

5 2020: World rocked by COVID, Trump and Black Lives Matter



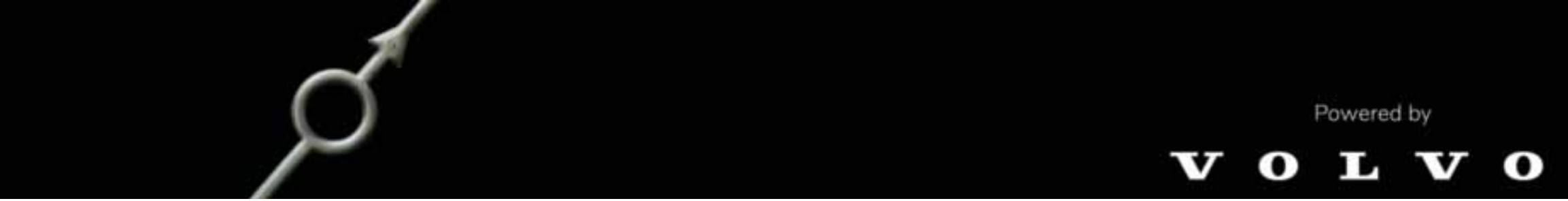
8 Aussie lobster sector claws back trade after China ban



13 From bean to bar, Haiti's cocoa wants international recognition



16 Liverpool stumble as West Brom snatch draw at Anfield



MPs discuss general amnesty law in meeting with premier

Lawmakers target expats in govt jobs • Foreign consultants terminated

Kuwait's COVID vaccination drive begins in earnest

KUWAIT: Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah yesterday hailed the high turnout of medical personnel and frontline workers at the coronavirus vaccination center after the vaccination campaign kicked off yesterday. The actual inoculation campaign began yesterday after its inauguration on Thursday, the minister said in a statement to journalists while inspecting the center at the International Fairgrounds in Mishref.

Medical personnel will be the first to take the vaccine against COVID-19 throughout the week, Sheikh Basel affirmed. A shipment of vaccine doses will arrive in Kuwait every month and they will be provided to willing citizens and expatriates throughout 2021, he added. The minister called on everyone to register their names and other required data on the assigned website to get a date for immunization against COVID-19. He revealed none of those who had taken the vaccine suffered from side effects. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah watches as a medic receives a dose of the Pfizer-BioTech COVID-19 vaccine at the vaccination center at the international fairgrounds in Mishref yesterday. — KUNA (See Page 4)

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah yesterday met around 10 MPs and discussed with them the government's position towards a proposed general amnesty law to pardon political activists. MP Ahmad Al-Azemi said the meeting also tackled other issues like cooperation between the Assembly and the government and popular issues including housing, education, health and others.

The lawmaker said the meeting focused on the need to pardon a group of former opposition MPs and activists who have been living in exile in Turkey for more than two years. The Assembly's legal and legislative committee yesterday discussed the general amnesty law and invited authorities to send their views on the legislation within two weeks, head of the committee MP Khaled Al-Enezi said.

He said the committee also discussed draft laws for amending the election law and for Kuwaitization of government jobs. The government was given two years to send its views on these bills, after which the committee will invite the concerned minister for discussion, Enezi said. The Kuwaitization law aims at replacing a majority of expats in government jobs with Kuwaitis.

The move comes after new Commerce and Industry Minister Faisal Al-Medlej dismissed all foreign consultants at the ministry and banned

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News in brief

60,000 ration cards canceled

KUWAIT: The commerce ministry announced it will be cancelling 60,000 food ration cards of domestic workers who are no longer working under their employers from the beginning of January. A source said some of the domestic workers have left the country but their sponsors have not updated their records and continue to receive their share. The decision will save around KD 4.5 million annually. — Al-Rai

KD 130 health insurance

KUWAIT: Chairman of Health Assurance Hospitals Co (Dhaman) Mutlaq Al-Sane said the company plans to launch operations at five primary care centers with a 600-bed capacity by the beginning of 2022. Speaking during the opening of a primary care center in Dajeej, he said patients will have to pay annual health insurance of KD 130 per person, in addition to visitation fees. — Al-Rai

600 teachers face termination

KUWAIT: The education ministry is considering terminating 600 expatriate teachers who are still stranded abroad due to coronavirus travel restrictions. The teachers specialize in subjects including computer, craft and Islamic education - which can be taught by locally-hired teachers. But the ministry decided to bring back to Kuwait around 330 teachers of maths, chemistry, English and physics who are stuck abroad by issuing them new visas. — Al-Jarida

Gulf FMs discuss 'cooperation'

KUWAIT: Gulf Arab foreign ministers held a virtual meeting hosted by Manama yesterday to bolster "cooperation" ahead of a summit next month amid efforts to end a rift between a Saudi-led alliance and Qatar. The six GCC countries addressed yesterday "suggestions on supporting and strengthening joint Gulf cooperation in various political, economic and social aspects", according to a statement by Kuwait's foreign ministry. — AFP (See Page 2)

EU launches vaccinations to end 'nightmare'

PARIS: EU countries yesterday embarked on a vaccination campaign to defeat the "nightmare" of COVID-19, with the first to be immunized expressing emotion after their job and leaders hailing a milestone in the fight against the pandemic. The vaccine is a glimmer of hope for a continent yearning for a return to normal from a pandemic that has killed 1.76 million

people worldwide since emerging in China late last year and caused at least 80 million confirmed cases, according to an AFP tally.

But polls have shown many Europeans are unwilling to take the vaccine, which could impede its effectiveness in beating the virus, while it will take months for large chunks of the population to be immunized. "It is with deep pride and a deep sense of responsibility that I got the vaccine today. A small gesture but a fundamental gesture for all of us," said Claudia Alivernini, 29, an Italian nurse who was the first in her country to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech jab yesterday morning.

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SEVRAN, France: Mauricette, a 78-year-old French woman, receives the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at Rene-Muret Hospital on the outskirts of Paris yesterday. — AFP

Oman launches vaccination drive

MUSCAT: Oman started coronavirus vaccinations yesterday, two days ahead of plans to resume all flights and open borders that temporarily closed amid concerns over a new strain of the disease. The sultanate - which has recorded the second highest number of COVID-19 deaths in the Gulf after Saudi Arabia - is the last of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) to begin inoculating people. Like most of its neighbors it has opted for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Health Minister Ahmed Al-Saidi, one of the first citizens to get a jab at a Muscat clinic, said priority

would be given to front line health workers and people who are considered to be vulnerable. Oman has so far recorded more than 128,000 cases of the novel coronavirus, including 1,495 deaths - the highest after Saudi Arabia which has recorded over 6,000 deaths.

Along with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the Gulf sultanate suspended commercial travel and banned entry and exit via their land and sea borders last week after a new strain of the virus appeared in Britain. Saudi Arabia has yet to announce whether it will lift the suspension this week, while Kuwait has said it plans to re-open on Jan 1.

Oman is hoping to quickly start receiving tourists, especially from its wealthy neighboring countries, to boost its economy that has been hit hard by slumping oil prices and the pandemic. —AFP



MUSCAT: Oman's Health Minister Ahmed Al-Saidi reacts as he receives his first dose of the vaccine yesterday. — AFP

11 killed in Iran blizzards, avalanches

TEHRAN: Three more climbers in Iran have died after avalanches struck mountains north of the capital Tehran, bringing the overall toll to 11, the Red Crescent said yesterday. State news agency IRNA said the tragedy began on Friday when avalanches and blizzards hit the mountainous region. Several climbers were trapped in the area but the Red Crescent managed

to rescue 14 during a three-day operation led by 20 emergency teams backed by helicopters.

On Saturday, rescuers said they had found the bodies of eight climbers, while yesterday morning it was announced that another had died. The bodies of another two were recovered in the Darabad mountains, the Red Crescent said yesterday, adding that the rescue operation was now over.

Tehran lies at the foot of the Alborz mountain range which stretches across 900 km from the border with Azerbaijan in Iran's northwest to Khorasan province in the northeast. The area is famous for its many ski resorts and is popular with climbers. — AFP



TEHRAN: A handout picture shows rescue team transporting the bodies of mountaineers who died after blizzards and avalanches hit mountains north of Tehran on Saturday. — AFP

Local

Kuwait Amir condolences with Egypt over hospital fire victims

Sheikh Nawaf receives state officials at Seif Palace



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.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem. — Amiri Diwan photos



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 has sent a cable of condolences to Egyptian President Abdulfattah Al-Sisi on a deadly fire that happened at a medical unit for treating COVID-19 cases in Cairo. His Highness the Amir prayed for the souls of the deceased, wished the injured recovery and well-being and their families strength and patience. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-

Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a cable of identical content to President Al-Sisi. His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah also addressed Sisi with a similar cable. Meanwhile, National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem sent a similar cable to his Egyptian counterpart Dr Ali Abdalal. It was reported in Cairo that the blaze killed seven patients and injured five people. The fire had

erupted at a hospital in Obour district on northern outskirts of the Egyptian capital.

In other news, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Seif Palace yesterday His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh

Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir later received Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh. In the meantime, His Highness the Crown Prince received Ghanem, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali and Saleh at Seif Palace.

Zain evolves graduate program to 'CODE 7' data science focused initiative

KUWAIT: Zain Group, a leading mobile telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa, announces that after five successful years, the company's progressive Generation Z graduate training program has transformed into an initiative focused on developing cutting edge skills of future data analysts.

The new program, called 'CODE 7' targets Kuwaiti graduates who have majored in computer science-related subjects. Five dynamic young people were selected to participate in the inaugural year-long program by Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO, Bader Al-Kharafi. These bright young recruits, who will formally commence the pro-

gram at the start of 2021, will be guided through the year with the intention that they will then go on to support digitization efforts within Zain in areas such as data analytics and data science.

Aligned to the reimagined graduate program, Zain is set to establish an in-house Data Science division that will harness the talents of the participants given the company's focus on identifying future trends and developing skill sets to match those future requirements. Ultimately, Zain expects students who pass through its CODE 7 program to grow to become highly sort-after data science professionals who support Zain's evolution to a digital lifestyle operator and beyond.

Bader Al-Kharafi commented, "The world continues to change at a rapid pace, and the importance of data science-related disciplines in making organizations future-ready and successful is highly relevant. As such, we believe it is the right time to launch this CODE 7 initiative, taking our graduate program to a new direction. We have every confidence that the efforts we will place in these young talents will result in forging high-performing and successful careers, as well as being beneficial for Zain through the insights they will later be able to offer the company. I encourage the incoming graduates to make the most of this life-altering opportunity and wish them every success."

The year-long CODE 7 program offers an invigorating selection of topics, subjects, and activities that include:

- Creativity and Innovation
- Data Science Certification to expert level
- Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning



KUWAIT: Five CODE 7 participants: (from left) Omar Saleh, Khalid Al-Jassim, Abdullah Al-Rasheed, Abdulaziz Khalifa and Sara Al-Rabab.

- Behavioral Work (life skills, resilience etc)
- Innovative Sustainable Projects
- Rotations across Zain operations on digitization
- On-the-job applications and case

studies

The five successful participants to be selected for the inaugural CODE 7 program are: Omar Saleh; Khalid Al-Jassim; Abdullah Al-Rasheed; Abdulaziz Khalifa and Sara Al-Rabab.

EU launches vaccinations...

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In Greece, the first in line was nurse Efsthathia Kampissioulis who flashed a V-sign while being vaccinated and later told Ert TV it was "a great honor for me but also for those working on the frontline". European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen hailed the campaign start as a "touching moment of unity and a European success story", adding the process will "help to get our normal lives back gradually".

Countries are however showing different strategies, with Italy focusing on health workers, France the elderly and in the Czech Republic, Greece and Slovakia political leaders at the front of the queue. In a sign of impatience, some EU countries began vaccinating on Saturday, a day before the official start, with a 101-year-old woman in a care home becoming the first person in Germany to be inoculated and Hungary and Slovakia also handing out their first shots.

Araceli Rosario Hidalgo Sanchez, a 96-year-old living in a care home in central Spain became the first person in the country to be vaccinated yesterday, in an event broadcast by national television. She said smilingly she felt "nothing" from the shot. France began its campaign in care homes for the elderly in the Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis, a low-income area hard hit by COVID-19, with a 78-year-old woman named Maurice the first to receive the jab to applause from staff.

"We have a new weapon against the virus - the vaccine," tweeted President Emmanuel Macron. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven described the vaccine as a "ray of light in the darkness". One of the first Swedes to get the vaccine, Stig Larsson, 89, said he "did not hesitate" about being inoculated. China, Russia,

Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Serbia, Singapore and Saudi Arabia have also begun their vaccination campaigns.

Britain, which last week finalized a deal on leaving the EU, began its vaccination campaign amid much fanfare on Dec 8, three weeks ahead of the bloc. But it was also in Britain that a new strain of the virus emerged that has already reached several other European countries as well as Japan and Canada. The new strain, which experts fear is more contagious, prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on the UK.

Echoing concerns from officials across the continent, Health Minister Olivier Veran said France has not ruled out imposing a third nationwide lockdown if coronavirus cases continue to rise after the holiday season. He said it would become clear in the next months if the vaccine did not just stop people falling sick but also from passing the virus on. "This would allow us to leave this nightmare quicker," he said.

Vaccines other than the Pfizer-BioNTech jab are also in the pipeline, and the United States, where over a million people have already been vaccinated, last week began jabs with the vaccine developed by US biotech firm Moderna. Meanwhile the University of Oxford and drug manufacturer AstraZeneca have applied to the UK authorities for permission to roll out their COVID-19 vaccine.

AstraZeneca chief executive Pascal Soriot said yesterday its vaccine was a "winning formula" and provided "100 percent protection" against severe COVID requiring hospitalization. There is concern that wariness among Europeans over the vaccine could impede its effectiveness, with a poll published in the Journal du Dimanche saying 56 percent of French people do not plan to take the jab.

China, accused of covering up the initial outbreak, has largely curbed the domestic spread of the virus. Its Communist leadership issued a statement hailing the "extremely extraordinary glory" of its handling of the crisis. — AFP

also asked about the reasons of not appointing Kuwaitis in their jobs.

In his questions to Finance Minister Khalifa Hamada, the lawmaker asked about the number of non-Kuwaiti employees, their salaries, qualifications and experience, who are employed at a number of state-owned companies like the Industrial Bank, Kuwait Cement Co, Kuwait Airways and others.

He also demanded the same information about companies in which the government owns 25 percent or more of their capital. Jowhar also demanded to know the size of public deposits at all local banks and the interest rates on them. He asked the minister for the number of Kuwaitis employed at local banks and their percentage of the workforce. The lawmaker asked Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah to provide him with the number of expat employees at the ministry of health, their qualifications and salaries.

National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said yesterday the Assembly office has been formed and it will meet today to decide the schedule of Assembly meetings.

Officials discuss Gulf 'cooperation' ahead of summit

MANAMA: Top Gulf Arab officials held a virtual meeting yesterday to bolster "cooperation" ahead of a summit next month amid efforts to end a rift between a Saudi-led alliance and Qatar. The foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait took part in the meeting hosted by Manama, while Qatar was represented by its minister of state for foreign affairs.

The participation of Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, would have been seen as another sign towards ending the diplomatic dispute. Saudi Arabia led its allies the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt to cut ties with Qatar in June 2017, saying it was too close to Iran and funding radical Islamist movements - charges Doha staunchly denies.

After severing ties, the countries issued a list of 13 demands for Qatar, including that it shut down its broadcaster Al Jazeera. The six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) addressed yesterday "suggestions on supporting and strengthening joint Gulf cooperation in various political, economic and social aspects", according to a statement by Kuwait's foreign ministry.

This comes after Manama on Wednesday called for an "end to regional disputes", softening its rhetoric surrounding the Gulf crisis. Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdellatif Al-Zayani expressed confidence Sunday "in Saudi Arabia's ability to find a solution to the dispute within the Gulf". Zayani added during the meeting that his country hoped for a return to



MANAMA: Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdellatif Al-Zayani holds a virtual meeting with top Gulf Arab officials yesterday. — AFP

normalcy in the region, according to Bahraini media.

Earlier this month, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said a resolution was in sight, with the four governments behind the blockade "on board" and a final agreement expected soon as the GCC prepares to convene in the kingdom on Jan 5. Egypt and the UAE have since given their public support to the negotiations although diplomatic sources say the UAE has been reluctant to compromise.

Sources privy to the negotiations have said the Saudi-led quartet was willing to compromise on its list of demands, with the upcoming summit providing a path to reconciliation but not a final comprehensive agreement. According to Majed Alraeisi, an Emirati analyst, coining the "coming phase a 'reconciliation' was unrealistic". "It is a phase (to show) credibility and good intentions from point zero with the goal to strengthen dialogue... the current optimism is out of place compared to the reality," he tweeted yesterday. — AFP

MPs discuss general amnesty...

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the appointment of non-Kuwaitis in such positions. Employees working in the following government agencies will be affected: Supreme Council for Planning and Development, Civil Service Commission, Public Authority for Manpower, Environmental Public Authority, Central Statistical Bureau and Kuwait Authority for Privatization.

MP Hasan Jowhar meanwhile sent a series of questions to the prime minister and the ministers of finance and health about the number of expatriate employees in government bodies under their authority. In his question to the prime minister, Jowhar demanded to know the number of non-Kuwaiti consultants employed in bodies under the Cabinet, the terms of their appointment and their qualifications and pay. He

Dubai cuts 2021 budget as COVID hits economy

DUBAI: Dubai said yesterday it expects to cut its budget to \$15.5 billion in 2021 after its economy was impacted by a plunge in tourism and other sectors amid the novel coronavirus pandemic. The emirate, one of the seven that make up the United Arab Emirates, had posted a record \$18.1 billion budget for 2020. "The newly-announced budget takes into account the exceptional economic conditions of the fiscal year 2020 and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy," said a statement by the Dubai Media Office.

Dubai foresees a deficit for the fifth year in a row, of \$1.3 billion in 2021. In 2019, it had forecast a \$700 million deficit for this year. The emirate, which

depends heavily on tourism and retail services, closed its border for several months due to the pandemic, resulting in a 10.8 percent GDP plunge in the first half of the year. According to government estimates published earlier this week, the economy will likely contract 6.2 percent this year but is expected to see four percent growth in 2021. The new budget "confirms Dubai's ability to deal with the crisis, restore the pace of economic growth, strengthen social benefits and essential services," the media office said.

The government was counting on the six-month Dubai Expo 2020 global trade fair - which was scheduled for October but postponed by one year - to attract millions of visitors. Tourism has long been an economic mainstay of Dubai, which welcomed more than 16 million visitors last year. Before the pandemic, the aim was to reach 20 million this year. Dubai is renowned for its skyscrapers, including the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa, but its key property sector has been hit since 2014 by lower oil prices. — AFP

Local

Major events connected with the Kuwaiti Cabinet in 2020



KUWAIT: This December 14, 2020 file photo shows His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah with members of the new Cabinet after ministers took the oath of office. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Cabinet had its hands full during 2020, signing several agreements with Arab and foreign governments. The government's formation also saw a resignation of the Cabinet and the emergence of a new incarnation this year. The spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) also had an impact on the government's performance, which tried to handle the pandemic in the best way it saw fit. The following are the major activities and events involving the Cabinet:

Jan 6: Cabinet approved draft laws over Saudi-Kuwaiti neutral zone and nearby submerged area.

Jan 8: The government communication center announced that the account of Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) was hacked, stressing that the news item regarding the withdrawal of US forces was false.

Jan 14: Cabinet approved the formation of a cooperation committee between Kuwait and Niger.

Jan 14: Cabinet ratified a draft law concerning income and budget.

Jan 16: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah attended and sponsored the 19th Asian men's handball tournament held at Sheikh Saad Al-Abdullah indoor sports stadium.

Jan 20: Cabinet approved draft decree on aviation services between Kuwait and Rwanda.

Jan 20: Cabinet passed a draft decree to appoint a number of Kuwaiti figures at the GCC's Consultative Authority for a period of three years.

Jan 30: The Prime Minister attended and patronized the flag hoisting ceremony at the Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Center (JACC), an event coinciding with Kuwait's national celebrations.

Jan 30: A decree was issued approving the resignation of Minister of Social Affairs Dr Ghadeer Al-Aseeri. Waleed Al-Jassem was appointed as acting Minister.

Feb 6: The Prime Minister attended, patronized the "Shamel 6" Kuwait Fire Service Directorate (KFSD) exercise at Araifjan area with the participation of 32 entities.

Feb 13: The Prime Minister arrived in Germany to partake in Munich's 56th security conference.

