



5 Lives cut short: The American children lost to stray bullets



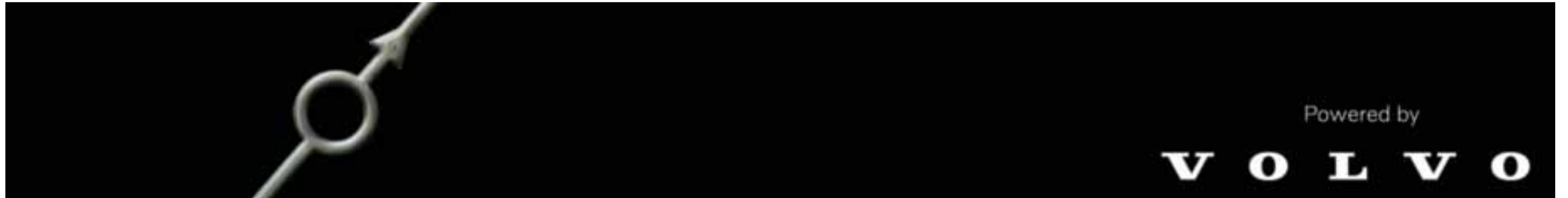
8 Thousands of trucks mass at Dover in cross-Channel chaos



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Premier to launch coronavirus vaccination campaign today

First shipment of COVID vaccines arrives • Priority for the elderly, frontliners



By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah will today launch Kuwait's coronavirus vaccination campaign at a special facility at the international fairgrounds in Mishref, Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh said yesterday. Saleh said the vaccination will be given to all "citizens and expats". Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said yesterday the vaccination campaign will continue for one year until "the entire population of Kuwait has been vaccinated".

The first shipment of the vaccines arrived early yesterday and the health minister said they will continue to arrive every month for a year. The first vaccines will be given to people aged above 65, frontline health workers and people with special needs. A statement by the health ministry yesterday said it will take five to six minutes to vaccinate each person, with a maximum of 10,000 people to be vaccinated daily.

During an inspection with Saleh of Hall 5 at the fairgrounds, Sheikh Basel thanked medical cadres, technicians and experts for their round-the-clock efforts in the previous months, saying it resulted in the logistical success of delivering the vaccine to Kuwait. He said Kuwait will now begin a new phase of vaccinations and hopefully beat the virus, adding that it is important to eradicate COVID-19 rather than focus on bringing the number of infections down. He affirmed herd immunity can only be achieved through the vaccination campaign.

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Masks block 99.9% of large COVID droplets

PARIS: Face masks reduce the risk of spreading large COVID-linked droplets when speaking or coughing by up to 99.9 percent, according to a lab experiment with mechanical mannequins and human subjects, researchers said yesterday. A woman standing two meters from a coughing man without a mask will be exposed to 10,000 times more such droplets than if he were wearing one, even if he is only 50 cm away, they reported in the journal Royal Society Open Science.

"There is no more doubt whatsoever that face masks can dramatically reduce the dispersion of potentially virus-laden droplets," senior author Ignazio Maria Viola, an expert in applied fluid dynamics at the University of Edinburgh's

Continued on Page 2

Dubai rolls out COVID jabs

DUBAI: Dubai launched its COVID-19 vaccination program yesterday with a senior citizen and a nurse among the first to be inoculated using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the government said. The UAE -which is made up of seven emirates including the capital Abu Dhabi and Dubai - approved the emergency registration of the vaccine on Tuesday, the same day the first batch arrived from abroad, the official WAM news agency reported.

Dubai "begins COVID-19 vaccination 'Pfizer-BioNTech' campaign", the Dubai Media Office tweeted, along

with pictures of men and women receiving the jab. It added that the first phase of the rollout will target citizens and residents over the age of 60, adults with chronic diseases, people with special needs as well as frontline and other key workers. Along with the elderly man and nurse, a paramedic, a police officer and a driver were among the first to receive the jab in Dubai, which has said vaccination will be "free of charge" for all citizens and residents.

The first batch arrived on an Emirates cargo flight from Brussels on Tuesday, WAM said. "It has been our honor to transport these vaccines free of charge on our flight," the airline's chairman and chief executive, Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al-Maktoum, said in a statement.

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DUBAI: A health worker administers a dose of the coronavirus vaccine to a senior citizen at a medical center yesterday. — AFP

Iraqis angry but unsurprised over Trump pardons

BAGHDAD: Iraqis yesterday were outraged, heartbroken but not surprised to hear US President Donald Trump had pardoned for four Blackwater contractors convicted of killing Iraqi civilians in Baghdad in 2007. "I

lost hope a long time ago," said Fares Saadi, the Iraqi police officer who led the investigations into the shootings at Baghdad's crowded Nisur Square. The Blackwater team, contracted to provide security for US diplomats in Iraq following the American-led invasion in 2003, claimed they were responding to insurgent fire.

The bloody episode left at least 14 Iraqi civilians dead and 17 wounded, many of whom Saadi remembered taking to the hospital himself. "Thirteen years, you said? My God. I remember it like it was yesterday," he told AFP by telephone in Baghdad. "It was random fire, 360 degrees. I picked up people, drove

them to the hospital, took statements," he said.

Saadi was the lead Iraqi police investigator into the incident, coordinating with FBI teams sent to Baghdad and even providing witness testimony in US trials. Three of the guards - Paul Slough, Evan Liberty and Dustin Heard - were initially convicted of manslaughter, attempted manslaughter and a firearm offense, and sentenced to 30 years each. A fourth, Nicholas Slatten, was determined to have fired the first shots and was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Continued on Page 2

Trump rejects COVID bill, calls it 'a disgrace'

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump on Tuesday rejected a massive COVID economic relief package passed by Congress, branding it "a disgrace" in an act of political brinkmanship less than a month before he must leave office and when millions of Americans are suffering fallout from the pandemic. Trump dropped the bombshell via a pre-recorded statement made in the White House and sent out on Twitter.

It came just a day after his Republicans and the Democrats finally agreed overwhelmingly to a \$900 billion bill meant to throw a lifeline to businesses and people struggling to keep heads above water. In his address, Trump said he would refuse to accept the bill as it is and demanded changes,

Continued on Page 2

US-Israeli delegation signs deals in Morocco

RABAT: A US-Israeli delegation signed agreements with Morocco in Rabat Tuesday, cementing a Washington-sponsored normalization of relations between the Jewish state and the North African country. The visiting delegation, led by Jared Kushner - son-in-law and advisor to outgoing US President Donald Trump - and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's security advisor, Meir Ben Shabbat, arrived in Rabat from Tel Aviv on the first direct commercial

flight between Israel and Morocco.

Less than two weeks ago, Morocco became the third Arab state this year, after the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, to normalize ties with Israel under US-brokered deals, while the Sudan has pledged to follow suit. The US-Israeli delegation met King Mohammed VI at the royal palace, before the signing of a tripartite declaration lauding Trump's Dec 10 decision to recognize Morocco's

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RABAT: King Mohammed VI, flanked by his son Crown Prince Moulay Hassan, meets US Presidential Advisor Jared Kushner and Israeli National Security Advisor Meir Ben Shabbat on Tuesday. — AFP

Local

Health ministry ready to receive everyone for COVID-19 vaccines

Kuwait's COVID-19 cases jump by 266, deaths by one



KUWAIT: Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah tours the Kuwait vaccination center for COVID-19 at Kuwait International Fairground in Mishref yesterday.

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health is ready to receive everyone to take novel coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccines, Director of Public Health Department Dr Fahad Al-Qimlas announced yesterday, adding that the ministry has a well-placed plan to approve vaccination centers, namely halls number five and six in Kuwait International Fairground (KIF), as well as two additional centers in Al-Ahmadi and Al-Jahra governorates in the future. Qimlas added in remarks to the press at Kuwait International Fairground in Mishref yesterday that people desiring to receive COVID-19 vaccinations have to register their

requests on the ministry's website to facilitate the process of their entrance to the centers, and to approve their reservations, as the Ministry is ready to receive thousands of people daily.

Accurate information

Qimlas called on people questioning the credibility of the vaccine to avoid the spreading rumors, to take accurate information from its trusted sources, and from specialized people who are thoroughly looking at the studies on the efficiency of the vaccine. The official noted that medical cadres are fully



Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah tours the Kuwait vaccination center for COVID-19. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

in charge and prepared in the vaccination centers, as they are capable to receive all registered people, calling on everyone to immediately register online. The COVID-19 vaccines are stored according to the instructions and regulations of the Ministry's medical storage department, as the vaccine quantities are sufficient and cover the need of all demands, he said.

One death

Kuwait has meanwhile registered yesterday 266 additional COVID-19 cases recorded over a 24-

hour span, increasing the total number of infections to 148,773, while one fatality was recorded to a death toll of 924. Plus, active cases amounted to 3,255 with 54 of them in intensive care units, Mof's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. Earlier, the ministry confirmed 238 fresh recovery cases, added to a total of 144,594 cured people thus far. Health authorities conducted 3,459 swab tests in 24 hours, increasing the total to 1,232,277, Dr Sanad revealed. The spokesman further urged everyone in Kuwait to adhere to precautionary measures against the virus and maintain social distancing. — KUNA

Defense Minister meets top Kuwait army officials

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah chaired a meeting with senior ministry and high ranking military officials at the Defense Ministry's

headquarters yesterday. Sheikh Hamad said that achieving reform and performance improvement requires the consolidated efforts of various departments at the ministry. He said this can be achieved by giving priority to responsibility and public interest, while instilling principles of justice and equality at all times. Army Chief of Staff Lt Gen Staff Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah, Deputy Chief of Staff Lt Gen Staff Fahad Abdulrahman Al-Nasser, Acting Undersecretary of the Defense Ministry Sheikh Fahad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, and other high ranking officials were in attendance.



KUWAIT: Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah chairs a meeting with senior ministry and high ranking military officials. — Defense Ministry photo

US-Israeli delegation signs...

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"sovereignty" over the disputed region of Western Sahara, widely read as a quid pro quo for Rabat's simultaneous pledge to restore ties with Israel.

Tuesday's declaration included a commitment to "immediately resume full official contacts between Israeli and Moroccan counterparts", with all parties agreeing to "fully implement" their sides of the bargain before the end of January. Appearing alongside Morocco's Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, Kushner said at an evening press conference that the visit had been "enormously productive so far".

Both Kushner and Ben Shabbat were received at the airport by Moroccan officials, albeit in a low key welcome far from the pomp of the delegation's departure from Israel. Alongside the tripartite declaration, four bilateral deals were signed Tuesday between Israel and Morocco, centering on direct air links, water management, connecting financial systems and a visa waiver arrangement for diplomats. Morocco has North Africa's largest Jewish community of about 3,000 people, and Israel is home to 700,000 Jews of Moroccan origin.

As part of the Morocco-Israel deal unveiled earlier this month, Trump fulfilled a decades-old goal of Rabat by backing its contested sovereignty in the

disputed region of Western Sahara. The move infuriated the Algerian-backed pro-independence Polisario Front, which controls about one fifth of the desert territory that was once a Spanish colony.

Kushner said Tuesday the US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara was "rejecting the failed status quo, which benefits no one". "Genuine autonomy is the only feasible option but it will take work, we urge all parties to constructively engage with the United Nations to move forward through the negotiations," he added.

In a statement late Tuesday, Mohammed VI congratulated Kushner for his "substantial work... which has led to the historic turning point in favor of Morocco's territorial integrity and this promising development for peace in the Middle East". The US aims to open a consulate in Western Sahara, and has pledged investment, which Moroccan media described as "colossal". Israel and Morocco are meanwhile due to reopen diplomatic offices. Morocco closed its liaison office in Tel Aviv in 2000, at the start of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising.

Mohammed VI has said Morocco will remain an advocate for the Palestinians. Alongside the announcement of the resumption of relations with Israel, the king had earlier this month assured Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas of Morocco's "continued and sustained commitment to the just Palestinian cause", based on the two-state solution to that conflict. He reiterated his commitment in his statement on Tuesday. —AFP

Department did not renew its contract there with the firm. Blackwater changed its name several times, eventually becoming Academi and merging with other firms to form the Constellis Group. One of Constellis's smaller firms, Olive Group, is currently operating in Iraq. There was no immediate reaction from the Iraqi government yesterday.

The US trial found none of the 14 people killed in Nisur Square was armed. Many were in their vehicles, which had been sprayed with machine-gun fire. At least one child died. All but one of the victims' families accepted compensation from Blackwater, a lawyer wounded in the attack told AFP previously. Those hurt received up to \$50,000, while the relatives of those killed were offered \$100,000.

Haitham Al-Rubaia, who lost his son Ahmad and wife Mahasin, was the only one to turn down the offers. Ahmad was a 20-year-old medical student, a former classmate said yesterday. "All of us at school were devastated and heartbroken," said the classmate, who asked for her name to be withheld so she could speak freely. "Times were really tough... and to hear that he and his mom were both murdered added to our sense of desperation."

She said she expected Ahmad would have been a successful physician - like his mother - had he lived. "It is an utter outrage, but it is also not surprising by any means. The Americans have never approached us Iraqis as equals," the former classmate said. "As far as they are concerned, our blood is cheaper than water and our demands for justice and accountability are merely a nuisance." —AFP

Dubai rolls out COVID jabs...

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The Dubai Media Office said that vaccinations will be available at six health authority facilities.

Earlier this month, the United Arab Emirates had already approved the vaccine developed by Chinese drugs giant Sinopharm, which it said was 86 percent effective. The vaccine produced by US pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech - which proved to be 95 percent effective in late-stage clinical trials - is adminis-

Masks block 99.9% of large...

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School of Engineering, told AFP. Large respiratory droplets - which act like projectiles before being pulled toward the ground by gravity - are thought to be the main driver of SARS-CoV-2 transmission, he noted.

Smaller ones, sometimes called aerosol droplets, can remain suspended in the air for longer periods. "We continuously exhale a whole range of droplets,

tered in two doses, 21 days apart.

The vaccine must be stored at -70 degrees Celsius, a temperature much lower than standard freezers and which forced the company to develop special containers for transport. Taking part in the vaccination campaign remains voluntary in the UAE, but officials have encouraged the population to be inoculated. Two vaccines have undergone third-phase trials in the UAE - the Sinopharm project and Russia's Sputnik-V, named after the Soviet-era satellite.

Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum said in November that he had received an experimental coronavirus vaccine, joining other top UAE officials to take part in the trials. The UAE has so far recorded more than 197,000 cases of the novel coronavirus, including 645 deaths. —AFP

from micro-scale to millimeter-scale," Maria Viola said by phone. "Some of the droplets will drop faster than others" depending on temperature, humidity and especially air speed, he said. The study focused on particles larger than 170 microns in diameter - roughly two to four times the width of a human hair.

Aerosol particles, which tend to follow currents in the air, are generally described as smaller than 20 or 30 microns. Intermediate size droplets can behave either way, the study found. "If you wear a mask, you are mitigating the virus transmission by an order of magnitude — 10 times less," Maria Viola said. "In our study, for the larger droplets we measure, we're talking about 99.9 percent less." —AFP

Iraqis angry but unsurprised over...

Continued from Page 1

Slatten was retried and sentenced in Aug 2019 to life in prison. The following month, Slough, Liberty and Heard had their sentences reduced by half or more. "I was following carefully the whole time. It was a gradual reduction - I knew we'd never get justice," Saadi said. The pardon came just a few weeks after the International Criminal Court shut down a preliminary probe into alleged war crimes by British troops in Iraq after the invasion.

The ICC prosecutor had said in 2017 that there was "reasonable basis" for believing British soldiers had committed such crimes. But she said this month she could not find proof Britain had shielded suspects from prosecution. Ali Bayati of Iraq's Human Rights Commission said the back-to-back decisions showed there was little respect for human rights abroad. "The latest decision confirms these countries' violations of human rights and international law," he told AFP. "They grant immunity to their soldiers even as they claim to protect human rights."

Baghdad was gripped by bloody sectarian warfare in 2007, and there was no local trial over the Sept 16 deaths in Nisur Square. Following the shootings, Iraq announced it would not renew Blackwater's operating license and the US State

wasteful and unnecessary items from this legislation, and just send me a suitable bill."

Trump has not yet received the bill and he did not explicitly say he would not sign. If he actually vetoed the package, Congress would almost certainly quickly override that, given the bipartisan support. In what is widely expected to be only a portion of a slew of presidential pardons and commutations issued in the dying days of the administration, the White House also announced late Tuesday that 20 people had been selected.

They included two convicted in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia probe into Trump campaign ties to Moscow and four men convicted in connection with the mass killing of at least 14 Iraqi civilians. The COVID package is wrapped into a \$2.3 trillion, almost 5,600-page "coronavirus" bill that includes a so-called omnibus bill to fund the government for the coming year. —AFP

health and all members of the ministry for their efforts. He added that members of the interior ministry, Kuwait Fire Force and related bodies will do their best to facilitate the campaign's success.

People interested in getting vaccinated are requested to register at a special site set up by the health ministry (covid19vaccine.moh.gov.kw). By late Tuesday, around 74,000 people had already registered. Local media reported that the first shipment contains around 150,000 vaccines good for 75,000 people, as the vaccination is administered twice.

Trump rejects COVID bill...

Continued from Page 1

notably a big increase in the proposed \$600 direct payments to less well-off Americans.

"I am asking Congress to amend this bill and increase the ridiculously low \$600 to \$2,000, or \$4,000 for a couple," he said, referring to relief checks. Tapping into his nationalist "America First" brand, Trump also castigated measures added onto the bill during complex negotiations that would provide funding for projects benefiting US partners abroad and other non-COVID related items like the environment. "It really is a disgrace," he said. "I'm also asking Congress to immediately get rid of the

Premier to launch coronavirus...

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Saleh revealed HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled will be the first to receive the jab, followed by those who have registered for the vaccination online. Saleh expressed pride in the preparation for the campaign, thanking the minister of

Local

Kuwait's Amir thanks former ministers for their service

Sheikh Nawaf receives condolences from Prince Charles



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — Amiri Diwan photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets former Minister of Justice Dr Fahad Al-Afasi, former Minister of Oil Dr Khaled Al-Fadhel, former Minister of Social Affairs Maryam Al-Aqeel, former Minister of Education Dr Saud Al-Harbi, former State Minister for Municipal Affairs Waleed Al-Jassem, and former Minister of Finance Barrak Al-Sheetan.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Al-Ghanem.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday a number of former ministers. During the meeting, His Highness the Amir thanked the officials for their efforts during their respective tenures and wished them the best of luck in their future endeavors. The officials were former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, former Minister of Justice and Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Dr Fahad Al-Afasi, former Minister of Oil and acting Minister of Water and Electricity Dr Khaled Al-Fadhel, former Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of State for Economic Affairs Maryam Al-Aqeel, former Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Dr Saud Al-Harbi, former State Minister for Municipal Affairs and State Minister for Social Affairs Waleed Al-Jassem, and former Minister of Finance Barrak Al-Sheetan. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah also received the former ministers yesterday at Bayan Palace. Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir received His Highness the Crown Prince at Bayan Palace yesterday.

