Gennaro Gattuso watched from the sidelines with a black patch over his right eye as an out-of-sorts Napoli fell to consecutive defeats for the first time this season following a 2-0 loss at Lazio in Serie A on Sunday. "Rino is fighting this eye problem and will have it for a few more days, then hopefully everything will return as before," his assistant Luigi Riccio who attended the press conference in Gattuso's place said after the match. Gattuso, 42, suffers from ocular myasthenia, an auto-immune disease that affects the muscles which control the eyes, and which flared up several days ago. Fifth-placed Napoli suffered against Lazio, in eighth, who are their direct rivals for the Champions League places. Napoli were playing without injured Nigerian striker Victor Osimhen and club record scorer Dries Mertens, with captain Lorenzo Insigne suspended for insulting the referee in their defeat at Inter Milan last time out. —AFP

Thuram fined for spitting

BERLIN: Borussia Moenchengladbach fined striker Marcus Thuram one month's salary, to be paid to a charity, on Sunday for spitting on an opponent the previous day. "Marcus has accepted this and has also offered to engage with this social cause on his own behalf," the club's sporting director Max Eberl said in a statement. Thuram was sent off after a video review showed him spitting in the face of Stefan Posch of Hoffenheim as the two argued during a Bundesliga match. With Gladbach down to 10 men, Hoffenheim scored a late goal and won 2-1. According to Bild daily, the fine could be in the region of 150,000 euros (\$185,796) and constitute a club record sanction. "Today something took place that is not in my character and must never happen." Thuram, a 23-year-old France international, posted on Instagram after the game adding that the spit "occurred accidentally and not intentionally." —AFP

Sports

Show some fight, new manager demands of West Brom players

West Brom slump to a 3-0 defeat to Aston

LONDON: New West Brom manager Sam Allardyce says he wants to see the spirit the players showed in last week's 1-1 draw with Manchester City return for the Premier League strugglers' next game against champions Liverpool. The 66-year-old faces a daunting challenge to preserve his managerial record of never being relegated from the Premier League after West Brom slumped to a 3-0 defeat to Aston Villa in his first game on Sunday.

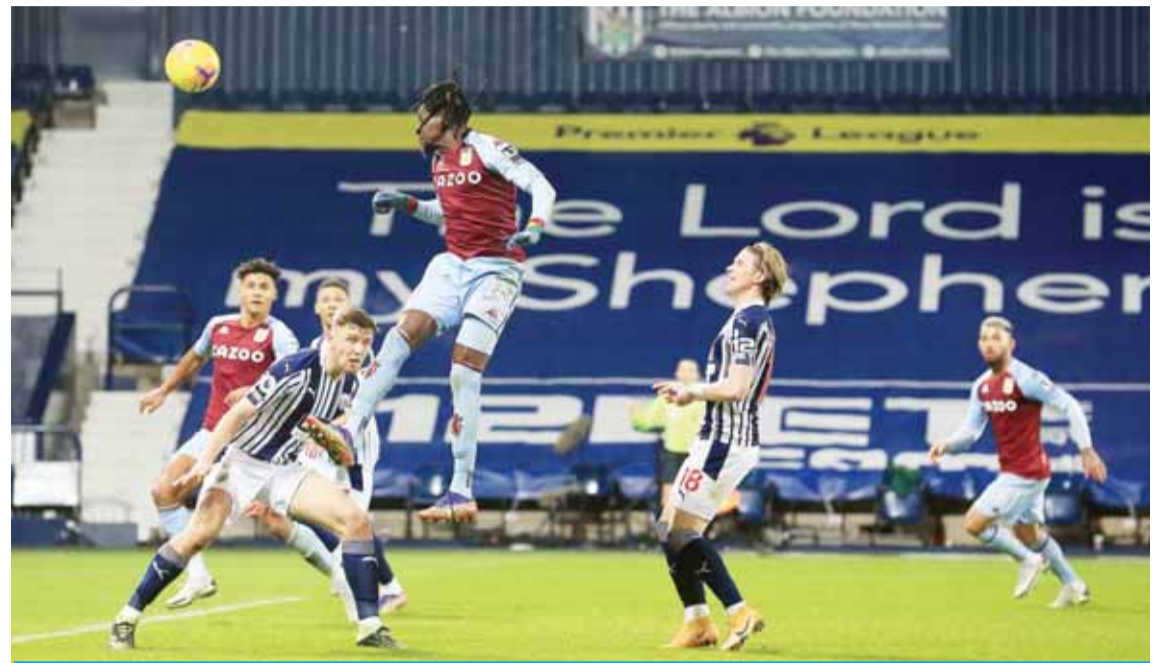
The former England manager's first match in charge since replacing Slaven Bilic left him with much food for thought—not least whether Jake Livermore should be restored to the captaincy when the former England international has served a three-game ban for his red card in Sunday's match. Since the Premier League came into being, no club with fewer than eight points after 14 games have stayed up. This was West Brom's 14th game and they have seven points. "An easy one next (Liverpool)," quipped Allardyce about next Sunday's game at Anfield. "We will give it our best shot, no-one expected us to battle against Manchester City and I did not see that tonight, we need to find that."

