

Friday Times

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Local

Maids and the virus



Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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Last week, a local private TV channel interviewed two Asian domestic workers in Kuwait. Both were in tears and confused over their situation, because they suddenly found themselves on the street without shelter in difficult circumstances, as they were thrown out from their sponsor's house on the pretext of the spread of the coronavirus. Their painful oppression made me and others wonder about the conditions of some of the workers who may be suffering due to the repercussions of this virus – financially and morally.

It was sad to watch these women, relatively old in age, who found themselves on the street and did not know where to go and what they did wrong. They said their embassy did not receive them, so they walked aimlessly in the streets until they met the reporter and made their voices heard. They were taken to a shelter under state custody. The video was also published on social media. They are safe now, but are victims of abuse by their sponsor.

The women were lucky and are undoubtedly secure now, but I wonder if there are more similar cases who may be struggling under the hard conditions because of the damage they suffered because of the coronavirus. We all know there are families who have lost their salaries or part of it due to the stoppage of businesses, and this has certainly hurt them.

Some of these families may have domestic workers who are also in desperate need to support their families back home, so stopping the maid's salary for any reason will hugely harm her family as well. She may be able to afford to eat and sleep, but who knows what her family is going through.

Those two women represent an example of what a sponsor can do in the event he is unwilling to pay the maid. He may find it easier to throw the worker out of the house like a used item or trash on the excuse of spreading the virus, instead of taking responsibility for her as per her contract. Some people have no sense, otherwise we wouldn't see people like those two women.

I felt comfortable that the state intervened and placed those women in a shelter to protect them, as it is not possible to leave them on the street without a roof or money. Yet I wonder about the position of the law in this case and if the sponsor can act in this aggressive manner. To my understanding, he is responsible to care for these dependents. I also believe their embassy has to demand the rights of these women if the sponsor hasn't paid their salaries.

I believe that throwing out the maids was an inhuman act, and the sponsor must be punished, knowing that the government did not cut the salaries of employees in the government sector, whether they are expatriates or citizens. The same holds true for many in the private sector as well.

I hope Asian embassies will alert all their citizens to contact them directly in case they are expelled and the coronavirus outbreak is used as an excuse to harm them. The entire world, as well as Kuwait, is recovering from this virus and preparing to return to normal life. There is no need to cause harm to others. There is no excuse because businesses are on their way back soon.

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MP Safa Al-Hashem is seen during a session at the National Assembly on June 16, 2020. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Different but similar



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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I came across a piece about customs that distinguish people from each other, and it was amazing how a subject is approached differently by people of different nations; even in different parts of the same country. There is no doubt that every nation has its own exclusive customs due to various factors such as geopolitical location, environment, history and even civilizations that existed there.

In many cases, the existence of certain customs in a place does not mean they will not spread somewhere else. Our current world seems to be a very small town when it comes to social media, communications and ease of travel.

If we look at languages for example, we find Arabic is described by many as the most difficult language to learn, and its difficulty comes from the sound of some of its alphabets. Actually it has one alphabet that is exclusive to it – dhad – after which the language is described or referred to.

Yet I am amazed at the number of people from all parts of the world –from the US all the way to China – who learn and speak the language with its grammar and the masculine and feminine differentiations!

Sometimes it seems that some customs are universal, although with some modifications here and there. In the Gulf region for example, we have Girgian during the month

of Ramadan, where children go from house to house singing traditional songs while carrying specially-sewn bags to collect candy and even money. This reminds me of the trick or treat custom in the West, although the backgrounds of both are totally different.

Another custom that exists in this part of the world has to do with weddings. On the eve of the wedding party, the female relatives of the bride will be invited to celebrate a henna night, during which the hands of the bride will be decorated with henna and the women will sing and dance the night out to mark the end of being single. Is not this close to what is called a bachelorette's party in some other countries?

It seems that as much as there are differences, there are similarities regardless of language, location, color, belief and so on.

On a lighter note, I was amazed at hearing one supposedly educated person who was claiming that we have a highly effective remedy for COVID-19, which is actually a dish that is very popular in Egypt and the rest of Arabia. It is mulukhiya!

He said that if it is eaten in the shaloulou way, it will not allow the virus to find refuge in your body. I do not know about this but I mentioned mulukhiya because it was a dish exclusive to royalty in Egypt before it became popular – mulukiya actually means 'it is royal'.

Finally, Allah says: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed the most noble of you in sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted." — Holy Quran (49:13)

Local

Lack of public transport has made life difficult for many

By Ben Garcia

Public transport is a basic necessity wherever you are in the world today. However, when the lockdown began, all public transport in Kuwait was ceased. Since June 1, the first phase of a five-phase program by the government to return to normalcy is being implemented. In some sectors, work has resumed. But resumption of public transportation is not included in the first phase. Taxis can begin plying the streets only in phase three, tentatively scheduled to start on July 12, and buses can resume services on Aug 2 (again, depending on the health situation at that time).

The suspension of public transport is meant to slow the spread of coronavirus in

Kuwait. But for commuters whose work has resumed, the lack of public transport is a nightmare. "This should have resumed in the first phase because how can people go to work, especially those who are using public transport?" asked Ronnie, a Filipino commuter.

Since the reopening of his company on May 31, he claims he walks to work daily from Kuwait City to Shuwaikh. "I need to get up by 5 am to be able to arrive for duty at 8 am. I start walking from 6 am from Kuwait City. I walk slowly because I still need energy when I get to my worksite. Also, if you leave early from home, the climate is still cool. I only have to endure the 2 pm heat after work. It's an unforgettable experience," Ronnie told Kuwait Times.

"Maybe I will die not from the coronavirus, but from heatstroke. I looked for private transport, but it costs me KD 4 daily," he said. "When I use the bus, I only spend half a dinar going back and forth because it's only 250 fils for each way. I cannot work only to give my income for transport," he added.

Ronnie's company doesn't provide transportation. "Our agreement is just for the basic salary and transportation will be under our expense. It is up to us if we want to report to work or not. I need the job and money, so I endure and accept this fate," he said.

For Sam, the stoppage of public transport is a great advantage for him. "Now my commute to work is free. My boss required us to report to work, so I am ferried by the com-

pany car every day for free. Before COVID I spent money on the bus. It's a bother because it's hot and also it takes a lot of time on the road before you reach your destination. Now there are no hassles, because the driver will come to my doorstep and bring me to work. I hope this will continue even after corona," Sam told Kuwait Times. By not taking the bus, Sam saves around KD 13 every month.

An Egyptian taxi driver explained how he has circumvented the taxi ban. "Since taxis are not allowed, I rented a car so I can still take my wife to work at a money remittance office in Kuwait City and can accept passengers, especially those who are my regular customers. I still earn money – it's not much, but at least it's regular income," he said.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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Local

Kuwait mourns passing of Ahmed Yousef Behbehani



Ahmed Yousef Behbehani (third left) and other Kuwait Journalists Association officials meet HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in this file photo.

Kuwait's pioneering media figure and economist Ahmed Yousef Behbehani passed away on Wednesday at the age of 79 following a long and successful career. Behbehani was the first Kuwaiti to helm the Arab Journalists Association. He was also the chairman of Kuwait Journalists Association for 29 years, was the honorary chairman of the Press Emblem Campaign, member of the International Journalism Institute, member of Dubai's Arab Journalism Award

board of directors and member of Los Angeles Press Club.

In addition, Behbehani was Kuwait News Agency's deputy chairman and vice president of Kuwait Intellectual Property Rights Society and board chairman of Al-Taqatha Press and Publication House. Behbehani was also a prominent banker. He was chairman of Al-Ahli bank from 2003 until 2014, when he resigned due to health reasons.

KUNA Chairman and Director General Sheikh Mubarak Al-

Duaj Al-Sabah expressed sorrow over the demise of Behbehani. In a press statement, Sheikh Mubarak said his demise was a great loss for Kuwait and all Gulf and Arab media, stressing he was a very well-known writer, teacher and Arab press pioneer. Sheikh Mubarak noted that the late Ahmed Behbahani was also a great and important economic pillar who contributed to supporting the national economy, in addition to his media role. — Agencies



Local



**Kuwait Journalists Association
and the journalism community**
announce the sad demise of their colleague

**Ahmed Yousef Behbehani
(Abu Salman)**

Honorary Chairman of KJA,
Former Chairman of KJA.
Former Chairman of Arab Journalists
Association,

Who passed away
Wednesday June 17th, 2020.

May Allah Almighty bestow His mercy on him
and grant his bereaved family patience.



Local

EU envoy praises Kuwait's efforts to fight pandemic

KUWAIT: Underlining the importance of further deepening the excellent relationship between the European Union and Kuwait, the Ambassador of the European Union to Kuwait and Qatar Cristian Tudor joined social media influencer and Kuwaiti entrepreneur Bader Al-Essa on his social media platform to have a direct discussion with youth in Kuwait on the "Role of passion in building diplomatic relations" and EU-Kuwait bilateral relations in the post-pandemic context. The social media interview focused on highlighting the establishment of the Delegation of the European Union in Kuwait as a milestone in its bilateral relations with Kuwait.

"Every crisis could be a driver of change. Being already close partners with Kuwait, I believe that COVID-19 could open a new window of opportunity for deepening our bilateral relations in various fields such as economic diversification, innovative technologies, climate change, youth exchanges and humanitarian aid, among others", explained Tudor.

The ambassador also praised Kuwait's response to the pandemic and the recent initia-

tives of the Kuwaiti government in mitigating different aspects of the health crisis. He further highlighted efforts by the Kuwaiti leadership in bringing more stability to the Gulf region, referring to the latest diplomatic exchanges to overcome the Gulf rift.

In another statement, Essa praised the current efforts of the government and parliament in reaching out to Kuwaiti entrepreneurs through a meeting that was chaired by National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem with local small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In the interview, he highlighted the importance of supporting SMEs in Kuwait and worldwide as they will heavily contribute in the economic recovery process in Kuwait post COVID-19. Essa also stated that he aims to inspire and infuse hope in young entrepreneurs during this phase through his platform by interviewing prominent officials and people with success stories.

The Delegation of the European Union to Kuwait was inaugurated on July 14, 2019 to deepen engagement with Kuwait and other countries in the GCC, aiming to have a comprehensive and multi-dimensional co-opera-



Bader Al-Essa



Cristian Tudor

tion covering political dialogue, economy and trade, sectoral and regional co-operation. The EU Delegation in Kuwait is also responsible for EU's relations with Qatar. It is the third EU Delegation in the Gulf region, after Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

Essa (founder and host of Richter Talk Show), is an entrepreneur, social media influ-

encer and talk show host. In 2014, he founded Neqsa, a trendy pastry shop, co-founded Richter Creative Office, a Kuwait-based 360 marketing and creative agency, and started the very first episode of Richter Talk Show in 2015. Essa earned his Bachelors of Business Administration and Information Technology from Denver University

KRCS hands out food aid to needy residents in Subhan

KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) handed out 1,000 food parcels and 1,000 milk cartons to residents in Subhan in cooperation with the interior ministry on Wednesday. The organization's ongoing efforts targeting several areas in the country stems from its humanitarian role to fulfill the needs of underprivileged laborers and relieve their plight amid the coronavirus crisis, Khaled Al-Zaid, Director of Public Relations and Information at the Society, told KUNA.

The distribution zones have been highlighted based on the needs of the people. The association is carrying out a multitude of programs, including the distribution of hot meals, food, cleaning products and medical devices, as well as necessary needs to hospitals and quarantine centers, he added. Nationals and residents are urged to provide donations to the society as it responds to the needs of the underprivileged across the country. — KUNA



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Local

Kuwait underlines continued support to the Syrian people

Iraq wants to use Kuwait donor meet funds to fight COVID-19

BRUSSELS: Kuwait has once again stressed its commitment and determination to continue support to the Syrian people and renewed calls for a political solution to the Syrian crisis. This was expressed by Kuwait's Ambassador to the European Union, Belgium and NATO Jassem Al-Budaiwi during a video event on Syria organized by the EU Tuesday evening. He stressed on the prominent and important Kuwaiti role since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, and noted that the first three donor conferences organized by Kuwait on Syria are the core of the ongoing conferences on Syria.

He said Kuwait's support for the brotherly Syrian people continues from sincere intentions to end their suffering and enjoy security and stability. Budaiwi said Kuwait has always fulfilled its obligations towards the Syrian people at home and abroad, and continues to do so. He expressed hope that international efforts will continue to support the Syrian people, particularly in the current coronavirus pandemic crisis.

Budaiwi also hoped these efforts would lead to the start of a political process and facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people, especially during the tenth year of the Syrian crisis. The meeting titled "Humanitarian access to Syria" was a side event ahead of the fourth Brussels conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region organized by the EU that will take place on June 30.

Meanwhile, speaking to KUNA, Budaiwi said Kuwait's participation in the event comes in line with its commitments to help the Syrian people and in line with its commitment to work with the international community to help ease the suffering of the Syrian people. The EU invitation to Kuwait is in recognition of the role that Kuwait has played ever since the Syrian crisis broke out and in line with all humanitarian efforts by Kuwait all over the world under the leadership of HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who has been declared as the humanitarian leader of the world.

The activities that Kuwait does under his auspices has a special place in every diplomat's heart and we do our best to fulfill the commitments of HH the Amir, he added to KUNA. The counselor of Kuwait's embassy in Brussels Fahd Al-Jaimaz also participated in the online event.

Meanwhile, Iraqi and World Bank officials discussed Wednesday how to benefit from funds raised at the Kuwait pledging conference to help Iraq confront the coronavirus. Minister of Planning Khaled Battal discussed in a video-conference with representatives of the World Bank and donor countries how to use the pledge made at the 2018 conference to support cash-strapped Iraq fight the pandemic, a ministry statement said.

Battal called for quick action to boost the response against the virus. The World Bank officials said the bank is ready to support Iraq to address financial problems as well as fight the pandemic, coupled with reconstruction. The two sides called for improving financial management,



Kuwait's Ambassador to the European Union, Belgium and NATO Jassem Al-Budaiwi. — KUNA

developing digital skills in the educational sector, developing social protection systems and creating jobs. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Officials hold a press conference to announce the resumption of sports training. — KUNA

Sports training to resume June 28

KUWAIT: Public Sports Authority (PAS) Deputy Director-General Saqer Al-Mulla said the tripartite committee adopted a sports training resumption mechanism, which will start June 28. In a press conference held Wednesday in the presence of representatives of the ministry of health and Kuwaiti Olympic Committee, Mulla affirmed that the mechanism is subject to international health standards to ensure athletes' safety.

He pointed out that the athletes who have qualified or are still competing to qualify for the

2020 Tokyo Olympic Games will start training first. Mulla said every athlete will have to adhere to health guidelines and preventive standards.

Director of the Public Health Department and representative of the ministry of health Dr Fahd Al-Qamlas said the ministry has developed a health protocol based on principles and guidelines for sports' resumption. On Monday, the Cabinet agreed in its meeting to resume sports training while adhering to health requirements. — KUNA

KUFPEC Egypt begins extracting bitumen oil from Gulf of Suez

KUWAIT: Egypt's branch of Kuwait Foreign Petroleum Exploration Company (KUFPEC) has begun extracting bitumen oil from a well in the Gulf of Suez, the company announced yesterday. In a statement, KUFPEC said its wholly owned subsidiary, KUFPEC Egypt Limited (KUFPEC Egypt), has "achieved" the first oil production from its appraisal well GNN-4 in the Geisum concession in Egypt's Gulf of Suez.

GNN-4 is the first appraisal well in the ongoing early production and reservoir appraisal drilling program for the GNN Nukhul oil discovery. It indicated that the reservoir discovery dated back to July 2019; specifically at the GNN-3 exploration well, where preliminary survey revealed it contained 500 feet of high quality oil; estimated at 260 million barrels.

The Geisum concession is located offshore Egypt in the Southern Gulf of Suez in shallow waters with a depth ranging from 30 to 200 feet, covering an area of approximately 105 sq km. KUFPEC Acting CEO Sheikh Nawaf Saud Nasser Al-Sabah stated that the main objective of drilling operations for GNN-4 was to ap-

praise oil in the Nukhul formation. The well was successfully completed and tested at initial rates of over 2,000 barrels per day (bpd).

Sheikh Nawaf further affirmed that KUFPEC's exploration successes, whether the huge discovery KUFPEC announced last year with multi-TCF resource in Malaysia or the current one in Egypt, demonstrate its ability to achieve strategic targets through exploration. KUFPEC Egypt holds a 40 percent working interest under the production sharing contract with the operator PICO GoS Limited (a Chevron Group Company), holding the remaining 60 percent working interest.