His Highness the Amir also received Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Al-Ghanem and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. In the meantime, His Highness the Crown Prince received Ghanem and His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled at Bayan Palace.

Condolences

Separately, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a cable of condolences yesterday from Prince of Wales Prince Charles, expressing his sorrow over the demise of late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the former Deputy Prime Minister and former Minister of Defense. In the cable, Prince Charles also offered his sincere condolences to Al-Sabah family. In turn, His Highness the Amir thanked Prince Charles for his kind words and sincere sentiments. His Highness the Amir also received yesterday a cable of condolences from Iraq's "Iraqiyoon" Coalition Party Leader Ammar Abdulaziz Al-Hakim, expressing his sorrow over the demise of late Sheikh Nasser. His Highness the Amir thanked Al-Hakim for his kind words and

sincere sentiments.

On Tuesday, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf received cables of condolences from President of UAE Khalifa Bin Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan; UAE Vice President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum; and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al-Nahyan expressing their deepest condolences over the death of late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad. In their cables, they also prayed to Allah Almighty to bestow His Highness the Amir and the family of late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad solace and patience. Rulers of Al-Fujaira Sheikh Hamad Bin Mohammad Al-Sharqi, Umm Al-Quwain Sheikh Saud Bin Rashid Al-Mualaa, Sharja Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammad Al-Qasemi, Ras Al-Khaima Sheikh Saud bin Saqer Al-Qasemi and Ajman Sheikh Humaid bin Rashid Al-Nuaimi sent similar cables. His Highness the Amir replied to UAE leaders with cables expressing His Highness's deepest thanks, praying to Allah Almighty to rest the late Sheikh's soul in peace and grant him best place in paradise.

Sisi condoles

Egyptian President Abdulfatah Al-Sisi also sent a cable of condolences to His Highness the Amir on Tuesday, in which he expressed his sincere condolences over the demise of Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad. In his cable, the Egyptian president offered his condolences to Al-Sabah family as well. In a reply cable, His Highness the Amir expressed his gratitude to the Egyptian leader for his kind words and sincere sentiments. His Highness the Amir received a similar cable from President of Mauritania Mohammad Ould Ghazouani yesterday. In the meantime, His Highness the Amir received a phone call from Saudi Minister of State Prince Turki bin Mohammad bin Fahd over the death of Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad. During the call, Prince Turki bin Mohammad expressed his sincere sympathy to His Highness the Amir and Al-Sabah family, and prayed to Allah Almighty to bestow mercy on Sheikh Nasser's soul and bring solace to his family. His Highness the Amir expressed gratitude to Prince Turki for his sincere condolences. Prince Turki made a similar phone call to His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad. — KUNA

China offers condolences over Sheikh Nasser

KUWAIT: China yesterday expressed its sincere condolences to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti government and its people over the demise of late Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the former Deputy Prime Minister and former Minister of Defense. The remarks were made in a cable sent by the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC) to Kuwait's Embassy in China. In the cable, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) expressed sorrow and sadness on the news of late Sheikh Nasser, extending their deepest condolences to Al-Sabah family. The CCP continued to mention that the late Sheikh Nasser was an old friend of theirs, as he made positive contributions to enhancing mutual political trust and intellectual exchange between China and Kuwait, while promoting cooperation between both sides within the framework of the Belt and Road initiative, and with his death, they lost a loyal friend. Sheikh Nasser passed away on December 20 at the age of 72, leaving behind a legacy of politics and national achievements. — KUNA

Embassy in Belgium urges citizens to keep in contact

BRUSSELS: The Embassy of Kuwait in Brussels urged yesterday citizens in Belgium to adhere to and abide by the local authorities' decisions and instructions regarding health precautions against COVID-19. The remarks were based on a decision by Kuwaiti authorities suspending commercial flights to and from Kuwait International Airport from December 21, 2020 to January 1, 2021, the embassy said in a statement. The embassy called on citizens in case of emergency or any inquiries, to contact them on the following numbers: 0032026477950 and 0032047775801. Meanwhile, Kuwait's embassy in Hungary called on citizens in the European country to contact the mission in case they needed assistance due to the flights' suspension to and from Kuwait International Airport. The embassy called on citizens to contact the mission on the following number: (+3) 630-898-0000. The embassy also stressed on the importance of adhering to the precautionary and preventive measures taken by the health authorities to confront the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). — KUNA

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: This picture shows sunrise in Fahaheel beach. —Photo by Sito Mirah Ayu (Instagram account: @sito_ayu)

Kuwait's virtual book fair extends until Feb: NCCAL

KUWAIT: Secretary-General of National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature Kamel Al-Abduljalil announced yesterday the extension of the Kuwait Virtual Book Fair until February 2021. This year's Book Fair is being held in cooperation with NCCAL's strategic partner, Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences.

He said that that council was keen on continuing its services to the public in light of the cessation of many activities throughout the world. He added that among the other main reasons for the extension was the requests from publishing houses and libraries to participate in the exhibition, in addition to the high number of visitors of the exhibition's website, which exceeded 2,000 people per day, purchasing more than 70 publications, for a value of over KD 1,000 per day. The Kuwait Virtual Book Fair began on November 29, 2020.

Kuwait oil price down 50 cents

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went down 50 cents to \$49.41 per barrel on Tuesday after it was at \$49.91 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. At the global level, the price of the Brent crude went down by 60 cents to \$50.32 per barrel, the same case with the West Texas Intermediate, which went down by 72 cents to \$47.25 pb. —KUNA

Special education schools resume in-person classes

Students attend class under strict health precautions

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Schools for children with special abilities resumed in-person classes on campus this week. To respect health precautions, students were separated in two groups at the Hope School for Special Needs. According to the admission staff at the school, a first group of students attends classes from 8:00 am till 11:00 am, while the second group attends from 11:30 am to 2:30 pm.

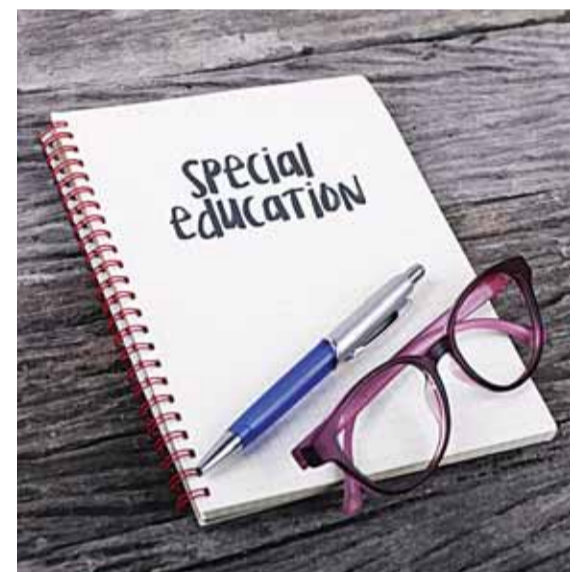
Khalifa School also resumed in-person classes for students from Sunday, Dec 20, 2020. An official from the admission department said they are glad to welcome students again at the school premises. "Not all students are attending. Some students preferred to continue studying through online classes, and we respect their choice. For in-class students, we have taken all health and safety precautions to keep them safe," she told Kuwait Times.

All schools in Kuwait were closed for the National

Day holidays in February when the global coronavirus pandemic outbreak reached the country. The education ministry announced closures initially for two weeks, then an additional two weeks, and finally for the rest of the school year for in-person learning.

Over the summer, parents learned that there would be no in-person learning at all for any schools - public, private or special needs - for the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year. It is unclear if students will be allowed to return to campus for the second semester of the current school year. Kuwait is scheduled to begin vaccinating people today, starting with frontliners and those at high risk, before moving on to the general population.

Schools are not expected to resume on-campus learning for all students until the vaccine is more widely administered. There are an estimated half a million school-age students in Kuwait, all of them have been learning through virtual classes since the start of the current school year.



Kuwait prepares for Iraq joint committee meeting



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah chairs a preparatory coordination meeting ahead of the Kuwait-Iraq joint committee meeting. —KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah headed yesterday a preparatory coordination meeting ahead of the Kuwait-Iraq joint committee meeting, scheduled for next month. Jarallah stressed, in a delivered speech at the meeting, on the importance of coordination and consul-

tation with all Kuwaiti parties involved ahead of next month meeting, affirming on the importance of mutual partnership that would benefit all parties involved and people of both countries. The Deputy Foreign Minister hailed Kuwaiti various entities for their efforts in this regard. —KUNA

American institute awards Kuwaiti architectural design

KUWAIT: The American Institute of Architecture has awarded Kuwait University Construction Program (KUCP) for a design of the planned engineering and petroleum faculty at the KU-affiliated Sabah Al-Salem University City. The KUCP said in a press release yesterday that the design won the American award at the Middle East level, indicating that it was chosen for the trophy due to special structures that cope well with Kuwait's heat season. The design also allows sunlight to reach inner parts of the vast building where large halls and wide corridors provide ways for easy internal movement of personnel and students. The award jurists granted



the prize to the KUCP at the Middle East level for 2020 during a virtual convention, held on December 20. —KUNA



KUWAIT: The engineering and petroleum faculty at the Sabah Al-Salem University City. —KUNA





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The Afghan police team welcoming back Taliban fighters

Trump pardons two linked to Russia probe, Blackwater guards, others

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WASHINGTON: John Ayala holds up a picture on Dec 17, 2020 of his grandson, Davon McLean, 11, killed by a stray bullet on July 4, 2020. (Inset) This photo received from the DC Metropolitan Police Department on Dec 21, 2020 shows a picture of homicide victim Carmelo Duncan. —AFP

The American children lost to stray bullets

Many US cities reported 'historic levels of violence' in 2020

WASHINGTON: Carmelo Duncan was strapped into his car seat when he was hit by multiple stray bullets, becoming at just 15 months old one of the youngest shooting victims in the US this year - and a symbol of powerlessness in the face of gun violence. On Dec 2, he and his eight-year-old brother were in a car being driven by their father through southeast Washington, DC, when unknown shooters opened fire on the vehicle before fleeing in a stolen SUV.

The toddler died at the hospital. His father and brother survived the ambush, for which police say they don't know the motive. Carmelo was the 187th victim of gunshot homicide this year in the American capital, out of 197 - the highest total in 15 years. The city had 196 shooting deaths in 2005. Many US cities reported "historic levels of violence" in 2020, according to a report by the organization Everytown for Gun Safety - and young people are paying a heavy price.

This is due to a climate of violence following the police killings of Black Americans, and the COVID-19 pandemic that has closed down schools and youth programs. "As these critical supports

have been shuttered, the void has been filled with gun violence," said the Everytown report. Just a few days before Christmas, gun violence has already caused more than 18,500 deaths in the US in 2020, according to the Gun Violence Archive, including more than 1,300 minors. Of these, 284 were 11 years old or younger.

Killed on the Fourth of July

One such child is Davon McNeal, who was shot in the head on July 4 by a stray bullet fired by young adults celebrating the national holiday. Only 11 years old, he had left a picnic organized by his mother, Crystal McNeal, in a poor neighborhood in southeast Washington. "They were just having fun shooting their firearms," his paternal grandfather, John Ayala, told AFP. One of the shooters, Ayala explained, had been released from prison in May as part of an effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus in detention facilities.

Ayala has been a well-known figure in Washington's Black community since 1989. He founded the local chapter of the group Guardian Angels - easily recog-

nized by their red berets - that works to stop violence and crime in metro areas. "For years I worked all over the world going out to be a role model, talking about positive things and to prevent tragedies like this from happening," said the New York-born 51-year-old. "And then it hits my own doorstep."

"What's sad is when a child is murdered here, we already know that's not the last one," he added, pointing to the general sense of powerlessness. The day Davon died, at least four children under eight years old were killed by stray bullets in Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco and St. Louis, Missouri, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

'Mentality has to change'

Ayala denounced the passivity and "culture" of silence among some in the African-American community, which is the most affected by gun violence. "That mentality has to change," he said. "Snitching is not when you report a crime that is happening in your community against you or somebody else."

In order to keep Davon's name alive, McNeal created a foundation that helps

homeless people and disadvantaged youth, though she admits that her charitable work isn't enough to stem the violence. "You can do all the peace walks, all the events, all the toys giveaways, anything. You can't tell somebody to stop something they already planned on doing," she told AFP.

Ayala and Kevin McGill, the coach of Davon's school football team, also denounced rival gangs that don't hesitate to settle scores around children. "Where we're from, it ain't really unheard of," said McGill. "It's heartbreaking. At the same time, it's like you become numb to it." Like McNeal, Maurice Burden, a custodian at a Washington public high school, wants to raise awareness.

He co-founded the group Indigenous Suns, which regularly organizes food and clothing drives. He also wants to hold monthly protests against gun violence. "Usually we have one march, weeks pass and everybody forgets. So that people don't forget, one march will not do it, we must have many," the 39-year-old father of two told AFP. Carmelo Duncan's death is "not normal and we will not go to the point of this to be normal," he said. —AFP

3 French police killed by domestic violence suspect

SAINT-JUST, France: Three police officers were killed and a fourth wounded in central France yesterday when a man opened fire as they responded to a domestic violence call, the deadliest attack in years on French security forces outside of terrorism incidents. The suspect, a 48-year-old man known to authorities for child custody disputes, was "discovered dead" several hours after fleeing the home in an isolated hamlet near Saint-Just, a village of some 160 people south of Clermont-Ferrand, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said in a tweet.

"This is one of the most tragic events in the

history" of France's Gendarmes force, which often ensures law enforcement in rural areas, Darmanin said after arriving at the scene. He gave no further details on how the man died, though a ministry source told AFP the suspect "was found dead in his vehicle, apparently a suicide". Identified by officials as Frederik L, he opened fire at two officers who arrived at the house shortly after midnight after being alerted to a reported domestic assault.

One was killed immediately and the other shot in the thigh before the man set fire to the house, where a woman had climbed onto the roof. Police reinforcements and firefighters were rushed to the scene, and all roads leading to the house were blocked off, according to the prosecutor's office in Clermont-Ferrand.

Two further police who were trying to determine if rescue officers could reach their shot colleagues were then fired on and killed by the suspect, who had barricaded himself in the house.



AMBERT, France: French gendarmes speak with a man at the gendarmerie yesterday after three gendarmes were killed and a fourth wounded by a gunman they confronted in response to a domestic violence call in Saint-Just. —AFP

"He was an amateur shooter" and was "heavily armed, with a rifle and two pistols", a source close to the inquiry said. He later escaped and some 300 officers spent hours searching for the suspect. —AFP

US delivery-only kitchens flourish during pandemic

NEW YORK: You can't eat there or collect your meal. But so-called ghost kitchens, which only prepare food for delivery, are booming in the United States during the pandemic. Don't look for a Firebelly Wings or a Monster Mac restaurant anywhere in America because you won't find their signs on any street. Instead, their chicken wings or macaroni and cheese are found via smartphones. The new brands, like dozens of others, were invented solely for delivery. Their dishes are prepared in

"ghost" kitchens, hidden commercial spaces closed to the public. The trend, sometimes called "dark" kitchens, has been around for a couple of years but is enjoying a huge boost due to coronavirus shutdowns. "Consumer behavior has been altered by COVID-19," said a spokesperson for Nextbite, an operator of ghost kitchens. "Consumers who had never ordered from delivery platforms have adopted the convenience."

Restaurants closed for months, others open with reduced capacity, customers preferring to eat at home for fear of infection: everything has been pointing towards increased demand for delivery. DoorDash, the leading food delivery platform in the US with 47 percent market share, handled 543 million orders between January and September, a three-fold increase on last year. "It's capitalizing a lot on the restaurants that have closed. But at the same time there's new demand created too," said R J Holtov, director of financial analytics at global restaurant

consultancy firm Aaron Allen & Associates.

Zuul, C3, Kitchen United and CloudfKitchens, headed by Uber co-founder Travis Kalanick, offer restaurateurs kitchens - sometimes fully equipped - along with technical support to manage orders and advice on developing their brands. Nextbite focuses on the latter, helping restaurants develop new menus in their existing kitchens. Traditional caterers are getting in on the act, opening ghost kitchens under their own names and inventing new culinary offerings.

"Everyone is trying to address the downward pressure on your margins," said Kristen Barnett, COO at Zuul who manages a facility in New York that houses nine different ghost kitchens. Michael Roper, CEO of healthy fast-food chain Muscle Maker Grill, says a dark kitchen can be opened with a \$75,000 investment. A classic brick and mortar restaurant would cost "between \$350,000 and \$500,000," he said. —AFP

METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT
HOMICIDE VICTIM
Up to \$60,000 Reward

VICTIM: Carmelo Duncan
LOCATION: 5700 block of Southern Avenue, SE
DATE: Wednesday, December 2, 2020
TIME: 9:35 PM
CONTACT: Detective Chuan Stewart (202) 637-0433, Detective Ben Williams (202) 637-2032, Detective Anthony Brown (202) 637-2032, Detective Bruce (202) 637-2032

DESCRIPTION OF INCIDENT: On Wednesday, December 2, 2020, a 15-month-old child, Carmelo Duncan, was shot and killed in the 5700 block of Southern Avenue, SE. The Metropolitan Police Department seeks the public's assistance in gathering information regarding this homicide.

HOW TO HELP OUR INVESTIGATION: Homicide Branch (202) 637-0433, ANONYMOUS TIPS (202) 727-9099, TIPS LINE (202) 727-9099, TIPS LINE (202) 727-9099

DO YOUR PART TO HELP PREVENT AND SOLVE CRIME: Report suspicious activity to the nearest police officer, call the police, or contact the Crime Prevention Center at (202) 637-0433. We are committed to your safety and the safety of our community. We are committed to your safety and the safety of our community. We are committed to your safety and the safety of our community.

