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Fury, tears as crowds mourn slain Iran general Soleimani

US asks Iran for proportionate response • US deploys up to 3,500 troops to Kuwait



BAGHDAD: Mourners surround a car carrying the coffin of Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani (image on placard) during a funeral procession for him and nine others in Baghdad's district of Al-Jadriya near the high-security Green Zone yesterday. — AFP (See Page 10)

BAGHDAD: Tens of thousands of Iraqis, many chanting "Death to America" yesterday mourned a top Iranian commander and others killed in a US drone attack that sparked fears of a regional proxy war between Washington and Tehran. The killing of Iran's Major General Qasem Soleimani on Friday was the most dramatic escalation yet in spiraling tensions between Iran and the United States, which pledged to send thousands more troops to the region.

Iraqi political leaders and clerics attended the mass ceremony to honor 62-year-old Soleimani and the other nine victim of the predawn attack on Baghdad international airport. US President Donald Trump said he had decided to "terminate" Iran's military mastermind to prevent an "imminent" attack on US diplomats and troops. "We took action last night to stop a war," he insisted. "We did not take action to start a war."

But a furious Iran has vowed revenge for the killing of Soleimani, the chief architect of its military operations across the Middle East. "The response for a military action is a military action," Iranian ambassador to the United Nations Majid Takht Ravanchi told CNN, calling the strike an "act of war." "By whom, by when, where? That is for the future to witness."

In the hours after the strike, the US reached out to Iran, with which it has had no direct diplomatic ties for decades. Switzerland, whose embassy in Tehran represents US interests, confirmed yesterday its charge d'affaires had on Friday been "informed of Iran's position and in turn delivered the message of the United States".

Iran's Revolutionary Guards said Washington had used "diplomatic measures" to urge Tehran to respond "in proportion" to the strike - a message Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif slammed as "foolish". They "even said that if you want to get revenge, get revenge in proportion to what we did", the Guard's Rear-Admiral Ali Fadavi said on Iranian state television. But Fadavi said the United States was not in a position "to determine" Iran's response. "The Americans must await severe revenge. This revenge will not be limited to Iran," he said. "The 'Resistance Front', with a vast geography, is ready to materialize this revenge," he added, referring to Iran's allies across the Middle East.

The Swiss official "was summoned in the evening and received a decisive response in writing... to the Americans' audacious letter," Zarif said. Zarif also spoke with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, who

Continued on Page 24

Gulf allies of US fear reprisals after Soleimani killing

DUBAI: America's allies in the Gulf could be on the front line of Iranian reprisals after the assassination of military commander Qasem Soleimani inflamed fears of a disastrous escalation, analysts say. Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' foreign operations arm, was killed Friday along with an Iraqi pro-Iran leader and their entourage by a US air strike near Baghdad international airport.

The strike, ordered by President Donald Trump,

came three days after an attack on the US embassy in the Iraqi capital by a pro-Iran mob. The Islamic Republic immediately warned of "severe revenge" and threats of reprisals were relayed by its regional allies including Lebanon's Hezbollah Shiite militant group and Yemen's Houthi rebels.

"This is this moment where Iran's proxy partners around the region are going to be called on to step up and support Iran. This is this moment that analysts have been worried about and warning about," said Sanam Vakil from the London-based Chatham House. "These relationships that are quite separate are now going to be linked together in a transnational way."

The prospect of a coordinated response among Iran's militant allies "is probably the worst case scenario that we should be thinking about," she said. Iraq, where the Islamic republic is most influential

Continued on Page 24

Philippine embassy explains 'partial' deployment ban

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The Philippine Embassy in Kuwait yesterday clarified the imposition of a ban on Filipino domestic helpers to Kuwait from Jan 3, 2020. The ban was issued amid reported cases of maltreatment and deaths involving overseas Filipino workers in Kuwait, specifically the death of Jeanelyn Padernal Villavende last month.

An advisory posted on social media signed by Philippine Labor Attache to Kuwait Nasser Mustafa read as follows: "The ban applies only to visa 20 (domestic helpers) for both new hires and 'balik mangagawa' (returning OFWs). This includes the verification, accreditation and processing of individual contracts and additional job orders for visa 20. All overseas employment certificates issued to domestic workers by the Philippine

Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) on or before 5 pm of Jan 3, 2020 shall be valid for deployment."

Many Filipinos in Kuwait support the ban, but a few expressed dismay over this decision by Manila. "I am not very excited about this ban. I know they'll ban today but tomorrow they'll open employment for domestic helpers again, because this new ban is a product of anger. Any ban should study the pros and cons for both sides for the sake of the workers and the two governments," said a 43-year-old Filipino skilled worker. "Let the ban be imposed forever, and not only an overnight ban. Why compromise? Look at the Indonesians - they were able to do this. If they say it, they mean it. I hope this will not be the same as the 2018 ban," he added.

"I hope to see the ban a bit longer this time, so they see the value of Filipino household service workers. They need us so they can go to work and play. But it seems our value to them is so little, that they consider us as slaves instead of helpers," said a Pinoy domestic worker in Qurtuba. "I only get one day off a month. The memorandum of agreement between Kuwait and the Philippines says one off every week, but many of us are not even getting a day off," she said.

Continued on Page 24

Power supply fears as troops called to battle Aussie fires

BATEMANS BAY, Australia: Skies turned black and ash rained down as fires raged across southeastern Australia yesterday, threatening power supplies to major cities and prompting the call-up of 3,000 military reservists. Temperature records were smashed, and gale-force winds pounded fire-stricken coastal communities in the two most populous states New South Wales and Victoria. New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian warned that worst-case scenario projections were "coming to fruition", although large-scale evacuations meant the human toll was minimised.

Since late September, 23 people have died, more than 1,500 homes have been damaged and an area roughly twice the size of Belgium or Hawaii has burned.

The latest fatalities were in Kangaroo Island - a tourist haven southwest of Adelaide - when two people were trapped in a car overrun by flames on Friday. But strong winds and high temperatures continued to fuel hundreds of fires and cause chaos.

Bushfires took out two substations and transmission lines, prompting authorities in New South Wales that an area home to almost eight million people and the nation's largest city Sydney could experience rolling blackouts. "We are in for a long night and we have still to hit the worst of it," Berejiklian warned as another total fire ban was declared for today.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the largest military call-up in living memory, mobilizing 3,000 reservists to assist thousands of volunteer fire-fighters who have been battling the blazes. "Today's decision puts more boots on the ground, puts more planes in the sky, puts more ships at sea," said Morrison, who made the announcement after being pilloried for his response to the deadly disaster. A state of emergency had been declared across much of the

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Local

MPs want end of expat hiring exemptions in public sector

Number of PhD holders in state departments dropped

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: The parliament's human resource committee urged the government to make recommendations to cancel exemptions the Civil Service Commission (CSC) makes to recruit non-Kuwaitis with C and D graduation grades in the public sector, and use the same conditions on hiring non-Kuwaitis in jobs excluded from the replacement policy. The committee also called for following sister countries' steps in implementing the replacement policy in order to absorb national manpower and make the best use of their potentials, while at the same time focus on enlarging the role the private sector plays in fighting unemployment through attracting more citizens instead of it being repellent for them.

Further, the committee demanded that the private sector should encourage more citizens to join it and provide the professional security they need. It also noted that it would urge the government to adopt a new evaluation system based on yearlong achievements in order to qualify an employee for bonuses instead of granting such bonuses according to social relationships. "This, of course, involves very hard work to change a system that has been in use for over 50 years," the committee remarked, calling on the CSC, the manpower authority, the investment authority and the planning

secretariat general to set a new comprehensive plan to nationalize non-technical jobs in the next five years. In addition, the committee urged the ministry of higher education to set plans according to the local market's demands and prepare statistics about Kuwaitis expected to graduate in the coming few years.

PhD holders

Meanwhile, recent statistics issued by the CSC's information technology center showed that the total number of PhD holders in state departments had dropped by 238 employees in 2019, while those holding master's degrees dropped by 420 in the same period. Statistics also showed a one percent (11,679) increase in the total number of citizens working for government bodies, while non-Kuwaitis dropped by 2 percent (1,812 employees).

In addition, statistics showed that the total number of government employees by the end of 2019 was 365,957, including 149,917 (40.97 percent) male employees and 216,040 (59.03 percent) females. The total number of citizens working for government bodies is 284,681 employees, while GCC nationals number 4,725 and non-Kuwaitis (including Arabs and foreigners) number 76,551 employees.

Statistics also showed that the education ministry has the largest number of civil

employees with a total of 121,116 employees, followed by the health ministry with 63,527 employees, awqaf ministry with 23,330 employees and electricity and water ministry with 23,181 employees.

As far as job type is concerned, statistics showed that teaching and training came first with 89,158 employees, followed by administrative support with 58,366 employees, health and medical services with 51,574 employees, engineering jobs with 47,306 employees, finance and economics with 23,999 and marine jobs last with 559 employees. Academically, statistics showed that the total number of PhD holders is 5,447, master's degree holders is 11,460, graduates number 159,603, diploma holders are 52,354, high school graduates are 64,411, and employees with primary education are 2,814 including 2,621 citizens.

Job vacancies

In the meantime, the education ministry has prepared a comprehensive plan to fill all job vacancies including those of education area directors for the Capital, Farwaniya and Ahmadi areas within the maximum of two months, said official sources. The sources added that filling the vacancies will be done with justice and equality according to preset conditions that ultimately aim at appointing the most qualified candidates capable of filling the vacancies.



The Civil Service Commission.

Further, the sources said Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi met assistant undersecretaries and area directors to urge them to set direct and clear questions for the interviews. The sources said the ministry has a special plan to restructure the

entire ministry with help of experts from within and outside the ministry and that the educational facilities' sector plans to dismantle the project directorate into smaller departments subject to each area's engineering affairs office.

Firemen handle several cases during weekend

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Fire teams dealt with several accidents reported over the weekend, including a report about an elevator inside a Mubarakiya restaurant that malfunctioned and trapped a number of people inside. Firemen lowered the elevator then freed those trapped. No injuries were reported. Meanwhile, Sulaibikhat and technical rescue teams responded to the scene of a traffic accident involving a vehicle and a truck on Fifth Ring Road. Trapped individuals in the vehicle were freed and handed to emergency medical technicians.

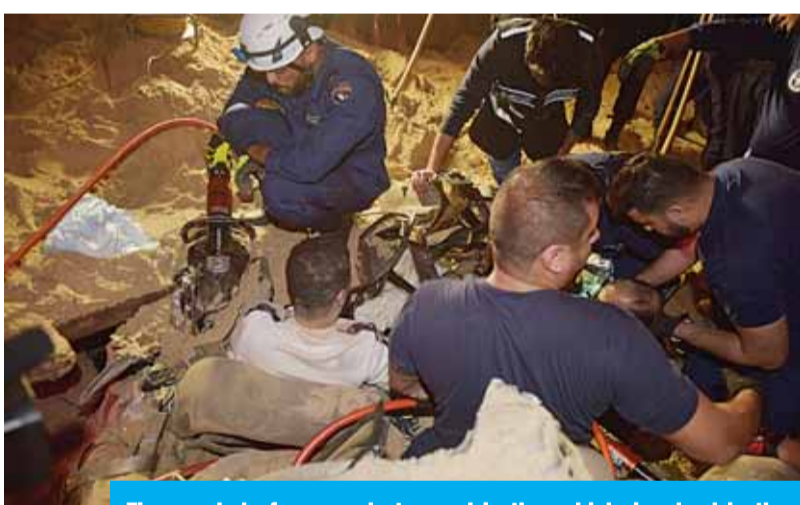
In the meantime, Hawally and Salmiya firemen battled a blaze reported in the basement of a Hawally building consisting of six floors. The building's residents were evacuated before the fire was extinguished. No injuries were reported, and an investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the fire. Separately, Industrial Shuwaikh, Shuhada, Ardhiya, back up and Madina fire stations responded to a call about a blaze that started in a 700-square-meter building in Shuwaikh consisting of three floors, and divided into several shops including a carpentry shop. The fire was put out and kept from spreading further. No injuries were reported, and a case was filed for investigations.



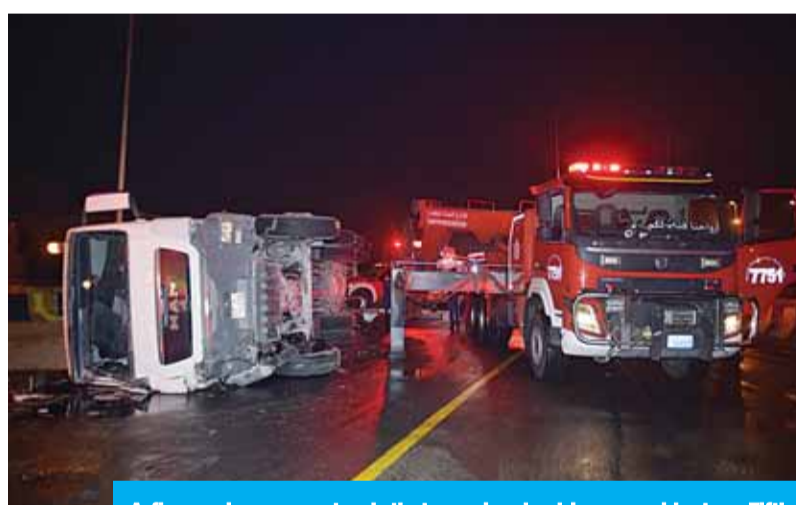
KUWAIT: Firemen help free people trapped in an elevator in Mubarakiya.



A fireman battles the blaze in Hawally



Firemen help free people trapped in the vehicle involved in the accident.



A fire engine near a truck that was involved in an accident on Fifth Ring Road.



Firemen at the scene of the accident.



Firemen battle the Shuwaikh blaze.



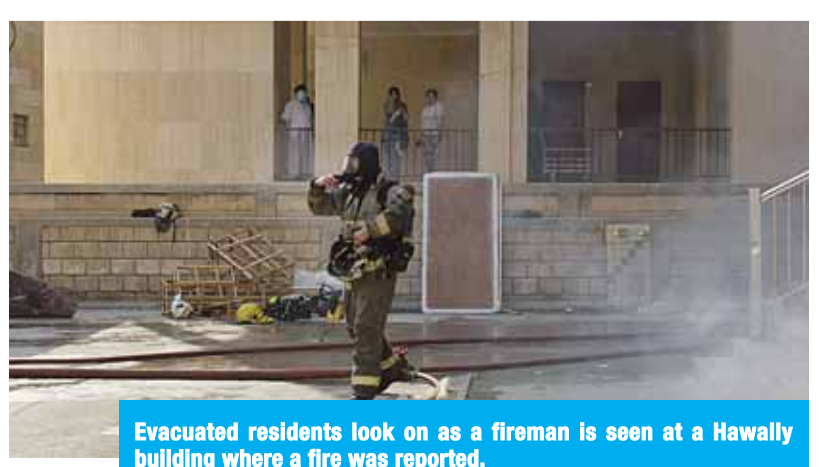
Flames seen from outside the Shuwaikh building.



Firemen battle the Shuwaikh blaze.



Carboard boxes left at the scene in Hawally.



Evacuated residents look on as a fireman is seen at a Hawally building where a fire was reported.

Local

Recent regional events require solidarity: Kuwaiti Speaker

Kuwait attentively following up on rapid regional developments: Spokesman

KUWAIT: Kuwait's National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem on Friday stressed the importance of solidarity in light of recent regional developments, adding that Kuwaitis have gone through more difficult circumstances. Regarding the recent political developments, Ghanem tweeted that the matter foreshadows seriousness, which requires rationale, social solidarity and support for the political leadership.

Meanwhile, a government official said that the State of Kuwait is attentively following up on recent rapid regional developments and their repercussions. In a press release, head of the Center for Government Communication (CGC) and official Cabinet spokesman Tareq Al-Mezrem called on all individuals to avoid discourse that might affect national unity and lead to division and trouble. He added that the government had the legal right to pursue those threatening security and stability in the country, especially during the current turbulent situation.

Mezrem affirmed that the Kuwaiti government was keen on bolstering freedom of speech and expression within the mainframe of the constitution and law. He called on citizens to promote dialogue in favor of national unity and exercise their rights in a manner that would not defame any sector of society, avoiding all efforts to spread rumors and false information and seek news from official sources. His statement came on the backdrop of the killing of Qassem Soleimani, commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, and the second man in

command of the Iraqi Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi irregular force Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandes were killed in an US military operation near Baghdad International Airport earlier on Friday. Iran's Foreign Ministry on Friday summoned the Swiss charge d'affaires, tasked with looking after American interests in the nation, against the backdrop of killing Soleimani in Iraq.

3,500 troops

This came as the US announced deploying up to 3,500 more troops to Kuwait, to boost some 14,000 reinforcements already deployed to the region. The reinforcements would come from the 82nd Airborne Division's Global Response Force, which already supplied several hundred extra troops to the region earlier last week as tensions grew over an attack on the US embassy in Baghdad, a Pentagon official said Friday.

US deploys troops to Kuwait



A Defense Department spokesperson said that the 82nd Airborne's Immediate Response Force brigade had already been notified earlier in that they could be sent to the region. "The brigade will deploy to Kuwait as an appropriate and precautionary action in response to increased threat levels against US personnel and facilities, and will assist in reconstituting the reserve," the official said.

In the meantime, a Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry source said that Kuwait has followed with extreme concern the recent unfortunate events in Iraq and the continued escalation in the region, the dangerous repercussions on security and stability of which it had previously warned of. In a statement on Friday,



KUWAIT: This handout image released courtesy of the US Department of Defense (DOD) shows US Marines assigned to Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response-Central Command (SPMAFTF-CR-CC) 19.2, preparing to deploy from Kuwait to support the personnel at the Embassy in Baghdad on December 31, 2019. — AFP

the source urged the utmost restraint and understanding in regards to these developments in order to reach a political resolution that avoids further escalation and risks in the region. The international

community was also called on to hastily bear its responsibilities in maintaining the security and stability of this vital region of the world, steering it clear from escalating actions. — Agencies

Kuwait oil price up to \$69.42 pb



KUWAIT: Kuwait oil price went up by \$2.16 to \$69.42 per barrel (pb) in Friday's trade against \$67.26 pb the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. In international markets, oil prices jumped to the highest level in over three months on Friday after the US killed commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force Qassem Soleimani, which raised concerns that this may disrupt crude supplies. Brent mixed trading session on Friday rose \$2.35 to \$68.60 pb, the

highest level since the attack on Saudi oil facilities last mid-September. West Texas crude contracts rose \$1.87 settling at \$63.05 pb, the highest since last April 2019 at \$64.09. The US Department of Defense stressed the US army carried out a decisive defensive act, killing Soleimani and deputy chief of Iraqi Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi irregular force Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandes. Iranian state television quoted Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei as vowing to retaliate for Soleimani's death. — KUNA



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KUWAIT: Vehicles drive through thick fog which affected Kuwait yesterday. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Local

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Sunrise over the beach in Mahboula. — Photo by Mohammad Rasheed (KUNA)

Ooredoo Kuwait continues to support entrepreneurs in Murouj

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KUWAIT: Ooredoo Kuwait, first to launch innovated digital services in Kuwait is proudly partnered with Al-Souq Murouj for the fourth consecutive year. The third market was held on December 27, 2019 in which Ooredoo supported local entrepreneurs and businesses. The market, which was held at Al-Murouj Complex, included local farm produce, artisanal food products and crafts, with a 'street food' section aimed at highlighting the culinary diversity of Kuwait's local food community. The market also offered a section dedicated for children's activities. It will be held once a

month on weekends, until March 2020. Commenting on this sponsorship, Ooredoo Kuwait Senior Director of Corporate Communications Mijbil Al-Ayoub said: "We are happy to be supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs through this engaging project. This sponsorship comes in tandem with our social responsibility strategy, which in turn is based on our core values of caring, connecting and challenging. We look forward to meeting those young enthusiastic small business owners as well as our valued customers at the next market."



Mijbil Al-Ayoub



Local

Jeddah joins popular destinations for Kuwait holidaymakers

Over 255,000 people travelled through Kuwait airport during holiday



DUBAI: Fireworks explode at the Burj Khalifah, the world's tallest building, on New Year's Eve to welcome 2020 in Dubai. — AFP



Fireworks explode around the London Eye during New Year's celebrations in central London just after midnight on January 1, 2020.



Fireworks light the sky over the Arc de Triomphe during the New Year's celebrations on the Champs Elysees avenue, in Paris, on January 1, 2020.

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The four-day New Year holiday prompted people to travel this year to new destinations that were not common in previous years. According to Kuwait TV, Jeddah ranked as the top destination for travelers from Kuwait. According to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, over 255,000 people travelled through Kuwait International Airport (departures and arrivals), flying on 1,725 flights from Wednesday to Saturday. In addition, thousands of holidaymakers also travelled by car, especially to Saudi Arabia.

Some people extended their vacation and traveled for over a week to enjoy far-flung destinations. London, Paris, Istanbul, Malaysia, and Dubai were the top travel destinations during this holiday, according to Saleh Al-Ruwayih, tourism and travel expert at Travel Mate agency. "The demand during this vacation was for destinations that are popular for New Year's celebrations, such as London, Eiffel Tower in Paris, Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Burj Khalifa in Dubai and so on. Also, Istanbul and Thailand were among the most sought-after destinations," he told Kuwait Times.

Early promotions were behind the mar-



Fireworks explode in the sky over the Ortakoy Mosque by the July 15 Martyrs' Bridge during the New Year's celebrations, in Istanbul on January 1, 2020.



Fireworks erupt in the sky over people during New Year celebrations in Kuala Lumpur on January 1, 2020.

keting of faraway destinations. "We attracted clients to book their tickets early through promotions held in June. In September, hotels around the world increase their tariffs, so when my clients booked their trips in June, they got an around 50 percent cheaper price. For instance, instead of paying KD 80 per night, they only paid KD 40," explained Ruwayih. "The promotion first

only included the European destinations, but more customers were asking for offers for cheaper destinations in Asia. So we included Malaysia and Thailand, as these are popular destinations during summer as well," he added.

Although Saudi Arabia has become a very popular destination, it's not on the top of the list of travel agencies. "Most Kuwaitis

traveling to Saudi Arabia prefer to stay in residential apartments rather than hotels, so they usually don't buy packages from our agency. Also, they travel by car, especially if they are a group. Furthermore, our agency doesn't have deals with the organizers of events taking place in Saudi Arabia the same way we have with European countries, such as for football matches, as we

market their events," Ruwayih pointed out. February is also a travel season for travelers from Kuwait for short holidays. "During February, we have more promotions for destinations that include winter activities such as skiing, exhibitions, shopping and more. These winter activities take place in European countries, and we offer special promotions," concluded Ruwayih.

Towers' monument, Gazans' 'thank you' note to Kuwait

GAZA: A monument was designed and erected at one of Gaza's main roads in recognition of Kuwait's continuous support for the Palestinian people. The monument, situated at a round-

about and depicts the eminent Kuwait Towers, is still yet to be officially inaugurated. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Fireworks light the sky over a camp area in the Kuwaiti desert, 60 km south of the capital, during the New Year's celebrations, on January 1, 2020. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



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Shock, fear and sadness grip Australia's 'bushfire refugees'

US Republicans, Democrats spar over killing of Iran commander

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Page 9



BENHAZI: The Libyan House of Representatives (HOR) holds an emergency session in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi yesterday to discuss Turkey's prospective military intervention in support of the UN-recognized Tripoli-based government. —AFP

Break ties with Turkey, call Libya MPs

Flights suspended in Libya's capital as violence intensifies

BENHAZI: Libyan deputies voted yesterday for a break in diplomatic relations with Turkey over its controversial agreements with the UN-recognized government that is contested inside the North African country.

At an emergency meeting in the eastern city of Benghazi, parliament also urged the international community to withdraw recognition of the Government of National Accord (GNA) which MPs accused of "high treason" because of the maritime and military deals it signed with Ankara in November clearing the way for a Turkish military intervention on its side.

Parliament speaker Abdallah Bleheq said MPs voted "unanimously" to scrap the accords, which they likened to "a return of colonialism", and to sever ties with Ankara. The parliament, which was elected in 2014 and took refuge in eastern Libya, has been weakened by divisions within its ranks and the departure of around 40 members to Tripoli, the GNA-controlled capital.

Yesterday's meeting fell short of the required quorum, according to pro-GNA media, but there was no independent verification of the number of MPs who took part.

The parliament is allied with military strongman Khalifa Haftar, who is at war with the GNA that is headed by Fayez Al-Sarraj.

Turkish lawmakers last Thursday approved military deployment in support of the GNA, which has been hit by a Haftar offensive against Tripoli since early April. According to interior minister Fathi Bachagha, the agreements with Turkey were concluded "legally and openly", unlike deals between Haftar's forces and his foreign supporters.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which have tense or limited ties with Turkey, support Haftar. The UN's Libya envoy, Ghassan Salame, has said Russian mercenaries are operating on the ground on the side of Haftar and has accused several countries of violating a UN arms embargo on Libya. Libya was plunged into chaos with the toppling and killing of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising. It has since become divided between the GNA and rival authorities based in the country's east.

Flights suspended

Flights were suspended at the only func-

tioning airport in Libya's capital Tripoli on Friday because of rocket fire and shelling, as people in eastern Libya protested Turkish military support for their rivals.

The GNA has sought Turkey's support as it fends off an offensive by General Khalifa Haftar's forces, which control the east and swept through southern Libya in early 2019. Haftar's forces said they had carried out air strikes in several places on Friday, including south of the city of Sirte and in Tripoli. Sirte lies in the center of Libya's coastline, on the dividing line between the warring factions. An increase in air strikes and shelling in and around Tripoli has caused the deaths of at least 11 civilians since early December and shut down health facilities and schools, the UN mission in Libya said. Haftar's Tripoli offensive quickly stalled in the outskirts of the city, but led to increased international involvement in the conflict. Turkey has backed the GNA while Haftar has received support from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Jordan. Russian military contractors have also been deployed with Haftar's Libyan National Army for several months, diplomats and analysts said.

There were protests in several cities and towns in eastern Libya against the Turkish parliament's decision. In Benghazi, where about 3,000 people took to the streets, protesters said they had turned out to oppose a Turkish "invasion" of Libya, which was part of the Ottoman Empire before coming under Italian occupation. Haftar later gave a televised speech in which he announced a "call to arms and mass mobilization ... to defend our land and our honor".

Three subsidiaries of Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) which operate in areas under Haftar's control - Ras Lanuf Oil and Gas Company, Sirte Oil Co and Arabian Gulf Oil Company (AGOCO) - said they would boycott Turkish companies.

An engineer from Ras Lanuf said one Turkish company had been doing contracting work at Ras Lanuf port since 2017. It was unclear what immediate impact the companies' statements would have. Mitiga airport has been repeatedly closed and reopened in recent years because of risks from shelling and air strikes, reopening most recently on Dec. 12 after a closure of nearly 3-1/2 months. It closed early on Friday

because of rocket fire nearby, reopened briefly and then shut again because of shelling, airport and airline officials said.

AU slams interference

African Union chief Moussa Faki Mahamat has expressed his grave concern over potential "interference" in Libya, after Turkey approved the deployment of troops to the conflict-torn North African nation. Turkish lawmakers on Thursday passed a bill approving a military deployment in Libya to shore up the UN-backed government in Tripoli, which has been under sustained attack since April from a rival administration in the east of the country. Faki said in a statement late Friday he was "deeply concerned at the deterioration of the situation in Libya and the continuing suffering of the Libyan people." "The various threats of political and military interference in the internal affairs of the country increase the risk of a confrontation, whose motives have nothing to do with the fundamental interests of the Libyan people and their aspirations for freedom, peace, democracy and development," read the statement. —Agencies

Indonesia flood toll rises to 53

JAKARTA: Indonesian rescue teams flew helicopters stuffed with food to remote flood-hit communities yesterday as the death toll from the disaster jumped to 53 and fears grew about the possibility of more torrential rain. Tens of thousands in Jakarta were still unable to return to their waterlogged homes after some of the deadliest flooding in years hit the enormous capital region, home to about 30 million.

In neighboring Lebak, where half a dozen people died, police and military personnel dropped boxes of instant noodles and other supplies into remote communities inaccessible by road after bridges were destroyed.

"It's tough to get supplies in there... and there are about a dozen places hit by landslides," Banten police chief Toms Tohir told AFP. "That is why we're using helicopters although there aren't any landing spots." Local health center chief Suropto, who goes by one name, said injured residents were flowing into his clinic. "Some of them were wounded after they were swept away by floods and hit with wood and rocks," he said.

Around Jakarta, more than 170,000 people took refuge in shelters across the massive urban conglomeration after whole neighborhoods were submerged. Torrential rains that started on New Year's Eve unleashed flash floods and landslides in the region and Lebak at the south end of Java island. Yesterday, Indonesia's disaster agency said the death toll had climbed to 53 with one person still missing. "We've discovered more dead bodies," said National Disaster Mitigation Agency spokesman Agus Wibowo.

'Trauma healing'

Jakarta shelters filled up with refugees, including infants, resting on thin mats as food and drinking water ran low. Some had been reduced to using floodwater for cleaning.

"We're cleaning ourselves in a nearby church but the timing has been limited since it uses an electric generator for power," said Trima Kanti, 39, from one refuge in Jakarta's western edges. In hard-hit Bekasi, on the eastern outskirts of Jakarta, swampy streets were littered with debris and crushed cars lying on top of each other—with waterline marks reaching as high as the sec-



Villagers commute through the mud in a landslide area at Sukaraksa village in Bogor, after torrential rains began to hit the area. Indonesian rescue teams flew helicopters stuffed with food to remote flood-hit communities yesterday as the death toll from the disaster jumped to 53 and fears grew about the possibility of more torrential rain. —AFP

ond floors of buildings. On Friday, the government said would start cloud seeding to the west of the capital-inducing rain using chemicals sprayed from planes to prevent approaching rainfall from pounding the region. Waters had receded in many areas and power was being restored in hundreds of districts. The health ministry has said it had deployed some 11,000 health workers and soldiers to distribute medicine, disinfectant hygiene kits and food in a bid to stave off outbreaks of Hepatitis A, mosquito-borne Dengue fever and other illnesses, including infections linked to contact with dead animals.

Visiting hard-hit Lebak, Coordinating Human Development and Culture Minister Muhadjir Effendy said the government would help rebuild destroyed schools and construct temporary bridges, while offering assistance to victims. "We're also asking

for NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to help with trauma healing," Muhadjir told reporters yesterday.

Electrocution, drowning

Around Jakarta, a family-including a four- and nine-year-old-died of suspected gas poisoning from a portable power generator, while an eight-year-old boy was killed in a landslide. Others died from drowning or hypothermia, while one 16-year-old boy was electrocuted by a power line.

Jakarta is regularly hit by floods during the rainy season, which started in late November. But this week marked Jakarta's deadliest flooding since 2013 when dozens were killed after the city was inundated by monsoon rains. Urban planning experts said the disaster was partly due to record rainfall. —AFP

Tens of thousands march in southern India to protest citizenship law

HYDERABAD/NEW DELHI: Over one hundred thousand protesters, many carrying the Indian tricolor flag, took part in a peaceful march in the southern city of Hyderabad yesterday, chanting slogans against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's new citizenship law.

The protest, dubbed the 'Million March', was organized by an umbrella group of Muslim and civil society organizations. More than 40 percent of Hyderabad's estimated population of nearly 7 million are Muslims. Demonstrators were still pouring into the protest site late yesterday afternoon, according to a Reuters witness, despite police saying no march would be allowed and that permission had only been granted for a 1,000-person gathering. The Indian government has faced weeks of acrimonious and, at times, violent protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which was passed by Modi's government in December. The Hyderabad protesters held placards with slogans including "Withdraw CAA immediately," and "India's only religion is Secularism." The Reuters witness said the protest remained peaceful, and estimated that more than one hundred thousand people were in attendance.

The new law eases the path for non-Muslim minorities from the neighboring Muslim-majority nations of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan to gain Indian citizenship. But, if combined with a proposed national register of citizens, critics of the CAA fear it will discriminate against minority Muslims in India and chip away at India's secular constitution. Modi's government maintains the new law is necessary to help minorities facing persecution in Muslim-majority nations, and it has called the pan-India protests politically motivated. —Reuters

International

Syria death toll tops 380,000 in almost 9-year war: Monitor

No progress seen despite intense UN talks on Syria aid

BEIRUT: Almost nine years of civil war in Syria has left more than 380,000 people dead including over 115,000 civilians, a war monitor said in a new toll yesterday. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has a network of sources across the country, said they included around 22,000 children and more than 13,000 women. The conflict flared after unprecedented anti-government protests in the southern city of Daraa on March 15, 2011. Demonstrations spread across Syria and were brutally suppressed by the regime, triggering a multi-front armed conflict that has drawn in jihadists and foreign powers.