The concession is managed by the joint operating company Petro Gulf Misr, which is jointly owned by the Egyptian General Petroleum Company, KUFPEC Egypt and PICO GoS Limited, and which is technically supervised by South Valley Egyptian Petroleum Holding Company. KUFPEC is an international upstream company engaged in exploration, development and production of crude oil and natural gas outside Kuwait and is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation. — KUNA



Sheikh Nawaf Al-Sabah

Local

Ministers, MPs asked to isolate over suspected virus infection

MPs approve bill allowing appeal of final verdicts in criminal cases



KUWAIT: The National Assembly is sanitized after a suspected case of coronavirus was discovered after a parliamentary session on Wednesday.— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and KUNA

KUWAIT: The secretariat general of the National Assembly has asked all those present during Wednesday's parliament session to self-quarantine for 14 days after a lawmaker was suspected to be infected with the coronavirus, according to a report in *Al-Anbaa* daily. The secretariat general said all attendees should also be tested for COVID-19, the report added.

During the session, the parliament approved a bill amending the criminal prosecution law whereby appealing final verdicts is permissible in some criminal cases. Up to 51 of those attending the session that came on heels of Tuesday's session during which two government officials were grilled voted in favor of the legal draft law, with one against, out of the total of 52 attending legislators. The lawmakers conducted the voting after discussing some provisions of law 17/1960 on criminal law and proceedings. Moreover, the MPs voted in favor of a bill stipulating issuance of a law intended to bring judges and public prosecutors to account for irregularities or breaching laws. They also blessed another bill with respect to issuance of licenses for individuals and companies "in a fashion intended to stay abreast of digital evolution".

MPs also agreed to a separate bill amending the social security law, lowering monthly payments for retirees from 25 to 15 percent. The first article of the draft law says a retiree is entitled to request payment of a sum seven times their net retirement payment while being compelled to pay back at a rate of 15 percent of their net monthly salary.

Finance Minister Barrak Al-Sheetan confirmed that the parlia-

ment's approval of the bill to amend some provisions of the Public Institution for Social Security to reduce the repayment rate is in the interest of retirees. In a press statement, the minister said the parliamentary financial and economic affairs committee report sought to reduce the rate to 10 percent, which would constitute a cost to public funds, noting that the government's opinion was to maintain the 25 percent deduction rate. The minister pointed out that out of cooperation and in the interest of retirees, it was agreed to reduce the rate to 15 percent.

MPs also approved a bill delaying collection of installments due from defaulters and family support funds for six months effective April 2020. An affiliate memo of the bill notes the response of the ministry of finance to HH the Amir's desire to ease the financial burden on citizens as a result of the coronavirus outbreak and its ramifications at various levels.

MPs also approved a draft law regarding civil and commercial proceedings in relation to electronic advertisements. The approved amendment to civil and commercial proceedings states that an advertisement can be posted on the Internet or any other electronic means that can be preserved and retrieved upon a decision by the minister of justice.

In cases where parties involved do not know how to post an advertisement digitally, the court is entitled to do so conventionally. Minister of Justice Fahd Al-Afasi affirmed that such a legislation is important to facilitate modernizing the tasks of the judiciary. National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem on



Wednesday praised HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah for his constructive cooperation that enabled lawmakers to approve a series of bills in Wednesday's follow-up session. The speaker, during the session, re-affirmed significance of cooperation between the legislative and executive authorities for enacting laws that concern citizens.

Minister of State for Services Affairs and Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Mubarak Al-Haris affirmed during the session the government's keenness on cooperation with legislators in line with guidelines in this respect by HH the Amir. — Agencies

New e-service for temporary visa holders

KUWAIT: The interior ministry on Wednesday launched a new electronic service that allows holders of temporary residency (article 14) to transfer to their previous residency status. In a statement, the ministry's General Administration for Security Relations and Media said that the service is to renew the regular residence of those who hold temporary residencies that will expire on Aug 31, 2020.

The service comes within the framework of the continuous development process in all sectors in order to help citizens and residents to save time and effort and speedy completion of transactions, it added. The ministry called on all beneficiaries of this service to quickly register on the ministry's website (www.moi.gov.kw) and follow the necessary steps. — KUNA

ECMO tech used in children's COVID treatment

KUWAIT: Adan Hospital announced yesterday that it had successfully utilized Extra-Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) in the treatment of children affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19). Head of Ahmadi medical zone Dr Ahmad Al-Shatti affirmed to KUNA that treatment for COVID-19 using ECMO technology is rare. The staff at Adan Hospital managed to succeed in utilizing ECMO under the supervision

and support of the ministry of health, he added.

With regards to the case, Shatti indicated that an eight-year-old girl – suffering from acute lung infection – received treatment using ECMO for about two weeks. The girl survived and was shifted back to the ICU dedicated to children, he said, mentioning that there will be discussions on expanding the use of ECMO to include more cases. — KUNA



WHO halts HCQ trials on patients

US sanctions dozens including Syrian first lady

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KARACHI: People gather in vehicles to travel on a street as COVID-19 coronavirus cases still increase in the country in Karachi. —AFP

‘Catastrophic’: South Asia reels

Infection rates turn South Asia into a global hot spot

ISLAMABAD: Early optimism that South Asia might have dodged the worst ravages of the coronavirus pandemic has disappeared as soaring infection rates turn the densely populated region into a global hot spot. After several months trailing the US and western Europe, cases of COVID-19 are surging across South Asia - home to almost a quarter of the world's population - where the virus is wreaking havoc on fragile medical systems and underfunded health agencies are pushed to breaking point.

Overflowing hospitals from Kabul to Dhaka are turning away suspected virus patients, mortuaries are being overwhelmed as cemeteries and crematoria struggle to cope, and desperate families are searching for help for critically ill loved ones. “The situation is catastrophic,” Abdur Rob, a senior doctor at Bangladesh’s Chittagong General Hospital, told AFP.

“Patients are dying in the ambulances on the roads as they shunt between hospitals looking for (intensive care) beds or hospital admission.” Archie Clements, the vice-chancellor of the health sciences faculty at Curtin University in Western Australia, said the situation would likely worsen. The growth curve “is still in an exponential phase”, Clements said. “We could be heading towards a larger number of deaths in the weeks ahead.” Worldwide more than eight million people have been infected by COVID-19 and over 446,000 have died, with the virus accelerating across South Asia and Latin America.

Easing lockdowns, rising cases

Devastating scenarios are playing out as cash-strapped governments choose between enforcing lockdowns or watching low-income families slide deeper into poverty, often with no safety nets to catch them. India is the fourth worst-hit country in the world with more than 354,000 confirmed cases - though limited testing means the true number is likely much higher. The number of fatalities leapt by more than 2,000 to top 11,900 on Wednesday after Mumbai and New Delhi updated their figures. The government won plaudits in late March for imposing one of the world's strictest lockdowns. But millions of migrant workers were left jobless and, unable to get home, sometimes held in crowded facilities that increased the risk of transmission.

As the government steadily lifts restrictions, cases have surged. “The problem is that in a country like India, with its large-scale poverty and large migrant community, you can't expect everyone to shelter in place and ride out the storm,” said Michael Kugelman, an analyst from the Washington-based Wilson Center. In neighboring Pakistan, which has recorded more than 160,000 cases and over 3,000 deaths, Prime Minister Imran Khan resisted a nationwide lockdown, saying the country could ill afford it. Many there chose to ignore social distancing guidelines and provincial lockdowns were relaxed during last month's Eid al-Fitr holiday, helping fuel the current increase in cases.

“When Eid celebrations came, the public took the ease of the lockdown as a sign that the disease was all over. They swamped the markets, they went to funerals, there was no enforcement of the (social distancing

measures),” said Samra Fakhar, a surgeon in the northwestern city of Peshawar. Authorities have warned that Pakistan would likely see more than one million cases by July, and the World Health Organization has called for new lockdowns, a measure Khan rejected. In Pakistan's overwhelmed hospitals, doctors say national leaders wasted precious early months to brace for a potential onslaught.

“We had a chance to prepare for this but unfortunately it didn't happen. Things are going to get worse,” said Saeedullah Shah, a doctor with the Pakistan Islamic Medical Association COVID-19 task force. “Are we ready for it? Not at all... People will start getting violent when they don't find beds.” Further complicating the crisis is limited testing which is skewing data lower. Last week, burial figures released by nine state-run graveyards in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka, as well as dozens of small graveyards in a neighboring city, showed at least 1,600 additional deaths in April and May, a top Bengali news site reported. Yet health ministry data show only 450 people died from COVID-19 in the two cities during the period. Similar anecdotes are emerging in conflict-battered Afghanistan, which has only acknowledged more than 26,000 cases and 500 deaths - seemingly impossibly low numbers for a country that failed to enforce lockdowns amid ongoing fighting and where impoverished day laborers are unable to stay home. “We have reports of increasing suspected deaths, people burying dead bodies at night,” said Kabul governor Mohammad Yakub Haidary last week, adding that the Afghan capital was suspected of having more than a million infected people. “There is a disaster coming.” —AFP

International

China-India brutal high altitude, low-tech battle

Fists, stones and clubs

NEW DELHI: India and China's militaries have some of the world's most sophisticated modern weaponry, but their deadliest scrap in over 50 years was fought using fists, rocks wrapped in barbed wire and clubs studded with nails. There is an understanding between the nuclear-armed neighbors that despite their decades-old failure to demarcate their huge border, their troops in the disputed and inhospitable region will not use firearms. The several hours of scuffles on Monday, reportedly involving hundreds of soldiers around 4,500 meters (15,000 feet) up in the Himalayas, left at least 20 Indians dead, according to the Indian army.

Indian media claim that 43 Chinese were also killed or seriously hurt - Beijing is yet to give casualty numbers - making it the deadliest encounter since 1967 and the first deaths in fighting since 1975. But unlike then, this time no shot was fired, with the victims bludgeoned with crude hand-made weapons, hit by stones or punched and shoved off a ridge onto rocks and an icy river below, reports and sources indicate. Post-mortems so far showed that the "primary reason for death is drowning and it looks like they fell from a height into the water because of head injuries," one Indian official told AFP. The NDTV and Network 18 television channels reported that 16 of the Indian soldiers were killed with blunt objects and four fell into the river.

'Rocks in barbed wire'

According to broadcaster India Today, last week Chinese forces returned and camped in an area that they had previously withdrawn from. Indian troops "dismantled" the camp and a scuffle left several soldiers injured. The Chinese returned in larger numbers over the weekend and on Sunday stones were thrown. The next evening, on a high ridge with a big drop towards the fast-flowing Galwan river, clashes erupted. Matters escalated rapidly and several Indian soldiers tumbled into the icy water, while an unarmed Indian patrol team led by Colonel Santosh Babu set out to parley with the Chinese.

But the Chinese refused to budge and attacked the Indians with boulders, rocks wrapped with barbed wire and clubs studded with nails, Indian reports said. Colonel Babu was seriously injured. He would later die. Forty minutes later, the same unit led by a major returned and further fighting broke out, this time reportedly involving hundreds of soldiers and the Chinese outnumbering the Indians, raging until after midnight. "When they (the Indian soldiers) were encountered by the Chinese soldiers they were overwhelmed and many were pushed down a harsh rocky slope," one security source said. "They came hurtling down like free falling objects."



SILIGURI: Police personnel catch activists of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as they shout slogans during an anti-China protest in Siliguri. — AFP

'A cold desert'

Colonel S Dinny, who until 2017 commanded an Indian battalion in the region, said that the terrain is "extremely treacherous", with troops having to climb as high as 5,200 meters. "It's a cold desert," he told AFP. "It takes a toll on the body and mind. The oxygen level is only 60 percent of what is available in cities like Delhi, Mumbai." And it's also confusing. The area "is not demar-

cated on the map, there is no boundary. The maps have not even been exchanged so that the other person knows what someone is claiming. There are no boundary markers," Dinny said. But retired lieutenant general DS Hooda, who headed the army's Northern Command, said that there are detailed protocols that have ensured misunderstandings usually do not escalate - starting with the no-guns policy. — AFP

India, Mexico, Norway, Ireland elected to UN Security Council

UNITED NATIONS: The UN General Assembly elected on Wednesday four new members of the Security Council for 2021 and 2022, with Canada losing out again and the battle for the African seat going to a second round. India, Mexico, Norway and Ireland were chosen as non-permanent members, while Djibouti and Kenya - both of which failed to receive the two-thirds vote majority required to win - will go to a second round of voting. Canada was beaten once again for one of the Western seats, by Ireland and Norway, despite a long and star-studded campaign, a result likely to be a blow to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. In the Asia-Pacific region, India - which has been trying unsuccessfully to win a permanent seat in an expanded Security Council - ran unopposed to win 184 votes out of the 192 countries that participated in the election.

The result means that India will now have a seat at the same table as China, just days after the two nations disputed their Himalayan border, trading blame for a brawl that left at least 20 Indian soldiers dead. Mexico, which also ran unopposed, earned 187 votes. African nations have in the past picked their own candidate but were unable to put forward a single country this time. Kenya received 113 votes against Djibouti, which got 78. Kenya boasts of enjoying the support of the African Union, but Djibouti says it should have the seat due to Nairobi's past participation on the Security Council and the principle of rotation.

French-speaking Djibouti and English-speaking Kenya are both highlighting their roles in seeking peace on the Horn of Africa, as well as their contributions to UN peacekeeping options. Kenya has pointed to its welcome to refugees from Somalia and South Sudan, as well as to its support to the two countries' fragile governments. Djibouti, in turn, notes its strategic location and unusual role as a defense base for diverse countries - France, the United States, China and Japan - as well as its contributions in Somalia.

For Europe and the Western seats, the competition was more customary. Canada - already stung by a defeat in 2010 during its last bid for the Security Council, when the General Assembly chose Portugal instead - was dominated by Norway, with 130 votes, and Ireland, which had 128, the minimum number required to win. Trudeau had invested heavily in the latest Security Council effort, with the defeat potentially causing him political embarrassment at home. "As we move forward, we remain committed to the goals and principles that we laid out during this campaign," Trudeau said in a statement, adding that Canada would "continue to play a vital role in advancing global cooperation and building a more peaceful, inclusive and sustainable world."

Celine Dion vs Bono

Hoping to woo delegates, both Canada and Ireland had wielded star power: Celine Dion sang in New York City to promote Canada at the UN, while U2 performed a concert in the Big Apple for Ireland. "Campaigning for a UNSC seat involves endless lobbying, entertaining and worrying that the ambassador who just promised you a vote is a liar," tweeted Richard Gowan, an expert on the world body at the International Crisis Group. Fearing fraud or manipulation, the General Assembly did not vote electronically, even though the United Nations is mostly operating virtually until the end of July due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

Egypt repatriates laborers abused in Libya

CAIRO: Egypt repatriated 23 laborers yesterday from western Libya after allegations that forces allied to the UN-recognized government had detained and abused them, private television channel CBC Extra and a security source said. The 23 workers arrived at Marsa Matrouh, a Mediterranean resort town in northwest Egypt, the security source told AFP.

Prominent TV host Ahmed Moussa broadcast pictures of the men on their arrival draped in Egyptians flags and donning protective masks. Earlier in the week, a video widely circulated on social media allegedly showing the laborers forced to stand on one leg with their bare feet on sand as they raised their hands. The detained men in the footage, filmed in daylight, appeared to be repeating at the command of an unidentified man expletives against Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and Libya's self-styled leader Khalifa Haftar.

The video immediately drew swift condemnation from senior Egyptian officials. It "will not pass lightly and the Egyptian state does not allow assault on its citizens abroad," immigration minister Nabila Makram was quoted as saying in local media. Libya's UN-recognized Government of National Accord announced Wednesday the arrest of suspects in the alleged abuse after the outcry. Police had "apprehended the people involved" and were preparing to present them to the prosecutor, the GNA's interior ministry said in a statement. — AFP

International

French black, Arab men face 'discriminatory' police checks

Angry protests over racism sweep across the country

PARIS: French police conduct discriminatory identity checks on black and Arab men, Human Rights Watch charged yesterday, as angry protests over alleged racism in the security forces sweep across the country. France has seen numerous demonstrations in recent weeks protesting the actions of police, many coalescing around the 2016 death of young black man Adama Traore in police custody, which activists say echoes George Floyd's killing in the US. Human Rights Watch said in a report that the French police have "overly broad" powers "to conduct discriminatory and abusive checks on black and Arab boys and men", leaving too much room for arbitrary and biased decisions.

"There is ample evidence that identity checks in France drive a deep and sharp wedge between communities and the police, while doing virtually nothing to deter or detect crime," HRW's France director Benedicte Jeannerod said. The report comes as France is reeling from allegations of institutionalized racism in the ranks of its police, an accusation vehemently rejected by police forces who say the problems are down to individual security force members. French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged in a national address Sunday that France had to fight against the fact that "the name, the address, the color of the skin" can

affect a person's chances in their lives.

But Macron defended France's under-fire police force, saying they "deserve public support and the recognition of the nation for their work". On Tuesday his government backtracked on a ban on the use of chokeholds by the police after a backlash by police unions, who demonstrated across France and threw down their handcuffs in protest. HRW's report - based on interviews with 90 men and boys belonging to minority groups in Paris, Grenoble, Strasbourg and Lille - says the stop-and-search checks "often involved invasive and humiliating body pat-downs."