Feb 19: The Prime Minister attended and patronized "Henna Laha" celebration at Al-Shaheed Park.

Feb 20: The Prime Minister inaugurated the new Jahra governorate building.

Feb 24: Cabinet ordered the cancelation of all national celebrations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Feb 26: Cabinet declared that studying in all educational facilities would be halted due to the coronavirus spread.

Feb 26: Cabinet, upon a request from His Highness the Amir, named a historical monument after the late Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to honor his previous stances and support to Kuwait.

Feb 26: Cabinet announced the arrival of a medical team from the World Health Organization (WHO) to assess Kuwait's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

March 2: Amiri decree issued approving the resignation of Minister of Water and Electricity Mohammad Bushehri. Minister of Oil Dr Khaled Al-Fadhel was appointed as acting Minister of the post.

March 6: Cabinet approved, in an exceptional meeting, a weeklong suspension of flights to and from Bangladesh, Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt as a measure to counter the COVID-19 spread.

March 9: Cabinet extended the suspension of study-

ing at educational facilities in Kuwait for two more weeks due COVID-19.

March 9: Cabinet ordered the closing of cinemas, theaters, and wedding halls until further notice due to the coronavirus pandemic. Funerals at the cemetery were still allowed in compliance with health regulations. Employees under quarantine were prevented from going to work and the exhibitions ground at Mishref area was handed over to the Health Ministry for use in COVID-19 screenings.

March 9: Cabinet halted issuing of entry visas to Kuwait in an effort to curb the spread of coronavirus.

March 11: Cabinet declared an official rest days on March 12- 29 to prevent COVID-19 from spreading.

March 11: Cabinet halted all commercial flights to and from Kuwait until further notice as a COVID-19 prevention measure.

March 11: Cabinet banned gatherings in gyms, restaurants and cafes to prevent coronavirus from spreading.

March 12: The government of Kuwait launched a website to update the public on the spread of COVID-19.

March 16: The Cabinet erected a temporary fund to receive institutional, corporate, and individual donations to help in the fight against COVID-19.

March 21: Cabinet announced a curfew starting on March 22 until further notice to prevent the spread of coronavirus. It started at 05:00 pm local-time and ended at 04:00 am.

March 26: Cabinet decided to continue providing a monthly salary for Kuwaiti students abroad. It also ordered the halt of press conferences, opting for virtual ones, and suspended taxi services nationwide.

April 6: The Cabinet decided to enforce full lockdown on Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Al-Mahboul districts.

April 6: The Cabinet decided to alter the curfew duration making it, indefinitely, effective as of 05:00 pm until 06:00 am.

April 6: The Cabinet accepted a request by the Ministry of Health (MoH) to bring specialized medical teams from abroad to back up the frontline teams.

April 6: The Cabinet tasked Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh with taking legal measures to bring into account persons responsible for non-productive workers and residencies' traders.

April 6: The Cabinet approved a proposal by the Minister of Commerce and Industry, offering online dates' booking for visits to shopping stores to minimize mingling and stem infections with the novel coronavirus.

April 9: The technological back-up committee of the novel coronavirus crisis launched the website "Ma'akom" including data about citizens abroad to facilitate their comeback.

April 13: The Cabinet launched a five-phase plan for evacuating citizens abroad. Phase one (April 19-21): Patients who finalized treatment and their companions, also tourists and personnel on official assignments. Phase two (April 23): Patients in need of medical beds and life support apparatuses. Phase three (April 25-May 1): Students. Phase 4 (May 3-4): Diplomats and the fifth stage (May 6-7) for other segments.

April 20: The Cabinet amended curfew duration setting it from 04:00 pm until 08:00.

May 4: The Cabinet was informed about instructions

by His Highness the Amir donating \$40 million, half of the sum from Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) and the other half from Kuwait Foundation for Advancement of Sciences (KFAS). A total of \$100 million of the fund was allocated for the World Health Organization (WHO) as a contribution to combating the novel coronavirus and \$60 million also for WHO to aid limited income countries against the pandemic.

May 10: Comprehensive curfew went into effect as of 04:00 pm and was set to remain until May 30 as part of the state measures against the pandemic.

May 25: The Cabinet, upon Amiri instructions, approved a proposed mechanism for honoring civil servants and personnel tasked with facing the novel coronavirus between February 24 and May 31 (2020).

May 30: Partial curfew indefinitely effected as of 06:00 pm until 06:00 am following the full lockdown enforced on May 10.

May 28: The Cabinet decided to enforce full lockdown on Al-Farwaniya district and some sections of Khaitan, in addition to complete lockdown on Hawally, Nugra, Maidan Hawally while the full one on Al-Mahboul and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh would remain in effect.

May 28: The Cabinet adopted a plan for staged restoration of normal life.

June 3: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled said — during a meeting with chief editors of local newspapers, the minister of information, and the chairman and director-general Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) — that Kuwait's financial solvency is excellent but economic reforms were slow, which required the restructuring of the economy.

June 3: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah affirmed, during a meeting with the press chief editors, information minister, and KUNA chairman, his concern for tackling GCC rifts.

June 25: The Cabinet decided to form a main committee, including the minister of health and ministries' undersecretaries, for following up on anti-COVID-19 measures.

June 29: The Cabinet nodded a bill regarding the Arab protocol for combating human trade.

June 29: The Cabinet blessed a bill on cultural cooperation with Sierra Leone.

June 29: The Cabinet approved bills regarding cultural, economic, and aviation cooperation with Burkina Faso.

June 29: The Cabinet nodded a bill approving an aviation cooperation accord with the Gambia.

June 29: The Cabinet Okayed a bill approving an accord with Holland for cooperation in aviation services.

June 30: Work was back at ministries and other government departments after the government declared an official and indefinite holiday as of March 12 due to repercussions of the novel coronavirus.

Aug 9: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah declared, during an international conference for Lebanon, the contribution of \$41 million to aid the country in aftermath of the Beirut port bombing. The sum included \$30 million worth of a previous pledge by Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) and \$11 million worth of urgent medical and food aid.

Aug 18: Fourth phase of restoring normal life began after a five-month closure of barber and tailor shops,

gyms, restaurants, cafes, and businesses in malls.

Aug 30: Partial curfew was lifted effective 03:00 pm however some businesses remained shut according to a Cabinet decision on the 20th of the month.

Sept 7: The Cabinet approved a bill for forming a joint committee with South Sudan and another draft law regarding the Arab protocol on barring and combating piracy at sea and armed robbery, as complementary to the Arab Convention on Combating Transnational Organized Crime.

Sept 25: His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, the Representative of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and the Prime Minister, declared in a statement during the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, allocating \$270 million to back up global efforts against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

Sept 28: The Cabinet agreed to reopen Al-Abdali border checkpoint with Iraq for exports.

Oct 19: The Cabinet approved a draft decree calling on constituents to partake in the National Assembly's elections for the 16th legislative term on December 5, and decided to refer it to His Highness the Amir.

Oct 26: The Cabinet accepted the resignation of Minister of Information and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Mohammad Nasser Al-Jabri.

Nov 19: The Cabinet approved a draft decree appointing retired Lieutenant General Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah as Deputy Chief of the National Guard with a minister's degree, and decided to submit it to His Highness the Amir.

Dec 2: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled announced in the second international conference to support Beirut and the Lebanese people that a sum of \$30 million will be allocated to repair the grain silos in Beirut port affected by the horrific explosion and also pledged \$11 million in humanitarian assistance.

Dec 2: In his address to the fourth ministerial form titled 'achievements despite challenges', His Highness the Prime Minister said that 57 cases of public wealth infringement and 1,042 violations on state properties were sent referred by the Cabinet during its short-lived term.

Dec 2: In his address to the fourth ministerial form titled 'achievements despite challenges', His Highness the Prime Minister said that 42 deaths and 9,000 infections were reported amongst frontline workers since the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in Kuwait. Some 154,000 frontline workers and 10,000 volunteers took part in the campaign to curb the spread of the virus.

Dec 13: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled kicked off Kuwait's Achievers for Future Opportunities (KAFO), a project supporting youth talents and innovations.

Dec 14: The Cabinet held a session headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled after swearing oath to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Dec 15: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, in his address to the opening session of the 16th legislative term of parliament, said that the Cabinet believed in cooperation amongst constitutional institutes was the cornerstone of democracy.

Dec 21: The Cabinet suspended commercial flights from and to Kuwait International Airport and also blocked traffic in land and sea borders until January 1, 2021. The decision will be reviewed after the term is concluded with a possibility of extension. Cargo operations were excluded from the decision. — KUNA

Major events connected with National Assembly in 2020

KUWAIT: The National Assembly saw several laws approved and interpellations against members of the Cabinet. The 15th legislative term concluded this year, paving the way to the 2020 elections and the opening of the 16th legislative term. Those are the major events and that happened in parliament this year:

Jan 7: National Assembly refused the lifting of immunity of MP Riyadh Al-Adsani on the backdrop of an electronic media case.

Jan 22: National Assembly approved a memorandum between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia concerning the neutral zone and nearby submerged area.

Jan 30: Minister of Social Affairs Dr Ghadeer Al-Aseeri submitted resignation after MP Dr Adel Al-Dhamki is grilling motion.

Feb 18: Finance Minister Mubarak Al-Sheetan and Minister of Electricity and Water Mohammad Buseri swore constitutional oath at the National Assembly.

Feb 19: The National Assembly approved a draft law connected with monetary policy, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK), and the banking jobs. The draft aimed at forming a supreme overseeing authority on a legal level.

June 16: Finance Minister Barrak Al-Sheetan was grilled according to a motion filed by MP Riad Al-Adsani on June 4. The interpellation ended without recommendations or proposals.

June 16: Minister of Education and Higher Education Dr Saud Al-Harbi was grilled according to a motion submitted by MP Faisal Al-Kandari on May 13. The inter-

pellation concluded with a number of recommendations.

June 17: The National Assembly agreed to delay payment of due installments of defaulters fund for six months as of the first due payment in April 2020.

June 17: The National Assembly agreed to amend the law of the Public Institution For Social Security (PIFSS) to lower retirees' monthly pensions from 25 percent to 15 percent.

June 17: The National Assembly approved a bill allowing individuals and companies to solicit permits online.

June 17: The National Assembly agreed to modify some provisions of the commercial and civil lawsuits' law for setting up a system where judges and public prosecution personnel can be indicted.

June 17: The National Assembly approved a bill amending some provisions of criminal proceedings allowing petitions against final verdicts in some cases.

June 17: The parliament nodded bills to amend the decree-into-law regarding commercial and civil lawsuits in relation to digital advertisements.

Aug 5: The National Assembly approved a law stipulating stricter safety precautions against fires.

Aug 5: The parliament blessed bills for property rents protecting tenants' rights against evacuation.

Aug 5: The National Assembly approved bills concerning the right to have access to information to boost transparency and

integrity in economic and administrative transactions.

Aug 12: The National Assembly renewed confidence in Finance Minister Barrak Al-Sheetan with 32 votes in favor in the interpellation spearheaded by MP Riad Al-Adsani. Ten MPs proposed no confidence.

Aug 19: The parliament approved a bill stipulating that employees in the private sector are entitled for end of service compensation based on the full salary.

Aug 19: The National Assembly passed a law regarding domestic violence.

Oct 7: The National Assembly blessed a bill for protecting competition, in tandem with rapid developments in this respect, globally and regionally.

Oct 7: The National Assembly approved a bill with respect to practicing medicine, back-up professions, patients' rights and health facilities, with aim of promoting the level of the medical services.

Oct 7: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem declared voting on a non-cooperation motion submitted by ten MPs against His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah would not be held during a parliamentary session after these legislators withdrew it.

Oct 7: The National Assembly approved a bill specifying financial allocations for the 'Head of State' and referred it to the Cabinet. It stipulated that these allotments would be projected in the state budget, along with specifying terms for payments to members of the ruling family, ways of their specification and disbursement, in line with an Amiri Order.

Oct 8: The National Assembly unanimously declared allegiance to His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber al-Sabah as Crown Prince.



KUWAIT: This December 5, 2020 file photo shows voters outside a school turned into a polling station on the National Assembly's election day. — KUNA

Oct 8: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem declared the conclusion of the National Assembly's fourth regular session of the 15th legislative term and said the parliament would re-convene on October 20.

Oct 20: The National Assembly endorsed a bill amending the law of special needs' citizens, stipulating continuous care for this segment and those caring for them as well as securing all comfort accommodations in an equal manner with other members of society.

Oct 20: The National Assembly approved a bill for regulating the demographic status, tackling defects, specifying proportions of persons of various countries that are allowed to be present in the country in a manner that would not overburden economic, social, and services sectors.

Oct 20: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem wrapped up the fifth follow-up regular session of the 15th legislative term.

Nov 4: Nomination for parliamentary

elections for the 16th legislative term closed with tally of candidates standing at 395, including 362 males and 33 females. Registration for the candidates kicked off on October 26.

Dec 5: Polling stations opened for 567,694 eligible voters to elect 50 MPs for the 16th legislative term of parliament.

Dec 15: National Assembly elected Marzouq Al-Ghanem as speaker of parliament during the opening session of the 16th legislative term. Eight individuals held the title since the first legislative term in 1963.

Dec 15: National Assembly elected MP Ahmad Al-Shuhumi as Deputy Speaker of parliament during the opening session of the 16th legislative term.

Dec 15: National Assembly elected MP Osama Al-Shaheen as observer of parliament during the opening session of the 16th legislative term. National Assembly elected MP Farz Al-Daihani as secretary of parliament during the opening session of the 16th legislative term. — KUNA

Local

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Kuwait lists 204 new COVID-19 cases, two deaths

KUWAIT: Kuwait yesterday listed 204 new coronavirus infections recorded over the past 24 hours, raising the total to 149,653. Meanwhile, two virus-related deaths were recorded during the same period as the death toll rose to 931, the health ministry said. The ministry had earlier reported that 199 patients recovered during the same period, raising the total number of recoveries to 145,579. The number of patients hospitalized stood yesterday at 3,143, with 36 of them in intensive care units, according to ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad. He further revealed that 2,158 swab tests were conducted over the same period, bringing the total up to 1,243,422. He went on to urge the public to continue to abide by health precautions, mainly wearing facemasks and maintaining social distancing, which he said are the most effective ways to halt the spread of the virus. — KUNA



KUWAIT: A large number of medical personnel and frontline workers headed yesterday to the Kuwait Vaccination Center, at the Kuwait International Fairground in Mishref, to receive their vaccines against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Low-key New Year celebrations amid pandemic

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: 2020 will end for many of us without celebrations and parties. Families will spend the New Year in the comfort of their homes, share food with their loved ones, and take some rest. Kuwait Times spoke to some expats and asked what they have planned for the New Year. "My husband and I will spend New Year at home. It's a tradition for us since when we were newlyweds and younger. Our children have families of their own now, so we see to it that we come home and share the blessings together every New Year," said 55-year-old Patricia, a nurse who is married to an architect.

"I see to it that we are all at home at the advent of every New Year. My two kids have their own lives now - one is in Australia, the other in the Philippines, and they have their own families. We greet each other at the time of our respective New Years since we are in different time zones," she said.

"If not for COVID, we would've been in Australia now. But we opted not to travel, not because of the recent travel lockdown in Kuwait. If we go to Australia, we will not enjoy the holiday because of too many restrictions there, so we preferred to stay



where we are," Patricia said. "I will call some friends to see if they can come over to my house and celebrate with us, otherwise I will celebrate with my husband only," she added.

Family gathering

An Indian family is planning to spend New Year's Eve away from the city. "We have an invitation from a family friend in Kabd. We are planning to go there on New Year's Eve and stay there until the following day. That'll be a change since we cannot go out of the country right now," said Sunil, a father of three. "We want to unwind from the busy days and challenges - it's draining, so we want to begin the year with new ideas and prospects of life."

Sunil owns a restaurant in Salmiya. "I have peo-

ple looking after the business, which will be open even on the New Year. That's the time we get more customers, so I keep the restaurant open and give my workers additional money or bonuses," he said.

Rafiq and his wife have invited their three married children to spend the New Year with them. "It's good that we are all here in Kuwait. I have two other children who are unmarried, and we want all of them to be in one place during the New Year. I thank Allah - because of COVID-19, they were unable to leave Kuwait. We can now gather as one family, unlike previous years, as my kids are scattered across the Middle East and Europe. Now they are all here in Kuwait because of COVID, so we can gather and talk until the morning of January 1," he said.

stc builds on commitment to combat COVID-19 in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that it has distributed hand sanitizers stands, face masks, and other safety supplies to the Ministry of Interior in a gesture of appreciation to ensure their safety while on duty.

The initiative falls under stc's "Stay Safe" campaign, which was launched during the early stages of the pandemic. Additionally, the Company equipped its headquarters and branches with similar safety supplies and disinfection stations to prevent the spread of disease. To ensure the safety of its employees during these unprecedented times, stc carried out yet another awareness campaign focused on preventative guidelines and precautionary measures that must be applied to maintain the health and safety of both employees and stc's valued customers.

In recognition of the Company's critical and vital role in the community, stc's Corporate Communications team, led by Danah Al-Jasem, with the presence of Hadeel Al-Abdullah, Ahmed Al-Shayji and Ahmed Al-Nowaibet, visited the MOI headquarters to distribute the infection preventative items.

Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, said, "In line with our commitment to our society and the social responsibility framework under our "Stay Safe" campaign, we launched a series of humanitarian activities aimed at mitigating the risks impacting the residents of Kuwait during these unprecedented times. It is critical for the private sector to take a strong stand and continue its role in backing the Kuwaiti community, as well as the decisions taken by the country."

She said, "This initiative comes as an additional step in the range of activities launched by stc since the Coronavirus outbreak in support of the relentless efforts made by State officials to overcome current challenges. It goes without saying that stc and other members of the private sector, will continuously support the Kuwaiti society and government institutions during both challenging and prosperous times."

In relation to actions taken by stc during the pandemic, Jasem added, "To better serve its customers, stc upgraded its digital channels to offer



an array of products and services to new and existing customers from the comfort of their homes. stc's online platforms also allow customers to seamlessly execute transactions related to their accounts online and hassle free. Considering the conditions the country is going through, the Company launched a series of online exclusive offers to enrich the customers' experience at home, whether it be online gaming, working remotely from home or enjoying free services to fulfill their entertainment needs."

Jasem thanked the frontline heroes, including ranking officials and police officers at the Ministry of Interior for placing their lives on the line to serve and protect the residents of Kuwait. Even though curfew restrictions have been lifted, their critical role in preserving the health and safety measures in Kuwait does not go unnoticed.

Colonel Abdulillah Abdulrazzaq Al-Abdulsalam, Assistant Director General of the General Administration of Security Relations and Media in the Ministry of Interior, praised the efforts made by stc to provide a helping hand during the Coronavirus pandemic, extending his appreciation to the Company's employees for this kind gesture.

Abdulsalam added, "The Ministry of Interior acknowledges and highly values the cooperation placed forth by companies and civil society institutions. Through this belief, this collaboration was formed by stc to distribute sanitizer stands in the Ministry of Interior building to be used by both visitors and employees."

It is worth mentioning that stc launched several internal and community-based activities in the past period, including distributing face masks and hand sanitizers to several key areas around Kuwait. This comes in addition to the awareness campaigns carried out on the Company's social media platforms. stc also distributed 5,000 vouchers to returning citizens and at Ambulance Centers to front-liners during the Company's field visits to welcome back citizens and as a token of appreciation to paramedics. The initiatives were held under the framework of stc's "Stay Safe" campaign, also including the distribution of 25,000 free prepaid lines to travelers returning to Kuwait.



Danah Al-Jasem

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Niger stages historic elections despite jihadist bloody attacks

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Catholics and evangelicals unite against Argentina's abortion bill



NEW DELHI: A man sits in front of a mural representing a frontline warrior of the COVID-19, painted on a wall along the roadside yesterday. — AFP

World rocked by COVID, Trump, BLM

Brexit, Hong Kong clampdown, Beirut blast cast a long pall over 2020

PARIS: The COVID-19 pandemic cast a long pall over 2020 but it also saw President Donald Trump beaten by Joe Biden in a tumultuous US election and the Black Lives Matter movement shake the world. Here are some of the key events of the year:

Rampaging virus

On January 11, less than two weeks after it alerts a cluster of pneumonia cases "of unknown cause", Beijing announces its first death from an illness which will become known as COVID-19. By March a pandemic has been declared and a month later half of humanity is in lockdown as governments scramble to halt its spread. Massive state aid programs are rolled out to save jobs as the International Monetary Fund predicts recession, with the global economy shrinking by 4.4 percent. In November, drug companies announce positive results for several vaccines as a second wave of cases lashes the planet. Within a month, the first shots are being given but by Christmas some 1.7 million people are dead, with the US the worst hit.