The conflict has displaced or sent into exile around 13 million Syrians, causing billions of dollars-worth of destruction. The Britain-based Observatory's last casualty toll on the Syrian conflict, issued in March last year, stood at more than 370,000 dead. The latest toll included more than 128,000 Syrian and non-Syrian pro-regime fighters. More than half of those were Syrian soldiers, while 1,682 were from the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah whose members have been fighting in Syria since 2013. The war has also taken the lives of more than 69,000 opposition, Islamist, and Kurdish-led fighters. It has killed more than 67,000 jihadists, mainly from the Islamic State group and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a group dominated by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate. The total death toll does not include some 88,000 people who died of torture in regime jails, or thousands missing after being abducted by all sides in the conflict.

With the support of powerful allies Russia and Iran, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has inched his way back in recent years to controlling almost two-thirds of the country. That comes after a string of victories against rebels and jihadists since 2015, but also his forces being deployed to parts of the northeast of the country under a deal to halt a Turkish cross-border operation last year. Several parts of the country, however, remain beyond the reach of the Damascus government. They include the last major opposition bastion of Idlib, a region of some three million people that is ruled by the jihadists of HTS. An escalation in violence there in recent weeks has caused 284,000 people to flee their homes, according to the United Nations.

No progress

UN Security Council members held an intensive round of meetings Friday on the humanitarian crisis in Syria's embattled Idlib province amid calls to reauthorize urgently needed cross-border aid. Humanitarian aid currently flows into northwestern Syria—a last rebel stronghold—through UN-designated checkpoints in Turkey and Iraq without Damascus's formal permission. But that arrangement is set to expire on January 10, and with only a week to find a solution, diplomats said Friday they had no progress to report so far. Several also said there had not yet been any discussion of how this week's killing by the US of top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani might affect matters in Syria, where Shiite forces under his sway play an outsized role.

In a first closed-door meeting Friday, requested by Britain and France, Security Council delegates were briefed by the under-secretaries general for political and humanitarian affairs, respectively Rosemary DiCarlo and Mark Lowcock. The council issued no statement afterward.

Two other closed-door sessions were held on the aid question. The first brought together the council's five permanent members—the US, Britain, France, Russia and China. The second involved the 10 non-permanent members, all of whom support a continuation of cross-border aid even without Damascus's permission, one diplomat said. When the council took up the matter on December 20, Russia and China vetoed a resolution that would have authorized continued aid deliveries for a year through four border points—two with Turkey, one with Jordan and one with Iraq.

Three million people in the Idlib region benefit from the aid, according to the UN. Damascus maintains that only 800,000 people in Idlib are in need of aid. Russia, a key supporter of the Syrian government, has said it would support only a six-month extension, involving only two passage points on the Turkish-Syrian border. An earlier Russian draft proposal to that effect won only nine of the 15 Security Council votes needed for



In this file photo, a view of tents at a camp for displaced Syrians at Khirbet al-Joz in the west of the northwestern Idlib province near the border with Turkey, where residents survive mostly on aid and barely have enough money to buy food and clothes to keep warm. —AFP

approval. Syria's UN ambassador, Bashar Jaafari, told reporters on Friday that there was "no longer any justification for cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid." He added that all aid must pass through Damascus. Referring to Idlib, he said, "The Syrian government is determined not to give up its rights and duty as a sovereign state to eliminate the last stronghold of terrorism."

Despite a truce announced in August, Idlib—a last rebel stronghold—has seen a resurgence of violence in the last several weeks, hit by bombardments from

Syrian and Russian forces, and with government forces clashing against jihadists and rebels. In the northeast, Turkish troops and their proxies control a strip of land along the border after seizing it from Kurdish fighters earlier this year. Kurdish-led forces control the far east Syria, where US troops have been deployed near major oil fields. Syria's conflict is estimated to have set its economy back three decades, destroying infrastructure and paralyzing the production of electricity and oil. —AFP

Soleimani: Iran's regional pointman

TEHRAN: Revolutionary Guards commander Qasem Soleimani, who was killed Friday in a US strike, was one of the most popular figures in Iran and seen as a deadly adversary by America and its allies. General Soleimani, who headed the external operations Quds Force for the Guards, had wielded his regional clout publicly since 2018 when it was revealed that he had direct involvement in top-level talks over the formation of Iraq's government.

It was no surprise at the time for a man who has been at the centre of power-broking in the region for two decades. Soleimani has been in and out of Baghdad ever since, most recently last month as parties sought to form a new government.

Where once he kept to the shadows, Soleimani has in recent years become an unlikely celebrity in Iran-replete with a huge following on Instagram. His profile rose suddenly when he was pushed forward as the public face of Iran's intervention in the Syrian conflict from 2013, appearing in battlefield photos, documentaries—and even being featured in a music video and animated film.

In a rare interview aired on Iranian state television in October, he said he was in Lebanon during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war to oversee the conflict. To

his fans and enemies alike, Soleimani was the key architect of Iran's regional influence, leading the fight against jihadist forces and extending Iran's diplomatic heft in Iraq, Syria and beyond.

"To Middle Eastern Shiites, he is James Bond, Erwin Rommel and Lady Gaga rolled into one," wrote former CIA analyst Kenneth Pollack in a profile for Time's 100 most influential people in 2017.

"To the West, he is... responsible for exporting Iran's Islamic revolution, supporting terrorists, subverting pro-Western governments and waging Iran's foreign wars," Pollack added.

With Iran roiled by protests and economic problems at home, and the US once again mounting pressure from the outside, some Iranians had even called for Soleimani to enter domestic politics.

While he has dismissed rumors he might one day run for president, the general has played a decisive role in the politics of Iran's neighbor, Iraq. As well as talks on forming a government, he was pivotal in pressuring Iraq's Kurds to abandon their plans for independence after an ill-judged referendum last September.

Decision-maker

His influence has deep roots, since Soleimani was already leading the Quds Force when the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001. "My Iranian interlocutors on Afghanistan made clear that while they kept the foreign ministry informed, ultimately it was General Soleimani that would make the decisions," former US ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker told



BAGHDAD: An Iraqi woman attends the funeral of Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani (portrait), Iraqi paramilitary chief Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis and eight others in Baghdad's district of Al-Jadriya, in Baghdad's high-security Green Zone, yesterday. —AFP

the BBC in 2013.

His firm but quiet presence play perfectly to the Iranian penchant for dignified humility.

"He sits over there on the other side of room, by himself, in a very quiet way. Doesn't speak, doesn't comment, just sits and listens. And so of course everyone is thinking only about him," a senior Iraqi official told the New Yorker for a long profile of Soleimani.

A survey published in 2018 by IranPoll and the University of Maryland—one of the few considered reliable by analysts—found Soleimani had a popularity rating

of 83 percent, beating President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Western leaders saw him as central to Iran's ties with militia groups including Lebanon's Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas. Part of his appeal was the suggestion he might bridge Iran's bitter social divides on issues such as its strict "hijab" clothing rules.

"If we constantly use terms such as 'bad hijab' and 'good hijab', reformist or conservative... then who is left?" Soleimani said in a speech to mark World Mosque Day in 2017. —AFP

Muhandis: Iran's man in Baghdad

BAGHDAD: Iraqi paramilitary chief Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, killed early Friday in a US strike on Baghdad, was seen as Tehran's man in Iraq and a sworn enemy of the United States. The US strike on Baghdad's international airport early Friday also killed his personal friend Qasem Soleimani, a top commander in Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. The men both died in a strike on a convoy belonging to Hashed Al-Shaabi, an Iraqi paramilitary force with close ties to Iran, whose deputy chief was Muhandis.

It came just days after Hashed supporters attacked the American embassy in Baghdad, provoking anger in Washington. Muhandis—the widely-used nom-de-guerre for Jamal Jaafar al-Ibrahimi—was among the pro-Iran mob laying siege to the embassy on Tuesday.

Known for his virulent anti-Americanism during the US-led occupation in Iraq, Muhandis also built up close ties to Iran over decades. "Muhandis was demonstrative of how Iran built its network of proxies in Iraq," said Phillip Smyth, a US-based researcher focused on Shiite armed groups. "He has history with basically

every major network Iran had in Iraq. You would not have found a stronger ideal" of Iran's influence in the country, he said.

Born in 1953 in Iraq's southern Basra, Muhandis held both Iraqi and Iranian citizenship. In the 1980s, he was a leading commander in the Badr Corps, a unit of Iraqi fighters founded in Iran in opposition to then-dictator Saddam Hussein. He was sentenced to death in Kuwait for involvement in the 1983 bomb attacks on US and French embassies there but fled the country.

'Inveterate opponent of US'

After Saddam's ouster in the US-led invasion in 2003, Muhandis briefly served as a member of parliament in Iraq following the 2005 elections. He then helped found Kataeb Hezbollah—a hardline Iran-backed faction that targeted US troops. In 2009, the US sanctioned both Muhandis and Kataeb Hezbollah as "terrorist" entities. Washington said he ran "weapons smuggling networks and participated in bombings of Western embassies and attempted assassinations in the region." Michael Knights, an expert at the Washington Institute, described Muhandis as "the most inveterate opponent of the United States" among Iraq's Shiite armed groups.

He was later appointed deputy head of the Hashed, founded as a loose network of Shiite-majority factions fighting the Islamic State group in Iraq. It was later absorbed into Iraq's formal security forces, but some of its more hardline fac-



This photo taken on December 31, 2019 shows Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, a commander in the Popular Mobilization Forces, attending the funeral procession of Hashed Al-Shaabi fighters in Baghdad, who were killed on the weekend in US air strikes on a base in western Iraq near al-Qaim, on the border with Syria. —AFP

tions, including Kataeb Hezbollah, still operate independently of Baghdad. "Muhandis worked assiduously to develop the Hashed into an organization that was neither subject to full prime ministerial command nor subordinate to the conventional security forces," said Knights. Although he worked under Faleh Al-Fayyadh, also Iraq's national security adviser, Muhandis was widely recognized as the Hashed's "real" leader, observers said. He had both the utmost loyalty of

its forces on the ground and control over its financial resources. That made him "the central nervous system" of the IRGC's Quds Force in Iraq, Knights wrote last year.

He was a personal advisor to Soleimani, with the two pictured on multiple occasions in warm embraces. Like the Iranian commander, Muhandis sported a white beard and kept his white hair swept into a neat coiffe. He wore glasses and spoke fluent Persian. —AFP

Popular Mideast app accused of spying back on Google Play

ABU DHABI: The popular UAE-developed mobile application ToTok has returned to the Google Play Store after it was removed on claims it was being used for government spying, the company said yesterday.

Google and Apple removed the app from their online marketplaces last month after The New York Times reported ToTok allowed the UAE government to track the conversations, movements and other details of people who installed it on their phone. "We are happy to inform you #ToTok is now available for download on the Google Play Store," a statement on ToTok's Twitter account said. On its platform, Google lists a series of "updates" to the app, including requesting access to permissions and data and a "newly designed dialog to ask your authorization of accessing and syncing your contact list". The app remains unavailable on the Apple Store.

Apple told AFP that ToTok was removed from its App Store pending a review, while Google said it was taken down from the Play Store "for a policy issue". ToTok became popular by offering free calling and messaging to millions of users in countries like the United Arab Emirates where internet calling services like Skype are blocked.

Launched in 2019, ToTok was developed by Breej Holding, which The Times reported is likely a "front company" affiliated with DarkMatter, an Abu Dhabi-based cyberintelligence and hacking firm. The UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority denied the accusations, saying that the country's laws "prohibit any kind of data breach and unlawful interception". —AFP

US unveils partial ban on flavored e-cigarettes

WASHINGTON: The US government announced Thursday it was banning most flavored e-cigarettes in a bid to curb the rising tide of youth vaping, but under industry pressure it stopped short of the full ban promised in September by the White House. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said cartridge-based e-cigarettes in flavors other than tobacco or menthol would be illegal unless specifically authorized by the government.

The change will take effect in early February, outlawing cartridges with fruit, mint and candy flavors, which are particularly popular with young people. Juul, the e-cigarette industry leader, had anticipated the decision and withdrew those flavors from sale in the US, leaving only tobacco and menthol.

The ban will exempt large, tank-based rechargeable vaping devices, however, which are primarily sold in vape shops that cater to adults. "It was the pod cartridge-based systems that got us into this problem that are most attractive to kids," Health Secretary Alex Azar said in a conference call with reporters. "The kids simply are not using in any material level the open tank vaping systems," he added. Companies that do not cease making and selling such cartridges will face punishment, the FDA said, without specifying the potential sanctions. —AFP

International

US Republicans, Democrats spar over killing of Iran commander

Dems warn attack could trigger a devastating military confrontation

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump's order to kill a top Iranian commander has laid bare Washington's stark political divide, with Republicans rallying behind the president and Democrats warning that Friday's attack could trigger a devastating military confrontation.

Significant US military operations on foreign soil often gain bipartisan support, as was the case in 2011 when American special forces killed Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan. But such consensus has frayed in recent years, and the surprise pre-dawn attack in Baghdad that killed Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' foreign operations arm, has highlighted the widening chasm on Capitol Hill. Democratic lawmakers and aides say congressional leaders including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, both fierce Trump critics, were left in the dark about the deadly strike.

The White House traditionally gives warning to senior members of both parties in the Senate and House of Representatives ahead of major military action. But one Republican confidant of Trump, Senator Lindsey Graham, said he "was briefed about the potential operation" when he visited with Trump this week at his Florida resort.

"This was a defensive strike to neutralize future attacks that were being planned and executed by Soleimani," Graham told Fox News, adding he appreciated "being brought into the orbit" of military assault planning. Top House Republican Kevin McCarthy called the attack "a display of resolve and strength," while Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Soleimani was an "evil man."

But while Democrats joined their Republican opponents in condemning Soleimani's actions, and involvement in the

deaths of Americans, they savaged Trump's order ahead of this year's presidential election.

Pelosi said Soleimani's killing risks provoking a "dangerous escalation of violence." And Schumer chimed in that Trump "may well have brought our nation closer to another endless war." "A trigger happy armchair strongman, lacking congressional authority, has recklessly brought our nation closer to war," House Democrat Hank Johnson said on Twitter. The strike on Soleimani also killed the deputy chief of Iraq's powerful Hashed Al-Shaabi paramilitary force. It came after a pro-Iran mob this week laid siege to the US embassy in Baghdad following deadly American air strikes on a hardline Hashed faction in response to a rocket attack that killed an American contractor in Iraq.

'Stick of dynamite'

Democrats vying for the right to take on Trump in the November election also weighed in, starting with former vice president Joe Biden, who said the Republican had "just tossed a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox." While most Republicans backed Trump, some party moderates joined Democrats in calling for a full briefing by the administration and a congressional role on future action.

McConnell said senators would hopefully get a classified briefing "early next week," and urged them to reserve judgment until they can "review the facts." Senator Rand Paul, long opposed to expanded US military engagement abroad, was seemingly alone in delivering a sharp warning from Republican ranks. "A war without a Congressional declaration is a recipe for feckless intermittent eruptions of violence w/ no clear mission for our soldiers," he tweeted. —AFP



PALM BEACH: US President Donald Trump leaves after making a statement on Iran at the Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach Florida, on Friday. — AFP

How the world is reacting to US killing of top Iran general

PARIS: The world reacted with alarm on Friday after top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani was killed in a US strike in Baghdad, with many governments appealing for restraint. The attack was praised by US President Donald Trump's Republicans and close ally Israel, but elsewhere there were sharp warnings it could inflame regional tensions. Following are some of the reactions from around the world:

'Terminated'

US President Donald Trump said Soleimani was "terminated" when he was on the verge of attacking US diplomats but insisted that Washington is not seeking to topple Iran's government. But among Democrats, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the killing risks provoking a "dangerous escalation of violence". "President Trump just tossed a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox," his 2020 presidential rival Joe Biden said.

'Aggravate situation'

"This action can seriously aggravate the situation in the region," Russian President Vladimir Putin said, according to a Kremlin readout of a phone conversation with French counterpart Emmanuel Macron.

'Cannot afford another war'

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres warned of the need to avoid war in the Gulf. "This is a moment in which leaders must exercise maximum restraint. The world cannot afford another war in the Gulf," a spokesman for Guterres said in a statement.

'Remain calm'

"China has always opposed the use of force in international relations," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said. "We urge the relevant sides, especially the United States, to remain calm and exercise restraint to avoid further escalating tensions." He said Iraq's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity must be respected.

'Spark a devastating war'

Iraq's caretaker prime minister Adel Abdel Mahdi said the US strike, which also killed an Iraqi commander, would "spark a devastating war". "The assassination of an Iraqi military commander in an official post is an aggression against the country of Iraq, its state, its government and its people," he said. It was a "flagrant violation of the conditions authorizing the presence of US troops" on Iraqi soil, he added.

'Cycle of violence'

"The current cycle of violence in Iraq must be stopped before it spirals out of control," EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell said in a statement. "The EU calls on all the actors involved and on those partners who can have an influence to exercise maximum restraint and show responsibility in this crucial moment."

'Right' to self-defense

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised Trump "for acting swiftly, forcefully and decisively" to eliminate the general. "Just as Israel has the right of self-defense, the United States has exactly the same right."

'Will not be forgotten'

The Syrian regime condemned the killing and heaped praise on the Iranian general. The Syrian people "will not forget that he stuck by the side of the Syrian Arab army", Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad said in a letter of condolences sent to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

'Meting out punishment'

"Meting out the appropriate punishment to these criminal assassins... will be the responsibility and task of all resistance fighters worldwide," the leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, Hassan Nasrallah, said in a statement. "We will carry a flag on all battlefields and all fronts and we will step up the victories of the axis of resistance with the blessing of his pure blood."

'Threaten peace and stability'

"Pakistan has viewed with deep concern the recent developments in the Middle East, which seriously threaten peace and stability in the region," the foreign ministry said. "Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity are the fundamental principles of the UN Charter, which should be adhered to. It is also important to avoid unilateral actions and use of force." The foreign ministry in neighboring India said: "We have noted that a senior Iranian leader has been killed by the US. The increase in tension has alarmed the world."

'Against foreign intervention'

"It is manifest that the operation carried out by the US will increase insecurity and instability in the region... Turkey has always been against any foreign intervention in the region, assassinations and sectarian conflicts," the foreign ministry said.

'Act with restraint'

French President Emmanuel Macron urged restraint after Soleimani's killing. In his telephone call with Putin, Macron said there should be no "new dangerous escalation of tensions" and "called on all the parties to act with restraint," the Elysee said. British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said London had "always recognised the aggressive threat" posed by Soleimani and his Quds Force. "Following his death, we urge all parties to de-escalate. Further conflict is in none of our interests." — AFP

Evangelical voters told they have God on their side

MIAMI: US President Donald Trump wooed crucial evangelical voters Friday with a speech in Florida where he told them God is "on our side" ahead of this year's elections. Trump—who despite three marriages, sexual assault allegations and a controversial business history has made himself a champion of right-wing Christians—promised "another monumental victory for faith and family, God and country, flag and freedom."

"I really do believe we have God on our side," Trump told the crowd at the King Jesus International Ministry mega church in Miami. This was Trump's first campaign rally of the year and sets him up for what will be a tough fight against his Democratic challenger in November. Trump, who also faces a looming impeachment trial in the Senate, arrived on stage at the church to be blessed by several television pastors.

"Every demonic altar that has been raised against him will be torn down," prayed Paula White, frequently portrayed as Trump's spiritual advisor. According to a recent poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), 77 percent of white evangelical Republicans approve of the job Trump is doing at the White House. That's in marked contrast to the steady majority of the country disapproving of Trump's performance. And when it comes to impeachment over Trump's alleged abuse of office, those evangelicals are even more united. A crushing 98 percent majority oppose his removal.

"We have not really seen throughout Trump's presidency any discernible cracks," PRRI chief executive Robert Jones told AFP. "Our polling shows that they have been largely unfazed by the impeachment proceedings," said Jones, the author of "The End of White Christian America."

'Profoundly immoral'

Friday's event at the King Jesus International Ministry, also known as El Rey Jesus, aimed to lock down support for Trump in the key demographic. In 2016, Trump won election thanks to victories in several crucial swing states, despite trailing Hillary Clinton by nearly three million ballots in the overall popular vote. So any bleeding of evangelicals—especially in battleground states like Florida—could doom a repeat of the feat.

Team Trump was taken by surprise when evangelical magazine Christianity Today published a scathing editorial before Christmas in favor of the president's removal from office, calling his behavior "profoundly immoral." But allies rallied to Trump's side.

Franklin Graham—one of the sons of the celebrated late pastor Billy Graham, who popularized televangelism in the 1950s and founded Christianity Today—lent his support. —AFP



MIAMI, Florida: People turn to make their feelings known toward the media covering President Donald Trump during a 'Evangelicals for Trump' campaign event held at the King Jesus International Ministry on Friday in Miami, Florida. — AFP



KAMPALA: Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni (front third right) walks during the first day of a 6-day trek, covering a distance of 195km, called "Africa Kwetu" (Africa our homeland) in Galamba, about 30km North of Kampala, Uganda, yesterday. — AFP

Uganda's Museveni begins jungle march to highlight liberation struggle

KAMPALA: Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni yesterday began a six-day march through the jungle to re-trace the route through which his guerrilla forces seized power three decades ago, which critics dismissed as a bid to rally support ahead of 2021 elections. Museveni is one of Africa's longest-ruling leaders, having seized power in 1986 after taking part in rebellions to end the brutal rule of Idi Amin and Milton Obote, and is expected to seek a sixth term in office in the next elections.

He began what will be a 195-kilometre (121-mile) walk from Galamba, north of Kampala, and will end on January 10 in Birembo north of the capital where his rebel army faced one of its toughest battles in the fight to overthrow Obote. "The great trek started today and will last six days. This is a journey that the president is leading, a journey

through the past to appreciate the present," Museveni's senior press secretary, Don Wanyama, told AFP yesterday.

"The journey will take a week through the jungle, a route the liberators led by Museveni took to liberate the country." The walk comes a month after the president led an anti-corruption walk through the capital in a move derided by critics who said that the corruption took place under his government.

Museveni is facing an election challenge from pop-star turned leading opposition politician Bobi Wine, who appeals to a youthful population that has only ever known one president. "This (trek) is part of the wasteful ventures government is taking aimed at boosting his (Museveni) dwindling support among Ugandans," the singer-whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi—told AFP.

"My advice is rather than spending taxpayers' money on such trips, Museveni should know time is up for him to leave power. Time for hoodwinking peasants has passed him. The peasants and everyone in Uganda are demanding change and no less," he said. Asuman Basalirwa, an MP from the opposition Forum for Democratic Change, slammed the trek as a "campaigning tool".

"Ugandans deserve better than a president walking through a jungle. Time spent should be used for other important issues affecting the country especially how he plans to hand over power," he said. — AFP

Suspect in attack on NY rabbi home gets additional murder charge

NEW YORK: The man accused of a stabbing spree at a New York rabbi's suburban home during Hanukkah was hit Friday with additional charges including a sixth count of attempted murder, a district attorney said. Grafton Thomas, 37, allegedly entered the property in the town of Monsey during celebrations for the Jewish festival, knifing several people with a machete before fleeing. Celebrants were forced to defend themselves by throwing furniture, and one of the injured, 72-year-old Josef Neumann who was hit in the head, remains in critical condition.

Thomas was initially accused of five counts of attempted murder. In addition, he stands charged with three counts of assault, three counts of attempted assault and two counts of burglary, according to a statement from the district attorney of Rockland County, which includes Monsey, located some 30 miles (50 kilometers) from New York city. He faces a maximum of 25 years in state prison over the charges. US authorities have also laid federal hate crimes charges against Thomas who had expressed anti-Semitic views, referred to "Nazi culture" and drew swastikas in handwritten journals, according to a criminal complaint filed with a United States court.

According to US media, police are also investigating the possibility that Thomas was behind a separate attack on an Orthodox Jewish community on November 20 in Ramapo, also in Rockland County.

However police in the town have not confirmed the reports. Thomas pleaded not guilty when he appeared for the first time in court on Sunday. His family and lawyer said he was mentally ill and had been hospitalized several times. Rockland has the largest Jewish population per capita of any US county, with 31.4 percent, or 90,000 Jewish residents.

The attack on Monsey, home to a large Orthodox Jewish community, has heightened fears among American Jews, who have faced an increasing number of anti-Semitic attacks in recent years, particularly in the New York area. — AFP

International

Shock, fear and sadness grip Australia's 'bushfire refugees'

Thousands find themselves stuck in makeshift camps

BATEMANS BAY, Australia: Thousands of Australians forced from their homes by rampaging bushfires now find themselves stuck in makeshift camps, fearful for the future and turned refugees in their own country. On golf courses, cricket ovals and showgrounds-anywhere with a minimal amount of combustible tree cover-Australians are sheltering from a climate-fuelled disaster.

At the Catalina Country Club in Batemans Bay, New South Wales, rows of caravans, 4x4s, pick-up trucks and tents are pitched cheek by jowl.

The golf club's dining room has been converted into an evacuation center. Instead of players sipping a beer after a summer's day of play, elderly displaced ladies huddle around cups of tea and play cards to pass the time. Stacks of donations-food, clothing, water-are piled high and there is a steady stream of people walking in and out.

Some new arrivals quip that they are refugees. But even in a country accustomed to bushfires and which prides itself on resilience in extreme conditions, the last few days, weeks and months have been shocking. Towering blazes have turned the sky black and choking smoke has covered whole cities-

as well as parts of neighboring New Zealand and New Caledonia-amid searing images of families forced to wade into the ocean for safety. For many, the future is riddled with uncertainty: about whether their homes still stand, when they can return and-with months of summer still to go-about when all this will end. Many are facing this uncertainty while dealing with the trauma of what they have lived through.

Narelle Coady, 54, took refuge at a Batemans Bay beach yesterday when her home came under threat for the second time in five days. "We defended on Tuesday and it was just too scary," she told AFP. "Really bad, couldn't breathe. Oxygen gone. It was horrible." "That was my first and last time."

Batemans Bay motel owner Justine Donald, 40, evacuated her home on New Year's Eve in a scene she described as looking like "the end of the world". "The town went black," she said. "It was black, orange and so thick that to breathe it in, you thought you were going to suffocate."

"That frightened me so much for my life that now I don't even think about the properties." "It's devastating," she said, at times becoming tearful. "My main thing is I just

want to be alive and for all of us to be safe." "If that's going to happen again today, I'm going to need a good big bottle of wine and hopefully be stuck inside with towels under my doors because I'm not going to go outside into that again."

Mick Cummins, 57, also recalled New Year's Eve when he left his home as fires tore up the east coast. "Hellfire came over the hill," he said. "We just sat there and watched explosion after explosion, the bowling club went up, the houses down the street went up."

He remembered the fires from 1994 as particularly bad. But compared with this year, they were "just a barbeque", he said. "We're here until we can go home," said his wife Ulla. "They're saying we're probably not going to have power until next week. And if we've got no power, we've got no phone service either. We're stuck."

Wes Moreton, a 30-year-old father of five left his home, but then was forced to leave his place of refuge as the fire front moved north. He took no chances and headed with his family to Sydney. Like so many, he is unsure whether they will have a home when they return. "Fingers crossed it's still standing," he said. — AFP



Evacuees from Mallacoota arrive on the navy ship HMAS Choules at the port of Hastings, Victoria, Australia, yesterday. — Reuters

Australia PM puts off visits to India, Japan amid bushfire crisis

MELBOURNE: Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has cancelled official trips to India and Japan that were scheduled for the second half of January as he battles a bushfire emergency at home.

Morrison said yesterday he had spoken to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japan's ambassador to Australia, Reichihiro Takahashi, seeking to reschedule the meetings so he could tackle the country's growing fire crisis. "I should stress that both of those scheduled meetings are postponed and will move quickly to identify another opportunity," Morrison told reporters after announcing a big step-up in the military's role in rescue and relief efforts.

Morrison had been set to leave for India on Jan 12, followed by a trip to Japan, with talks due to focus on defense, intelligence and security and trade issues. The decision to postpone the trips came after Morrison faced heavy criticism in December for taking off on a family holiday to Hawaii while fires raged across Australia since September continued to burn.

He cut the family trip short and apologized. Australian firefighters continued to battle dangerous conditions, with fires in New South Wales and Victoria states expected to burn uncontrollably in temperatures above 40C (104F) and strong, shifting winds threatening to fan and spread the flames.

Authorities have said conditions could be worse than New Year's Eve, when fires burnt massive tracts of bushland and forced thousands of residents and summer



BATEMANS BAY: A bushfire burns in the town of Moruya, south of Batemans Bay, in New South Wales yesterday. — AFP

holidaymakers to seek refuge on beaches. Bushfires have killed 23 people and destroyed more than 1,500 homes since September, Morrison confirmed.

Power supply fears

Skies turned black and ash rained down as fires raged across southeastern Australia yesterday, threatening power supplies to major cities and prompting the call-up of 3,000 military reservists. Temperature records were smashed, and gale-force winds pounded fire-stricken coastal communities in the two most populous states New South Wales and Victoria.

New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian warned that worst-case scenario projections were "coming to fruition", although large-scale evacuations meant the human toll was minimized.

Since late September, 23 people have died, more than 1,500 homes have been

damaged and an area roughly twice the size of Belgium or Hawaii has burned.

The latest fatalities were in Kangaroo Island—a tourist haven southwest of Adelaide—when two people were trapped in a car overrun by flames on Friday. But strong winds and high temperatures continued to fuel hundreds of fires and cause chaos. Bushfires took out two substations and transmission lines, prompting authorities in New South Wales that an area home to almost eight million people and the nation's largest city Sydney could experience rolling blackouts. "We are in for a long night and we have still to hit the worst of it," Berejiklian warned as another total fire ban was declared for today.

Record temperatures

A state of emergency had been declared across much of the heavily populated southeast and more than 100,000

people were told to leave their homes across three states.

Thousands heeded that call on Friday, abandoning summer holidays and piling into cars that clogged the highways linking southeastern coastal towns with the relative safety of Sydney or larger towns.

Several emergency warnings were issued yesterday, and there were fears one one blaze southwest of Sydney could reach the city's outskirts.

Sydney recorded its highest-ever temperature of 48.9 degrees Celsius (120 degrees Fahrenheit) in the western suburb of Penrith, and the nation's capital Canberra hit 44 degrees Celsius, also an all-time record, a Bureau of Meteorology spokesman said.

Thousands of volunteer firefighters battled the infernos as some residents stayed behind to defend their homes.

Just outside the seaside town of Batemans Bay, a four-hour drive south of Sydney, locals joined forces with firefighters to tackle the fires.

"Today, we've had nothing short of a disaster. A very large fire-front came through... the high temperatures and the southerly change is putting a real lot of pressure on the resources that we have," local Adam Pike told AFP. "Guys that know the bush, guys that know fire, helped save at least 10 to 12 homes on this street... we are so grateful for their help." The only activity in the usually bustling tourist hotspot was at an evacuation centre, where hundreds of locals forced from their homes were sheltering on an open field in tents and caravans.

Mick Cummins, 57, and his wife fled to the evacuation centre when fire ripped through his rural town on New Year's Eve. "We said this is too tough for us, let's get out. We went to the beach and then hellfire came over the hill," he told AFP.

"I was here in the '94 fires. I thought that was bad. That was just a barbeque" in comparison, he said. — Agencies

Pakistan govt introduces bill to extend army chief's tenure

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's government on Friday introduced legislation to extend the tenure of the army chief in line with a Supreme Court order that it must justify its wish to see the top commander stay on in the job for an extra three years. The government of Prime Minister Imran Khan approved an extension for General Qamar Javed Bajwa in August, citing a worsening national security situation in the region over its rivalry with India.

But in a surprise ruling, the Supreme Court struck down the extension in November, ordering the government and army to produce legal provisions and arguments on the reasoning behind the move, pitting the judiciary against the government and powerful military. Pakistan's military has ruled the country for about half its 72-year history and sets defense and security policy and recently has had a role in framing economic policies too.

The army chief usually serves a three-year term. On Friday, the first day of a new parliamentary session, the government introduced a lower house bill to provide legal cover for Bajwa's extension after managing to win the support of opposition parties, government officials said.

"We are willing to support the legislation if the government follows parliamentary procedures," said Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the leader of a main opposition party. The legalization is expected to be passed by next week, clearing way for Bajwa in his post until 2022. During Bajwa's tenure, the opposition has accused the military of meddling in elections and politics to support Khan, while limiting civil liberties and muzzling the media. The military denies interfering in politics. — Reuters

To skirt police curbs, Indian protesters take a page from HK and beyond

NEW DELHI/BENGALURU: Before midnight on New Year's Eve, a call to action was sent on a private WhatsApp group - within the hour, dozens gathered in the center of the southern Indian city of Hyderabad, many holding banners to protest a controversial new citizenship law.

Police quickly dispersed the group and briefly detained six people, but for Syed Faheem - who formed the WhatsApp group - it marked another successful flash protest, inspired by tactics used by protesters in Hong Kong. Faheem, a software consultant, is one of a growing group of opponents to the new law who have begun to borrow tactics used in protests from Hong Kong to Paris, to protest legislation that critics say discriminates against Muslims.