The 44-page document includes 12-year-old Koffi's account, who says his class was subjected to an identity check in front of their school in Bobigny, a disadvantaged neighborhood in northeastern Paris, as they were leaving on a field trip to the famous Louvre museum. He said three police officers searched their bags. "They put their hands in my pockets. They spread my legs and touched my genitals," Koffi said. Children as young as 10 are targeted, the HRW report said. There are no official statistics on the racial profiles of those stopped by the police, as a 1978 French law prohibits the collection of data on a person's race, ethnicity, or political or religious opinions. — AFP



PARIS: Handcuffs and badges are displayed on the ground during a protest in reaction to the French Interior minister's announcements, amid the latest wave of protests against racism and police violence. —AFP

WHO halts HCQ trials on patients

GENEVA: The World Health Organization decided Wednesday to halt trials of hydroxychloroquine as a potential treatment for hospitalized COVID-19 patients, finding it did not reduce the mortality rate. A decades-old malaria and rheumatoid arthritis drug, hydroxychloroquine has been at the center of political and scientific controversy. It has been touted as a possible treatment for the new coronavirus by high profile figures, including US President Donald Trump.

The drug has been included in several randomized clinical trials - considered the gold standard for clinical investigation - but the WHO said the evidence had led the UN health agency to call time on its own trials. Doctor Ana Maria Heno Restrepo, from the WHO's health emergencies program, told a virtual press conference in Geneva that it was being withdrawn from its multi-country Solidarity Trial of a range of potential treatments.

"The internal evidence from the Solidarity/Discovery Trial, the external evidence from the Recovery Trial and the combined evidence from these large randomized trials, brought together, suggest that hydroxychloroquine - when compared with the standard of care in the treatment of hospitalized COVID-19 patients - does not result in the reduction of the

mortality of those patients," she said. "Based on this analysis and on the review of the published evidence, the Executive Group of the Solidarity/Recovery Trial has met on two occasions and today we met with all the principal investigators. "After deliberation, they have concluded that the hydroxychloroquine arm will be stopped from the Solidarity Trial."

British trial results

Heno Restrepo said it was not a WHO policy recommendation and the decision to stop testing it on COVID-19 hospital patients did not apply to the use or the evaluation of the drug as a potential preventative measure against the virus. Earlier this month, the Recovery Trial - a major trial run by the University of Oxford - found hydroxychloroquine had "no benefit" for patients hospitalized with COVID-19.

The British trial, the biggest so far to come forward with findings, said it would stop recruiting patients to be given hydroxychloroquine "with immediate effect". "Our conclusion is that this treatment does not reduce the risk of dying from COVID among hospital patients," said Martin Landray, an Oxford professor of medicine and epidemiology who co-leads the study. The randomized clinical trial has recruited a total of 11,000 patients from 175 hospitals in the UK to test a range of potential treatments. The WHO announcement came after the United States on Monday withdrew emergency use authorizations for hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine - both favored by Trump to treat the new coronavirus. — AFP

Facial recognition: IT and police in delicate dance

PARIS: Tech giants love to portray themselves as forces for good and as the United States was gripped by anti-racism protests a number of them publicly disavowed selling controversial facial recognition technology to police forces. Facial recognition has numerous applications that could simplify our lives as we've seen with Apple using it to unlock smartphones or in stores to replace cash registers.

But the technology has a dark side, with facial recognition integrated into China's massive public surveillance system and its social credit experiment where even minor infractions of public norms can result in sanctions. As the protests spread across the United States about police violence and racism, pressure mounted on tech firms about the technology. Microsoft and Amazon announced they would suspend sales of facial recognition software to police forces while IBM said it would exit the business. Privacy and rights groups worry about the implications of the use of facial recognition technology by law enforcement.

'Extremely intrusive' technology

"It is an extremely intrusive form of surveillance and can seriously undermine our freedoms and eventually our society as a whole," says Pri-

vacy International. "The biggest danger is that this technology will be used for general, suspicionless surveillance systems," says for its part the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). It notes that US state governments hold extensive photo databases as part of their motor vehicle departments, which if combined with public surveillance or other cameras, could result in "a comprehensive system of identification and tracking". In January 2020, a New York Times investigation pulled back the curtain on the activities of Californian startup Clearview AI, whose facial recognition tool "could end your ability to walk down the street anonymously".

Social network photos scraped

That is because Clearview AI doesn't use photos held by governments, but billions of photos scraped from social media sites. While social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube (Google) and LinkedIn (Microsoft) protested against the unsanctioned use of their users' photos, Clearview hasn't acceded to their demands to delete them. The firm, which received funding from PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, says it has already signed up 600 law enforcement agencies worldwide. According to advocacy group AlgorithmWatch, at least 10 European police forces already use facial recognition technology and haven't needed to turn to the tech giants. "I have never seen a contract between Microsoft, Amazon or IBM and a police force in the investigations I have done on the subject," said journalist Nicolas Kayser-Bril, who did the research behind the AlgorithmWatch report. — AFP

International

Case cracked: mystery Antarctica fossil is 'massive prehistoric egg'

'The Thing' - a mysterious football-sized fossil

TOKYO: Scientists had nicknamed it "The Thing" - a mysterious football-sized fossil discovered in Antarctica that sat in a Chilean museum awaiting someone who could work out just what it was. Now, analysis has revealed the mystery fossil to be a soft-shelled egg, the largest ever found, laid some 68 million years ago, possibly by a type of extinct sea snake or lizard. The revelation ends nearly a decade of speculation and could change thinking about the lives of marine creatures in this era, said Lucas Legendre, lead author of a paper detailing the findings, published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*. "It is very rare to find fossil soft-shelled eggs that are that well-preserved," Legendre, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Texas at Austin, told AFP.

"This new egg is by far the largest soft-shelled egg ever discovered. We did not know that these eggs could reach such an enormous size, and since we hypothesise it was laid by a giant marine reptile, it might also be a unique

glimpse into the reproductive strategy of these animals," he said. The fossil was discovered in 2011 by a group of Chilean scientists working in Antarctica. It looks a bit like a crumpled baked potato but measures a whopping 11 by seven inches - 28 by 18 centimeters. For years, visiting scientists examined the fossil in vain, until in 2018 a palaeontologist suggested it might be an egg.

A mammoth find

It wasn't the most obvious hypothesis given its size and appearance, and there was no skeleton inside to confirm it. Analysis of sections of the fossil revealed "a layered structure similar to a soft membrane, and a much thinner hard outer layer, suggesting it was soft-shelled," Legendre said. Chemical analyses showed "the eggshell is distinct from the sediment around it, and was originally a living tissue." But that left other mysteries to unravel, including what animal laid such an enormous egg - only one bigger has been found, produced by the now-extinct elephant

bird from Madagascar. The team believe this egg wasn't from a dinosaur - the types living in Antarctica at the time were mostly too small to have produced such a mammoth egg, and the ones large enough laid spherical, rather than oval-shaped, ones. Instead they believe it came from a kind of reptile, possibly a group known as Mosasaurs, which were common in the region.

Soft-shelled dinosaur eggs

The paper was published in *Nature* along a separate study that argues that it wasn't only ancient reptiles that laid soft-shell eggs - dinosaurs did too. For years, experts believed dinosaurs only laid hard-shelled eggs, which are all that had been found. But Mark Norell, curator of palaeontology at the American Museum of Natural History, said the discovery of a group of fossilised embryonic Protoceratops dinosaurs in Mongolia made him revisit the assumption. "Why do we only find dinosaur eggs relatively late in the Mesozoic and why only in a couple groups of dinosaurs," he said

he asked himself. The answer, he theorized, was that early dinosaurs laid soft-shell eggs that were destroyed and not fossilized. To test the theory, Norell and a team analysed the material around some of the Protoceratops skeletons in the Mongolia fossil and another fossil of two apparently newborn *Mussaurus*.

They found chemical signatures showing the dinosaurs would have been surrounded by soft, leathery eggshells. "The first dinosaur egg was soft-shelled," Norell and his team conclude in the paper. Norell's findings may have implications for the fossil once named "The Thing" - which is now known as *Antarcticoolithus*, according to a review of the studies published in *Nature*. They "could implicate some form of dinosaur as the proud parent," wrote Johan Lindgren of Lund University and Benjamin Kear of Uppsala University. "Let us hope that future discoveries of similarly spectacular fossil eggs with intact embryos will solve this thought-provoking enigma." — AFP

US sanctions dozens including Syrian first lady

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday imposed sanctions on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's wife and dozens of others as it vowed a vast pressure campaign under a new law that has already rattled the war-torn nation's economy. The Caesar Act, which took effect Wednesday, punishes under US law any company that works with Assad, casting a cloud over efforts to rebuild Syria. "We anticipate many more sanctions and we will not stop until Assad and his regime stop their needless, brutal war against the Syrian people," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement, vowing a "sustained campaign of economic and political pressure."

The first batch of designations target 39 people or entities, including Assad personally as well as his wife Asma — the first time she has been hit by US sanctions. Under the law, any assets in the United States will be frozen. Assad has been under US sanctions since he began to crush an uprising in 2011. Born in Britain to a cardiologist father and diplomat mother, Asma Al-Assad is a former investment banker who had styled herself as a progressive reformer and modern face of the Assads. She announced in August that she had recovered from breast cancer. Pompeo in his statement charged that Asma Al-Assad, with the support of her husband and her own Akhras family, "has become one of Syria's most notorious war profiteers."



IDLIB: Residents watch as a young Syrian man performs a 'parcours', an obstacle course method derived from military training, over the ruins of a building destroyed during past shelling by pro-regime forces, in the town of Binnish in the country's northwestern Idlib province. — AFP

Effects felt in Syria

Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, has succeeded in winning back most of Syria after a war that has killed more than 380,000 people and saw the rise of the ultra-violent Islamic State movement. In its first batch of sanctions the United States focused on Syrians and avoided targeting companies from crucial ally Russia. James Jeffrey, the US pointman on Syria, said Russia had recently shown greater willingness to "at least explore" steps alongside Western nations to ease the Syria crisis.

The Treasury Department took action against companies involved in major property projects for post-war Syria, accusing Assad of razing homes in opposition strongholds to benefit his loyalists. The targets include Marota City, an under-con-

struction luxury residential complex, and Grand Town Tourist City, a development near the Damascus airport set to include an exclusive hotel and golf course. People and groups designated by the State Department include Mohammed Hamsho, one of Syria's most prominent entrepreneurs, and the Fatemiyoun, an Iranian-led division of Afghan Shiite Muslims that has been deployed to prop up Assad. The Caesar Act, passed by the US Congress last year with bipartisan support, aims to prevent Assad's normalization without accountability for human rights abuses. The Act is named after a Syrian former military photographer who fled in 2014 at great personal risk with 55,000 images of brutality in Assad's jails. The measure also blocks US reconstruction assistance. — AFP

Study shows how quickly COVID spreads at home

PARIS: The novel coronavirus is twice as infectious within households than similar diseases such as SARS, with a substantial number of additional infections spreading before a COVID-19 sufferer shows any symptoms, according to modeling released yesterday. Researchers based in China and the United States said their findings could have profound impacts on reducing the number of new infections as the pandemic progresses. Using data on 350 COVID-19 patients and nearly 2,000 of their close contacts in the city of Guangzhou, China, the researchers estimated the virus' "secondary attack rate" - that is, the probability that an infected person transmits the disease to someone else. They found that while the average patient had just a 2.4 percent chance of infecting someone they did not live with, that figure jumped to 17.1 percent - around one in six - among cohabitants.

According to their models, which rely on data collated in January and February but have been updated to reflect the latest developments, the likelihood of household infection was highest among over-60s, and lowest among under-20s. The overall chances of infecting a family member or live-in partner with COVID-19 are twice as high as with SARS, and three times higher than MERS, another coronavirus, they found. Significantly, the researchers found that the probability of a COVID-19 carrier infecting a family member or flatmate was significantly higher - 39 percent - before they started showing symptoms than afterwards. This suggests that the virus is easily transmissible within its incubation period and may be passed on by individuals who don't know they are infected. The team said that isolation within households cut the total number of COVID-19 cases among the study cohort by 20-50 percent compared with no quarantine. — AFP

International

COVID-19 cases surge in Oklahoma, other states ahead of Trump rally

Tulsa rally to be largest indoor social gathering in US in 3 months

PHOENIX: Several US states including Oklahoma reported a surge in new coronavirus infections on late Wednesday, days before a planned campaign rally for President Donald Trump in Tulsa that would be the nation's largest indoor social gathering in three months.

An uptick in coronavirus cases in many states over the past two weeks, along with rising COVID-19 hospitalizations, reflected a troubling national trend that has seen daily US infection numbers climbing after more than a month of declines.

Oklahoma reported a record 259 new cases over the previous 24 hours, while Florida reported more than 2,600 new cases and Arizona more than 1,800 - the second-highest daily increases for those two states.

In Arizona, where doctors, nurses and health administrators called for making face coverings mandatory statewide in public places, Governor Doug Ducey said he would let local officials decide whether to impose such rules and how to enforce them.

"If you do go out, wear a mask. It's the smart thing to do," he said. Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego immediately tweeted that a vote on a proposed ordinance to require face masks outdoors in the nation's fifth-largest city would go on the agenda for the city council's next meeting.

Texas reported 3,100 new coronavirus cases on Wednesday, its biggest single-day tally yet, along with another all-time high for COVID-19 hospitalizations - nearly 2,800 patients. That marks the sixth straight day in

which the number of patients currently admitted for the highly contagious respiratory virus has reached record numbers in Texas. While Texas has not reported how many of its hospitalized COVID-19 patients are admitted to intensive care units, 1,500 ICU beds are available statewide. The daily count of infections also hit a new benchmark in California, with more than 4,000 cases recorded statewide on Wednesday. Los Angeles County alone reported its largest daily increase, over 2,100 new cases, though several hundred were attributed to a backlog in test results released all at once.

Trump's political team, meanwhile, forged ahead with plans for a campaign rally on Saturday in Tulsa, his first such event since stay-at-home restrictions were imposed across much of the country in March to fight the coronavirus.

Public health experts worry that assembling thousands of shouting, chanting people inside an arena - particularly if many aren't wearing masks - could turn the rally into a coronavirus "super-spreader event." Trump, in a Fox News interview on Wednesday, repeated an assertion he has made in the past that the coronavirus, with or without the advent of a vaccine or new effective treatment, is "fading away."

"It's going to fade away, but having a vaccine would be really nice, and that's going to happen," he added.

Trump's campaign advisers see the rally as a chance to rejuvenate his political base after a string of national and state opinion polls showed the president trailing Democratic rival Joe Biden.

protests in the United States and around the world against police brutality and racism.

It has also been a painful reminder to black mothers in the US how vulnerable their children, and especially their sons, are to police brutality, at least five women Reuters interviewed said.

Police-involved fatalities in the United States average nearly three deaths per day, a 2018 study in the American Journal of Public Health showed, and black men are more than twice as likely to be killed during them than white men.

One in every 1,000 black men in the United States will be killed by a police officer, vs. one in every 2,000 men overall, a 2019 study by National Academy of Sciences found.

Floyd's death follows a string of other high profile deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police, including the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Ohio in 2014, the choking death of Eric Garner in New York City in 2014, and the March shooting of Breonna Taylor in Kentucky during a "no knock" arrest that targeted the wrong house.

On June 12, Rayshard Brooks, a black man, was fatally shot in the back by police in Atlanta, after being found asleep in a parking lot.



NEW YORK: People gather outside a reopening phase following the COVID-19 outbreak in the East Village neighborhood in New York City, US.— Reuters

Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt said during a briefing on Wednesday that state officials were doing their utmost to ensure that the event is "safe as possible."

Oklahoma health officials recommend anyone attending the rally to get tested for the coronavirus before arriving, then to self-isolate afterward and get tested again. The health

commissioner urged those at high risk of severe illness from COVID-19 - senior citizens and people with chronic underlying health conditions - to stay home.

Biden accused Trump of "surrendering" to the coronavirus pandemic and failing to stay prepared for a resurgence that could put a US economic recovery at risk.—Reuters

The anguish of raising black boys in America

NEW YORK/LOS ANGELES: Raising black boys in America involves "constant mental anguish," Danielle Pattillo, a special education teacher in New York City and mother to two sons, ages 14 and 22, said. Every day Pattillo told her sons they were unique, wanted, valued, and loved - "each step in their life, each plateau of their life."

"I let them know that the world does not love them," Pattillo said. "And just because they don't love you doesn't mean you're not great. And it doesn't mean that you're not important. And it doesn't mean that you don't exist."

The death of George Floyd, a 46-year old black man who died in May after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes, has triggered widespread

Pattillo said she sobbed the first time she sat down her younger son, then 12 years old, to have what's known in the black community as "The Talk" - about how to behave when you are inevitably stopped by police, so you don't become another statistic.