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SCHEDULED BY: MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR



MOSCOW: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Qatari counterpart Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani enter a hall to attend a press conference yesterday. —AFP

Russia expects 'nothing good' from Biden

MOSCOW: With less than a month before Joe Biden moves into the White House, Moscow yesterday accused the incoming US administration of "Russophobia" after the president-elect promised to punish Russia for a major cyber attack. Biden is expected to take a tougher stance against Russia than Donald Trump, whose ascent to the US presidency in 2016 was plagued by accusations of Russian interference to boost his campaign.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was one of the last leaders to congratulate Biden on his election victory, sending his congratulatory message six weeks after the November 3 vote and saying he was ready for "collaboration". Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, speaking to reporters yesterday, said the Kremlin was expecting "nothing positive" in ties with Washington.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov struck a similar note, speaking about Moscow's expectations from the future US administration. "We are definitely not expecting anything good," Ryabkov said in an interview with Interfax news agency. "And it would be strange to expect good things from people, many of whom made their careers on Russophobia and throwing mud at my country," he added. Washington has recently accused Russia of a major cyber attack on government agencies - a claim Moscow has denied. Biden on Tuesday said the attack cannot go "unanswered", promising to retaliate once he steps into office on Jan 20. The US president-elect also accused Trump of downplaying the gravity of the attack.

Russia and the United States have a litany of issues to settle following the transition of power in Washington. Tensions have raged for months over the fate of New START, which caps the number of nuclear warheads held by Washington and Moscow and expires in Feb 2021. No agreement has been reached on the extension of the last major nuclear arms reduction accord between Russia and the United States. The Iran nuclear deal has also been on the brink of collapse ever since Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and imposed crippling economic sanctions on Tehran. Ryabkov said Moscow should move to a "total containment" approach in relations with the United States and retain "selective dialogue" on subjects that are of interest to Russia. —AFP

International

Trump pardons two linked to Russia probe, Blackwater guards, others

Outgoing Republican still refuses to concede defeat to Biden

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump granted pardons Tuesday to two people linked to a probe into alleged collusion between his campaign and Russia along with a list of others as time ticks away on his remaining weeks in office. The moves drew even further controversy and came as the outgoing Republican continues to refuse to concede defeat to Democrat Joe Biden in the November election.

They add to pardons already issued to political allies of Trump, due to leave office on January 20.

The White House said in a statement that Trump had granted full pardons to 15 people and commuted all or part of the sentences for five others. A full pardon was given to George Papadopoulos, a former Trump campaign adviser who admitted lying to federal investigators about his contacts with Russians.

Papadopoulos was a member of Trump's foreign policy advisory panel when he ran for president in 2016.

He pleaded guilty in October 2017 to lying to the FBI about contacts with a professor who promised to connect him to senior Russian officials. He cooperated with investigators led by Robert Mueller, the special prosecutor who conducted a two-year probe into alleged collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia.

Papadopoulos spent 12 days in jail after his guilty plea. "Today's pardon helps correct the wrong that Mueller's team inflicted on so many people," the White House statement said. Another full pardon was granted to Alex van der Zwaan, a Dutch lawyer who was also convicted in connection with Mueller's probe.

Full pardons were also granted to four Blackwater security guards convicted over the 2007 killing of Iraqis. The four guards for the Blackwater security firm convicted over the 2007 shootings included Nicholas Slatten,



WASHINGTON, DC: In this file photo, attorney Alex van der Zwaan (left), who formerly worked for the Skadden Arps law firm, arrives at a US District Courthouse for his sentencing in Washington, DC. US President Donald Trump granted pardons to two people linked to a probe into alleged collusion between his campaign and Russia along with a list of others as time ticks away on his remaining weeks in office. — AFP

who had been sentenced to life. They were convicted of opening fire in Baghdad's crowded Nisur Square on September 16, 2007 in a bloody episode that caused an international scandal and heightened resentment of the American presence. The shooting left at least 14 Iraqi civilians dead and 17 wounded while perpetuating the image of US security contractors run amok.

The Blackwater guards said they acted in self-defense in response to insurgent fire. The White House statement said the four men, former members of the military, "have a long history of service to the nation." Others included on

the list were three former Republican members of Congress.

'If you lie'

The announcement drew quick condemnation from a number of Trump critics, including Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff, the head of the House Intelligence committee. "If you lie to cover up for the president, you get a pardon. If you are a corrupt politician who endorsed Trump, you get a pardon. If you murder civilians while at war, you get a pardon," Schiff said in a statement.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was particularly scathing on the pardon of the Blackwater security contractors behind the Iraq shooting. "President Trump has hit a disgraceful new low with the Blackwater pardons," said Hina Shamsi, director of the ACLU's National Security Project.

"These military contractors were convicted for their role in killing 17 Iraqi civilians and their actions caused devastation in Iraq, shame and horror in the United States, and a worldwide scandal. President Trump insults the memory of the Iraqi victims and further degrades his office with this action."

Outgoing Republican Congressman Will Hurd also slammed the move on Twitter, saying that "pardoning privileged people of elected office and power for committing crimes they knew they were breaking and have pleaded guilty to is not conservative at all." "I know nothing he does is surprising any more, but what an obscene, partisan, and gross abuse of power," said Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen on Twitter. "This is the swamp at its muckiest. January 20th can't come soon enough," he said. —AFP



Journalist Can Dundar

Turkey sentences exiled reporter to 27 years jail

ISTANBUL: A Turkish court yesterday sentenced the exiled former editor-in-chief of the opposition Cumhuriyet daily to more than 27 years in jail on charges of aiding a terror group and espionage.

The court found Can Dundar-who fled to Germany in 2016 — guilty in connection with a story about an alleged Turkish arms shipment to Syrian rebels fighting President Bashar al-Assad.

He was sentenced to 18 years and nine months for "securing confidential information for espionage" and eight years and nine months for "aiding a terrorist group" led by US-based Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen. The Turkish government blames the cleric for orchestrating a 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Rights groups routinely accuse Turkey of undermining press freedom by arresting journalists and shutting down critical media outlets. The US-based Committee to Protect Journalists listed Turkey as one of the top jailers after China in its annual global report last week.

It found 37 journalists imprisoned this year-less than half the number arrested in 2016 around the time of the coup attempt. Dundar's lawyers boycotted yesterday hearing because they did not believe they would get a fair trial. Dundar was jailed in 2015 along with Cumhuriyet's then Ankara bureau chief Erdem Gul over the paper's report on the alleged transfer of weapons to Syrian insurgents on trucks operated by Turkey's MIT intelligence service.

The pair were released in February 2016 thanks to a Constitutional Court ruling which said their 92-day detention violated their rights to liberty and freedom of the press. The report was accompanied by a video and deeply angered Erdogan. The Turkish leader warned Dundar that he would "pay a heavy price". The Cumhuriyet daily's reports have often irritated Erdogan's government and its staff have regularly ended up in court.

The country's oldest daily-which means "Republic" in Turkish-was founded in 1924 and remains one of the few media outlets not controlled by government-allied tycoons.

Dundar was first sentenced to nearly six years in May 2016 for "obtaining and disclosing classified documents related to the security of the state". He was shot at by an assailant outside Istanbul's main courthouse during that hearing but escaped unharmed after his wife Dilek grabbed the attacker and surrendered him to the police. The gunman was later sentenced to 10 months in jail.—AFP

Erdogan slams European rights court's ruling

ANKARA: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday blasted the top European rights court's call for Turkey to release Kurdish political leader Selahattin Demirtas after four years in jail.

Erdogan said the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued an "entirely political" ruling by publishing its judgment before Demirtas had used up all his legal challenges in Turkish courts.

Demirtas was convicted of disseminating terror propaganda in 2018 and is facing other charges that could see him sentenced to 142 years behind bars. The 47-year-old led his pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to its first-ever appearance in the Turkish parliament in 2015 and challenged Erdogan in the 2016 presidential election.

He finished third with almost 10 percent of the vote. Turkish authorities suspect the HDP of being a political front for outlawed Kurdish militants, who have waged an insurgency against the state since 1984. Demirtas is also accused of fomenting 2014 protests that spread to Turkey after Islamic State (IS) group jihadists fought to capture the mainly Kurdish northern Syrian border town of Kobane.

That unrest claimed the lives of 37 people in Turkey. The European court ruled Tuesday that Turkish authorities violated Demirtas's rights to free speech and called his jailing "cover for an ulterior political purpose". Turkey is bound by the Strasbourg-based court's decision because it is a member of the Council of Europe. But Erdogan called the court's decision full of "double standards" and "hypocrisy". "The ECHR should know that they defend, they stand behind a terrorist," Erdogan said. "He is guilty in the eyes of our nation not because of his political beliefs but because he failed to distance himself from terror groups that were responsible for the killing of dozens (of people)," he said.—AFP



LONDON: Passengers board a Eurostar train at St Pancras International station in London yesterday as services prepare to resume following a 48 hour closure of the French border, due to a new coronavirus strain being discovered in the UK. — AFP

UK health service urges Brexit extension to avert catastrophe

LONDON: Britain's public health service urged Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday to extend the country's Brexit transition period or risk pushing hospitals already struggling with coronavirus "over the edge" in the event of a no-deal departure from the EU single market.

As Britain struggles to contain a surge in coronavirus cases caused by an apparently more transmissible variant of the virus, National Health Service (NHS) leaders said a month's delay would take hospitals away from "the immediate danger zone". They warned the prime minister that the "disruptive changes" posed by a no-deal outcome would hit just as the NHS is "battling the greatest challenge in its history during what is traditionally its busiest time of year". "The NHS might not be perceived to be on the Brexit negotiating table, but the disruption shockwaves from a no-deal outcome could push the NHS' ability to function over the edge," the NHS Confederation, one of the health service's umbrella organizations said in a letter. "Given we are days away from the cliff edge, we urge you to extend the transition period by a month, buying the NHS a precious few extra weeks and enabling the UK to leave the EU after a one-year transition period," it added.

Britain formally left the EU on January 31 after five

decades of integration, but a transition period during which it remains bound by the bloc's rules ends on December 31.

Tired and depleted

The spread of the new strain of the coronavirus across southern England-believed to buy up to 70 percent more transmissible-has forced border closures and threatened supply chains just as London and Brussels approach the deadline to negotiate their future trade arrangements. NHS leaders cautioned that the current travel chaos could be just a foretaste of the crisis if Britain leaves the EU without any trade deal. "Should a deal not be reached, the magnitude and extent of disruption will be of a much greater order," they said.

The NHS faces having to make major adjustments in a short timespan as new rules, guidance and information will be introduced from January 1 in the event of a no-deal departure from the EU. The overhaul would come amid rapidly rising virus cases and a vaccine rollout that has just begun, while NHS workers are tired and depleted, the confederation said.

Britain, which began a mass vaccination program this month, has one of the highest death tolls from the virus in Europe, with more than 68,000 deaths. On Tuesday, it recorded 36,804 new infections, a record since the beginning of the pandemic, bringing the total to more than 2.1 million positive cases.

At a press conference on Monday, Johnson refused to consider an extension to the transition period.

A government spokesman said Britain was exploring "every route to a deal" and added NHS "will thrive after the transition period". —AFP

tion in Rio de Janeiro. I ask that justice be served," said Crivella. He received support from far-right President Jair Bolsonaro at last month's municipal elections but was soundly beaten.

Crivella claimed to be the victim of "political persecution." Several other people were also arrested as part of the same operation including businessman Rafael Alves, the suspected mastermind. He is the brother of Marcelo Alves, the president of municipal tourism agency Riotur. Mauro Macedo, Crivella's former campaign treasurer, was also arrested.

He is the cousin of evangelical preacher Edir Macedo, who is also Crivella's uncle.

\$10 million collected?

According to the investigation, which began in 2018, companies that wanted to secure contracts with Riotur gave checks to Rafael Alves. "The criminal organization collected at least 50 million reais (around \$10 million) from what we've been able to discover," said Deputy Attorney General Ricardo Ribeiro Martins. During his re-election campaign Crivella, 63, claimed his center-right opponent Eduardo Paes, who beat him by 64 percent to 36 percent, would go to prison for corruption. Crivella is a former pastor, missionary and gospel singer. Throughout his mandate,

Biden says huge cyberattack cannot go unanswered

WILMINGTON, United States: President-elect Joe Biden said Tuesday that the perpetrators of a massive cyberattack on the US government, unofficially blamed on Russia, must face consequences, and assailed President Donald Trump over his response to the threat. "We can't let this go unanswered," Biden said in pre-holiday remarks to the American people. "That means making clear, and publicly, who is responsible for the attack and taking meaningful steps to hold them in account."

Biden, who as president-in-waiting has received intelligence briefings on key national security issues, says much remains unknown about the extent of the damage from the attack. Last week the US cybersecurity agency said a well-coordinated, highly technical operation penetrated US government and corporate systems months ago by hacking widely-used security software.

"I see no evidence that it's under control," Biden said, responding to Trump's claim to the contrary.

"This president hasn't even identified who is responsible yet," he noted. He warned he would retaliate once he become president on January 20. "When I learn the extent of the damage and, in fact, who is formally responsible, they can be assured that we will respond, and probably respond in kind," he said. "There are many options which I will not discuss now."

Devastating breach

According to US officials, the most devastating breach of US computer security in years affected at least the departments of State, Commerce, Treasury, Energy and Homeland Security, as well as the National Institutes of Health. Analysts expect that other departments, including possibly key intelligence agencies, were also victims in the hack, and that it could take months or longer to assess the damage.

Biden called the attack a "grave risk to our national security" and criticized Trump for de-emphasizing cybersecurity during his nearly four years in office. The attack, he said, was "carefully planned and carefully orchestrated. It was carried out by using sophisticated cyber tools." "The attackers succeeded in catching the federal government off-guard and unprepared." He accused Trump of falling down on his job to protect the country and of an "irrational downplaying of the seriousness of this attack." "It's still his responsibility as president to defend American interests for the next four weeks," he said.—AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: Picture released by Agencia o Dia showing Rio de Janeiro's Mayor Marcelo Crivella (center) while being arrested as part of an investigation into corruption at the municipality, during an operation by the Civil Police in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Tuesday. — AFP

Crivella faced investigations over mismanagement, accused of mixing politics and religion and favoring members of his church. In July 2018, according to O Globo newspaper, Crivella promised some evangelical preachers that members of Edir Macedo's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God would receive priority for cataract operations in municipal clinics.—AFP

Rio mayor arrested in corruption probe

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil: Rio de Janeiro mayor Marcelo Crivella was arrested on Tuesday as part of a corruption investigation just nine days before the end of his term in office. The judge leading the investigation, Rosa Helena Penna Macedo Guita, called him "the head of a criminal organization ... installed within the Rio mayor's office with the aim of obtaining illicit profits in the most varied ways." After a two-hour hearing, she ordered him held in custody and television footage later showed him being transferred to a prison in the city's north.

Hours later a judge granted permission for the mayor to be held under house arrest, but Crivella will have to wear an electronic ankle bracelet, submit all his telephone and computers and not have any contact with third parties. GloboNews television channel had broadcast footage of police arresting the mayor at his home in the upscale Barra de Tijuca neighborhood just before 6:00 am (0900 GMT).

"I'm the mayor that's done the most against corrup-

International

New beginning: Afghan police team welcoming back Taliban fighters

Election activist dies after rush-hour Kabul ambush

PANJWAI, Afghanistan: After more than a decade fighting for the Taliban and being hunted by Afghan and US forces, Haji Lala thought there was little chance of ever returning home. Once a commander and senior district official for the insurgent group, he says he was captured by Pakistan's security services who took him across the border and detained him for two and a half years.

Haji Lala said he was interrogated by the agents-long-term backers of the Taliban-for information about a spy working against the group. When he was released, the 58-year-old vowed to put his militant years behind him and look for a way to go back home.

It was with the unlikely support of a police chief and the encouragement of a fellow former Taliban militant that he was given the opportunity to return home to the southern province of Kandahar. "I thought maybe... they would hand me over to the US troops," said Lala, describing his initial trepidation at trusting a police officer. Before being captured, US forces he had battled against had raided his house nearly 15 times. "After I returned, friends and villagers visited me for nearly 10 days, as if there was a wedding party," he told AFP. "I have a good reputation now in the village and the police are also not troubling

me. I feel absolutely safe."

Haji Lala's return early this year was made possible because of the protection of the former police chief of Panjwai district, Sultan Mohammad Hakimi. Despite the bloodshed he has witnessed throughout his career, Hakimi has made it a personal mission to give ex-Taliban fighters, commanders and officials the chance to reintegrate into village life. "We invited the former fighters to return, assuring them that nobody would harass them," said Hakimi. "Those whose farms were destroyed, we rebuilt them; those who had no water, we dug wells for them."

'Our brothers'

Even in retirement, Hakimi has continued an effort first launched by former Kandahar police chief General Abdul Raziq, a fierce opponent of the insurgents who was assassinated in 2018.

Raziq's brother Tadin Khan Achakzai has since joined the effort after taking over as police chief of the province. "We will continue to help them in the future, they are our brothers too," said Achakzai.

"If we have the right to live, so does the Taliban-but to live in peace... not to carry out suicide attacks and kill people." For Hakimi, it is a way of contributing to a reconciliation process and also

of "weakening the leadership" of the Taliban. During his time as Panjwai police chief, Hakimi launched insurgent-clearing operations in almost every village in the district, making it one of the most secure areas in Kandahar. But with violence surging in Afghanistan, the progress is fragile-with the Taliban last month retaking part of Panjwai in a major offensive.

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 with an iron fist, imposing a harsh version of the Islamic sharia law. Ousted by a US-led invasion after the September 11 attacks, the jihadists were able to regroup, launching a deadly insurgency that continues to this day.

In February, the Taliban signed a deal with Washington that paved the way for the withdrawal of all foreign forces by May 2021 and the start of peace negotiations between the insurgents and the Afghan government in Qatar.

New beginnings

Hundreds of Taliban fighters have defected from the group, but it still has tens of thousands of members and claims to have influence over more than half of Afghanistan. Several previous efforts to help reintegrate Taliban fighters had failed as they were "sporadic", said Andrew Watkins of conflict think tank



PANJWAI: In this photo, former police chief of the Panjwai district, Sultan Mohammad Hakimi, poses with a gun during an interview in Panjwai. — AFP

International Crisis Group. "They were never able to convince the higher-up commanders to bring a lot of their fighters along with them," Watkins said.