Allardyce is renowned for no-frills football but his strength is instilling self-belief. He will need to act fast as Liverpool hammered Crystal Palace 7-

0 at the weekend. "It's one win in 14," Allardyce said of West Brom. "My first battle is to make sure they don't lose confidence in their own ability. Then I need to guide them to battle their way out of this position, because they can't play their way out." Allardyce said he would consult with the players over their failure to adapt to the Premier League after Bilic guided them back a season after being relegated.

"I want to find out why the players think they haven't got the results they feel they have deserved," he said. The Villa game was the seventh time they have failed to score—and they have kept only two clean sheets. "Small moments can define your season. If you concentrate when these small moments come along and you stop mistakes, then you stop conceding goals," said Allardyce.

"That is the ultimate aim for me in the beginning." Livermore will have felt the lash of the blunt-speaking Allardyce after the seven-times capped midfielder was sent off for a lunge on Villa playmaker Jack Grealish. "I am upset with the red card," said Allardyce. "It was reckless and he will be fined. He has apologized but I won't accept another sending-off no matter what. Someone else has to be captain now because Jake is suspended for three games." — AFP



WEST BROMWICH: Aston Villa's striker Bertrand Traore jumps for the ball during the English Premier League football match between West Bromwich Albion and Aston Villa on December 20, 2020. —AFP

Lille reclaim top spot with PSG stalemate

PARIS: Lille moved back top of Ligue 1 on Sunday after holding Paris Saint-Germain to an uninspiring goalless draw which failed to live up to its pre-match billing. Lille take first place in the French top flight from Lyon on goal difference after a match which saw just a handful of shots on target and very little in the way of incident. PSG are a point back in third after failing to create anything from their territorial dominance, shorn of attacking inspiration without Neymar and Mauro Icardi, among others, while Kylian Mbappe started on the bench as he reportedly struggles with a thigh knock.

Marseille meanwhile are five points behind the leaders after their 1-1 draw with Reims on Saturday, although Andre Villas-Boas' side do have two games in hand on their title rivals. "I saw a very strong performance from my team," insisted PSG coach Thomas Tuchel. "We lacked a lot of quality but we played well. We were very disci-

plined and we never lost our structure." PSG were the stronger side in a dismal first half which didn't see a shot on target until Moise Kean's weak flicked header was easily collected by Mike Maignan in the 42nd minute.

Lille, who on Friday were sold to Callisto, a subsidiary of the Merlyn Partners investment fund, struggled to get a foothold in the biggest match of their league campaign so far. PSG's dominance continued in the second period but they were lacking their usual creative spark, and the highlight of the latter stages was Presnel Kimpembe's superb tackle on Burak Yilmaz with Lille charging towards goal on the break.