Speak slowly, keep your school I.D. on you, but don't put your hand in your pocket to reach for it without asking. Don't give the officer anything that could be considered sass.

"These are not conversations that you should be having with your children who are 12," she said. The Talk is so ubiquitous that the National Black Police Association (NBPA) holds a dramatized version with police officers, judges and prosecutors in high schools, and distributes a written guide entitled "What to Do When Stopped by the Police."

"We show how quickly it can go bad," explained Regina Holman, a retired police officer in Las Vegas, president of the NBPA in Nevada, and mother and grandmother. Officers teach students "they have a very good chance that their cars are going to be ransacked, and they're not going to be treated right."

"When they become non-compliant, that's



NEW YORK: Raising black boys in America involves "constant mental anguish," Danielle Pattillo, a special education teacher in New York City and mother to two sons, ages 14 and 22, said. —Reuters

when things go wrong," Holman said. "We teach them you cannot fight your battles at that moment." Neakai Lewis, an event producer in Los Angeles, lives in upscale neighborhood View Park nicknamed "The Black Beverly Hills," that has been home to entertainers Ray Charles and Tina Turner. —Reuters

International

Trump asked China's Xi for re-election help: Bolton

Ex-national security advisor writes in an explosive new behind-the-scenes book

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump pleaded with China's leader Xi Jinping for help to win re-election in 2020, the US president's former national security advisor John Bolton writes in an explosive new behind-the-scenes book, according to excerpts published Wednesday.

Bolton alleges in a blistering critique that Trump's focus on winning a second term was the driving principle of his foreign policy, and that top aides routinely disparaged the Republican leader for his ignorance of basic geopolitical facts.

In excerpts published by The Washington Post, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, Bolton also claims Trump repeatedly showed a readiness to overlook Chinese human rights abuses—most strikingly telling Xi the mass internment of Uighur Muslims was “exactly the right thing to do.”

“I am hard-pressed to identify any significant Trump decision during my White House tenure that wasn't driven by reelection calculations,” Bolton writes of the real estate magnate-turned-president, who was impeached in December for seeking dirt from Ukraine on his 2020 Democratic election rival Joe Biden.

In a key meeting with Xi last June, Trump “stunningly turned the conversation to the US presidential election, alluding to China's economic capability to affect the ongoing campaigns, pleading with Xi to ensure he'd win,” Bolton claims in his upcoming tell-all. Bolton writes that Trump stressed the importance of

US farmers and how “increased Chinese purchases of soybeans and wheat” could impact the US electoral outcome.

When asked about the claims in the book yesterday, China said it has “always pursued the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.” “We have no intention to and will not interfere in US internal politics and elections,” said foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian.

In a sign of Trump's anger over the memoir, the Justice Department filed an emergency order late Wednesday seeking to halt publication, the second time in as many days it has tried to block the book.

Arguing that Bolton failed to allow completion of vetting of the book as required, the department urged the court to take action to “prevent the harm to national security that will result if his manuscript is published to the world.” Bolton “broke the law” by divulging “highly classified information,” Trump said in a late Wednesday interview with Fox News' Sean Hannity.

He also derided his former advisor, a veteran Washington insider, as “washed up,” and mocked Bolton's past support for the US war in Iraq.

“Wacko John Bolton's ‘exceedingly tedious’ (New York Times) book is made up of lies & fake stories,” Trump later tweeted.

In the released excerpts Bolton said by intervening in cases involving major firms in China and Turkey, Trump appeared to “give



In this file photo US President Donald Trump and China's President Xi Jinping leave a business leaders event at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.—AFP

personal favors to dictators he liked.”

He describes “obstruction of justice as a way of life” in the White House, and says he reported his concerns to Attorney General William Barr.

‘Morally repugnant’

The bombshell book, “The Room Where It Happened,” is due for release next Tuesday, in the thick of a presidential campaign against Democrat Biden.

The former vice president said Bolton's revelations show Trump “sold out the American people to protect his political future.” “If these accounts are true, it's not only morally repugnant, it's a violation of Donald Trump's sacred duty to the American people to protect America's interests and defend our values.”

The conservative Bolton, himself a controversial figure in US politics, spent 17 turbulent months in the White House before resigning last September.—AFP

Atlanta police officer charged with murder for shooting black man

ATLANTA: An Atlanta police officer has been charged with murder for shooting a 27-year-old man in the back, justice officials announced Wednesday, in the latest case to spark anger over police killings of African Americans.

Rayshard Brooks' shooting came less than three weeks after a Minneapolis police officer's killing of handcuffed African American George Floyd on May 25 fuelled a national uproar over racism and police brutality.

Atlanta District Attorney Paul Howard said police officer Garrett Rolfe had no justification for shooting Brooks as he fled, and aggravated the case by kicking his body as he lay on the ground bleeding. He also said that Rolfe and fellow officer Devin Brosnan violated multiple police department regulations after they detained Brooks on June 12.

Not treated fairly

“We concluded that, at the time that Mr Brooks was shot, he did not pose an immediate threat of death or serious physical injury to the officers,” Howard said.

Donald Trump called the killing of Brooks “a terrible situa-

tion”, but went on to claim officers have “not been treated fairly” in a Fox News interview Wednesday. “I hope he gets a fair shake because police have not been treated fairly in our country,” the US president said, when asked about the charges against Rolfe.

“But, again, you can't resist a police officer like that. And they ended up in a very terrible disagreement and look at the way it ended. Very bad. Very bad.” Brooks' death ignited a fresh round of angry protests, and forced the resignation of Atlanta's police chief.

Howard said a warrant was issued for Rolfe's arrest on 11 counts, including felony murder—a homicide committed in the course of another felony crime—aggravated assault, and multiple counts of violating police procedures.

The murder count could bring a sentence of death or life in prison. Brosnan, who has agreed to become a witness for the state in the investigation, faces three charges including aggravated assault.

Brosnan and Rolfe found Brooks sleeping in his car in the drive-up line at a local Wendy's fast-food restaurant last Friday.

Over a calm 20 minute interaction, they gave him an alcohol test and, after it proved positive, sought to arrest him for driving under the influence.

After a brief struggle Brooks ran off with one of the officers' Tasers and, as he swung his arm back to point it at them, Rolfe shot Brooks twice in the back.

The issue of whether Rolfe reasonably believed he was in



ATLANTA: Tomika Miller, the widow of Rayshard Brooks, stands with her lawyer, Chris Stewart, as she participates in a press conference at the lawyers' office after Fulton County District Attorney Paul L. Howard, Jr. announced 11 charges against former Atlanta Police Officer Garrett Rolfe on Wednesday.—AFP

danger was at the heart of deciding if he should be charged. Howard said that a review of eight video recordings of the incident, from police cameras and bystander phone recordings, and multiple witnesses, showed the officers themselves never displayed fear of danger from Brooks.

They never told Brooks he was under arrest, and while he was shot and lay on the ground dying, Rolfe kicked him while Brosnan stood on his shoulders.—AFP

International

Nepal's parliament approves new map including Indian territory

New dispute strains ties between South Asian neighbors

KATHMANDU: The upper house of Nepal's parliament approved a new map of the country yesterday including land controlled by India, in a row that has strained ties between the South Asian neighbors.

India, which controls the region — a slice of land including the Limpiyadhura, Lipulkeh and Kalapani areas to the west of Nepal — has rejected the map, saying it was not based on historical facts or evidence. Members in the 59-seat National Assembly, or upper house, voted 57-0 in favor of a constitutional amendment bill seeking to replace the old map, chairman of the house Ganesh Prasad Timilsina said. The bill was passed by the lower house over the weekend. "We have enough facts and evidence and we'll sit (with India) to resolve the dispute through diplomatic negotiations," law minister Shiva Maya Tumbahamphe told parliament.

The new map requires President Bidhya

Devi Bhandari's approval. The row over the map began last month after India inaugurated an 80-km (50-mile) road from the northern state of Uttarakhand to Lipulekh on the border with the Tibet region of China, about 19 km of which passes through the area Nepal says belongs to it.

The road cuts the travel time and distance from India to Tibet's Mansarovar lake, considered holy by Hindus. Nepal says the land belongs to it as a river in the region formed its western border with India under an 1816 treaty with the British East India Company. Nepal, which was never a part of British India, and New Delhi differ over where the river originates. The disputed land, about 372 square km (144 square miles) in area, is strategically located at the tri-junction between Nepal, India and the Tibet region of China. India has kept a security presence in the area since a border war with China in 1962. — Reuters



KATHMANDU: People light candles as they celebrate after the parliament approved a new national emblem with a controversial political map that includes strategic territories disputed with its giant neighbor India, in Kathmandu.—AFP

Beijing residents rush to COVID test clinics

BEIJING: China's capital has mandated coronavirus tests for hundreds of thousands of people as it widens measures against a new outbreak of the disease that has sent anxious residents flooding to clinics for voluntary tests, putting a strain on the system.

Crowds of masked people waiting for tests have become a common sight in recent days across Beijing, which has tested more than 350,000 people, with many more expected. "It's very difficult right now," said musician Chen Weiwen, 31, whose plans to visit the southwestern city of Chengdu faced a delay because of the wait for a test.

"I don't mind waiting, but after the test I need to leave in 7 days and there may not be a flight I can get then." The measures are part of the city's "wartime" response to a surge of 158 infections since last week, the majority linked to its huge Xinfadi wholesale food center. Residents now require a negative result on a nucleic acid test to travel, officials say, as well as to visit some attractions or return to work in industries that involve food handling. That is in addition to mandatory tests for those with direct links to the market and their close contacts, as well as people in surrounding neighborhoods and frontline health workers. That could be a large number, as officials say about 200,000 people from all over Beijing have visited Xinfadi since May 30.

"Testing efficiency is high," Pan Xuhong,

deputy director of the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau, said yesterday.

"Those who need to leave Beijing can safely do so once tested negative in a nucleic acid test." Staff at a restaurant in the southern Fengtai district told Reuters that health workers had tested every employee.

Long waiting times

At the same time, state media warned that supplies in the city of 21 million could be strained, and Reuters checks showed waiting times for voluntary appointments stretched to weeks or months in some places. China, a top producer of nucleic acid tests, could turn out up to 5 million a day, authorities said last month. Beijing has expanded daily testing capacity to 90,000, but the new program puts a strain on resources. "Some citizens spontaneously go to medical institutions or fever clinics for (tests) and crowding occurs," the state-run Beijing Daily newspaper said. That in turn heightened infection risks and pressure on the supply of materials and testing capacity, it added. A Reuters check showed many testing facilities inundated by those seeking voluntary tests, with bookings filled as soon they opened on the city's official app. Just one of 11 test sites telephoned by Reuters answered. The First Medical Center of the People's Liberation Army Hospital said its next available slot was a month away.—Reuters

Pakistan's mango growers face a sticky season

ISLAMABAD: A combination of a coronavirus-spurred trade slowdown, locust attacks and odd weather have created a nightmare year for growers and exporters of Pakistani mangoes, with both production and demand plummeting this year, they said.

Domestic and international markets for the sought-after sweet seasonal fruit have been hit as harvests and exports have dropped by at least a quarter, they noted. Muhammad Ansar, a small-scale grower from the Sanghar area of central Sindh province, said his mango production had fallen 30 percent this year as a result of locust attacks. It was unusual for a broad belt of Pakistan's mango-producing areas to be hit by the pests, he added.

"We face double problems this year: the low production followed by less demand in markets due to the prolonged lockdown because of coronavirus," Ansar said. He usually sells about 500 crates of mangos, each weighing 10kg (22 pounds), but this year has harvested only 200 crates and could "hardly find any demand for export". That shortfall has cost him between \$2,000 and \$2,500 in income, he said.

Wild weather

Pakistan is the world's fifth-largest mango producer, after India, China, Thailand and Indonesia, according to Pakistan's Chambers of Commerce and Industry. But Abdul Waheed, a top mango grower and exporter and head of the All Pakistan Fruit and Vegetable Exporters, Im-

porters and Merchants Association, said erratic weather linked to climate change was taking a toll on mangoes and a wide range of other crops in Pakistan.

Yields are falling and harvest seasons are shifting, he said, noting that "this change in weather conditions has weakened the resistance of mangoes to fight diseases".

"It ultimately damages mangoes at large scale," he said. Punjab, which produces about 70 percent of Pakistan's mangoes, has seen production fall more than 35 percent this year, mango growers and traders estimate, while Sindh province's harvest is down 15 percent.

Finding markets for the mangoes that are harvested is another problem. Suspended flights and high freight charges this year related to coronavirus lockdown restrictions are likely to reduce the country's mango exports substantially, officials said. Ahmad Jawad, chair of the agriculture standing committee for the chamber of commerce, said Pakistan's mango exports, which last year stood at 130,000 tons, may drop by 30,000 tons this year.

In the south London neighborhood of Tooting, where mango stands run by vendors of Pakistani descent are a seasonal highlight, prices for most varieties have doubled this year — and profits are down. "You cannot sell it," said Asif Khaliq, standing over a big display of the golden fruit. "We can't convince the customers to understand" why prices are so much higher than last year, he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.—Reuters

International

Indian families demand justice as they await bodies of soldiers

Indian army hands over bodies of soldiers killed in border skirmish

AHMEDABAD: In their last phone conversation, Neha Ojha, the wife of an Indian soldier, said she laughed off her husband's idea to name their daughter Snow White because he received the news of her birth while patrolling a snow-covered valley on the border with China.

She said she asked her husband, Kundan, to come up with an Indian name before he came home. Sixteen hours later, Ojha was informed that her husband was among 20 soldiers killed by Chinese troops in the disputed Galwan Valley. On Thursday, she said she was struggling to nurse her 18-day-old infant as she awaited her husband's remains. "We were all waiting for him (Kundan) to host the naming ceremony of our daughter. Now we're preparing to hold his final rites," 23-year-old Ojha said in a telephone conversation, speaking haltingly.

The Indian army yesterday began handing over the bodies of the soldiers killed in the fight - the worst clash in over half a century between the nuclear-armed neighbors. Both countries blame each other for the clash, but agreed not to take any steps to escalate matters further.

Indian soldiers who survived the clash said the Chinese used bamboo sticks studded with nails during the confrontation in sub-zero temperatures

in the high altitude terrain, while the Indians used stones and sticks. Under an agreement forged in the 1990s, the two armies carry but do not use arms near the border.

China said its troops were engaged in a "violent physical confrontation" with Indian soldiers, but has given no details on casualties. Families of the fallen Indian soldiers and other citizens demanded Prime Minister Narendra Modi find diplomatic and strategic ways to punish China.

Despite her husband's posting in one of world's most highly militarized areas, Ojha said she had assumed that the dispute with the Chinese would never take a serious turn. "My husband had compared brawls with Chinese soldiers to scuffles between boys in school, 'We push them, they push us, we throw a stick, they fling it back'," she recalled her husband recounting to her.

"I was wrong, we were all wrong to trust the Chinese...they must be punished."

Hardline nationalist groups with ties to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party have stepped up calls for a boycott of Chinese goods and a cancellation of contracts with Chinese firms. "This kind of bludgeoning must stop. China has a strong army but Indians will unite against them if they continue such attacks," said Kishore Singh, the father of a de-



GURDASPUR: Relatives comfort Jaswinder Kaur (center) after her husband Indian soldier Satnam Singh, was killed in a clash with Chinese forces in the Galwan valley area, at Bhojraj village near Gurdaspur yesterday. — AFP

ceased soldier, hours before he received the body. "The Chinese are using their brute force amid a pandemic, the world must stand with India to punish them," said Singh, a retired teacher. — Reuters

Fitch cuts India's rating outlook to 'negative'

MUMBAI/BENGALURU: Fitch cut its outlook on India's sovereign rating to "negative" from "stable" yesterday and forecast a 5 percent contraction in growth for the current fiscal year, saying the coronavirus outbreak was extracting a heavy toll on the economy.

"The coronavirus pandemic has significantly weakened India's growth outlook for this year and exposed the challenges associated with a high public-debt burden," the ratings agency said in a statement.

However, Fitch maintained its India rating at 'BBB-', the lowest investment grade. The move comes after Moody's downgraded India earlier this month to a notch above junk, falling in line with other global agencies, while also cutting its outlook to 'negative'. But S&P shortly after affirmed its rating and maintained a 'stable' outlook.

Fitch said it expected India to rebound with growth of 9.5 percent in 2021/22, mainly due to a low base but highlighted that its forecasts are subjected to considerable risks due to continued rise in new COVID-19 cases as

nationwide lockdowns are eased gradually.

The agency said the medium-term fiscal outlook is of particular importance from the rating perspective, but is subject to great uncertainty and would depend on the level of GDP growth and government's policy intentions. Fiscal metrics have deteriorated significantly and Fitch said it expects government debt to jump to 84.5 percent of GDP this year from 71 percent last year and sharply higher than the median 52.6 percent for other similar rated countries in 2020. Fitch said India's medium-term GDP growth outlook might be negatively affected by renewed asset-quality challenges in banks and liquidity issues in non-banking financial companies and need for further financial support for banks is inevitable.