Iranian roulette

The world holds its breath after top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani is killed in a US drone strike in Iraq on January 3, days after pro-Iranian protesters storm the US embassy in Baghdad. Iran retaliates by launching a volley of missiles at bases in Iraq housing US troops. The same day, it shoots down a Ukrainian passenger plane "in error" shortly after take off from Tehran, killing all 176 people on board. Tensions mount again at the end of November when top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh is assassinated, with Tehran blaming Israel.

Brexit endgame

Britain becomes the first country to leave the European Union on January 31 following its 2016 Brexit referendum. But crucial talks on future ties and trade with the bloc drag on for months, breaking deadline after deadline as negotiators try to avert a hard Brexit before a last-gasp deal on

Christmas Eve. While British Prime Minister Boris Johnson claims victory, Scotland's anti-Brexit leader Nicola Sturgeon says its future is "an independent, European nation".

US-Taleban accord

The US and the Taleban sign a deal in Doha on February 29, with all foreign forces to quit Afghanistan by May 2021 after nearly two decades of war. Talks between the Afghan government and insurgents start in September, but fighting rages on as the Taleban launch attack after attack and a string of civil society figures are assassinated. The Pentagon is due to pull 2,000 of 4,500 US soldiers out of the country by January 15, 2021.

George Floyd killed

The killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American, by white police officers on May 25 in Minneapolis sparks protests across the US and inspires anti-racism rallies across the world. The Black Lives Matter movement leads to a major debate about race and the toppling of statues of figures linked to slavery or colonization.

Hong Kong clampdown

In June, a year after a massive wave of demonstrations, China imposes a sweeping new security law on Hong Kong that opponents say undermines the semi-autonomous city's liberties, promised under its handover from Britain in 1997. Pro-democracy lawmakers are ousted, harassed and arrested. In December, three prominent Hong Kong activists are jailed including Joshua Wong.

Thais rise up

Students spark pro-democracy protests in July that roll on for the rest of the year calling for a new constitution, reform of the untouchable monarchy, and for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha to resign.

Beirut blast

A massive explosion on August 4 destroys

much of Beirut's port and devastates swathes of the capital, killing more than 200 and injuring at least 6,500. The blast from a vast stockpile of ammonium nitrate fertilizer devastates an already teetering Lebanese economy and the credibility of its governing elite.

Fires and hurricanes

Enormous bushfires rage across Australia in what becomes known as its "Black Summer" while in September San Francisco and other regions of the American West Coast wake to orange skies as the state's largest ever inferno breaks out. In November, two hurricanes devastate Central America, leaving more than 200 dead.

The Navalny affair

Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny is flown to Berlin in a medically induced coma after becoming violently ill after he boarded an internal flight to Moscow. Tests reveal he was poisoned with the Soviet-era nerve agent Novichok. Navalny accuses Russian President Vladimir Putin of trying to kill him and later releases a recording where he appears to trick the alleged agent responsible into telling him the poison was put in his underpants.

Crisis in Belarus

Belarus strongman President Alexander Lukashenko's disputed victory in August 9 elections sparks four months of anti-government protests, centred on his main rival, political novice Svetlana Tikhonovskaya. Opposition leaders are jailed or driven into exile.

Israel's new friends

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain normalize ties with Israel on September 15 as Palestinians condemn the move as a "stab in the back". The next month Donald Trump announces that Sudan is joining them, while in November unconfirmed reports of a secret trip to Saudi Arabia by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu sparks speculation that the kingdom is set to follow. In another twist, Morocco "resumed relations" with Israel on December 10 in return for the US recognizing its claim to Western Sahara.

China-US tensions

2020 sees US-China relations nosedive, with Trump calling COVID-19 the "China virus" and saying Beijing is responsible for "a mass world-wide killing". They also clash over the repression of Turkic speaking Uighur minority in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, as well as the national security law imposed on Hong Kong.

Biden beats Trump

Deeply-divided Americans vote in record numbers in the November presidential election between outgoing Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden. After four days of nail biting, Biden takes the White House by seven million votes. Trump cries fraud without evidence and has yet to concede defeat.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Heavy fighting for the Armenian-populated region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which broke away from Azerbaijan after a war in the 1990s, goes on for 45 days. Several thousand die before a Kremlin-brokered peace deal on November 9, with Armenians losing swathes of territory to Azerbaijan forces.

Ethiopia: Tigray conflict

Ethiopian Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Abiy Ahmed orders a military response to attacks on federal army camps in the dissident northern Tigray region. The Tigray People's Liberation Front - which has dominated Ethiopian politics for nearly three decades - denies responsibility and says the reported attacks are a pretext for an "invasion". Federal forces take the Tigrayan capital on November 28. — AFP

Iran says US wants vaccine payments to go via its banks

TEHRAN: President Hassan Rouhani said Saturday that Washington was demanding Iranian transactions for novel coronavirus vaccines pass through US banks, and expressed fear the money could be seized. US President Donald Trump has imposed wave after wave of sanctions on the Islamic republic since 2018, when he unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal. Iran has assets frozen in several countries, including in the US. "We want to transfer money from a country

where our money is" to buy the vaccine and "this country has accepted", Rouhani said during a meeting of Iran's coronavirus task force, without identifying the country in question.

In theory, medicines are exempt from the sanctions, but in reality, international banks tend to turn down transactions involving Iran to avoid being exposed to potential litigation. The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control had initially indicated that "it didn't have a problem" with such a transfer of funds, he said. But "it said later that the money had to first pass through a US bank before being transferred" for the vaccine purchase, Rouhani said.

In April, the Iranian president said the country had won a legal "victory" over \$1.6 billion of its assets that had long been frozen on a US request in Luxembourg. "Who can trust people like you?

You have stolen our money everywhere you found it," Rouhani said Saturday, addressing the US administration. The Islamic republic has been battling the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of the novel coronavirus since February, with almost 1,195,000 cases and over 54,500 deaths, according to official figures.

Health Minister Saeed Namaki said early this month that Iran had "pre-purchased" about 16.8 million vaccine doses "via COVAX", without specifying which vaccine. COVAX is an international initiative that aims to ensure equitable access to coronavirus vaccines for all countries. The vaccine purchase "could be more costly and be delayed, but it will certainly happen", Rouhani said Saturday. Iran has also called for volunteers for the start of clinical trials for its own vaccine, which it began to develop in the spring, the health ministry said. — AFP



TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani chairs the weekly coronavirus taskforce meeting on Saturday. — AFP

International

Catholics and evangelicals unite against Argentina's abortion bill

Catholic Church wielding more political than religious clout

BUENOS AIRES: At the entrance to Argentina's Congress is a plaque reminding legislators that Our Lady of Lujan is the patron saint of the country's political parties - a not-so-subtle nod to religion in a nation considering whether to allow abortions. As Argentina's Senate prepares to vote on a bill that would legalize the practice, the Catholic Church has joined forces with evangelical Christians to fight the measure tooth and nail.

The bill, which aims to legalize voluntary abortions at up to 14 weeks, was passed by the Chamber of Deputies on December 11 and will be debated and voted on in the Senate on Tuesday. Two years ago a similar bill passed the lower house but was defeated in the Senate following a determined campaign by both Catholics and evangelicals.

Argentina's constitution guarantees freedom of religion and a 1994 reform removed the requirement that the president be Catholic. However it retains a reference to God in its preamble and its second article guarantees government support for the Catholic Church. "The Catholic Church in Argentina has great sway. There's a very strong Catholic culture in the political world," sociologist Fortunato Mallimaci, who wrote a book on what he says is the myth of Argentine secularism, told AFP.

"Religious groups look for state support and the state, when it feels weak, looks for support from religious groups. Today the Catholic Church wields more political than religious clout," he said. Catholicism is a strong force in Argentina, the homeland of Pope Francis. The state pays a salary to archbishops and subsidizes Catholic schooling, which accounts for 36 percent of education in

Argentina, according to Mallimaci.

Francis stays silent

However, Catholicism has been losing influence as evangelical Christianity gains ground. According to a 2019 poll by a government agency, 62.0 percent of Argentines identify as Catholic, 18.9 percent as non-religious and 15.3 percent as evangelical. The Catholic Church's sway can be seen in Argentina's delay compared to other countries in adopting a number of laws: divorce was legalized only in 1987, sex education introduced in 2006, gay marriage approved in 2010 and a gender identity law passed in 2012. Abortion is currently only allowed in two cases: rape and a danger to the mother's life. "There is an opposition and huge rejection from the Catholic Church, which weighs heavily" on the chances of the law passing, constitutional lawyer Alfonso Santiago told AFP.

However, Santiago believes the relationship between the government of President Alberto

Fernandez, who sponsored the abortion bill, and the Catholic Church will remain strong regardless of which way the vote goes. "I don't think there will be a break in collaboration on other issues. It didn't happen before" when, for example, same-sex marriage was approved, he said.

While Francis has in the past likened abortion to hiring an assassin, he's remained silent over the current debate.

Protest strength

"The problem for the Catholic Church if abortion is legalized is that it will be up to it, and not the



BUENOS AIRES: Demonstrators celebrate with green headscarves - the symbol of abortion rights activists - outside the Argentine Congress on Dec 11, 2020, after legislators passed a bill to legalize abortion. —AFP

state, to ensure that its faithful comply with a prohibition that will be only religious," said Mallimaci. A 2020 government poll found that 22.3 percent of Catholics in Argentina believe that a woman should have the right to an abortion if she wants one. Meanwhile 55.7 percent said it should be permitted only in certain situations while just 17.2 percent supported a blanket ban. Since 2018, evangelicals have come to the fore in protesting legalization.

"They have the momentum of the reborn," said Mallimaci, pointing to the light blue handkerchiefs

brandished by evangelicals at their protests, as a counterweight to the green ones sported by abortion rights activists. "Catholics don't mobilize in that way." Despite their constant growth, evangelical churches in Argentina "don't have the same political weight as in other countries, such as Brazil where they can count on a parliamentary bloc." Their strength, however, lies in street protests and they will be out in force Tuesday in front of Congress, face-to-face with abortion rights demonstrators.—AFP

With Biden, Britain's Brexiteers lose their cheerleader

WASHINGTON: Promoters of Britain's divorce from the European Union had said they would revitalize bonds with the United States, where President Donald Trump, with his shared disdain for multinational bodies, seemed the perfect partner. Come January, Britain both definitively leaves the 27-nation bloc and will deal with a new US president, Joe Biden, who prioritizes the EU and shares none of the Brexiteers' romanticism about going it alone. Biden, an Irish-American who will be the second Catholic president, had already warned Prime Minister Boris Johnson not to jeopardize peace in Northern Ireland by erecting a hard border between the British-ruled province and EU member Ireland.

Even as trade talks dragged on, Britain reached a deal with Brussels on special arrangements for Northern Ireland - a sign to observers that Biden's election had already made an impact. "It was recognized in London that if you messed up the Northern Irish border, it would have been absolutely poisonous for the US-UK relationship," said Jacob Kirkegaard, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

Johnson's Conservative government has emphasized issues on which it enjoys common ground with Biden, including fighting climate change, and announced a historic boost in military spending. Kirkegaard said Britain was hoping to punch above its weight as a strategic security partner of the United States, especially at a time of high tension with China, but said Biden could find similar capabilities in the much larger EU, where France is a major military player. "Brexit Britain has made itself nice to have but no longer strictly necessary to have onboard for the US," he said.

'I'm Irish'

Biden is surrounded by Barack Obama's former aides who have not forgotten Johnson's 2016 quip, in line with thinking on the US far-right, that the then US president had an "ancestral dislike" of Britain because of his "part-Kenyan" heritage. While the racial undertones differ markedly, Biden has himself said, at least partly in jest, that his Irish ancestry soured him on Britain.

In footage that went viral after his election, Biden is seen walking on as a BBC journalist tries to ask him a question, responding, "The BBC? I'm Irish!" before flashing a friendly smile. "Clearly I think there is a sense among some people in Biden's orbit that Brexit was a completely misguided policy and Prime Minister Johnson has been too close to Trump and therefore there's a need to downplay this relationship a little bit," said Erik Brattberg, director of the Europe program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. —AFP

Blocking pandemic relief: Biden warns of 'consequences'

WASHINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden warned Saturday of "devastating consequences" if

AstraZeneca COVID vaccine has 'winning formula'

LONDON: The COVID-19 vaccine developed by the British drugs group AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford has achieved a "winning formula" for efficacy, the company's chief executive said yesterday. The vaccine, currently being evaluated by Britain's independent medicines regulator, provides "100 percent protection" against severe COVID disease requiring hospitalization, Pascal Soriot said in an interview with the Sunday Times newspaper.

He added he believes trials will show his firm has achieved a vaccine efficacy equal to Pfizer-BioNTech at 95 percent and Moderna at 94.5 percent. "We think we have figured out the winning formula and how to get efficacy that, after two doses, is up there with everybody else," the chief executive said, while saying only that data would be published at "some point". The UK government announced on December 23 that the developers of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine had submitted their data to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

Approval is expected to be granted to roll out the jab on Jan 4. The Sunday Telegraph newspaper reported. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was the first coronavirus shot to be authorized for use by the UK's independent medicines regulator and has been given to 600,000 of the country's most vulnerable people since last month. Earlier trials had shown varying outcomes in the AstraZeneca shot's efficacy. The vaccine initially showed an average 70 percent effectiveness but that

Fly south or roost? 'Snowbirds' weigh Florida pandemic

MONTREAL: Birds of a feather normally flock together, but the pandemic has divided Canada's "snowbird" warm weather migrants into two camps: those staying home this winter and those heading to Florida no matter the cost. Nearly a million Canadians make the annual pilgrimage, fleeing to the southern United States to pass what would otherwise be gray and snowy months with their toes tucked in the sand and ocean breeze in their hair. The coronavirus has led a majority to forgo the trip this year - but for those flouting Canada's repeated calls to stay put, the price tag on winter at the beach has skyrocketed.

With the land border between the US and Canada closed for non-essential travel since March, Canada has implored its citizens to stay home.

President Donald Trump continues to delay signing a COVID-19 economic relief bill passed by Congress. Biden spoke out as millions of Americans saw their jobless benefits expire after Trump threw a long-awaited pandemic aid package into doubt - demanding lawmakers more than triple the \$600 direct payments to US taxpayers.

"This abdication of responsibility has devastating consequences. Today, about 10 million Americans will lose unemployment insurance bene-

level jumped to 90 percent depending on dosage.

'Storm' over data

Behind this average figure from large-scale trials in the UK and Brazil was a 62 percent effectiveness for those who were vaccinated with two full doses of the shot. For volunteers who received a half-dose first and then a full dose one month later, however, the vaccine was found to have 90 percent efficacy. Soriot said he was "surprised" by the initial findings. "We would have preferred a simpler set of results," he added. The lack of clarity and transparency over the discrepancy in the results was widely criticised. Soriot said he had not expected the pushback that followed. "We assumed people would be a bit disappointed, that's for sure," he said. "But we didn't expect that storm".

Great hopes have been placed in the AstraZeneca shot, originally based on a weakened version of a chimpanzee virus, because of its low cost. AstraZeneca's vaccine also enjoys a logistical advantage over the Pfizer-BioNTech alternative, as it can be stored, transported and handled at normal refrigerated conditions of between two and eight degrees Celsius (36-46 Fahrenheit) for at least six months. That is a far cry from the -70C needed for Pfizer/BioNTech's offering and could allow use of the existing refrigerated supply chain to cut costs.

'Light at the end of the tunnel'

In a vote of confidence for its homegrown vaccine, the bulk of Britain's requirements are expected to be met by the jab. The government has ordered 100 million doses, with 40 million doses scheduled to be available by the end of March. UK officials will hope that confidence is rewarded, not least because the country has been one of the countries most affected by the pandemic with more than 70,000 deaths.



A surge in cases has hit nationwide over the past week, falling especially on the southeast of England and blamed on a new strain of the virus believed to be more infectious, which was first identified in the UK. According to one British study the strain is 50 percent to 74 percent more contagious. In an effort to contain the spread of the disease, millions across Britain were placed under tougher lockdown restrictions that came into force on 26 December.

Dozens of countries have also imposed travel restrictions on the UK to stop the spread of the new strain. Writing in the Mail on Sunday newspaper, Finance Minister Rishi Sunak acknowledged it had been "a tough year for everyone in this country". However, he added that "the early roll-out of vaccines - and the incredible work of our scientists and NHS - means we can now see light at the end of the tunnel". Nearly 200 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine will be made before the end of the year, the UK drug manufacturer has said, and more than 700 million globally by the end of March next year. —AFP



MONTREAL: People make their way to St-Hubert airport to drop off their motor home to be driven across the border by a commercial company on Dec 18, 2020. —AFP

His clients board a plane in the Montreal suburbs and arrive 12 minutes later in Plattsburgh, New York, where a KMC employee meets them with their vehicle, transported across the border. The experience does not come cheap: Each

plane ticket costs Can\$500 (around \$390) and hauling the vehicle 55 miles (90 kilometers) across the border sets customers back \$1,000. Around 2,000 people have so far used the service, according to Couturier.—AFP

fits," Biden said in a statement. The stimulus measure is wrapped up with a \$1.4 trillion funding bill, without which the government will be forced to shut down at midnight Monday. "In just a few days, government funding will expire, putting vital services and paychecks for military personnel at risk," Biden added.

"In less than a week, a moratorium on evictions expires, putting millions at risk of being forced from their homes over the holidays." In a video late

Tuesday, Trump, who is due to leave office in less than a month, called the \$900 million bill "a disgrace" - despite it being passed Monday with a large bipartisan majority after months of negotiation. The legislation was designed to throw a lifeline to businesses and people struggling to keep their heads above water. But in a pre-recorded statement made in the White House, Trump said he would refuse to accept the bill without changes increasing the checks to taxpayers to \$2,000. —AFP

International

Niger stages historic elections despite jihadist bloody attacks

Poll could seal a first peaceful handover between elected presidents

NIAMEY: Voters went to the polls in Niger yesterday for an election that could seal a first peaceful handover between elected presidents, against the backdrop of a bloody jihadist insurgency. The West African country, unstable since gaining independence from France 60 years ago, is ranked the world's poorest country according to the UN's Human Development Index. Around 7.4 million people are registered to vote for the ballot for presidency, which coincides with legislative elections.

"I expect the Nigerian president to put security, health, progress and democracy first," Aboubakar Saleh, a 37-year-old launderer, told AFP in Niamey without revealing who he voted for. Issaka Soumana, a 52-year-old lorry driver, said he wanted change. "Niger is not moving forward. Our country must rise," he said, brandishing his thumb stained with ink to show he had cast his ballot. President Mahamadou Issoufou, who was elected in 2011 after the country's last coup in 2010, is voluntarily stepping down after two five-year terms.

"It is a special day for Niger which will experience for the first time in its history a democratic transition," Issoufou said after voting at the city hall in Niamey. The frontrunner in the 30-strong field is his designated successor, Mohamed Bazoum, 60, a for-

mer interior and foreign minister. "It is a great pride that this date of December 27 has been respected," Bazoum said after voting. Bazoum's main rival, former prime minister Hama Amadou, was barred from contesting the vote on the grounds that in 2017 he was handed a 12-month jail term for baby trafficking—a charge he says was bogus.

Overshadowed by insecurity

Polling stations are scheduled to close at 7:00 pm but are instructed to close later in case of delays to ensure 11 hours of voting. Partial results for the presidential election are expected to be announced today with final counts on Wednesday or Thursday. A second round, if necessary, will be held on February 20. Campaigning has been overshadowed by insecurity—Niger is being battered

by jihadists on its southwestern border with Mali, and its southeastern frontier with Nigeria.

A jihadist insurgency that has spilt across borders in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger claimed some 4,000 lives last year from jihadist violence and ethnic bloodshed stirred by Islamists, according to the UN. In Niger itself, hundreds have died in the past five years, and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes. The economy, already fragile, has suffered devastating blows. Around 42 percent of Nigeriens



NIAMEY: Niger's outgoing president Mahamadou Issoufou casts his ballot at a polling station yesterday. — AFP

lived last year on under \$1.90 (1.56 euros) per day, according to the World Bank, while nearly a fifth of its surging population of 23 million relied on food aid.