In Hyderabad, some protesters say it is impossible to secure police permission to hold demonstrations, forcing them to adopt new tactics to show dissent. "The objective is to get 30 minutes at one spot. Some people support us, others come and argue with us," said Faheem, who has organized regular flash protests through WhatsApp messages that are amplified via social media.

The location of the protests, which change daily, are posted just an hour or two in advance, with the exact spots shared just minutes ahead of time. Hyderabad's police chief Anjani Kumar told Reuters people are being permitted to gather in areas such as sports grounds, or indoor auditoriums to protest, but added: "We've not given permission for any rally or procession because that affects traffic."

'Be water'

In Hong Kong, where anti-government demonstrations have raged on for months, protesters adopted a "be water" strategy, inspired by martial arts legend Bruce Lee, popping up in different locations almost daily to catch authorities flat-footed. Sharjeel Imam, who helped



HYDERABAD: Protesters take part in a demonstration against India's new citizenship law in Hyderabad yesterday. — AFP

organize a New Delhi sit-in protest against the new law that has run for weeks, said he plans to adopt the flash mob strategy to keep the agitation going.

In Hyderabad, the idea to copy Hong Kong's play-book came as protestors sought ways to run a long-term campaign that police would find hard to curb, two members from Faheem's group said.

"Hong Kong has been pivotal...It was very inspiring," said a 30-year-old IT professional, who declined to be identified. After police restricted protests in another southern city, students at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore took inspiration from 2015

protests in Paris where shoes were put on display - in place of cancelled protests - to support action against climate change. Students also borrowed ideas from the 1975 protests against the imposition of an emergency in India.

"Police weren't letting us place placards with any messages, so we copied what the press did in 1975 and left blank placards with 'Concerned Citizens of IIM-Bangalore' written on them," a student involved in the protest said. "Generations later, when they ask us what we did when they came for the Muslims. I at least want to be able to say - 'We tried'," she said. — Reuters

Bus crash kills 19 on Thai border with Myanmar

YANGON: A head-on collision between a bus and a car in mountains on the Myanmar-Thai border killed 19 and left more than 30 injured on Friday. Images posted by local media showed the bus upside down after it span off the road and plummeted down a steep bank at a spot notorious for traffic accidents.

Myanmar Social Rescue Group vice-chairman Aung Myint told AFP the express bus had been travelling from Yangon Friday morning when it careered into an oncoming car after its brakes failed.

"The bus plunged off the mountain, killing 18 and injuring 33 outright," he said by phone, adding the number included the car's seven passengers who all lost their lives. A doctor at Myawady hospital confirmed that one critically-injured woman later died, bringing the toll to 19.

Myawady town in Karen state is one of the key land border points between Myanmar and Thailand with hundreds of traders crossing daily in both directions. "A lot of accidents happen here," Aung Myint said about the site of the accident, where the highway comprises a series of steep switchbacks as it cuts through the thickly-forested mountain range.

Myanmar's road safety standards lag behind neighbors in the region and crashes are common.

An accident last week in neighboring Mon state killed 10 people while 15 pilgrims returning from a Buddhist festival in October died when their truck plunged from a cliff in Shan state to the north. — AFP

Analysis

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Washington Watch

No good will come of this

By Dr James J Zogby

The US drone attack that assassinated Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards elite Quds Force, represents an unsettling major escalation in the US involvement in the region. Given Soleimani's record, there should be no tears shed over his demise. He and his minions have played a central role not only in Iran's increasingly violent, destabilizing role throughout the region, he also led efforts to brutally repress Iran's domestic democratic movement and the recent uprising against corrupt Iranian-backed sectarianism in Iraq. Despite this, Soleimani's assassination is deeply troubling for several reasons.

In the first place, no one should be foolish enough to imagine that this will be a 'one-off' event. Iran and its allies throughout the region will no doubt find a way to respond to this attack, with the strong likelihood that US may become fully engaged in a regional conflict with the Islamic Republic. The question, therefore, that must be asked is whether or not the US military and public are prepared for a long drawn-out conflict that can become damaging, deadly, and costly.

Next to be considered is the regional impact of this attack and the conflict that may follow. If recent history has taught us anything, it is that the unanticipated consequences of hostilities must always be considered.

In a real sense, the US and Iran have been at war for a number of years now. The Iranians, feeling the damage done by US sanctions on their economy, have been playing a deadly game testing the resolve of the US. Their aggressive and provocative behavior in the Gulf; their meddling in several Arab countries; and their brazen attack on Saudi oil facilities – have all been met with so little response that the Iranians appear to have felt a certain sense of impunity.

Now, the game has changed and a central figure of the Tehran regime has been assassinated. Just as it is unlikely that the Iranians will directly retaliate for this act, it is equally unlikely that they will sit on their hands and not respond to the challenge. What remains to be seen is how and where they will respond and, more importantly, where that will lead us and how great the resultant damage will be.

A third consideration is that the attack has taken place in Iraq. If anything has become clear in our recent Zogby Research Services (ZRS) in Iraq, it is that most Iraqis are tired of their country being used as a playground for regional conflict, especially the conflict between the US and Iran. In fact, our polling has shown Iraqis increasingly upset with the role played by both the US and Iran in their country. Majorities see both of these countries as having been the major beneficiaries of the wars that have ravaged their nation since the US invaded in 2003. Iraqi attitudes toward the US have long been extremely unfavorable – giving the US single digit favorable ratings and equally low ratings for 'contributes to peace and stability in the region'.

Iraq fares no better. Up until 2018, Iran's ratings in Iraq were somewhat higher than those given to the US. In 2018 we saw a significant shift. For example, when we asked Iraqis what concerned them most about Iran, they told us that it was Iran's role in their country. And this negative assessment of Iran's role was shared not only by Sunni Arabs and Kurds but by a substantial percentage of Shi'a Arabs, as well.

The bottom line is most Iraqis are fed up with foreign meddling in their lives. Not only have they had enough of the United States and Iran. They appear to be fed up, as well, with corrupt sectarian leaders, violent sectarian groups, and the dysfunctional sectarian political system that was imposed on them both by the US occupation and aided and abetted by Iranian meddling.

As the recent uprising in Iraq made clear, young Iraqis, especially Shi'a, were ready to lay down their lives not only to challenge corrupt leaders in their government, they were also challenging Iran's role in backing these leaders. When we asked Iraqis who they blamed for the violence against the young demonstrators, a majority obliquely, but pointedly, suggested 'outside foreign hands.'

The questions that must now be considered are: What impact will this assassination have on domestic Iraqi politics? Will Iraqis turn against the US for this act? Will it be seen as the US, like Iran, using their country as a playground on which they pursue their deadly competition? Will the fragile unity across Iraqi sect lines hold, or will it fray? And should the Iranian response occur within Iraq, will this lead to a renewed sectarian conflict in Iraq with Iranian-backed militias engaged, not in a direct assault on the US, but rather in low intensity but still deadly and destabilizing attacks on the US and its interests and allies?

I hope that a few things are clear to readers of my column. In the first place, I have long been opposed to the so-called Islamic Republic of Iran. It was born as a counter-revolutionary brutal and repressive regime that from its inception sought to export its 'revolutionary' sectarian ideology. It has meddled in other countries and has become a menacing presence in the region.

At the same time, I have long been a foe of American foreign policy in the Middle East. It has often been so shortsighted in the pursuit of its narrowly defined, selfish, and domestically driven interests, that it has brought untold suffering to millions. Because the US never considered the regional impact of its policies or the consequences of its actions or inaction, we have more often than not been a source of great instability.

I opposed the Iraq War precisely because policymakers never understood nor were they equipped to deal with what would happen the day after the Saddam regime fell. For the same reason, I opposed the Obama Administration's actions in Libya. This is why I fear that no good will come of the assassination of Soleimani. He will be replaced. But the potential for an expanded conflict which no one should want, and for which no one is prepared, is too great. As I said, I'll shed no tears that Soleimani is gone, instead I will save them for the tragedies I fear are yet to come.

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute

All articles appearing on this page are the personal opinion of the writers. Kuwait Times takes no responsibility for views expressed therein.



A picture published by the media office of the Iraqi military's joint operations forces on their official Facebook page shows a destroyed vehicle on fire following a US strike on Friday on Baghdad international airport road in which top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani (inset left) was killed along with eight others, including the deputy head of Iraq's powerful Hashed Al-Shaabi paramilitary force Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis (inset right). — AFP

Soleimani strike will be felt well beyond Mideast

In killing Iran's Major-General Qasem Soleimani in an air strike near Baghdad's international airport, Donald Trump has taken a geostrategic risk it is almost impossible to imagine from any other US president. Its hugely unpredictable impact is already being felt well beyond the Middle East – and right now, no one can really know what that will mean.

In some respects, of course, the strike is simply the latest escalation in a years-long proxy confrontation that has raged across the Middle East for almost two decades. From Syria to Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and beyond, it is a confrontation that has already killed hundreds of thousands. Throughout the last year in particular, it has been clear that both Iran and its adversaries had been tearing up the rule book, with high-profile attacks on tankers in the Gulf and Saudi energy infrastructure. And with retaliatory US strikes on Iranian-backed militia in Iraq this week – and what looked to be an attempt to storm the US Embassy in Baghdad in response – matters were already entering uncharted territory.

In the short-term, it is unclear whether the unilateral US action – which will have shocked many in Washington DC as much as anywhere else – will make the region more or less violent. Soleimani – in some ways the second most powerful man in Iran, and the chief architect of its international military operations – would normally have been the key decision-maker behind any response. Multiple forces in Tehran and elsewhere will be scrambling for advantage after his death, and while some will want to unleash regional chaos as part of that, others may be deterred into being more restrained.

Trump's no 'stupid' wars doctrine faces biggest test

US President Donald Trump campaigns on a no more "stupid" wars mantra, but the US killing of Iran's military mastermind will test his ability to stay out of Middle Eastern quagmires less than a year from election day. Since the day of his surprise election victory in 2016, Trump has signaled an end to what critics long derided as Washington's global "policeman" role.

Now though, Trump is celebrating his order to kill Qasem Soleimani, who as commander of the elite Revolutionary Guard Corps' foreign operations was arguably the second most important person in Tehran and a lynchpin of Iranian policy across the region. "He should have been taken out many years ago!" Trump tweeted Friday, adding triumphantly that Soleimani "got caught!"

That and an earlier tweet simply posting an American flag show Trump building himself up as a wartime commander ahead of his November reelection attempt and looming impeachment trial in the Senate. It's a posture he promoted further at a speech in Florida later Friday to rightwing evangelical Christians.

Trump acted where other US leaders saw big risks

President Donald Trump did Friday what previous presidents did not dare to do – eliminate a top Iranian general who aggressively expanded Tehran's power while obstructing US efforts across the Middle East. Trump's predecessors thought killing Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, would risk another war in the region while US troops were bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But after three years of vying with Soleimani's proxies with deadly results, culminating in this week's assault on the US embassy in Baghdad, the Pentagon decided that if it did not act, "we would be culpably negligent." Joint Chiefs Chairman General Mark Milley said. Soleimani was killed in a drone strike just outside the Baghdad airport shortly after flying in to meet with local Iran allies.

The US had "compelling" information of looming threats from Soleimani's operations that were much greater in "size, scale, scope" than in the past, Milley said. "Is there risk? Damn right there is risk," Milley said. "The

'Buzz saw' of US military force. Whether that is now more or less likely in the immediate term will depend on how power games in Tehran play out, and whether elements potentially even more hawkish than the slain general are able to call the shots.

Other potential responses could include further attacks on shipping in the Gulf – although that would give those in the United States – as well as Israel and the Gulf states – who have long wanted to devastate Tehran's military capability the opportunity for action.

In the longer run, an Iranian response is inevitable – potentially igniting a full-on regional war. Just as important is the response of America's local and global allies and adversaries. Russia and increasingly China already looked as if they were being sucked into that regional face-off, announcing joint naval drills with Tehran only days ago.

Whether those would still go ahead if US and Iranian forces are openly trading blows is far from certain – but most likely, Russian President Vladimir Putin in particular will be tempted to double down to back Tehran. The two nations have a complex relationship, but have been relatively effective allies in Syria in particular, even as they also wrestle between themselves for influence and access across the Middle East.

'Worst decision ever'

Until now Trump has built his brand on a very different platform. While he has imposed crippling economic sanctions on Iran he has repeatedly stressed unwillingness to attack the longtime US foe militarily. And in North Korea, a potentially even more dangerous foe, Trump has gone out of his way to befriend dictator Kim Jong Un. That stand gets enthusiastic applause at rallies around the country, following two decades of costly, unpopular and often seemingly fruitless US battles in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

Just last October, Trump shocked US allies with an abrupt order to withdraw military assets backing Kurdish forces in yet another war zone, Syria. That triggered an almost overnight shift in regional power, with Russia, Turkey, Iran and the Syrian government gaining ground. Trump dismissed the ensuing outcry from even his own Republican party, saying that "stupid endless wars, for us, are ending." "GOING INTO THE MIDDLE EAST IS THE WORST DECISION EVER MADE IN THE HISTORY OF OUR COUNTRY!" he tweeted in his trademark all-caps style.

That was much the same message issued a month earlier when Trump fired national security advisor John Bolton, a hardliner who has pushed for overthrowing the government in Iran. This was also the message Trump, not even a politician then, delivered back in Nov 2011 when he lashed out at president Barack Obama. "In order to get elected, @BarackObama will start a war with Iran,"

No small decision

Killing Soleimani was no small decision, said Max Boot, a national security expert at the Council on Foreign Relations. "His death makes him the highest-ranking foreign military commander assassinated by the United States since the shoot-down in 1943 of an airplane carrying Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the Japanese architect of the December 1941 Pearl Harbor attack, Boot wrote in the Washington Post.

Yet neither president George W Bush or Barack Obama was willing to do it. "What always kept both Democratic and Republican presidents from targeting Soleimani himself was the simple question: Was the strike worth the likely retaliation, and the potential to pull us into protracted conflict?" said CIA analyst-turned-lawmaker Elissa Slotkin.

Killing Soleimani "has been discussed going back well over a decade", said Gil Barndollar, a Senior Fellow at the Defense Priorities think tank. Yet even Israel, known for its decapitation strikes on enemy threats, decided it wasn't worth the risk of war, he noted. In 2007 Bush's special operations chief, General Stanley McChrystal, had a convoy carrying Soleimani from Iran into Iraq in his sights. "There was good reason to eliminate Soleimani," he wrote last year. But McChrystal held off "to avoid a firefight, and the contentious politics that would follow".

General David Petraeus, the commander of US forces in the region in 2008, called Soleimani "truly evil". But the

Hawkish take

America's allies will also be abruptly considering their position. European states in particular have long voiced concerns over Trump's increasingly hawkish take on Iran, and will have no appetite for being sucked into any outright war. Failing to back Trump, however, will unquestionably exacerbate already growing strains between the United States and its allies. Iraq's government is in a particularly complex position, having both US and Iranian forces on its soil. So are the growing protest movements within both Iran and Iraq. Soleimani had been seen as one of the architects of recent crackdowns against such dissidents – but that does not mean they will have any huge enthusiasm for the sort of US action Trump has just demonstrated.

None of that looks likely to bother the US president. Ever since taking office, he has chafed against the influence of more established foreign policy and military figures who reports say he clearly feels have been trying to control him. Almost all – including former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis – have now left his administration. As he heads into a presidential election and impeachment hearings, his political calculation may be that appearing militarily strong and decisive will appeal to his political base, even as it alarms many others. That may point to the most alarming lesson of last night's strike and whatever follows. More than anyone else, even Putin, Soleimani was an example of a leader who had no compunction about ignoring what rules might exist and unleashing bloody mayhem to suit his ambition and agenda. It is behaviour becoming more internationally normalized by the day, and no one knows where it will end. — Reuters

Trump sniped. In fact, Obama did not go to war with Iran and won reelection in 2012.

Strong or erratic?

The White House is portraying the Soleimani killing as evidence of strength. The Iranian general was for years seen by both Democrats and Republicans as the single most important individual behind deadly attacks on US interests in the Middle East. Most recently he was accused of approving a mob's attack on the US embassy in Baghdad this week. But while Republicans publicly approve the Soleimani killing, Democrats claim Trump is now going down precisely the warmongering path he long railed against. "Trump's dangerous escalation brings us closer to another disastrous war in the Middle East that could cost countless lives and trillions more dollars," leftist Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders said. "Trump promised to end endless wars, but this action puts us on the path to another one."

Foreign allies, spooked by what they see as the growing US leadership vacuum abroad, are ever more alarmed. "We have woken up to a more dangerous world," France's Europe Minister Amelie de Montchalin told French radio. Trump habitually dismisses Washington's European allies, but he will no doubt be watching the reaction of the US stock market – one of his favorite barometers of economic performance in the run-up to this year's election. Early trading saw the major indices falling and oil prices spiking. — AFP

Maximum pressure

Trump changed course in 2018, setting a "maximum pressure" sanctions campaign against Tehran and pulling out of the nuclear deal Obama crafted, which had calmed some of the bilateral tensions. The result has been a slow escalation of tit-for-tat actions, including over the past year attacks by Iran on oil tankers in the Gulf, shooting down a US drone, and a rocket attack on Saudi oil installations. Trump's policy essentially benefitted Iran's hardliners like Soleimani, said Barndollar. "That only further increased his domestic sway," he said. And his power mounted across the region: in the past few years Soleimani arguably set the political and military agenda in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Will Fulton, an independent Iran expert, said that Soleimani was now likely seen as too dangerous. "His remit and reach has expanded, and perhaps the Trump administration decided Soleimani's influence and ability to shape regional events was too great a threat to leave unchecked," he said. — AFP

Business

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In this file photo, flames rise from a Total Elf Fina offshore oil rig off the Angolan coast. World oil prices jumped on Friday after the US killed a top Iranian general, fanning fresh fears of conflict in the crude-rich Middle East, with Tehran warning of 'severe' retaliation. —AFP

Oil, safe havens surge after strike in Iraq

Killing of Iranian commander douses equity market rally

NEW YORK/LONDON: Oil prices surged as much as \$3 a barrel as gold, the yen and safe-haven bonds all rallied on Friday after the US killing of Iran's top military commander in an air strike in Iraq ratcheted up tensions between Washington and Tehran. Traders were spooked after the death of Major General Qassem Soleimani, head of the elite Quds Force who was also one of Iran's most influential figures, and by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's vow of revenge.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the strike aimed to disrupt an "imminent attack" that would have endangered Americans in the Middle East. The most dramatic moves were in the oil markets, with Brent crude futures leaping as much 4.5 percent to \$69.20 a barrel, the highest level since Saudi crude facilities were attacked in September. The impact hit almost every asset class. MSCI's gauge of stocks across the globe declined 0.52 percent, while its emerging markets index lost 0.40 percent.

Europe's broad STOXX 600 index fell as much as 1 percent, but pared losses to close down 0.33 percent, while shares on Wall Street fell around 0.8 percent as New Year optimism, which had pushed equity markets to record

highs, evaporated. The yen rose half a percent against the dollar to a two-month high, the Swiss franc hit its highest level against the euro since September and gold prices climbed to a four-month peak, racing past the key \$1,550 an ounce level. "Geopolitics has come back to the table, and this is something that could have major cross-asset implications," said Salman Ahmed, Lombard Odier's chief investment strategist.

"What is critical is how it pans out in the next few days," Ahmed said. "Whether it turns into a theme depends on Iran's reaction and then the US response." Iran promised harsh revenge. The Quds Force and its paramilitary proxies have ample means to mount a response.

In September, US officials blamed Iran for attacking the oil installations of Saudi Aramco, the state energy giant and the world's largest oil exporter. Iran has denied responsibility for the strikes and accused Washington of warmongering. The Trump administration then did not respond, beyond heated rhetoric and threats, and markets settled down within a week after Brent surged 14.6 percent, its biggest one-day percentage gain since at least 1988, on Sept. 16.

The U.S. government and others on Friday urged their citizens in the region either to return

home or to stay away from potential targets and public gatherings. President Hassan Rouhani said the killing would stiffen Iran's resistance to the United States. Pompeo said in a round of TV interviews that the United States remained committed to de-escalation with Iran but that it had needed to defend itself.

"He (Soleimani) was actively plotting in the region to take actions - a big action as he described it - that would have put dozens if not hundreds of American lives at risk. We know it was imminent," Pompeo told CNN. Stocks on Wall Street opened down 1 percent, the lowest point of the session, as losses were later pared a bit.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 233.92 points, or 0.81 percent, to 28,634.88. The S&P 500 lost 23 points, or 0.71 percent, to 3,234.85 and the Nasdaq Composite dropped 71.42 points, or 0.79 percent, to 9,020.77. The global gauge and Wall Street indexes set record closing highs on Thursday, extending the year-end rally in equities into 2020. Brent settled \$2.35 higher at \$68.60 after rising as high as \$69.20. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude rose \$1.87 to settle at \$63.05 a barrel, after earlier spiking to \$64.09 a barrel, its highest level since April 2019.

Scramble to safety

Yields on German Bunds and US Treasuries - the world's benchmark government bonds that are typically seen as the safest assets - fell sharply. The 10-year Bund yield fell 7 basis points to a two-week low of -0.299 percent, while Bund futures were up 0.62 percent at 172.33 euros. Benchmark 10-year Treasury notes rose 26/32 in price to yield 1.7916 percent, from 1.882 percent late on Thursday. Spot gold prices hit a high of \$1,553.20 an ounce. U.S. gold futures settled 1.5 percent higher at \$1,552.40. The dollar index rose 0.05 percent, with the euro down 0.09 percent to \$1.116. The Japanese yen strengthened 0.41 percent versus the greenback at 108.13 per dollar. The focus on geopolitics meant markets paid little attention to stronger-than-expected data from France, where inflation rose 1.6 percent year-on-year in December, beating analysts' expectations for a 1.4 percent rise. German inflation figures were also higher, although unemployment in Europe's largest economy rose more than expected. The US manufacturing sector contracted in December by the most in more than a decade, with order volumes crashing to near an 11-year low and factory employment falling for a fifth straight month, the Institute for Supply Management said. —Reuters

Ghosn lawyer feels betrayal, sympathy over tycoon's Japan escape

TOKYO: A lawyer for former Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn said yesterday he felt betrayed by his client's escape from Japan but still understood his act, claiming it resulted from Japan's inhumane justice system. The international tycoon, who faces multiple charges of financial misconduct that he denies, jumped bail and fled to Lebanon in late December to avoid a Japanese trial. "First, I was filled with a sense of strong anger. I felt betrayed," Ghosn's lawyer Takashi Takano wrote in his blog, stating that he had not been informed about the plan in advance. "But anger was turning to something else as I recalled how he was treated by the country's justice system," Takano said. Ghosn is thought to have taken a private jet from Kansai Airport in western Japan, heading for Istanbul. It is believed he headed from there to Beirut.

"I can easily imagine that if people with wealth, human networks and ability to take action have the same experience (as Ghosn), they would do the same thing or at least consider doing so," Takano said. Ghosn's high-profile arrest in November 2018 and his long detention under severe conditions were widely considered draconian compared with the West.

Suspects in Japan can be detained for weeks or even months before trial, with limited access to their lawyers, and around 99 percent of trials in the country result in a conviction.

Critics including rights groups such as Amnesty International have derided Japan's system as "hostage justice", designed to break morale and force confessions from suspects. When safely in Lebanon, Ghosn pressed this point again, saying he "would no longer be held hostage by a rigged Japanese justice system".

Another lawyer for Ghosn, Junichiro Hironaka, yesterday also said that harsh bail conditions—notably the restrictions on contact with his wife Carole—appeared to have motivated the tycoon's escape. "He did not know when he can meet his wife ... and there was no prospect for a change in his bail conditions," Hironaka told reporters. "I guess these things were really tough for him," the lawyer said. A Tokyo court banned Ghosn from contacting his wife despite several petitions from his legal team describing the measure as "cruel and a punishment".

He was later permitted to speak to her via videoconference only. While Japanese prosecutors have launched an investigation, the circumstances of Ghosn's Hollywood-like flight from Japan are still unclear. Ghosn is due to be summoned by Lebanon's public prosecutor next week, an official said Friday. Japanese investigators are probing how the man who was once the country's best paid corporate executive managed to slip out of house arrest and dodge trial, causing a national embarrassment. The Lebanese authorities have already stressed that Ghosn—who holds the French, Lebanese and Brazilian nationalities—had entered the country legally and that Beirut had no extradition agreement with Japan. An



BEIRUT: An unidentified car enters the underground parking of a house said to belong to former Nissan chief Carlos Ghosn in a wealthy neighborhood of the Lebanese capital Beirut yesterday. —AFP

official speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity said a summons was expected to be handed to Ghosn next week, as a result of Interpol issuing a "red notice" against him.

"The Lebanese judiciary is obliged to hear him. But it can still decide whether to arrest him or let him remain free," the official said, adding that Ghosn could be heard on January 7 or 8. Ghosn was arrested in Tokyo in November 2018 and has been under house arrest since April, facing multiple charges of financial misconduct. —AFP

US factory sector in deepest slump in more than 10 years

WASHINGTON: The US manufacturing sector fell into its deepest slump in more than a decade in December as the US-China trade war kept a lid on factory output, orders and employment, although the long-awaited Phase 1 deal between Washington and Beijing could limit further downside. The Institute for Supply Management (ISM) said its index of national factory activity fell to 47.2 last month from 48.1 in November. It was the lowest reading since June 2009 and, coupled with readings for both new orders and factory employment at multi-year lows, thwarted expectations for a leveling off in the pace of decline in a sector buffeted by trade tensions. A reading below 50 indicates the sector is in contraction, and December's reading marked the fifth straight month below that benchmark level. Economists polled by Reuters had been looking for an increase to 49.0.

The manufacturing sector had been under pressure for much of the second half of 2019, as tit-for-tat tariffs by the United States and China slowed the flow of goods between the world's two largest economies and contributed to a cooling in the pace of global economic growth.

Last month, the two sides announced they had reached agreement on a Phase 1 deal, and US President Donald Trump this week said the accord would be signed on Jan. 15 in Washington, and talks to cement a wider Phase 2 deal would begin shortly.

"Global trade remains the most significant cross-industry issue, but there are signs that several industry sectors will improve as a result of the Phase 1 trade agreement," Timothy Fiore, chair of ISM's Manufacturing Business Survey Committee, said in a statement. In addition to the drag from trade frictions, Boeing Co's inability to get its 737 Max jetliner back in service may have been a factor, especially in the transportation equipment industry, which was the weakest of the six big industry sectors, according to Fiore. Boeing will cease production of the plane this month until regulators allow it to resume flying in the wake of two crashes, and that could be a headwind in the coming months that may counter improvements arising elsewhere from the trade deal.

While ISM's overall measure of activity in December was the lowest in more than a decade, Fiore said on balance the contraction remains relatively shallow. "It's not super low," he said on a conference call. "We're still in that range of slight contraction to slight expansion." —Reuters

Business

Eurozone loan growth slows in first month of QE reboot

German jobless count holds steady, but inflation climbs

FRANKFURT: Growth in lending to the eurozone's private sector slowed in November, the first month after the European Central Bank relaunched its controversial bond-buying scheme, data from the Frankfurt institution showed Friday.

Credit grew by 3.6 percent year-on-year in November, a pace 0.1 percentage points below October's reading, the ECB said in figures adjusted for some purely financial transactions. Growth in lending to businesses fell back to 3.4 percent-down 0.4 points-while the rate of expansion in credit to households was steady at 3.5 percent. In the final monetary policy shift under former ECB president Mario Draghi, governors decided last year to relaunch their "quantitative easing" (QE) bond-buying scheme at 20 billion euros (\$22.3 billion) per month from November.

Amounting to 2.6 trillion euros in 2015-18, the scheme was designed to pump cash through the financial system and encourage lending, in turn stimulating growth and inflation.

But the decision to relaunch QE prompted rarely-seen public splits in the ECB's governing council, with national central bank chiefs giving angry newspaper interviews and a German board member quitting in its wake. Opponents say that while inflation continues to fall short of the ECB's just-below-2.0-percent target, it is far from the risk of deflation-a harmful downward spiral of prices and activity-that justified starting QE in 2015.

New ECB chief Christine Lagarde has made knitting together divisions her top priority, but policy-including monthly bond purchases-is likely to remain on hold while the bank completes its first "strategic review" since 2003.

Meanwhile, the unemployment rate in Europe's top economy Germany held steady close to historic lows in December, official data showed Friday, a relief after

a second successive year squeaking by recession. While the number of workers out of a job increased by 8,000, that was not enough to shift the jobless rate higher than its long-held 5.0 percent, the BA federal labor agency said in seasonally-adjusted figures.

Continued labor market strength has buttressed German domestic demand even as the export-oriented industrial sector suffered the effects of US-led trade wars in recent months. "The labor market again looked overwhelmingly stable at the end of the year," said BA chief Detlef Scheele, "but signs of the weak phase for economic activity can be seen."

In absolute figures, less indicative of underlying trends but widely used in public debate, the unemployed count grew by 47,000, to more than 2.2 million people. Data released last month showed the first fall in German industrial employment in a decade, with the mighty car sector suffering disproportionate losses.

Many industries have suffered the knock-on effects of the US-China trade war-which observers hope will be partly salved with the signing of a preliminary deal this month.

But carmakers in particular are battling falling demand and a pricey transition to electric and connected mobility. Several major manufacturers including Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz parent Daimler have announced thousands of job cuts for the coming years.

Inflation in Germany clambered higher in December, official data showed Friday, but remained short of the European Central Bank's target for the 19-nation eurozone. Price growth hit 1.5 percent year-on-year last month, statistics authority Destatis said, some 0.4 percentage points higher than in November. And it reached the same level when measured using the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) yardstick preferred by the ECB.

But while German price growth was headed in the



FRANKFURT: Growth in lending to the eurozone's private sector slowed in November, the first month after the European Central Bank relaunched its controversial bond-buying scheme, data from the Frankfurt institution showed Friday.

right direction, it was still well short of the ECB's just-below-two-percent goal. Over the full year 2019, inflation averaged just 1.4 percent.

"There is little sign of sustained growing price pressure that could prompt the ECB to rethink its ultra-expansive monetary policy," said economist Uwe Burkert of LBBW bank.

The ECB has set interest rates at historic lows, granted hundreds of billions of euros in cheap loans to banks, and bought more than 2.6 trillion euros (\$2.9 trillion) of bonds in efforts to keep credit flowing to the economy, stoking growth and inflation. But it has fallen short of its eurozone-wide price growth

target for years, predicting last month it would inch up to just 1.6 percent by 2022.

Economists have pointed to both uncertainty over political events, like trade wars and Brexit, and long-term developments like ageing populations as possible reasons for sluggish growth and inflation. Under new chief Christine Lagarde, the ECB plans to launch a wide-ranging "strategic review" this year, its first since 2003, that could adjust its tools or even re-examine the inflation target itself. In the meantime, she has urged countries-like Germany-with sound government finances to lift spending in hopes of juicing the economy. —AFP

GM reports lower Q4 inventories, sales after strike

NEW YORK: General Motors reported lower fourth-quarter car sales Friday as a lengthy US worker strike continued to pinch auto inventories. The biggest US automaker delivered 735,909 vehicles during the quarter ending December 31, down 6.3 percent from the year-ago period. At year's end, the company had inventories of 616,023, down 18.4 percent. Although the figures demonstrated the continued drag from a 40-day strike that ended in late October, executives touted strong sales of larger sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks. Sales of "full-size" pickup trucks and SUVs topped one million during the year. "Our fourth-quarter stocks were leaner than we wanted, but as we get ready to launch our all-new full-size SUVs, we look forward to another solid year in 2020," said GM vice president for US sales Kurt McNeil.

"We've focused our resources on what our customers want-crossovers and trucks-and that has paid off." GM had previously signaled that the strike would weigh on fourth-quarter results, saying in October that the stoppage would cut about \$3 billion from 2019 earnings. The United Auto Workers strike ended after the union on October 25 ratified a new contract that boosted pay and contained health care costs, but allowed the automaker to permanently shut four plants. "As of late October, GM plants are back up and running, and we are working to produce every vehicle we can," a GM spokeswoman said Friday.

For all of 2019, GM reported sales of 2.9 million, down 2.3 percent. Among other large companies, Fiat Chrysler reported 542,519 car sales during the fourth quarter, down two percent. For the year, FCA's sales dipped one percent to 2.2 million. FCA said it scored records for its Ram pickup trucks and its Dodge Charger muscle car. —AFP

S&P 500 snaps win streak as ME tensions push down Wall Street

NEW YORK: Wall Street's major indexes fell from record highs on Friday after a US air strike in Iraq ratcheted up tensions in the Middle East and a bigger-than-expected contraction in the US manufacturing sector raised concerns of slowing economic growth. Friday's decline put the benchmark S&P 500 in the red for the week, snapping a five-week winning streak for the index.