"It remains to be seen whether India can return to sustained growth rates of 6 percent to 7 percent as we previously estimated, depending on the lasting impact of the pandemic, particularly in the financial sector," they wrote. — Reuters

Living on the edge: Pakistani Hindus feel safer in India

NEW DELHI: Seven years ago, Dharamveer Solanki, a Hindu, left his home in Pakistan's Hyderabad city, never to return. When his train crossed the border into India, Solanki said he felt happier than ever before.

"It felt as though I had been reborn," he said, sitting inside a bustling refugee colony on the outskirts of New Delhi, where he and hundreds of other Hindus who fled Muslim-majority Pakistan have built a new home. Asylum-seekers like Solanki are the main beneficiaries of a law that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government introduced late last year, laying out a path to citizenship for people from six religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India before 2015.

The law excluded Muslims from the list, and that determination of rights to citizenship based on religion triggered protests across India that resulted in a fierce police crackdown and deadly violence. Critics say the law discriminates against Muslims and undermines India's secular constitution.

But for the Hindus of Pakistan, Modi's long-held commitment to providing them refuge has drawn more and more across the border even before the new

law was enacted. In the 15 months through March 2019 India's home ministry dealt with 16,121 applications from Pakistani nationals for long-term visas. In preceding years, the number of visas granted rose from hundreds to thousands.

The flow of migrants has stopped temporarily as borders have been sealed to control the spread of the coronavirus. But many remain desperate to cross, Solanki said. They often come on 25-day pilgrimage visas and stay on until they get citizenship.

Solanki is still waiting for India to grant him citizenship, as the process has now been delayed by the coronavirus outbreak in the country. He was unaware that there was a World Refugee Day, but when told by Reuters that it would fall on June 20, he was very clear what he would like to see.

"The citizenship law has been passed. Our people should now get land and benefits as citizens," Solanki told Reuters at his home in the Majnu Ka Tilla neighborhood on Delhi's northern fringe.

The settlement where he lives is a cluster of cement, brick and wood huts, with no electricity or water supply, off a busy road. Around 600 people live there. Many of the young men work as hawkers or, like Solanki, as laborers. Several said they lived in better conditions in Pakistan, but they felt safer in India.

A few miles away, across the heavily-polluted Yamuna river, a newer settlement has sprung up in the woods beneath a highway overpass called Signature Bridge. In July last year, when Reuters began observing this community, there were only a few rickety huts. But now hundreds of people live there. The huts are built with wood from the surrounding forest. —Reuters

International

Top US, China diplomats meet in Hawaii as tensions flare

First known contact between Pompeo, Yang since April 15

WASHINGTON/BEIJING: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met China's top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, in Hawaii on Wednesday, in high-level face-to-face talks that have become rare amid tensions between the two strategic rivals. The world's two largest economies have been at loggerheads over the handling of the coronavirus pandemic and China's move to impose security legislation on Hong Kong, among multiple points of friction that have worsened this year.

Yang told Pompeo that Washington needs to respect Beijing's positions on key issues, halt its interference on matters such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Xinjiang, and work to repair relations, China's foreign ministry said in a statement.

Pompeo, who has been singled out for scathing criticism by Chinese diplomats and state media, stressed "the need for fully-reciprocal dealings between the two nations," US State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortugus said in a statement.

"He also stressed the need for full transparency and information sharing to combat the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and prevent future outbreaks."

Hours after the meeting ended, China announced that its top parliamentary body will review draft Hong Kong national security legislation during a session that began yesterday. Earlier, foreign ministers of the G7 countries, including Pompeo, issued a statement calling on China not to follow through with the Hong Kong legislation, which critics call an as-

sault on the territory's democratic freedoms. As the meeting got under way, US President Donald Trump signed legislation calling for sanctions against those responsible for repression of Uighur Muslims in China's Xinjiang region, prompting a threat of retaliation from Beijing.

Wu Xinbo, dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, said that meeting could reduce "microphone diplomacy" between the two bickering sides, but said he was doubtful that it would stabilize relations. "Trump will continue to criticize China in the lead-up to the US elections," he said. Pompeo has been forceful in his criticism of Beijing. It was his first known contact with Yang since they discussed the coronavirus by phone on April 15, and their first face-to-face meeting since last year.

Neither side outlined an agenda for the Hawaii talks, but diplomats and other sources have said the meeting was requested by China.

Low point

US-China relations have reached their lowest point in years. In mid-May Trump, who has pursued a deal to end a damaging trade war he launched with China, went so far as to suggest he could cut ties with Beijing. The bill Trump signed on Wednesday calls for sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for oppressing Uighur Muslims. Trump tempered that possibility by saying he regarded its sanctions requirements as advisory, not mandatory. While Trump and his administration have stepped up rhetoric

five people last year to get her elected in the 2019 upper house election, in which she won a seat.

Separately, Katsuyuki Kawai gave a total of 24 million yen to about 90 people, the statement said. Katsuyuki Kawai, who previously served as a foreign policy adviser to Abe, quit as minister last October after reports of election irregularities by his wife.

"I have never engaged in political activities that are shameful in the light of my conscience, nor against the law," Kyodo news agency quoted Katsuyuki Kawai as saying on Wednesday.

Anri has also denied vote-buying, media reports said. On Wednesday she told reporters her lawyer had advised her not to comment. Neither could be reached immediately for comment yesterday. Lawmakers cannot be arrested while parliament is in session. Parliament's session ended on Wednesday.

Abe returned to office in December 2012 and last November became Japan's longest serving prime minister. His term as ruling Lib-



In this file photo, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis (second left) and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (third left) meet with Chinese politburo member Yang Jiechi (third right) and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe (second right) during the US-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue at the State Department in Washington, DC. — AFP

against China in the run-up to the November US election, his former national security adviser, John Bolton, said on Wednesday Trump had sought Chinese President Xi Jinping's help to win re-election. China said yesterday it has no interest in interfering with the election.

Bolton's accusations are part of a book the US government on Tuesday sued to block him from publishing. Trump hit back at Bolton, calling

him "a liar".

Among his criticisms of China, Pompeo has said it could have prevented hundreds of thousands of deaths from the global coronavirus pandemic by being more transparent. Trump has initiated a process of eliminating special US treatment for Hong Kong to punish China for curbing freedoms there, but has stopped short of immediately ending privileges. — Reuters

Former Japanese Minister and wife arrested

TOKYO: A former Japanese justice minister and his lawmaker wife were arrested yesterday suspicion of vote-buying, prosecutors said, in a harsh blow to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as he struggles with falling voter support.

Support for Abe, who had close ties to the ex-justice minister, has declined over what critics say is his clumsy handling of the coronavirus outbreak, a furore over efforts to extend top prosecutors' retirement age, and questions about government programs to support tourism and smaller companies.

Tokyo prosecutors said in a statement that former justice minister Katsuyuki Kawai and his wife Anri paid 1.7 million yen (\$15,900) to

eral Democratic Party leader and hence, premier, ends in September 2021 but speculation is simmering that he may have to step down sooner given his sagging voter support, which fell below 30% in two opinion polls last month.

"Abe's responsibility for appointing Kawai as justice minister will be called into question," said Tomoaki Iwai, a political science professor at Nihon University. "His ratings could fall further."

Political sources and experts said Abe would be weakened but was unlikely to step down immediately as Japan contends with the coronavirus outbreak.

"The damage will be quite big," said University of Tokyo political science professor Yu Uchiyama. "He will be a lame duck."

Abe is struggling to ease the impact of the coronavirus on the world's third-largest economy. He has responded with two stimulus packages totalling \$2.2 trillion but over half of the respondents to a Reuters survey were critical of the response. — Reuters



In this file photo, Japan's then justice minister Katsuyuki Kawai speaks to journalists after submitting his resignation in Tokyo. — AFP

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Tunisia rediscovers traditional art of calligraphy

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A municipal worker wears a face mask and shield at the Bosa neighbourhood, one of the areas with more COVID-19 cases in Bogota, on Wednesday.—AFP

Must be glove: The Japan man obsessed with lost gloves

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'Recovered' French star Deneuve to return to filming

French film icon Catherine Deneuve will return to work next month after suffering a minor stroke on set last year, a spokeswoman for the actress told AFP. The 76-year-old was ironically in a hospital shooting a scene for the movie "De son vivant" ("In His Lifetime") in November when she fell ill. Her spokeswoman said Deneuve, who has been France's biggest screen star since the 1960s, has "perfectly recovered" from a "very limited" ischemic stroke. "She was very lucky that she was treated very quickly as they were shooting in a hospital," she added.

Since then the star of "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg", "Belle de Jour" and "Indochine"—for which she was nominated for an Oscar—has "reacted well to treatment and has got some rest". Shooting will restart on the delayed film directed by Emmanuelle Bercot, which was halted by Deneuve's illness, on July 6, the producers said late Tuesday. The movie also stars Benoit Magimel as a man suffering from cancer, with Deneuve playing his mother. Since the shoot was halted dozens of other French films have suffered the same fate because of the coronavirus. Deneuve was last seen in Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda's latest film, "The Truth", alongside Juliette Binoche.—AFP



Catherine Deneuve

Netflix founder gives \$120 million for US black college scholarships

Netflix chief Reed Hastings and his philanthropist wife on Wednesday gave \$120 million to historically black US colleges to fund full-ride scholarships for students. The gift by the Netflix co-founder and his wife, Patty Quillin, to Spelman College and Morehouse College—two Atlanta universities—and the United Negro College Fund was touted as the largest-ever contribution by an individual in support of such scholarships. "Both of us had the privilege of a great education and we want to help more students—in particular students of color—get the same start in life," Quillin and Hastings said in a statement. "Historically black colleges and universities have a tremendous record, yet are disadvantaged when it comes to giving." The money is to be spent during the coming decade to pay for 200 students to attend full 4-year college programs. Quillin and Hastings said they hoped the scholarships help "reverse generations of inequity in our country." Hastings, who as a younger man spent time in the Peace Corps and teaching high school-level math in Swaziland, and his wife have a history of philanthropy aimed at education. Apple recently launched a \$100 million initiative to combat systemic racism, and Google has committed \$275 million to help black artists on YouTube, help fund African American small businesses and other projects to support the community.—AFP



Reed Hastings

'That '70s Show' actor Masterson charged with multiple rapes

US actor and Scientologist Danny Masterson has been charged with raping three women at his home in the Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles prosecutors said Wednesday. The star of television's "That '70s Show" and "The Ranch" allegedly raped the women, all in their twenties at the time, "by force or fear" in separate incidents between 2001 and 2003. Masterson, 44, faces a maximum sentence of 45 years to life in prison if convicted on all charges. Masterson's lawyer denied the allegations in a statement to AFP. "Mr Masterson is innocent, and we're confident that he will be exonerated when all the evidence finally comes to light and witnesses have the opportunity to testify," wrote Tom Mesereau.

Prosecutors dropped two further sexual assault cases against Masterson over lack of evidence and the statute of limitations passing, the Los Angeles County district attorney's office said. Masterson rose to fame with the 1998 launch of retro sitcom "That '70s Show," where he played the character of Steven Hyde alongside fellow stars Mila Kunis and Ashton Kutcher. He co-starred again with Kutcher on Netflix's "The Ranch," but was fired in 2017 and written off the show after Los Angeles police confirmed they were investigating multiple rape allegations against the actor.

At the time, Masterson said the claims were motivated by the producer of an anti-



In this file photo US actor Danny Masterson attends the premiere of "Forgetting Sarah Marshall" at the Chinese theatre in Los Angeles.—AFP

Scientology television series. Four women last year filed a lawsuit against Masterson and the Church of Scientology alleging they were stalked, harassed and intimidated after reporting abuse to Los Angeles police. Masterson's lawyer wrote on Wednesday: "Obviously, Mr Masterson and his wife are in complete shock considering that these nearly 20-year old allegations are suddenly resulting in charges being filed, but they and their family are comforted knowing that ultimately the truth will come out. "The people who know Mr Masterson know his character and know the allegations to be false." His arraignment is scheduled for September. —AFP

Filmmakers urge EU to stand up to streaming giants

More than a dozen top European film directors have called on the EU to regulate streaming giants like Netflix and Amazon. The group led by the Spanish auteur Pedro Almodovar and the double Cannes Palme d'Or winner Luc Dardenne have asked to meet the EU's Internal Market commissioner Thierry Breton in a letter released Wednesday. The group, which also includes the Romanian Cristian Mungiu, warned that Europe would be reduced to a "colony" of the US and China if its culture is not protected from "non-European digital giants".

"America understood these cultural and economic stakes when it imposed its films on other countries with the Marshall Plan" after World War II, the directors said in their plea to Breton. But today Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Netflix (which are known collectively as GAFAN) "have grown a

thousand times more powerful," they wrote. Lockdowns because of the coronavirus "have allowed them to become wealthier than ever, as other nations and their (entertainment) industries collapsed," the letter said. Meanwhile, "by avoiding taxes, the GAFAN companies have contributed very little to the funding of hospitals, education and all the vital apparatuses of European democracies," they said.

The directors urged the EU to be brave and to impose strict regulations and "appropriate sanctions for what is at stake", and to stop filmmakers being corralled into "the narrow paths set by platforms and their big data analytics". The letter said that Europe's decision to support the idea of a "cultural exception" with quotas and protection in 1990 has since been copied by 183 countries. It argued that the South Korean film "Parasite", which won the best film Oscar as well as the Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival, was living proof of how policy worked and enriched the world. Brussels has just begun a review of how it can better regulate tech giants, with the European Commission set to bring forward the so-called Digital Services Act before the end of the year.—AFP

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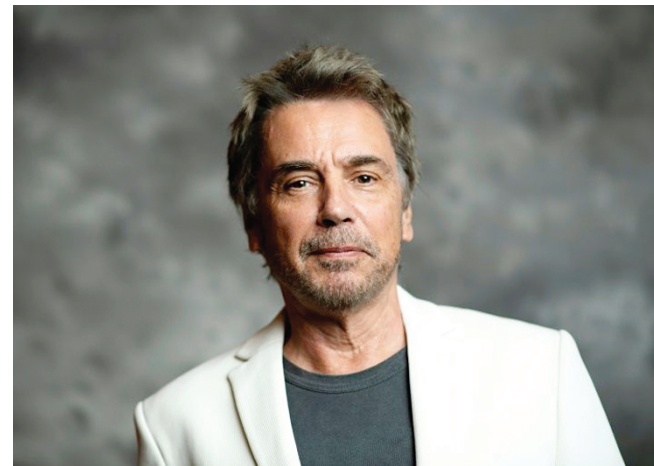
French composer Jarre to perform world's first 'Matrix avatar' concert

French electronic music legend Jean-Michel Jarre told AFP Wednesday that he is going to perform the world's first "avatar" concert—“like in the Matrix”. The veteran star will play live on Sunday in a virtual universe created for the French midsummer Festival of Music where he will be joined by “the audience as avatars who will be totally immersed” in his musical world. Jarre said the concert will be one step beyond the lockdown concert performed by the US rapper Travis Scott inside the shooter game Fortnite in April, which was watched by more than 12 million players. “Everything will be done live,” Jarre told AFP, whereas with “Fortnite it was pre-recorded in a universe that already existed. “Here it will be total immersion in a space that we will be creating live, like in ‘The Matrix,’” he said, referring to the cult 1999 sci-fi film.

The 71-year-old said the concert will last 45 minutes and promised that there would “be interaction with the public. It is up to us as artists to invent,” said the electronic pioneer

whose 1976 album “Oxygene” became an international hit, selling over 1.75 million copies in France alone. The concert called “Alone Together” will be streamed free in augmented reality at 9:00 pm Paris time Sunday on all major platforms thanks to help from the French ministry of culture.

It will also be available on Jarre's website and that of the French startup that helped create it, VRrOOM. Jarre, who is also head of the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers, said musicians were suffering across the world and “we have to stop thinking that music is free like the air we breathe.” He said streaming platforms “are the only people to have made money during the lockdowns on the back of the virus” while performers have been suffering. While the musician has prided himself as being a tech prophet, he argued that “augmented reality will never replace a live concert, but it can complement it.” “You can compare it to theatre with the arrival of cinema,” Jarre said.—AFP



French electronic music legend Jean-Michel Jarre

New Fortnite mission: Reaching out to abused children

During France's coronavirus lockdown, a futuristic blue-winged avatar joined the wildly popular world of Fortnite, but its goal was not to be the last person standing—its job was to give young victims of abuse a chance to tell their stories. The secret project was launched by the French children's aid group L'Enfant Bleu (Blue Child), which disclosed its Fortnite partnership this week in hopes the idea can be applied to more online games. “The number one challenge is getting children to talk so that adults can identify the problem,” said Blue Child's director Laura Morin. “Young children do not use the same media that we do as adults. So we have to adapt and find new ways of establishing contact with them,” she said.