Army deployed

On Monday, seven troops and 11 suspected jihadists died in an ambush in the southwestern region of Tillabéri, the government said on Thursday. On December 12, 34 villagers were massacred in Toumour,

in the southeastern region of Diffa, on the eve of municipal and regional elections that had been repeatedly delayed because of poor security. The army has been massively deployed for yesterday's vote, the authorities say. "Sporadic attacks will not prevent the staging of the elections," a spokesman said on Thursday. The attack in Toumour triggered three days of national mourning, but the elections the following day went ahead smoothly, officials say. — AFP

CAR votes in polls marred by violence

BANGUI: Voters went to the polls yesterday in the Central African Republic (CAR) in presidential and legislative elections marred by the latest flare-up in a long-running civil war, with many voters unable to cast their ballots. Incumbent Faustin Archange Touadera is the frontrunner in polls that follow a week of turbulence marked by accusations of an attempted coup, rebels briefly seizing the fourth-largest town and Russia and Rwanda dispatching military personnel to help the beleaguered government.

UN peacekeepers and local and Rwandan soldiers were patrolling the streets of the capital yesterday with armored vehicles posted outside polling stations. Although some stations opened late in Bangui because of a lack of voting materials, senior election officials told AFP they would stay open later to make up for it. "It's very important for me to be here, as a citizen. I think this vote will change our country, whoever the president will be," teacher Hortense Reine said.

Sixteen candidates are vying for the presidency - Touadera's main rival is former prime minister Anicet Georges Dologuele. Polls are due to close at 5:00 pm with partial results expected on January 4 and the final totals on January 19. A runoff will be held on February 14 if there is no overall majority in the first round.

Threats against voters

Away from Bangui, sporadic fighting has been going on for nine days and scattered incidents were reported yesterday. In the northwest, more than 500 kilometers from the capital, rebels seized election materials in Kouï and officials received death threats in Ngaoundaye, according to a senior UN official. In some areas, rebels threatened anyone who went to vote. Meanwhile, thousands of people had not received their voter cards because of the dire security situation, according to local and UN



BANGUI: Voters wait as electoral commission officials check the voters roll at the Barthelemy Boganda high school polling station in the 4th district yesterday. — AFP

officials who all requested anonymity.

"How do we vote when we don't even have our voter cards," Robert, from Boali 80 kilometers north of Bangui told AFP by phone - explosions audible in the background. "Everyone is fleeing at the moment. I'm holed up at home." Ahead of the elections many of the 1,500 candidates contesting the 140 seats in the national assembly were unable to campaign. Former president Francois Bozize, who wanted to stand but was barred by judges because he is under UN sanctions, urged people not to vote and backed a rebel coalition. "Stay at home. Let Touadera place his ballot in the box alone," Bozize said in an audio message published online which his party confirmed to AFP.

Coup allegations

The government on December 19 accused Bozize of attempting a coup alongside armed groups advancing on the capital, a charge he denies. Fears about the rebels swept the city in the following days, although the UN peacekeeping force MINUSCA said their advance had been stopped. The rebel coalition on Wednesday announced a 72-hour "unilateral ceasefire" in the runup to the vote, only to call

it off on Friday saying it would resume its march on the capital. On Tuesday, the CAR's fourth-largest town, Bambari, 380 kilometers northeast of Bangui, was overrun but security forces backed by UN peacekeepers regained control the following day. Yesterday, polling stations in Bambari remained closed in the morning because of gunfire from armed groups, according to Jeannot Nguemendji, president of the local peace committee.

Legitimacy concerns

The mineral-rich but poverty-stricken CAR has been unstable since independence 60 years ago. Thousands of people have died since a civil war erupted in 2013 and more than a quarter of the population of 4.9 million have fled their homes. Of these, 675,000 are refugees in neighboring countries and cannot vote. Even though bloodshed has receded in intensity over the last two years, violence remains chronic. Militia groups hold sway over two-thirds of the territory. Experts and opposition figures have already asked what legitimacy the president and 140 MPs to be elected will have, given the obstacles to holding a free vote. — AFP

January 1973: Divided Britain joins Europe

PARIS: On January 1, 1973 Britain joined the European Economic Community in festive spirits following a decade of tough negotiations, though public opinion on membership was mixed. For around 10 days, as part of a "Fanfare for Europe" gala, 300 sports and cultural events were held nationwide showcasing the EEC countries.

Membership had increased from six to nine, with Denmark and Ireland also joining alongside Britain. The Conservative government's europhile prime minister Edward Heath described Britain's entry to the bloc as "very moving". Football players from the three new states played against a team of players from the six other countries. Italy loaned a Michaelangelo for an exhibition, the Netherlands provided a Rembrandt. Only the Louvre spoilt the fun by refusing to let the "Mona Lisa" leave Paris. Here is a look back at AFP's reporting from the time.

Hastings and Waterloo

On the eve of the big day, the British press devote their front pages to the event. A chapter of a thousand years of history is closing, says The Sunday Times. The Sunday Telegraph predicts joining would prove as decisive for British history as the Battles of Hastings or Waterloo. "The Daily Mail above all warns its readers against the use of inappropriate common parlance that could shock the citizens of the eight other countries," writes AFP. Meanwhile

the most passionate advocates against joining the EEC organize their last stand on December 31. Five hundred people join a torchlit procession to the sound of bagpipes in front of the Palace of Westminster, the seat of the British parliament.

Stink bombs

Festivities get under way on January 2 at a "European" dinner with 258 attendees hosted by the British Council at Hampton Court Palace, the former royal residence. The next day Heath, Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Philip attend the first gala evening, an opera at Covent Garden in London, where they are met by stink bombs thrown by 200 protesters. Public opinion is "hesitant and (...) remains - polls say - deeply divided" over joining, AFP reports. The decision to join had been taken in 1972 by a vote in parliament and it was never put to a referendum, unlike in Denmark and Ireland.

'A fool's paradise'

AFP's reporter Basile Tesselin heads to a London pub to test the mood. "We have our own government, a parliament we elect," a print worker tells him. "We do not want to be led by who knows what from Brussels. Everything we have is better than what you have." "I'm wary of you, I see you coming," says a taxi driver from Scotland.

"You suck up to us, and then once we're in your sacred trap, your fool's paradise, you'll make us fall out with our real friends, the Americans, the Canadians, the Australians. And you'll all become communists and take us down with you." The list of recriminations grows: fears that VAT (Value Added Tax) will increase, that the weight of trucks will



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures as he holds a remote press conference to update the nation on the post-Brexit trade agreement at 10 Downing Street on Dec 24, 2020. — AFP

become an issue, and on the free entry of Europeans. "I like going to Europe," says one truck driver from Scotland. "Particularly to France. I feel at home there. I don't trust the English."

The opposition Labor Party quickly makes clear its intention to renegotiate the accession treaty. Its leader Harold Wilson accuses the government of having "abdicated" its responsibilities to Brussels. In 1974, Labor returns to power and, after securing a renegotiation, organizes a referendum the following year on whether or not to remain in the EEC. The "Yes" vote wins by 67 percent. On June 23, 2016, 41 years later, Britons will vote by 52 percent to leave the European Union. Brexit plunges Britain into more than three years of crisis before its departure becomes reality on January 31, 2020. — AFP

News in brief

Three killed in Illinois shooting

WASHINGTON: Three people were killed and another three wounded Saturday in the US state of Illinois when a shooter opened fire at a bowling alley, police said. A suspect in his 30s was in police custody. Rockford city police urged people on Twitter to stay away from the area near the Don Carter Lanes bowling alley, as it was an "active situation" and officers were clearing the site. The force posted on Twitter shortly after midnight: "37-year-old white male suspect is in custody. There are no others being sought at this time." "It's still an ongoing investigation. We do have three individuals that are confirmed deceased," police chief Dan O'Shea earlier told a press conference near the scene of the shooting. He said three other people had been wounded from the gunfire and were being treated at local hospitals. He did not specify whether the shooter had a motive. — AFP

Syrian refugee camp set ablaze

BEIRUT: A Syrian refugee camp in northern Lebanon was set on fire Saturday night following a fight between members of the camp and a local Lebanese family, state media reported. The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, confirmed a large fire had broken out in a camp in the Miniye region and said some injured had been taken to hospital, but did not provide an exact number. "The fire has spread to all the tented shelters"—made of plastic sheeting and wood—UNHCR spokesman Khaled Kabbara said. The camp housed around 75 families, he said. The National News Agency reported that the fire followed an "altercation" between a member of a Lebanese family and "Syrian workers". — AFP

Jihadists snatch dozens of loggers

KANO: Boko Haram jihadists have seized around 40 loggers and killed three others in northeast Nigeria near the border with Cameroon, militia sources and residents told AFP on Saturday. The hostages were rounded up by the insurgents on Thursday in Wulgo forest near the town of Gamboru where they went to collect firewood, the sources said. The jihadists have increasingly targeted loggers and farmers in the northeast, accusing them of passing information to the military and local militias. "A group of more than 40 loggers left Shihuri on the outskirts of Gamboru on Thursday and never returned by evening as usual," said militia leader Umar Kachalla, who was involved in the search. — AFP

4 killed in army copter crash

ISLAMABAD: A military helicopter has crashed in mountainous northern Pakistan, killing four soldiers including the two pilots, the army said. The chopper crashed Saturday in the Gilgit-Baltistan region "due to technical reasons" while transporting the body of a soldier to the military hospital in Skardu, it said in a statement. Pakistan has a chequered military and civilian aviation safety record, with frequent plane and helicopter crashes over the years. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) came under heavy scrutiny this year after one of its planes came down among houses in Karachi, killing 98 people. In August 2015, 12 people were killed when an army chopper crashed in the northwest. — AFP

MONDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2020

Business

Boursa Kuwait gets CMA nod to revamp its Premier Market's promotion requirements

New initiative will help increase listed companies on 'Premier Market'

KUWAIT: After the success of the "Premier Market", which is considered the ideal destination for investors for what it offers in terms of transparency and liquidity, Boursa Kuwait has received approval from the Capital Markets Authority to restructure its promotion requirements for its "Premier Market". The new parameters are expected to raise transparency and increase the issuer base in the "Premier Market" by potentially increasing the number of mid to large sized companies in it, all of which will reflect positively on the development of the Kuwaiti capital market and benefit its investors.

Companies listed in the "Premier Market" are required to maintain an average market capitalization greater than or equal to 78 million Kuwaiti dinars as a minimum, which is the median market capitalization of all companies listed on the exchange. This filter was developed by Boursa Kuwait, with the cooperation of the Capital Markets Authority, and will be updated whenever listed companies' market caps undergo considerable changes. Additionally, the requirement of a price to par ratio will be waived as per the new filters. Furthermore, a condition that the company has not faced any disciplinary sanctions, which could be related to the suspension of trading of its securities,

the suspension or revocation of its license, or the dismissal of all or some of the members of the board of directors or the CEO, during the two years prior to the annual review was added.

The new filters will be implemented starting from the annual review set to take place in January of next year, with the results announced on the second Sunday of January and taking effect on the second Sunday of February. The Capital Markets Authority Commissioners' Council also approved a Boursa Kuwait initiative to suspend reclassification of listed companies from the "Premier Market" to the "Main Market" due to not meeting liquidity criteria for this year only.

The Capital Markets Authority has supported the restructuring of promotion requirements because it aims to develop the Kuwaiti capital market overall by raising transparency levels and allowing more companies to be promoted into Boursa Kuwait's flagship market, raising the market's ability to attract local and foreign investors. The "Premier Market's" requirements and obligations, which include bilingual (Arabic and English) disclosures, the establishment of an investor relations department as well as quarterly analyst conferences, have made it the premier investment destination for investors from all classes since the market was seg-

mented around two years ago. With that in mind, Boursa Kuwait wants to increase the issuer base of that market and entice companies from the "Main Market", who fit the new criteria and want to attract the local and international investment community, to be promoted to the "Premier Market". It should be emphasized that a listed company eligible for promotion to the "Premier Market" must officially accept its promotion to the "Premier Market". Otherwise, it can opt to stay in the "Main Market".

It is worth noting that most investment products are more effective when there is more trading and liquidity on a particular stock and that most mid to large companies that enjoy high liquidity levels and continuous communication with their investors usually attract local and international institutional investors on a bigger scale.

Boursa Kuwait aims to entice more investors to the Kuwaiti capital market through its series of Corporate Days, showcasing some of its standout listed companies and the investment opportunities that reside in the Kuwaiti capital market. Putting these companies in touch with some of the world's leading investment firms and financial institutions, the events aim to highlight these companies' financial health and business strategies and outlooks helping investors gain an in-depth understanding of



بورصة الكويت
BOURSA KUWAIT

the benefits and opportunities of investing in Kuwaiti companies.

Boursa Kuwait is working to develop a strong and efficient financial market with liquidity and transparency, that can effectively put issuers and investors in touch with one other for investment opportunities and high returns on investment to create a developed capital market that is a pioneer in the region.



Fisherman Joe Paratore (left) displaying his catch of western rock lobster aboard his boat to customers at the Fishing Boat Harbour that features a bronze statue of a lobster fisherman in Fremantle in Western Australia. — AFP

Australian lobster sector claws back trade after China ban

FREMANTLE, Australia: Even in the scorching Australian summer sun, long queues of customers snake around Fremantle harbor—a soothing sight for beleaguered local fishermen trying to replace lost business with China. Australia's rock lobster exports are worth half a billion US dollars a year—and in normal times, 94 percent of them go to China.

But all that changed a few weeks ago, when Beijing imposed a near-total import ban on lobster, part of a broader politically charged "shadow trade war". "It has affected us drastically," third-generation fisherman Fedele Camarda told AFP. "Our income has been reduced considerably."

Relations between Canberra and Beijing have been in free-fall for most of this year, with China hitting out at a list of issues including Australia's call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 and a ban on Huawei's participation in the nation's 5G network. The row has seen more than a dozen Australian sectors hit with import levies, with the barley and wine industries particularly badly hit. Exporters stand to lose as much as US\$2-4 billion worth of sales.

So far, the broader Australian economy has weathered the storm. The economy returned to growth in the last quarter, exiting a COVID-induced recession.

But individual businesses have been forced to find new customers and markets overnight to avoid red ink, job cuts or bankruptcy.

Close to home

Some barley farmers have planted other grains or re-routed shipments to the Middle East, and winemakers have focused on selling more in Japan.

But the lobster industry is looking closer to home. In a bid to help the ravaged sector, local authorities recently changed legislation to allow commercial rock lobster fishers to sell large quantities from the back of their boats during December and January.

So far the Australian public has responded enthusiastically, offering a much-needed lifeline to Camarda and his fellow vendors. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, prices topped \$80 a kilogram (\$36 a pound) in Western Australia and usually

averaged around \$53 per kilo.

On one muggy pre-Christmas weekday, sweat-drenched customers bought the world-renowned western rock lobster direct on the quay for \$34 a kilogram—a 36 percent markdown. "That's just enough to break even," Camarda said. "But we have been selling out almost every day. We are taking pre-orders as people want it for Christmas."

Ensuring they were set up to manage orders and make the product available to the public had been "a crash course," he admitted. Such is the demand across Australia that some supermarkets have had to place limits on the number of lobsters customers can buy.

Nick Van Niekerk, a resident of nearby Mosman Park, was one of those braving the heat to stand in line for 30 minutes. "I came down to support the local fishermen and show that we as a community care," he said. "It's important to be able to get lobsters directly from the boats and know what you're actually getting."

"Lobsters are usually really expensive, so to get them at an affordable price I think is great for the local community."

The long haul

But everyone acknowledges back-of-the-boat sales are a short-term fix. In the longer term, Australia's fishermen are looking to get a higher price again in markets like Japan, the United States and Europe, and not just rely on one, politically fickle, customer. "China was willing to pay more and the whole market was essentially moved there," said Keith Pearce, the former president of the local Professional Fishermen's Association.

"The market needed to be diversified so you don't end up with the problem we have today," he added. Camarda is optimistic that the sector can pull through, despite the continued uncertainty.

His grandfather began dropping craypots in Fremantle in 1912 having come from Italy four years earlier, and he hopes that tradition can continue. "My family has been in the industry for generations but this is the sort of thing we have to endure from time to time," he said. —AFP

British business breathes easy after no-deal Brexit averted

LONDON: Business breathed a sigh of relief after London and Brussels announced a post-Brexit trade deal, but called for greater clarity over services, and for the move to a new regime as smooth as possible. "This will come as a huge relief to British business at a time when resilience is at an all-time low," said Tony Danker, director general of employers' body the Confederation of British Industry.

He added: "With a deal secured we can begin our new chapter on firmer ground."

Britain has been one of the world's worst affected by the coronavirus pandemic, plunging its economy into a historic recession and slowing growth. The government expects a contraction of more than 11 percent in 2020 before rebounding to 5.5 percent next year.

New variants of the virus, which could spread more rapidly, have led to further stay-at-home orders across swathes of southern and southeast England, forcing already struggling businesses to close.

Devil in the detail

Britain's departure from the EU single market could see it lose the equivalent of 4.9 percent of GDP over 15 years, according to government estimates in 2018. A feared "no-deal" would have compounded that, given it would have meant World Trade Organization rules, with high customs duties, quotas and tariffs, on top of extra paperwork for business.

Gregory McDonald, who runs a plastic manufacturing firm, Goodfish, in central England, said Brexit had already cost him £500,000 and forced him to cut 20 jobs. "I'm expecting tariffs will not be significant if at all but we're outside the customs union so there will be more paperwork," he said.

"There will be problems at ports like we saw with France closing its

borders," he added. The devil of the deal will be in the detail, according to Danker, as the CBI and captains of industry prepared to scrutinize the reported 2,000 pages of the treaty. "Immediate guidance from government is required across all sectors," he added, pointing out that the end of the standstill transition period ends on December 31.

"Above all, we need urgent confirmation of grace periods to smooth the cliff edge on everything from data to rules of origin and we need to ensure we keep goods moving across borders." Mike Hawes, chief executive of car industry trade body the SMMT, agreed: "A phase-in period is critical to help businesses on both sides adapt and efforts should now be sustained to ensure seamless implementation, with tariff-free trade fully accessible and effective for all from day one."

The car industry is one of the most exposed to Brexit given its reliance on "just in time" supply chain of components and parts from Europe and across the world. Britain's car manufacturers export most of their vehicles to the EU, and has faced warnings of factory closures if tariffs and quotas were imposed.

Many issues remain unresolved, notably the place of financial services, which represent 80 per cent of the British economy, as the newly inked deal focuses on trade in goods.

For the financial markets, an amicable divorce between the EU and the UK should result in smooth market continuity after four years of preparation. But from January 1, the UK financial sector and the City of London will lose its European "passport", a device allowing financial products and services to be sold from the UK in the EU. The City is now worried about negotiating an "equivalence" regime, which would make the rules compatible to keep trade in certain services flowing smoothly. —AFP



Fisherman Joe Paratore displaying his catch of the day to his customers at the Fishing Boat Harbor that features a bronze statue of a lobster fisherman in Fremantle in Western Australia. —AFP



In this picture, flags of the European Union can be seen fluttering outside the European commission headquarters in Brussels. —AFP

Business

Taiba Hospital reaccredited by Joint Commission International

JCIA reaffirms Taiba's standards of excellence in healthcare for fourth term in a row

KUWAIT: Taiba Hospital announced yesterday that it is awarded the Joint Commission International Accreditation (JCIA) for the fourth term in a row, reaffirming its standards of excellence in healthcare and continued investment in its medical services at par with international levels of quality in the field. Taiba Hospital was first accredited by JCI in 2010 and has successfully maintained this accreditation throughout the past decade.

JCI is the recognized global leader in Healthcare Accreditation, measuring the quality of care provided, safety of patients, management and the approach in providing a streamlined medical service. JCI provide an independent, objective assessment of quality achievement, patient care and safety in a hospital setup.

Taiba Hospital Chief Executive Officer, Eng. Lama Al-Fadala, said: "JCI has been a supporting force in this journey towards excellence. I am proud to be part of a relentless team of Caregivers putting our patients first and ensuring

our patients receive the best of our healthy operations." Al-Fadala added: "Our resilient Caregivers efficiently conducted the virtual survey, following a cycle of local and International governance, delivering best practices and standards, to continue to align our policies and procedures with data driven decision making.

Chief Quality Officer at Taiba Hospital, Dr Aysha John, who has led the hospital during the last four JCI surveys said, "This sustained achievement is the result of hard work and the consistent endeavor of our caregivers and a visionary management. She congratulated the entire workforce in completing a decade as a JCI Accredited hospital". The Orthopedic department of Taiba Hospital also got recertified by JCI for a second term as Center of Excellence in "Total Knee Replacement and Lumbar Decompression and Fixation", recognizing the highest quality of care ensured by the Orthopedic Department, headed by Dr Waleed Altnaib and Dr Huthayfah Bin Nekhi.