Meanwhile, a prominent Afghan activist who led an independent election monitoring organization died Wednesday after being ambushed by gunmen in Kabul, an aide and police said, the latest targeted killing in the restive capital. Mohammad Yousuf Rasheed was attacked in a south-

ern suburb of the capital as he headed to work in his car. Rasheed's murder follows a similar pattern of recent weeks, where prominent Afghans have been ambushed during the often-chaotic morning traffic. Rasheed was head of the Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan (FEFA) which, according to its website, has worked since 2004 to promote democracy, good governance and human resource management. — AFP

Japan court allows retrial for 'longest' death row prisoner

TOKYO: Japan's highest court has upheld a ruling granting a retrial to a man described as the world's longest-serving death row inmate, a lawyer for the 84-year-old said yesterday. Iwao Hakamada has lived under a death sentence for more than half a century, after being convicted of robbing and murdering his boss, the man's wife, and their two teenage children.

But he and his supporters argue that he confessed to the crime after an allegedly brutal police interrogation that included beatings, and that evidence in the case was planted. He tried to retract his confession, but was sentenced to death in 1968, with the verdict confirmed by the Supreme Court in 1980. However, in a rare about-face for Japan's rigid

justice system, a district court in the central city of Shizuoka in 2014 granted his request for a retrial.

The court said investigators could have planted evidence and ordered the former boxer freed, adding it was "unbearably unjust" to keep him detained pending the new trial. Prosecutors appealed that ruling, and won at the Tokyo High Court, prompting Hakamada to move the case to the Supreme Court, which yesterday ruled in his favor, backing the retrial. "The Supreme Court made a decision today to uphold a retrial by overturning the decision by the Tokyo High Court to dismiss the request for retrial," Hakamada's lawyer Yoshiyuki Todate wrote on his blog. "The fact that a path for the resumption of a retrial was not cut off is very welcome. My hands are still shaking after hearing this. I'm really, really glad."

Supporters say nearly 50 years of detention, mostly in solitary confinement with the ever-present threat of execution looming over him, took a heavy toll on Hakamada's mental health. In an interview with AFP in 2018, the former boxer said he felt he was "fighting about every day".

Japan is the only major industrialized democracy



Iwao Hakamada was convicted of murdering four members of the same family, but claims he confessed after a brutal police interrogation. — AFP

other than the United States to carry out capital punishment, which still enjoys broad public support, although debate on the issue is rare. — AFP

Sugathakumari, Malayalam poet and activist dies

TRIVANDRUM: Sugathakumari, an eminent Malayalam poet, conservationist and women's activist died yesterday. She was 86. Sugathakumari had tested positive for COVID-19 and was undergoing treatment at the government hospital in Thiruvananthapuram.

The octogenarian poet rarely made any public appearance in recent days due to old age related difficulties. Fondly called "Sugatha Teacher" by hundreds of her admirers and followers, Sugathakumar had been admitted to the intensive care unit of the medical college after being diag-

nosed with the viral infection on December 21. The poet was on ventilator support, medical college authorities said.

Besides the severe bronchial pneumonia, an after-effect of COVID-19, the condition of her vital organs also deteriorated, doctors said. One of the most celebrated Malayalam poets of the contemporary era, Sugathakumari was known for her unique poems filled with compassion and philosophical quest. In her poetic career spanning over six decades, she fought against the ruthless oppression of women and indiscriminate exploitation of nature, through her work.

"The tragic end has come. As I bow my head in tribute to the departed soul, I recall many moments at her side, from felicitating her Saraswati Samman, to addressing environmentalists alongside her..." author and politician Shashi Tharoor wrote on Twitter in his tribute to Sugathakumari. A fearless and tireless fighter in real life, Sugathakumari led



In this file photo, Myanmar migrants and Thai workers gather fresh shrimps at a seafood market in the Thai coastal province of Samut Sakhon. — AFP

Myanmar ethnic group sentences child murderer to death

YANGON: A minority ethnic group that unofficially controls a swathe of eastern Myanmar has sentenced a man to death for the kidnap, rape and murder of a six-year-old girl. An official from the Shan State Progress Party said Wednesday the death penalty was "the only option" for the 30-year-old, who assaulted the girl before throwing her body off a cliff.

Shan State is home to several armed ethnic groups who are allowed unofficial autonomy in an uneasy agreement with Myanmar's military. The region is part of the golden triangle-including Thailand and Laos-that is frequently described as

lawless, and where huge quantities of the world's heroin, speed and crystal meth are produced.

"This is the lesson to give to the people, so they don't commit the same crime in the future," said party spokesman Sai Than Aung. "The girl's parents demanded we give him the death sentence-just like he did to their daughter." Yangon-based lawyer and women's rights activist Hla Hla Yee said the crime was abhorrent, but said the death penalty was a severe punishment.

"There's scope with the death penalty that it can be handed to an innocent person and injustice can be carried out," she said. Non-governmental organizations say child rape is common in Myanmar, and Hla Hla Yee called for a ramp-up in child protection and sex education programs-particularly targeting online pornography. "People here don't have sex education knowledge, so they target the kids around them," she said. Marginalized ethnic groups control an estimated third of Myanmar's territory. — AFP



several agitations for the environmental cause and conservation of nature. She had spearheaded the fiercest environmental campaign witnessed by Kerala against a proposal to set up a hydel project in the Silent valley in Western Ghats. She was also in the forefront of the recent agitation against construction of an airport at Aranmula.

Indian priest and nun convicted of convent killing after 28 years

NEW DELHI: An Indian court on Tuesday convicted a priest and a nun for the axe murder of another convent sister 30 years ago because they feared their illicit relationship would be made public.

Highlighting the latest in a series of sex scandals to hit the Roman Catholic church in the southern state of Kerala, prosecutors said they would seek a tough sentence for Father Thomas Kottoor and Sister Sephy in a hearing yesterday. The murder only came to light after federal investigators were called in because of doubts over local police claims that Sister Abhaya, a member of the Pious X Convent in Kottayam, had committed suicide. The 18-year-old nun's body was found in a well in the convent in 1992. Prosecutors told the Central Bureau of Investigation court that the nun was killed after finding Sister Sephy with Kottoor and another priest in a "compromising position" in a convent kitchen. Fearing they would be given away, the two defendants killed Abhaya with an axe and threw her body into the well.

The court found Kottoor and Sephy guilty of murder. Charges against another priest, Jose Poothrikayil, were dismissed in 2018 for lack of evidence. The Catholic church in Kerala has faced a number of scandals in recent years, including allegations of rape, abuse of nuns and priests fathering children. The church has been accused of trying to influence cases. Three inquiries into Sister Abhaya's death that said murder could not be proved or the killers could not be identified were rejected by courts. — AFP

News in brief

Cardona US education secretary

WASHINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden on Tuesday nominated Miguel Cardona to be his education secretary, marking a new record for the potential number of Latinos in the cabinet. "In Miguel Cardona, America will have an experienced and dedicated public school teacher leading the way," Biden said in a statement. The incoming president said Cardona's appointment "will help us address systemic inequities" and "tackle the mental health crisis in our education system," as well as ease student debt and give teachers a raise. Biden, who takes office on January 20, has already tapped Alejandro Mayorkas as head of the Department of Homeland Security and Xavier Becerra as health secretary. — AFP

HK tycoon Lai granted bail

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong pro-democracy media tycoon detained under a new national security law was granted bail yesterday under strict conditions, including house arrest and a ban on social media posts. Jimmy Lai, a vocal Beijing critic, is one of the highest-profile figures charged under a sweeping security law that China imposed on the financial hub over the summer in a bid to stamp out dissent. He is accused of colluding with foreign countries by calling on overseas governments to sanction Hong Kong and China in response to its ongoing crackdown on pro-democracy activism in the city. — AFP

Japan's 'Twitter killer' drops appeal

TOKYO: A Japanese man dubbed the "Twitter killer" has withdrawn an appeal of his guilty verdict and death sentence over the murder of nine people, a court official said yesterday. Takahiro Shiraiishi, 30, "submitted the motion" on Monday to drop the appeal filed by his lawyers, a court spokesman said. Shiraiishi lured people who posted online comments about suicidal thoughts to his home, where he killed and butchered his young victims. All but one of those murdered were women, and they ranged in age from 15 to 26. — AFP

Mexico to start vaccinations today

MEXICO CITY: Mexico will begin Covid-19 immunizations today, a day after the country receives its first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines, Undersecretary of Health Hugo Lopez-Gatell said. "Tomorrow (Wednesday) the first consignment of the Pfizer vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 arrives," he said Tuesday on Twitter. "There will be a press opportunity and then the vaccine will be safeguarded until its use on Thursday, December 24, the day vaccinations start," Lopez-Gatell said. Earlier, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said 1.4 million doses will arrive from Belgium of the 34.4 million that the company has agreed to deliver. — AFP

Sydney eases virus curbs for Christmas

SYDNEY: Sydney yesterday eased lockdown restrictions for Christmas after Australia's largest city reported a second day of new coronavirus cases in the single digits. Amid a record testing and tracing effort, just eight new cases were recorded in the past 24 hours, prompting authorities to announce all residents could have at least some visitors over to celebrate the festive period. — AFP

Business

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2020

Thousands of trucks mass at Dover in cross-Channel chaos

French Minister confirms air travel, boats and Eurostar trains resume service

LONDON: France and Britain reopened cross-Channel travel yesterday after a 48-hour ban to curb the spread of a new coronavirus variant but London has warned it could take days for thousands of trucks blocked around the port of Dover to get moving. The major transit hub reopened following an agreement between London and Paris to allow hauliers stranded in the UK to leave the country if they could produce a negative coronavirus test that was less than 72 hours old.

"It will take a few days to work our way through," Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick told Sky News. "There's going to be quite a lot of work to do." Much of Europe had swiftly banned British travellers following the emergence of a more transmissible variant of COVID-19 in Britain, and France's decision to block freight movements sparked fears of food shortages.

As dramatic images showed masses of lorries backed up in Dover, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was under intense pressure to resolve the deadlock — even as 11th-hour talks with Brussels on a post-Brexit trade deal were at a stalemate. Jenrick said a total of around 4,000 trucks were stranded in Dover and overall in southern Kent county. Between 700 and 800 were parked alongside the motorway heading out of London via Kent and some 3,000 were at the nearby disused airport of Manston where drivers are to be tested. As night fell on Tuesday, many drivers at Manston sounded their horns for more than half an hour in protest over the delays.

Jenrick said testing would be carried out at Manston and "multiple other locations." If a driver tests positive following a rapid screening that normally produces results in 30 minutes, the driver will be given a more accurate swab test. In the event of two positive results the drivers will be placed in isolation in a hotel for 10 days.

French Transport Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari confirmed that air travel, boats and Eurostar trains would resume service as of yesterday, saying "French nationals, people living in France and those with a legitimate reason will have to be carrying a negative test." But his British counterpart Grant Shapps urged lorry drivers not to head to Kent expecting to board a ferry or train, even though Dover said it would reopen from midnight local time (2300 GMT) for travellers with a negative COVID result.

A handful of passenger vehicles disembarked from two ferries in Calais early yesterday, an AFP correspondent said, but port management said traffic was not expected to pick up until later.

Food shortage worries

The measures imposed on hauliers have caused concern over shortages of some fresh food products over a holiday period already dampened by strict coronavirus restrictions. Despite the fresh agreement — which will be reviewed on December 31 — it was unclear when traffic will begin moving again.

The French transport ministry said in a statement that all travellers from Britain would be required to present a negative COVID-19 test to their airline,



RAMSGATE: An aerial view shows lines of freight lorries and heavy goods vehicles parked on the tarmac at Manston Airport near Ramsgate, south east England on Tuesday. — AFP

ship or railway company less than 72 hours before departure.

French nationals, EU nationals or French residents carrying out essential travel will be allowed to cross the Channel. The European Union had called on members to facilitate transit and to lift other

transport bans to avoid supply chain disruptions. Johnson, criticized for his management of a pandemic that has caused nearly 68,000 deaths — one of the highest death tolls in Europe — has argued that the risk of transmission by lorry drivers was "really very low". —AFP

Elderly 2.0: China looks to tap digital 'silver dollar'

CHENGDU: Li Changming just purchased a new Huawei smartphone and the 70-year-old retiree is still a bit puzzled by a high-tech device that China policymakers hope will help unlock spending by millions of older Chinese. Undeterred, he's enrolled in a training session—sort of a "mobile phones 101"—that is part of China's plans to help its legions of pensioners keep up in a fast-developing digital economy.

"I don't understand all the functions yet but I want to learn," Li said, tapping gingerly at the screen. "You're never too old to learn."

He and his elderly classmates in the southwestern city of Chengdu sat and listened as an instructor expounded on the use of popular Chinese apps, navigation with map programs and how to change phone settings. Demonstrating how to shut down background apps, the teacher tried to use terms the greying students could grasp. "It's like the room has become too crowded, and you need to clean it up," he said.

China is pushing a years-long effort to boost domestic consumption to bring balance to an economy tradi-

tionally over-reliant on manufacturing and government investment. E-commerce is a central pillar.

Vast and growing amounts of Chinese economic activity are now handled through digital apps that have become part of the fabric of life in modern China, led by Tencent's WeChat Pay and its rival Alipay, run by Alibaba spin-off Ant Group. Together they dominate the huge Chinese online payments industry, typified by shoppers scanning QR codes to make purchases rather than use physical cash, which has become old-fashioned in China.

'Can't live without it'

Brands worldwide are chasing the so-called "silver dollar" and governments also are keen to get elderly savings flowing into economies to boost growth. But China's ageing population offers a particularly rich opportunity.

Chinese retirees are expected to number 300 million by 2025, and Daxue Consulting now estimates the size of the country's elderly economy at around 4.9 trillion yuan (\$750 billion). And Beijing says 98 percent of



CHENGDU: Women looking at a phone as they attend a training session to get retirees up to speed with digital devices at the Xiaojiahe University of Old Age in Chengdu, the capital of China's Sichuan province. — AFP

rural areas are now connected to 4G internet networks. Most retirees in China are keen to adopt new tech and tap into a growing range of mobile services catering to them.

A report by banking group UBS this year said older consumers were "already catching up" with the younger generation. "We can't live without smartphones," says Meng Li, 61, who also joined the Chengdu course and only recently learned how to make mobile payments.

"I only knew how to make a call at first, but after my daughter showed me

more and I joined training sessions like today, I can handle it now."

In November the government called for a nationwide push to "strengthen the ability of the elderly" to use digital tech, urging communities to hold training sessions and developers to create elderly-friendly apps. This has become even more imperative in the era of the coronavirus, which emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Resulting Chinese pandemic lockdowns forced masses of consumers into online shopping and home delivery. —AFP



Pilot redundancies dodged as Lufthansa inks deal with union

BERLIN: German airline Lufthansa said yesterday it has reached a deal with a union that heads off any forced redundancies of pilots to March 2022, as the aviation giant struggles to stay solvent in the pandemic.

Under the deal affecting 5,000 pilots, a short-term program putting them on curtailed work hours will be extended through 2021, along with accompanying cuts in salaries. Collective pay increases will also be suspended during this time, according to the agreement with the union Cockpit (VC).

The deal would help the airline save more than 450 million euros (\$547 million), said Cockpit.

The measures apply to pilots at Lufthansa, Lufthansa Cargo, Lufthansa Aviation Training and a subgroup of Germanwings pilots. "I am pleased about the further substantial contribution of the cockpit employees to help manage the crisis," said Michael Niggemann, human resources and legal affairs chief at Lufthansa. "We want to use the time covered by this crisis collective accord to agree on sustainable structural solutions with VC in response to the changed conditions and to be able to avoid layoffs even after the crisis agreement has expired."

The airline, which received a nine-billion-euro bailout from Germany, said in November that 27,000 jobs were at risk following a collapse in demand sparked by the pandemic. It posted a loss of two billion euros for the third quarter. —AFP

Telegram messaging app to launch pay-for services

MOSCOW: Encrypted messaging app Telegram will launch pay-for services in 2021, its Russian-born founder Pavel Durov said yesterday, as the growing company needed "at least a few hundred million dollars per year". "Telegram will begin to generate revenue, starting next year," Durov said in a statement.

"We will be able to launch countless new features and welcome billions of new users," Durov, 36, said he did not plan to sell the company and therefore needed to look for other ways to come up with funding. Telegram is a popular social media platform in a number of countries, particularly in the former Soviet Union and Iran, and is used both for private communications and sharing information and news.

It has attracted nearly 500 million active users since its launch by Durov and his brother Nikolai in 2013. "For most of Telegram's history, I paid for the expenses of the company from my personal savings," Durov said. "However, with its current growth Telegram is on track to reach billions of users and to require appropriate funding." He said that free features would remain free. —AFP

Hopes for Brexit trade deal hang on leaders' calls

BRUSSELS: EU chief Ursula von der Leyen and Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson held the fate of a post-Brexit trade deal in their hands yesterday as talks hung in the balance.

The focus of the negotiations has shifted to cross-Channel calls between the leaders after officials failed to close the gap on how to share access to UK fishing waters. Asked whether a deal was possible yesterday or today, a European source close to the talks said: "Yes, but as ever nothing is guaranteed." If there is no breakthrough in the next two days, teams are expected to take a Christmas break, leaving only a narrow window to reach any deal before New Year.

And, with or without a trade deal, Britain will leave the EU single market at midnight on December 31, ending a half-century of deepening economic partnership. The remaining differences between the two camps are narrow but deep, in particular over fishing, with EU crews facing a dramatic cut in their catch from British waters.

Empty nets?

London wants to reduce EU fishing fleets' share of the estimated 650-million-euro annual haul by more than a third, with changes phased in over three years. The EU, in particular countries with northern fishing fleets like France, Denmark and the Netherlands—are insisting on 25 percent over at least six years. And there are thorny details to be hammered out. There are quotas for more than a hundred different species of fish, and EU members want to share the cuts equally.

EU negotiator Michel Barnier briefed ambassadors and then senior MEPs on Tuesday that he had made his last offer on fish and that it was now up to political leaders to decide. "Progress has been made. Most issues are preliminarily closed or close to being agreed," a senior diplomat said, recounting Barnier's briefing to EU envoys. "However, differences on fisheries remain difficult to bridge. Unfortunately, the UK is not moving enough yet to clinch a fair deal on fisheries."

Brussels will continue to negotiate until the end of the year—or even "beyond", as Barnier suggested—but time is running out for any deal to be provisionally applied. EU members agreed to keep talking, but one diplomat warned: "Barnier was unable to tell member states whether there would be a deal tomorrow, before Christmas, the New Year or summer 2021. "Also a narrow path might in the end prove a dead end," he said.