Health experts had warned that children could be especially vulnerable to domestic violence while forced to stay home during the COVID-19 outbreak, since some 80 percent of physical, psychological or sexual acts of abuse are committed by a member of a child's close family. French officials said the country's child danger hotline had seen an 89 percent surge in weekly calls after one month of lockdown compared with a year earlier. To discreetly reach out to potential victims without alerting their parents or other abusers, Enfant Bleu volunteers took turns roaming Fortnite battle arenas every day until 10:30 pm (2030 GMT).

At the same time, the association enlisted Fortnite stars with large followings on Snapchat or Instagram, and whose games are often followed live by thousands of people via Twitch and other platforms, to spread the message. “If you are a victim of any kind of violence, add the account Epic EnfantBleu on Fortnite to talk privately,” read messages on the instant messaging feeds that run alongside the games.



'Extraordinary number'

Some 1,200 children and teenagers aged 10 to 17 spoke with the avatar during the month-long operation, “an extraordinary number,” Morin said. Most of them clicked merely out of curiosity but around a third described “personal problems,” including some who said they were in “urgent danger,” she said. The volunteers running the avatar would try to engage the children in conversations and direct them to the appropriate support services. “It's the right medium, with the right vocabulary, so that we're clearly understood by children who need support, without drawing the attention of the people who are mistreating them,” said Fabrice Plazolles of the marketing company Havas Sports and Entertainment, which managed the operation.

“The lockdown meant that children didn't have any other means of sounding the alarm, so it would have been disastrous if a parent discovered the project and took away the game,” he said. Morin said jumping into Fortnite, which has attracted 250 million registered players since its launch in 2017, had proved the potential of video games for reaching children where they congregate. The goal now is to establish a more permanent presence across more platforms. Starting in September, L'Enfant Bleu will form a working group with video game editors, judges and police officers specialised in child abuse, and France's secretary of state for child protection to discuss the possibilities.—AFP

Police nab Italy prison escapees who promised to return

Two inmates who escaped from a prison in Rome earlier this month, leaving guards a note promising to return, have been arrested in Tuscany, the Italian justice ministry said Wednesday. The two cousins, Davad Zukanovic, 40, and Lil Ahmetovic, 46, broke out of Rebibbia prison overnight on June 2 by scaling a wall using a water hose

left in a courtyard.

But before they escaped, they left a note in their cell explaining they had personal reasons for needing to flee, the Repubblica daily said. They were driven by “the need to protect their children from a nasty business they had got themselves into,” the daily said, paraphrasing the contents of the letter. The inmates specified

that only they could make things right as their wives were also both in jail. At the end of the signed note, Zukanovic and Ahmetovic promised to return in about 15 days once everything was sorted out, the newspaper said. The men were serving sentences to 2029 for non-violent crimes, including fraud and receiving stolen goods.—AFP

Bella Hadid has called for justice for George Floyd

The 23-year-old model has taken to Instagram to voice her sympathy for Floyd, who recently died on the streets of Minneapolis, and has told anyone who disagrees with her stance to unfollow her on social media. Bella - who has 31 million followers on Instagram - said: “I've been sitting here listening. Understanding. Educating myself. Making calls to demand justice. Donating. And reaching out to friends just in case they feel hurt or lost this week. “If you are not standing in solidarity with the black community TODAY and EVERYDAY. Please unfollow me. (sic)” Bella has voiced her support for the Black Lives Matter movement. The model also revealed she intends to donate money to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which fights for justice for African Americans. Her Instagram post continued: “Black lives matter...Black voices matter and the black community matters” “Today I will be standing with and donating to @NAACP_LDF, one of America's oldest civil rights law organizations, which fights for police reform every day. ‘Partial justice is not justice at all—until all of the officers involved in the brutal murder of



Bella Hadid

George Floyd are arrested, we will keep the pressure on.’ (sic)” Prior to that, Bella insisted Floyd's death could “not be overlooked”. She wrote on Instagram: “I'm sure all of you feel the same way but my sadness has viciously turned into anger...this will not be overlooked!! (sic)”—Bang Showbiz

Lifestyle | Features



Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni looks at his artwork at his home in the town of Hammam-Lif.—AFP photos



Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni displays a design reading in Arabic “thus we defy corona” alongside other work at his home.

Tunisia rediscovers traditional art of calligraphy

Tunisia’s president has become a surprise champion of Arabic calligraphy in his country, shining a light on the artistic tradition as Arab states lobby for its recognition by UNESCO. President Kais Saied sparked both admiration and mockery on social media when images emerged of hand-written presidential letters on official paper not long after he took office in October last year. An academic with a keen interest in the art form, Saied had studied with well-known Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni.

To prove that Saied had penned the documents himself, the presidency released a video showing him writing in a guest book. The president “writes official correspondence in maghrebi script and private letters in diwani”, Jomni said, referring to two forms of Arabic calligraphy. Maghrebi script is a form of the older, angular style of Kufic calligraphy, while diwani is a more ornamental Ottoman style popular for poetry. The president’s “recognition” of calligraphy has warmed artists’ hearts, Jomni said, giving them hope for a brighter future for an art form that was like “a closed book”.

Not just a ‘technical skill’

Calligraphy in Tunisia lacks the prominence it enjoys in some other Arab countries—such as in the Gulf—and its National Centre of Calligraphic Arts, created in 1994, risks closing its doors. With a lack of instructors, courses will likely have to end this year, according to the institute’s head, Abdel Jaoued Lotfi. “There are not enough professional calligraphers in Tunisia,” said calligraphy master Jomni, who is in his sixties. “You can count them on one hand and they are working in precarious conditions.”

Sixteen Arab countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, have prepared a proposal to have Arabic calligraphy inscribed on the UNESCO list of humanity’s intangible cultural heritage. It’s a chance to consider calligraphy “as a whole culture and living heritage... and not just as a simple technical skill”, said Imed Soula, a researcher overseeing Tunisia’s submission to the UN cul-

tural body. He said Tunisia’s fading calligraphy practice, which traditionally saw artists tackle surfaces like copper or stone, was also linked to the growing use of new technologies, some of which have moved it away from its performing-art dimension. But Jomni said calligraphy in Tunisia suffered from “the brutal and chaotic marginalisation of Islamic culture during the ‘60s, whose repercussions we still feel today”.

Updating tradition

The country’s first president, Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987), dismantled and divided up the Islamic University of Ez-Zitouna after a power struggle with its clerical leadership. Books and manuscripts from the institute, then Tunisia’s main Arab-language university and one of the most important in the Muslim world, were seized. Tunisian calligrapher Mohamed Salah Khamasi studied there at the start of the 20th century and laid down the foundations for calligraphy in the country, passing his knowledge on to several generations. Following the 2011 revolution that set Tunisia on the road to democracy, a young generation of calligraphers is now calling for a reinvention of the art form to reflect the spirit of the times—“so that it doesn’t get rusty and outdated”, Karim Jabbari told AFP. The artist in his thirties is known internationally for his large-scale calligraphy works, often created with light using long-exposure photography, or in mural form.

In 2011, in his marginalised hometown of Kasserine, which saw deadly clashes before the fall of longtime autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Jabbari used light to write the names of protesters in the places where they were killed. “Through this form of calligraphy, I want to highlight the beauty of the Arabic language and bring it closer to people,” Jabbari said—and “keep our heritage firmly anchored in our memory”.—AFP



Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni stands next to his artwork.



Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni displays his work at his home.

Flying bubble makers could save world from starvation

Flying robots equipped with bubble guns could one day help save our planet. That’s according to a study published in *iScience* on Wednesday by a Japanese scientist who successfully demonstrated that soap bubbles can be used to pollinate fruit-bearing plants—seen as vital to keeping the world fed in the coming decades in the face of vanishing bee populations. Eijiro Miyako, an associate professor at the Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology in Nomi, told AFP he had been working on robotic pollinators for years, but was disheartened when the toy drones he used smashed into flowers, destroying them. “It was too sad,” he said.



This handout photo shows a chemically functionalized soap bubble on a campanula flower (*Campanula persicifolia*).—AFP

The whimsical idea of trying bubbles came to Miyako when he was playing with his son in a park close to their home. The scientist was inspired when one of the bubbles harmlessly burst on his three-year-old’s face. Miyako and co-author Xi Yang first used microscopes to confirm that soap bubbles could carry pollen grains. Next, they tested five solutions available in shops, finding one called lauramidopropyl betaine—used in cosmetic products to boost foam formation—resulted in better growth of the tube that develops from pollen grains after they are deposited on flowers. They also added calcium to support the germination process and found the optimum pH balance.

Drones target flowers

The pair loaded their solution into a bubble gun and released pollen-bearing bubbles into a pear orchard—at a rate of about 2,000 grains per bubble—finding that 95 percent of the targeted flowers bore fruit. “It sounds somewhat like fantasy, but the... soap bubble allows effective pollination and assures that the quality of fruits is the same as with conventional hand pollination,” said Miyako. Hand pollination is a much more labor intensive process. Finally, the researchers took their experiment to the skies—loading a bubble gun onto a small drone programmed to fly on a predetermined route. —AFP

Must be glove: the Japan man obsessed with lost gloves

Koji Ishii can't help himself: whenever he sees a lost glove on the streets of his hometown Tokyo, he just has to stop and document it. For more than 15 years, the 39-year-old has photographed and meticulously recorded details about thousands of lone gloves on the streets of the Japanese capital and beyond. It's a passion, but also, he says, something like a "curse." "I live with the constant fear that there might be a glove right around the corner. I can only describe it as a curse," he told AFP. He's not alone. Around the world a thriving subculture has popped up documenting lost gloves, with many social media accounts dedicated to them—such as Instagram's Long Lost Gloves and Lost Glove Sightings.

pled on streets, stuck in drains, hanging off traffic cones or even washed up on the beach. Ishii, who works at a restaurant, doesn't touch the gloves. He simply photographs each one and records details about its location.

'Dynamic phenomena'

The appeal, he says, lies in imagining how the glove got there and who once wore it. "I imagine people who were here, somebody who used it for work or some other person who was very kind and picked it up from the ground," he said. "They are no longer here but certainly they were weeks ago or months ago. This is what I enjoy." He has developed a sort of categorisation matrix, determining first what kind of glove it is—a dis-

wearing gloves outdoors for safety—a bonanza for Ishii. "In summer 2020, we may see as many lone gloves as in winter," he said. As Ishii moved to another location, he pointed at a leather glove on a roadside fence. "This is a fashion-warm/picked-up/fence type I found last week," he said. When he saw it last week, he realised he had actually seen the same glove two months earlier—at that time tucked into a binding on a pole several metres away. "Lone gloves are a constantly changing, dynamic phenomena," he said, adding he often visits the same place multiple times to observe any changes, and once recorded the same glove in at least eight different but adjacent locations.

'Acts of kindness'

After three weeks, it finally disappeared. "Then I realised that not recording the location of a glove that has now gone means that I have missed an important piece," he said. Since then he has returned to around 100 now-gloveless locations, often noticing changing scenery including demolished buildings or taller grass. Ishii's fascination means he sometimes finds himself getting off a bus before his stop because he has spotted a glove. But the interruptions are often a chance to see a glimpse of kindness in a massive metropolis whose residents are sometimes regarded as cold or distant, he said.

"There are people who cannot simply pass by somebody's tiny misfortune or tragedy, they cannot help picking it up," Ishii said. "Even in Tokyo, even in this mega-city, we still have lots of such small acts of kindness." Ishii's wife and daughter tolerate his obsession and sometimes share locations of gloves they have seen, but he is convinced there must be other like-minded people out there. "There must be people around the world who have feelings for something that has parted with the other half," he said. "I want to have a get-together with these people someday, I'd call it G7 or Glove Seven."—AFP



Japanese photographer Koji Ishii looking for lost gloves on the streets of his hometown Tokyo.—AFP photos



Japanese photographer Koji Ishii taking pictures of a lost globe hung on a wire fence in Tokyo.



Japanese photographer Koji Ishii taking pictures of a lost glove on a pole beside the road in Tokyo.

Hollywood star Tom Hanks has delighted fans with his shots of lone accessories, recently even sharing an image of a sole hospital glove when announcing he'd contracted COVID-19. However Ishii is the elder statesmen of lost glove photography. His obsession began back in 2004 when he saw a yellow workman's glove dropped near his home and decided to take a photograph with his new flip-phone. "I felt a shock like being struck by lightning," he said of the experience. In the years since, he has photographed and recorded information about over 5,000 gloves—everything from children's mittens to delicate lady's lace numbers. He finds them tram-

posable medical glove? a children's mitten? — then whether it is still where it was dropped or has been moved to a prominent spot by a kind bystander, and then describing the type of location. On a recent expedition, he found a grey glove on the ground by a crosswalk. "I'd say this is a light-duty/neglected/crossing type," he said as he crouched down to take a good look.

Closer inspection revealed it to be a mesh fabric ladies' glove, leading Ishii to extrapolate it was worn by a woman who removed it at the crossing to check her smartphone while she waited and didn't notice she had dropped it. The coronavirus pandemic has led to many people



Japanese photographer Koji Ishii taking pictures of a grey glove on the ground by a crosswalk in Tokyo.

Humans can tell what chimps are saying... sort of

Do you speak chimp? They are among our closest relatives in the animal kingdom, and new research published Wednesday shows that humans can tell when a chimpanzee is happy, sad, angry or scared—simply by listening to their cries. Proving a hypothesis first posed by Charles Darwin, researchers in the Netherlands found that humans were able to differentiate chimp cries depending on their context—be that being tickled, threatened by a predator, or eating high-value food. "We demonstrate for the first time that humans can

accurately map other species vocalisations to specific behavioural contexts," Roza Kamiloglu, a researcher at the University of Amsterdam and lead study author, told AFP.

Kamiloglu and the team asked close to 3,500 participants to listen to recordings of 150 chimp sounds, then decide based on what they heard if the animal was in a positive or negative situation, and whether it was excited or relaxed. Around 300 participants were then asked to match sounds to a list of 10 behaviours, including chimps mating, being sepa-

rated from their mothers, or being scared by something. The humans proved surprising adept at understanding the correct context in which the cries were recorded.

They were more successful in identifying situations designated as "negative"—such as when the animal is in danger or under stress—something Kamiloglu suggested could be down to our inbuilt survival mechanisms. "Survival might be facilitated by the ability to infer information from negative vocalisations of other species because negative situations in-

volve danger and they might be more important for survival," she said. Darwin theorised in the nineteenth century that vocalisations like laughter and screams were linked to emotional states shared among similar species. Kamiloglu said the study, which was published in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, supports Darwin's idea.—AFP



Cremona's current oldest luthier, Hungary's Stefano Conia (74) and his son Stefano Jr (47) are pictured with a violin at their workshop in Cremona.—AFP photos



Stefano Conia Jr, 47, carves a violin scroll at the workshop of his father, Cremona's current oldest luthier, Hungary's Stefano Conia in Cremona.



Italian-Colombian Master luthier and president of the Cremona's Antonio Stradivari luthiers consortium, Giorgio Grisales is pictured with a violin at his workshop.



Italian cellist of the Bazzini quartet of Cremona, Fausto Solci plays on a cello made by Italian-Colombian Master luthier Giorgio Grisales.

VIOLIN-MAKERS TUNE IN TO TRADITION OF STRADIVARIUS IN ITALY'S CREMONA

Working in the shadow of the great masters, the violin-makers of Italy's Cremona are valiantly fighting a shrinking market and foreign competition as they seek perfection, one violin at a time. The birthplace of Stradivarius, Cremona is a veritable laboratory for luthiers from all over the world, where violin workshops seem to be everywhere you look. Stefano Conia's studio—just one of the 160 in this northern Italian city of 70,000 inhabitants—has not changed for decades. It's situated at the back of a flower-filled courtyard, and this native Hungarian, one of the doyens of Cremonese violin-makers,

heads there every day, despite retiring nearly 10 years ago.

"If I stopped making violins, life for me would be over. Every day I'm here in the workshop. It's an antidote to old age," said a smiling Conia, 74, whose father crafted violins and whose son is also pursuing the family tradition. Conia's workbench faces that of his son. Both are covered with files, clamps, compasses, brushes and small saws. Wooden planks are laid on the floor.

"Going into violin-making was a natural choice," said Conia's son, Stefano, known as "the youngster" who began handling tools at the age of seven or eight. He spent his childhood in the workshop his father opened in 1972, two months before his birth. "I would play with the wood and the musicians would come and buy their violins and play," said the younger Conia. "It's always been a special atmosphere, which I really liked."

For the Conias, the violins lovingly made from flamed maple or spruce are more than just instruments—they become family. "The instruments are a bit like children. They live thanks to the energy we give them, it is a part of us that will continue to live after our death," said Stefano Conia.



Spanish luthier, Arantzazu Rojo from Bilbao is pictured working on a cello.