Demand for safe-haven assets soared as Iran vied for revenge for the killing of Qassem Soleimani, head of its elite Quds Force, in an air strike authorized by US President Donald Trump.

In a further blow to US market sentiment, data from the Institute for Supply Management showed that US factory activity contracted in December by the most in more than a decade. "There was a reinforcement of weak manufacturing activity and then you had the geopolitical spark," said Michael Antonelli, market strategist at Robert W. Baird in Milwaukee. "That's on top of the sentiment that the market has been overbought."

Sterling sags as risk of no-deal Brexit in focus

LONDON: Sterling was on track for its biggest daily loss in more than two weeks on Thursday as euphoria after last month's British election gave way to anxiety over the risk of

S&P 500 bank stocks dropped 1.6 percent as the news sent benchmark US bond yields to their lowest since Dec. 12. Shares of airlines also tumbled as oil prices jumped about 3 percent. American Airlines Group Inc shares dropped 5.0 percent, while shares of United Airlines Holdings Inc fell 2.1 percent. Among the S&P 500's 11 major sectors, only real estate and utilities - both considered defensive plays - ended higher.

In a sign of investor jitters, US stocks extended their fall following a false report of an attack on a US military base in Iraq. Shares of US defense companies jumped on news of the air strike that killed Soleimani. Northrop Grumman Corp shares climbed 5.4 percent and Lockheed Martin Corp shares rose 3.6 percent. The two provided the biggest boosts to the S&P 500. The market disturbance following the strike could be fleeting, said Wayne Wicker, chief investment officer of Vantagepoint Investment Advisers in Washington.

"We've looked at many types of conflicts over the last 20 years, and they've had much more of a short-term impact," Wicker said. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 233.92 points, or 0.81 percent, to 28,634.88. The S&P 500 lost 23 points, or 0.71 percent, to 3,234.85. The Nasdaq Composite dropped 71.42 points, or 0.79 percent, to 9,020.77.

For the week, the Dow dipped 0.04 percent, the S&P 500 fell 0.17 percent,



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) on Friday in New York City. Following news that the US military killed Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's elite paramilitary forces, global stocks and oil prices fell with the Dow falling over 220 points. —AFP

and the Nasdaq rose 0.16 percent. Among advancers, Tesla Inc shares hit a record high and ended up 3.0 percent after the automaker beat estimates for vehicle deliveries in the fourth quarter. Lamb Weston Holdings Inc shares surged 11.3 percent, the biggest percentage gain on the S&P 500, after the frozen foods supplier's quarterly results surpassed estimates. Shares of retailer L Brands Inc rose 7.8 percent after Bank of America upgraded its rating on the

company's stock. Declining issues outnumbered advancing ones on the NYSE by a 1.14-to-1 ratio. On Nasdaq, a 1.71-to-1 ratio favored decliners.

The S&P 500 posted 22 new 52-week highs and one new low. The Nasdaq Composite recorded 60 new highs and 15 new lows. Volume on US exchanges was 7.47 billion shares, compared to the 6.87 billion average for the full session over the last 20 trading days. —Reuters

a no-deal Brexit at the end of 2020. Market liquidity was thin on the first trading day of the year, but the pound's decline also reflected worries over Britain's trade negotiations with the European Union following its expected exit from the bloc at the end of this month. Britain has until the end of 2020 to strike a trade deal and while the deadline can be extended, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said he will not ask for an extension, despite warnings it would be hard to agree to a deal in just under a year.

The final reading of a British manufacturing purchasing managers' index contributed to the gloom, showing factory

output fell in December at the fastest rate since 2012 as a tepid global economy hurt demand and businesses reduced inventories built up in the event of a no-deal Brexit last year. "The pound was the second worst performing G10 currency overnight amid thin liquidity as markets grow nervous that the recent rally in the pound was overdone," said Lee Hardman, currency analyst at MCFG. "At the moment there is still significant uncertainty about the macroeconomic direction over the next few months and so we expect the pound could be more sensitive to data releases going forward," Hardman said. —Reuters

EXCHANGE RATES

Al-Muzaini Exchange Co.

ASIAN COUNTRIES

Japanese Yen	2.812
Indian Rupees	4.237
Pakistani Rupees	1.970
Sri Lankan Rupees	1.672
Nepali Rupees	2.648
Singapore Dollar	227.210
Hongkong Dollar	39.067
Bangladesh Taka	3.551
Philippine Peso	5.958
Thai Baht	10.193
Malaysian Ringgit	77.724

GCC COUNTRIES

Saudi Riyal	81.094
Qatari Riyal	83.523
UAE Dirham	789.864
Bahraini Dinar	807.490
UAE Dirham	82.795

ARAB COUNTRIES

Egyptian Pound - Cash	22.350
Egyptian Pound - Transfer	18.965
Yemen Riyal/for 1000	1.221
Tunisian Dinar	111.730
Jordanian Dinar	428.900
Lebanese Lira/for 1000	0.203
Syrian Lira	0.000
Morocco Dirham	32.193

EUROPEAN & AMERICAN COUNTRIES

US Dollar Transfer	303.900
Euro	342.800
Sterling Pound	401.450
Canadian dollar	236.040
Turkish lira	52.040
Swiss Franc	316.400
US Dollar Buying	296.550

Dollarco Exchange Co. Ltd

Rate for Transfer	Selling Rate
US Dollar	303.550
Canadian Dollar	234.360
Sterling Pound	402.480
Euro	341.625
Swiss Franc	297.055
Bahraini Dinar	807.250
UAE Dirhams	83.050
Qatari Riyals	84.285
Saudi Riyals	81.840
Jordanian Dinar	429.420
Egyptian Pound	18.955
Sri Lankan Rupees	1.670
Indian Rupees	4.249
Pakistani Rupees	1.958
Bangladesh Taka	3.546
Philippines Peso	5.992
Cyprus pound	18.060
Japanese Yen	3.790
Syrian Pound	1.590
Nepales Rupees	2.665

Malaysian Ringgit	75.120
Chinese Yuan Renminbi	43.995
Thai Bhat	11.070
Turkish Lira	51.450
Singapore dollars	224.556

BAHRAIN EXCHANGE COMPANY WLL

CURRENCY	BUY	SELL
British Pound	0.391602	0.405502
Czech Korune	0.005385	0.014685
Danish Krone	0.041365	0.046365
Euro	0.332432	0.346132
Georgian Lari	0.113985	0.113985
Hungarian	0.001145	0.001335
Norwegian Krone	0.030497	0.035697
Romanian Leu	0.065096	0.081946
Russian Ruble	0.004914	0.004914
Slovakia	0.009076	0.019076
Swedish Krona	0.028439	0.033439
Swiss Franc	0.306416	0.317416
Australian Dollar	0.203482	0.215482
New Zealand Dollar	0.198689	0.206189
Canada Dollar	0.228680	0.237680
US Dollars	0.299800	0.304350
US Dollars Mint	0.300300	0.304350
Bangladesh Taka	0.002940	0.003741

Chinese Yuan	0.042252	0.045752
Hong Kong Dollar	0.037047	0.039797
Indian Rupee	0.003592	0.004364
Indonesian Rupiah	0.000017	0.000023
Japanese Yen	0.002732	0.002812
Korean Won	0.000250	0.000265
Malaysian Ringgit	0.0702314	0.076314
Nepalese Rupee	0.002620	0.002960
Pakistan Rupee	0.001321	0.002091
Philippine Peso	0.005856	0.006156
Singapore Dollar	0.220210	0.230210
Sri Lankan Rupee	0.001316	0.001896
Taiwan	0.010109	0.010289
Thai Baht	0.009742	0.010292
Vietnamese Dong	0.000013	0.000013

Arab

Bahraini Dinar	0.799959	0.807999
Egyptian Pound	0.018906	0.021647
Iranian Riyal	0.000084	0.000086
Iraqi Dinar	0.000199	0.000259
Jordanian Dinar	0.423725	0.432725
Kuwaiti Dinar	1.000000	1.000000
Lebanese Pound	0.000103	0.000253
Moroccan Dirhams	0.021137	0.045137
Omani Riyal	0.784227	0.792109
Qatar Riyal	0.082819	0.083651
Saudi Riyal	0.079953	0.081253
Syrian Pound	0.001288	0.001508
Tunisian Dinar	0.104855	0.112855
Turkish Lira	0.044652	0.054497
UAE Dirhams	0.082108	0.082934
Yemen Riyal	0.000988	0.001068

Business

Lebanon's economic crisis needs \$20bn-\$25bn bailout: Ex-minister

Economy could contract 10% in 2020 without plan

BEIRUT: Lebanon needs a \$20 billion-\$25 billion bailout including International Monetary Fund support to emerge from its financial crisis, former economy minister Nasser Saidi told Reuters on Friday.

Lebanon's crisis has shattered confidence in its banking system and raised investors' concerns that a default could loom for one of the world's most indebted countries, with a \$1.2 billion Eurobond due in March. Lebanon's politicians have failed to come up with a rescue plan since Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri quit in October after protests over state corruption. Depositors and investors say they have been kept in the dark about the country's dire financial situation.

President Michel Aoun said on Friday that he hoped a new government would be formed next week. But analysts say the cabinet to be led by Hassan Diab may struggle to win international support because he was nominated by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah group and its allies. Saidi said time was running short, and that \$11 billion in previously pledged support from foreign donors was now roughly half of what was needed to mount a recovery.

"The danger of the current situation is we're approaching economic collapse that can potentially reduce GDP (for 2020) by 10 percent," Saidi said in an interview. Economists have said 2020 is likely to register Lebanon's

first economic contraction in 20 years, with some saying GDP will contract by 2 percent.

Others have predicted a long depression unseen since independence from France in 1943 or during the 1975-90 civil war.

Lebanese companies have laid off workers and business has ground to a halt. A hard currency crunch has prompted banks to restrict access to dollars and the Lebanese pound trades a third weaker on the parallel market, driving up prices.

"Our policymakers are not willing to recognize the depth of the problems we have ... They need the courage to tell the Lebanese population that difficult times are coming," said Saidi.

Credit ratings agencies have downgraded Lebanon's sovereign rating and the ratings of its commercial banks on fears of default. Saidi said a \$20-\$25 billion package could guarantee payment on some of the country's public debt, enabling it to restructure in a way that would extend maturities and reduce interest rates. Saidi said that would need support from the IMF, World Bank, and Western and Gulf states. Hariri last month discussed the possibility of technical assistance from the IMF and World Bank, but there has been no public mention of a financial package. — Reuters



SIDON: A flatbed truck, placed by an angry Lebanese client, blocks the entrance to his bank branch in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon yesterday after the establishment refused to allow him to withdraw his savings. — AFP

Thousands march against pension reform in Paris

PARIS: Thousands of people demonstrated yesterday against French President Emmanuel Macron's proposed pension reforms which have sparked a month-long transport strike.

Some protesters donned the yellow vests which over the past year have become symbolic of opposition to Macron's attempts at reforms he says will rationalize France's 42 separate pension regimes into a single points-based system. Unions reject the scheme saying it would require millions of people to work beyond the official retirement age of 62.

The marchers set off after midday from the Gare de Lyon railway station in eastern Paris behind a giant banner reading "Macron, withdraw your project; save and improve our retirements," heading for Gare de l'Est, four kilometers (2.5 miles) to the north, an AFP reporter said.

Reaching the opera house at Bastille square, some demonstrators shouted "we don't want the grandfather clause" referring to proposals for new opera dancers to lose the current generous pension benefits enjoyed by older colleagues who can currently retire at 42. So far, more than 60 performances at the Paris opera's historic Garnier and modern Bastille stages have been cancelled, leading to losses of more than 12 million euros (\$13.4 million) in ticket sales.

Several other professions, including train drivers, also enjoy special pension provisions. Macron wants to simplify the system and is banking on support falling for the strikers the longer the disruption goes on amid what is now the longest continuous train strike in French history. A new poll published Friday showed a majority of 61 percent still support the strike, although



PARIS: People hold a banner reading "On strike until withdrawal" during a demonstration called by French national trade union General Confederation of Labor (CGT) against the pension reform yesterday in Paris. — AFP

that was five points lower than a December 19 survey, according to pollster Odoxa.

Unions have called another day of mass demonstrations for Thursday, when teachers, hospital workers and others are expected to join the strike.

The public transport headache has taken a big bite out of holiday earnings for shops in the capital, with revenues down 30 to 40 percent, according to the CMA business federation.

Hardline unions are fighting an overhaul that would rationalize France's 42 separate pension regimes into a single points-based system which they say would require millions of people to work beyond the official retirement age of 62. President Emmanuel Macron made pension reform a key plank of his election campaign, saying it would be fairer and more transparent, particularly for low earners and women. But unions are vehemently opposed to the proposed "pivot age" of 64 until which people would have to work to receive a full pension, and the loss of early-retirement provisions for some sectors including the railways.

The CGT union has called a four-day blockade of fuel refineries and depots

starting Tuesday, when talks between unions and the government are to resume. Two unions representing pilots and cabin crew at Air France have called a strike for next week, as have lawyers, physiotherapists and other self-employed workers who have separate-and more advantageous-pension schemes.

"We're getting dozens of emails from supporters every day," CGT chief Philippe Martinez said during a rally outside a Paris department store Friday.

War of wills

In a New Year's Eve address Macron insisted that he would push ahead with the reform, which will be presented to his cabinet on January 22 ahead of a parliamentary debate. But he promised that people with arduous jobs would still be allowed to retire earlier — a key sticking point in the talks with unions.

Macron is hoping to win the battle of public opinion, betting that support for the strike will falter the longer the disruption persists. "I support them... but the problem is that this shouldn't impact all the transport lines," Sonia Bergoz, a 59-year-old

nurse, told AFP at the Aulnay-sous-Bois suburban train station northeast of Paris. "You can't do anything, go to work... you can't even go out. I'm getting tired of it," she said.

However, a new poll published Friday showed a majority of 61 percent still support the strike, although that was five points lower than a December 19 survey, according to pollster Odoxa.

Unions have called another day of mass demonstrations for Thursday, when teachers, hospital workers and others are expected to join the strike. "The government is engaged in a battle of attrition... We are playing the exact opposite game we will continue to be strong," said Eric Challal, a 35-year-old employee at rail operator SNCF who has been on strike since December 5.

But he conceded that losing 30 days' worth of pay and with little prospect of any change was starting to be a concern. Asked at the Gare du Nord station in Paris how much longer he could hold out, he told AFP: "I don't really know."

"But for now, we are gritting our teeth," he said as he gathered with other strikers. Although the number of strikers at the SNCF and Paris transport operator RATP has dropped sharply, travellers continue to suffer extensive service disruptions. Most Paris metro lines operate only at rush hours, and a third of the country's high-speed TGV trains were cancelled on Friday. It has become the longest continuous train strike in French history, as well as the longest by Paris Opera dancers and other employees who enjoy special pension provisions. So far, 63 performances at the Opera's historic Garnier and modern Bastille stages have been cancelled, costing the company more than 12 million euros (\$13.4 million) in lost ticket sales.

Jean-Marie Monnier, 57, said his wife Le Rallye du Nord has seen turnover "at least 50 percent" lower than a year ago, a loss he said was "comparable to the attacks" of 2015, when jihadist strikes scared many tourists out of Paris. — AFP

Oil jumps as uncontrolled escalation risk rises in Mideast

LONDON: The US air strike that killed a top commander of Iran's revolutionary guard in Baghdad seems to have been intended to restore strategic deterrence in the aftermath of the assault on the US embassy in the Iraqi capital.

The aggressive response implies the United States still believes it has "escalation dominance" and Iran will absorb the blow rather than trying to match it or risk escalating the conflict further. Officially, the United States remains committed to a policy of coercive diplomacy, steadily increasing economic pressure through sanctions to persuade Iran to resume negotiations on nuclear and regional security issues.

But Iran has refused to negotiate under sanctions and tensions between the two countries have been steadily increasing. The lack of movement on the diplomatic front has caused the focus to switch to military operations as both sides try to increase their leverage and force a resumption of negotiations on their own terms. Qassem Soleimani's killing is the latest incident in the "shadow war" between Iran and its regional proxies on the one hand, and the United States and its allies, including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Britain, on the other. The undeclared conflict has included attacks on tankers, industrial sabotage, cyber warfare, assassinations and hostage taking, as well as on US bases in Iraq and oil installations in Saudi Arabia.

Oil market impact

So far, sanctions on Iran's exports and low-level military confrontation have not had a lasting impact on the oil market. In 2018, big reductions in the volume of Iran's exports as a result of US sanctions were offset by increased output from Saudi Arabia and US shale producers, ensuring oil supplies remained plentiful and prices fell.

In 2019, attacks on tanker shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and on oil installations in Saudi Arabia had only a transient effect on prices because of plentiful shale production and slack global oil consumption growth. The increase in oil prices following Soleimani's killing, with front-month Brent futures up by around \$2.50 per barrel (4 percent), suggests oil traders think the pattern will be repeated. The small rise in Brent indicates traders are so far pricing in a low but non-zero probability of significant uncontrolled escalation across the region disrupting oil supplies.

Escalation control

Both countries insist they are prepared for a full-scale armed conflict, while saying they do not seek it or think it likely. Both have pursued a mixed strategy of escalation (increased sanctions, attacks on oil infrastructure) and containment. And both have signalled at various times that they want to avoid provoking a full-scale and uncontrolled confrontation.

The United States has pursued a policy of strategic patience to give sanctions time to work, rather than resort to heavy armed force, in the belief a weakening economy will eventually force Iran to negotiate on more favorable terms. The US government believes time is on its side so there is no rush to bring the economic and military conflict to a crisis, which could also weaken support for its sanctions policy among its European and Middle East allies. In turn, Iran has pursued its own version of forward defense, trying to push the conflict away from its own territory into neighboring states, and raise the cost of sanctions on the United States and its allies.

Miscalculation risk

Soleimani's killing represents a serious escalation of the conflict because he was identified as the architect of Iran's forward defense policy. It remains unclear why the United States selected such a high-value target at this particular point, especially since it will likely provoke reprisals and impose some costs on US intelligence collection efforts. Iran will likely review its operational security and conduct a counter-intelligence sweep to identify the source of information that enabled the United States to locate its commander in real time. The killing is likely to impose real costs but presumably the White House and senior decision-makers decided they were worth it to send a strong deterrence signal to Iran and reassure regional allies about US resolve. It remains unclear whether Soleimani's killing will mark a shift in the strategic calculations of either party. — Reuters

Russia no longer Finland's sole gas supplier

RIGA: Russia is no longer Finland's sole gas supplier, as stored natural gas has begun flowing to the country from Latvia through the new Balticconnector pipeline.

Some of the gas stored in Latvia itself comes from Russia, but there are also other sources including Norwegian supplies imported via Lithuania, though the exact percentages are not publicly available.

The stored gas will also reduce the likelihood that Finland will have to make quick and expensive purchases from Russia at times of increased demand. "Russia is—and will be—the main source of natural gas consumed in the Baltic countries and Finland. But the use of Inčukalns storage now gives Finland and Estonia more leverage against Gazprom, just like Latvia has always had," economic analyst Maris Kirsons told AFP.

"Utility companies can buy gas at low prices, store it underground and then use it whenever demand rises, avoiding paying Russia high prices on the spot." Estonia's electricity and gas system operator Elering said in a statement that gas began flowing from Latvia's underground storage facility in the central village of Inčukalns to Finland via Estonia on January 1.

Much of Inčukalns's stored gas comes from Russia, but there are

also other sources, including Latvian biogas producers and Lithuania's floating LNG terminal in the port of Klaipeda, which buys the gas from countries including Norway, the Gulf States and the United States.

The Balticconnector project cost around 250 million euros (\$279 million), with 75 percent of it covered by the European Union. Estonia and Latvia's pipelines have already been connected for half a century.

Fees for transporting gas from one Baltic country to another have also been scrapped, meaning that gas can now flow throughout the single market comprising Estonia, Finland and Latvia with no extra charges beyond pipeline and storage costs.

"Launching the single market marks a major turning point for the energy industry, demonstrating that several countries are able to work together to strengthen their energy independence and work towards more efficient use of infrastructure on a transnational scale," said Zane Kotane, board chairwoman for Conexus, the company that manages Inčukalns.

"In addition, the Estonia-Finland interconnector... will put an end to Finland's isolation," she told public broadcaster LSM. The Baltic states' heavy dependence on Russian gas was partly reduced in January 2015, when Lithuania broke the Russian monopoly on gas deliveries by launching the LNG terminal in Klaipeda. Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula prompted the EU to speed up its plans to cut dependence on Russian gas. — AFP



CUPERTINO: In this file photo Apple CEO Tim Cook speaks on-stage during a product launch event at Apple's headquarters in Cupertino, California. — AFP

CEO Tim Cook sees pay ebb along with Apple performance

SAN FRANCISCO: Apple chief Tim Cook saw his annual pay slip to \$11.6 million in 2019 after the company registered a weaker financial performance compared with the previous year, according to documents filed Friday. Cook, who took home \$15.7 million in 2018, is paid a base salary of \$3 million, in addition to a bonus and various compensations.

His 2019 incentive bonus, which is tied to Apple's performance, tallied about \$7.7 million, and was calculated based on the fact that Apple exceeded its sales target by only

28 percent. That compared with \$12 million in 2018, based on the company exceeding its sales target by 100 percent, the filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission said.

Cook's 2019 pay was also reported to include another \$885,000 worth of benefits, most of which were for security and use of a private jet. "For security and efficiency reasons, the board requires Mr. Cook to use private aircraft for all business and personal travel," the filing said.

Apart from his salary, Cook also saw more than \$113 million worth of Apple shares become vested as part of his long-term compensation as head of the firm, according to the filing.

As iPhone sales have weakened, Apple has been shifting to earnings from digital content and services sold to the legions of fans of its devices. Apple reported net sales of \$260.2 billion and operating income of \$63.9 billion for 2019, it said in the filing. — AFP

Business

KFH launches purchasing gold biscuits, and instant cheque printing services

New digital services under slogan 'New Generation of Easy Banking Services'

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has launched two first-of-its-kind in Kuwait services: purchasing and receiving gold biscuits (10 grams) and instant cheque printing. In line with its strategy of digital transformation, KFH offers such digital services to enhance customers' experience and fulfill their requirements and needs around the clock, easily, simply and safely, under the slogan "New Generation of Easy Banking Services".

In 9 different areas in Kuwait, customers can visit the nearest KFH Go branch to purchase and receive the gold biscuit (10 grams) immediately by using the ATM machines or calling KFH "ALLO BAITEK".

For instant cheque printing, customers can visit the nearest KFH Go self-banking station, request and print a cheque book of 10 leaves by video conference with KFH agent. KFH is keen on constantly improving its digital banking solutions, especially that the bank has uniquely rolled out innovative services that can be completed online and via mobile using robotics, AI, XTMs and the smart branches KFH Go. This contributed to adding value to the customer's experience, confirming that the easy banking services encourage customers to use KFH Online in their transactions.

KFH offers online financial solutions, including local and telex financial transfers, opening deposits, adding beneficiaries, balance inquiry, cheque book request, opening KFH gold account, conducting gold transactions (purchase, sell and trade), requesting financing, opening an account, applying for Al-Khair card, and checking the PINs for credit and debit cards.

KFH was the first to adopt the Robotics Process Automation (RPA) program that is enhanced with artificial intelligence system to facilitate and auto-



KFH-Go self-banking station



mate the internal financing transactions, therefore increasing the efficiency and saving time.

KFH was established in Kuwait in 1977 and is enlisted in the Kuwait Stock Exchange. KFH Group is a global pioneer in the field of Islamic banking services, where it offers a wide array of Islamic financial products and services, not to mention a high stan-

dard of innovation and customer service.

KFH manages its operations in the GCC, Asia, and Europe through over 510 branches, including KFH-Turkey, to offer services for the bank's customers in Turkey, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Germany, and the UAE.

KFH's mission is to achieve highest levels of excel-

lence and innovation in the field of customer service, while developing common interest for all those concerned with the financial institution. KFH's vision is to spearhead the global development in Islamic financial services, and to upgrade the bank into the level of becoming the most sustainable profitable Islamic bank in the world.

E-car sales in Norway reach new record high

OSLO: Sales of new electric cars in Norway hit a record high last year, sector experts said Friday, reaching 42.4 percent of all newly-registered cars in 2019, mostly thanks to strong demand for Tesla's Model 3. Norway, a major oil producer that has pioneered electric mobility, offers a very advantageous tax regime for clean vehicles, making them highly competitive in cost terms against petrol and diesel vehicles.

New e-car models arriving on the market should help push their share higher still this year, said OFV, a body which monitors Norway's car market. In 2019, 60,316 all-electric new cars were sold in Norway out of a total of 142,381, a rise of 30.8 percent from the previous year when the market share of e-cars was 31.2 percent. The Norwegian car importer association said it expects e-cars to take a market share for new cars of 55 to 60 percent in 2020.

New models including the Volkswagen ID.3, the Ford Mustang Mach-e, the Polestar 2 and the Peugeot e-208 are expected to boost e-car sales. "Today, in 2020 and in the years to come, a much larger range of cars is coming, with increased autonomy, greater size and in affordable price segments," said OFV boss Oyvind Solberg Thorsen. US firm Tesla was the biggest single seller of e-cars in Norway last year, with its latest Model 3 alone selling 15,700 units. Norway's Electric Vehicle Association called the numbers "very positive" but told AFP it had hoped for e-cars to account for 50 percent of new car sales last year.

The association's secretary-general, Christina Bu, called on the government to maintain tax breaks for electric cars, which have become the topic of much debate in the Scandinavian country. —AFP

UK house price growth tops 1% for first time in a year

LONDON: British house prices rose in annual terms by more than 1 percent for the first time in 12 months in December, but uncertainty about Brexit is likely to weigh on the market again in 2020, mortgage lender Nationwide said on Friday.

House prices increased by 1.4 percent compared with December 2018, Nationwide said, in line with the median forecast in a Reuters poll of economists. In December alone, house prices rose by 0.1 percent, compared with a median forecast in the poll for no change. Britain's housing market, along with the rest of the economy, has slowed since the 2016 referendum decision by voters to leave the European Union. Last year's average price rise was weaker than gains of about 5 percent at the time of the referendum, according to Nationwide's index. The lender said it expected house prices to remain broadly flat over the next 12 months.

"Looking ahead, economic developments will remain the key driver of housing market trends and house prices," Robert Gardner, Nationwide's chief economist, said. "Much will continue to depend on how quickly uncertainty about the UK's future trading relationships lifts as well as the outlook for global growth." Prime Minister Boris Johnson led his Conservative Party to a sweeping victory in an election in December that paved the way for Britain to leave the EU at the end of this month. —Reuters

HSBC kicks off year with Hong Kong branches closed, vandalized

HONG KONG: HSBC is being drawn into Hong Kong's political turmoil with protesters attacking some of its branches and graffiti daubed on the famous pair of lions that guard its city-center headquarters.

Hong Kong is the bank's single most important market, accounting for just over half of its \$12.5 billion pre-tax profits in the first half of 2019, though with the protests tipping Hong Kong's economy into recession, HSBC and its peers are expected to take a financial hit. Until now, HSBC had largely escaped direct involvement in the often-violent anti-government protests that have shaken Hong Kong for more than six months even as other companies with perceived links to Beijing have seen premises vandalized, including Bank of China (Hong Kong), Hong Kong's second largest bank behind HSBC.

But more recently, HSBC has drawn the ire of some protesters who accuse it of being complicit in action by the authorities against activists trying to raise money to support their campaign.

Protesters link the bank's closure in November of an account held by a group called Spark Alliance, which helps pay protesters' legal costs, to the December arrest of four Spark Alliance members on money laundering charges. HSBC has strongly denied any connection.

"People are angry because they feel that HSBC has stopped money getting to the protesters," one protester said on Wednesday, of the decision to close the

account as he stood in a group taking photos of the damaged lions. HSBC said in a statement after the arrests that the decision to close the account was "in accordance to international regulatory standards". "Our decision is completely unrelated to the Hong Kong Police's arrest of the four individuals on 19 December 2019. We closed the account in November 2019 following direct instruction from the customer," the bank said.

It is highly unusual for HSBC to comment on individual cases. Two HSBC branches and seven indoor ATM clusters were closed on Thursday, the first working day of the year.

Some had their windows smashed and "support Spark Alliance" was spray painted on their walls during a New Year's Day anti-government protest march. Others were damaged during protests on Christmas Eve.

The two lions were daubed with graffiti and briefly set alight after being doused in a flammable liquid.

HSBC said on Thursday initial cleaning of the lions had begun. "We are engaging conservation experts to advise us on the professional restoration required and the process can take time," the bank said in a statement.

'FINE LINE'

More than 90 percent of the \$4.4 billion generated by HSBC's retail banking and wealth management unit in the six months to last June, came from Hong Kong. HSBC has also deployed billions of dollars in China's southern Pearl River Delta region, adjacent to Hong Kong, and has expanded its services in the world's second largest economy. Some analysts believe HSBC executives will have to explain their Hong Kong strategy when they discuss annual results on Feb. 18.

John Cronin, an analyst with Goodbody, said he expects to hear

Tesla reports solid Q4 auto deliveries, extending streak

NEW YORK: Electric automaker Tesla saw a late year surge after a bumpy start to 2019, posting a jump in car deliveries in the final three months, the company said Friday.

The firm founded by controversial entrepreneur Elon Musk delivered 112,000 vehicles in the quarter ending December 31, a nearly 23 percent from the same three-month period of 2018. The positive results contrasted with those of conventional auto giants like General Motors and Fiat Chrysler that on Friday reported middling sales which pressured their share prices. But Tesla shares rallied further on the news, the latest in a run of better performance reflected in strong third-quarter earnings in October, a splashy launch of a new SUV design in November and the successful ramp-up of a Chinese car factory earlier this week.

Things have improved considerably from the early part of 2019 when US securities regulators sought to sanction Musk for violating a settlement over his August

2018 statements on Twitter tied to a quickly-aborted effort to take the company private. In April, Musk and the Securities Exchange Commission settled the matter, imposing clearer guidelines on topics Musk should avoid on social media, including statements about acquisitions, mergers, new products and production numbers.

Since then, Musk has "toned down significantly" in his leadership style, said CFRA Research analyst Garrett Nelson in an email to AFP. "The perception among investors is that he's more operationally focused that he was previously. "Tesla's execution in bringing the China factory online was impressive and Musk recently provided more clarity regarding its product pipeline that has given investors a greater degree of confidence in the future growth of the company."

Overseas push

Tesla deliveries in all of 2019 surged to 367,500, 50 percent above the 2018 level and in line with company forecasts, the company reported. Those figures are still fraction of the sales of GM, FCA and Toyota, all of which reported modestly lower US car sales for the year.

Tesla touted its speedy completion of the China plant, saying it has already produced just under 1,000 "customer salable cars" in China "despite breaking ground at Gigafactory Shanghai less than 12 months



HONG KONG: A protester sets fire to an ATM outside an HSBC branch in Central following a pro-democracy march in Hong Kong on January 1, 2020. —AFP

about a push to grow in other Asian nations, especially emerging markets, as unrest in Hong Kong continues. "Even putting aside the political turmoil in Hong Kong, HSBC's dependence on Hong Kong for profitability is something I expect that management will seek to tackle," Cronin told Reuters. Beijing plans to integrate the Pearl River Delta and Hong Kong and Macau to create an economic powerhouse under its Greater Bay Area Initiative.

HSBC's entanglement in the protests underlines the tightrope that companies have had to walk since the protests got going in June in response to a now-withdrawn bill that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China, where courts are controlled by the Communist Party.

The demonstrations have evolved into a broad pro-democracy movement. "Clearly, there is a fine line for management to draw between customers and

the Chinese authorities," said a head of corporate governance at a UK-based asset manager and HSBC shareholder.

Other Hong Kong companies have been damaged by being perceived to be too supportive of the protests. Cathay Pacific Airways was forced by Beijing to suspend staff involved in the protests, and chief executive Rupert Hogg and his top deputy resigned in August amid the turmoil.

HSBC has previously been targeted by supporters of Beijing. Users of China's Weibo social media platform shared screenshots last year of an HSBC employee's Facebook posts supporting the protests. The posts urged readers to complain to HSBC management. "Businesses now have to consider how three different groups will react to their decisions: The Chinese government, Hong Kong protesters, and Chinese consumers," said Kent Kedl, head of Control Risks' Greater China practice. —Reuters



SHANGHAI: In this file photo, motorcycles are parked next to the new Tesla factory in Shanghai. Tesla reported on Friday, a jump in fourth-quarter auto deliveries, lifting shares as it ramps up output in the United States and China. —AFP

ago." The plant's completion positions Tesla in a key growth market for electric cars at a time when still-brittle US-China trade relations raises questions around importing into the country.