A colleague from another member state suggested that if there was no breakthrough on Wednesday talks could resume next week. If Barnier and his UK counterpart David Frost fail, the UK will leave without a follow-on trade deal. —AFP

Business

China launches bid to become commodities market player

Beijing opens new futures contract on popular copper market

LONDON: China, a big raw materials consumer, hopes to position itself as a global commodities marketplace with its launch of a new futures contract on the popular copper market.

The Shanghai International Energy Exchange (INE), a division of the Shanghai Commodity Exchange, opened the contract for the so-called eternal metal to foreign investors on November 19, following several trial runs—including one in oil—in 2018. Copper contracts already existed in China but exclusively for domestic trading. “The launch of bonded copper futures is necessary for the continued growth of China’s copper industry,” INE has said.

Philippe Sebille-Lopez, of the Geopolia Institute, called it a shrewd move by China, given its reliance on certain commodities to power its economy. “The greater the Chinese market share for a given raw material, the more Shanghai will be able to attract foreign investors,” he said. The world’s factory accounts for around half of global copper production but it faces an uphill struggle to win business.

London’s edge

Although large brokerage companies want a presence in Shanghai, its trading volume remains very low compared with London, by far the bigger sister in the relationship. London has historically dominated

exchanges. The London Metal Exchange (LME), which was founded in 1877, proclaims itself the “world center” for industrial metals trading, especially non-ferrous metals such as copper, aluminum, lead and zinc.

The LME, a subsidiary since 2012 of the HKEX—owner of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange—has significant technical advantages to retain its pre-eminence.

They include a network of warehouses around the world as well as a degree of liquidity and flexibility that its superior size provides. It also has “the ‘date structure’—you can trade for any single day,” Marc Bailey, head of Sueden trading house, said.

“That uniqueness makes it extremely attractive to trade,” he added. Sebille-Lopez nonetheless sees an opening for Shanghai. “Each new contract is interesting because it presents margin opportunities,” compared with other markets, he added.

Sueden has not yet opened its exchanges on INE to its customers, and just trades itself on the new market primarily because of currency conversion benefits.

‘Political ambition’

Another disadvantage for investors is that the INE and its contracts are denominated in the Chinese yuan, which Beijing keeps a firm control of. But the copper launch is also the latest step in China’s slow evolution towards freer convertibility of its currency. “It’s actually



SHANGHAI: A worker inspects newly smelted copper anode sheets for delivery at the Dachang Copper companies refinery, in Shanghai, China, a major consumer of raw materials, is seeking to position itself as an international marketplace for the brokerage of these assets and has just launched a futures contract on the hot copper market. — AFP

the mechanics, in that the INE have created a copper futures contract that allows us to trade onshore in renminbi, then convert the profits through a Bank of China account back to dollars,” explained Bailey. “The converted dollars can be in a Hong Kong bank account in an hour or two, this is a fundamental difference from where we were before,” he said, adding that is how

“Beijing is allowing more access to the Chinese market”.

The price of copper is tracked particularly because it is often considered a good indicator of the health of the world economy. Copper is widely used across various industries, in particular in electrical circuits used everywhere, from real estate to vehicles and household appliances. — AFP



ISCHGL: An individual walks along an empty street of the village of Ischgl, Austria. Austria’s ski lifts may be reopening today, but as the country struggles to control coronavirus infections, the thousands of migrant workers who depend on it are facing an uncertain winter. — AFP

Migrant workers in limbo as Austrian ski resorts reopen

ISCHGL, Austria: Austria’s ski lifts may be operating but as the country struggles to control coronavirus infections, the sector expects a subdued season and migrant workers who depend on its face an uncertain winter. In a normal year they would be part of one of Europe’s largest seasonal labor migrations. In western Austria’s Tyrol province alone, more than 31,000 foreign workers are needed when its 80 ski resorts are in full swing, according to one estimate.

But events in Ischgl, the village that became one of Europe’s first major coronavirus clusters, explain why many of those workers are now unemployed.

Around 6,000 tourists claim to have carried the virus home from there. AFP interviewed workers from Germany, Italy, Croatia and Slovakia, some of whom spoke on condition of anonymity because they feared risking future employment.

‘Mindless debauchery’

In March, as COVID-19 was ravaging northern Italy, Ischgl’s celebrated party scene carried on. An independent report has said shutdown measures should have been taken there after a barkeeper tested positive for the virus on March 7, but restaurants and bars remained open regardless. Waiters cut through crowds by blowing whistles amidst what one ex-employee described as scenes of “mindless debauchery”. “We were still joking because we didn’t realise how fast things could happen,” recalls Manuel, a German chef. “It was pretty clear that this was a financial decision—you can’t believe how much money they make there every single day,” a Croatian worker

says of the decision to stay open. Tyrolean ski lifts alone rake in around 800 million euros (\$980 million) annually, while the province’s ski industry accounts for almost three percent of Austrian annual output.

‘Abandoned like dogs’

A few days later, Ischgl was shut down. While infected tourists fled, the resort’s migrant workers turned off stoves, wiped the bars clean, and cleared rubbish from abandoned five-star hotel rooms.

Workers were stranded, many only getting home with the help of their embassies. Andreas Steibl, head of Ischgl’s tourism association, says the hundreds of workers forced to quarantine were “taken care of” and that some “were able to use the infrastructure of the hotels as guests do”. Steibl insists workers were in a “thoroughly pleasant situation”—something many of them would dispute. Some tested positive, while others say they couldn’t access medical care despite having symptoms that made even climbing the stairs a challenge. “Once the tourists were gone, we were worthless—a burden, actually,” a German waiter recalls.

“They abandoned us like dogs,” says Predrag—not his real name—from Croatia, who was stuck in Ischgl for more than three weeks. Figures provided by the Austrian Institute of Economic Research show the ensuing shutdown led to around three quarters of all migrant workers in Tyrol’s winter tourism industry losing their jobs. That represents around 24,000 people, only some of whom were eligible for unemployment benefits in Austria or their home countries. “It’s a very precarious sector,” says Thomas Radner, head of employment law at Tyrol’s Workers’ Chamber.

Though he says migrant workers claiming they’re “treated like slaves” is nothing new, Radner also notes a dramatic spike in such complaints since the outbreak. Workers who had already signed contracts for the current season have seen them cancelled at short notice. Despite the disappointment, most potential employees AFP spoke to said they would return to Ischgl given the opportunity.—AFP

was mixed Tuesday. The worrying spike in infections has overshadowed the rollout of vaccines and news at the start of the week that Congress had finally hammered out an economic rescue package worth around \$900 billion. However Trump slammed the package as not doing enough for American families and told Congress to rethink it, raising the possibility of it being held up until after Christmas. “It really is a disgrace,” he said in a video message posted on Twitter.

He demanded that individuals receive relief cheques totalling \$2,000, up from \$600 — with couples getting \$4,000. “I’m also asking Congress to immediately get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items from this legislation, and just send me a suitable bill,” Trump added. Looking ahead, Axi analyst Stephen Innes warned the first quarter of 2021 could be a struggle for markets. “Even with the vaccine rollout getting underway, people have become polarized into one of two groups—those ready to travel now and those who are not prepared for six months or more.

“With the new variant of the virus unleashing its wrath on the UK, it is not a stretch to assume that the percentage of those ready to travel anytime soon will drop.” Worries about the impact of new lockdowns on travel have hit oil prices badly, with both main contracts down sharply since hitting 10-month highs last week.—AFP

Forget Christmas: Truckers struggle to cross Channel

CALAIS: Stranded lorry drivers saw the prospect of spending Christmas with their families fade yesterday even after France eased Covid travel restrictions from Britain. The French government said Tuesday it would relax a temporary UK travel ban introduced after a new variant of coronavirus emerged, allowing EU nationals and residents of EU countries to enter provided they can show a negative Covid-19 test no more than 72 hours old. But frustrated truckers said there was little chance of making it across the English Channel from Dover to France anytime soon.

“Home for Christmas? Forget it,” said Laurent Beghin, a French trucker who delivered a cargo of paint to the UK on Sunday and was still stuck in England yesterday. Beghin, who lives near Dunkirk in northern France, told AFP by phone that he hadn’t been able to take the COVID test that would allow him to cross the Channel.

Christian Cosma, a Romanian national, is one of the lucky few to have made it back to the continent within hours of the travel ban being relaxed.

It was awful

Cosma, who drives a light van, told AFP at a service station near Calais that he was exhausted from a long wait in testing conditions on the British side. “It was

awful, we waited for 50 hours or more, there were no toilets, nothing to eat,” he said. “I looked for a local hotel, but everywhere was full.”

Cosma’s boss managed to get his driver a COVID test appointment, but he still had to travel for hours from the parking lot where had been waiting to the virus test site. “I drove 300 kilometers (almost 200 miles) to do the test, and 300 kilometers back to Dover,” he said. Yesterday, he was still 2,500 kilometers from home, with no chance of making it back to Romania for Christmas Eve on Thursday, but hopeful for the following day. Cosma said he had his COVID test checked “four or five times in the terminal”, and that there were 10 people “at most” on the ferry that took him across. Truck drivers without a negative COVID test have been loading their trailers onto ferries as unaccompanied cargo, to be picked up by colleagues on the French side.

Back to UK? ‘Don’t bother asking’

While waiting, lorry drivers are having to put up with plenty of frustration they are not likely to forget soon. Beghin said he found a small parking spot for the wait but was fined 70 pounds (\$94) for illegal parking and had to move. “Then we were boxed in like cattle at the airport, with 12 rows and more than 100 lorries per row,” he said.

“It’s disgusting, there’s not even a shower, they just put up toilet booths. Yesterday we got two half-litre water bottles but nothing to eat,” he said. By yesterday morning, there was no information available on where the truckers might take COVID tests, Beghin said. “I told my boss, don’t bother asking me to go to England again,” he said.—AFP



Trucks leave after disembarking from a ferry from Newcastle in IJmuiden, The Netherlands yesterday, as Europe began lifting travel bans on Britain put in place to contain a new fast-spreading COVID strain. — AFP

Stocks climb, dollar drops after Trump stimulus attack

LONDON: Stock markets mostly rose and the dollar fell yesterday after President Donald Trump called a key US stimulus package “a disgrace” and told lawmakers to amend it. Elsewhere the pound won back ground on post-Brexit trade deal hopes. Oil prices edged higher after big losses this week as coronavirus cases surged across the planet and a new strain was reported in the UK. That forced governments to impose tight restrictions and lockdowns to contain the disease over the festive period.

“Even though the Trump news is a bump in the road, there is some hope that a deal will eventually be put into place,” said CMC Markets analyst David Madden. “Stock markets in Europe are broadly building on yesterday’s gains, even though the health crisis is still rumbling on and there has yet to be a deal agreed between the UK and the EU.” Asian stock markets closed mainly higher yesterday, while Wall Street

Nord Stream 2 pipelaying to begin in Jan

COPENHAGEN: The Danish Maritime Authority has said that construction will begin in January on the stretch in Danish waters of the disputed Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is to bring Russian gas to Germany. Work on the 10-billion-euro (\$11 billion) pipeline resumed in German waters earlier in December after being suspended for nearly a year because of US sanctions. Signed off by US President Donald Trump in late 2019, the measures threatened asset freezes and visa restrictions for companies involved in the construction.

In a notice to mariners published on Tuesday, the Danish Maritime Authority said that work on laying two gas pipelines would begin in Danish waters on January 15. Temporary prohibited areas would be established around the pipelaying and construction vessels, in which “unauthorized navigation, diving, anchoring, fishing and working on the seabed” would be banned. A spokesman for the Nord Stream 2 consortium managing the project was unable to confirm the details and said he was “not in a position to deliver construction details.”—AFP

Canada, UK sign interim deal to avoid tariff rise

OTTAWA: Canada and Britain have signed a temporary agreement to avoid an increase in tariffs between the two countries after the British exit from the European Union in early 2021, Ottawa said Tuesday. At the end of November, the two countries announced they had concluded a provisional post-Brexit trade agreement that would reflect, as of January 1, the terms of the deal that Britain benefited from as a member state of the EU.

But the agreement could not be ratified before the Canadian parliament went into its winter recess, which would have resulted in an automatic increase in tariffs between the two countries on January 1. The temporary deal allows tariffs between the two countries to remain at current levels until the new trade deal is passed in parliament, a foreign ministry statement said.

With the interim agreement, the Canadian government “is making sure businesses can easily continue trading without adding paperwork for businesses and importers,” it said in a statement. “These measures will ensure stability and certainty on both sides of the Atlantic,” it added. Bilateral trade with Britain was worth Can\$29 billion (18.5 billion euros) in 2019, according to official government figures. Britain is the main market for Canadian exports to Europe. — AFP

Business

Fitch Ratings affirms KIB's long-term IDR at 'A+' with a stable outlook

KIB's long-term IDR reflects outlook on Kuwaiti sovereign rating

KUWAIT: Fitch Ratings, one of the leading global credit ratings agencies, has affirmed Kuwait International Bank (KIB)'s Long-term Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'A+' and viability rating (VR) at 'bb-', with a stable outlook. This stable outlook on KIB's long-term IDR reflects the outlook on the Kuwaiti sovereign rating.

In its report issued on 22 December 2020, Fitch stated that KIB's Issuer Default Ratings (IDRs) reflect an extremely high probability of support from the Kuwaiti authorities, if needed. This considers Kuwait's strong ability to provide support to domestic banks, as reflected by its sovereign rating (AA/Stable) and strong willingness to do so irrespective of the banks' size, franchise, funding structure and the level of government ownership. Fitch also added that key rating drivers include stable funding, nominal domestic franchise, higher risk appetite, asset quality and profitability under pressure, adequate but declining capitalization.

Fitch stated that the bank's fast growth and the implementation of Basel 3 have reduced capitalization levels and buffers over minimum requirements but capital ratios continue to compare well with

peers. KIB successfully issued a \$300 million perpetual Tier 1 sukuk in June 2019 and a \$300 million Tier 2 sukuk in November 2020 to boost its total capital adequacy ratio and fund its growth.

Fitch mentioned that the Central Bank of Kuwait operates a strict regime with good oversight, sound supervision and active monitoring ensuring compliance with prudential limits. These include Basel III capital, leverage and liquidity requirements, as well as financing caps and best practice corporate governance requirements. According to Fitch, a stronger franchise and better profitability, lower financing growth and concentrations, as well as a record of stable asset quality would be positive for the VR.

Commenting about the ratings, Sheikh Mohamed Jarrah Al-Sabah, Chairman of KIB, said: "This recently released credit rating reflects KIB's distinctive position and highlights our strong financial position, as well as our sound growth and investment strategy. This rating is also in line with Fitch's report on the Tier 2 Sukuk final "A-" rating - Fitch has also assigned final A+/F1 long- and short-term ratings, respectively, to the program, which will apply only to senior unsecured certificates to be issued under the

umbrella of this issuance program."

Al-Jarrah stressed that these distinct ratings help KIB achieve its strategic objectives. "In addition to consolidating its position as a leading Islamic Bank over the long term, Fitch's ratings help boost the trust of our customers and shareholders and enhance the Bank's reputation in the market, which unlocks many growth opportunities in the near future," he said.

Raed Jawad Bukhamseen, Vice Chairman and CEO of KIB, said: "The reality is that the global banking industry must evolve in a way that is compatible with the future. From our side, we are committed to stay ahead of the curve and keeping up with the rapid pace of change in our industry, which is why we made major investments in upgrading our IT infrastructure, streamlining systems and processes, and restructuring our operational model to provide customers with an enhanced digital experience. We believe that this will eventually contribute towards expanding our customer-base, thereby promoting the Bank's long-term growth and stability."

Bukhamseen further added: "We have always been proud of our success and notable industry track record, in addition to having garnered numerous



Sheikh Mohamed Jarrah Al-Sabah

Raed Jawad Bukhamseen

regional and international awards. For example, in 2020, we were honored to be recognized as the "Fastest Growing Islamic Bank MENA" and the "Best Shari'a Complaint Bank MENA" by CFL.co, for the fourth and fifth years respectively. We are also proud to have recently picked up the "Most Secure Bank in Kuwait" Award and the "Best Islamic Bank" Award from World Finance, the latter being an award we have now received for the seventh consecutive time."

Japan's renewable energy sector seeks carbon neutral windfall

TOKYO: Japan needs to boost renewable energy by reforming outdated policies on land use and the national grid if it is to meet a new goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, industry players and experts say. Since announcing the 2050 target in November, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government has pledged to spend \$20 billion on green tech and set ambitious new wind power targets.

But the world's third-largest economy has a lot of catching up to do, said Ken Isono, CEO of renewable energy company Shizen Energy. "Japan could be a leading country in solar, 15 years ago it used to be," he said. "But I think Japan lacked vision and so it got totally left behind."

Critics have long bemoaned a lack of ambition in Japan's policy, which currently aims for 22-24 percent of the country's energy to come from renewables by 2030. Around 17 percent already came from renewables in 2017, and a combination of growth in the sector and a pandemic-related fall in demand means Japan is on track to meet its 2030 target this year.

Japan was the sixth-biggest contributor to global greenhouse emissions in 2017, according to the International Energy Agency. It relies heavily on coal and liquefied natural gas, particularly with many of its nuclear reactors still offline after the 2011 Fukushima accident. Isono, whose firm works in solar, wind and hydroelectric, thinks the government should set a goal of "at least 40 percent" renewable energy by 2030, which he calls realistic rather than visionary.

Freeing up land

But getting there will require concrete action, particularly on land use, he argued. Japan is sometimes assumed to struggle with renewables because its mountainous territory is ill-suited for solar and wind installation. But Isono said that is "an excuse," pointing to the country's comparatively abundant abandoned and underutilized farmland.

"The average age of most farmers in Japan is almost 70 years old. In five or 10 years, nobody is going to be doing agriculture... How can we create energy from that land?" he said. Isono favors legal reforms to make it easier for municipalities to take over such land and use it for renewable energy projects, an idea backed by others in the sector and some in government. Freeing up farmland would mostly benefit solar, which dominates Japan's renewable sector because panels are comparatively easy to install and maintain, and offer flexibility in terms of project size.

But there are also some specific factors holding back other options, including wind power, according to Mika Ohbayashi, director of the Renewable Energy Institute, a think tank in Tokyo. Wind projects are more efficient the larger they are, but securing grid access for significant output is a challenge, because Japan's existing utilities dominate and "have restricted access to decentralized renewables such as wind power," she said.