Violins are displayed in the shop and workshop of Italian-Colombian Master luthier and president of Cremona's Antonio Stradivari luthiers consortium.

Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, June 19, 2020



A general view shows the workshop, where people of various nationalities work, of Italian-Colombian Master luthier and president of the Cremona's Antonio Stradivari luthiers consortium, Giorgio Grisales in Cremona.

'Cradle of violin-making'

Like the Conias, the majority of Cremona's luthiers are foreigners. Many came to study at the city's International School of Violin-making and stayed on. "The school was started in 1938, the first teachers were foreigners and the students come from all over the world. There's a saying that 'Nobody is a prophet in his own country' and it's true that we, Cremonese violin-makers, are really few and far between," said Marco Nolli, 55, one of this exclusive club. Of the third of Cremona's violin-makers who are Italian, only about 10 percent come from Cremona, he said.

Benedicte Friedmann, a 45-year-old from France, has been living in "the cradle of violin-making" for about 20 years. "Coming to Cremona was—and maybe it's a bit pretentious to say this—like walking in the footsteps of the greatest, Stradivarius, Guarneri, Amati," she said, referring to the city's most revered craftsmen of centuries past. "Being a luthier here means being able to devote yourself 100 percent to creating instruments. And the more you do, the better you become," said Friedmann. In France, she explained, in order to earn a living as a violin-maker, many people do repairs, re-hair bows, sell accessories, which leaves them little time for their art. The situation is not always simple, however, for the violin-makers of Cremona, who enjoyed growth in the 1960s-1980s, before things got tougher. "Our market, which is an elite market, has shrunk. We are facing a very serious problem," said Giorgio Grisales, the president of the artisans' consortium.

Fewer performances and musical venues and the preference of seasoned violinists for antique instruments from the

18th and 19th centuries have hurt the niche industry. Even before the coronavirus swept through northern Italy, Grisales said, "the sector was in trouble because of ruthless competition from China and Eastern Europe". China is the world's leading producer of bowed instruments with \$77.8 million in exports in 2019, or 1.5 million instruments, more than half of the world market, according to the International Trade Centre. Italy is in fifth position, with 4.6 percent of world exports, behind the United Kingdom and Germany but ahead of France. Italy's main customers are Japan and the United States.

Assembly-line instruments

Italian violin-makers must contend with counterfeit instruments in the marketplace, some built elsewhere and advertised as Cremonese, but above all competition comes from lower priced violins. "Master instruments start at 25,000 euros (\$28,000)," although others of fine quality can sell for about 10,000 euros less, said Grisales. But for 200 euros or less, it is possible to buy a Chinese violin, bow and case.

"They are economic instruments, made in series, and intended for those who are beginning to study," explained baroque violinist Fabrizio Longo. Friedmann, the French violin-maker, said that the process of making a violin in China is for the most part vastly different from the craftsmanship she and others in Cremona engage in. "They are hand-made, but 10 violin-makers work every day on the same parts. It's a line job and at the end you get an assembly," she said. "There's no uniqueness, no authenticity." In Cremona, according to Grisales of the consortium, it takes at least 300

hours to make a violin, or between two and three months. Another challenge for the luthiers is to stand out among the Cremonese competition.

"Getting known is a bit laborious," while the search for orders "is a permanent quest", said Friedmann. Some violin-makers were able to offer lower prices, hurting fellow luthiers, by working on the black market and avoiding high taxes. Despite these challenges, Friedmann said, the concentration of violin-makers in Cremona creates a healthy environment of emulation and the desire to excel. "When I'm asked which is the most beautiful instrument I've made, for me it's always the next one..."—AFP



French luthier Benedicte Friedmann works on a violin at her workshop in Cremona.



Italian-Colombian Master luthier and president of Cremona's Antonio Stradivari luthiers consortium, Giorgio Grisales poses in his shop and workshop in Cremona.



Working tools are pictured in the workshop of Italian master luthier Marco Nolli in Cremona.



Top plates for violins are pictured.



Young Colombian luthier, Ricardo Grisales works on a violin.

Hideaway jungle villa opens in Mexico biosphere reserve



By **Andrea Smith**, Lonely Planet Writer

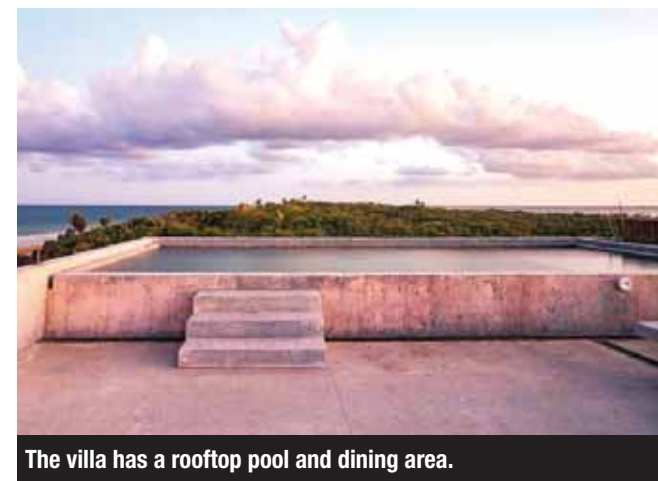
A new hideaway villa that has opened in Tulum, Mexico will suit luxury travellers seeking privacy, as it almost disappears into the dense vegetation of lush tropical jungle. High-end travellers looking to get

away from it all can head to Casa Bautista, which can accommodate 10 guests in four bedrooms and a studio. A stay at the new retreat includes three meals per day, and the villa's chef and the kitchen staff will do all the shopping, cooking and cleaning, and guests can book massage or yoga sessions on the rooftop if desired.

Because of its protected location in Yucatan's Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, planning restrictions meant that the villa could only measure 300 square-metres and be eight metres in height, keeping it low in its jungle surroundings. The reserve is home to spider and howler monkeys, American crocodiles, Central American tapirs and hundreds of types of birds.



A concrete spiral staircase connects all three levels of the house.



The villa has a rooftop pool and dining area.

Lifestyle | Travel



The retreat features a Brutalist-type concrete spiral staircase, connecting all three levels. Designed by Mexico City practice, Productora, the building is wrapped by timber pergolas, protecting the interior from the sun. In the event of hurricane, the terraces also have a folding mechanism that transforms it into a closed box in order to protect it.

Anyone staying there will have a sustainable visit, as the villa is fully powered by solar and wind energy. Also, by raising the house on cross-shaped columns, the impact on the environment is reduced. However, a stay at the hotel won't come cheap. Prices are listed between \$1,950 and \$6,000 USD per night. — www.lonelyplanet.com



The villa's look is softened by timber pergolas.



A new hideaway villa has opened in Tulum in Mexico.



Casa Bautista can accommodate 10 guests.

Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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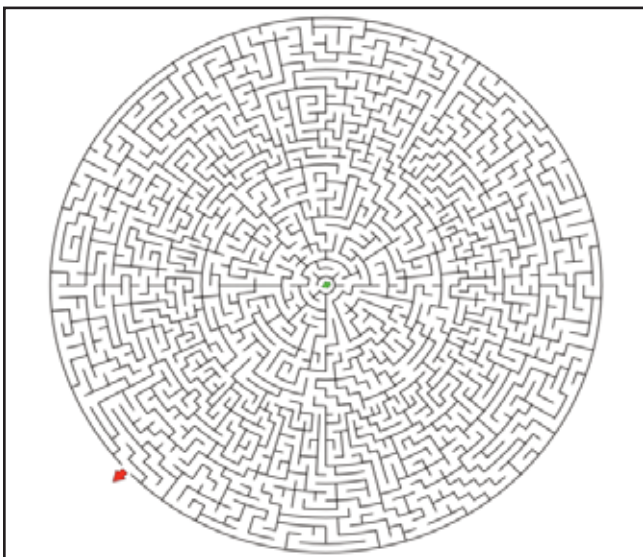
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Yesterday's Solution

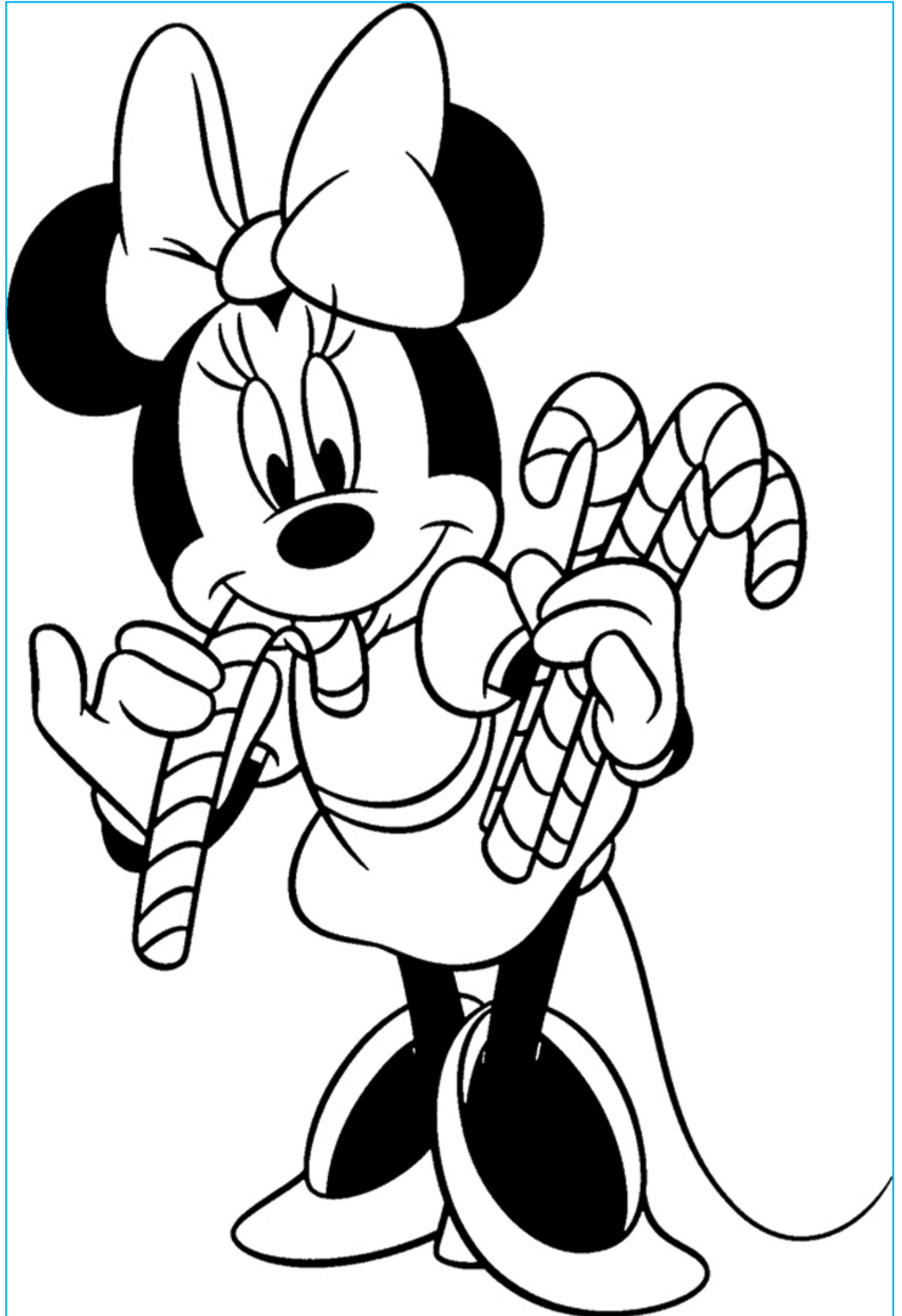
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5	8	6	1	2	7	9	3	4
3	9	2	8	5	4	6	7	1
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medium

Kids Mazes



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Join the dots



Word Scramble



Scrambled Bartender

How many of these terms all relating to bartending can you unscramble?

SPEANTU	_____	TUJLAQE	_____
SKIMRE	_____	MELUDRD	_____
TECRSOA	_____	ILOCCAKT	_____
TTEBOL	_____	BDRANY	_____
OEEPRN	_____	LLLWBAO	_____
PROU	_____	YKWSIHE	_____
LEERBND	_____	IGN	_____
RBDENARET	_____	NULNFE	_____
AKOVD	_____	RISNTRAE	_____
TICUEBKCE	_____	EWLTO	_____
SHAEKR	_____	JGRIGE	_____
TRGARE	_____	LEUTF	_____
HOTS	_____	HHBALLGI	_____
RASMUEE	_____	URM	_____
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Stars

STAR TRACK

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

You are very interested in technological breakthroughs and innovation, Aries, especially if it has some benefit for individuals. Since you also concern yourself with social issues and subjects like psychology and spiritual therapies, you realize the importance of progress in these areas for the future. You also wonder where you fit in.

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

You're a reasonable, generous person, Taurus. Your altruism plays a big part in your life. This is why your friends will be amazed to see you express a lot of personal desires now. When you think about it, everything is getting clearer. You might even want to change a lot of things in your life. And letting your feelings guide you doesn't have to mean that you won't think about your friends.

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

Today, you'll need to come up with the answer to an important question, Gemini. What do you really want? Events might compel you to choose between your current way of living and a more stable life. But you could be worried about the unknown. It's ironic, but you will need to change your habits if you want more stability. Think about it.

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

Your calm will be put to the test today, Cancer. Try not to fall into this trap. You should try to show people that you're a thoughtful person and your past experiences have given you wisdom. You don't necessarily have to respond to aggression. However, you shouldn't forget about your own point of view. Try to assert yourself calmly and steadily.

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

You tend to think that you're the only person on this planet born under a lucky star, Leo. Try to trust the ones you love, because they might not appreciate having to deal with your anxiety. Don't forget that they also know how to fend for themselves. They, too, have had to adapt to this world we live in. They can stand up for themselves.

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

You're an eccentric person, Virgo. Yet you also feel the need to be loved and feel the approval of those around you. It isn't always easy to think differently from other people or to feel completely different. In order to be accepted, you must help them understand you. Try to express your ideas and opinions in a more realistic way. You can't live out of sync all the time.

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

Your altruism and ability to listen to others will greatly influence the day, Libra. Someone close to you is having difficulties and doesn't know how to explain the problem. This person needs you and knows that you're the only one who can help find a way out. Make time to listen patiently and you'll find a solution together.

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

The day belongs to you. The celestial movements encourage you to think about your future. Don't be afraid. With your usual self-confidence and dynamism, you're in the best position to have a head start. Your Scorpio nature will be in control of your actions and you can rest assured that this period in time will be a favorable one for you. What more could you ask for?

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

There's a radical change taking place in the Zodiac, Sagittarius. The changes in the economy and society seem to suggest that now is the time to think about how your actions impact the lives of your loved ones, community, and society at large. What steps could you take to help make this world a better place? Thinking about these issues prepares you to shape your future as you want it to be.

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

Capricorn, the atmosphere of the day gives you the impression that there could be a lot of changes waiting to unfold in your personal life. Most of them will concern your relationships. Today you could feel as if you've just changed your star sign. Take the time to open up and listen to what the stars might reveal to you. This will be time well spent.

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

You're the type of person who loves knowing a lot of different people, Aquarius. You feel that you must help your friends communicate so that they have a better forum in which to express themselves. You're good at bringing out the best in others and helping them find a solid footing in the present, despite your love of the past. Go with the flow.

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

You should make more of your own decisions, Pisces. Don't let others have so much control over your life. When in a relationship, for example, you tend to let your partner dominate. You seem to no longer want to be in charge of any initiatives with regard to your joint life. Try to free yourself from this situation and take charge. You'll be a better and more valuable partner.

Country Codes

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

FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2020

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DUBAI: Emiratis visit the Dubai Expo 2020 site, under construction in the Emirati city. Armies of workers in protective masks are racing to complete the mammoth Dubai Expo 2020 site despite the coronavirus that has sickened some workers. —AFP

Race to ready Dubai's mega expo site

Armies of workers deployed to complete work despite virus-fuelled hurdles

DUBAI: Armies of workers in protective masks are racing to complete the mammoth Dubai Expo 2020 site despite the coronavirus that has sickened some employees, forced a one-year postponement, and created a logistical headache.

The six-month world fair, a milestone for the emirate which has splashed out \$8.2 billion on the eye-popping venue in the hope of boosting its soft power and resetting the economy, will now open its doors in October 2021. But organizers grappling with the complexities of rescheduling the event are intent on delivering the main buildings of the Expo by the original start date. They are keeping the Expo 2020 name and logo, which is emblazoned on everything from billboards to aircraft.

As well as the onset of the scorching Gulf summer, organizers have had to contend with coronavirus infections and layoffs among a large workforce recruited from across the world. "Of course, the impact of COVID-19 has affected the logistics and the processes of delivering some of the remaining works," said Ahmed Al-Khatib, chief development and delivery officer.

But "work continues and some of the pavilions have actually reached a very final stage. 2020 is the year of delivery," he told AFP during a rare visit to the site, which will be mothballed once the

major work is done.