Chinese authorities have granted a waiver of purchase taxes on locally made Model 3 Teslas, as well as a subsidy of up to 25,000 yuan per car. Tesla also plans to add production capacity for the European

market, announcing in November that it will build a new auto factory in Berlin that reportedly could start up by 2021. Despite the positive results, CFRA's Nelson placed a "hold" rating on Tesla, and said the company still faces questions in China due to pricing pressure and in the United States, where there will be a "flood" of new electric car competition "with at least 25 new models debuting this year." —AFP

What's On



Concert of Youth Symphony Orchestra of Uzbekistan 'Peace Message Night'

Dear Bader Al-Duweesh, your excellencies ambassadors, my compatriots, ladies and gentlemen and friends, Assalomu alaykum, Good evening.

It gives me an enormous pleasure to welcome You to Uzbek-Kuwait music evening and express to all of You my big respect.

It is big pleasure also to welcome HE Ambassador of Kuwait to Uzbekistan Ahmad Al Jyran and HE Sheikhha Hala Al Sabah. Today, at the beginning of New Year - 2020, we organize the important cultural manifestation in friendly for Uzbekistan country - State of Kuwait, in this beautiful and famous Abdel Hussein Abdel Reda Theater in Salmiya.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature of Kuwait, particularly to Bader Al Duveesh, deputy General secretary of this Council, one of the big friends of Uzbekistan, for there big contribution to organize this concert.

I want to express my gratitude to Dr Amer Jafaar, professor in the Music Department in the College of Basic Education in Kuwait, a well-known Kuwaiti composer. His compositions vary from Arabic to international music forms. On 2008 Dr Amer Jafaar won the first prize for composing the best music piece competition, held by the Union of Arabic countries. Lately, he added the re-orchestration at the National Anthem of the State of Kuwait of his achievements.

Of course, today we express our big gratitude to Youth Symphony Orchestra of Uzbekistan, particularly to his chief conductor and artistic director Kamoliddin Urinbayev. Urinbayev is a participant of numerous international festivals and competitions all over the world.

He worked with such orchestras as State Academic Symphony chapel of Russia, National Symphony orchestra of Ukraine, Brandenburg Symphony orchestra, National Symphony orchestra of Uzbekistan etc. He used to work also as an opera conductor at the State Academic Theater named Alisher Navoi in Tashkent.

In 2014 with the group of talented young musician, Kamoliddin established Youth Symphony Orchestra of Uzbekistan. Despite to fact, that Orchestra does not exist for a very long time, it achieved great results and has already performed many concerts abroad - in countries of Europe, USA, Middle East, including Kuwait, Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine etc.

Today, I want particularly emphasize the very successful cooperation established between Youth Symphony Orchestra of Uzbekistan and two famous Kuwaiti composers - Drs Amer Jafaar and Suleiman Aldikan. The Uzbek orchestra already played two concerts with the music of the two composers in Uzbekistan and Kuwait. Today it is third common concert and next concert with the music of Dr Suleiman Aldikan will be held on 8 January.



cert and next concert with the music of Dr Suleiman Aldikan will be held on 8 January.

It is very symbolic, that this concert today takes place under the device "Peace Message Night" and on the occasion of 25th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Kuwait.

People's diplomacy, the cultural ties takes a very important place in diplomacy and plays a big role in the development of the relations between countries. The cultural diplomacy and music open the way to the political, trade and economic and humanitarian cooperation between states, also to close the peoples in the world.

We begun a New Year 2020 with a big cultural event - concert in Kuwait. It is pleasant to underline, that, nowadays, cultural diplomacy became an increasingly important component of uzbek-kuwaiti relationships. In this context, dear Drs Amer Jafaar and Suleiman Aldikan, Kamoliddin we appreciate highly your big contribution to cement our bilateral relations. We hope, that with your successful cooperation and Your unlimited energy You can serve during long time to the benefit of Uzbek and Kuwait friendly peoples, to the deepening of bilateral relations between two countries.

Dear friends, I take this opportunity to send our sincere greetings and best wishes of good health, happiness, prosperity and peace on the occasion New Year 2020 to HH the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, all mem-



bers of Kuwait government under the leadership of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, the all friendly Kuwaiti people; to HE the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev,

all members of the government of Uzbekistan and lovely people of my country; and to all of you, your families and friends and all our compatriots in Kuwait and other countries.

Qatar's Orphans Care Center 'Dreema' honors Al-Mas'oudi

CEO of Qatar's Orphans Care Center 'Dreema', Mariam Bin Ali Bin Nasser Al-Mesnad recently honored Suad Al-Sabah Publishing House manager, Ali Al-Mas'oudi.

Al-Mesnad had visited Kuwait accompanied by a delegation from Dreema to take part in the International Forum for Humanitarian Ambassadors 2019 recently held in Kuwait.

During her visit, Al-Mesnad visited a number of Kuwaiti social and cultural establishments and met with officials there including the prominent Kuwaiti writer, Dr Suad Al-Sabah and Kuwait National Library manager, Rasha Al-Sabah. Bilateral cooperation and partnership agreements in childhood-related issues were discussed on both meetings.



Birthday wishes



Happy birthday! May your day be as bright as your smile and as lovely as you. Happy birthday Mohammed Yusuf, lots of love from: Abbu & Ammi (Safeer), Badey Abbu & Ammi (Tanveer), Chacha & Chachi (Zaheer), Bhuppi (Yasmeen & Afreen), mama (Imthiyaz & Khadeer), Munwar, Hakeem (FICO), Habeeb, friends & relatives from Kuwait and India.

Farm Land, golden sponsor of Horeca 2020, competitions

Horeca Kuwait 2020 keeps attracting more sponsors, which reflects the exhibition's uniqueness as a one of its kind event in Kuwait and phenomenal regional hospitality activity.

In this regard, the exclusive agent of the 'President' trade mark; Farm Land Company; a genuine Kuwaiti trademark founded in Kuwait, announced renewing its golden sponsorship of Horeca Kuwait for the ninth consecutive time.

Speaking on the occasion, Horeca Kuwait 2020 organizer; Leaders Group said that Farm Land is one of the largest regional companies in dairy products and that it would be a main contributor in the exhibition activities and provider of the ingredients needed for the daily cooking competitions throughout the three-day exhibition, which is organized by Leaders Group in collaboration with Hospitality Services Co. at Mishref International Fair Grounds in the period of January 20-22, 2020.

On his part, Farm Land's general manager, Antoine Obeid said that Horeca Kuwait is a high quality phenomena in the world of hospitality and all the logistic skills, arts, equipment, food stuff needed for the business.

Obeid added that farmland annually looks forward to holding Horeca Kuwait because of its role in bringing co-work-



ers together under one roof to discuss various concerns and exchange expertise first hand.

Further, Obeid explained that Farm Land provides the best quality products including President Cheese, one of the world's premiere cheese makers. He also noted that President offers many products produced of 100 per cent pure milk to prepare the most delicious dishes under prestigious brand names such as the fresh Italian Galbani Mozzarella, the famous French Valbreso Feta, Societe Roquefort cheese in addition to a number of international brands such as Muratbey, Granoro, Hollinger, Al-Attar and White Chef.

Finally, Obeid announced that, following their visit to Kuwait, the Lamaison Du Fromage (which literally translates to The House of Cheese) recently opened their branch in Kuwait to serve over 250 types of cheese from over seven outstanding cheese producing countries such as France, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, Spain, England and Germany.

Health & Science

The 'supercells' that cured an infant's grave genetic illness

MCLEAN: When a person's immune system is impaired by a genetic disease, a bone-marrow transplant can be a powerful therapeutic tool, but with a major downside: during the first few months the recipient's defenses against viruses are severely weakened. The slightest infection can lead to a hospital trip.

A still-experimental type of treatment known as T-cell therapy aims to assist during this vulnerable period — the months during which the body is rebuilding its natural defenses. After two decades of clinical trials, the technology has been refined, and is being used to treat more and more patients, many of them children.

A boy named Johan is one of them. Today he is a mischievous, smiling toddler with a thick shock of light-brown hair, who never tires, playfully tormenting the family's puppy, Henry. There is no sign of the three-year-long medical and emotional roller-coaster ride he and his family, who live in an affluent Washington suburb, have been on. The first traumatic surprise came with the results of a pregnancy test: Johan was not planned. "That was a huge shock. I cried," said his mother, 39-year-old Maren Chamorro.

Risky procedure

She had known since childhood that she carried a gene that can be fatal in a child's first 10 years, chronic granulomatous disease (CGD). Her brother died of it at the age of seven. The inexorable laws of genetics meant that Maren had a one in four chance of transmitting it to her child.

For their first children, she and her husband Ricardo had chosen in-vitro fertilization, allowing the embryos to be genetically tested before implantation. Their twins Thomas and Joanna were born — both disease-free —

seven and a half years ago. But in Johan's case, a post-birth genetic test quickly confirmed the worst: he had CGD.

After conferring with experts at Children's National Hospital in Washington, the couple took one of the most important decisions of their lives: Johan would receive a bone-marrow transplant, a risky procedure but one that would give him a chance of a cure. "Obviously, the fact that Maren had lost a sibling at a young age from the disease played a big role," Ricardo confided. Bone marrow, the spongy tissue inside bones, serves as the body's "factory" for the production of blood cells — both red and white.

His brother's immune system

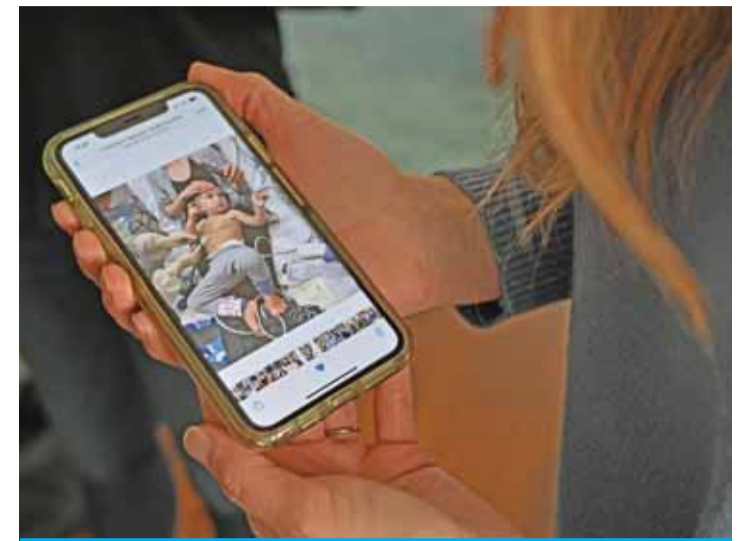
Johan's white blood cells were incapable of fighting off bacteria and fungal infections. A simple bacterial infection, of negligible concern in a healthy child, could spread out of control in his young body.

Luckily, Johan's brother Thomas, six years old at the time, was a perfect match. In April 2018, doctors first "cleansed" Johan's marrow using chemotherapy. They then took a small amount of marrow from Thomas's hip bones using a long, thin needle.

From that sample they extracted "supercells," as Thomas calls them — stem cells, which they reinserted into Johan's veins. Those cells would eventually settle in his bone marrow — and begin producing normal white blood cells. The second step was preventive cell therapy, under an experimental program led by immunologist Michael Keller at Children's National Hospital. The part of the immune system that protects against bacteria can be rebuilt in only a matter of weeks; but for viruses, the natural process takes at least three months.



WASHINGTON: Dr Michael Keller, an Immunologist and Assistant Professor at Children's National Hospital, picks up a T-cell research sample from an incubator as he explains a new kind of tailored treatment during an interview with AFP on December 12, 2019 in Washington, DC.



Maren Chamorro displays a photo on a smartphone of her son Johan while he was receiving a specialized T-cell infusion at Children's National Hospital, during an interview with AFP at her home in McLean, Virginia, December 26, 2019. — AFP photos

Hurdles remain

From Thomas's blood, doctors extracted specialized white blood cells — T-cells — that had already encountered six viruses. Keller grew them for 10 days in an incubator, creating an army of hundreds of millions of those specialized T-cells. The result: a fluffy white substance contained in a small glass vial.

Those T-cells were then injected into Johan's veins, immediately conferring protection against the six viruses. "He has his brother's immune system," said Keller, an assistant professor at Children's National.

Johan's mother confirmed as much: today,

when Thomas and Johan catch a cold, they have the same symptoms, and for nearly the same amount of time. "I think it's pretty cool to have immunity from your big brother," Maren Chamorro said.

This therapeutic approach — boosting the body's immune system using cells from a donor or one's own genetically modified cells — is known as immunotherapy. Its main use so far has been against cancer, but Keller hopes it will soon become available against viruses for patients, like Johan, who suffer from depressed immune systems.

The chief obstacles to that happening are

the complexity of the process and the costs, which can run to many thousands of dollars. These factors currently restrict the procedure to some 30 medical centers in the United States.

For Johan, a year and a half after his bone marrow transplant, everything points to a complete success. "It's neat to see him processing things, and especially play outside in the mud," his mother said. "You know, what a gift!" Her only concern now is the same as any mother would have — that when her son does fall ill, others in the family might catch the same bug. — AFP

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These services include, but are not limited to, the below:

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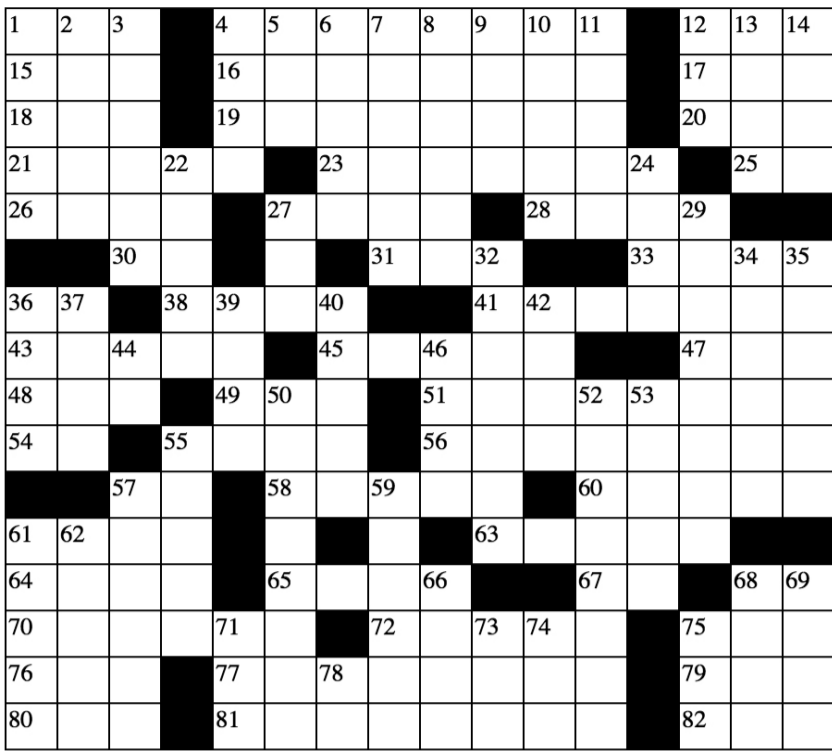
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Stars

CROSSWORD 2401



ACROSS

DOWN

- 1. A defensive missile designed to shoot down incoming intercontinental ballistic missiles.
- 4. City in central Iran.
- 12. The compass point that is one point south of due east.
- 15. The cry made by sheep.
- 16. Someone who reasons logically.
- 17. Resinlike substance secreted by certain lac insects.
- 18. The fatty flesh of eel.
- 19. Point representing the mean position of the matter in a body.
- 20. Type genus of the family Mycidae.
- 21. (Babylonian) A demigod or first man.
- 23. Harmed or injured or spoiled.
- 25. The blood group whose red cells carry both the A and B antigens.
- 26. A member of an American Indian people of Yucatan and Belize and Guatemala who once had a culture characterized by outstanding architecture and pottery and astronomy.
- 28. A complex red organic pigment containing iron and other atoms to which oxygen binds.
- 30. A public promotion of some product or service.
- 31. A constellation in the southern hemisphere near Telescopium and Norma.
- 33. A sequence of 8 bits (enough to represent one character of alphanumeric data) processed as a single unit of information.
- 36. An associate degree in nursing.
- 38. Herb of the Pacific islands grown throughout the tropics for its edible root and in temperate areas as an ornamental for its large glossy leaves.
- 41. Light in a transparent protective case.
- 43. Food mixtures either arranged on a plate or tossed and served with a moist dressing.
- 45. Accord or comport with.
- 47. United States sculptor and architect whose public works include the memorial to veterans of the Vietnam War in Washington (born in 1959).
- 48. An accountant certified by the state.
- 49. Goddess of criminal rashness and its punishment.
- 51. Of parents and children.
- 54. (astronomy) The angular distance of a celestial point measured westward along the celestial equator from the zenith crossing.
- 56. The character flaw or error of a tragic hero that leads to his downfall.
- 58. A broken piece of a brittle artifact.
- 60. Submerged aquatic plant having narrow leaves and small flowers.
- 61. King of Saudi Arabia since 1982 (born in 1922).
- 63. United States anatomist who identified four pituitary hormones and discovered vitamin E (1882-1971).
- 64. On or toward the lee.
- 65. According to the Old Testament he was a pagan king of Israel and husband of Jezebel (9th century BC).
- 67. A chronic progressive nervous disorder involving loss of myelin sheath around certain nerve fibers.
- 70. The French-speaking capital of the province of Quebec.
- 72. Chinese fruit having a thin brittle shell enclosing a sweet jellylike pulp and a single seed.
- 76. A kind of person.
- 77. Grown for its thickened edible aromatic root.
- 79. A loose sleeveless outer garment made from aba cloth.
- 80. A column of light (as from a beacon).
- 81. A great raja.
- 82. A compartment in front of a motor vehicle where driver sits.

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

A goal that you may have been working toward for a long time might still seem very distant right now, Aries. Therefore, today you could actually find yourself giving up on it. This doesn't imply that what you want will never happen. In fact, sometimes letting go of a dream can actually cause it to manifest. Remember this when you start to brood on your lack of success so far. All is not hopeless!



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

A member of your household may be having troubles, Taurus, and therefore you might consider staying home from work in order to help them get through it all. Nonetheless, you have career responsibilities that you need to fulfill. Whether to stay home or go to work may be a difficult decision to make today, but be sure you weigh all possible factors. Probably your housemate will insist that all is well and send you to work.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

An important career concern could require considerable effort on your part today in order to enable you to advance whatever it is you're trying to accomplish, Gemini. At some point during the day, you may be plagued by doubts as to your ability to do this. However, don't let this cause you to panic. All you need is to muster a little energy and stay focused on the task at hand. Believe that today you're capable of accomplishing wonders.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

A trip that you wanted to take may have to be postponed, Cancer, probably for financial reasons. You'll want to make the journey in the company of someone who's financially strapped right now. This could be disappointing, but remember that this is only a delay. You'll be able to have your vacation at a later date. Don't be afraid to start making the arrangements. By that time, your friend should have the money.



Leo (July 23-August 22)

The need to complete an important task could have you mustering a far higher level of self-control than you're used to, Leo. Perseverance and determination could dominate your mood, and therefore you could accomplish wonders. However, be sure to take breaks occasionally, and remember to relax from time to time. Above all, don't be so focused on your work that you forget to eat. Your work will only suffer if you neglect your body. Pace yourself!



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

A business or romantic partner could be in a rather schizoid mood today, Virgo. You'll probably spend a lot of time together, and during the course of the day your friend could jump between enthusiasm and gloom. This could drive you crazy, as you won't know how to respond. All you can do is make sure all attention stays focused on the issues at hand. This changeability should burn out by the end of the day.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

Generally, you tend to be rather ingenious where work is concerned, Libra, but today you may feel that the fountain of innovation has totally dried up. No matter how hard you try, you probably won't be able to muster any new ideas whatsoever. Chances are your biorhythms are low, and therefore your mind is working at a slower pace than usual. Concentrate on routine tasks today. By tomorrow your ingenuity should be back on track.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

A crisis of values may confront you today, Scorpio. Someone you care about might need you to do something for them that you don't feel comfortable doing, and this could put you in a tough spot. You probably won't want to do it, but your friend needs your help. Consider every possible contingency before saying yes or no. Reflect on how the results could affect both you and your friend. Only in this way can you really be fair.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Today you might feel a little gloomy without knowing why, Sagittarius, and you could spend a lot of time trying to find a reason. There probably isn't any concrete reason. It's likely that you're simply responding to low biorhythms. This is, therefore, a great day to go for a workout. This way you can get the endorphins going and feel a lot better by late afternoon. Then you should actually feel like going out and having some fun.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

A close friend or love partner you haven't seen for a while could finally make arrangements to see you, Capricorn. You therefore could spend much of the day in a great mood, looking forward to the encounter ahead. You'll have a lot of fascinating information to share. It might be a good idea, however, to cut your visit a little shorter than you'd like and make arrangements for another meeting. Otherwise, you might get too tired.



Aquarius (January 20-February 18)

The house might seem rather empty today, Aquarius, as most of the other members of your household are probably out and about. This is, however, a good time for you to take care of some projects of your own that you've been putting off. They might be tedious and rather boring, but think how good you'll feel when they're finally done! In the evening you might entertain some visitors. Enjoy your day.



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

Someone close to you might not be feeling very well, Pisces, and you might feel the need to remain nearby and take care of this person. By all means do this. However, bear in mind that your empathic abilities are operating at a very high level today, and therefore you could actually experience some of their discomfort. Be sure to protect yourself psychically by keeping the white light around you if you want to avoid feeling ill yourself.

Wordsearch Puzzle

Surgery

Find and circle all of the words that are hidden in the grid. The remaining letters spell a secret message.

Grid for word search puzzle containing various medical terms. Words to find include: ANESTHESIA, DRILL, LUNGS, SPLINT, APPENDIX, ENDOSCOPE, MALLET, SPONGE, BIOPSY, FORCEPS, NEEDLE, STAPLER, BLOOD, GRASPERS, OCCLUDERS, SUCTION, BONE SAW, HEART, PROBE, SURGEON, BRAIN, HEMOSTAT, RETRACTORS, SUTURE, CALIPER, HOOK, RIBS, SYRINGE, CANNULA, INCISION, RULER, TISSUE, CATHETER, INJECTION, SCALPEL, TRACHEOTOME, CLAMPS, IRRIGATION, SCISSORS, TRANSPLANT, COLON, KIDNEY, SKIN, TREPINE, DILATORS, LANCET, SPECULA, TROCAR, DISTRACTORS, LIVER, SPLEEN, TWEEZERS.

Wednesday's Solution

Summer Olympics

Grid for Summer Olympics word search puzzle. Words to find include: ARCHERY, ATHLETICS, BADMINTON, BASEBALL, BASKETBALL, BEACH VOLLEYBALL, BOXING, CANOEING, CYCLING, DIVING, EQUESTRIANISM, FENCING, FOOTBALL, GYMNASTICS, HANDBALL, HOCKEY, JUDO, MODERN PENTATHLON, RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS, ROWING, SHOOTING, SOFTBALL, SWIMMING, SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING, TABLE TENNIS, TAEKWONDO, TENNIS, TRAMPOLINING, TRIATHLON, VOLLEYBALL, WATER POLO, WEIGHTLIFTING, WRESTLING, YACHTING.

- ARCHERY
- ATHLETICS
- BADMINTON
- BASEBALL
- BASKETBALL
- BEACH VOLLEYBALL
- BOXING
- CANOEING
- CYCLING
- DIVING
- EQUESTRIANISM
- FENCING
- FOOTBALL
- GYMNASTICS
- HANDBALL
- HOCKEY
- JUDO
- MODERN PENTATHLON
- RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS
- ROWING
- SHOOTING
- SOFTBALL
- SWIMMING
- SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING
- TABLE TENNIS
- TAEKWONDO
- TENNIS
- TRAMPOLINING
- TRIATHLON
- VOLLEYBALL
- WATER POLO
- WEIGHTLIFTING
- WRESTLING
- YACHTING

The hidden sentence is: THE FIRST OLYMPIC GYMNAS T TO ACHIEVE A PERFECT SCORE OF TEN WAS NADIA COMANEI

Wednesday's Solution

Sudoku solution grid:

```

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

Daily SuDoku

Grid for Daily SuDoku puzzle:

```

6 9 2 3
2 8 1
4 5 8 2
2 3
8 4 9 6
8 5 1 9
4 5 3 4
4 6 9 5
    
```

hard

Wednesday's Solution

Grid for Wednesday's Solution SuDoku puzzle:

```

6 8 2 4 7 9 1 5 3
3 7 5 6 2 1 9 8 4
9 1 4 5 3 8 2 7 6
7 5 3 9 4 6 8 1 2
1 2 8 3 5 7 4 6 9
4 6 9 8 1 2 5 3 7
8 3 6 2 9 5 7 4 1
2 4 1 7 8 3 6 9 5
5 9 7 1 6 4 3 2 8
    