And there are other barriers: wind projects generating over 10 megawatts require an often lengthy environmental assessment-the bar for such assessment of coal-fired plants is 150 megawatts.

Offshore wind has been floated as an area for potential renewable growth, with the government now planning to generate up to 45 gigawatts by 2040. That is a massive jump from the 20,000 kilowatts currently being produced, and not everyone is convinced it is realistic. "Unlike the EU market, there's not very many places that are suitable for wind generation," said Shinichi Suzuki, CEO of XSOL, a Japanese firm specializing in solar panel installation and operation. —AFP

Virus success helps Taiwan buck global economic downturn

TAIPEI: As the world's economies reel from the coronavirus pandemic, Taiwan is on track to end the year clocking up enviable growth—a testament to the island's success in halting the deadly disease. Throughout much of the year, shoppers have thronged stores, restaurants have stayed busy, tourist attractions have remained open and factories have kept humming. In a remarkable contrast to comparable industrialized economies, which have taken a battering, official projections forecast growth of 2.5 percent in 2020.

"That probably will be the highest in the world," Lin Chu-chia, an economist at National Chengchi University, told AFP. For the first time since 1991, Taiwan is also set to outgrow its giant neighbor China, where the virus first emerged but has now also been largely vanquished.

The International Monetary Fund estimates China will grow 1.9 percent this year, compared with a global contraction of 4.4 percent.

Act fast

Taiwan's ability to weather the coronavirus was centered on two crucial elements. When the virus first emerged, authorities made economically painful and unpopular shutdown decisions early on. Borders were shut, strict quarantine measures enforced and carriers traced. As a result, Taiwan had no local infections for 253 straight days from early April. That clean streak was broken on Tuesday when a woman tested positive after coming into contact with a foreign pilot, prompting a scramble to contain the new outbreak.

But it was because the disease was essentially defeated by the beginning of April that Taiwan's high-tech economy was in a unique position to roar

back. For decades, Taiwan has been the world's premier destination for computer chip and electronics manufacturing.

And at a time when vast swathes of the world were suddenly forced to work or learn from home, Taiwan's factories were able to meet the soaring demand. "The key drive for Taiwan's economy is the robust export growth," Lin said. Exports soared to a historic high of \$32 billion in October, up 11 percent on-year, with double-digit growth in major markets including China and the United States, official data showed.

November's exports became the second highest ever, with the annual total on course to break records too. Earlier this month, Taiwan's dollar was trading at highs not seen since 1997.

Tech titans

Topping the list of a string of tech companies that registered record profits in the third quarter is Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co (TSMC), the world's largest contract microchip maker that supplies Apple and other international brands. TSMC's net profit in those three months rose by over a third on-year to \$4.8 billion. Meanwhile its shares soared over 50 percent since the beginning of the year, propelling the stock market to new highs.

Computer maker Acer saw revenues for its Chromebooks and gaming hardware rise 94 percent and 70 percent respectively, to lift net profit to its highest in almost a decade. "We do see that the demand is higher than our supply into the foreseeable future," said Acer CEO and chairman Jason Chen.

There have inevitably been some victims.

The hotel and tourism trade has been hit hard by the evaporation of international travel. Combined revenue for listed hotels and tour operators in the first 11 months of 2020 fell 43 percent from last year, according to the Taiwan Stock Exchange. But the fall could have been steeper had Taiwan suffered the repeated lockdowns and restrictions seen in many western countries.

Venezuela's oil unions accuse govt of persecution

CARACAS: Venezuela's vital oil industry is failing and the socialist government is feeling the pressure, and now the regime of President Nicolas Maduro is being accused of lashing out at the sector's unions. In recent months, several union leaders have been arrested, accused of terrorism, sharing confidential information and inciting hatred.

Venezuela is in the midst of a crippling economic crisis that it is unable to escape because its oil industry is operating at just one eighth of its capacity from 12 years ago. Critics say the government doesn't want anyone to know it's to blame for the demise. "The idea is to neutralize the oil union movement by force," said Ivan Freites, director of the federation of Venezuelan oil workers, who has fled to neighboring Colombia.

Speaking to AFP by WhatsApp, the 57-year-old accused the government of "political persecution."

He slipped out of Venezuela secretly, using a false identity and by breaking through border fences put up due to the coronavirus pandemic. "They were going to come for me," Freites said. On November 18, military intelligence officers arrested another oil union spokesman, Eudis Girot. They accused him of terrorism and revealing secret information.

Four days before that, Guillermo Zarraga—a colleague of Freites's at the Paraguana refinery, the largest in Venezuela—was detained after an explosion at the refinery that the government claimed was a "terrorist attack." Union leaders, however, said it was due to failed attempts to reactivate facilities amidst a chronic fuel shortage that has seen cars lining up for days at gas stations waiting to fill their tanks.

In January, two other union members were arrested by members of the National Guard during a workers' assembly at the major El Palito refinery in the northern Carabobo state. "In Venezuela the criminalization of critical opinion and social protests is a state policy, systematic and generalized," said the human rights NGO



In this file photo taken on May 25, 2020 a worker of the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA looks at the Iranian-flagged oil tanker Fortune as it docks at the El Palito refinery in Puerto Cabello in the northern state of Carabobo, Venezuela. Venezuela's vital oil industry is failing and the socialist government is feeling the pressure, but now insiders claim the regime of President Nicolas Maduro is lashing out at the sector's unions.

PROVEA in a 2019 report on the persecution of unions.

'Destabilizing action'

Venezuela has been wracked by three

years of hyperinflation and has been in recession for seven years. Citizens have faced shortages of basic necessities such as food and medicine while public services regularly fail. —AFP

ABK receives elite quality recognition award from JP Morgan

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK), was recently awarded with the 'Elite Quality Recognition Award 2020' for its operational excellence in Straight-Through-Processing (STP) rates for the 2019 calendar year, by leading global financial institution JP Morgan. The award acknowledges ABK's outstanding achievement of a 98.42 percent STP rate, which is the result of consistent, high quality performance and standards in the transferring of USD funds.

In line with the global guidelines for COVID-19 safety precautions, JP Morgan organized a digital award ceremony to honor ABK with certificates and plaques. Established in 1997, JP Morgan



Quality Recognition Awards honor US dollar clearing institutions that meet or exceed the stringent

criteria for STP of international payment and settlement transactions.

Classifieds

Thursday, December 24, 2020

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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY NIGHT: Rather cold to cold and Partly cloudy to cloudy with light to moderate freshening at times south easterly wind changing to north westerly wind later on with speed of 12 - 42 km/h with a chance for rain that

BY DAY: Rather cold and Cloudy to partly cloudy with light to moderate freshening at times north westerly wind with speed of 15 - 40 km/h with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times.

WEATHER WATCH			Fog	
STATION	MAX. REC.	MIN. EXP.	SFC. CHART 23/12/2020 1200 UTC	
KUWAIT CITY	20 °C	14 °C		
KUWAIT AIRPORT	22 °C	12 °C		
ABDALY	22 °C	09 °C		
BUBYAN	18 °C	12 °C		
JAHRA	23 °C	11 °C		
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C		
SALMIYAH	19 °C	15 °C		
AHMADI	- °C	- °C		
NUWASIB	23 °C	11 °C		
WAFRA	23 °C	08 °C		
SALMY	23 °C	08 °C		

4 DAYS FORECAST						
DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Thursday	12/24	Rather cold and Cloudy to partly cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times	19 °C	12 °C	NW	15 - 40 km/h
Friday	12/25	Rather cold	16 °C	05 °C	NW	15 - 45 km/h
Saturday	12/26	Rather cold and some scattered clouds will appear	15 °C	06 °C	NW	15 - 45 km/h
Sunday	12/27	Rather cold and Partly cloudy	16 °C	07 °C	NW	12 - 32 km/h

TOMORROW PRAYER TIMES	
Fajr	05:14
Sunrise	06:39
Zuhr	11:47
Asr	14:37
Sunset	16:55
Isha	18:18

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT	
MAX. Temp.	20 °C
MIN. Temp.	07 °C
MAX. RH	89 %
MIN. RH	31 %
MAX. Wind	NW 32 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

NOTICE
 December 15, 2020

Mr. Jay Ashok Varia son of Mr. Ashok Varia, resident of TRTB-5/1, ACC colony, VPO Barmana, Teh Sadar Distt, Bilaspur, Pin: 174013, Himachal Pradesh and Ms. Prakriti Subba daughter of Mr. Amber Subba, resident of Shanti Bazar, OAKS Tea Garden Sonada, Darjeeling, Pin: 734209, West Bengal, both Indian nationals presently residing in Kuwait have given notice of intended marriage between them under the Foreign Marriage Act, 1969. If anyone has any objection to the proposed marriage, he/she may file the same with the undersigned according to the procedure laid down under the Act/Rule within thirty days from the date of publication of this notice. Communications in this regard can be made by Email (cw2.kuwait@mea.gov.in) / letters / telephonic calls (00965-22533315, 00965-22533125).

(Ranveer Bharti)
 Second Secretary (Cons) and Marriage Officer.

Embassy of India, Kuwait.
 Email: cw2.kuwait@mea.gov.in

For labor-related inquiries and complaints:
Call MSALHOTLINE 128

Word Search

Donuts by the Dozen
 Don't forget to celebrate National Doughnut Day, June 7th, with a little sweet something.

APPLE
 BERLINER
 BLUEBERRY
 BOX
 CHOCOLATE
 CIDER
 CINNAMON
 COCONUT
 COFFEE
 CREAM
 CRULLER
 DONUT
 DOUGHNUT
 DOZEN
 ÉCLAIR
 FRIED
 FRITTER

FROSTING
 GLAZED
 HOLE
 HOLES
 JELLY
 MAPLE

OLD FASHIONED
 SPRINKLES
 STICKY
 SUGAR
 SWEET
 TWIST

Join the Dots



STAR TRACK

<p>Aries (March 21-April 19)</p> <p>You have strong humanitarian instincts, Aries. You think of your fellow humans more than most. This, combined with your intuition and empathy, makes you well suited for the healing professions. If you've felt a bit disgruntled at work lately, it may be that you're in the wrong career. Consider training as a counselor or therapist. You would be good at it and help a lot of people.</p>	<p>Cancer (June 21-July 22)</p> <p>It's time to loosen up, Cancer. The planetary aspects bring a new cycle of tolerance and understanding your way. You could use a bit of both. Take baby steps as you introduce the kinder, gentler you to your friends and co-workers. They won't accept a rapid transformation, but they won't mind gradual changes. Listen more and speak less. This can make a big difference in a relationship.</p>	<p>Libra (September 23-October 22)</p> <p>You have tremendous creativity inside you, Libra. Have you begun to use some of it? This creative cycle will last for the next month or so. Don't let it pass without taking advantage of it. Use the other side of your brain for a change. Take up sketching, painting, or fiction writing. What you do is less important than doing something. The simple act of creation unlocks the brain.</p>	<p>Capricorn (December 22-January 19)</p> <p>Capricorn, you're bound to enjoy this day! It's full of possibilities and opportunities. It may begin routinely, but keep your eyes and ears open for hints of change. Your new adventure may come about in a mundane way. You might meet someone in line at the store who becomes a business partner. Or maybe you will meet a romantic interest at the ATM. Adventure is all around. Trust that you will find it!</p>
<p>Taurus (April 20-May 20)</p> <p>You've been more thoughtful lately and truer to yourself. This is due to your recent introspection. You really can change your life. All it takes is time and commitment. You've made great progress in your development. Continue on this path and you will wind up in a much better place. Keep your eye on the goal, but don't be so focused that you forget to enjoy the journey.</p>	<p>Leo (July 23-August 22)</p> <p>Remember all those resolutions you made in the past? It's time to recommit to them. All signs indicate that you need to take better care of yourself. You've been so busy working that exercising has begun to feel like a luxury you can't afford. Actually, exercise and proper nutrition are luxuries you can't afford to ignore. You're burning the candle at both ends. Stop before you burn out completely!</p>	<p>Scorpio (October 23-November 21)</p> <p>Get excited because this is going to be one great day! Everything will go your way. It will seem as if you simply can't lose. At work, team members look to you as the leader. At home, family members express gratitude and affection. You may be tempted to try this luck at the casino, but don't be impulsive. You're already a winner. You've earned this shining moment.</p>	<p>Aquarius (January 20- February 18)</p> <p>Forget about work for a change and focus instead on your love life! This is one area that can really use some attention. There's no sense waiting for your partner to do it. It's up to you. Why not book a romantic weekend? It will do wonders for your relationship and add spark just by anticipating the fun you will have. Your commitment should mean more than your independence.</p>
<p>Gemini (May 21-June 20)</p> <p>You're feeling confident and more comfortable in your own skin than you have in a long time, Gemini. You're so accomplished, why are you the last one to acknowledge it? Try to look up from your desk long enough to socialize with friends and loved ones. You've been so focused on work that your relationships may have suffered a bit. Spend some quality time with those you care about, if possible.</p>	<p>Virgo (August 23-September 22)</p> <p>This is an auspicious time for you, Virgo. It gives you the energy and enthusiasm to make the necessary changes in your life. There is a lot of work to do, but you're up to it! First focus on your relationships. Your loved ones don't care about your professional successes. They want (and perhaps need) to spend more time with you. Do what you can to bring your life more into balance.</p>	<p>Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)</p> <p>This is a good day for quiet contemplation, Sagittarius. You may have worried about finances lately, but there's no longer any need to concern yourself. All signs indicate that your financial fortunes are about to change. You've been working hard and should reap some rewards. Today's aspects suggest that you will. Enjoy your newfound peace of mind, but don't go out and use the credit cards in celebration!</p>	<p>Pisces (February 19-March 20)</p> <p>You greet the day energized! Your confidence is at an all-time high because of recent events. You have every reason to be proud of what you've accomplished, especially at work. But your love life could benefit from the same level of commitment. Why not be proactive? Arrange a romantic evening for you and your partner. What a difference a few hours can make in your relationship!</p>

Lifestyle | Features



Passers-by in Montreal enjoy the 'Loop', one of the five light installations on display to bring some comfort to residents of a city that has been battered by months of coronavirus in Montreal, Quebec. — AFP photos



People enjoy the 'New Moon' sound-and-light installation, consisting of seven inflated spheres that reveal through shadows and light, iconic images and stories inspired by the culture of the Quartier des Spectacles.



People explore the 'Entre les rangs', comprised of thousands of flexible stems topped with white reflectors, this installation reinterprets a slice of Quebec's agricultural history.



People explore the 'Entre les rangs'.



People walk through the 'Iceberg' sound-and-light installation.

Montreal offers 'light therapy' in pandemic winter

In the heart of downtown Montreal, residents of a city battered by months of dealing with the coronavirus pandemic can now indulge in a little seasonal "light therapy". A special sound and light display has been set up to try to bring some comfort to Montreal. On Festival Square, Montrealers can marvel at imposing luminous zoetropes, fast-revolving wheels that project illustrations from twelve books written from Quebec in a way that makes the images seem like animation. Sitting inside one of these 19th-century pre-cinematic con-

traptions, Alison Abrego and Salma Houaichi, both 27, push a lever towards each other that rolls the illustrations on the cylinder, giving the impression that the images are coming to life.

"I think we all need therapy this year, more than other years. Keeping these activities accessible and free in the city helps us get out of our bubbles a bit, with everything being so restricted, and see something else," Houaichi told AFP. "It's super important for your morale, for your mental health", said Abrego. "The principle of light therapy is to light up the

mind a little, to wake us up, to keep us animated," said Olivier Girouard, designer of the work entitled Loop.

Organizers say the installation, entitled "Light therapy, beating heart," and which is the eleventh time the annual Montreal event has been staged, is intended to be "fun, interactive." It is made up of five light and sound installations that will remain in place until March 14, 2021. "We wanted to make an enveloping, comforting journey," said Catherine Girard Lantagne, acting director of programming for the Quartier des

Spectacles Partnership. "A comforting journey is a journey with music that is soft, piano sounds, with a little snow falling, with works like that, through which we wander, where we take pictures," she said.

Every evening at 6:00 p.m., the display of sound and light is projected on to the facades of numerous buildings in the city. For about five minutes, a heartbeat resounds in the streets accompanied by red lighting that symbolizes solidarity, at a time when the city's vibrant restaurant and theater scene has been forced to

close. "The heart of Montreal is still beating, the heart of culture is still beating, that is part of the message we wanted to send," said Girard Lantagne. On the first weekend of December, some 3,000 people came to see the launch of the display, according to the organizers. "It is very safe as an experiment," said Girard Lantagne, pointing to signs that remind the public of the health authorities' recommendations. — AFP

CHRISTMAS GRUB: ZIMBABWEAN BEETLE MAKES A SEASONAL SNACK

Earnmore Chikavaza takes a mouthful of fried beetles and munches happily, downing the crunchy snack with a mouthful of water. He runs out of superlatives to sum up the benefits of a food that is healthy, tasty, organic and a special advantage in a poor country-absolutely free. The delicacy is the chafer beetle, also called the Christmas beetle, a dark-red Zimbabwean bug which proliferates in the southern hemisphere country at this time of year. "You don't spend anything on the beetles. They are free relish," the slender 28-year-old miner told AFP.

"All you have to do is to go out in the bush and shake them off or pluck them from musasa trees and they come in summer when other forms of relish are scarce." In Zimbabwean towns, food tastes have become westernized, but in the countryside, there remains a time-honored tradition of eating insects, mopani worms and white ants—the bounty of rich soil and luxuriant vegetation.



Earnmore Chikavaza, a villager, climbs up branches of a musasa tree (*brachystegia spiciformis*) to shake and dislodge mandere (chafer beetles, also called the Christmas beetle) from hiding in the leaves down to the ground in his search for the protein-rich edible insects in Mhondoro, Zimbabwe. — AFP photos

Chikavaza lives in Mhondoro, a village about 100 kilometers (60 miles) southwest of the capital Harare. Three weeks of heavy rain have made it too dangerous to venture into the mining tunnels, so he spends time with a bowl in his hands, shaking beetles out of the trees for food.

Chikavaza takes his harvest to a local lady, Winnie Chikaonda, 72, who helps him cook the insects. The recipe is simple—the beetles are boiled until soft and then fried until they reach the desired level of crunchiness. "As children, we used to go out in the bush to harvest them," Chikaonda recalled. "God creat-

ed them knowing they were healthy to eat. It's a pity children from the cities don't like them. They regard them as creepy creatures that bite." — AFP



A chafer beetle, also called the Christmas beetle, climbs for cover in a musasa tree (*brachystegia spiciformis*) tree in Mhondoro.