Dr Aysha said' the hospital achieved an overall compliance rate of 98 percent in JCI Hospital standards survey and specially thanked Dr Jamil A J Qaddoumi, Medical Director and Carlo A Perino, CNO and the entire workforce of Taiba Hospital for maintaining such high standards even during this difficult phase of COVID-19 pandemic. She concluded saying, "JCI Accreditation is a journey and not a destination. In that journey, Taiba Hospital will continue to deliver quality care and excellence to our patients and plans to maintain all it's recognitions including 'JCI Accreditation', 'CAP Accreditation', 'Baby Friendly Hospital Award' and will strive for center of excellence programs in other specialties as well in the next decade.



Trucker, fisherman, scientist... the voices of Brexit

LONDON: Britain left the EU on January 31, 2020, but ties between the bloc and its former member remained unchanged during a so-called transition period while both sides tried to work out a new trading relationship. With that standstill period coming to an end on December 31, the realities of Brexit will arguably become tangible for both Britons and their counterparts on mainland Europe for the first time. AFP has spoken to six people whose lives will be directly affected by Britain's departure from the EU, the single market and the customs union.

Dimitar Velinov, lorry driver

A truck driver with many years of experience under his belt, Bulgarian Dimitar Velinov, 74, says he is expecting long queues at the UK border from January 1. "To me, Brexit means logistical chaos, which will hinder our work," he explains in the garage of his employer Eurospeed, based in the outskirts of Sofia which employs more than 300 drivers. "I transport goods across the European Union and for me it is important to be able to do my job without problems, without having to wait at borders for one or two days," Velinov says.

Crossing the Channel was already difficult as for years migrants have tried to stow away illegally in lorries heading to Britain. But Brexit will make it even more so, the driver says, complaining that he gets no sleep at all while waiting to embark from the French port of Calais to avoid heavy fines for those found carrying stowaways.

Sam Crow, fisherman

"We want to leave, 90 percent of fishermen want to leave," says 26-year-old Sam Crow from Scarborough in the north of England. "I still do feel like we are left in the dark a lot for what we do. The fish that we land and the scallops and the shrimps, all that is the freshest food on this planet and we're not praised enough for what we do," he says. Crow, who principally catches crab in the North Sea for export to Europe and China, says he has been heartened to see UK politicians fighting for the fishing sector in negotiations. As talks came down to the wire, European access to UK waters was a key sticking point. "I've heard that they've been fighting for our quotas and obviously I am grateful for that," he says.

The fisherman feels the UK fishing industry will be given a new lease of life following changes

expected to quotas that came with EU membership. Fishing communities, like Scarborough where Crow's family have fished for generations, have been in decline for decades. They hope Brexit will bring about a regeneration of their way of life.

"Back in the day the harbor was full of people to welcome in the lads and help out," Crow says. "It's just not like that now. Nobody's interested."

Greg McDonald, entrepreneur

"Brexit was never good news for the British economy," Greg McDonald the chief executive of Goodfish, a small company that produces plastic parts for the automotive, medical and electronics industries, tells AFP. "I closed a factory in March because our American customer closed their operation in the UK," he says. McDonald's company is located in the heart of England's Midlands in Cannock, not far from Birmingham. It is also highly dependent on the EU and exports a large part of its output to the bloc.

"It's probably cost us half a million pounds (548,000 euros, \$668,000) and 20 jobs" out of a total workforce of 110, he says. The entrepreneur slams Brexit as a "political project driven by nationalist and populist governments" and questions whether those who had voted in favor of leaving will ever benefit from it. McDonald says he had hoped for "minimum tariffs or no tariffs" when Britain left the EU and he complains of "more paperwork" and likely "problems at ports" after December 31.

Pascal Aussignac, restaurateur

"I have become a British citizen, but the company to which I have dedicated two decades of my life is no longer safe here and I am afraid of the future," says Pascal Aussignac, a French chef who has lived in London for 22 years and co-owns six premises, including a Michelin-starred restaurant and a cocktail bar. "2021 could turn out to be worse than 2020. Are we going to survive? That's the big question," he says. Over the course of the year, he has already suffered the shock of the coronavirus pandemic and was forced to close for months.

He is also already feeling the effects of Brexit, which has already sparked a drain on the European employees needed in kitchens and restaurants. British people don't work in the hospitality sector," Aussignac says. The ability to continue to source the local produce from France on which he has built his reputation remains uncertain. "I have no idea how long it will take to deliver" after January 1, he says.

Neuroscientist Tara Spire-Jones, from the University of Edinburgh, is concerned about international collaboration between laboratories, which she says was "very easy" with membership of the European Union. "The changes of regulation, if it diverges from the EU, will be more difficult to

talks, and the deal sees EU fishing vessels steadily give up part of current quotas.

"Fishermen and wholesalers will be able to benefit from a flat-rate aid of up to 30,000 euros depending on their dependence on products caught in British waters," the French fisheries ministry said in a statement.

"The government will soon present its complete plan to support French fishermen," Minister Annick Girardin said. The plan provides for compensation over a limited period for part of the turnover losses of companies dependent on British waters.

Other measures include investment aid under a recovery plan and "fleet exit plan" will be available

government spokesman Katsunobu Kato told a regular briefing. Japan, which is a signatory to the Paris climate deal, has been seen as reluctant to reduce its reliance on fossil fuel, despite its self-professed pride as a nation of energy-saving technologies.

The country was the sixth-biggest contributor to global greenhouse emissions in 2017, according to the International Energy Agency. The world's third largest economy still relies heavily on coal and liquefied natural gas, with most of its nuclear reactors offline since the 2011 Fukushima disaster.

Japan expects demand for electricity to surge 30-50 percent by 2050, but the nation's conservative ruling party has so far stayed lukewarm about renewable energy, though Suga has shifted the tone in recent weeks. Under the plans to boost renewables, officials are placing a new focus on offshore wind generation, with the goal of producing up to 45 gigawatts within the coming decades.

Japan also wants to use nuclear and thermal power plants with carbon capture technology to



As talks came down to the wire, European access to UK waters was a key sticking point.

share things like brain tissues and living cells," says the academic who is also the director of the British Dementia Research Institute.

"From day one, we will have more difficulties with ordering things, such as equipment," she cautions. The researcher explains the end of the Brexit transition period will pose a "big problem" for British research funding, which is heavily subsidized by the EU. "In our university, something between 20 and 30 percent of our research funding is coming from Europe," she says, noting there were no plans to replace this funding at the moment. Though "no one will be fired on day one because of Brexit," some of the contracts of the 10 people she employs will not be renewable. "It's a real threat," she says, warning there would also be an inevitable brain drain as European students stay away from Britain.

Wendy Williams, homeowner in Greece

Wendy Williams, a 62-year-old Briton, says she feels her "EU citizenship was stolen" by the Brexit vote. As of January 1, she and her husband will not be able to travel as freely as before to their house on the Greek island of Kefalonia, bought in 2018 with all their savings, in anticipation of a retirement in the sun. Unless they have a residence permit or a long-term visa, British citizens will now only be able to visit the European Union for a total of 90 days over a six-month period.

"We will have to calculate the days, and include any days spent elsewhere in the EU," she says. "We had planned to spend longer periods in Greece," Williams says, but now they will only be able to spend a quarter of their time there. While she continues to work in the UK, where her elderly father is also based, Williams said she will not embark on the process of obtaining a two-year visa for her family, a process she describes as "complicated" and "expensive". —AFP

for vessels dependent on British waters that want to stop activity.

Britain had insisted it wanted to take back full control of its waters while EU coastal states sought guarantees their fleets could keep fishing in UK waters.

The two sides reached a compromise that will see European boats gradually relinquish 25 percent of their current quotas during a five-and-a-half year transition period.

After that there will be annual negotiations on the amount of fish EU vessels can take from British waters—and if Brussels is not satisfied it can impose economic measures against the UK. —AFP

cover 30-40 percent of the nation's electricity demand.

Ammonia and hydrogen technologies are expected to fulfil about 10 percent of the nation's power needs. By the mid-2030s, the government also wants to end the sale of new passenger vehicles that are solely powered by gasoline.

Japan plans to replace them with hybrids, electric cars and cars fitted with fuel-cell engines, while bringing down the cost of batteries for those vehicles. But while officials say the new plan is ambitious, some critics believe it falls short. Mika Ohbayashi, director of the Renewable Energy Institute, said the figures were "a poor starting point for discussions and (showed) a lack of ambition."

Japan should aim for renewable energy to cover 50-60 percent of national electricity needs by 2030, rather than wait until 2050, the think tank said. The institution also voiced its skepticism about whether carbon capture technology will become widely available in the coming decades—an assumption made by Japan as well as other nations in their carbon-neutral plans. —AFP

European businesses hopeful of China-EU investment deal

BEIJING: European businesses in China are hopeful of an EU-China investment deal by end of the year, the head of the European Chamber of Commerce in China said on Saturday, although Beijing has declined to commit to a deadline.

The China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment has been in the works for seven years, and is expected to pave the way for European businesses to invest in financial services, telecommunications, electric vehicles and other sectors that are gradually being opened up for foreign investment in China. But the deal is facing opposition from some European members of parliament and the incoming US administration of President-elect Joe Biden, who say it does not address concerns about the use of forced labor by Chinese manufacturers, especially in the restive north-western region of Xinjiang.

"The next few days will be interesting. My sense is that there is a serious push to get this past the finishing line," Joerg Wuttke, head of the European Chamber of Commerce in China, told AFP.

"It's not a perfect deal, far from it, but it's a big step forward." China's commerce ministry has refrained from committing to a year-end deadline and appears prepared for an extension of discussions. "In order to preserve its security and development interests, China will conduct the negotiations at its own pace and strive to reach a comprehensive, balanced and ambitious investment agreement with the EU," it said in a statement late Thursday.

"The China-EU investment agreement is aimed at providing more investment opportunities and sound institutional guarantees for the two sides, but to reach it requires joint efforts and to meet each other halfway," it added.

In an interview with Le Monde on Wednesday, France's junior trade minister Franck Riester said Beijing needed to address the issue of forced labor if Paris was to agree to the deal. Human rights organizations have raised concerns about labor practices in Xinjiang where Uighurs and members of other Muslim-minority ethnic groups have reportedly been forced to pick cotton under a coercive state-run scheme. Beijing rejects the accusations.

Other critics of the deal say it might undermine Biden's efforts to mend bridges with European allies, following Donald Trump's divisive tenure. "There is nothing in the agreement that would be at the disadvantage of the US," Wuttke insisted.

But Biden's camp has been nervous about Brussels moving closer to Beijing.

Jake Sullivan, who has been tipped as National Security Advisor, tweeted on Tuesday that: "The Biden-Harris administration would welcome early consultations with our European partners on our common concerns about China's economic practices."

The investment deal aims to create an equal playing field for European businesses in China that have long complained about preferential terms enjoyed by domestic firms.

The treaty will also strengthen intellectual property protections for European companies and ban forced technology transfers. —AFP



TOKYO: Japan unveiled plans to boost renewable energy, phase out gasoline-powered cars and reduce battery costs as part of a bid to reach an ambitious 2050 carbon-neutral goal.

France offers fishermen aid after trade deal

PARIS: The French government announced measures to support fishermen and fishmongers, including up to 30,000 euros in individual aid, after the European Union and the UK reached a post-Brexit trade agreement. Access to Britain's rich fishing waters was a major sticking point in the post-Brexit

Japan unveils green growth plan for 2050 carbon-neutral goal

TOKYO: Japan unveiled plans to boost renewable energy, phase out gasoline-powered cars and reduce battery costs as part of a bid to reach an ambitious 2050 carbon-neutral goal.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced the new 2050 goal in November, significantly moving up Japan's timeline for carbon-neutrality. On Friday, his government laid out for the first time what meeting that target will involve, including setting a provisional goal of generating more than half of the country's electricity from renewable sources by 2050.

"The government's actions on the environment reflect our belief that a significant change of mindset is required and that these are not constraints for growth, rather they are drivers of growth," top

Business

Markaz wins three awards at 'Mideast Banking Awards 2020'

Markaz was named 'Best Asset Manager in Kuwait' and 'Best Local Investment Bank'

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz" was recently recognized among the leading investment and asset management institutions across the region with three awards from the EMEA Finance magazine's 'Middle East Banking Awards 2020'. Reinforcing its market leadership, Markaz was named the 'Best Asset Manager in Kuwait' and the 'Best Local Investment Bank' for the eighth consecutive year. The company also won the 'Corporate Social Responsibility Award - Middle East' from the prestigious regional awards.

The reputable awards reflect Markaz's continuing success and solid performance in the asset management and investment banking business despite the prevailing challenges in the global economy triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. Markaz has maintained its strong track record in delivering returns to its clients and consolidated its position in the local and regional market. The awards considered various performance and structural factors such as market share, innovative products, growth in important product classes, and corporate strategy. The organizer commended the winners' many impressive initiatives that focused on supporting clients, communities, and the public sector.

Abdullatif W Al-Nusif, Managing Director, Wealth Management and Business Development at Markaz commented: "The year 2020 has been a positive year for Markaz where our investment products yielded solid performance, despite the

global health crisis and the resulting uncertainties. The pandemic-induced situation provided us with an opportunity to prove that we are resilient and well-positioned to weather severe challenges, and the awards from EMEA Finance further reinforced this reputation. We are delighted to have received the 'Best Asset Manager in Kuwait' award for the eighth year in a row in a compelling testimony to the robustness and success of our growing portfolio of high-performing solutions for sustainable wealth creation. I would like to thank our colleagues for delivering excellent performance with their hard work and their commitment to follow prudent risk management policies in the rapidly changing investment environment."

He added: "Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on investors' appetite and market confidence globally, our comprehensive range of investment banking services has experienced strong demand. Our mandated transactions, which are underpinned by excellent execution capabilities, extensive research, and industry expertise, generated long-term value for our clients. The winning of the 'Best Local Investment Bank' award for the eighth consecutive year represents an acclaimed recognition of our unique offerings and uncompromising commitment to service excellence."

Commenting on the winning of the Corporate Social Responsibility Award - Middle East, Al-Nusif said: "As an organization that thrives on core

values, Markaz places corporate social responsibility at the heart of our operations. Amidst the unprecedented circumstances in both local and international markets, we have remained steadfast in our commitment to working towards the betterment of the communities where we operate. We are proud that our many initiatives have created a meaningful impact on the beneficiaries that include our people, society, and the state of Kuwait. We are greatly encouraged by the award to further our endeavors focused on driving sustainable prosperity around the world."

In another major development, Markaz was named the 'Best Investment Bank in Kuwait' for the ninth time at Global Finance's 'World's Best Investment Banks 2020' awards. The magazine said the top performers "stand out for their ability to maintain and even strengthen their market positions in volatile environments." The criteria used to select the winners included market share, number and size of deals, service and advice, structuring capabilities, distribution network, efforts to address market conditions, innovation, pricing, after-market perform-



Abdullatif W Al-Nusif



ance of underwritings, and market reputation.

Established in 1974, Kuwait Financial Centre K.P.S.C "Markaz" is one of the leading asset management and investment banking institutions in the MENA region with total assets under management of over KD 1.03 billion as of 30 September 2020 (\$3.37 billion). Markaz was listed on the Boursa Kuwait in 1997.

Britain, EU release text of post-Brexit trade agreement

LONDON: Britain and the European Union on Saturday published the full text of the post-Brexit trade agreement aimed at governing their relationship when the UK definitively leaves the bloc's single market in just five days. The document, which is more than 1,200 pages long, lays out detail on trade, law enforcement and dispute settlement among other arrangements after the UK leaves the single market and customs union on 31 December.

Despite the complexity of the document, which includes explanatory notes and side agreements on nuclear cooperation and the exchange of classified information, both sides have indicated they will rush through the adoption.

However, with fishing rights one of the final sticking points in the negotiations, a UK fishing industry body condemned the deal as "paltry". David Frost, the UK's chief negotiator, told reporters on Saturday the deal was "one of the biggest and broadest agreements ever covering not just trading goods, but services, aviation, road transport, Social Security, health cooperation, law enforcement".

"This should be the beginning of a moment of national renewal for us," Frost said, reiterating that the agreement allowed Britain to leave the single market and the customs union without aligning to the EU and the European Court of Justice.

UK 'compromises'

As he tweeted out the 1,246-word agreement, which had been announced on Thursday after fraught negotiations that went right down to the wire, Frost's EU counterpart Michel Barnier called the accord: "The result of many months of intensive and dedicated work." In the foreword to the copy of the text published by the UK government, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the agreement had been "carefully judged to benefit everyone" and preserve "free trade for millions of people in the United Kingdom and across Europe".

"While we made our fair share of compromises during the negotiations, we never wavered from the goal of restoring national sovereignty," he wrote. Senior UK government minister Michael Gove wrote in The Times newspaper that the deal would allow Britain to bring "innovation and investment to parts of the country that have endured economic decline". He added there were still "significant changes" to be prepared for by businesses in the short term.

'Sacrifice fishing'

But Britain's fishing industry has expressed bitter disappointment, saying a five-year transition period when EU fleets will have free access to fish in UK waters, including up to six miles off the shoreline, was "pathetic". "In the end it was clear that Boris Johnson wanted an overall trade deal and was willing to sacrifice fishing," said Barrie Deas, chief executive of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organizations.

A senior member of the UK's negotiating team conceded it would have been better to get to the end of the new fisheries transition period "a bit faster", but added "at the end of the transition, it returns to normal arrangements, and we have full control over our waters".

Britain's parliament has been recalled to sit on December 30 so they can ratify the deal. A vote in favor is virtually assured after the UK's main opposition Labor Party said its MPs would back it. In a bid to unify his own Conservatives around the deal, Johnson has insisted the accord will stand up to scrutiny by the European Research Group, a core group Eurosceptic lawmakers in his party. —AFP

'Christmas present'? Britons in two minds about Brexit deal

BOSTON, UK: After months of fraught negotiations between the European Union and the UK, Britons welcomed "Christmas present" Brexit deal with relief and some skepticism. David Ashby, a 62-year-old from the town of Boston on the east coast of England, called it "a nice Christmas present for the country", saying it was good "just to get it all finished and tied up and done with".

"I think it's dragged on for too long now," he added. Andy Finch, who also lives in the Lincolnshire market town which voted by a higher margin than anywhere else in the UK to leave the EU, sounded a pessimistic note.

"I don't think it was a good idea in the first place. I still don't think it's a good idea. But that's where we are. And, well, we'll just have to see," Finch said. Paul Skinner, leader of Boston Borough Council, also questioned the thinking behind leaving the European Union.

"At the end of the day, what we do need to be doing is working with our partners, whether it's the council next door, or the countries next door, it works better if we work together. So that's the way I see it," he said. In London the news of the deal was also met with relief.

"It would've been a disaster if there would've been no deal, so very pleased that there is," Shane O'Neill said.

Move on

O'Neill added he would have preferred for Britain to remain in the European Union but that

Pound jumps after Brexit trade deal

NEW YORK: The pound jumped, while European stock markets were little changed, as Britain and the European Union reached a trade deal after months of talks on the terms of commerce in the aftermath of Brexit.

Sterling advanced against both the dollar and euro, while both London and Paris ended little changed. Frankfurt was closed, while Wall Street ended its own holiday-shortened session modestly higher despite continued uncertainty over a massive US stimulus package.

Traders in London said early gains were capped by rising fears over a new strain of the coronavirus that has forced the UK to impose tougher regional lockdowns across the nation. The pound was the main focus of attention as Britain and the European Union hammered out the final details on an agreement that ensures that Britain will not now face EU tariffs on cross-Channel commerce.

Spain ruling coalition divided over four-day work week

MADRID: Spain's coalition government is deeply split over a proposal to shorten the work week to four days to fight high unemployment sparked by the coronavirus pandemic. The measure is being pushed by far-left party Podemos, the junior partner in Socialist

Under the agreement, EU Commission president Ursula Von der Leyen said that although the UK would become a "third country," it would be a trusted partner. The agreement became possible after the two sides reached a compromise over fishing as both sides haggled over the access EU fishermen will get to Britain's waters after the end of the year.

Economists expect both economies, already weakened by the coronavirus epidemic, to take a hit as supply chains are disrupted and costs mount. Despite this, the threat of a return to tariffs will have been removed, and relations between the former partners will rest on a surer footing.

While the post-Brexit talks moved towards resolution a giant US stimulus package remained frozen in place following last-minute criticism from President Donald Trump.

Congressional Republicans blocked a Democratic-backed effort to lift one-time stimulus payments from \$600 to \$2,000 after Trump called for the change and hinted he would veto the bill without improvements. Investors have shrugged off the latest curveball on the stimulus after months of stalled negotiations in Capitol Hill, viewing the



LONDON: A worker loads hay into an automated bedding machine on David Exwood's farm near Horsham, south west of London. —AFP

ultimately "now the debate is over and we need to move on".