Kimpembe appeared to injure a hamstring as he charged across to make the goal-saving tackle with 12 minutes remaining, and limped off soon afterwards. Mbappe had been brought on a minute before Kimpembe's challenge but did very little in the time afforded him, and the curtain was soon brought down on a forgettable encounter between two tired-looking teams.

Monaco bounce back

Germany striker Kevin Volland scored his sixth Ligue 1 goal as Monaco battled to a 1-0 win at bot-



VILLENEUVE-D'ASCQ: Lille's Portuguese defender Jose Fonte (left) fights for the ball with Paris Saint-Germain's French defender Layvin Kurzawa during the French L1 football match between LOSC Lille and Paris Saint-Germain on December 20, 2020. —AFP

tom club Dijon to snap a three-match losing streak. Their win moved the seventh-placed principality club within seven points of Lille and Lyon. Former Bayer Leverkusen forward Volland slotted in the only goal on 15 minutes, with both sides seeing later efforts ruled out by VAR. "After four straight wins and then three defeats on the

bounce, the most important thing was to win," said coach Niko Kovac.

"It was not the best Monaco but we showed lots of character and that's the best way to move forward." Rennes are two points ahead of Monaco in fifth after strolling to a 3-0 win at Lorient, who sit second-from-bottom after their 11th defeat of the season. — AFP

7-try Racing thrash Harlequins; Bears edge Connacht

LONDON: Racing 92 ran in seven tries as they thrashed Harlequins 49-7 on Sunday to stay with the Pool 2 pacesetters in the European Champions Cup. Last season's runners-up gained a bonus point to join two other French clubs, Lyon and Toulouse, at the top of the 12-team pool with 10 points after two of the four rounds of games.

Racing were in control from the third minute when fullback Teddy Thomas scored in the corner. Prop Kevin Le Guen added a second after 19 minutes after the Racing pack drove Quins back in a driving maul. Maxime Machenaud converted both tries and kicked two penalties to put the visitors ahead 20-0 at the break but he missed three conversions in the second half. The second half started like the first, when Racing's Irish winger Simon Zebo crossed in the corner in the first minute.

Prop Georges-Henri Colombe secured the bonus point with a try in the 49th minute. Scottish fly-half Finn Russell chipped over the defense for centre Donovan Taofifenua who spun through a tackle to score in the 61st minute. Scrum-half Scott Steele replied for Quins but Racing responded with two late scores. Teddy Baubigny, who had replaced Le Guen, smashed over in the 76th minute and Francois Trinh-Duc, who had come on for Russell, trotted over two minutes later.

Trinh-Duc also converted both late tries. "Our



LONDON: Racing 92's French prop Georges-Henri Colombe Reazel scores a try during the European Rugby Champions Cup first round, Pool B, rugby union match between Harlequins and Racing 92 on December 20, 2020. —AFP

forwards had a lot of control in the match," Russell told British broadcaster BT. "Our driving mauls and our scrums, always on the front foot, we're guaranteed to get good ball there. The whole pack create that strength and that power and I would imagine for teams that are facing us, it's quite daunting. It's a real strength." In Sunday's late game, Bristol recorded their first win with a battling 27-18 victory at Connacht. The Bears, who were mauled 51-38 by Clermont in last weekend's opening round, moved into sixth place in the pool, four points off the lead.

Nkana

Nkana sacked coach Manfred Chabinga last week and hired Kelvin Kaindu after a disappointing start to the Zambian Premier League and the Champions League seasons. Kaindu has been set a tough target of going beyond the group stage in Africa with a club he calls "the greatest in Zambia". While Nkana struggled against Bantu, Petro did not impress either, needing an 89th-minute goal from 'Yano' to squeeze past minnows Akonangui from Equatorial Guinea.

Simba

The Tanzanian club caused the biggest upset of the preliminary round by scoring the only goal of a tie against Plateau United of Nigeria. It was the first

time a club from the east African nation had beaten Nigerian opponents in a two-legged Champions League encounter. The team coached by Belgian Sven Vandenbroeck face another tricky assignment, away to Platinum of Zimbabwe, who reached the group stage of the last two editions.