Earnmore Chikavaza eats from his plate of crunchy fried chafer beetles, also called Christmas beetles, which were fried after first boiling in a pot in Mhondoro.



Earnmore Chikavaza, a villager, shows off his bountiful harvest of mandere in a dish after a successful search for the protein-rich edible insects in Mhondoro.

Florida weather forecast: Chilly with a chance of iguanas

Known for its warm, balmy winters, Florida is expecting an unusually chilly Christmas this year, and with that comes a phenomenon peculiar to the Sunshine State: falling iguanas. "Low temperatures in the 30s/40s and falling iguanas are possible. Keep up with forecast changes and stay warm!" the National Weather Service's Miami office said on Twitter Monday. That means residents of southern Florida will have to swap their shorts and tee shirts for warmer attire for a few days and keep an eye on the sky for frozen reptiles falling from the palm trees.



When the temperature drops below 40 degrees Fahrenheit (four degrees Celsius) the cold-blooded lizards are immobilized and fall from the trees they live in, the forecasters said. The creatures do not die from the cold, but simply remain unable to move until the temperatures rise again. And the danger of being hit by a frozen reptile are real, given how many of the invasive species now live in Florida, devastating the native flora. Last year local authorities actually asked people to kill as many of the reptiles as they could, though preferably humanely.

In 2018, the southeastern state already experienced iguana showers in a cold snap, astounding the population. Some locals tried warming up the stricken lizards with blankets, took them home or put them in their cars to resuscitate them, something the authorities strongly advise against. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features



A student (center) takes a face mask from a basket held by an elephant (left) from the Ayutthaya Elephant Palace, dressed in a Santa Claus costume and wearing a face mask, outside the Jirasat Wittaya School in the central Thai province of Ayutthaya.



A student (right) takes a face mask from a basket held by an elephant.



Elephants from the Ayutthaya Elephant Palace, dressed in Santa Claus costumes and wearing face masks, pose for photos ahead of event to hand out face masks to students.



An elephant from the Ayutthaya Elephant Palace holds a basket full of face masks to give out to students.



Elephants from the Ayutthaya Elephant Palace, dressed in Santa Claus costumes and wearing face masks, pose for photos ahead of event to hand out face masks to students. — AFP photos

ELEPHANT SANTAS SPREAD VIRUS AWARENESS AMONG THAI CHILDREN

Christmas and Thailand's love of elephants combined yesterday when four of the giant creatures dressed as Santa turned up at a school just outside Bangkok, complete with huge coronavirus masks. Excited children from Jirasat Wittaya School in Ayutthaya, an hour's drive from the capital, sang Christmas carols and lined up to have their photos taken with the animals in the annual tradition. The elephants, Sri Mongkon, 14, Sri Raya, 6, Peter, 15, and King Kaew, 18, used their trunks to carry baskets of face masks to the youngsters

and motorists outside the school. English and science teacher Brett Baxter said the event brought a special kind of Christmas spirit coupled with a flavor of Thailand. "It's fantastic for the children. It mixes two cultures together. It's not just about Santa Claus... the culture of Thailand is based around elephants," he said. Ayutthaya, the former capital of Siam, the country now known as Thailand, is considered the birthplace of the kingdom's Catholic community. European Catholic missionaries built a church on the banks of the Chao Phraya

River three centuries ago. Ittipan Paolamai, the manager of Ayutthaya's elephant palace, where the animals are cared for, said the school visit had been held for 17 years.

"This year due to the pandemic as well as the recent outbreak, we used this opportunity to raise public awareness about the spread of Covid-19," he told AFP. Thailand, a country of 70 million people, has registered more than 5,700 coronavirus infections and in the past week there has been a spike of more than 1,000 cases linked to an outbreak at

a Thai seafood market. But not everyone feels the Christmas school visit is a healthy tradition. Jan Schmidt-Burbach, a wildlife veterinarian and adviser for World Animal Protection, said bringing elephants to a school "for these kinds of public stunts is quite questionable and not acceptable". "Children will perceive elephants as entertainers and clowns rather than the wild animals they biologically are," he told AFP.

The experience can be stressful for the animals, he added, and there was always the potential for accidents. "The

elephant handler has to make sure he can control the elephant... Elephants can get out of control and hurt and sometimes even kill people." But manager Ittipan told AFP that the creatures were well trained and looked after. "I don't see this as exploitation or torture. We have had elephants in our province for tourism and social awareness for a really long time. So it's really not a big deal doing activities with them like this morning," Ittipan said. "Elephants have always been integral to the Thai way of life." — AFP



Lottery sellers of the popular "Dona Manolita" lottery outlet celebrate selling the first prize of Spain's Christmas lottery draw "El Gordo" (the Fat One) in Madrid. — AFP photos

World's richest lottery spreads Christmas cheer in Spain

Spain's annual Christmas lottery doled out 2.4 billion euros (\$2.9 billion) to multiple winners on Tuesday, spreading holiday cheer in one of the European nations worst hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Unlike other big lotteries that generate just a few big winners, "El Gordo" (The Fat One) aims to share the wealth, with thousands of numbers getting a prize. The total prize money involved makes it the world's richest lottery. El Gordo shelled out 400,000 euros to the lucky holders of tickets bearing this year's top-prize number, 72897. A total of 1,720 tickets bearing this number were sold across the country. "It's an enormous reward during a very difficult year," Manuel Rodriguez, a lottery salesman from northwestern Spain who sold several winning tickets, told local media.



A lottery seller celebrates selling the first prize of Spain's Christmas lottery draw "El Gordo" (the Fat One) in Vigo.

keeping with tradition children from a Madrid school that was once an orphanage called out the winning numbers in a nationally televised draw although this year there was no live audience present. The Christmas lottery has been held uninterrupted since 1892, even during Spain's 1936-39 civil war, when each side held its own draw. It has become a popular Christmas tradition in Spain, with friends, colleagues and bar regulars banding together to buy tickets costing 20 euros apiece. — AFP

"We are happy that it landed here amongst our neighbors, that is what we work for, to spread prizes and dreams among our neighbors." As in other years, winners gathered at lottery offices that sold winning tickets to celebrate with champagne and confetti, temporarily dispensing with social distancing and mask-wearing amid the euphoria. In

SWISS SKI RESORT FEELS CHILL FROM BRITISH STAYAWAY

Switzerland's ski resorts were set to boom with snow-seeking British winter tourists-but the flight ban because of the new COVID-19 variant raging in England has put those Christmas plans on ice. In plush Verbier, 1,500 meters up in the Alps, hoteliers were left struggling to deal with Monday's ruling by the Swiss government-which

also included a 10-day retroactive quarantine for anyone who arrived from Britain since December 14. Meanwhile, Britons working in the luxury mountain resort who had been preparing to welcome friends and family to the chalets and ski slopes were facing a festive season filled with video calls instead. Busloads of skiers arrived in the town-but the few Britons among them, queuing for the cable cars to the snow-capped mountain tops, were ski instructors and seasonal workers.

"I've been coming here 15 years working as a ski instructor; I have never seen the Christmas week as quiet as this," said Briton Trevor Dean, 68, of Performance Ski School. "Bookings are way, way down. There's very few British people coming for lessons this year. My hours are about a fifth of what they would normally be. "It's an expensive place to go into quarantine," he said, adding that the

mountain air and spectacular views would be little consolation.



This photograph shows a gondola in the Alpine resort of Verbier, well known by British ski holiday makers. — AFP photos

Hotels hit Voted Switzerland's best ski resort for the past two years, Verbier markets itself as offering "adrenaline-packed thrills,

So this is Christmas? How the virus is killing the fun

The world is readying for a downbeat festive season with Christmas plans in tatters and New Year celebrations without crowds or fireworks-all scuppered by new virus curbs. Here is an overview of how COVID-19 is putting a kibosh on the festivities.

Cancelling Christmas

With a new strain "out of control" and more than 40 countries banning travel with Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson scraps plans to relax the rules over Christmas and tells people to stay home. London and southeast England-where the new strain is worst-will remain in lockdown until December 30. In Italy people can only leave their homes once a day until January 6, with bars, restaurants and non-essential shops also shuttered. The Netherlands has reimposed a lockdown until January 19 with schools and all non-essential shops closed, while Germany is under partial lockdown till January 10.

Norway has called on its population to follow a voluntary lockdown, while Sweden has done a U-turn on its lax attitude to the virus by asking people to wear masks on public transport at peak times. France has slightly eased its lockdown, but has also introduced a curfew from 8:00 pm every night with a one-day reprieve on December 25.

Cold turkey anyone...?

Among the countries allowing gatherings over Christmas, Belgium is setting its limit to just one guest per household, and two guests for people living alone. Luxembourg is allowing two guests per household. From December 24 to 26 in Germany, gatherings are limited to close family members. The Netherlands



is advising households to welcome no more than three guests at Christmas while France has set the maximum at six adults around the dinner table. Quebec in Canada has scrapped its decision to allow gatherings over a four-day period during Christmas, in light of the sharp rise in new infections there. And Ireland declared a cold Christmas Tuesday with families urged to stay at home and only two households allowed to mix from December 27.

No festive fun

Last-minute Christmas shopping is off in Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia and the southeast of England where non-essential shops have shut. And there is no hope of warming up with some mulled wine in Germany from traditional outdoor stands, all shut this year. Non-essential shops have reopened in France, but there will be no restaurants open for New Year celebrations, nor live shows. In Switzerland, restaurants, as well as culture and sports facilities are all closing their doors before Christmas, while shops will stay open.

Silent prayers

Pope Francis has brought the Vatican's Christmas midnight mass forward by two hours due to Italy's curfew. Christmas mass in Bethlehem will take place without worshippers. Singing in churches in Switzerland is banned, while in Greece churches will open for the festive period but with a capacity of nine people, and 25 in cathedrals. Croatia has imposed travel restrictions for the holidays but eased curbs on Christmas masses.

And then... it gets worse

Scotland, Northern Ireland and Austria have all announced fresh lockdowns immediately after Christmas. While Portugal is imposing a curfew on New Year's Eve and Kazakhstan will ban all mass gatherings and events from December 25 and through the New Year. A partial lockdown will come into force in Poland for three weeks starting December 28. And schools, universities, non-essential shops, restaurants, cinemas and sports venues will all shut in Ukraine from January 8 to 24. — AFP



A tourist wearing a protective face mask walks past a Christmas tree in the Alpine resort of Verbier well known by British ski holiday makers.

simple pleasures and a chic lifestyle". Glistening fresh snow melted from the chalet rooftops in the bright sunshine on Tuesday. At the Hotel La Rotonde, a group of British tourists decided to leave immediately rather than go into quaran-

tine from Tuesday-though one decided to tough it out in his room. "He cannot come out, we cannot go in," said Vincent Theo, director of the 27-room hotel. "We bring him his breakfast, lunch and dinner and try to provide a certain level of comfort, and try to keep things convivial during his quarantine so he doesn't feel quite so isolated."

Sports

Photo of the Day



Kaito Toba, motorcycle racer, competes at the Qatar Stop of the MotoGP World Championship. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

NBA champion Lakers lose opener to Clippers as Nets rout Warriors

LeBron James lifts Lakers with 22 points



LOS ANGELES: Anthony Davis #3 of the Los Angeles Lakers reacts after a collision with Lou Williams #23 of the LA Clippers during a 116-109 Clippers win in the season opening game at Staples Center on December 22, 2020. —AFP photos



NEW YORK: DeAndre Jordan #6 of the Brooklyn Nets looks to pass as James Wiseman #33 of the Golden State Warriors and Andrew Wiggins #22 defend during the second half at Barclays Center on December 22, 2020.

LOS ANGELES: The Los Angeles Lakers sure didn't have long to savor their 17th NBA title. Little more than two months after the Lakers locked up the 2020 crown with a Finals win over the Miami Heat, they were back to the grind in a 116-109 loss to the Los Angeles Clippers on the opening night of the 2020-21 campaign on Tuesday. Paul George led the Clippers, less than two weeks after signing a four-year contract extension worth a reported \$226 million. George scored 26 of his 33 points in the second half as the Clippers kept the Lakers at bay.

"I got into a good rhythm making plays for the team," George said. "That's how I catch fire - I let the game come to me. I took the shots when they were available." Kawhi Leonard added 26 points for the Clippers, who are out to expunge the memory of their agonizing Western Conference semi-finals loss to the Denver Nuggets, who trailed 3-1 in the series but won in seven games. LeBron James led the Lakers with 22

points. Anthony Davis added 18 and German point guard Dennis Schroder - a new addition - scored 14 points with 12 rebounds and eight assists.

Ring ceremony

The night at Staples Center started with the Lakers receiving their diamond and amethyst championship rings. There were no fans in attendance, but family members - and some frontline healthcare workers who are Lakers fans - delivered heartfelt recorded messages of congratulations to the team prior to the game. But they were on the back foot early, trailing from start to finish in a game the Clippers led by as many as 22 points in the first quarter. "The game comes quick, and you've got to get focused," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said of shifting gears after the ring ceremony.

The Lakers cut the deficit to 56-54 at halftime, and Schroder's jump shot knotted it at 75-75 with

5:04 left in the third. But the Clippers clamped down defensively and pulled away again. "It's just weird in all facets," said James, who turned an ankle in the fourth quarter, about the overriding feeling of the day. "Celebrating an historic moment with our franchise and having to do it without our family and friends and our fans, it's just a weird day to say the least. He added of the result: "It's game one, it's the first test for us. We've literally been together for nine days as a full group."

The game was one of two on the opening-day slate, which also featured Kevin Durant's long-awaited Brooklyn Nets debut. It didn't disappoint, the two-time NBA Finals MVP teaming seamlessly with Kyrie Irving in a 125-99 blowout over the Golden State Warriors. Durant hadn't played since suffering a devastating torn Achilles tendon playing for the Warriors against Toronto in game five of the championship series on June 10, 2019. — AFP

News in brief

Kristoffersen wins slalom race

MADONNA DI CAMPIGLIO: Norway's Henrik Kristoffersen set a blistering pace in the second run to win the men's night slalom in Madonna di Campiglio on Tuesday. Kristoffersen had been 12th after the first run but powered back in the second to finish 0.33sec ahead of compatriot Sebastian Foss-Solevaag, who had led the way earlier in the Italian Dolomites. Italy's Alex Vinatzer finished third at 0.34sec, for just the second podium finish of his career. "I don't think I've ever been so emotional after a victory," said Kristoffersen after his 22nd career win and 64th podium. The 26-year-old's last success was the slalom in Schladming, Austria last January. "The last three weeks have been very difficult. I've already had difficult times in my career but I have always come back. Skiing is my life: I have skiing, my family and that's it," he said. — AFP

Aris goalkeeper under protection

THESSALONIKI: Aris Thessaloniki goalie Marios Siampanis has been placed under 24-hour police protection after reporting a bribery attempt, Greek media reported on Tuesday. Reports said that four policemen have been assigned to guard the 21-year-old player after numerous threats against him on social media. On December 14, Siampanis sent letters to the Greek football federation and Super League reporting that he was "approached before the Aris-PAOK derby in Thessaloniki on Sunday to give a poor performance." Siampanis also complained that PAOK had reacted by attacking him. In a post on Instagram he said he was angry that PAOK had posted his contract with Aris and personal details on their club web site. Siampanis came through the PAOK youth system but left the club for Olympiakos of Athens who then released him after one year. He then returned to Thessaloniki and signed with Aris. — AFP

AEK Athens fire coach Carrera

ATHENS: AEK Athens have sacked coach Massimo Carrera after one year at the helm, the Greek Super League club announced on Tuesday. "AEK thanks Massimo Carrera for his contribution to our team and wishes him every success in the continuation of his coaching career," the Athens club said. Under his leadership, AEK finished in third last season and lost the Greek Cup final to Olympiakos. However AEK failed to make it to the Europa League knockout stages this season after winning just one match in six group stage contests. They are currently fourth in the Greek top flight, eight points behind leaders Olympiakos. Former Juventus and Atlanta Defender Carrera previously coached Spartak Moscow between 2016 and 2018 and also had spells as assistant coach for the Italian national team and Juve. — AFP

FA probe Juventus goalkeeper

MILAN: Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon is being probed by the Italian Football Federation for allegedly using a blasphemous phrase during a league game, the FIGC confirmed on Tuesday. Federal Prosecutor Giuseppe Chine opened the investigation after 42-year-old Buffon was overheard using a blasphemous expression when addressing teammate Manolo Portanova during Juventus's 4-0 win over Parma last weekend. The incident was not reported because Buffon was not on camera at the time, but there was an audio recording. "The investigation will serve to clarify through the possibility of listening to the person concerned," the FIGC said. Since 2010, the Italian FA have taken disciplinary action against several players and coaches heard disrespecting God or the sacred. Former Italy captain Buffon, the oldest player in the league and holder of the record for Serie A appearances with 653, has in the past been forced to apologise for uttering the word "Dio" (God), although he once claimed he had said "Zio" (uncle). — AFP

Lyon lose Dembele to injury

LYON: Lyon striker Moussa Dembele broke an arm in training and will miss at least the last match before the brief winter break, the Ligue 1 club said on Tuesday. Lyon are second in the French top flight on goal difference and entertain Nantes. The club said the 24-year-old striker broke his arm on Monday but did not say how long he would be out. However coach Rudi Garcia said at his press conference that he feared the player would need an operation. Lyon resume their league campaign on January 6 against Lens. Dembele has struggled so far this season with just one goal and has frequently started on the bench. Last season he scored 16 goals in 27 Ligue 1 appearances. — AFP

Washington QB Haskins apologizes

WASHINGTON: Washington quarterback Dwayne Haskins issued an apology on Tuesday after images of him partying in a strip club without a mask emerged on social media. In a statement on Twitter, Haskins admitted he had put team-mates at risk after breaching COVID-19 safety protocols. "I want to publicly apologize for my actions this past Sunday," Haskins said on Twitter. "I spoke with Coach (Ron) Rivera yesterday and took full accountability for putting the team at risk. "It was irresponsible and immature of me and I accept responsibility for my action. "I also want to apologize for creating a distraction for my team during our playoff push. I will learn and grow from this and do what's best for the team moving forward." — AFP



KUWAIT: Public Authority for Sport Deputy Director General for competitive sports Dr Saqer Al-Mulla said a new system for athletes to have free time for participating in events will take effect at the beginning of New Year. This is considered the second step on the road of digital transformation, as the e-correspondence is already adopted by sports facilities. He said preparations are being made for partial professionalism (registration electronically), adding that certain issues mentioned by the Audit Bureau were avoided. — Photos by Abdellatif Sharaa



New director picked for 'restrained' Tokyo Olympic ceremonies

TOKYO: Organizers of the coronavirus-postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympics said yesterday they have picked a new creative director to redesign "simpler and more restrained" opening and closing ceremonies for next year's Games. The mammoth task will fall to advertising executive Hiroshi Sasaki, who helped produce the ceremony handing over the Games from Rio to Tokyo - famously featuring then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as a character from

the Super Mario video game.