```

easy

Lifestyle

SUNDAY, JANUARY 5, 2020



Rubens Barbosa falls as he competes during the PBR Unleash the Beast Bull Riding competition at Madison Square Garden on Friday in New York City. — AFP

Folk puppets keeping heritage of Egyptian satire alive

In an era of on-screen entertainment, a simple glove puppet named Aragoz still lures Egyptian audiences with comic sketches showing how wits and skill can defeat the thuggish and corrupt. Recounting stories with a thought-provoking moral in their tale, puppeteers evoke peels of laughter from spectators, mainly children, as they enact Aragoz's exploits, some of which date back centuries to Ottoman times.

"I fell in love with Aragoz as I grew up. Everyone loves it actually," said Sabry Metawly, one of a diminishing band of veteran puppeteers still putting on performances of Egypt's most adored folk figure. "It has clicked with the people because it represents them. It succeeds where they cannot by challenging and winning against rivals."

The squeaky-voiced puppet, with a wooden head, red conical hat, thin painted moustache and a bright red cloth cloak, was recognized by UNESCO in 2018 as part of the planet's intangible cultural heritage. "Aragoz humorously criticizes the actions of the powerful and resists the corrupt during the plays," said Nabil Bahgat, founder of the Wamda troupe, of which Metawly is also a member. "But it does not target specific figures of current politics or leaders."

Outspoken, mocking, stubborn and often vulgar, the Aragoz character has long been viewed as a reflection of popular Egyptian society. The troupe - which comprises only six members - has been drawing weekly audiences for more than a decade at the Ottoman-era Beit al-Sehimi building in Cairo. But it has not faced any censorship despite the ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression since President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi took power in 2014. "Performers usually deal within the allowed limits of freedom," Bahgat stressed.

Tales as old as time

Like his father before him, Metawly performs from behind a portable box-like booth moving two puppets,



Members of Egypt's Wamda troupe manipulate puppets during an Aragoz puppets show in Beit al-Sehemi, in Cairo's Gamaliya district, on Nov 15, 2019. — AFP photos

one on each hand. He has been working as a puppeteer for more than 50 years, following in his father's footsteps. He learned the stories - which are passed down orally - by watching his father perform in the streets and at rural festivals and Muslim celebrations. By 2003 when Bahgat formed Wamda he had managed to collect 19 plays orally and commit them to paper.

All the Aragoz sketches, still performed today, are part of the country's cultural heritage, passed down from one generation of performers to the next, without being properly documented, he said. "All plays are authorless," Bahgat added. "Practitioners were in the habit of learning them by heart from their predecessors and passing them on to the new generations," he said.



Verbal sparring

None of the plays can be traced to a certain time or specific person, said troupe member Mahmoud Sayed. In them, Aragoz is often pitted against other puppets resembling an Ottoman-era policeman, a sheikh or a bully, and gets into comical verbal sparring matches sprinkled with clever puns. In one sketch, Aragoz argues with a bully dubbed the fetewa, a term used to describe powerful men who ran local neighborhoods outside the law.

"What do you want?" Aragoz asks after a long banter, with the bully immediately replying he wants a fight to see who is the most powerful. "Whoever wins gets the support of this audience," says the fetewa. Aragoz immediately pounces on the bully dealing him a flurry of blows. He wins the scuffle after three rounds, and kicks his opponent off the box. "Get out!" shouts Aragoz, to huge cheers and applause. — AFP



Obama nod sets up bright year for Indian 'heartbreak' singer



In this handout photograph taken in Dec 2019, singer Prateek Kuhad reacts as he performs on stage in New Delhi. — AFP

Starting out, Indian singer Prateek Kuhad gave himself one year to make it. He is still no stranger to self-doubt - but now even Barack Obama is a fan of his heartbreak-inspired songs. The 29-year-old was enjoying a quiet New Year's Eve at his family home in New Delhi when he received a message saying: "This is big." Former US president Obama had included Kuhad's wistful hit "cold/mess" in his annual list of favorite music, alongside the likes of Bruce Springsteen, Beyonce and Lizzo.

"It's cool," Kuhad told AFP, adding that being mentioned in Obama's viral Twitter and Instagram posts was still "overwhelming". "He is one of the few personalities in our generation who has got a fairly clean image, is one of the good presidents that the world has seen," he said. "He listens to Big Thief. I love them, but they're not a really big band. It clearly looks like Obama scouts his music well."

Kuhad is not sure how Obama first heard his music but links it to his 2019 tour across North America and Europe that helped him break through internationally, but tested his resolve. "I almost hated performing when I started doing it. I'm getting used to it only now," he said. He describes the track picked by the ex-president as a "straight-up heart-break song", saying he accepts that writing about romance, longing and the complications of love has helped him find fame. "People would say this is all I can write about. You question yourself, and I did have such a moment in mid-2019. But then I realised I loved what I do," he said. — AFP



This photo taken on Dec 11, 2019 shows a worker (right) waiting to weigh the incense sticks he produced at the Fujian Xingquan Incense Factory in the city of Quanzhou in China's Fujian Province. — AFP photos



A worker stacks newly produced incense sticks.



A worker covers incense sticks with colored powder.

Burning issue: China's incense makers toil ahead of Lunar New Year



Finished incense sticks are seen at the Fujian Xingquan Incense Factory.



Dozens of workers toil through the night coating thin lengths of bamboo in herbs, spices and richly colored powders to create incense sticks that are spread out under the rising sun to dry. It is an important time of year for the villagers of Yongchun county, a mountainous area of southeastern Fujian province that supplies much of the world's incense. Now, the clock is ticking with the approach of the Lunar New Year holiday later this month, when countless Chinese will pray and burn incense at temples and in traditional ceremonies.

The craft of producing incense runs deep in Dapu town, where Hong Zhongsen operates a family business passed down through the generations. "Making incense is very important for my family. It's not just a business. It's also to preserve an ancestral craft and a traditional religious culture," said Hong, 31, standing amid rows of brightly coloured incense sticks.

The area's fortunes have long been tied to the nearby ancient city of Quanzhou, a key conduit for foreign trade for centuries. It is believed that Arab traders brought incense to Yongchun, where the aromatic spices that they imported were combined with local bamboo. Yongchun county is now home to around 300 manufacturers, according to Chinese media, employing more than 30,000 people.

Locals claim that one in every three incense sticks sold in Southeast Asia is made in Yongchun. A round-the-clock production process involves up to 18

separate stages during which bamboo sticks are coated in fragrant herbs and spices and then dusted with powders of deep purple, red and yellow. The messy process also leaves workers looking as if they had been dipped in the colours themselves.

The sticks are then dried in the sun, a nerve-racking step for workers like Li Xiuzhen, 57, due to the area's changeable weather. "I'm at the mercy of good weather," she said. Through three generations of tweaking, Hong's family has arrived at a secret recipe for which it is well known. Demand is growing in China and in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia that have prominent overseas Chinese communities, as well as in Buddhist Thailand. Shipments to Europe also are rising, Hong said.

His production has increased four-fold in the past 15 years to millions of incense sticks per day, he said, necessitating the introduction of some automation to meet demand. But he still insists on several steps such as dyeing and drying the sticks being done by hand using age-old methods to preserve quality. "Yongchun incense is unique, with a special scent and texture. It's an exquisite art, and a slight difference in production may change the overall quality," Hong said.

Hong, a Buddhist, says there is at least one Buddhist temple in every village in Yongchun and Quanzhou. "Incense used for paying respects to Buddha is still the main type we produce as it's a legacy of our forefathers. We're also diversifying our incense



A worker places incense sticks on a wooden platform to dry.



varieties to serve multiple purposes like home air freshening or aromatherapy," Hong said. — AFP

A worker shovels powder during the preparation of incense sticks.

Istanbul Jews fight to save their ancestral tongue

If there's one thing Dora Beraha regrets in her twilight years, it is not passing on the 500-year-old language of Istanbul's Jews, Ladino, now on the point of extinction. "After us, will there still be people who speak this language?" says 90-year-old Beraha. "Surely, very few. It is possible that it will disappear." Ladino is a unique mix of medieval Castilian and Hebrew, with sprinklings of Turkish, Arabic and Greek, that emerged when Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, with many ending up in the Ottoman empire.

Turkey now has the largest community of Jews in the Middle East outside of Israel - around 15,000 - some of whom are belatedly fighting an uphill battle to preserve the language before it disappears. Ladino was passed down through the generations, peaking in popularity in the 19th century, but increasingly fell out of use in favour of French among Jews in the later Ottoman period.

Minority cultures and languages were deliberately suppressed when modern Turkey was formed in the 1920s. "Citizens, speak Turkish!" was a rallying cry of the new republic. Beraha made a conscious decision to avoid teaching Ladino to her children, wanting them to assimilate as much as possible. "We wanted them to succeed," she says.

Saving Ladino

Turkey's neutrality during the Second World War spared Ladino-speakers the decimation of Jewish communities in other parts of the region, but today the remaining practitioners are mostly advanced in age. According to UNESCO, more than 100,000 people still speak Ladino around the world, mostly in Israel where tens of thousands of Jews from the former Ottoman empire have immigrated to in recent decades.

Technically, 'Ladino' refers to a different language used by Spanish rabbis to teach Hebrew texts, but it has become



In this photograph taken on Dec 12, 2019, Karen Sarhon (right), editor of the El Amaneser monthly, entirely published in Judeo-Spanish, works on a new edition of newspaper in Istanbul. — AFP photos

the common name for Judeo-Spanish, which is also known as Judesmo and Spanyolit. Karen Sarhon, 61, has dedicated her life to saving Ladino. She heads the Turkish Ottoman Sephardic Research Centre and El Amaneser, a monthly supplement written entirely in Ladino, for the Turkish newspaper Salom.

Sarhon says there has been a resurgence of interest in the language lately. "We launched El Amaneser in 2003 with eight pages. Today, it's 32 pages," she said, adding that 8,000 people read the supplement each month in Turkey and abroad. She knows that Ladino is losing out to "more useful" languages such as English and Spanish, so in the hopes of reaching younger readers, she posts regular tutorials on social media.

'Who we are'

The fight to preserve a crucial piece of the Turkish Jewish identity comes at a difficult moment for the dwindling community, which has faced security threats including bomb attacks on two synagogues in 2003, and flagrant anti-Semitism in some newspapers. Can Evrensel Rodrik, Beraha's grandson, is one of those hoping to regain the lost tongue. The 30-year-old biologist says none of his cousins spoke Ladino and he had to force his grandparents to teach him.



Izzet Bana (left), leader of the NES choir that sings in Judeo-Spanish, conducts the choir in Istanbul.

Rodrik says a different approach is needed to spark the interest of younger generations and give the language a future, such as opening a Ladino radio station, translating a video game or teaching it to children at a Jewish creche in Istanbul. For many Jews in Turkey, Ladino is the last, vanishing tie to their historical roots in Spain. "From a very young age, I've been told: 'Vinimos de la Espana en 1492,'" says Evrensel Rodrik, using the Ladino phrase. "A big part of who we are, a great culture and a great language, will disappear if we lose Jewish-Spanish."

For others, like Denise Horada, 63, who sings every Thursday in a Ladino choir, the language evokes more recent memories. "It reminds me of my grandmother. I always heard these songs when I was young," she says, smiling. "When I sing, it's as though she was by my side." "Before it's too late" Sarhon has started building an archive and has conducted interviews with the few people, like Beraha, for whom Ladino is their mother-tongue. Tapping the hard disk that contains her treasure trove, she says: "If future generations want to know where they came from, how their ancestors spoke, their sense of humour, they will have it all here." — AFP



30-year-old Can Evrensel Rodrik (right) who was taught Judeo-Spanish when he was a child by his 90-year-old grandmother Dora Beraha (left), looks at a family photo album in Istanbul.

Lifestyle | Movies

Gervais back to roast Hollywood in 'final' Globes role

"Shut up, you disgusting, pill-popping deviant scum!" Those were the words Ricky Gervais used to open the star-studded Golden Globes in 2016 - the last time he hosted Hollywood's most free-wheeling award show. So A-listers in the audience will be on their guard today, when the provocative British comic returns to oversee the boozy prize-giving gala for "the very last time."

Gervais' no-holds-barred humor has drawn praise and criticism in previous years, with everyone from Caitlyn Jenner to Roman Polanski considered fair targets for his sharp barbs. "She didn't do a lot for women drivers, but you can't have everything, can you?" he once joked of Jenner. Jenner was in a car crash that killed a 69-year-old woman months before the former Olympic champion came out as a transgender woman.

"Roman Polanski called it the best date movie ever," he said of "Spotlight", which tackled sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests. The French-Polish film director has been a fugitive from US justice since 1978 when he admitted to statutory rape of a 13 year-old. Billboards carrying Gervais' image along with the slogan "Frankly, Hollywood..." have sprung up across Los Angeles, while broadcaster NBC's commercials claim "as usual, we have no idea what he's going to do".

'Expect the unexpected'

Lorenzo Soria, president of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, has warned stars in attendance to once again "expect the unexpected". That was certainly the case in 2004 when Gervais was catapulted to global fame with shock Globe wins for British mockumentary



In this file photo taken on Jan 10, 2016, host Ricky Gervais attends the 73rd Annual Golden Globe Awards in Beverly Hills, California. — AFP

"The Office", then airing on the little-seen BBC America cable channel. "I'm from a little place called England. We used to run the world before you," a clearly off-guard Gervais blurted out as he collected gongs for best comedy, and best actor.

But Gervais quickly made himself at home in the Beverly Hills hotel which hosts the Globes each year, tak-



In this photo taken on Dec 9, 2019, the stage is ready ahead of the 77th Annual Golden Globe Awards nominations announcement in Beverly Hills.

ing to the podium with his trademark lager in hand for three consecutive years as host from 2010-12. Jokes about Scientology, Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic rant, Bill Cosby's sex abuse allegations and Charlie Sheen's heavy drinking antics drew A-listers' fury - but generated headlines and boosted TV ratings.

Gervais, 58, has been given free rein to send up even the show and its organizers, dubbing the Globes "just like the Oscars, but without all that esteem". "The Golden Globes are to the Oscars what Kim Kardashian is to Kate Middleton," he said in 2012. "Bit louder, bit trashier, bit drunker, and more easily bought."

Born in Reading, England in 1961, Gervais was a late-

comer to the top echelons of the entertainment industry. After a failed bid to become a pop singer, Gervais joined London radio station XFM in the late 1990s, where he met future "The Office" and "Extras" collaborator Stephen Merchant. Thanks to "The Office," released in 2001 and earning a lucrative US remake from 2005, Gervais is now one of the world's wealthiest and most successful comedians. He continues to court accusations of transphobia, last month wading into a Twitter row about a woman who lost her job after saying people cannot change their biological sex. — AFP

Five things to watch for at Golden Globes

Hollywood hits the red carpet today for the Golden Globes, the first major awards show of the year, which honors the best in film and television. Millions of viewers are expected to tune in, but what should you be watching for? Here is our quick guide to the event, which will take place in Beverly Hills, California:

Another record for Scorsese?

There are few cinematic worlds left for Hollywood veteran Martin Scorsese to conquer, but the Globes could offer a new record. If he takes home a fourth best director prize for his gangster epic "The Irishman", Scorsese will tie the record for most wins. Legendary late director Elia Kazan currently sits alone at four, most recently for "America America" in 1964. Scorsese has previously won for "Gangs of New York" (in 2003), "The Departed" (2007) and "Hugo" (2012) - and missed out on a further five nominations in the category.

After #TimesUp, women still overlooked

Natalie Portman drew praise - and the organizers' ire - for introducing the best director category in 2018 with the words: "Here are the all-male nominees". Barbra Streisand remains the only woman to win the award, for "Yentl" in 1984. She, too, spoke out at the 2018 ceremony, telling the audience: "Folks, time's up," name-checking the anti-harassment initiative. But once again this year, the Hollywood Foreign Press Association has selected only male contenders for the prize, ignoring the likes of "Little Women" helmer Greta Gerwig. Will anyone address the elephant in the room?

Awkwafina eyes Globes history

There are no sure things at the unpredictable Globes, but Awkwafina is as likely as anyone to take home a gong. She is the hot favorite to win the prize for best actress in a comedy for "The Farewell". Dubbed as a "tale based on an actual lie," it portrays a global family reuniting in China to say goodbye to their beloved matriarch,



Martin Scorsese

who does not know she is dying. If victorious, the rapper-turned-actress would become the first winner of Asian descent in the category's history.

Streaming wars invade Globes?

The Globes' television categories are frequently overlooked, coming just months after the small screen's biggest night, the Emmys. This year promises to be different, as Apple entered the "streaming wars" with its new platform in November. Flagship launch program "The Morning Show", about a newsroom hit by a #MeToo scandal, was not eligible at the Emmys, but garnered Globes nods for stars Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon, as well as for best drama.

But Netflix has since wheeled out its perennial big-hitter "The Crown", with the royal drama's third season boasting a new, heavyweight cast including Olivia Colman and Helena Bonham-Carter. And while "Game of Thrones" again dominated the Emmys for its final run, it has been left out in the Globes cold, with only one nomination for Kit Harington as lead actor.

Ricky Gervais returns

Controversial British comedian Ricky Gervais returns as host - which means that once again, no A-lister will be safe from his irreverent jokes. What's more, Gervais has promised his record fifth stint will be his "very last", meaning there will be truly no reason to hold back. Since



Awkwafina



Natalie Portman

his last appearance in 2016, Hollywood has gone through radical upheaval with the #MeToo movement and the fall of Harvey Weinstein, meaning Gervais will not be short of potential targets. Who will be caught in his firing line this time around? — AFP

'Little Women' director 'sad' at awards snub of female filmmakers



US actress and filmmaker Greta Gerwig arrives for the 31st Annual Palm Springs International Film Festival (PSIFF) Awards Gala at the Convention Center in Palm Springs, California on Jan 2, 2020. — AFP

Top Hollywood woman director Greta Gerwig said she was "disappointed" that she had been snubbed by the Golden Globes, with the producer of her hit film "Little Women" blaming the "unconscious bias" of male movie critics. With the awards from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association about to kick off the Oscar season on Sunday, Gerwig told AFP she had been saddened to have been "bumped out" of the best director race.

However, her adaptation of the much-loved novel by Louisa May Alcott won nods for best actress for its lead Saoirse Ronan and best music for French composer Alexandre Desplat. "Of course, I'm disappointed. I love the film that we made and of course it's lovely to be honored," said Gerwig, one of only five women ever to be nominated for a best director Oscar for her last film, "Lady Bird". But the fact "Little Women" was completely ignored by the Screen Actors Guild awards has caused consternation among some in Hollywood.

'Active hostility'

With the voters who chose the best films of the year overwhelming men, New York Times critic Janet Maslin tweeted her shock at the "active hostility about 'Little Women' from men I know, love and respect". Producer Amy Pascal echoed her uneasiness in an interview with Vanity Fair. She said women outnumbered men two to one at the screenings laid on for Academy members in the run up to the Oscar nominations. "It's a completely unconscious bias. I don't think it's anything like a malicious rejection," she said. However, "I don't think that [men] came to the screenings in droves, let me put it that way," Pascal added.

Gerwig, 36, said that "there are so many beautiful films made by women this year, and so many worthy films... I want to give them a bunch of statues". She said there had been progress for women directors, but "it's still dreadful". "I think in the past couple of years it's got better. I think people have been more willing to take this risk of taking a chance on different voices, and different authors, writers and directors."

Hollywood's golden couple

The fallout from the Harvey Weinstein scandal had been positive, but the system was still skewed in favour of men, she said. "I think obviously movies are expensive, they take a lot of time, a lot of money, a lot of people saying yes - and most of those people are men," she told AFP. But she said there had been progress towards "the kind of world that I think Louisa May Alcott would have wanted, this more egalitarian world". "Feminism is not about exclusion, but about lifting everyone and finding a better form of masculinity, as well as more freedom and opportunity for women," the writer-director added. This week the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative said 10.6 percent of the top 100 Hollywood movies of 2019 were directed by women, a 13-year high and more than twice the previous year's figure. Gerwig, who first made her name as an actor and screenwriter, is one half of Hollywood's hottest couple at the moment. — AFP

'Hollywood needs to step up': Sexual harassment after Weinstein

The #MeToo movement sparked by sexual assault charges against movie mogul Harvey Weinstein brought down many Hollywood celebrities, but insiders believe the entertainment industry has a long way to go to change its culture and handling of harassment. While the conversation surrounding predators in positions of power in Tinseltown has moved into the open, the underlying behavior often continues - as do attempts to cover up incidents by people surrounding the accused.

Only two years ago, before #MeToo erupted, it was "kind of unthinkable ... to even ask Gwyneth Paltrow or Rosanna Arquette, 'Did you get assaulted by Harvey Weinstein?'" said the Hollywood Reporter's Kim Masters. But even now, "I hear stories all the time that we can't even get to the point of publishing," said Masters, who has written extensively on the scandals.

Recent films such as "Bombshell" and the Apple TV+ series "The Morning Show" have earned praise for portraying predatory sexual harassment in the media world. Yet some studios and agencies still threaten lawsuits to try to prevent true stories emerging, and only take action against the accused individuals once they get publicly caught, said Masters. "When you finally fight your way through it, they suddenly say that 'We take it very seriously,'" she said.

It is a far cry from the hopes raised when an Oct 2017 investigation by two New York Times reporters revealing

Weinstein's predatory behavior sparked the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. Weinstein has since been accused by dozens more women, both famous and anonymous. He denies any form of harassment. The once-powerful producer of "Pulp Fiction" and "Shakespeare in Love" faces a criminal trial in New York from tomorrow, which is separate from charges levelled by dozens of other women that he settled for \$25 million last month.

"There's no question that some of the secrecy around sexual harassment and sexual assault has been shattered," said Megan Twohey, one of the two New York Times journalists who broke the story. For a long time, reporters had people "slam the door in our face" and the fact that "tips and victims are now coming to us is massively significant," she told Vanity Fair. "At the same time, there hasn't been the type of systemic reform" that everyone was expecting, said Twohey, pointing to the enduring use of financial settlements and confidentiality clauses that "helped conceal the conduct of Harvey Weinstein for years."

'Step up'

While many actors and actresses in Hollywood are reluctant to speak publicly on the issue, others have voiced fears or anger that the harassment is not being tackled. Actress and model Emily Ratajkowski appeared on a recent Hollywood red carpet with the words "F**k Harvey" written on her arm in black marker.

Weinstein "won't have to admit wrongdoing or pay his own money" under last month's settlement with some of his victims, she wrote in an angry Twitter message. "Ratatouille" star Patton Oswalt told AFP the industry was "seeing a lot of visible progress". "But what I'm worried about is the stuff underneath that we don't see," he added. "You read these reports, and you're like 'Oh my god!' ... Sadly you know it is (still going on), you know it is." Jodi Kantor, the other Times reporter who broke the Weinstein scandal, told Vanity Fair that "everything's changed and nothing's changed". — AFP



Harvey Weinstein



Rose McGowan

Lifestyle | Cocktail

London Fashion Week Men's seeks new audience

London Fashion Week Men's, which started yesterday, is being partly hosted in Milan in an unprecedented move designed to broaden its international appeal and send a message just weeks before Brexit. London Show Rooms, featuring emerging British and Italian designers, an art installation and a catwalk show by young English designer Samuel Ross's A-Cold-Wall brand, will be staged in the Italian city.

In another bid to broaden its reach, shows on the main London catwalk will be broadcast live on LFW's Instagram account. The three-day event is dedicated to autumn-winter 2020-2021 collections. Deserted by British fashion's big names such as Burberry, LFW Men's showcases promising young designers like Bethany Williams, who presented her collection yesterday.

The 30-year-old, who stands out for her ecological and social approach, was named British Emerging Talent Menswear last month at Britain's Fashion Awards 2019. Grace Wales Bonner, 29, is another name to follow. Since launching her eponymous brand in 2014, she has won the LVMH Award for young designers and collaborated with Dior.

This Fashion Week is the last before Britain leaves the European Union on Jan 31. Announcing the tie-up with London, Carlo Capasa, president of the Italian national chamber of fashion, said last month that the collaboration was a "message" on Brexit that the industry wanted to continue close links after Britain leaves the EU. — AFP



A model presents a creation from London-based designer Paria Farzaneh during a catwalk show on the first day of the Autumn/Winter 2020 London Fashion Week Men's in London yesterday. — AFP



People protest in front of the Opera at Place de la Bastille during a demonstration called by French national trade union General Confederation of Labor (CGT) yesterday in Paris. — AFP

Ballet dancers down tutus in longest strike ever at Paris Opera

Paris Opera has lost more than €12 million (\$13.3 million) in a month-long strike by ballet dancers fighting to cling onto pension rights that date back to the "Sun King" Louis XIV. The opera - one of the oldest and most prestigious in the world - confirmed to AFP that the dispute is now the costliest in its history, with 63 ballet and opera performances cancelled since dancers walked out on Dec 5. Technical and backstage staff have joined them on the picket lines as part of a wider clash over French government pension reforms that has paralysed the country's public transport system for nearly four weeks.

While the opera has seen plenty of strikes by stagehands, it is almost unheard of to have dancers downing tutus. Their decision to take to the streets for the first time in the opera's 350-year existence made international headlines. The month of transport disruption caused by the general strikes has also been a disaster for French theatres and concert halls with scores of shows cancelled and actors playing to almost empty houses on what should be the busiest nights of the year.

With the opera warning that the lost box

office takings have already sunk a huge hole in its budget, France's culture ministry told AFP that "talks are going on with the management and the staff" to resolve the standoff that wiped out its usually crowded Christmas program.

Ancient rights

In a bid to win back the hearts of frustrated fans, the striking dancers gave a free performance of parts of "Swan Lake" on the steps of the Opera Garnier in the centre of the French capital on Christmas Eve. But that has not stopped them digging in their heels, determined to hold onto a unique system which allows them to retire at 42. Its origins date to the 17th century and Louis XIV, a mean dancer himself who knew the crippling toll performing at the highest level can take on dancers' bodies.

Dancers have already rejected a watered down proposal that would have the change only affect those who joined the ballet after 2021. A former director of the opera warned that this row was different. Most strikes have been about "pay or working conditions and have never generally lasted longer than a few days", said the ex-director, who did not want to be

named. "We have to avoid a systematic blockage and keep dialogue going," he insisted.

Fears for future

"We have to come up with a retirement system which involves helping them retrain because a lot of dancers get into great difficulty" after retiring, having sacrificed most of their lives to the ballet, he told AFP. Most all come through the ballet's training school as children. As it stands, the French state picks up half the bill for the opera's €14-million pension fund, which has nearly 1,900 members.

But with losses piling up, the opera's outgoing director Stephane Lissner is worried about the coffers being drained for future productions. In an internal letter seen by AFP, he warned that the strike is "affecting our relations with the public". The opera later told AFP that it will be "making a number of gestures to audiences" to make up for the cancellations.

Even so, rehearsals are still going on for upcoming productions, with the French baritone Florian Sempey tweeting that he was looking forward to appearing in the "Barber of Seville" and star dancer Hugo Marchand sharing a video of himself limbering up for "Giselle". The last major strike at the Paris Opera in 2007 led to the cancellation of 17 performances, costing the institution €3.2 million. The same year Dorothee Gilbert was named principal dancer after a memorable strike-hit performance of "The Nutcracker" done without costumes or a change of decor. — AFP

Rage Against the Machine reunite to headline Coachella

More than two decades after anti-authoritarian rockers Rage Against the Machine headlined the first-ever Coachella festival, the rap metal group is returning to the California desert's main stage for a reunion this spring. The band's songs - heavy on social activism and leftist views - make them a fitting headliner for the 2020 festival that will take place over two weekends in early April, just as the Democratic presidential hopefuls head into the home stretch of their battle to take on Donald Trump.



In this file photo taken on April 29, 2007, (from left) musicians Tim Commerford, Zack De La Rocha and Brad Wilk from the band "Rage Against the Machine" perform during day 3 of the Coachella Music Festival held at the Empire Polo Field in Indio, California. — AFP

Rage Against the Machine's Coachella dates on April 10 and April 17 are part of the band's reunion tour after an eight-year hiatus. The famously elusive singer Frank Ocean and rapper Travis Scott round out this year's class of headliners for the sun-drenched trendsetting festival. Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke, hip-hop duo Run the Jewels, baroque pop star Lana Del Rey, and a slate of rising rappers including 21 Savage, Megan Thee Stallion, DaBaby, and Lil Uzi Vert will also perform.

Country-rap sensation Lil Nas X of "Old Town Road" fame is another addition to this year's Coachella, which draws hundreds of thousands of concertgoers to southern California and kicks off the influential festival circuit. Singer-turned-composer Danny Elfman - who scored "The Simpsons" theme along with films like "Edward Scissorhands" and "The Nightmare Before Christmas" - is also curiously featured prominently on the line-up. — AFP

Biggest bloom: 'World's largest' flower spotted in Indonesia

Indonesian conservationists say they've spotted the biggest specimen ever of what's already been billed as one of the world's largest flowers. The giant Rafflesia tuan-mudae - a fleshy red flower with white blister-like spots on its enormous petals - came in at a whopping 111 cm in diameter. That's bigger than the previous record of 107 cm on a bloom also found in the jungles of West Sumatra several years ago. "This is the largest Rafflesia tuan-mudae that has ever been documented," said Ade Putra at the Agam Conservation Agency in Sumatra. The flower's bloom will only last about one week before it will wither and rot, he added.

It was named Rafflesia after British colonialist Sir Stamford Raffles who spotted one in Indonesia in the early 19th Century. The species grows in several Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines where a 100-cm specimen was recorded. The parasitic bloom, sometimes referred to as corpse flower, mimics the stench of rotting meat to attract insects. Sharing that noxious smell is Indonesia's Amorphophallus titanum, a phallus-shaped flower that can reach heights of up to three metres. — AFP



This handout picture taken on Jan 2, 2020 shows a giant Rafflesia tuan-mudae at the Maninjau nature preserve in Agam, West Sumatra. — AFP

Neutral pronoun 'they' chosen as word of the decade

US linguists on Friday chose "they" as their Word of the Decade, recognizing the growing use of third-person plural pronouns as a singular form to refer to people who identify their gender as neither entirely male nor entirely female. Separately, the American Dialect Society bestowed its Word of the Year honors on the increasingly common practice of introducing oneself in correspondence or socially by the set of pronouns one prefers to be called by - declaring in an email, for example, "pronouns: she/her."

The two awards were decided by some 350 member of the society at its annual meeting of academics, graduate students and word lovers who voted by a show of hands, said Ben Zimmer, a linguist and lexicographer who chairs the group's New Words Committee. The most popular pick for Word of the Year was "(my) pronouns," a reflection of "how the personal expression of gender identity has become an increasing part of our shared discourse", the society said in a statement announcing the outcome.

The same trend was behind the selection of "they" as the Word of the Decade, recognizing its growing use to refer to a person whose gender identity is non-binary. The singular use of "they" was previously designated as the 2015 Word of the Year. "People want to choose something that stands the test of time and sums up the decade as a whole," said Zimmer, who writes a language column for the Wall Street Journal.

Social media has turbo-charged the way words or phrases become popular, leading to some recent multi-word champions for Word of the Year, including "tender-age shelter" (a detention facility for young undocumented migrant children separated from their parents) in 2018 and "fake news" in 2017.

Other decade nominees considered on Friday included:

- "#BlackLivesMatter", the hashtag used to protest alleged disparities in police use of force against African Americans.

- "Climate", reflecting increased interest in the impact of climate change.

- "#MeToo", the movement that has highlighted widespread patterns of sexual abuse and harassment that women have faced at the hands of men across many spheres of life, including business, politics and entertainment.

The society, founded in 1889 and dedicated to the study of the English language in North America, started selecting its "Word of the Year" in 1991 and since then has picked only two other "Word of the Decade" winners. Top choices were "web" for the 1990s and "Google" as a verb for the 2000s.

Other "Word of the Year" nominations for 2019 included:

- "OK Boomer", described as a retort to someone older, typically a member of the Baby Boom generation, who expresses views that are out-of-touch or condescending to young people and their concerns.

- "Cancel", meaning to withdraw support from someone or something that is considered problematic or unacceptable, used in the phrase "cancel culture".

- "Karen", the stereotype of a complaining, self-important, demanding white woman, typically a member of Generation X or "Generation Karen". — Reuters

Going meme: Thai shoppers get creative after plastic bag ban