Student Harry Vincent said it was a "relief" to have a deal but questioned whether it would have been better to remain in the EU. He said the compromises that had been necessary to strike a deal "sort of made me wonder whether it was worth it to begin with it all".

Hugh Rowlands also said the Brexit deal was like a "big Christmas present".

The student added that was especially the case after "Christmas was cancelled" following the reintroduction of coronavirus restrictions across much of the country to curb the spread of the disease.

In the Scottish capital of Edinburgh, which voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European

Union, Sharmila Hutchinson, a bank employee, said she hadn't supported Brexit and was "gutted to not be part of Europe anymore". "It does make me nervous to think how I'm going to visit the European cities and friends," the 35-year-old said. Henry Gray, a charity worker, said Brexit had brought him to think Scotland should become an independent country.

"I think we could be led better from Scotland. It would be nice to feel we would be part of the EU still," he said. Lewis Summers, a 25-year-old property developer, was pleased the whole thing was over.

"I'm happy that it's eventually over the line," he said. "There's been a bit of uncertainty but hopefully we can just move on and get things done now." —AFP



NEW YORK: In this file photo, the Wall Street sign at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) is seen in New York City. —AFP

back-and-forth as dealing the bill a delay rather than a mortal blow. "These are cantankerous political matters, yet the market isn't overly bothered by them because, in its mind, it's a matter of when, not if, a stimulus deal will be passed," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

About 14 million jobless workers will lose their pandemic unemployment benefits right after Christmas if the bill

is not enacted, and millions more face losing their home when an eviction moratorium expires at the end of the year. Recent data have shown worrying signs that the world's largest economy is faltering after the sharp rebound in the third quarter fueled by the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act that Congress approved in late March, just as the pandemic restrictions were taking hold. —AFP

working world," added Labor Minister Yolanda Diaz, also from Podemos, on Twitter.

The proposal comes as the New Zealand branch of Unilever earlier this month began a trial of a four-day work week for its staff in the country. Germany's powerful IG Metall union has also floated the idea.

But in Spain the idea has been met with reluctance from the Socialists, the dominant party in Spain's first coalition government since its return to democracy in the late 1970s. Budget Minister Maria Jesus Montero said the government "must not lose focus" from its main priority, which is "to return to the growth rates which we had at the start of the pandemic". —AFP

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's minority government which has ruled the eurozone's fourth largest economy since January. Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, announced earlier this month that the labor ministry was looking into reducing work hours, saying this "could without a doubt favor the creation of employment".

He was responding during a TV interview to the proposal made by a far-left lawmaker that called for the work week to be reduced to 32 hours from the current 40 hours.

"Work time requires a new concept which dares to challenge, as we do, the laws and customs of the

Classifieds

Monday, December 28, 2020



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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Rather cold and Partly cloudy to cloudy with light to moderate freshening at times over costal areas north westerly wind with speed of 12 - 42 km/h with a chance for scattered light rain.

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

WEATHER WARNING			No Current Warnings	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.	SFC. CHART 27/12/2020 0000 UTC	
KUWAIT CITY	17 °C	11 °C		
KUWAIT AIRPORT	17 °C	09 °C		
ABDALY	17 °C	05 °C		
BUBYAN	16 °C	06 °C		
JAHRA	17 °C	09 °C		
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C		
SALMIYAH	16 °C	12 °C		
AHMADI	- °C	- °C		
NUWAISIB	16 °C	08 °C		
WAFRA	17 °C	06 °C		
SALMY	16 °C	04 °C		

4 DAYS FORECAST					
DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.	
Monday	12/28	Rather cold with a chance for scattered rain	18 °C	10 °C	NW-VRB 10 - 32 km/h
Tuesday	12/29	Rather cold and Partly cloudy to cloudy	18 °C	09 °C	NW-VRB 08 - 30 km/h
Wednesday	12/30	Fair and Partly cloudy	20 °C	11 °C	NW-VRB 08 - 28 km/h
Thursday	12/31	Rather cold and Partly cloudy with a chance for scattered rain	19 °C	10 °C	VRB-NE 08 - 28 km/h

PRAYER TIMES	
Fajr	05:16
Sunrise	06:41
Zuhr	11:49
Asr	14:39
Sunset	16:57
Isha	18:20

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT	
MAX. Temp.	16 °C
MIN. Temp.	07 °C
MAX. RH	62 %
MIN. RH	18 %
MAX. Wind	N 39 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, **HUSEIN** AKBER SAJJAD HUSEN KOTHAMBAWALA, Passport No. N7016963 hereby change my name to **HUSSAIN** AKBAR KOTHAMBAWALA in all my dealings and documents. My new & correct name shall be First Name: **HUSSAIN**, Middle Name (Father's Name): **AKBAR**, Surname: **KOTHAMBAWALA**.

(C 5827) 28-12-2020

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

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MOAT

MONARCHY

NOBLEWOMAN

PRINCE

PRINCESS

QUEEN

ROYALTY

RULER

SLIPPER

THRONE

TIARA

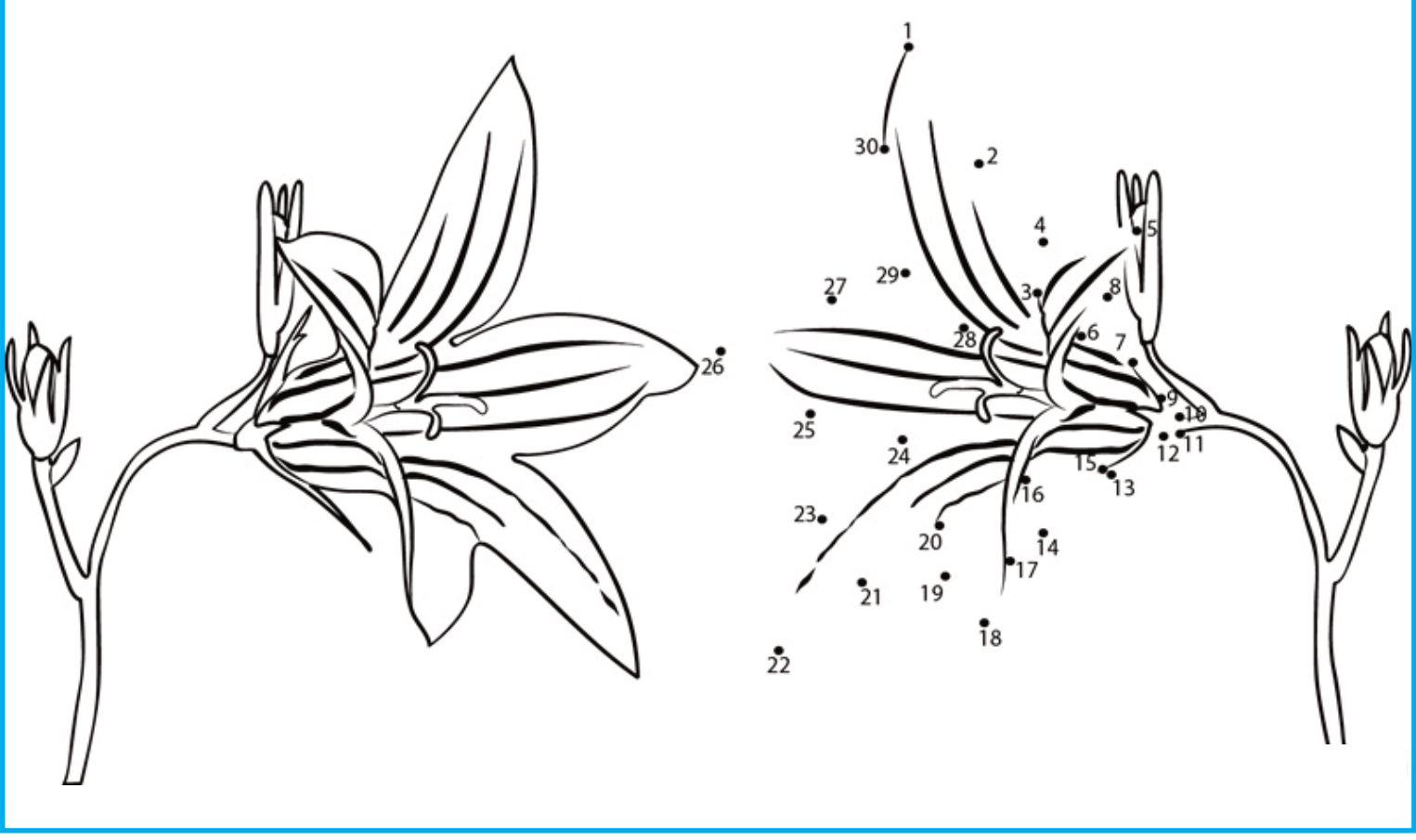
TOWER

UNICORN

WAND

WEALTHY

Join the Dots



STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

Today you may get the opportunity to feel proud of yourself. But don't let things get too out of hand. It isn't often that you allow yourself this little bit of narcissism. Everything you say will be pertinent, and people will let you know. For once, the stars are giving you the opportunity to cater to your own ego, so take advantage of it!



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

You tend to want to explain everything that goes on around you, Cancer. You rationalize everything in an instant, and group all your experiences into great theories. But you've been very quiet for quite some time now. It's as if something is keeping you from speaking. Today you will get a few words in, so don't worry.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

You're often like a Zen master who doesn't say anything to pupils for months, until the day the pupils begin to not believe any more and find themselves growing indifferent to the whole thing. Then the master pronounces one or two phrases that are so incredibly true that no one knows what to say! You could be that Zen master today.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Are you going to be available to other people today? Someone in your entourage may need to confide in you. If the superficiality of the exchange bothers you, you will understand what the atmosphere of today is all about! Yes, you're available, but not for just anything. You're in no mood to waste time at the moment.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Today you may be overcome by a current of humanist thought, Taurus. Your consciousness is traveling, and you probably couldn't care less about the details of the events going on around you. You're freethinking, which is inspired by your spirit of fairness. You may even be in a situation where you have to act as a kind of "enlightened" referee, which you will only be too happy to do!



Leo (July 23-August 22)

As a Leo, you don't really like to talk about things. Talking just isn't one of your specialties. Everyone has his/her own role, and yours is to take action and create, not talk about doing it. However, the planetary positions today might make you utter a few very deep words. Come on! Tell us a little something about how you feel deep inside!



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

It's time to take some time out of your busy day for your personal life, Scorpio. One of your family members or friends may need to talk to you, and you need to listen attentively to what they have to say. You need to use all your wonderful energy to get down to the heart of the matter. Who knows? You may discover some hidden treasures along the way.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

You may come in contact with someone today with whom you enjoy a highly emotional exchange. You may even fall in love! Be very attentive to your moods and everything going on inside you, Aquarius. They will be particularly strong, and they will help you understand what is changing in you. Just be careful to distinguish your feelings from those of your (future?) partner.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Even if you're a good judge of character, Gemini, the people who know you say that you base your opinions on your personal feelings, which often affect your good judgment. Today your critics are wrong, and your judgments are as precise and objective as they can possibly be. They may even help you out of a sticky situation.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Scientists seem to live in a world apart from the rest of us, Virgo, and from the events in everyday life, because they're so absorbed in other realities. This is a lot like your universe. If you were a scientist, you might do what they sometimes do - make parallels, like those learned men who apply their scientific reasoning to events in the world by analogy. Tell us your theories!



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Today is a good day to clarify your life, Sagittarius. You may have understood lately that it's useless to undertake anything new when you're confused. You've figured out that all it takes to get out of that state is to take care of yourself, eat better, get more sleep, or take a vacation. Your mind will be sufficiently rested today to deal with all the problems that come your way.



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

It's possible that you're having some ups and downs in your love life at the moment. Someone may be asking you to play another role than you're used to playing in your relationship. Today, Pisces, you should take the time to think about these pressures on you. You're going to need the answers to these questions over the next few months.

Lifestyle | Features

Virtual idols take to the real-life stage in China



This handout photograph released by the Beijing Mizhi Tech company, shows fans watching projections of members of the virtual girl band And2girls on a screen at an event in Shanghai. —AFP photos



This photo shows pillows and a shopping bag featuring images of idols of the virtual girl band And2girls at the apartment of fan Liu Jun in Beijing.

Liu Jun has long been a fan of a Chinese star called Amy, a teenage pop singer with red hair whose autobiography he treasures—and who only exists in the digital world. On Saturday “Amy” won a breakthrough virtual talent show in China, where computer-generated entertainers perform in front of real-life judges and tens of millions of online viewers. “You can’t see what they are like in real life, so you can have more fantasies about them,” said 28-year-old Liu, who has attended more than ten of Amy’s concerts and fan events in recent years. “The virtual idol is indestructible—as long as the image is still there, she can stay in your heart forever,” he added.

Amy found fame on “Dimension Nova”, which claims to be the world’s first talent show bringing together digital performers to dance and sing in front of three-real-life-celebrity judges. But Liu has followed Amy’s

career from the start and said he cried when he saw her on the talent show, feeling the performer would finally get the bigger platform she deserved. At one of Amy’s fan events, Liu and other fans talked with her through a two-meter high screen, and a printer attached to the screen gave him her “signature”. Although the virtual idol concept originated in Japan, these digital avatars are now stealing airtime in China, where they appear on TV shows, billboards and even news programs. They now command growing fanbases—research from iQiyi estimates an audience of 390 million nationwide. “The idea of making this talent show is to let everyone know that virtual idols can show up in our real world now,” the show’s executive producer Liu Jiachao told AFP.

Making stars

The virtual stars in the show are creat-

ed by a mixture of computer animation and actors—Amy’s clothes, hairstyle and appearance are created by animators, before her human actor takes on everything else. Real-time motion capture and rendering technology mean as the human moves it is reflected by the on-screen idol. To prepare for Amy’s performances, the actor had to take extra dance training. But creators avoid all mention of the existence of the actor behind the idol. “Our logic is that every virtual idol has a real soul,” said Beijing Mizhi Tech chief executive Liu Yong, whose firm created Amy.

“They have their own personality, characteristics and preferences... they really exist in this world,” he told AFP. Instead of showing the actor, the show runs footage of animators anxiously waiting backstage, as if they were the performer’s family. “I see Amy as my daughter,” said 26-year-old

Xu Xingmei, the animator in charge of designing Amy’s expressions and motions. “When I saw Amy show up on the stage, I felt that my daughter had finally grown up.”

Technical bloopers

Amy belongs to a booming virtual idol industry that is expected to be worth 1.5 billion yuan (\$230 million) within the next two years, according to Beijing-based market researcher Newsjije. Video-sharing website Bilibili reported a 200 percent increase in viewing hours of its virtual idol live streaming channels in the first ten months of this year. Some experts worry that if too many companies pile in on the market the quality could suffer.

“If you really want to join (the industry), you need money, technology and perseverance,” said Cao Pu, chief executive of

Shanghai Henian Technology, which created one of China’s most successful virtual idols. Since virtual idols live and die through the strength of their technology, the risk of embarrassing technical failures is high. In one awkward show appearance, only Amy’s cap appeared onstage. Other performers have disintegrated mid-appearance after technical breakdowns—including one contestant who froze when he tried to teach the judges kung fu.

“It’s so embarrassing that I don’t think it’s fit for humans to watch,” complained one viewer on social media. But the show’s creators have batted away criticism. “Many viewers who have followed our show from the beginning will find that there has been a great improvement in our technology,” said Liu, the producer. “Controversy is inevitable when new things come out.” —AFP



A cutout of virtual idol Amy on the desk of an animator at the Beijing Mizhi Tech offices in Beijing.



An animator works on designs for virtual idol Amy at the Beijing Mizhi Tech offices in Beijing.



An animator works on hairstyles for a virtual idol at the Beijing Mizhi Tech offices in Beijing.



These pictures released by the Pompei Press Office shows a thermopolium, a sort of street “fast-food” counter in ancient Rome, that has been unearthed in Pompeii, decorated with polychrome motifs and in an exceptional state of preservation. —AFP photos

‘Fast-food’ bar frozen in Pompeii ash gives clues on Roman snacking habits

A 2,000-year-old fast-food stall unearthed from the ash of Pompeii has given researchers new clues about the snacking habits of the ancient Romans. The ornate snack bar counter, decorated with polychrome patterns and frozen by volcanic ash, was partially exhumed last year but archaeologists extended work on the site to reveal it in its full glory. Pompeii was buried in a sea of boiling lava when the volcano on nearby Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, killing between 2,000 and 15,000 people. Archaeologists continue to make discoveries there. The thermopolium—from the Greek “thermos” for hot and “poleo” to sell—at what was a busy intersection of Silver Wedding Street and Alley of Balconies, was the Roman era equivalent of a fast-food snack stall.

The team found duck bone fragments as well as the remains of pigs, goats, fish and snails in earthenware pots. Some of the ingredients had been cooked together like a Roman era paella. Crushed fava beans, used to modify the taste of wine, were found at the bottom of one jar. The counter appears to have been closed in a hurry and abandoned by its owners—perhaps as the first rumblings of the eruption were felt—Massimo Osanna, director general at the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, told Ansa news agency.

Witness to antiquity

Amphorae, a water tower and a fountain were found alongside human remains, including those of a man believed to have been aged around 50

and discovered near a child’s bed. “It is possible that someone, perhaps the oldest man, stayed behind and perished during the first phase of the eruption,” Osanna told Ansa news agency. The remains of another person were also found and could be an opportunist thief or someone fleeing the eruption who was “surprised by the burning vapours just as he had his hand on the lid of the pot that he had just opened”, added Osanna.

In the latest stage of their work, archaeologists uncovered a number of still life scenes, including depictions of animals believed to have been on the menu, notably mallard ducks and a rooster, for serving up with wine or hot beverages. Previously unearthed was a fresco bearing an image of a Nereid nymph riding a seahorse and gladiators in combat. “As well as bearing witness to daily life in Pompeii, the possibilities to analyse afforded by this thermopolium are exceptional because for the first time we have excavated a site in its entirety,” said Massimo Osanna, director general at the Archaeological Park of Pompeii.

The thermopolium was very popular in the Roman world. Pompeii alone had around 80. The massive site that spreads over 44 hectares (110 acres) is what remains of one of the richest cities in the Roman empire. Layers of ash buried many buildings and objects in a nearly pristine state, including curled-up corpses of victims. Pompeii is Italy’s second most visited site after the Colosseum in Rome and last year attracted around four million tourists.—AFP

Jackson’s Neverland ranch sold to US billionaire at discount

Michael Jackson’s former Neverland Ranch in California has sold to US billionaire Ron Burkle, his spokesman said Thursday, reportedly at a steeply discounted price of around \$22 million. The late “King of Pop” famously converted his sprawling, gated home into a fairytale-themed retreat—complete with toy railroad, Ferris wheel and orangutans—and penned some of his top hits on the ranch. But Neverland was also the infamous location where Jackson invited children to visit and sleep over, and where he was accused of molesting young boys. It was rebranded after Jackson’s 2009 death as Sycamore Valley Ranch. Burkle, a Montana-based businessman with investments ranging from supermarkets to the entertainment industry, purchased the ranch “as a land banking opportunity,” his spokesman told AFP.

The \$22 million price tag reported by the Wall Street Journal—and confirmed to AFP as roughly accurate, by a source familiar with the deal—would mark



This file photo shows an aerial view of singer Michael Jackson’s Neverland Valley Ranch in Santa Ynez, CA. —AFP

a dramatic decline from the ranch’s \$100 million asking price in 2015. That lofty fee, dubbed “optimistic” by realtors even at the time, was slashed to \$31 million last year, but the ranch still did not sell and was taken off the market. Burkle was flying in the region recently to scout a neighboring property as a possible new branch of his Soho

House private club network when he spotted the ranch and called its owner, according to the spokesman. Jackson reportedly paid \$19.5 million for the property in the 1980s. Thomas Barrack Jr.’s Colony Capital investment firm purchased the ranch from the heavily indebted singer for \$22.5 million the year before his death.