Organizers said the decision to replace a previous seven-person creative team would improve efficiency as reshape the traditionally lavish and spectacular ceremonies to be "in tune with the situation." "The ceremonies will still be a great celebration to be enjoyed by the athletes and watching world but will likely take a simpler and more restrained approach designed to reflect the overall simplification of the Games and the potential need to still consider Covid-19 countermeasures," organizers said in a statement.

Sasaki replaces a team led by Mansai Nomura, a master of traditional Kyogen comic theatre who had pledged to produce ceremonies "rich in Japanese spirit." Sasaki designed the stripped-back event

organizers held in July to mark the new year-to-go until the postponed Games. That saw Japanese swimmer and leukaemia survivor Rikako Ikee appear in a darkened and empty stadium clutching the Olympic flame in a lantern, which organizers said was reflective of the principles that would guide the redesigned ceremonies.

"It is appropriate to make ceremonial events and programs simpler and have them in some way reflect and respect the world's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic," they said. Speaking to reporters, Sasaki said he still remembered watching as a child the opening ceremony for the 1964 Olympics, the first time Tokyo hosted the Summer Games, and had enjoyed the traditionally lavish events opening and closing the sporting event. — AFP

Sports

Brentford stun Newcastle to reach League Cup semi-finals

Brentford, fourth in the Championship, upset Premier League club

LONDON: Brentford reached their first League Cup semi-final with a shock 1-0 win against Newcastle, while troubled Arsenal lost to holders Manchester City on Tuesday. Brentford, fourth in the Championship, upset Premier League side Newcastle thanks to Josh Dasilva's second-half goal in rain-lashed west London.

Thomas Frank's team had already knocked out West Bromwich Albion, Southampton and Fulham en route to the quarter-finals. Their fourth Premier League scalp took them into their first ever major domestic cup semi-final. Badly hit by an outbreak of the coronavirus recently, this was another bitter blow in a frustrating season for Newcastle, who were hoping to reach their first domestic semi-final since the 2004-05 FA Cup.

The Magpies remain without a major domestic trophy since the 1955 FA Cup. With Newcastle winless in their last two Premier League matches, boss Steve Bruce will be under fire from angry fans after the latest cup embarrassment for his club. Newcastle striker Callum Wilson forced a good save from Luke Daniels early on with a powerful shot from an acute angle. The Bees were inches away from taking the lead when Dasilva's low cross reached Saman Ghoddos, but the Iran winger's mis-cued effort looped onto the crossbar.

Ryan Fraser's dipping strike was tipped over by Daniels before the interval. But Frank's side never looked overawed against and gained their reward in

the 66th minute. Canos pulled his cross back into the path of Dasilva and his volley flashed past Newcastle keeper Karl Darlow. In Tuesday's other quarter-final, Manchester City inflicted more misery on struggling Arsenal. Arsenal have lost five of their last seven Premier League games and are 15th in the table, making this their worst start to a season since 1974-75.

Their latest defeat came at Everton on Saturday, sparking talk of dressing room unrest amid reports Gunners manager Mikel Arteta could be in danger of the sack if Arsenal's wretched run continues. Arteta, whose club last won the League Cup in 1993, believes beating City would be a springboard to a successful second half of the season. "This is what we want to use it for because it's a competition we want to try to win," said Arteta, who worked as Pep Guardiola's City assistant before joining Arsenal 12 months ago.

City are unbeaten in their last eight games in all competitions - conceding just one goal in that period. But they still trail eight points behind Premier League leaders Liverpool after an inconsistent start to the campaign. Guardiola's men, who have found goals hard to come by in the absence of the injured Sergio Aguero, have won the League Cup for the last three seasons and are bidding to become the first team to win it four years in a row since Liverpool from 1981 to 1984. Yesterday, Everton hosted Manchester United and Tottenham visited second tier Stoke.—AFP



LONDON: Newcastle United's Paraguayan midfielder Miguel Almiron (left) and Brentford's Spanish striker Sergi Canos compete during the English League Cup quarter final football match between Brentford and Newcastle United at the Brentford Community Stadium in Brentford on December 22, 2020. —AFP

Tigres sink LAFC for CONCACAF crown

MIAMI: Andre-Pierre Gignac scored a late winner as Mexico's Tigres UANL came from behind to end their long wait for a CONCACAF Champions League crown with a 2-1 final victory over Los Angeles FC on Tuesday. Former Marseille and France international striker Gignac swept home the winner six minutes from time at Orlando's Exploria Stadium to complete a dramatic come-from-behind win for the Liga-MX side. The victory marked the end of years of frustration in the tournament for Tigres, who had been beaten in the final three times since 2016. "We lost it almost three years in a row and I think the club deserved to finally win it," Gignac said afterwards.

The Mexican side will now advance to the FIFA World Club Cup in Qatar next February following the win. "We finally achieved an international title," added Gignac, who was named tournament MVP and Golden Boot winner. "I always wanted to win it even though some say it is not worth much. It is worth going to a Club World Cup, and it is worth playing against the best teams from each continent. Today it is Tigres' turn." Tigres win extends Mexico's proud record in the competition. Mexican clubs have won the title for the last 15 editions.

But the loss shattered Los Angeles' dreams of becoming the first side from Major League Soccer to be crowned kings of club football in the North America, Central America and Caribbean (CONCACAF) region since Los Angeles Galaxy managed the feat in 2000. The defeat was even harder to swallow as the MLS side had appeared to be in total control for long periods of the second half after Uruguayan striker Diego Rossi fired them into a 61st-minute lead. Los Angeles captain Carlos Vela then missed a golden chance to double the MLS club's lead soon afterwards, taking too long to get his shot off and



ORLANDO: Tigres UANL celebrates the championship win over Los Angeles FC during the CONCACAF Champions League final game at Exploria Stadium on December 23, 2020 in Orlando, Florida. —AFP

allowing Tigres to block from close range.

At that point, Los Angeles looked by far the likelier winners against a Tigres side who had barely managed a shot on goal throughout. But the Mexican club were gifted a way back into the match when a defensive mix-up involving goalkeeper Kenneth Vermeer saw Los Angeles needlessly concede a corner with just under 20 minutes left. From the ensuing setpiece, Hugo Ayala's glancing header beat Vermeer and crept in at the far post. The goal transformed the contest, with Tigres pouring forward in search of a winner against a weary Los Angeles.

With extra-time looming, Luis Rodriguez went on a jinking run to the edge of the area before squaring for Gignac in space. The Frenchman made no mistake with the finish, coolly picking his spot to sidefoot into the bottom corner past former Ajax goalkeeper Vermeer. Tuesday's final marked the climax of a tumultuous tournament which began in February only to be halted abruptly midway through the quarter-finals in March as the Covid-19 pandemic erupted. The competition resumed last week with all remaining teams playing in a quarantine bubble in Orlando in games played behind closed doors. —AFP

Union, Hoffenheim suffer shock Cup eliminations

BERLIN: Liverpool loanee Loris Karius endured a miserable competitive debut for Union Berlin on Tuesday as his side crashed out of the German Cup in the second round following a surprise 3-2 home defeat to second-tier Paderborn. After spending all of the season on the bench up to now, Karius was forced to fish the ball out of the net just two minutes into his Union debut as Sven Michel gave the underdogs the lead.

Grischa Proemel quickly equalized, but Michel and Dennis Srbeny made it 3-1 before half-time, and a second-half own goal was too little, too late for Union. "Loris showed at times what he is capable of, but I have to say his defenders let him down in the first half," said Union coach Urs Fischer. Fellow Bundesliga side Hoffenheim were also on the receiving end of an upset, as they lost on penalties to second division outfit Greuther Fuerth. In a dramatic game, Hoffenheim took the lead through Andrej Kramaric early on, but Fuerth equalised quickly.

Ryan Sessegnon, on loan from Tottenham Hotspur, played Sebastian Ernst inside and the midfielder nutmegged goalkeeper Oliver Baumann. After further goals from Fuerth's Marco Meyerhoefer and Hoffenheim's Kevin Akpoguma, Sessegnon almost presented Fuerth with victory late on. The English left back brought down Branimir Hrgota in the box in stoppage time, but Baumann saved Paul Seguin's penalty to take the game to extra time. Fuerth triumphed in the shootout, with Meyerhoefer converting his side's ninth penalty to seal the win.

Elsewhere, goals from Mats Hummels and Jadon Sancho gave Borussia Dortmund a 2-0 win over second-tier Eintracht Braunschweig, while RB Leipzig reached the last 16 for the third season in a row as they eased to a 3-0 win over their cup bogey side Augsburg with goals from Willi Orban, Yussuf Poulsen and Angelino. Both Schalke and Borussia Moenchengladbach overcame fourth-tier opposition, with Gladbach beating Elversberg 5-0 and Schalke ending their miserable year with a 3-1 win over Ulm. —AFP



Loris Karius

Kuwait's Football League roundup



By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: HHH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah Cup final match will be played on Jan 12, 2021, Chairman of Kuwait Football Association Sheikh Ahmad Al-Yousuf Al-Sabah said. Al-Yousuf thanked the championship patron for his support. Sheikh Ahmad Al-Yousuf said Information Minister, State Minister for Youth Affairs Abdelrahman Al-Mutairi will represent HHH the Crown Prince. The Cup draw placed Kuwait, Yarmouk, Sahel, Fahaaheel, Khaitan, Nasr and Borgan in group one, while group two includes Qadisiya, Sulaibkhat, Arabi, Shabab, Salmiya, Tadhamon, Kazma and Jahra - bearing in mind that Kuwait will join the tournament in round eight as the champion of last season.

Kuwait Football League

Meanwhile, in the 14th round of Kuwait Football League (ranking phase), Jahra joined

the lower league after they lost to Khaitan 2-3 while Khaitan kept their hopes to remain in the premier league with their 17 points, while Jahra remained at 11.

In another match, things became more interesting as Borgan defeated Nasr 2-1. Borgan's goals were scored by Nicolas Kofi, while Nasr's lonely goal was scored by Adel Hassan. Borgan (now have 14 points) ignited the battle to stay in the premier league. Meanwhile Nasr have 29 points in second place.

The fifth team which will be determined at the 15th and final round of the ranking phase will join Jahra, Tadhamon, Yarmouk and Sulaibkhat. The competing teams are Sahel with - 17 points, Khaitan - 17, Fahaaheel - 15 and Borgan - 14.

Three of the said teams will remain in the premier league, and one will join the lower league. Another match, Sahel and Salmiya ended goalless - giving Salmiya 26 points in third place, while Sahel have 17 points.



Live		Matches on TV	
		(Local Timings)	
SPANISH LEAGUE			
Deportivo Alaves v SD Eibar			00:00
beIN Sports HD 3			
Real Betis v Cadiz CF			00:00
beIN Sports HD 5			

14 NBA champion Lakers lose opener to Clippers as Nets rout Warriors



15 Gignac strikes as Tigres sink LAFC for CONCACAF's crown



15 Brentford stun Newcastle to reach League Cup semi-finals



Messi overtakes Pele's goal record

Atletico cement La Liga lead; Sevilla beat struggling Valencia



VALLADOLID: Barcelona's Argentine forward Lionel Messi eyes the ball during the Spanish league football match between Real Valladolid FC and FC Barcelona at the Jose Zorrilla stadium on December 22, 2020. — AFP

MADRID: Lionel Messi overtook Pele's record of goals for a single club on Tuesday as Barcelona strolled to a 3-0 La Liga win at Real Valladolid, while Atletico Madrid kept hold of their place at the top of the table. Messi struck his 644th goal for Barca, one more than Brazil legend Pele scored for Santos, in the 65th minute of a routine win for Ronald Koeman's side, who are fifth in La Liga after the win and eight points behind leaders Atletico. The Argentine, who had looked out of sorts this season after trying to leave the club in the summer, was at the heart of a powerful Barca performance against admittedly poor opposition.

Catalan giants Barca have won three

of their last four matches after two embarrassing defeats to Cadiz and Juventus earlier this month. "I see Messi happy. He is working hard, and he is a very important part of our attacking game," said Koeman after the win. Barca started on the front foot at the Jose Zorrilla Stadium, with Messi flashing a curling shot wide in the seventh minute and forcing a superb save from Jordi Masip in the 20th minute. Barca took the lead seconds later when Messi clipped over a beautiful cross which France defender Clement Lenglet headed home.

Martin Braithwaite gave the away side a deserved second 14 minutes later, Messi slipping through Sergio Dest who rolled over a perfect low cross for the Danish

international to tap home. Messi scored the landmark goal his excellent performance deserved with a simple finish after bursting through to collect Pedri's delicate backheeled assist. The easy win puts Barca two points behind Sociedad and fourth-placed Villarreal, who drew 1-1 at home with Athletic Bilbao.

Atleti stay top

Earlier second-half goals from Mario Hermoso and Marcos Llorente earned Atletico a 2-0 win away at a Sociedad team that started the fixture three points off the lead but are now six back in third after their third straight league defeat. Diego Simeone's side are three clear of second-placed Real Madrid, who can

move level again with their city rivals with a home win over Granada. Atletico know that however Madrid fare that they will have played two fewer games than the reigning champions, while Sociedad have played three games more than the leaders.

The win was Simeone's 300th league win as Atletico coach. "It's means a lot, really a lot," the Argentine said. "I came here with the idea of taking Atletico to the summit of the game ... I can't thank the club enough for what they have given me." Sociedad were the better side in the first half but couldn't carve a goalscoring opportunity in an opening period without a shot on target. Atletico went ahead just three minutes after the break when

Hermoso found himself unmarked in the area and perfectly met Yannick Carrasco's free-kick to send a header flying into the bottom corner.

Atletico sealed the points with 16 minutes remaining, Llorente lashing home when the ball fell to him on the edge of the area to complete a textbook away performance. Sevilla are sixth, nine points behind Atletico after Suso fired them to a 1-0 win at struggling Valencia. Suso gave the Andalusians the points with a thumping strike in the 81st minute after charging through to collect a Joan Jordan through ball. Valencia are 13th and just a point above the relegation zone after their sixth consecutive league match without a win. — AFP

Arteta finds succor in Guardiola defense

LONDON: Mikel Arteta will hope the Arsenal board absorb the defense his former boss Pep Guardiola put up for him after Manchester City thumped the Gunners 4-1 in Tuesday's League Cup quarter-final. Languishing 15th in the Premier League after losing five of their last seven games—their worst start to a season since 1974-75 - Arsenal are in crisis. They are just four points above the drop zone with their last relegation coming in the 1912-13 season, when, as Woolwich Arsenal, they finished bottom of the old First Division.

Things could get worse as their next match is a daunting clash at home to high-flying London rivals Chelsea on Saturday. "We have to turn it around," said Arteta. "If we don't, we are in big trouble. So that is the moment which is going to decide our season." Arteta has been in charge just over a year after replacing his compatriot Unai Emery having impressed as assistant to Guardiola for three years. The 38-year-



LONDON: Manchester City's English defender Kyle Walker jumps over the tackle of Arsenal's German-born Bosnian defender Sead Kolasinac during the English League Cup quarter final football match between Arsenal and Manchester City at the Emirates Stadium, in London on December 22, 2020. — AFP

old Spaniard was a popular choice as unlike Emery he was seen by fans to be imbued with the spirit of the club having captained them during Arsene Wenger's tenure.

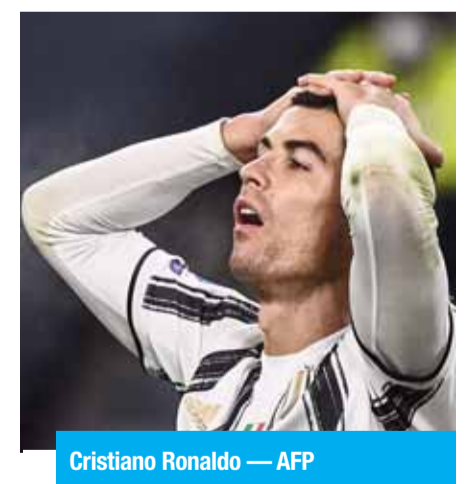
FA Cup success last season—beating Chelsea—and getting the better of champi-

ons Liverpool in the Community Shield built up his stock with the board and fans. However, that has proved to be a false dawn and the credit he built up has fast eroded. Luck has a tendency to go against you when you are on a bad run and Tuesday's game reflected that. — AFP

Ronaldo, Bonucci apologize

MILAN: Cristiano Ronaldo and Leonardo Bonucci yesterday apologized to Juventus fans for the "worst" performance of the season as the Italian champions fell to their first Serie A defeat this term against lowly Fiorentina. The 'Bianconeri' played most of the match a man down after Juan Cuadrado was sent off after quarter of an hour in their Allianz Stadium, losing 3-0 to the Tuscany side who are 15th after ending an eight-match winless run. "The worst Juventus of this first part of the season. I apologize to the fans in my name, first of all. There is nothing to add," defender Bonucci wrote on Instagram.

Ronaldo blasted "a far from acceptable result" as the Portuguese star failed to add to his Serie A-leading tally of 12 league goals so far. "Yesterday, with a poor performance and a far from acceptable result we closed our scheduled games for 2020, a special year in many ways," said the five-time Ballon d'Or winner on Instagram. "Empty stadiums, COVID protocols, postponed games, long stoppages and a very tight calendar. "But this is no excuse for anything. We know that we have to give more of ourselves, in



Cristiano Ronaldo — AFP

order to play better and to win in a more consistent way.

"We are Juventus! And we simply cannot accept anything less than excellence on the pitch! "I hope this short stoppage may help us to come back stronger and more united than ever, because the season is still far from over and in the end we believe that we will, once again, celebrate with our fans. "Believe in us, trust our team as much as we trust you, and we will deliver! Fino Alla Fine!" The defeat came hours after the nine-time reigning Serie A champions learned they must play the match against Napoli which was cancelled on October 4 after the southerners decided not to travel to Turin because of coronavirus cases. — AFP