Sonidep

The Niger club have traditionally struggled, even at home, against top-class opposition and are the first team to confront Al Ahly in Africa since they won a record-extending ninth title last month. Uncomfortable heat - it was 34 degrees celsius (93 fahrenheit) in Niamey Sunday - could hamper the Cairo Red Devils with the first leg scheduled to kick off at 1500 local time. Ahly travelled to west Africa without head coach Pitso Mosimane, who is self-isolating after contracting Covid-19, and fellow South African Cavin Johnson has taken temporary charge. — AFP

Lennon dedicates Scottish Cup win to Celtic board

GLASGOW: Neil Lennon thanked the Celtic board for giving him the chance to become the first man to win a treble of Scottish domestic trophies as a player and a manager after a dramatic penalty shootout win over Hearts on Saturday. Celtic clinched a 12th consecutive domestic trophy with a 4-3 win on penalties after a 3-3 draw at an empty Hampden.

The troubles that have plagued Lennon's men all season were in evidence as twice they failed to hold onto a lead against the Scottish Championship side. But with the Scottish Cup resuming at the semi-final stage in October from last season, the Hoops were able to polish off a 'quadruple treble'. "It's a very, very special moment for me. I've been here 20 years and I think I've become the first one to win it as a player and a manager," said Lennon, who returned for a second spell in charge in February 2019 after Brendan Rodgers had won the first seven of the 12-trophy haul.

"I'm very grateful to people who have supported me along the way." Fans have protested outside Celtic Park in recent weeks calling for Lennon's sacking as Celtic have fallen 16 points behind Rangers at the top of the Scottish Premiership, albeit with three games in hand, and crashed out of the League Cup, Champions League qualifying and Europa League with a string of embarrassing results. But the club's major shareholder Dermot Desmond and chief executive Peter Lawwell have resolutely backed Lennon.

"It's a monumental achievement for the club," added Lennon. "I'd like to dedicate it to Mr. Desmond, Peter and the board for their unwavering support over the last few weeks. And the players, they've been absolutely magnificent." Despite the celebrations, the performance will do little to convince the Celtic support they can reel Rangers back in to win a record 10th consecutive league title, Ryan Christie's brilliant strike and Odsonne Edouard's penalty looked to have Celtic in complete command at half-time, but their defensive problems were exposed as Liam Boyce and Stephen Kingsley pulled Hearts level. — AFP

Live Matches on TV (Local Timings)

ENGLISH LEAGUE CUP	
Brentford v Newcastle United	20:30
beIN Sports HD 2	
Arsenal v Manchester City	23:00
beIN Sports HD 1	

SPANISH LEAGUE	
Valencia C.F. v Sevilla	19:30
beIN Sports HD 1	
Elche CF v Osasuna	19:30
beIN Sports HD 5	
Huesca v Levante	21:45
beIN Sports HD 5	
Real Sociedad v Atletico de Madrid	21:45
beIN Sports HD 3	
Real Valladolid v FC Barcelona	00:00
beIN Sports HD 3	
Villarreal CF v Athletic de Bilbao	00:00
beIN Sports	

ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE	
Crotone v Parma Calcio 1913	20:30
beIN Sports HD 4	
Juventus FC v AC Fiorentina	22:45
beIN Sports HD 4	

Zambian club defend 62-match unbeaten home record

JOHANNESBURG: Zambian club Nkana have played 62 home matches in Confederation of African Football (CAF) competitions and never lost - a record even mighty Al Ahly of Egypt cannot match. They hope to extend the remarkable run of 44 victories and 18 draws from 1983 when they host Petro Luanda of Angola on Wednesday in a CAF Champions League last-32 first leg. The record could be in jeopardy, though, as Nkana struggled to overcome modest Bantu of Lesotho in the preliminary round and their domestic form has been poor with just three wins in eight league matches. Here,