Burkle previously worked as an adviser for the singer on business matters, including resolving debts incurred by his lavish lifestyle in the years before his death. The 2,700-acre (1,100-hectare) estate located 40 miles (65 kilometers) from Santa Barbara features a main house with six bedrooms along with three guest houses, a four-acre lake with a waterfall, tennis courts, several barns and animal shelter facilities. Jackson’s ranch was raided in 2003 as part of a child molestation case against him and police at the time seized a large collection of pornography and images of nude children. Jackson was acquitted in the case in 2005. Last year, HBO documentary “Leaving Neverland” aired testimonies of two men who claim Jackson sexually abused them as children all over the ranch, including the attic, the master bedroom and the pool. The Jackson estate—which is suing HBO for \$100 million over a “posthumous character assassination”—denies all the allegations, as Jackson did in his lifetime. —AFP

US parents in bizarre ‘balloon boy’ hoax granted pardon

Two Colorado parents jailed for falsely claiming their six-year-old son Falcon had floated away in a homemade balloon shaped like a flying saucer have been granted pardons by the western US state’s governor. Richard and Mayumi Heene pleaded guilty in 2009 to the “balloon boy” hoax, which became a worldwide media sensation with millions watching live as the silver helium balloon drifted through the skies for 70 miles (110 kilometers). The October 2009 incident ended after five hours when the grounded balloon was found to be empty and Falcon emerged from a hiding place at the family home.

The husband and wife, accused by prosecutors of plotting to use the publicity to land a reality television series, were pardoned Wednesday by Governor Jared Polis. “It’s time to no longer let a permanent criminal record from the balloon boy saga follow and drag down the parents for the rest of their lives,” wrote Polis in a statement, saying the pair had “paid the price in the eyes of the pub-

lic.” Law enforcement’s suspicions were inflated when Falcon let slip in a CNN television interview that the entire episode had been done “for the show.” The hoax was seemingly confirmed within 48 hours of the interview, when Japanese-born Mayumi Heene reportedly broke down under police questioning. But the couple’s lawyer told AFP Thursday they only pleaded guilty to stop her from being deported, and had genuinely feared their son was aboard the balloon. “They regret not checking this all out more thoroughly, but it was a coerced guilty plea,” said David Lane. “And I think that also influenced the governor.” He added: “I can now finally say the balloon-acy has ended.”

Richard Heene, handed a 90-day sentence for trying to influence a public servant, now owns a small business and has contributed to his community “by researching and educating about extreme weather events,” wrote Polis. Mayumi Heene, sentenced to 20 days in jail for false reporting to authorities, has become a naturalized American citizen. The couple now live in



In this file photo Richard Heene and Mayumi Heene (left) walk out of Courtroom 3A after their sentencing hearing at the Larimer County Justice Center in Fort Collins, Colorado. —AFP

Florida. Falcon, now a teenager, went on to form a heavy metal band with his brothers, Ryo and Bradford, releasing a song titled “Balloon Boy, No Hoax” and an accompanying low-budget video featuring a mocked-up flying saucer. —AFP

From bean to bar, Haiti's cocoa wants international recognition



Sorting of cocoa beans according to their size and appearance is done in the workshops of Makaya Chocolat in Petionville, Haiti. —AFP photos



Final packaging, ready for sale is seen in Makaya Chocolat's shop in Petionville, Haiti.



Ralph Leroy makes a last adjustment before Santa Claus can be put on sale.



Preparation of a chocolate mousse by chocolate maker Ralph Leroy in the workshops of Makaya Chocolat.

Although small in the face of South America's giants, Haiti is slowly developing its cocoa industry, earning better incomes for thousands of farmers and refuting the stereotype that culinary art is the preserve of wealthy countries. Haiti's annual production of 5,000 tons of cocoa pales in comparison to the 70,000 tons produced per year by neighboring Dominican Republic, but the sector's development is recent in the island nation. Feccano, a federation of cocoa cooperatives in northern Haiti, became the first group to organize exchanges in 2001 by prioritizing farmers' profits.

"Before, there was the systematic destruction of cocoa trees because the market price wasn't interesting for farmers who preferred very short-cycle crops," said Guito Gilot, Feccano's commercial director. The cooperative now works with more than 4,000 farmers in northern Haiti. By fermenting its members' beans before export, Feccano has been able to target the market for fine and aromatic cocoa. "Feccano's customers pay for quality: they don't have the New York Stock Exchange as a reference," said Gilot.

Just-in-time collection

Smelling potential, Haiti's private sector finally began investing in the cocoa industry, which until then had been supported solely by non-governmental organizations and humanitarian efforts. By setting up its fermentation setter in 2014 in Acul-du-Nord, 15 kilometers (nine miles) from Haiti's second city Cap-Haitien, the company Produit des îles (PISA) entered the market. But the logistical challenges are many. "The producers we work with farm less than a hectare, often divided into

several plots whereas, in Latin America, a small producer already owns four or five hectares," explained Aline Etlicher, who developed the industry at PISA.

"We buy fresh cocoa, the same day as the harvest so the farmer no longer has the problems of drying and storing that they would have if they sold it to an intermediary," said the French agronomist. In recent months, this just-in-time bean collection from all sites has been more challenging because many roads were regularly blocked due to socio-political unrest. Maintaining organic and fair trade certifications for the cocoa is delicate, but the Haitian style has made its mark abroad. "Today there are bars sold in the United States that are called Acul-du-Nord," Etlicher said proudly.

"With our customers, we are part of the 'bean to bar' movement of chocolate makers who transform the cocoa bean into the chocolate bar," she said, adding that by cutting out the middleman, Haitian producers' revenues have doubled. And on the other end of the chain, bean processing remains local.

'Plant your cocoa'

For master chocolatier Ralph Leroy, making a rum ganache-Haitian, just like all the products he uses—was not an obvious choice. After years in Montreal, he returned home to Haiti as a haute-couture stylist. His shift to cocoa began when he made clothes out of chocolate for a culinary trade show. The training he then underwent for a year in Italy fueled his passion as much as his pride. "The first week, I think I was insulted when the professor said, 'Chocolate is made for Europe. You there, plant your cocoa, we buy the cocoa and do the work,'" he recalled. Today, Leroy runs the chocolate

company he founded in 2016, Makaya, and the edible sculptures that come out of his workshop are a huge sensation at parties. His company now has about 20 employees who share his passion.

"Even in cooking schools, we don't learn this. I learned everything here and I am very, very proud," said Duasmine Paul, 22, head of Makaya's laboratory. Echoes of car horns reach the ears of Makaya employees carefully sorting cocoa beans, a side effect of the chaotic traffic that paralyzes Haitian capital Port-au-Prince at the end of the year. From his workshop, where he also concocts chocolate-based cocktails, Leroy sees as sweet revenge the great marketing of his bars. "The greatest pleasure is when, before traveling, Haitians come here to buy a lot to offer abroad. It's become their pride. And also when Europeans come and buy all the stock... I tell myself that I am doing a good job," he says with a burst of laughter. —AFP



Preparation of hot chocolate drink is done in the workshops of Makaya Chocolat.



Sorting of cocoa beans according to their size and appearance is done in the workshops of Makaya Chocolat in Petionville, Haiti.



Preparation of a chocolate ganache with local rum by chocolate maker Ralph Leroy.



Ganache of espresso chocolate, prepared by chocolate maker Ralph Leroy in the workshops of Makaya Chocolat.



Snowshoes are the new toilet paper as French banned from slopes

Demand for snowshoes has skyrocketed since the French government effectively banned downhill skiing in an attempt to contain Covid-19, the world's biggest manufacturer of snowshoes reported on Thursday. TSL Sport Equipment, based in the Alpine city of Annecy, said it was selling double the usual number of snowshoes this winter, with demand on some days spiking to 10 times the seasonal normal. Snowshoes allow walkers to navigate snowy terrain much more easily than normal shoes, allowing holiday makers in winter sport resorts to venture into mountainous terrain for long hikes. The French government has ordered ski lifts closed until January, fearing that queues of skiers would promote the spreading of coronavirus, but allowed resorts to open—albeit with restaurants and cafes shut like everywhere in France. "We're seeing a similar phenomenon to toilet paper purchases in shops," said Philippe Gallay, the company's owner for 34 years, in reference to empty shelves in supermarkets during a lockdown in the spring when people hoarded toilet paper for fear of running out.

He said daily orders had doubled to around 2,000 pairs of snowshoes, with

peaks of 10,000 orders on some days since President Emmanuel Macron ordered lifts shut on November 24 as part of a range of anti-virus measures. Gallay said snowshoe walking had already become the second most-loved winter sport in France after downhill skiing, but had taken the crown this season. "People want to enjoy the mountains, but they can't ski, so they go out with snowshoes," Gallay said. TSL has doubled its staff to 100 this season to meet demand, many of whom are seasonal workers and ski coaches who need work while they wait for lifts to reopen. Nevertheless, the order backlog is currently around 45,000 shoes, Gallay said. In total, TSL expects to sell 200,000 snowshoes this year, translating into revenues of around 10 million euros (\$12 million). When announcing the ski lift ban, Macron warned that coronavirus risks made it "impossible" to allow winter sports to resume quickly, adding he hoped that restrictions could be lifted in January. France's 350 ski resorts have been up in arms over the decision, saying the weeks around Christmas and New Year are crucial for their survival as they account for up to a quarter of their annual revenues. —AFP

GoDaddy apologises for fake Christmas bonus email security test

US web company GoDaddy apologized Thursday after an email that promised employees a Christmas bonus in the midst of the economic crisis turned out to be a computer security test. "GoDaddy takes the security of our platform extremely seriously. We understand some employees were upset by the phishing attempt and felt it was insensitive, for which we have apologized," a spokesman for GoDaddy, the largest internet domain management company in the world, told AFP in a statement. "While the test mimicked real attempts in play today, we need to do better and be more sensitive to our employees," added the Arizona-based company.



In December, around 500 employees clicked on an email from the company offering a Christmas bonus of \$650 and asking them to fill out a form with their personal details. Two days later, a different message appeared in their inboxes. "You are receiving this email because you failed our recent phishing test," the email from GoDaddy's security chief read, according to Arizona's Copper Courier newspaper. The technique of phishing, widely used by computer hackers, sees emails pretending to be a person known to the intended target, with the objective of obtaining information to infiltrate their computer systems. The test email sparked uproar on social media as millions of Americans have been hit hard by the economic crisis linked to the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

Secret Santa delights Canadians with lavish gifts

A mystery anonymous Santa Claus sent gift cards worth Can\$250 with poems to several hundred residents of a neighborhood in western Canada, reports said Saturday. "Woke up to find this on my step with a very large gift card. It appears my whole neighborhood got one," Edmonton resident Leigh-Ann MacNaughton said on Facebook alongside a picture of a three-verse composition about hope and solidarity. "I have been crying all morning." Around 400 similar envelopes were dropped on December 24, and each contained a Can\$250 Walmart voucher, residents told local media. Elisha Tennant, who lost her job during the pandemic, also welled up when she opened one of the mystery packages. "It was just very

heartwarming and touching that someone would do that," she said Friday, according to CBC. "To have something like this, I mean, that's a month of groceries for us."

The poem offered soothing words about the possibility of a better year after months of hardship caused by the coronavirus pandemic and a mounting worldwide death toll. CBC reached out to an email listed at the bottom of the note, which was signed "Secret Santa." "I decided to do it because I know that lots of people have had a really tough year and I had the means to help out," the apparent benefactor replied. "I hope the gifts gave people a sense that the world is good and there is a brighter future not far ahead." —AFP



Sports

Photo of the day



Max Verstappen of Netherlands and Red Bull Racing celebrates with his team in the F1 Grand Prix of Abu Dhabi. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Celtics confirm death of 12-time champion KC Jones

NEW YORK: KC Jones, a 12-time NBA champion as a player and coach and 1956 Olympic gold medalist, has died, his former club the Boston Celtics announced. He was 88. Jones, who was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1989, captured 10 titles as a player, two more as a coach and two others as an assistant coach. "The Celtics family mourns the loss of twelve-time NBA champion, two-time NCAA champion, Gold medal-winning Olympian and Hall of Famer KC Jones as we celebrate his remarkable career and life," the Celtics said in a statement.

Jones played college basketball at the University of San Francisco, winning 1955 and 1956 national crowns and a 1956 Melbourne Olympics title alongside future Celtics teammate Bill Russell. Russell tweeted that he was told Jones died Friday morning. "The way that he was revered by the players he played with, by the people he worked with, by the players that played for him, he was special," said current Celtics coach Brad Stevens. With the Celtics, Jones won eight consecutive titles from 1959 to 1966. The club retired his jersey number, 25, in 1967.

Only Celtics teammates Russell and Sam Jones won more career NBA titles as players. "Where KC Jones went, winning was sure to follow," the Celtics said. Jones joined Russell, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Quinn Buckner, Jerry Lucas and Clyde Lovellette as the only players to complete the "Triple Crown" of NBA and NCAA titles plus Olympic gold. Jones served as an assistant coach for the 1972 NBA champions Los Angeles Lakers and served as head coach for the Washington Bullets for three seasons, but he joined the Celtics coaching staff in 1978 and was an assistant when they won the 1981 NBA crown. —AFP

Gutsy Rahane century puts India in driving seat against Australia

India build an ominous 82-run lead

MELBOURNE: Stand-in skipper Ajinkya Rahane rode his luck to hit a gritty unbeaten century as India built an ominous 82-run lead over Australia on day two to take a stranglehold on the second Test in Melbourne yesterday. It was a determined and crucial knock against a world-class attack by the mild-mannered 32-year-old, who assumed the captaincy from Virat Kohli after he returned home for the birth of his first child.

Batting at four, he faced 200 balls for his 104 to steer India to 277 for five before rain ended play 15 minutes early. Ravindra Jadeja was not out 40. The hosts took just four wickets during a frustrating day in the field as the match began to slip away with India zeroing in on levelling the series after losing the first Test by eight wickets in Adelaide.

"Not our best day, but not our worst," said Australia's Mitchell Starc, who has two wickets but also saw catches put down off his bowling. "Jinx (Rahane) batted really well through the day there and they had some pretty good partnerships. 'I thought there was some really good stuff from us as well, we just didn't capitalize on some of the chances we created to finish in a better position. 'We're just going to have to back up tomorrow and take five wickets as quick as we can."

While Rahane was the hero, it was a gutsy Indian team performance, with three 50-plus wicket partnerships to help silence their critics after being skittled for their all-time low of 36 last week. Debutant Shubman Gill chipped in with an impressive 45 and paid tribute to Rahane. "His knock was all about patience. Sometimes against such a high-quality bowling attack you go into your shell and then you're not able to score runs," he said. "The way Ajinkya played, it was such a magnificent knock to watch, the way he

saw off the tough periods and the loose balls he was making sure he put them all away."

Problems

On a steamy day at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, India resumed on 36 for one in reply to Australia's first innings 195, having weathered 11 overs Saturday when they lost Mayank Agarwal for a duck to Starc. In an action-packed morning, the Australian attack consistently hit its line and length with Pat Cummins bagging Gill then the experienced Cheteshwar Pujara for 17. That brought Rahane to the crease and - first with Hanuma Vihari, then Rishabh Pant and finally Jadeja - he built half-century stands to put India in a strong position. He brought up his 12th Test ton in his 67th game, and his second in Melbourne, with a four off Cummins, but he enjoyed some good fortune. Australia removed first slip during Starc's first spell in the final session and lived to regret it with Rahane getting an edge on 57 that would almost certainly have been caught if the fielder was there.

He had a huge let-off on 73 when he was dropped at second slip by Steve Smith and again on 104 when the ball popped out of Travis Head's hands as he landed after taking the catch. Jadeja, back in the team after missing the first Test injured, ably supported Rahane after Vihari fell for 21 attempting to sweep Nathan Lyon, with Smith taking the catch. That brought the exuberant Pant to the crease. Preferred to Wriddhiman Saha as wicketkeeper, he scored a breezy 29 before becoming Starc's 250th Test victim, caught by Tim Paine for his 150th dismissal.

India were reduced to 64 for three before lunch after Cummins caused all sorts of problems. He signaled his intent with the first ball of the day, which zipped past



MELBOURNE: India's Ajinkya Rahane (left) celebrates scoring his century (100 runs) as teammate Ravi Jadeja (right) looks on during the second day of the second cricket Test match between Australia and India at the MCG in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

Pujara's bat. Paine called for a review, believing it took a nick, but replays showed it was not out. Cummins finally got the wicket he deserved when Gill, who added 17 to

his overnight score, got a nick and Paine took the catch. He then removed Pujara, again enticing an edge with Paine holding a brilliant diving catch. —AFP

Momota wins Japan title to cap comeback after car crash

TOKYO: Badminton world number one Kento Momota won the All-Japan championships yesterday to complete the first step of his comeback, nearly a year after suffering serious injuries in a car crash. Momota came from behind to beat world number 11 Kanta Tsuneyama 18-21, 21-12, 21-17 in Tokyo, marking a successful return from the accident that left him fearing his career might be over after fracturing an eye socket.

The win gave Momota his third straight national title, and he immediately turned his thoughts towards making his international comeback at the Thailand Open in January. "I had the initiative in the first game but then I started to lose my cool once I had the lead," said Momota. "I think that's because I'm still not used to playing matches. In the second and third games, I wanted to put all my feeling into it regardless of technique or tactics, and I think I willed myself to the win."

"The Thailand Open starts in the new year and I'll be able to play against players from overseas. I want to go there and show what I can do as the top Japanese player." Momota was badly hurt in January when the vehicle taking him to the airport after he won the Malaysia Masters crashed, killing the driver. He admitted to feeling nervous as he returned to competition this week in Tokyo, and he was pushed to the limit by Tsuneyama, who took him to 16-16 in the final game only to crumble with victory in sight.

"I was too cautious," said Momota, who also had to come from a game down in the quarter-finals. "Before, my game was about using everything I'd built up over time, and my results gave me the confidence to do that. "This week, I hadn't played for a long time so I was very anxious going into each match. But I think my game will start to return now that I've won this title." Momota is one of Japan's brightest hopes for a gold medal on home soil at the coronavirus-postponed Tokyo Games next year. —AFP

Jamieson strikes as Pakistan stumble in reply to NZ's 431

MOUNT MAUNGANUI: New Zealand were banking on a deteriorating pitch to defend their Kane Williamson-anchored 431 after reducing Pakistan to 30 for one on day two of the first Test at Mount Maunganui yesterday. Abid Ali was not out 19 with nightwatchman Mohammad Abbas yet to score after Kyle Jamieson removed opener Shan Masood for 10.

The Bay Oval pitch, Williamson's home wicket, is renowned for supporting the bowlers on the first and last day. But Williamson said it was already showing signs it would favor spin through the middle stages, while New Zealand sweated on the availability of short-ball specialist Neil Wagner. "Hopefully the cracks start to open and hopefully it starts to deteriorate," Williamson said. "Spin will come more into play. There are bits of rough as well so

I've no doubt spin will definitely have a role."

The immediate concern for New Zealand was the availability of Wagner who was to have a scan at the end of the day after being hit on the foot by a Shaheen Afridi yorker when he batted. Wagner managed three overs when Pakistan batted but was clearly in pain. New Zealand, having started the day at 222 for three, added a further 209 runs before Wagner was the last man out. The innings was headlined by Williamson's 129, his 23rd Test century, with sizeable contributions from BJ Watling (73) and Henry Nicholls (56) to go with Ross Taylor's 70 on the first day.

Patience and concentration

Williamson described his knock as "really satisfying" after New Zealand were sent into bat on a green wicket and with Afridi and Mohammad Abbas making life difficult with swing and seam on the first day. Although there was not the same movement on day two, the drying pitch started to show signs of turn which brought spin into play with Yasir Shah taking three wickets, including the prized scalp of Williamson.

Nicholls, who had partnered Williamson in a 133-run stand for the fourth wicket, was the first to fall, bizarrely

still wowed the crowd with his artistry and skill. He began with a quad loop and a quad salchow before nailing a triple axel into a double toe loop. He then landed a quad toe loop into a triple toe loop, a quad toe loop-single euler-triple salchow combination, then finished with a triple axel. Hanyu has been training by himself this year, with his Canadian coach Brian Orser unable to join him because of travel restrictions, and he again sat alone clutching a Winnie the Pooh tissue box as he waited for his scores.

"I've been working on my own for a long time and that's meant I've had more worries and anxieties to deal with," said Hanyu. "But I haven't really been alone. Training on my own has made me appreciate the connections I have. Of course I've been getting advice from afar, but I've taken more strength from the goodwill people have sent me." Pyeongchang Olympic silver medalist Shoma Uno was denied a fifth straight national title, finishing second with 284.81 points. Teenager Yuma Kagiyama, who won the NHK trophy last month in his senior Grand Prix debut, was third with 278.79.