Thai shoppers grabbed baskets, buckets and even a wheelbarrow to skirt a new ban on single-use plastic bags at big retailers, with many posting images of their efforts online. The restriction, introduced at the start of the new year by several major mall operators and the ubiquitous 7-Eleven convenience stores, was a victory for environmental campaigners in a country where individuals use an average of eight plastic bags a day.

Customers can now pay a small fee for reusables but budget-conscious shoppers saved money by grabbing anything available and celebrating the different choices on social media. Make-up artist Acharin Prahauri borrowed food-storage netting from his mother that she normally dries fish with, tossing snacks, milk and juice and posing for a photo at a 7-Eleven in eastern Thailand. "It's normally used to protect from flies," he told AFP, as his post racked up more than 1,600 likes.

In other posts, one man grinned at the camera as he held a wheelbarrow laden with bottles of water, paper towels and soap. Another two women clutched each side of a pink laundry basket heaving with goods. Experts say Thailand is one of the largest contributors to ocean pollution. But awareness about the problem has spread over the last year as images of dead turtles, whales and dugongs with pieces of plastic bags clogging their stomachs went viral.

A government campaign to eliminate their use by 2022 has even seen television channels pixelating plas-

tic bags onscreen - alongside other no-gos such as alcohol and smoking. Environmentalists have praised the ban as an important first step but say more needs to be done to eliminate a throw-away culture. But some shoppers were ready for the change. "I have been avoiding plastic bags for a while already," said a Thai office worker at the Big C supermarket chain on Friday, clutching a tote bag. — AFP



This handout photo taken on Jan 2, 2020 shows makeup artist Acharin Prahauri using food-storing netting to carry groceries at a convenience store in Khao Chakan. — AFP

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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Visibility will improve gradually and Partly cloudy to cloudy with light variable wind to light to moderate freshening at times north westerly wind, with speed of 10 - 40 km/h with a chance for rain that might be

BY NIGHT: Cold and Partly cloudy with light to moderate north westerly wind, with speed of 10 - 30 km/h with a chance for light fog forming over some areas.

WEATHER WARNING			Thunder Rain	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.	SFC. CHART 04/01/2020 0000 UTC	
KUWAIT CITY	20 °C	17 °C		
KUWAIT AIRPORT	21 °C	17 °C		
ABDALY	22 °C	15 °C		
BUBYAN	16 °C	12 °C		
JAHRA	23 °C	17 °C		
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C		
SALMIYAH	19 °C	17 °C		
AHMADI	20 °C	18 °C		
NUWAISIB	21 °C	15 °C		
WAFRA	23 °C	15 °C		
SALMY	22 °C	14 °C		

4 DAYS FORECAST						
DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Sunday	01/05	Fair and Mostly Sunny	18 °C	10 °C	NW	10 - 30 km/h
Monday	01/06	Fair with a chance for fog forming at night	17 °C	06 °C	NW-VRB	06 - 26 km/h
Tuesday	01/07	Fair and some scattered clouds will appear later on with a chance for scattered rain at times	18 °C	07 °C	VRB-SE	08 - 28 km/h
Wednesday	01/08	Partly cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times	20 °C	10 °C	SE	12 - 45 km/h

PRAYER TIMES	
Fajr	05:19
Sunrise	06:43
Zuhr	11:53
Asr	14:44
Sunset	17:03
Isha	18:25

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT	
MAX. Temp.	23 °C
MIN. Temp.	14 °C
MAX. RH	98 %
MIN. RH	66 %
MAX. Wind	SE 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

REQUIRED

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CHANGE OF NAME
 Adoor, Pathanamthitta, Kerala and presently residing at Kuwait do hereby change my son given name as: Bennett Abraham. Surname: Jayan (C 5602) 1-1-2020

SHARING ACCOMMODATION
 I, Jayan Abraham, father of Bennett Jayan Abraham holder of Indian Passport No. 57937159 issued at Kuwait on 26/07/2018, permanent address of Panayara Thekkathil House, Enathu P.O.,

Airlines

Kuwait Airways	171
Jazeera Airways	177
Turkish Airlines	1884918
FlyDubai	22414400
Qatar Airways	22423888
KLM	22425747
Royal Jordanian	22418064/5/6
British Airways	22425635
Air France	22430224
Emirates	22921555
Air India	22456700
Air India EXPRESS	22438185/4
Sri Lanka Airlines	22424444
Egypt Air	22421578
Swiss Air	22421516
Saudia	22426306
Middle East Airlines	22423073
Lufthansa	22422493
PIA	22421044
Bangladesh Airlines	22452977/8

Directorate General of Civil Aviation Home Page (www.kuwait-airport.com.kw) DIAL161 FOR AIRPORT INFORMATION

Arrival Flights on Sunday 5/1/2020				Departure Flights on Sunday 5/1/2020			
Airlines	Flt	Route	Time	Airlines	Flt	Route	Time
IGO	1757	Kochi	00:10	JZR	305	Istanbul	11:10
AIC	989	Mumbai	00:10	GFA	214	Bahrain	11:25
FEG	241	Alexandria	00:30	JZR	213	Jeddah	12:00
JZR	254	Amman	00:45	JZR	221	Riyadh	12:00
NIA	561	Asyut	00:45	MEA	405	Beirut	12:55
JZR	734	Cairo	00:50	QTR	1075	Doha	13:00
THY	772	Istanbul	00:50	JZR	115	Doha	13:00
KAC	102	London	00:55	GFA	210	Bahrain	13:05
KAC	504	Beirut	00:55	MSR	611	Cairo	13:25
PGT	858	Istanbul	00:55	SAW	702	Damascus	13:30
ETH	3424	Addis Ababa/Bahrain	01:30	KAC	781	Jeddah	13:30
DLH	625	Dammam	01:30	UAE	872	Dubai	14:15
THY	764	Istanbul	01:50	AXB	394	Kozhikode	14:15
PGT	840	Istanbul	01:50	RBG	218	Asyut	14:50
JZR	722	Alexandria	01:55	QTR	1079	Doha	15:00
IGO	002	LGW	01:55	FDB	060	Dubai	15:10
UAE	1759	Delhi	01:55	QTR	8323	Doha	15:15
ETH	620	Dubai	02:15	GFA	222	Bahrain	15:25
RBG	551	Alexandria	02:25	KAC	775	Riyadh	15:45
KLM	446	Bahrain	02:30	KAC	673	Dubai	15:50
GFA	211	Bahrain	02:30	SVA	501	Jeddah	16:00
QTR	1086	Doha	02:40	KNE	530	Jeddah	16:00
OMA	643	Muscat	02:55	KAC	563	Amman	16:00
RJA	648	Amman	03:05	KAC	743	Dammam	16:05
PGT	860	Istanbul	03:05	KAC	615	Bahrain	16:05
KKK	1268	Istanbul	03:05	ETD	304	Abu Dhabi	16:20
ETD	305	Abu Dhabi	03:10	KAC	785	Jeddah	16:30
MSR	612	Cairo	03:15	OMA	646	Muscat	16:35
KAC	414	Bangkok	04:00	ABY	128	Sharjah	16:35
LMU	510	Cairo	04:00	JZR	103	Bahrain	16:50
QTR	1076	Doha	04:00	KAC	283	Dhaka	17:00
IGO	1751	Chennai	04:10	KAC	503	Beirut	17:05
KAC	418	Manila	04:25	KAC	357	Kochi	17:35
OHY	352	Istanbul	04:30	KAC	619	Doha	17:35
KAC	302	Mumbai	04:40	UAE	858	Dubai	17:45
JZR	406	Kochi	04:45	FDB	052	Dubai	17:45
FDB	069	Dubai	05:00	QTR	1073	Doha	18:00
KAC	358	Kochi	05:10	KAC	343	Chennai	18:00
JZR	404	Hyderabad	05:10	JZR	733	Cairo	18:10
DHX	170	Bahrain	05:10	SVA	511	Riyadh	18:20
KAC	382	Delhi	05:20	GFA	216	Bahrain	18:20
KAC	784	Jeddah	05:20	KAC	301	Mumbai	18:35
THY	770	Istanbul	05:25	JZR	127	Dubai	18:35
JZR	112	Doha	05:35	JZR	403	Hyderabad	18:40
QTR	8511	Doha	05:45	KAC	381	Delhi	18:45
JZR	216	Jeddah	05:50	JZR	721	Alexandria	18:55
KAC	284	Dhaka	05:55	FDB	064	Dubai	19:20
JZR	402	Mumbai	06:05	JZR	253	Amman	19:20
KAC	344	Chennai	06:10	UAE	876	Dubai	19:30
JZR	120	Dubai	06:50	MSR	621	Cairo	19:30
KAC	544	Cairo	07:00	IRA	664	Shiraz	19:35
KAC	678	Dubai	07:05	QTR	1081	Doha	19:55
BAW	157	London	07:10	ABY	653	OSS	20:05
IGO	1766	Mumbai	07:10	ABY	124	Sharjah	20:05
KAC	204	Lahore	07:15	RBG	556	Alexandria	20:05
FDB	053	Dubai	07:50	RJA	641	Amman	20:10
KAC	622	Doha	08:00	GFA	218	Bahrain	20:15
QTR	1084	Doha	08:00	KAC	345	Ahmedabad	20:25
UAE	855	Dubai	08:35	JZR	501	Lahore	20:40
ETD	301	Abu Dhabi	08:55	FDB	058	Dubai	20:45
KAC	334	Trivandrum	09:00	OMS	266	Muscat	20:45
ABY	125	Sharjah	09:05	KAC	333	Trivandrum	20:50
KAC	304	Mumbai	09:30	KAC	353	Bengaluru	20:50
KAC	384	Delhi	09:30	JZR	401	Mumbai	20:55
FDB	055	Dubai	09:40	QTR	1091	Doha	21:00
IGO	1753	Ahmedabad	09:40	OMA	648	Muscat	21:20
QTR	1070	Doha	09:45	DLH	624	Dammam	21:45
SVA	512	Riyadh	10:00	DHX	171	Bahrain	21:50
JZR	114	Doha	10:20	KLM	445	Bahrain	21:50
GFA	213	Bahrain	10:40	QTR	1089	Doha	21:55
JZR	714	Sohag	10:50	RBG	214	Sohag	22:15
JZR	708	Luxor	10:55	KAC	203	Lahore	22:15
JZR	122	Dubai	11:15	JZR	701	Asyut	22:15
QTR	1074	Doha	11:35	MEA	403	Beirut	22:20
MEA	404	Beirut	11:55	ALK	230	Colombo	22:25
GFA	209	Bahrain	12:05	ETD	308	Abu Dhabi	22:25
MSR	610	Cairo	12:25	GFA	220	Bahrain	22:30
SAW	701	Damascus	12:30	UAE	860	Dubai	22:55
UAE	871	Dubai	12:50	ETD	310	Abu Dhabi	23:05
AXB	393	Kozhikode	13:15	KAC	383	Delhi	23:20
				QTR	1083	Doha	23:25
				KAC	411	Bangkok	23:25
				KAC	543	Cairo	23:30
				KAC	303	Mumbai	23:40
				GOW	062	CNN	23:55

Inside the plot by Soleimani to attack US forces in Iraq

WASHINGTON: In mid-October, Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani met with his Iraqi Shi'ite militia allies at a villa on the banks of the Tigris River, looking across at the US embassy complex in Baghdad. The Revolutionary Guards commander instructed his top ally in Iraq, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and other powerful militia leaders to step up attacks on US targets in the country using sophisticated new weapons provided by Iran, two militia commanders and two security sources briefed on the gathering told Reuters.

The strategy session, which has not been previously reported, came as mass protests against Iran's growing influence in Iraq were gaining momentum, putting the Islamic Republic in an unwelcome spotlight. Soleimani's plans to attack US forces aimed to provoke a military response that would redirect that rising anger toward the United States, according to the sources briefed on the gathering. Iraqi Shi'ite politicians and government officials close to Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi.

Soleimani's efforts ended up provoking the US attack on Friday that killed him and Muhandis, marking a major escalation of tensions between the United States and Iran. The two men died in air strikes on their convoy at a Baghdad airport as they headed to the capital, dealing a major blow to the Islamic Republic and the Iraqi paramilitary groups it supports. Interviews with the Iraqi security sources and Shi'ite militia commanders offer a rare glimpse of how Soleimani operated in Iraq, which he once told a Reuters reporter he knew like the back of his hand.

Two weeks before the October meeting, Soleimani ordered Iranian Revolutionary Guards to move more sophisticated weapons - such as Katyusha rockets and shoulder-fired missiles that could bring down helicopters - to Iraq through two border crossings, the militia commanders and Iraqi security sources told Reuters.

At the Baghdad villa, Soleimani told the assembled commanders to form a new militia group of low-profile paramilitaries - unknown to the United States - who could carry out rocket attacks on Americans housed at Iraqi military bases. He ordered Kataib Hezbollah - a force founded by Muhandis and trained in Iran - to direct the new plan, said the militia sources briefed on the meetings. Soleimani told them such a group "would be difficult to detect by the Americans," one of the militia sources told Reuters.

Before the attacks, the US intelligence community had reason to believe that Soleimani was involved in "late stage" planning to strike Americans in multiple countries, including Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, US officials told Reuters Friday on condition of anonymity. One senior US official said Soleimani had supplied advanced weaponry to Kataib Hezbollah.

White House national security adviser Robert O'Brien told reporters on Friday that Soleimani had just come from Damascus, "where he was planning attacks on American soldiers, airmen, Marines, sailors and against our diplomats". An official at the headquarters of Iran's Revolutionary Guards declined to comment. A spokesperson for the Iranian foreign ministry was not available for comment.

Picking us targets with drones

The United States has grown increasingly concerned about Iran's influence over the ruling elite in Iraq, which has been beset for months by protesters who accuse the government of enriching itself and serving the interests of foreign powers, especially Iran, as Iraqis languish in poverty without jobs or basic services. Soleimani, leader of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, was instrumental in expanding Iran's military influence in the Middle East as the operative who handles clandestine operations outside Iran. The 62-year-old general was regarded as the second-most powerful figure in Iran after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Muhandis, a former Iraqi lawmaker, oversaw Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), an umbrella grouping of paramilitary forces mostly consisting of Iran-backed Shi'ite militias that was formally integrated into Iraq's armed forces. Muhandis, like Soleimani, had long been on the radar of the United States, which had declared Muhandis a terrorist. In 2007, a Kuwaiti court sentenced him to death in absentia for his involvement in the 1983 US and French embassy bombings in Kuwait.

Soleimani picked Kataib Hezbollah to lead the attacks on US forces in the region because it had the capability to use drones to scout targets for Katyusha rocket attacks, one of the militia commanders told Reuters. Among the weapons that Soleimani's forces supplied to its Iraqi militia allies last fall was a drone Iran had developed that could elude radar systems, the militia commanders said. Kataib Hezbollah used the drones to gather aerial



TEHRAN: A billboard bearing a portrait with black mourning ribbon of slain Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani (left) and Iraqi paramilitary chief Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis hangs on a main road in the Iranian capital yesterday. — AFP

footage of locations where US troops were deployed, according to two Iraqi security officials who monitor the movements of militias.

On December 11, a senior US military official said attacks by Iranian-backed groups on bases hosting US forces in Iraq were increasing and becoming more sophisticated, pushing all sides closer to an uncontrollable escalation. His warning came two days after four Katyusha rockets struck a base near Baghdad international airport, wounding five members of Iraq's elite Counter-Terrorism Service. No group claimed responsibility for the attack but a US military official said intelligence and forensic analyses of the rockets and launchers pointed to Iranian-backed Shi'ite militia groups, notably Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.

On Dec 27 more than 30 rockets were fired at an Iraqi military base near the northern Iraq city of

Kirkuk. The attack killed a US civilian contractor and wounded four American and two Iraq servicemen. Washington accused Kataib Hezbollah of carrying out the attack, an allegation it denied. The United States then launched air strikes two days later against the militia, killing at least 25 militia fighters and wounding 55.

The attacks sparked two days of violent protests by supporters of Iranian-backed Iraqi paramilitary groups who stormed the US Embassy's perimeter and hurled rocks, prompting Washington to dispatch extra troops to the region and threaten reprisals against Tehran. On Thursday - the day before the attack that killed Soleimani - US Defense Secretary Mark Esper warned that the United States might have to take preemptive action to protect American lives from expected attacks by Iran-backed militias. "The game has changed," he said. — Reuters

Power supply fears as troops called to...

Continued from Page 1

heavily populated southeast and more than 100,000 people were told to leave their homes across three states. Thousands heeded that call on Friday, abandoning summer holidays and piling into cars that clogged the highways linking southeastern coastal towns with the relative safety of Sydney or larger towns.

Several emergency warnings were issued yesterday, and there were fears one blaze southwest of Sydney could reach the city's outskirts. Sydney recorded its highest-ever temperature of 48.9 degrees Celsius in the western suburb of Penrith, and the nation's capital Canberra hit 44 degrees Celsius, also an all-time record, a Bureau of Meteorology spokesman said.

Fury, tears as crowds mourn...

Continued from Page 1

argued that "the dangerous US military operation violates the basic norms of international relations and will aggravate regional tensions and turbulence," according to Chinese media.

The strike killed a total of five Iranian Guards and five members of Iraq's Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary network, whose members have close ties to Tehran. Among the dead was the Hashed's deputy Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, who was a top adviser and personal friend to Soleimani. Late yesterday, two rockets hit Iraq's Al-Balad air base, where US troops are stationed, while two mortars hit Baghdad's Green Zone, a high-security enclave housing the US embassy, security sources said. Sirens immediately rang out at the American compound in Baghdad hosting both diplomats and troops, sources there told AFP. The Al-Balad base, north of Baghdad, was hit by Katyusha rockets, security sources said.

Mass ceremonies started in Baghdad yesterday for the dead, with Iraq's caretaker premier Adel Abdel Mahdi and top pro-Iran figures in large crowds accompanying the coffins. They were first brought to a revered Shiite shrine in northern Baghdad, where thousands of mourners chanted "Death to America!" Dressed in black, they waved white Hashed flags and massive portraits of Iranian and Iraqi leaders, furiously calling for "revenge".

The remains were then moved to the shrine city of Karbala and would ultimately end up in Najaf, where the Iraqis will be buried. The Guards' remains would be flown to Iran, which has declared three days of mourning and religious rituals. US and Israeli flags were set alight in Iran's capital yesterday as thousands mourned the loss of Soleimani. "We are with you," they chanted as they waved their hands in unison during the outpouring of grief at a rally in Tehran's Palestine Square, an AFP correspondent reported.

Men held up placards that called for "revenge" and black-clad women clutched portraits of Soleimani and Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. One man wearing a mask climbed onto a stone monument holding burning US and Israeli flags as others chanted "Death to America". "Our response will definitely be beyond launching some missiles or destroying some American bases," said Milad Najafi, one of the mourners. "In fact, I think our revenge will be the annihilation of Israel," the student told AFP.

Another mourner, Ali Gholinam, paid tribute to

Thousands of volunteer firefighters battled the infernos as some residents stayed behind to defend their homes. Just outside the seaside town of Batemans Bay, a four-hour drive south of Sydney, locals joined forces with firefighters to tackle the fires. "Today, we've had nothing short of a disaster. A very large fire-front came through... the high temperatures and the southerly change is putting a real lot of pressure on the resources that we have," local Adam Pike told AFP. "Guys that know the bush, guys that know fire, helped save at least 10 to 12 homes on this street... we are so grateful for their help."

The only activity in the usually bustling tourist hotspot was at an evacuation center, where hundreds of locals forced from their homes were sheltering on an open field in tents and caravans. Mick Cummins, 57, and his wife fled to the evacuation center when fire ripped through his rural town on New Year's Eve. "We said this is too tough for us, let's get out. We went to the beach and then hellfire came over the hill," he told AFP. "I was here in the '94 fires. I thought that was bad. That was just a barbecue" in comparison, he said. — AFP

Soleimani as "the greatest man we had". "They took him not only from Iran but from the 'Resistance Front,'" he said, referring to Iran's allies in parts of the region including the Palestinian territories. "The 'Resistance Front' members are now mourning this great man," he told AFP. "I don't know what the response could be, but whatever it may be, it must be proportionate."

As head of the Guards' foreign operations arm, the Quds Force, Soleimani was a powerful figure domestically and oversaw Iran's wide-ranging interventions in regional power struggles. He had long been considered a lethal foe by Washington, with Trump saying he should have been killed "many years ago". Tehran has already named Soleimani's deputy, Esmail Qaani, to replace him. His first order of business was made clear Friday when Khamenei promised "severe revenge" for Soleimani's death.

Iraqis worry the US strike could unleash a new wave of destabilization for Iraq, which only two years ago announced it had defeated the Islamic State group. Abdel Mahdi warned Friday it would "spark a devastating war in Iraq", while President Barham Saleh pleaded for "voices of reason" to prevail. Yesterday, the Hashed said a new strike had hit a convoy of their forces north of Baghdad, with Iraqi state media blaming the US. But US-led coalition spokesman Myles Caggins denied involvement, telling AFP: "There was no American or coalition strike."

Amid the tensions, the Pentagon said up to 3,500 additional US troops would be dispatched to Iraq's neighbor Kuwait, to boost some 14,000 reinforcements already deployed to the region last year. About 5,200 US troops are stationed across Iraq to help fight IS. They have faced a spate of rocket attacks that the US has blamed on pro-Iran factions and which last month killed an American contractor.

As a result of the tensions, NATO said it was suspending its training activities in Iraq and a US defense official told AFP that American-led coalition forces would "limit" operations. "Our first priority is protecting coalition personnel," the official said, adding that the main focus of surveillance had shifted from IS to watching for incoming rocket attacks. Iraq's defense ministry had not been informed of the changes, its spokesman told AFP yesterday.

US citizens were meanwhile urged to leave Iraq immediately and American staff were evacuated from oil fields in the south. Iraq's pro-Iran factions have seized on Soleimani's death to push parliament, which convenes today, to revoke the security agreement allowing US forces on Iraqi soil. While praying over Muhandis' remains in Baghdad, top Hashed official Hadi Al-Ameri pledged to avenge him by ousting US troops. "Be reassured that the price of your pure blood will be the departure of American troops from Iraq, forever," he said. — Agencies

Philippine embassy explains 'partial'...

Continued from Page 1

Kuwait is utterly committed to the protection of expatriate labor rights, particularly domestic workers, the Kuwaiti finance minister said on Thursday, underlining that breaching these rights is not tolerated under any circumstances. Mariam Al-Aqeel, also acting State Minister for Economic Affairs, expressed sorrow over the death of a Filipino national employed as a domestic worker (Villavende), after an alleged attack by a Kuwaiti national.

"Kuwait is a nation of institutions, where the law is applicable to all - nationals and expatriates alike," the minister said in a statement. The minister said she was confident in "the Kuwaiti justice system, an impartial safe haven for nationals and expatriates", Kuwait hosts hundreds of thousands of migrant workers as it is one of the most lucrative employment destinations due to the freedom, security and protection of rights it offers to these employees, she added.

"Incidents may occur from time to time, but these are few in comparison to the size of the migrant labor employed in the country," Aqeel said, adding, "some might use these incidents to exacerbate the situation or attempt to drive a wedge between Kuwait and any labor-exporting nation."

Meanwhile, an OFW-advocate and former ACT-OFW party list congressman John Bertiz rejected Manila's decision to impose a partial ban on the deployment of Filipinos to Kuwait. "The current situation calls for a total ban," he said in a Manila newspaper. "Villavende's death should immediately prompt our gov-

ernment to impose a total ban, until the provisions of and conditions set under the existing labor agreement with Kuwait are fully implemented," he said.

On Friday, based on Governing Board Resolution 01, series of 2020, the POEA announced a partial ban on the sending of Filipino workers to Kuwait, particularly newly-hired household service workers, effective immediately. "The POEA Governing Board, in a meeting duly convened, hereby resolved to adopt the said memorandum and effect a deployment ban for newly-hired domestic workers to Kuwait effective immediately," the order said.

"A moratorium on the verification, accreditation and processing of individual contracts and additional job orders for the same category of workers shall be effected," it added. The governing board clarified that those workers with overseas employment certificates (OECs) issued on or before 5 pm of Jan 3 will be allowed to depart for Kuwait.

After consulting Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Loacin Jr and Undersecretary Brigido Dulay on Thursday, Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III, who also chairs the POEA Governing Board, issued a memorandum to POEA to immediately convene the board for the immediate issuance of a partial deployment ban involving visa 20 (domestic workers) new hires and "balik-manggagawa".

The memo also instructed the POEA to include a moratorium on the processing and verification of individual contracts and additional job orders for the same category of workers. On Feb 12, 2018, the Philippine government imposed a total deployment ban on the sending of OFWs to Kuwait due to a series of reports of abuse and deaths of OFWs in the country, including the death of Joanna Daniela Demafelis. The ban was lifted in May 2018 after then Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano and Kuwaiti officials signed an agreement on the employment of domestic workers.

Gulf allies of US fear reprisals after...

Continued from Page 1

and from where the US has asked its nationals to depart immediately, would be the "easiest target", Vakil said. But there are other possibilities. Several pro-Iran groups have the capacity to carry out attacks on US bases in Gulf states as well as against shipping in the Strait of Hormuz - the strategic waterway that Tehran could close at will.

They could also strike US troops in Syria, American embassies across the region, or Washington's allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia. "War? Chaos? limited reprisals? Nothing? Nobody really knows - neither in the region or in Washington - because this is unprecedented," said Kim Ghattas of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The United Arab Emirates, an ally of the US and Saudi Arabia in its rivalry against Tehran, was the first Gulf nation to react, with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash calling for "wisdom and moderation" rather than "confrontation and escalation". "This is a huge escalation of an already unstable situation in the Middle East, the region cannot afford more tension," said Jaber Al-Lamki, a media official with the UAE government. "Those countries must be feeling very concerned about the potential fallout and the risk

to their societies and their economies," said Vakil.

A string of attacks attributed to Iran has caused anxiety in recent months as Riyadh and Washington deliberated over how to react. "Both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have watched the developments in Iraq over the weekend with great concern, fearing that Iran might respond against US forces on their territory," said Andreas Krieg of King's College London. The timidity of the American reaction to devastating missile and drone attacks against Saudi oil installations in September led Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to adopt a more conciliatory approach aimed at avoiding confrontation with Iran "at all costs", he said.

Even though the Gulf states are united in condemnation of the attack on the US embassy in Baghdad, "none of them would take the risk at this point of being dragged into this spiral of escalatory violence," Krieg said. If Tehran does decide to target American forces in the Gulf, it will have to do so without completely destroying its fragile relationships with Gulf states, by targeting US troops directly and without collateral damage, he predicted.

Aziz Alghashian, a specialist in Middle East affairs at the University of Essex, was skeptical that tough Iranian rhetoric will be followed by matching action. "This is why the US strikes are significant, they delivered a robust message to Iran, and all who follow Iran, that if US officials are targeted, there will be a strong response." While Saudi Arabia and the UAE may be targeted with "symbolic" retaliation, the two Gulf powers are relieved that the US is finally taking a strong line against their archrival, he said. — AFP

Sports

Nadal and Djokovic off to winning starts at ATP Cup

Wins ensure Spain, Serbia clinch their ties at inaugural 24-nation team event

SYDNEY: Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic kickstarted their build-up to the Australian Open with straight sets wins at the ATP Cup yesterday, but world number four Dominic Thiem slumped to defeat.

Top-ranked Nadal had little trouble with Georgia's Nikoloz Basilashvili, racing to a 6-3, 7-5 victory, while long-time rival Djokovic was given more of a test by South Africa's Kevin Anderson before overcoming him 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (8/6).

Their wins ensured Spain and Serbia clinched their ties at the inaugural 24-nation team event, where the countries are split into six groups across Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. The top eight from the round robin go onto the knockout phase in Sydney before one is eventually crowned the winner.

France, Argentina, Croatia and Japan also began their tournament in style, winning their ties to join day one victors Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Norway, Russia and Australia.

"I'm super, super happy to be here in Perth for first time in my life. It's an amazing arena and a great crowd," said Nadal. "It was tough first match of the season, not an easy start. But I think I played a great game."

Earlier, his teammate Roberto Bautista Agut crushed a hapless Aleksandre Metreveli 6-0, 6-0. Serbian superstar Djokovic needed to produce some of his best tennis to see off the big-serving Anderson, admitting it was a testing encounter.

"What a way to start the year," he said. "He was on fire tonight — I think the quality of tennis was quite high. I was very pleased with the way I kind of weathered the storm." His teammate Dusan Lajovic outlasted

Lloyd Harris 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-3.

Austria's Thiem forecast this week that 2020 would be the year that the vice-like hold of Djokovic, Nadal and Roger Federer on Grand Slam titles would come to an end. He is tipped as one of those who could make the breakthrough, along with Alexander Zverev and Stefanos Tsitsipas. But all three have been beaten in their opening ATP Cup clashes.

Thiem, who won five titles last year, had six break points in the third set against Croatia's Borna Coric, but failed to convert any of them. "It's really nice to beat him because at the end of last season I was not playing well and this will give me a lot of confidence," said Coric, ranked 28 and who suffered six losses in a row in late 2019.

Fellow Croat Marin Cilic, a finalist at the 2018 Australian Open, used his experience to down Austria's Dennis Novak 6-7 (7/4), 6-4, 6-4, and ensure Croatia won the tie in Sydney. The most dominant win of the day came courtesy of Japan, who are without the injured Kei Nishikori but crushed Uruguay 3-0 in Perth, dropping just 15 games across their two singles and one doubles rubbers.

Yoshihito Nishioka routed higher-ranked Pablo Cuevas 6-0, 6-1 and veteran Go Soeda thrashed Martin Cuevas, Pablo's younger brother, 6-1, 6-3 before a tighter doubles encounter. French duo Gael Monfils and Benoit Paire, both in the top 25, led their country to a 2-1 Group A win over Chile, while Argentina scraped past Poland by the same score.

But it was a struggle for the South Americans with Polish number one Hubert Hurkacz upsetting world number 14 Diego Schwartzman in three sets. Guido



PERTH: Rafael Nadal of Spain hits a return against Nikoloz Basilashvili of Georgia during their men's singles match on day two of the ATP Cup tennis tournament in Perth yesterday. — AFP

Pella won the other singles before Maximo Gonzalez and Andres Molteni teamed to down Hurkacz and two-time Grand Slam winner Lukasz Kubot in the deciding doubles.

Some US\$15 million in prize money is at stake in the

tournament, with up to 750 singles and 250 doubles ATP rankings points up for grabs. Under the innovative tournament rules, on-court coaching is allowed and team zones are in the corners of the court, rather than on the sidelines by the umpire. — AFP

Thiem slumps as Croatia upset Austria

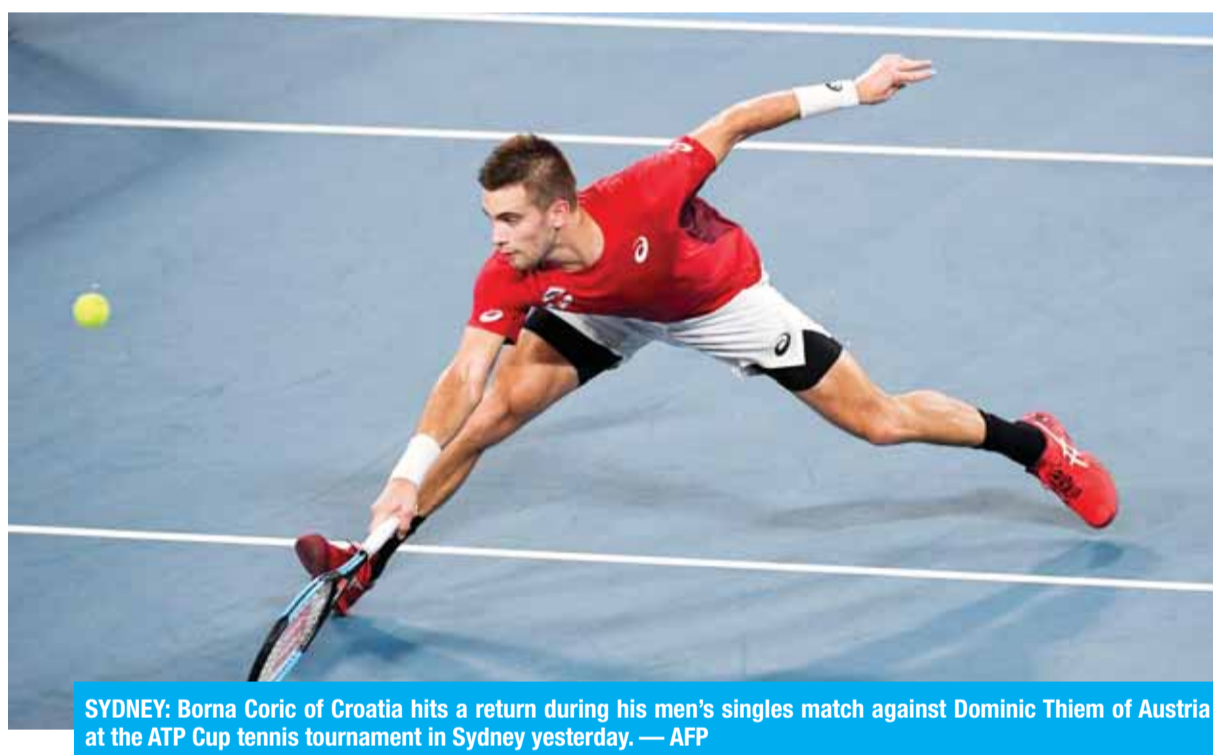
SYDNEY: Borna Coric earned some badly-needed confidence with a big upset over world number four Dominic Thiem in stifling hot conditions at the ATP Cup yesterday as Austria slumped to defeat against a battling Croatia.

Thiem had won all three previous encounters with the 28th ranked Coric but failed to rediscover that form in Sydney, crashing 7-6 (7/4), 2-6, 6-3. Veteran Marin Cilic, a finalist at the 2018 Australian Open, earlier used his experience to down Austria's Dennis Novak 6-7 (7/4), 6-4, 6-4, with Croatia taking an unassailable 2-0 lead in the Group E tie at the 24-team event.

"It was really hot in the beginning but in the second set I started to feel better because I think the temperature went down," said Coric. "But it was really physical. It's really nice to beat him because at the end of last season I was not playing well and this will give me a lot of confidence. Coric had six losses in a row at the end of 2019 but dug deep against Thiem, who worked six break points in the third set but couldn't convert any of them. Former world number three Cilic showed similar fight in his tough three set victory.

"I'm very excited. It was absolutely very difficult," said Cilic, who has fallen to 39 in the world, his lowest since 2013. "Dennis played a great level. It was our first meeting, and it was absolutely a thriller and difficult match... and also a great match to start the year. I think the level was really, really good."

Cilic sent down 15 aces and won all of his service games after losing the opening set. Earlier in Group E, Poland's top player Hubert Hurkacz stunned Argentinian



SYDNEY: Borna Coric of Croatia hits a return during his men's singles match against Dominic Thiem of Austria at the ATP Cup tennis tournament in Sydney yesterday. — AFP

pocket-rocket Diego Schwartzman, who blamed searing heat for his defeat.

Temperatures soared well above 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) in Sydney, although fears that smoke haze from bushfires burning across New South Wales could impact the action proved unfounded. World number 14 Schwartzman, one of the smallest players on tour at just 5ft 7ins (1.70 metres), looked destined for victory after winning the first set but wilted 4-6, 6-2, 6-3.

Guido Pella, ranked 25, had earlier battled past Kamil Majchrzak 6-2, 2-6, 6-2 to give Argentina the edge in their tie. Hurkacz returned to partner two-time Grand

Slam winner Lukasz Kubot in a deciding doubles rubber, but his energy was sapped and they fell 6-2, 6-4 to Maximo Gonzalez and Andres Molteni, handing Argentina a 2-1 victory.

"The first match with this weather, you know, 45 degrees inside the court, difficult to play, difficult to be ready every single point," said Schwartzman, who has improved his year-end ranking in four straight seasons. "Then I think he deserved to win. He played much better than me. "You know, that part of the game with this weather, it's difficult to do every point. So every single point was difficult for me at the end," he added. — AFP

Kerber backs Barty to handle world No 1 pressures

BRISBANE: Former world number one Angelique Kerber knows the pressure of starting a new season as the player everyone wants to beat, but she is confident Ashleigh Barty can meet the challenge.

The Australian had a breakout year in 2019, winning the French Open along with the prestigious WTA Finals, where she cemented her place atop the year-end rankings. Both Kerber and Barty, along with former world number one Naomi Osaka, begin their 2020 campaigns at the Brisbane International from Monday.

"She's always a tough opponent. She's such a great player, a great person as well and I'm really happy for her that she reached the number one spot," the German told reporters of Barty.

"She put a lot of effort in and she worked hard. It's always a tougher year to start as the number one player but I think she will deal with that situation."

Kerber well knows the perils of battling to back up a breakthrough season. After winning Grand Slams in 2016 and 2018, she struggled to emulate her results in the following years. "I was really trying to enjoy, but you really have to schedule your day a bit different than if you were number 20 or number 30 in the world," she said. "You have to improve every single tournament, every year, because even if you win a Grand Slam, everyone is looking to beat you."

But she is confident the level-headed Barty has what it takes to handle the expectations of her home fans and the extra off-court workload that comes with being the best player on the planet. "It's for sure completely dif-



Angelique Kerber

ferent — she has all the pressure, all the expectation, especially here in Australia," said Kerber. "I know her and also her team, she played so well and I'm really sure she'll continue to play how she played particularly the end of last year."

Since finishing 2016 as world number one after winning the Australian and US Opens, Kerber slipped to 21

the following year then climbed back to number two when she won Wimbledon in 2018.

Now ranked 20, she has a new coach — Didi Kindlmann — and is keen for a fresh start. "I was really looking forward to 2019 being over and we are 2020 now so I'm really looking forward to starting again," she said. — AFP

Schauffele grabs lead in stormy Maui

KAPALUA: Xander Schauffele sank his fifth birdie of the day on the 18th hole to take a one stroke lead during a wet and windy second round at the Sentry Tournament of Champions in Kapalua, Hawaii on Friday. The 26-year-old American fired his second bogey-free round of the tournament to keep his hopes of a title defense alive amid ever-changing weather conditions at the oceanside course.

"This is rain and wind that we don't really play too often in but fortunately it's kind of warm," Schauffele said after his second round 68 to sit nine-under par for the tournament. "It was an interesting day. I wasn't thinking about my score because I was trying to stay as dry and warm as possible."

The round of the day belonged to another past champion, American Patrick Reed, who mixed eight birdies with a bogey for a seven-under-par 66 and a share of second place with the overnight leader Joaquin Niemann of Chile.

Fellow American Rickie Fowler shot a solid two-under-par 71 to claim sole position of fourth place. Reed, the tournament's 2015 champion, entered the first PGA event of the year after two disappointing performances at the end of 2019.