14 'Phenomenal' Benzema stars as Real Madrid beat Eibar 3-1



15 Show some fight, new manager demands of West Brom players



15 Ligue 1: Lille reclaim top spot with PSG stalemate



Chiefs win ninth straight

Seahawks clinch NFL playoff berth



LANDOVER: Running back Chris Carson #32 of the Seattle Seahawks is tackled by strong safety Kamren Curl #31 and outside linebacker Shaun Dion Hamilton #51 of the Washington Football Team in the first half at FedExField on December 20, 2020. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: Patrick Mahomes tossed three touchdown passes as the Kansas City Chiefs improved to an NFL best 13-1 with a 32-29 victory over Drew Brees' New Orleans Saints on Sunday in Louisiana. Mahomes completed 26 of 47 passes for 254 yards as the defending Super Bowl champions won their ninth straight game in front of a pandemic-limited crowd of 3,000 at the Superdome arena. "We did a great job of running the ball and when we get the opportunity to throw the ball we are executing," Mahomes said.

Brees, who was playing his first game since missing four contests with rib injuries, looked out of sorts completing 15 of 34 passes for 234 yards with three touchdowns and an interception. New Orleans dropped to 10-4 on the season losing their second straight after a nine-

game winning streak. Brees' first three passes were incomplete and his fourth was intercepted by L'Jarius Sneed, leading to Mahomes' touchdown pass to Tyreek Hill and a 7-0 lead at the end of the first quarter.

On the first play of the second quarter, Mahomes threw a 1-yard touchdown pass to Travis Kelce for a 14-0 lead. "It feels awesome to win by 20 or 30 points but when you have a team that finds ways to win no matter what the score is, those are the teams that win championships," Mahomes said. With two weeks remaining in the season and the quest for playoff seeding hitting a key stage, the Chiefs took another step toward home-field advantage while the Saints missed a chance to wrap up the NFC South. "We played their hearts out," Saints coach Sean Payton said. "I'm proud of the effort."

Elsewhere, the Seattle Seahawks punched their playoff ticket on Sunday, rushing for 181 yards and thwarting a late Washington rally in a 20-15 victory. Seattle are back in the post-season for the ninth time in 11 seasons under coach Pete Carroll. The Seahawks appeared to be cruising toward victory when they took a 20-3 lead early in the third quarter. Chris Carson, Carlos Hyde and quarterback Russell Wilson all topped 50 yards rushing.

Hyde scored one of the Seahawks' two touchdowns on a 50-yard run and Wilson connected with tight end Jacob Hollister on the other. But a turnover and a spell of offensive doldrums opened the door to Washington backup quarterback Dwayne Haskins, who engineered two fourth-quarter touchdown drives. Sacks by Seattle defenders LJ Collier and Carlos

Dunlap helped the Seahawks escape. Seattle improved to 10-4, notching a second straight victory as they look ahead to next week's NFC West showdown with the Los Angeles Rams.

One day after the Buffalo Bills locked up their first AFC East division title in a quarter of a century, the New England Patriots—winners of the past 11 division titles—were officially eliminated from playoff contention. The Pats lost 22-12 to the Miami Dolphins, falling to 6-8. They are assured of a record of no better than .500 for the first time since 2000. "Disappointed," coach Bill Belichick said of failing to make the playoffs for the first time since 2008. "But we didn't deserve to win today."

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers, led by former Pats quarterback Tom Brady, kept their bid for a first playoff berth since

2007 alive as they rallied from a 17-0 halftime deficit to beat the Atlanta Falcons 31-27. Brady and the Bucs offense, forced to punt on their first four drives, came alive in the second half, scoring touchdowns on their first three drives. Receiver Antonio Brown's first TD catch as a Buccaneer with 6:19 remaining made it 31-27 and Tampa Bay's defense held firm down the stretch.