Hanyu endured a disappointing 2019 by his stellar standards, finishing second to Uno at nationals and losing out to American Nathan Chen at the Grand Prix Final. He will now aim to claim a third world title next spring after booking his place in Stockholm. "Last year, I felt like I wasn't developing any more," said Hanyu. —AFP



NAGANO: Yuzuru Hanyu of Japan performs during the men's free skating at the Japan's figure skating national championships in Nagano on December 26, 2020. —AFP

Sports

Arsenal sweep aside Chelsea 3-1, ease pressure on Arteta

Man City title challenge gaining momentum as Newcastle are blown away

LONDON: Mikel Arteta hailed Arsenal's emphatic 3-1 win against Chelsea on Saturday as a "turning point" in his troubled side's season. Arteta's side sat just three points above the relegation zone before kick-off at the Emirates Stadium after their worst start to a season since 1974-75. But the Gunners produced their best performance this term to outclass their London rivals. Alexandre Lacazette's controversial penalty opened the scoring before Granit Xhaka's superb free-kick increased Arsenal's lead before half-time.

Bukayo Saka bagged Arsenal's third goal after the break as they won in the Premier League for the first time in eight games stretching back to November 1. Tammy Abraham's late strike was no consolation for woeful Chelsea, who missed a penalty through Jorginho in the final moments. Moving six points clear of the bottom three will buy Arteta a little breathing space following talk he was in danger of the sack after just a year in charge. "It's a really big win for us. We were really disappointed and frustrated with the results," Arteta said.

"The players and fans were suffering and today is a really special day. It doesn't get any better; Boxing Day, playing a London derby at the Emirates and winning the way we've done it. "Hopefully this is a turning point and will elevate the confidence of the team because I know that they can play at this level. "It is how consistent we are throughout the game to sustain that level." With matches against Brighton and West Brom coming next in their Christmas schedule, Arsenal have a chance to climb to a healthy league position heading into 2021.

"The spirit before the game was really positive, they really wanted it," Arteta said. "I am pleased for the players and for the supporters. We have let them down for many weeks so it was a good day." Having won the FA Cup final against Chelsea in August, Arteta has now delivered two major blows to Blues boss Frank Lampard this year. Chelsea would have gone second with a victory, but instead they remain six points behind leaders Liverpool after a third defeat in their last four league games.

Lacklustre in attack, short of drive in midfield and bereft of a cutting edge up front, Chelsea's £200 million (\$267 million) pre-season overhaul is yet to pay off. "I'm angry because I want us to win

games. We were lazy to give away a penalty, lazy to give away a free-kick that he puts in the top corner," Lampard said. "I'm very disappointed in the way we approached the first half because some things in football are basics. "It is not tactics or systems, it is do you want to run, back your team-mate out and sprint? Or do you want to jog and say 'maybe I don't have to run' and we took that decision instead of the right one."

Arsenal made the breakthrough in the 35th minute when Kieran Tierney got across Reece James into the Chelsea area and tumbled under the slightest contact from the panicked defender. Michael Oliver's debatable decision to award a penalty survived a VAR review and Lacazette sent Edouard Mendy the wrong way from the spot for his sixth goal of the season. It was no more than Arsenal deserved for a vibrant first half and Arteta was celebrating again in the 44th minute.

N'Golo Kante fouled Saka and Xhaka did his bit to get back in favor when he whipped a brilliant 20-yard free-kick over the Chelsea wall and into the top corner. Saka made it three in the 56th minute as Hector Bellerin and Emile Smith Rowe combined to send the youngster into the area and his cross-shot looped over Mendy into the far corner. Abraham converted Hudson Odoi's cross from close range in the 85th minute. Pablo Mari's foul on Mount gave Chelsea a stoppage-time penalty, but Jorginho missed for the third time this season as Bernd Leno kept out the Italian's weak effort.

City gaining momentum

Meanwhile, Pep Guardiola is optimistic that Manchester City are on course to challenge Liverpool again for the Premier League title after climbing up to fifth and within five points of the leaders with a routine 2-0 win over Newcastle on Saturday. At a rain and windswept Etihad Stadium as Storm Bella swept into Manchester, it was plain sailing for the hosts as goals either side of half-time from Ilkay Gundogan and Ferran Torres extended their unbeaten run in all competitions to 10 games.

City's lack of goals has unusually been their undoing so far this season but despite again not hitting the free-flowing heights of previous years under Guardiola, an impressive defensive record is



LONDON: Arsenal's Scottish defender Kieran Tierney (left) and Chelsea's English defender Reece James compete during the English Premier League football match between Arsenal and Chelsea at the Emirates Stadium in London on December 26, 2020. — AFP

moving them back into contention. An eighth clean sheet in 10 games never looked threatened against a Newcastle side lacking in intent or threat, with top scorer Callum Wilson left on the bench.

"There are weird results for everyone. This season is about being calm in the good and bad moments," said Guardiola. "I have the feeling we are getting better." Guardiola's options had been limited prior to kick-off by Kyle Walker and Gabriel Jesus testing positive for coronavirus along with two members of the City staff. However, the loss of Jesus and Walker is likely to be more keenly felt in the coming week as City travel to second-placed

Everton on Monday and Chelsea next weekend in two real tests of their ability to reel in Liverpool at the top of the table.

"We played at the tempo we have to play. We are a team that needs to make a lot of passes, not run so much and attack in the right moments. Today our positional game was perfect," added Guardiola. "Unfortunately we could not score more goals but it is a good result and three more points. We don't have much time to think about it because in 45, 46 hours we are back." City threw away two points in their last home game in a 1-1 draw with West Brom after Gundogan opened the scoring. — Agencies

McCollum lifts Trail Blazers over Rockets, as Cavs edge Pistons

LOS ANGELES: Portland's CJ McCollum drained the game-winning three-pointer with 6.9 seconds left in overtime as the Trail Blazers edged James Harden and short-handed Houston 128-126 in the Rockets' belated NBA season opener on Saturday. McCollum scored 44 points, with a career-high nine three-pointers, and Damian Lillard added 32 as the Trail Blazers withstood a 44-point, 17-assist performance by Harden.

Center Christian Wood added 31 points for the Rockets, who had just nine players in uniform - one above the NBA minimum of eight - after two players tested positive for COVID-19 and four more were listed as unavailable due to "health and safety protocols" after being declared close contacts of those with the virus. The Rockets' scheduled season opener against Oklahoma City had been postponed when they could not field eight players. Harden was among those unavailable on Wednesday after he was deemed to have violated NBA anti-COVID measures that ban players from attending indoor gatherings

of more than 15 people.

He was fined \$50,000, in the latest installment of the pre-season drama surrounding Harden, who turned up late to training camp amid reports he has demanded to be traded. The three-time - and reigning - NBA scoring champion played more than 43 minutes. He connected on 12 of 22 shots from the field, including six three-pointers. Harden's step-back three-pointer with 15.3 seconds left in overtime put the Rockets up 126-125. But the Trail Blazers responded, Lillard driving toward the basket then kicking the ball out to McCollum who calmly sank a three-pointer of his own.

"I just got to the corner," McCollum said. "I knew (Lillard) was going to be aggressive, he drew a crowd. My man turned his back so I just relocated to the open area and knocked down the trey." The Rockets had the ball again after a timeout, but Robert Covington came up with the steal from Harden as he was driving toward the basket. In Detroit, Cleveland guard Collin Sexton scored 32 points, including a layup to force a



PORTLAND: Christian Wood #35 of the Houston Rockets dunks against Derrick Jones Jr #55 of the Portland Trail Blazers during the second quarter at Moda Center on December 26, 2020. — AFP

second overtime as the Cavaliers beat the Detroit Pistons 128-119.

Andre Drummond added 23 points against his former team, Cedi Osman scored 22 off the bench and Darius Garland chipped in 21 as the Cavaliers rallied from a nine-point deficit with 2:15 left in the first overtime. The Pistons appeared to seize control in the third quarter, when Jerami Grant scored 14 of his 28

points. Blake Griffin scored 26 points and Derrick Rose had 13, but the Pistons - with 24 turnovers leading to 31 Cavaliers points - could not hang on for the win. "It was multiple opportunities where we could've given in, there were multiple opportunities that we could've lost the fight," Cavaliers coach J.B. Bickerstaff said. "Every player, to a man, decided that was not going to happen." — AFP

Kuwait shooting Championship

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The Shooting Championship of the late Sheikh Abdallah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah will be held on Thursday 31/12/2020 and will continue until 2/1/2021. The tournament will be in 10m Air Pistol and Rifle in addition to Archery for men and women. Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federation Secretary General Obaid Al-Osaimi said the Shooting Club is always proud to organize the tournament every year, because it carries good memories for one of Kuwait's outstanding men who contributed to the Kuwait's renaissance.

Al-Osaimi thanked the family of the late Sheikh Abdallah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah for their continued support. He said the ranges of Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex are ready, and are equipped with all necessary protection against the novel coronavirus. He hoped shooters exert their extreme efforts and seek to get the best of results, as it is an important event to prepare for the championship of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah which will be held from 12-18/2/2021 in Kuwait



Obaid Al-Osaimi

Kuwait Football League roundup

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Three teams had to wait until the final round of Kuwait Football League's ranking phase to find out who will stay in the premier league and which one will be out of luck. Khaitan played leaders Qadisiya and managed to get a draw (1-1); while Fahaheel defeated their next door neighbors (2-0) to remain in the premier league. The third team fighting to stay in

the top flight league - Burgan failed to make that achievement despite their historic win against Kuwait 2-1. The 10 premier league teams now are Qadisiya, Nasr, Salmiya, Kazma, Kuwait, Arabi, Shabab, Sahel, Khaitan and Fahaheel. Meanwhile the lower league includes Burgan, Jahra, Tadhamon, Yarmouk and Sulaibkhat.

Qadisiya's Redha Hani scored first in the 39th minute, after which Khaitan's Olson was able to equalize in the 63rd minute. This result gave Khaitan 18 points and Qadisiya 32 points - on top of the ranking. Meanwhile Fahaheel defeated Sahel 2-0. The goals were scored by Abdallah Al-Shami and Saad Ayedh - giving them 18 points - while Sahel remained at 17.



Swansea move into 2nd place in Championship; Watford rock Norwich

LONDON: Swansea moved into second place in the Championship with a 2-0 victory at struggling QPR, while new Watford manager Xisco Munoz made a winning start against leaders Norwich on Saturday. Goals from Andre Ayew and Jamal Lowe lifted Steve Cooper's Swansea into the automatic promotion places as the race to reach the Premier League heats up.

QPR have now gone eight matches without a win and boss Mark Warburton is under increasing pressure. At Vicarage Road, Xisco got off the mark with a 1-0 win after becoming Watford's fifth manager since the start of last season following the sacking of Vladimir Ivic. Ismaila Sarr's first-half goal was enough to sink the Canaries, who remain four points clear of Swansea. Norwich were convinced they should have had a late penalty when Watford substitute Adam Masina tripped Teemu Pukki in front of goal.

Watford are up to fifth place as they chase an immediate return to the Premier League after last season's relegation. Chris Hughton and Aitor Karanka faced their former clubs in a 0-0 draw between Nottingham Forest and Birmingham at the City Ground. It was Hughton's Forest who often looked the more likely to snatch three points but they found themselves up against a goalkeeper in good form in Neil Etheridge. Famara Diedhiou came off the bench to fire a spectacular late winner as Bristol City beat bottom of the table Wycombe 2-1 at Ashton Gate.

City took a 23rd-minute lead through Chris Martin's downward header. Garath McCleary equalized on 68 minutes with a shot that took a wicked deflection off City substitute Adrian Mariappa. Having done so twice before this season, Diedhiou then proved the match-winner as a replacement when blasting an unstoppable right-footed shot past Ryan Allsop with three minutes remaining. Derby's unbeaten run under interim manager Wayne Rooney was ended when Preston scored deep in stoppage time to snatch a 1-0 victory at Pride Park. — AFP



Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE		
Crystal Palace v Leicester City	18:00	
beIN Sports HD 1		
Chelsea v Aston Villa	20:30	
beIN Sports HD 1		
Everton v Manchester City	23:00	
beIN Sports HD 1		

Sport Times

MONDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2020

14 Gutsy Rahane century puts India in driving seat against Australia



15 Arsenal sweep aside Chelsea 3-1, ease pressure on Arteta



15 McCollum lifts Trail Blazers over Rockets as Cavaliers edge Pistons



West Brom snatch draw at Liverpool

Leeds hold off Burnley • West Ham deny Brighton



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Brazilian midfielder Roberto Firmino (center) plays the ball during the English Premier League football match against West Bromwich Albion at Anfield yesterday. — AFP

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool blew the chance to open up a five-point lead at the top of the Premier League yesterday as Semi Ajayi's header eight minutes from time earned West Brom a shock 1-1 draw at Anfield. The Baggies remain second bottom of the table, but gave their chances of survival a huge boost by becoming the first visiting side to take even a point at Anfield in the league this season in Sam Allardyce's second match in charge.

Sadio Mane had given Liverpool a 12th minute lead, but Jurgen Klopp's men lived to regret not making more of a dominant first-half display to give the chasing pack in the title race an unexpected boost. The defending champions move three points clear at the top of the table, but just four points separate Everton in second from Southampton in ninth.

Allardyce was the last visiting manager to win a Premier League game at Anfield, when in charge of Crystal Palace back in April 2017, and the former England manager is now unbeaten in his last four away games against Klopp's men with three different clubs. The Baggies set out to limit the sort of damage suffered by Crystal Palace in a 7-0 hammering inflicted by Liverpool last

weekend, but could barely get out of their half before the break.

Mane ended his longest drought of nine games without a goal as a Liverpool player against Palace and showed his sharpness in front of goal is back with a brilliant touch to control and finish from Joel Matip's pass on 12 minutes. That could and should have opened the floodgates for Klopp's men given their level of control before the break. A series of dangerous crosses from Andy Robertson failed to find the finishing touch, while Mane headed just wide from Jordan Henderson's delivery.

However, Liverpool's failure to put the game beyond West Brom's reach led to a nervy second-half. The Reds suffered another injury blow at centre-back as Matip pulled up with a muscle problem and had to be replaced by 19-year-old Rhys Williams with Virgil Van Dijk and Joe Gomez long-term injury absentees. Williams was penalized for an innocuous foul with his first involvement, sparking a furious reaction from Klopp, which saw the German booked by referee Kevin Friend.

Despite their lowly position in the table, West Brom have already taken points off Manchester City and Chelsea

this season and were extremely unfortunate not to take at least a point away to Manchester United. Allardyce's game plan to stay in the game as long as possible worked to perfection as West Brom began to threaten in the final quarter. Karlan Grant outpaced Williams to burst clear on goal 20 minutes from time, but Alisson Becker spread himself brilliantly to block.

Ajayi was denied his first Premier League goal when his strike away to City in a 1-1 draw earlier this month was credited as a Ruben Dias own goal. But he repeated the trick and this time got the credit with a powerful header in off the inside of the post that this time left Alisson helpless. Liverpool have made a habit of winning games late in the past two seasons, most recently when Roberto Firmino's injury time header beat Tottenham 2-1 in their last outing at Anfield. The Brazilian nearly did it again at the death, but his downward header was brilliantly saved by Sam Johnstone.

Leeds hold off Burnley

Meanwhile, Patrick Bamford's early penalty earned Leeds a controversial 1-0 win over Burnley in the Premier League yesterday, while West Ham twice came

from behind to draw 2-2 with Brighton. Marcelo Bielsa's men now enjoy a nine-point cushion over the drop zone as they moved up to 11th, but needed luck on their side as Burnley were denied an equalizer through Ashley Barnes by a refereeing error. The only goal at Elland Road came after just five minutes when Bamford latched onto a long ball over the top and was wiped out by the onrushing Nick Pope.

Bamford fired home the resulting penalty into the top corner for his 10th goal of the season. Burnley felt doubly aggrieved when Barnes smashed home after Illan Meslier fumbled a high ball into the box on 17 minutes. The French goalkeeper was awarded a free-kick for backing in by Ben Mee and despite Meslier appearing to be the aggressor, the goal could not be reviewed by VAR as referee Robert Jones had blown for the foul before the ball hit the net.

"Their keeper comes through, knees him in the back," said Burnley boss Sean Dyche. "If a centre-half does that he probably gets booked. Not only is it a penalty, we put it in the goal and he doesn't give it one second to review it. "Ironically, it's been taking hours to make a decision and you get a really

important decision and they can't look at it. The referee played a big part, but we still have to focus on our part." Defeat sees the Clarets drop to 17th, still just two points above the relegation zone.

West Ham snatch point

Brighton edged ahead of Burnley thanks to a point at the London Stadium, but will be disappointed to have thrown away the chance of just a second win in 14 games. Twice the Seagulls led as Neal Maupay's predatory finish to a loose ball inside the area just before half-time was just reward for Brighton's more purposeful approach in the first-half.

David Moyes reacted with two changes at half-time to liven up West Ham after a dire first 45 minutes and got the reaction he wanted when substitutes Andriy Yarmolenko and Manuel Lanzini teed up 20-year-old Ben Johnson for his first senior goal. The visitors retook the lead when a corner broke perfectly for captain Lewis Dunk to fire high into the roof of the net. However, Brighton's struggles at defending set-pieces cost them all three points when Tomas Soucek's header leveled eight minutes from time. — Agencies

Brady's superb half lifts Tampa Bay into NFL playoffs

WASHINGTON: Tom Brady threw for 348 yards and four touchdowns in the first half Saturday to power Tampa Bay to a 47-7 win over Detroit and lift the Buccaneers into the NFL playoffs. The 43-year-old quarterback, who joined the Bucs this year after 20 campaigns and six Super Bowl crowns with New England, was benched for the second half after guiding Tampa Bay into the post-season for the first time since 2007.

"We played pretty good in the first half," Brady said. "Good execution. Guys were making plays for me all over the field. It was just a great effort by the whole team." The Buccaneers led 34-0 at half-time in improving to 10-5, securing a playoff spot while the Lions sank to 5-10. "It's just the beginning," said Bucs coach Bruce Arians. "Our goal when this all started was to get into the dance. Now it's to win 11 games and see who we play next. "We're going to be a pretty tough out."

Brady, who completed 22 of 27 throws, set a first-half career best and club record in passing yardage and the four touchdown passes were his most in a first half since 2014. Brady's club-record 36 passing touchdowns this season sent the Bucs to the playoffs, a feat New England failed to manage without him. The Buccaneers also set a team record with 410 total first-half yards, the most by any NFL club in a decade. In his 300th career NFL game, Brady threw touchdown strikes of 33 yards to former New England teammate Rob Gronkowski, 27 yards to Mike Evans, 12 yards to Antonio Brown and 7 yards to Chris Godwin.

Leonard Fournette added a four-yard touchdown run and Brady's back-up Blaine Gabbert added touchdown passes of 25 yards to Gronkowski and 22 yards to Evans in the rout. "When we do play the way we're capable of playing, we're tough to beat," Brady said. "We have to learn to do it more consistently."

Evans, who had 10 catches for 181 yards, broke his own team touchdown reception record with 13. "We've been scratching and clawing every year," Evans said of the Bucs' playoff quest. "We're happy we finally accomplished it, but that's just where it starts."

Arians said he could sense a great performance

coming while watching workouts. "You could feel this was a playoff practice week," Arians said. "Even with the holidays, they handled their business well." The Lions avoided a shutout when Jamal Agnew returned a punt 74 yards for a touchdown in the third quarter. Detroit, hampered by a right ankle injury to quarterback Matthew Stafford, also had five coaches sidelined by Covid-19 and contact tracing, with receivers coach Robert Prince serving as acting head coach.

Dolphins win thriller

The Bucs became the seventh NFL team to clinch a playoff berth, joining Green Bay, New Orleans and Seattle in the NFC plus Kansas City, Pittsburgh and Buffalo in the AFC. Miami's Jason Sanders kicked a 44-yard field goal with one second remaining to give the Dolphins a 26-25 victory at Las Vegas that saw four lead changes in the last four minutes. The Dolphins (10-5) stayed ahead of Baltimore (9-5) for the last AFC playoff berth by eliminating the Raiders (7-8).

Ryan Fitzpatrick's 34-yard pass - while having his face mask yanked by a defender - was caught by Mack Hollins to set up the winning kick. "It didn't feel great," Fitzpatrick said. "When I threw it, I didn't see it because my face mask got ripped off. It was pretty incredible." The San Francisco 49ers



DETROIT: Herb Miller #36 of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers intercepts a ball during the fourth quarter of a game against the Detroit Lions at Ford Field on December 26, 2020. — AFP

delivered a setback to Arizona's playoff hopes by beating the host Cardinals 20-12. CJ Beathard threw three touchdown passes for the 49ers and Cardinals quarterback Kyler Murray suffered a leg injury trying to spark a late rally. Chicago can deny Arizona a playoff spot by beating Jacksonville on Sunday and Green Bay next week. — AFP