He was assessed a two-stroke penalty at the Hero World Challenge in the Bahamas in early December for appearing to deliberately improve his lie in a bunker and ultimately finished in third place. At last month's Presidents Cup at Royal Melbourne he posted a disappointing 1-3-0 record as a member of the winning American side but looked on the bright side of his experience in Australia. "Any time you can go out and play for your country and play for others it means a lot, especially to me," said Reed, who has also represented the United States at Ryder Cup competitions and is nicknamed Captain America. The wind is forecast to die down somewhat at the Plantation Course for round three today. — Reuters

Serena, Kuznetsova to resume rivalry

WELLINGTON: Multiple Grand Slam winners Serena Williams and Svetlana Kuznetsova are set to resume their 16-year rivalry after being drawn yesterday to face each other in the first round of next week's Auckland WTA Classic.

Tournament top seed Williams, 38, and Kuznetsova, 34, are in a competitive half of the draw in which the veterans are competing against the rising stars of tennis, including American teen sensations Amanda Anisimova and Coco Gauff as well as 22-year-old Latvian Jelena Ostapenko.

Williams leads Kuznetsova 10-3 in their head-to-heads dating back to 2004 and has won 23 Grand Slams compared to two for the Russian. The last time Williams played in Auckland, in 2017, she had problems with the wind and was bundled out in the second round before going on to win the Australian Open a few weeks later.

The 15-year-old Gauff, who hit the headlines with her first round win over Venus Williams at Wimbledon last year, opens against World number 56 and 2019 Auckland semi-finalist Viktoria Kuzmova, while Anisimova has been drawn against Ukraine's Kateryna Kozlova.

Ostapenko, the seventh seed, plays Germany's Laura Siegemund in the first round. On the other side of the draw, fifth seed Caroline Wozniacki, who will be playing her penultimate tournament before retiring after the Australian Open, faces unheralded New Zealander Paige Hourigan in the first round.

Wozniacki will also team up with Serena Williams in the doubles for the first time. — AFP

Sports

New Zealand on the chase after Labuschagne's double ton in Sydney

Blackcaps batted through the final session without losing a wicket

SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard after the second day in the third Test between New Zealand and Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday:

Australia 1st innings (overnight 283-3)	
D. Warner c de Grandhomme b Wagner	45
J. Burns c Taylor b de Grandhomme	18
M. Labuschagne c & b Astle	215
S. Smith c Taylor b de Grandhomme	63
M. Wade b Somerville	22
T. Head c Watling b Henry	10
T. Paine b de Grandhomme	35
J. Pattinson b Wagner	2
P. Cummins c Phillips b Astle	8
M. Starc b Wagner	22
N. Lyon not out	6
Extras (lb6, nb1, w1)	8
Total (all out; 150.1 overs)	454
Fall of wickets: 1-39 (Burns), 2-95 (Warner), 3-251 (Smith), 4-288 (Wade), 5-331 (Head), 6-410 (Paine), 7-416 (Labuschagne), 8-426 (Pattinson), 9-430 (Cummins), 10-454 (Starc)	
Bowling: Henry 32-3-94-1 (1w), de Grandhomme 24-1-78-3 (1nb), Wagner 33.1-9-66-3, Somerville 29-2-99-1, Astle 32-0-111-2	

New Zealand 1st innings	
T. Latham not out	26
T. Blundell not out	34
Extras (b1, lb2)	3
Total (0 wkt, 29 overs)	63
Bowling: Starc 7-0-18-0, Cummins 9-3-18-0, Pattinson 4-1-10-0, Lyon 8-3-13-0, Labuschagne 1-0-1-0.	

SYDNEY: New Zealand made a secure start after a Marnus Labuschagne double century lifted Australia to a massive 454 first innings total in the third Test yesterday. The rock-solid number three reached his highest Test score of 215 in Sydney with the Australians dismissed just before tea on the second day.

In reply, the Blackcaps grittily batted through the final session without losing a wicket, leaving skipper Tom Latham on 26 and Melbourne Test centurion Tom Blundell at 34 in their team's total of 63.

There were a couple of close calls — notably a leg before wicket appeal off Nathan Lyon and a possible edge off Pat Cummins — but the Kiwis showed plenty of fight after enduring five tough sessions in the field in sapping heat. The day belonged to Labuschagne, who sweated on 199 for 20 minutes before he thick edged Colin de Grandhomme through the vacant slips to the ropes to bring up his double ton. The milestone came off 363 balls with 19 fours and a six and eclipsed his previous Test record of 185 against Pakistan in Brisbane last November.

"They batted really well to finish the day off. I thought we bowled really well," Labuschagne said. "The wicket looks like it's going to go a little up and down and spin a bit but we stuck to our guns there and hopefully the rewards will come tomorrow."

"It's always a privilege to play for Australia and it was nice to get some runs today and when you're batting well it's nice if you can make them count." Labuschagne's prodigious form has notched him a total of 837 runs since November and he has now leapfrogged the great Neil Harvey (834) for most runs scored by an Australian during a five-Test summer.

He was also Test cricket's leading run-getter last year with 1,104 runs. The Kiwis finally dispatched him after he was caught and bowled by leg-spinner Todd Astle. Skipper Tim Paine supported Labuschagne to reach his double century before he was bowled between his bat and pad by de Grandhomme for 35. Paine faced 92 balls and shared in a 79-run stand with Labuschagne to take Australia beyond 400.



SYDNEY: Australia's wicketkeeper and captain Tim Paine (L) bats watched by New Zealand's BJ Watling (2nd R) and Glenn Phillips (R) during the second day of the third cricket Test match between Australia and New Zealand at the Sydney Cricket Ground in Sydney yesterday. — AFP

WICKETS TUMBLE

Wickets tumbled quickly just before tea with James Pattinson bowled by Neil Wagner for two, Pat Cummins caught off Astle's bowling for eight and Mitchell Starc hitting a breezy 22 off 21 balls before he was bowled by Wagner, who finished with three for 66.

The hosts lost two wickets in the morning session. Matthew Wade was out in the day's first over, bowled off-stump while attempting to sweep off-spinner Will Somerville for no addition to his overnight score of 22.

Melbourne centurion Travis Head fell to Matt Henry, cutting too close to his body and snicking to wicket-

keeper BJ Watling. The Kiwi bowlers had strangled his scoring shots and his 10 runs came off 42 balls.

Henry was bowling despite fracturing his left thumb on Friday. He had the injury strapped and placed in a splint to continue on playing. The Sydney Test is being played against the backdrop of one of Australia's most devastating bushfire seasons with at least 20 people losing their lives in blazes raging across the country, including on the outskirts of Sydney.

Play will be suspended in the match at the umpire's discretion, should smoke significantly affect air quality or visibility, but the sky above the ground has remained largely clear so far. — AFP

Kohli opposes four-day Tests

GUWAHATI: India captain Virat Kohli yesterday hit out at proposals to cut Test matches from five days to four as the world body battles with the crowded cricket calendar.

Reports that the International Cricket Council could decide to cut the length of Test matches from 2023 have divided players and nations. Kohli, who leads the world Test batting rankings as well as being captain of the number one Test side, said the format should not be altered.

"Day-Night Tests is the most that should be changed about Test cricket, according to me," Kohli said in Guwahati, ahead of India's T20 game today against Sri Lanka. With four-day Tests "you are purely only talking about getting numbers in and entertainment, and I think the intent will not be right," said Kohli.

"Then you will speak of three-day Tests. I mean, where do you end," he added.

"I don't endorse that (change) at all. I don't think that that is fair to the purest format of the game — how cricket started." "Day-night tests are another step on commercializing Test cricket and creating excitement around it, but it can't be tinkered with too much."

Day-night Test were also initially resisted by players, but have become gradually accepted. The ICC allowed four-day Tests in 2017 and they have been tried in one-off games between South Africa and Zimbabwe and England against Ireland.

But they are not allowed in the Test world championship which is led by Kohli's India. The English, Australian and New Zealand national associations have indicated they are ready to change. Some players like England captain Joe Root have also said the plan should be considered.

But the key Board of Control for Cricket in India has not yet made a comment. And several leading players have joined Kohli in coming out against the change. Australia captain Tim Paine said that while four days could be used for some Tests, the main games had to stay at five.

Australia's most successful off-spinner Nathan Lyon has called the idea "ridiculous". "I believe you will get so many more draws and day five is crucial," he told the Unplayable Podcast before the recent Test against New Zealand. "I'm totally against it and I hope ICC aren't even considering it."

The ICC and national boards in favour of change say that cutting Test time is a way to ease a calendar now packed with Tests, 50 over internationals and the growing number of T20 internationals and leagues. — AFP

Elgar shines but England on top in second Test

CAPE TOWN: Dean Elgar and Rassie van der Dussen put on a century fourth-wicket stand for South Africa but England have taken charge of the second test after reducing the home side to 215 for eight at the close of the second day at Newlands yesterday.

South Africa trail by 54 runs on the first innings having bowled England out for 269 and will resume the third day with Vernon Philander (13 not out) and Kagiso Rabada (0 not out) at the crease.

England had the new ball in hand five overs from the end of play and will resume on day three in search of the wickets to quickly end the home side's innings with a handy lead. There is plenty in the wicket for the bowlers but South Africa were able to frustrate England through the middle part of the day as they seek to build on their 107-run first test win in Pretoria.

England made an excellent start with the ball and reduced South Africa to 40 for three. Seamer Stuart Broad (2-36) had debutant opener Pieter Malan caught by Joe Root at first slip for five, while Zubayr Hamza (5) could only fend a delivery to Ben Stokes at second slip.

James Anderson (3-34) removed South Africa's captain Faf du Plessis (1), also caught by Stokes, before Elgar and Van der Dussen's century stand steadied things for the home side. Elgar has a reputation as a dogged accumulator of runs and played to type to score 88 from 180 balls, his 14th test half-century to go with 12 hundreds.

He was out to an uncharacteristically loose shot though, trying to smash off-spinner Dominic Bess to mid-off, but only succeeding in picking out England



CAPE TOWN: South Africa's Rassie van der Dussen (L) runs the wickets while England's Zak Crawley (C) reaches for the ball during the second day of the second Test cricket match between South Africa and England at the Newlands stadium in Cape Town yesterday. — AFP

captain Root halfway to the boundary.

The dangerous Quinton de Kock played a typically breezy 20 before he was out in similar fashion, though seamer Sam Curran (2-39) was the bowler and Anderson took the catch. Van der Dussen's patient stay at the crease saw him reach 68 from 187 balls, before guiding Curran to Stokes at second slip.

Dwaine Pretorius also then steered an Anderson delivery to Stokes, a fourth catch for the all-rounder, before the seamer also claimed the scalp of Keshav

Maharaj (4) off what proved the final ball of the day.

England had resumed their first innings on 262 for nine at the start of the day but Anderson (4) was caught by Van der Dussen at first slip off Rabada (3-68). Ollie Pope finished the innings not out on 61.

Meanwhile, the tourists are hoping to have fast bowler Jofra Archer available for the third test that starts in Port Elizabeth on Jan. 16. A second scan on an elbow injury that kept him out of the Cape Town test revealed only bruising and swelling. — Reuters

India's Pathan announces retirement

MUMBAI: Indian all-rounder Irfan Pathan announced his retirement from all forms of the game yesterday, bringing the curtain down on an illustrious career which included a World Twenty20 triumph.

The 35-year-old left-arm seamer played 29 Tests, 120 one dayers and 24 T20Is for India, picking a total of 301 international wickets. "I have been fortunate to share the dressing room with greats of the game like (Sourav) Ganguly, (Rahul) Dravid and (VVS) Laxman. I am calling time on my career," Pathan announced on broadcaster Star Sports.

"I would like to thank my family for providing much-needed support. I would like to thank my fans. They have always hoped for my comeback. Their support has kept me going."

Pathan's biggest contribution to Indian cricket came in the game's shortest format as he was named man-of-the-match in the World T20 final against



Irfan Pathan

Pakistan in 2007. He took three crucial wickets as India lifted the trophy in Johannesburg.

He is one of three Indian bowlers to have claimed a test hat-trick and the first in the world to claim it in the first over of the match. Pathan last played for India during the World T20 in 2012, but featured regularly in the domestic circuit.

"I will keep contributing to Indian cricket, but it is always better if someone else takes my place in domestic cricket," Pathan added. — Reuters

Labuschagne hits record heights

SYDNEY: Steve Smith has set some pretty lofty standards for Australian batting in recent years but Marnus Labuschagne's exploits in the five home Tests this season now bear comparison, especially after he broke a 67-year-old scoring record yesterday.

The effervescent 25-year-old, born in Queensland, made his debut against Pakistan in October 2018 and impressed with four half centuries in last year's Ashes series in England.

Since he first took guard against Pakistan again in Perth in November, though, he has enjoyed a purple patch of form that few other batsmen have rivalled. After scoring 215 to drive Australia to 454 in the third Test against New Zealand yesterday, Labuschagne has now scored a double century, two 150s, one century and two half centuries in his last seven innings.

The knock took him to 837 runs at an average of 199.57 for the home season, bettering the 834 Australian batting great Neil Harvey tallied in a five-match series against South Africa in 1952-53.

"Obviously that's very special going past a player of that calibre," said Labuschagne. "I haven't really had a chance to stop and reflect on the summer

that I have had. Looking at it, it has been a very special summer but the real privilege is playing in this team."

"You're not just playing for yourself you're playing for a team that is really enjoyable to be a part of." Only Harvey, England's Wally Hammond and the great Don Bradman have ever scored in excess of 800 runs over a five-test Australian summer.

Bradman did it twice and he alone now stands above Labuschagne in the list of career averages for those batsmen who have played at least 20 innings. There is, of course, daylight between the 99.94 Bradman famously finished on and Labuschagne's current 63.63. Smith is now relegated to third on the list on 62.84.

Labuschagne will face tougher assignments overseas and much tougher opposition than Pakistan and a New Zealand side ravaged by illness and injury but he has already shown remarkable maturity for a batsman with only 14 tests under his belt.

"I think he's just very good at absorbing pressure and keeping ticking away," said New Zealand spinner Todd Astle, who dismissed Labuschagne caught and bowled yesterday with the 363rd delivery the Australian faced. "It's amazing how he's able to keep up that momentum." — Reuters

Sports

Kadri scores twice as Avalanche roll past visiting Blues 7-3

Canucks outlast Blackhawks to win sixth straight

DENVER: Nazem Kadri scored twice as the Colorado Avalanche ended a six-game losing streak to St. Louis by beating the Blues 7-3 in Denver. The Avalanche won for just the second time in their last seven games (2-4-1). The Western Conference-leading Blues have lost back-to-back games on the heels of an eight-game winning streak. Nathan MacKinnon scored one goal and assisted on three others for the Avalanche. Mikko Rantanen, Cale Makar, J.T. Compher and Joonas Donskoi also scored and Samuel Girard earned four assists. Avalanche goaltender Philipp Grubauer made 24 saves to snap his five-game winless streak. Robert Thomas scored twice and Alex Pietrangolo scored the other goal while adding an assist for the Blues. Jordan Binnington made 34 saves while giving up a career-worst seven goals before being relieved by Jake Allen.

CANUCKS 7, BLACKHAWKS 5

Adam Gaudette scored the game-winner while J.T. Miller collected four points as Vancouver claimed its sixth straight win with a home-ice victory over Chicago. With overtime looming, Gaudette gained the puck near the boards, went to the slot and sent a wrist shot that found the mark with 4:11 left on the clock. Bo Horvat rounded out the scoring with an empty-net goal to cap a three-point game (two goals, one assist). Elias Pettersson also had three points (one goal, two assists) for the Canucks. Robin Lehner stopped 30 shots for the Blackhawks, who saw their three-game winning streak snapped.

SHARKS 3, PENGUINS 2 (OT)

Brent Burns scored a power-play goal at 2:02 of overtime to give visiting San Jose a win over Pittsburgh. After a scoreless third period, the Sharks went to a four-on-three man advantage in overtime when Pittsburgh's Kris Letang tripped San Jose's Logan Couture. Burns' big slap shot from the top of the slot went over screened goaltender Tristan Jarry's glove. Tomas Hertl and Logan Couture also scored, and Burns had an assist to go along with his goal for San Jose, which twice blew a one-goal lead before snagging the two points. Patric Hornqvist, playing a day after his 33rd birthday, scored both goals for Pittsburgh, which had its three-game win streak snapped.

LIGHTNING 2, CANADIENS 1

Andrei Vasilevskiy finished with 38 saves to make a pair of first-period goals stand up as visiting Tampa Bay edged Montreal. Anthony Cirelli and Nikita Kucherov each scored in the first period for the Lightning, who extended their season-high winning streak to five games. They also have emerged victorious in 13 straight contests against Atlantic Division foes. Defenseman Jeff Petry scored early in the first period and Carey Price made 21 saves, but the

Canadiens failed to solve Vasilevskiy again and dropped their fourth in a row.

BLUE JACKETS 2, BRUINS 1 (OT)

Pierre-Luc Dubois scored 52 seconds into overtime as Columbus rallied past host Boston to extend its points streak to 12 games (8-0-4). Sonny Milano tied the game early in the third period, and Elvis Merzlikins made 26 saves as the Blue Jackets won for the seventh time in their last nine games. David Pastrnak became the league's first 30-goal scorer this season when he tallied for the Bruins, who extended their own points streak to nine (4-0-5). Tuukka Rask, making his 500th NHL start, stopped 31 shots.

SABRES 3, OILERS 2 (OT)

Jack Eichel scored on a penalty shot in overtime as host Buffalo rallied to snap a four-game losing streak by defeating Edmonton. Eichel, who was awarded the shot after being harassed enough while breaking to the net at just 1:09 into the extra session, went wide and then skated in on Edmonton netminder Mike Smith (23 saves). The Sabres star then shot up top and past Smith for his 26th goal of the season to give the hosts their second victory in nine games. Curtis Lazar and Sam Reinhart also scored for the Sabres, who trailed 2-0 after Riley Sheahan and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored for Edmonton. Linus Ullmark made 25 saves for Buffalo.

DEVILS 2, ISLANDERS 1

Nico Hischier scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period. Mackenzie Blackwood made 29 saves and New Jersey trimmed host New York in Uniondale, N.Y. P.K. Subban also scored for the Devils, who have won three straight games for the first time this season and are 6-2-1 over their past nine games. Brock Nelson scored, and Semyon Varlamov made 29 saves for New York, which had won two straight, both on the road at Minnesota and Washington. New York fell to 0-3-1 in its past four home games as it faced New Jersey for the first time this season.

MAPLE LEAFS 6, JETS 3

William Nylander scored two goals and added an assist and Frederik Andersen made 45 saves as streaking Toronto defeated host Winnipeg. Kasperii Kapanen added a goal and an assist and Travis Dermott, Pierre Engvall and Mitchell Marner also scored for the Maple Leafs, who extended their point streak to nine games (8-0-1). Kyle Connor, Patrik Laine and Mark Scheifele scored for the Jets, who dropped to 2-5-1 in their past eight games. Goalie Connor Hellebuyck was pulled following the second period after allowing five goals on 17 shots.



BUFFALO: Connor McDavid #97 of the Edmonton Oilers carries the puck up ice against the Buffalo Sabres at KeyBank Center in Buffalo, New York. — AFP

GOLDEN KNIGHTS 5, FLYERS 4

Max Pacioretty scored two goals, Shea Theodore had a goal and an assist and Marc-Andre Fleury finished with 34 saves, including one on a penalty shot, as Vegas won its third straight in beating Philadelphia in Las Vegas. Jon Merrill and Cody Glass also scored for Vegas, which had to kill a 6-on-3 advantage in the final 1:29 to hold on for the win. Paul Stastny added two assists. Sean Couturier had two goals and an assist, Claude Giroux added a goal and an assist and Travis Konecny also scored for Philadelphia. Carter Hart made 28 saves.

FLAMES 4, RANGERS 3

Johnny Gaudreau scored a goal and assisted on Sean Monahan's game-winner as host Calgary beat New York to snap a two-game losing skid. Former Rangers goaltender Cam Talbot made 24 saves for the Flames, who also ended a five-game home losing skid (0-4-1). Henrik Lundqvist stopped 25 shots for the Rangers, who have lost two straight and finish a four-game road trip yesterday in Vancouver.

PANTHERS 6, SENATORS 3

Evgenii Dadonov had two goals and an assist and Jonathan Huberdeau added a goal and an assist to lead Florida to victory over host Ottawa. Noel Acciari, Frank Vatrano and Colton Sceviour also scored goals for Florida, which won for the sixth time in eight games. Keith Yandle and Anton Stralman each added two assists and Sergei Bobrovsky made 28 saves for his 15th win of the season. Tyler Ennis had a goal and an assist and Chris Tierney and Connor Brown also scored goals for Ottawa, which lost its third straight game. Craig Anderson finished with 25 saves.

COYOTES 4, DUCKS 2

Arizona scored three third-period goals, including Brad Richardson's tally 6:47 into the period, en route to defeating Anaheim in Glendale, Ariz. The Coyotes sealed their second straight win when Carl Soderberg deflected a skimming shot from Clayton Keller past the reach of Ducks goaltender John Gibson. Lawson Crouse and Christian Dvorak also scored for the Coyotes, who got 27 saves from goaltender Antti Raanta. Anaheim had goals from Jakob Silfverberg and Max Jones. Gibson finished with 30 saves. — Reuters

Ibrahimovic vows to kick-start Milan as Conte's Inter seek rare win at Napoli

MILAN: Zlatan Ibrahimovic has vowed to kick-start struggling AC Milan's Serie A season as their local rivals Inter Milan recommence a title battle with Juventus this weekend after the end of the winter break. Milan play host to Sampdoria tomorrow, their first game since the humiliating 5-0 goal defeat to Atalanta last month which sparked Ibrahimovic's return. "I'm ready and I really hope I can play," said the 38-year-old Ibrahimovic as he returned to Milan nine years after his departure for Paris Saint-Germain.

"Things need to be improved on the pitch and that's why I'm here. I know what I have to do, Zlatan is still here." Seven-time European champions Milan are 11th in the table, 14 points off the Champions League places and just seven points clear of the relegation zone.

By contrast Inter are challenging champions Juventus' hegemony at the top of Serie A, with both sides level on 42 points after 17 games. Antonio Conte's Inter travel to Napoli, while Juve are at home against sixth-placed Cagliari, this season's surprise package who are well in the hunt for Champions League football. Inter Milan have not won at Napoli's Stadio San Paolo since October 1997 but last season's runners-up are eighth this term, with Gennaro Gattuso replacing Carlo Ancelotti last month. "Inter have been strong in previous years but they have improved even more under Conte," said Napoli defender Mario Rui.

"They will make us suffer, but we are ready." Juventus return to action after their Italian Super Cup defeat to Lazio against a Cagliari side that had been in impressive form before back-to-back losses.

Meanwhile red-hot Lazio, six points behind in third with a game in hand, are looking increasingly dangerous. Simone Inzaghi's side, who have not lost since



MILAN: Milan's Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic poses with his new jersey during his official presentation as new AC Milan player at the club's headquarters Casa Milan in Milan. Ibrahimovic returns to the side on a six-month deal, promising to help rescue the struggling Serie A outfit's season. — AFP

their 1-0 defeat to Inter in late September, can push their league winning streak to nine games against relegation-threatened Brescia.

The Roman side have scored two goals or more in each of their last 11 league games since that Inter defeat, the first team to achieve that feat since the legendary 'Grande Torino' side back in 1948.

One point behind Lazio in fourth are capital city rivals Roma, who host Torino amid takeover talks with US billionaire Dan Friedkin. Fiorentina and Genoa start the calendar year with new coaches.

Giuseppe Iachini's first game with 15th-placed Fiorentina will be at Bologna, a team they are unbeaten against in 10 games.

Bottom club Genoa have brought in reinforcements

for Davide Nicola's first game against Sassuolo. Italy goalkeeper Mattia Perin returns from Juventus along with Swiss midfielder Valon Behrami and Bologna striker Mattia Destro.

As veteran Ibrahimovic prepares to start for AC Milan, fellow Swede Dejan Kulusevski, 19, returns to Parma on loan after signing a five-year deal with champions Juventus. The promising teenager has had a breakthrough season since going on loan from Atalanta to Parma in June, scoring four goals and setting up another seven in 17 games. He will be up against his parent club this weekend. "I've heard great things about Kulusevski," said Ibrahimovic of the player who has more to Juve in a deal worth nearly 44 million euros (\$49 million). — AFP

Stones must improve fitness record: Guardiola

LONDON: Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola believes John Stones has the ability to become one of the best defenders in the world but said he will not reach his potential until he stays fit for long periods.

Stones last featured for City in a 2-1 Premier League defeat by Manchester United last month and has been restricted to just 12 club appearances this season.

The 25-year-old is likely to return to City's starting lineup for the FA Cup third round match against League Two side Port Vale on Saturday after recovering from his third thigh injury of the campaign.

"He has the conditions to do it, but to be the best central defender you have to play one entire season, every three days being there," Guardiola told a news conference. "I don't know why he has not been able to play regularly. We try to help him. We have tried to do the best to help him since the first day of the 3-1/2 years we have been here. We do everything for him."

"It depends on him. It's in his hands and in his head to become one of the best." In the absence of Stones, City have been forced to play Brazilian midfielder Fernandinho and 18-year-old Eric Garcia in centre back positions over the festive period.

Barcelona academy graduate Garcia has impressed Guardiola with his tactical maturity, having helped City to victories over Sheffield United and Everton. "Eric is so clever," Guardiola added. "Everything you say to him, he understands, he doesn't need more time to understand. "Life is about opportunities. We are delighted with how he has taken his. He's helped us in tough moments." — Reuters

Live Matches on TV (Local Timings)

SPANISH LEAGUE	
Granada CF v Real Mallorca	14:00
beIN Sports	
Real Sociedad v Villarreal CF	16:00
beIN Sports	
Deportivo Alaves v Real Betis	18:00
beIN Sports	
Celta de Vigo v Osasuna	23:00
beIN Sports	
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE	
Brescia v SS Lazio	14:30
beIN Sports	
spal v Hellas Verona FC	17:00
beIN Sports	
Genoa CFC v US Sassuolo Calcio	20:00
beIN Sports	
AS Roma v Torino FC	22:45
beIN Sports	

Solskjaer dismisses Van Persie's criticism

LONDON: Manchester United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has hit back at criticism of his management style from former Red Devils striker Robin Van Persie, saying: "I'm not in medieval times."

The Dutchman felt Solskjaer appeared too upbeat in the aftermath of the 2-0 defeat to Arsenal on New Year's Day that left United five points behind fourth-placed Chelsea in the Premier League. Van Persie said Solskjaer "seems like a really nice guy" but that the Norwegian needed to be more "mean at times" and "more angry" and added: "You need to have fear as well for your coach."

Solskjaer, who is also having to handle fresh speculation surrounding the future of star midfielder Paul Pogba, said Van Persie was not in a position to judge

his methods. "I don't know Robin and Robin doesn't know me," he said ahead of his side's FA Cup third-round tie away to Wolves.

"He probably doesn't have a right to criticise my management style and I won't change. That's definite. Robin took my number 20 (shirt) and that's probably all he's going to take from me as well. Because I'm not in medieval times."

The "medieval times" remark was perceived to be Solskjaer defending his man-management methods, which appear far removed from the more autocratic approach of his old United boss Alex Ferguson. Solskjaer was also asked about criticism of the club in general from Pogba's agent Mino Raiola.

The Italian is reported to have told La Repubblica

he would stop sending his clients to United, saying they would "ruin" even a great player. Coming in the context of a fresh injury setback for Pogba, who will be out for three to four weeks after surgery to remove bone fragments from his ankle, the comments have been interpreted by some as Raiola seeking to engineer a move away from Old Trafford for Pogba.

"Paul Pogba is our player and agents are hired by players, not the opposite way around. It's not 'agents' players', it's 'our players'," said Solskjaer. "What me and Paul are talking about I don't have to talk to you about."

That will be between us." United travel to Molineux to take on the team that knocked them out in last season's quarter-finals. — AFP

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Villa, Brighton make FA Cup exit



LONDON: Aston Villa's Ivorian striker Jonathan Kodjia (R) has an unsuccessful shot during the English FA Cup third round football match between Fulham and Aston Villa at Craven Cottage in Fulham, west London yesterday. — AFP

LONDON: Aston Villa and Brighton suffered FA Cup embarrassment as the Premier League clubs paid the price for making a raft of team changes in their shock third round exits yesterday.

Villa are languishing just above the relegation zone after a difficult first season back in the top-flight and boss Dean Smith prioritised that survival battle with nine changes against second tier Fulham.

Anthony Knockaert gave Fulham the lead at Craven Cottage with a 54th minute curler as the former Brighton forward grabbed his first goal since September. Anwar El Ghazi equalised for Villa in the 63rd minute, but the understudies couldn't hold on as Harry Arter won it with a 30-yard thunderbolt with 16 minutes left. Midfielder Arter had only been on the pitch for one minute and 45 seconds before scoring his first goal since November 2017.

Brighton endured the same fate as Villa as Albion boss Graham Potter made seven changes from their New Year's Day draw against Chelsea and second tier

Sheffield Wednesday took advantage with a 1-0 win at the Amex Stadium.

Adam Reach blasted Wednesday into the fourth round with a deflected long-range strike in the 65th minute. Watford blew a three-goal lead in a dramatic 3-3 draw against third tier strugglers Tranmere.

Last season's FA Cup runners-up were three up by half-time at Vicarage Road as Tom Dele-Bashiru, Nathaniel Chalobah and Roberto Pereyra netted. But they lost the recent momentum from new boss Nigel Pearson's arrival as Connor Jennings and Emmanuel Monthe scored in the second half before Paul Mullin's 87th minute penalty equaliser was followed by a red card for Pereyra.

Newcastle's wretched FA Cup record suffered a fresh blemish as 40-year-old Aaron Wilbraham gave minnows Rochdale a 1-1 draw at Spotland.

Magpies boss Steve Bruce had declared his determination not to lose to "bloody Rochdale" as he eyed a sustained Cup run for a club that hasn't won the com-

petition since 1955 and last reached the final in 1999.

NEWCASTLE STUMBLE

But Newcastle's FA Cup form is so bad that they have not gone beyond the fourth round for 13 years. Once again they endured embarrassment as Rochdale, who took Tottenham to a fifth round replay in 2018, recovered from Miguel Almiron's opener to earn a replay at St James' Park later in January thanks to a late leveller from old stager Wilbraham.

"Credit to Aaron Wilbraham, he's been around longer than I have!" Bruce said. "We could've been out, so it's a positive we are still in with a shout."

Paraguayan midfielder Almiron opened the scoring with a fierce drive into the top corner from Christian Atsu's 17th minute pass.

In need of a lift, Rochdale, sitting 18th in League One, opted for experience over the promise of youth at half-time when they sent on Wilbraham to replace 16-year-old Kwadwo Baah.

In the 674th game of his journeyman career, Wilbraham bagged only his second goal in the FA Cup with a close-range finish from Luke Matheson's cross in the 79th minute.

Rochdale boss Brian Barry-Murphy revealed Wilbraham had overcome heartbreak to emerge as the hero. "Aaron's mum passed away recently so he's been playing with that memory for the last couple of weeks," he said. "He's an amazing guy and he had a huge impact on the second half." Norwich's teenage striker Adam Idah scored a hat-trick — his first goals for the club — in their 4-2 win at Championship side Preston.

Will Smallbone marked his Southampton debut with a second half goal in their 2-0 victory over Huddersfield, while much-changed Burnley beat Peterborough 4-2.

FA Cup holders Manchester City host Port Vale later, while troubled Manchester United travel to Wolves looking to avoid a repeat of last season's quarter-final exit at Molineux. — AFP

Harden records triple-double in Rockets win

HOUSTON: James Harden recorded a 40-point triple-double and Clint Capela won the matchup of talented bigs as the Houston Rockets rolled to a 118-108 victory over the Philadelphia 76ers on Friday night in Houston. Harden posted 44 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists and intermittently carried the Rockets when things went awry. Capela added 30 points and 14 rebounds to outpace 76ers center Joel Embiid (20 points, 12 boards) and help send Philadelphia to its fourth consecutive defeat since a Christmas Day blistering of the Eastern Conference-leading Milwaukee Bucks. Harden was spectacular throughout, converting 6 of 12 3-

pointers while finishing 12-for-12 at the free-throw line.

LA LAKERS 123 - NEW ORLEANS PELICANS 113

Anthony Davis scored 46 points and grabbed 13 rebounds, leading Los Angeles to a victory over visiting New Orleans. Davis, who scored 41 points in the Lakers' win over the Pelicans in their initial meeting on Nov. 27, hit 15 of 21 shots and made all 13 of his free throws as the Lakers won their fourth consecutive game. Danny Green, who made 6 of 10 3-pointers for the game, had 20 of his 25 points in the first half, and LeBron James finished with 17 points, 15 assists and eight rebounds for Los Angeles. Lonzo Ball had 23 points and Brandon Ingram had 22 for the Pelicans, who had their four-game winning streak snapped. E'Twaun Moore added 16 points, Derrick Favors had 15 points, 14 rebounds and four blocks, and JJ Redick contributed 14 points for New Orleans.

ORLANDO MAGIC 105 - MIAMI HEAT 85

Reserve guard Terrence Ross scored a game-high 25 points — including 6 of 10 on 3-pointers — to lead host Orlando to a win over Miami. Nikola Vucevic added 20 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists for Orlando, which improved to 9-4 against its in-state rivals since the start of the 2016-2017 season. The Magic also got 16 points and eight rebounds from forward Aaron Gordon, who missed Orlando's two previous games due to a foot injury. Miami was led by shooting guard Jimmy Butler, who had 23 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists. Heat center Bam Adebayo added 14 points and 10 rebounds.

BOSTON CELTICS 109 - ATLANTA HAWKS 106

Daniel Theis blocked a potential go-ahead basket by Trae Young with 2.7 seconds remaining as Boston held off visiting Atlanta. Jaylen Brown had 24 points and 10 rebounds to lead all five starters scoring in double figures for the Celtics, who won for the seventh

time in their last eight games. Enes Kanter chipped in 14 points and 11 rebounds off the bench for Boston, which played without Kemba Walker (flu). Young had 28 points and 10 assists in his return from a two-game absence with a sprained ankle. Kevin Huerter scored 17 and John Collins was at 16 before exiting in the third with a back contusion for the Hawks, who have dropped 11 of 12.

PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS 122 - WASHINGTON WIZARDS 103

Damian Lillard scored 35 points, CJ McCollum added 24, and Portland snapped a five-game losing skid with a win over host Washington. The Wizards came into Friday's game without All-Stars John Wall (Achilles) and Bradley Beal (leg). Jordan McRae came off the bench and matched Lillard's game high with 35 points, Garrison Mathews added 18 points and Ish Smith finished with 16 points, all contributing to a 76-19 advantage in bench scoring for Washington. Portland's starters posted a

more lopsided edge, however, outscoring their counterparts 103-27. Lillard and McCollum led four Trail Blazers starters scoring in double figures, joined by Carmelo Anthony with 16 and Hassan Whiteside with 23. Whiteside also grabbed 21 rebounds. Mario Hezonja made it five Trail Blazers in double digits with 10 points.

PHOENIX SUNS 120 - NEW YORK KNICKS 112

Devin Booker scored a game-high 38 points — his franchise record-tying fifth straight 30-point game — as host Phoenix mounted a fourth-quarter comeback and pulled away from New York. The Suns, who have won three of four, outscored the Knicks 37-25 in the fourth quarter. New York had its season-high three-game winning streak snapped. Kelly Oubre Jr. scored 29 points for the Suns and Aron Baynes posted a double-double (20 points, 12 rebounds). Marcus Morris Sr. led the Knicks with 25 points while Bobby Portis added 20 off the bench. — Reuters