Brady, who won six Super Bowl titles in 20 seasons with the Patriots before landing in Tampa Bay, now has seven career comeback victories when trailing by 17 or more points. It was another bitter defeat at the hands of Brady for the Falcons. In the 2017 Super Bowl, Brady rallied the Patriots from a 28-3 deficit to a 34-28 overtime victory over Atlanta. But Brady said the Bucs need to avoid digging themselves such big holes. — AFP

NBA takes a leap into unknown as new season tips off

LOS ANGELES: The NBA takes a leap into the unknown today when the 2020-2021 season tips off after the shortest offseason in history against the backdrop of a raging COVID-19 crisis across the United States. Little more than two months after LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers brought the curtain down on a grueling, pandemic-interrupted season with victory in the NBA Finals in the Orlando quarantine bubble, a shortened 72-game campaign gets underway with games in New York and Los Angeles. The Golden State Warriors face a road trip to take on the Brooklyn Nets before the Lakers and the Los Angeles Clippers clash at Staples Center.

The new season marks the first time league action has taken place at home arenas since the 2019-2020 season was dramatically suspended in March as the coronavirus pandemic erupted across the United States. When the league resumed in July, teams were based at a single location at Disney World in Florida and kept in a tightly controlled bubble for three months to guard against COVID-19 infection. Yet the upcoming season will take place in 30 locations

across the United States at a time when the country continues to set new records for coronavirus cases and fatalities.

Travel, schedule tweaks

The NBA has put in place a range of measures designed to mitigate the Covid-19 threat, including strict safety protocols and a tweaked schedule that cuts down on travel. The new-look schedule—reduced from the standard 82 games—will see teams play each other on consecutive nights more frequently to reduce the amount of time spent on the road.

The league has also drawn up a schedule for the first half of the season—up to March 4—in order to give itself flexibility over possible postponements. Fans will also be largely absent from arenas. Only a handful of teams are allowing limited numbers of spectators into venues. An ambitious plan by Golden State to fill the Chase Center to 50% capacity was rejected by health authorities in San Francisco.

Arenas will also not carry the "Black Lives Matter" slogans on court as they had when play resumed last season, nor will players wear jerseys carrying social justice messages. The Toronto Raptors, the 2019 NBA champions, will play home games in Tampa, Florida, after Canadian authorities denied the NBA an exemption to COVID-19 restrictions placed on travel to and from the United States. Teams and players will be required to click back into gear after what has been the shortest offseason in history. — AFP

NHL brass approve a 56-game season starting Jan 13

LOS ANGELES: The National Hockey League has given its 31 teams the green light to play a 56-game season that will begin January 13 without any pre-season games. The owners and the players' union announced the deal on Sunday, but because of continuing COVID-19 pandemic restrictions there were still a list of logistical issues to work out, including where the league's seven Canadian teams will play.

Sunday's agreement includes a 16-team post-season with a traditional four rounds of best-of-seven contests that will wrap up in the middle of July. The Tampa Bay Lightning captured the Stanley Cup championship on September 28 in the last game played after the restarted 2019-20 season. The season had been on hold because of the global pandemic that halted play from March until August. The seven teams that did not participate in the 2019-20 Return to Play will be permitted to open their training camps as early as December 31.

Formal training camps will begin on January 3. "The National Hockey League looks forward to the opening of our 2020-21 season, especially since the

Return to Play in 2019-20 was so successful in crowning a Stanley Cup champion," NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said. "While we are well aware of the challenges ahead, as was the case last spring and summer, we are continuing to prioritize the health and safety of our participants and the communities in which we live and play."

"And, as was the case last spring and summer, I thank the NHLPA, particularly Executive Director Don Fehr, for working cooperatively with us to get our league back on the ice," Bettman said they hope to return to their normal 80-game regular season in October 2021. The league will be divided up into four divisions, West, Central and East and one from Canada. The Canadian teams will play every other team in the division nine or 10 times, while the other three divisions will play every other team in its division eight times.

"The players are pleased to have finalized agreements for the upcoming season, which will be unique but also very exciting for the fans and players alike," said Fehr. "During these troubled times, we hope that NHL games will provide fans with some much needed entertainment as the players return to the ice." The league did not release any details on whether health officials in Canada were on board with a plan, especially since the Canadian government closed its border with the pandemic-stricken United States which has seen over 317,000 deaths from COVID-19. — AFP