Difficult decisions

Once a tangle of concrete and dust, the 4.5 square kilometre venue has now risen from the deserts of Dubai. Many of the buildings' main structures have been completed. The United Arab Emirates pavilion, built in the shape of a falcon in flight, is only a few feathers away from completion, while the adjacent Saudi Arabian pavilion is now a huge window opening up into the sky.

Tunnels are open and streets have been paved. The sound system and 5G towers have been installed, and transplanted mango and olive trees are flourishing. Before the coronavirus pandemic, Dubai hoped the largest event ever staged in the Arab world—billed as the "World's Greatest Show"—would attract some 25 million visitors.

It will showcase dozens of pavilions among the 192 participating countries including Israel, despite the Jewish state having no diplomatic ties with the UAE.

Since the first "World Expo" was held at London's Crystal Palace in 1851, global fairs have been used to showcase new ideas and technology as well as serving as nation-branding exercises. With a lavish promotional campaign featuring super-

stars such as Lionel Messi, Dubai hopes the Expo will be a lifeline for the property, tourism and trade sectors, after years of malaise in the region which has now been aggravated by the global coronavirus-induced slowdown.

Chief Engagement Officer Manal Al-Bayat said the postponement approved in May by the governing Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) had no impact on the "commitment to deliver an Expo that inspires the world".

But as the timeline stretches out, putting pressure on budgets, it has led to layoffs among staff that once thronged the air-conditioned temporary buildings on site. "Very sadly, a number of Expo employees will be leaving us. Of course, the decision was very difficult taken in (the) context of the postponement and it's difficult because they're members of the tribe," said Al-Bayat, without specifying how many jobs were lost.

Daily challenges

On the vast Expo site south of the city, the pandemic creates daily challenges, as workers converse and share crane boxes, at a time when the UAE is still registering hundreds of new infections every day.

Al-Bayat said that among the many precau-



DUBAI: Ahmed Al-Khatib, chief development and delivery officer of Dubai Expo 2020. — AFP

tionary measures are a testing facility built on site and awareness sessions held for workers. But like many workplaces in the region, infections have emerged. "We have had some positive cases with our workers as well as with our Expo staff," she said, declining to say how many. "We ensure that if anyone has tested positive they do not come back until they have tested negative and have been approved by the health authorities to come back to work regardless of whether they are workers or Expo employees". — AFP

Business

Aramco completes purchase of 70% stake in SABIC for \$69.1bn

OPEC throttles output in May

RIYADH: Saudi Aramco said it has completed the acquisition of a 70 percent stake in chemical giant SABIC for \$69.1 billion, boosting it as one of the world's largest producers. The stake was held by the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund which has reportedly been on a spree to purchase stakes in international firms.

"The completion of the transaction enhances Aramco's presence in the global petrochemicals industry," Aramco said in a statement. "Combined, in 2019 Aramco and SABIC recorded petrochemicals production volume of nearly 90 million tons," one of the world's largest, the company said.

Completion of the purchase comes six months after Aramco sealed the world's biggest initial public offering, selling 1.7 percent of its shares for a record \$29.4 billion. Last year, the energy giant raised \$12 billion in a bond sale to help pay for the SABIC acquisition.

Aramco chairman Yasir Al-Rumayyan, who also chairs the Saudi wealth fund, said the SABIC deal served both parties. "It provides capital for PIF's long-term investment strategy as it drives the economic transformation and growth of Saudi Arabia, further benefiting the people of

our country," Rumayyan said.

"It supports Aramco's continued growth in downstream and enhances its international footprint."

The government last month transferred \$40 billion to PIF from the foreign reserves managed by the Saudi central bank to support its liquidity. In the first quarter of this year, it bought \$7.7 billion holdings in a host of companies—from Boeing, Walt Disney and Starbucks to Marriott and Citigroup. SABIC's share price has fallen by more than 27 percent since the deal was announced early last year. The company posted losses in both the fourth quarter of last year and first quarter of this year over low prices.

PIF, which aims to raise its holdings to \$2 trillion by 2030, is seen as the main driving force behind Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 economic diversification plan.

Meanwhile, major oil producers sharply cut back output in May, data showed on Wednesday, as part of a concerted effort to prop up prices that have fallen dramatically in the wake of the global coronavirus pandemic. In the latest monthly report by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, data showed that the cartel's 13 member states throttled output by 6.2

million barrels per day (bpd) last month.

Back in April, OPEC and key allies such as Russia—grouped together under the wider OPEC+ banner—had pledged to cut output by 9.7 million bpd from May 1 until the end of June. In a further crisis meeting earlier this month, the oil-producing nations subsequently agreed to extend those cuts through July.

OPEC itself does not officially publish exact output figures in its regular monthly bulletins, but instead cites data compiled by so-called secondary sources.

And according to those statistics, OPEC kingpin Saudi Arabia bore the brunt of the cuts, curbing its output by 3.16 million bpd alone. The United Arab Emirates curtailed production by 1.364 million bpd and Kuwait axed 921,000 bpd.

The concerted action was deemed necessary after oil prices plummeted in the face of falling demand as countries around the world imposed strict lockdowns to stop the spread of the new coronavirus.

Both the US benchmark, West Texas Intermediate (WTI), and Europe's Brent North Sea contracts, slumped to historic lows in April, with Brent falling as low as \$15 and WTI briefly entering negative territory.



Saudi ARAMCO oil facility in Dammam. — AFP

In its latest monthly report, OPEC estimated that 10 non-member states had, for their part, also cut production by 2.95 million bpd in May, bringing the overall volume of cuts to 9.2 million bpd. The cartel noted the "high level of conformity" to the voluntary production cuts by both its members and allied oil-producing countries, which, in addition to Russia, include Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Mexico and Oman. — AFP

AUB: Al-Hassad draws are back!

KUWAIT: In alignment with its plan to resume regular operations, Ahli United Bank (AUB) announced resuming the postponed Islamic Al-Hassad draws starting from 17 June 2020, which will be in accordance with preventive guidelines and measures set by health authorities.

All postponed draws will be held while preserving the full legal rights of all qualified Al-Hassad customers, including collecting all opportunities to win during the period of suspending the draws.

On this occasion, Faten Al-Tameemi, Head of Marketing & Products Development at AUB, said: It gives us great pleasure to announce to our valued customers the return of Al-Hassad draws and announcing the winners in the postponed draws during the previous months due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its impact of businesses.

Al-Tameemi clarified: During the period of suspending businesses, AUB remained close to its customers and fulfill their needs through its electronic banking services. This all included keeping them informed about all developments relevant to the operations of Branches and conducting their banking transactions through various electronic channels. We wish all our customers overall health and safety, as well as best of luck in Al-Hassad. AUB held the postponed draws for the following dates: the March 25 Monthly Draw for KD 100,000; the March 25 Privilege Draw for KD 25,000; the April 22 Quarterly Draw for KD 250,000. The remaining postponed draws will be held accordingly based

on relevant laws and regulations.

Al-Hassad draws includes several prizes, such as KD 100,000 each Eid. The grand quarterly draw for Al-Hassad Islamic account of KD 250,000 prize continues being a key aspiration for customers wishing to fulfill their dreams. On top of that, Al-Hassad still includes the monthly draw of KD 100,000, as well as 20 weekly prizes of KD 1,000 for each winner. In addition to this attractive package of rewards, Al-Hassad Islamic account incorporates a Wakala contract for projected annual profits, making this account beneficial to both families and others wishing to build their savings through a number of short and long-term advantages that are lauded by existing and potential customers. Furthermore, for the first time in Kuwait, the AUB Al-Hassad presents the "Privilege Draw". This is a quarterly draw of KD 25,000 exclusively for Al-Hassad customers who maintained their balances for more than one year and have not won a prize in the last five years with one draw chance per KD 50.

It is worth mentioning that Al-Hassad Islamic account has won the "Best Savings Product in Kuwait 2019" by the prestigious Banker Middle East Magazine for the numerous unique features it provides. Such features include the simplest and easiest program, highest number of winners, largest prize value, unique draws during Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha, loyalty multipliers, unique online account opening feature, transparent draws held during radio shows with live broadcast on the Bank's social media platforms.

Ooredoo launches iPhone 11 Pro with Shamel

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, is bringing the world to its customers with the power of the exceptional iPhone 11 Pro at an unbeatable price starting at KD 29 per month from Shamel. The Shamel plan includes unlimited Ooredoo minutes, 30 GB internet, and 500 local minutes.

Commenting on the campaign, Yousef Al-Shallal, Director of Marketing at Ooredoo Kuwait said, "During these unprecedented times, people are asked to remain home which hinders their ability to enjoy the things in life that they love. With this campaign, Ooredoo is inviting its customers to live their lives through their iPhone 11 Pro with Shamel". Al-Shallal further added, "We are bringing the world to our customers with simple activities such as going out, going to the movies, and traveling but virtually through their iPhone 11 Pro empowered by Shamel; this is aligned with our commitment to embracing digitalization and leading the way in meeting the growing demands for online digital services in Kuwait".

The iPhone 11 Pro is one of the most advanced line-up of Apple smartphones ever, and with its innovative and revolutionary design, it

carries many new features and capabilities built into the Apple iOS 13 operating system, delivering an unmatched customer experience. The devices are available in many colors; including midnight green, light gray, light silver, gold, black, white, purple, green, yellow and red.

It is worth mentioning Ooredoo Kuwait also launched its 'Be Safe. Be Home. Be Online' campaign, featuring an array of digital offers and services designed to support customers and to ensure they are well connected and informed during the Coronavirus outbreak in the country. The digital offers and services provided by Ooredoo Kuwait include subscription to any Ooredoo Surprise offer on My Ooredoo App, enjoying the best music, series, movies, and games, recharging online, joining ANA and free SIM delivery to customers' doorsteps, and amazing benefits from Shamel. Customers can also view Ooredoo's services as well as exclusive offers and their subscription data online through the MyOoredoo application and the Company website Ooredoo.com.kw in addition to contacting our call center through 121 around the clock for all enquiries and services.

Ooredoo Kuwait reaffirms its keenness to adhere to all instructions issued by the official authorities in Kuwait related to the current situation, confirming its cooperation and its complete readiness to implement the procedures followed in this regard during the coming period.



Yousef Al-Shallal

Business

US homebuilding rises; jump in permits hints at green shoots

Single-family starts rise 0.1%; multi-family jump 15%

WASHINGTON: US homebuilding increased less than expected in May, but a strong rebound in permits for future home construction suggested the housing market was starting to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis along with the broader economy.

Other data on Wednesday showed applications for loans to buy a home surged to a near 11-1/2-year high last week. The reports followed on the heels of data on Tuesday showing a record surge in retail sales in May. Employers hired a historic 2.5 million workers last month. Activity, however, remains well below pre-COVID-19 levels and economists warn it could take even a decade for the economy to fully recover from the global pandemic. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell also warned on Tuesday of the long road to recovery. The economy slipped into recession in February.

"Housing is a leading economic indicator and it is pointing the way forward but there is a limit to growth when the economy has to drag along the millions and millions of unemployed workers displaced in this pandemic recession who won't be seeing paychecks anytime soon," said Chris Rupkey, chief economist at MUFJ in New York.

Housing starts rose 4.3 percent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 974,000 units last month, the Commerce Department said. The increase recouped only a fraction of the more than 40 percent cumulative decline in homebuilding in March and April. Starts

dropped 23.2 percent on a year-on-year basis in May.

The rise in starts last month was tempered by a 0.1 percent gain in single-family homebuilding, which accounts for the largest share of the housing market, to a rate of 675,000 units. Steep decreases in homebuilding the Midwest and populous South offset robust increases in the West and Northeast. Starts for the volatile multi-family housing segment jumped 15.0 percent to a pace of 299,000 units.

With starts still in a deep rut, economists expect a sharp decline in homebuilding in the second quarter, in line with projections for the steepest contraction in gross domestic product since the Great Depression.

The Atlanta Fed is forecasting GDP falling at 45.5 percent rate in the second quarter. The economy shrank at a 5 percent pace in the January-March quarter, the deepest contraction since the 2007-2009 Great Recession. "The drop in housing construction in the second-quarter GDP report is likely to be jaw-dropping," said Conrad De-Quadros, senior economic advisor at Brean Capital in New York.

Rising demand

Stocks on Wall Street were lower in volatile trading as a record rise in coronavirus cases in six states hurt sentiment after a three-day rally. The PHLX housing index fell. The dollar



NEW YORK: In this file photo an aerial view is seen of a construction worker roofing an apartment home in Uniondale, New York. New home construction in May rose 4.3 percent compared to April, the Commerce Department said.—AFP

strengthened against a basket of currencies. US Treasury prices rose.

Permits for future home construction rebounded 14.4 percent to a rate of 1.220 million units in May, reinforcing economists' expectations that the housing market will lead the economy from the recession, driven by historically low mortgage rates.

Though the housing market accounts for about 3.3 percent of gross domestic product, it has a larger footprint on the economy. A

separate report from the Mortgage Bankers Association on Wednesday showed applications for loans to buy a home increased 4 percent last week to their highest level since January 2009.

Mortgage applications have climbed back above pre-COVID-19 levels. Signs of recovery in the housing market were underscored by a survey of Tuesday showing single-family homebuilders very upbeat in June about conditions in the industry.—Reuters

Why tradable value of ME crudes matters to buyers in Asia

By Dan Colover

The crude oil market has witnessed some of the highest volatility in living memory, casting a spotlight on the value of different benchmarks and liquidity and yield of crude that is delivered into them. Typically, the value of a grade of crude oil is defined by the underlying value of the products that are produced when it is refined. The refinery yields of different crude grades and underlying refinery economics are critical in analyzing the competitiveness of competing crudes. Crudes are not homogenous and there are hundreds of different types, each with their own qualities and characteristics. The international market has settled on using certain benchmarks, against which the values of crudes are measured.

For a crude benchmark to be robust it must have a variety of often disparate characteristics. These include abundance in production volume, steady quality, diversity of buyers and sellers, geographic relevance and absence of interference, from political forces for example. Many crudes around the world share some of these characteristics but only a

handful fulfill all criteria. Within the Middle East reference prices include Platts Dubai, Platts Oman and DME Oman, each having different characteristics. Both Platts Dubai and Platts Oman offer an alternative delivery mechanism, which means that more than one crude grade can help form the daily value of the assessment and ensure sufficient liquidity for the benchmark. For Platts Dubai, this includes the alternative delivery of Oman, Upper Zakum, Al-Shaheen and Murban. For Platts Oman, Murban is also acceptable as an alternative deliverable grade.

Total deliverable crude on a daily basis for Platts Dubai can therefore be calculated as the daily production of the five streams of crude that go into the assessment. Clearly, not all of this volume will be freely available on the spot market on any given day. Some will be diverted into domestic refineries and some cargoes may have destination restrictions. Yet the liquidity pool remains deep. A conservative estimate of crude available for delivery into Platts Dubai is 2.75 million b/d, while 1.75 million b/d is available for Platts Oman.

The DME Oman futures contract is underpinned by Oman's 950,000 b/d production and after allowing for domestic refinery consumption, around 800,000 b/d is available—slightly more than a cargo and a half of crude per day.

Crude oil grades from the Middle East are sought by complex refiners in Asia, which typically blend different crudes to customize their preferred slate required for their processing units. As a result, the underlying value of these different grades is critical when a refiner is evaluating which grade to purchase as part of their monthly requirements.

Changes in value of different crude grades can be linked to the value

of the products that the crude makes, with gasoline historically king of the barrel. Murban, which is among the lighter and sweeter crude grades across the Middle East, has the highest yield of gasoline among all the crudes in the Platts Dubai and Platts Oman alternative delivery mechanisms. This explains why it has typically been valued the highest.

However, with gasoline demand decimated due to Covid-19, Murban was more competitively valued versus the other grades as its yield values shifted to reflect the economics of refining the grade. Oman crude is mostly sold to China, which arguably has different refining economics to other end-users. Critically, Beijing adjusts domestic retail prices for oil products once crude oil falls below \$40/b. The breakdown of traditional refining economics focusing on the yield value of a particular crude have led to Oman crude trading away from other grades in the region. With Oman being the only deliverable into DME Oman, the contract diverged and moved substantially higher relative to the Platts Dubai and Platts Oman assessments. While it averaged 11 cents/b above Platts Oman in February, the difference leapt to over \$3.15/b in April and May.

This increased spread has likely impacted the economics for refiners in Asia processing grades that are priced against these different markers. The yield for the different crudes needs to be considered against the price of the different benchmarks to examine their relative competitiveness from a refinery's perspective. The availability of suitable alternative grades that can be delivered into a benchmark ensures tradable value and stable prices that are useful for all producers and buyers. Not just a single consumer of a single grade of oil. Note: Dan Colover is Head of Middle East Market Engagement, S&P Global Platts

Business

KIPCO looks to 2020 with caution as it monitors COVID's business impact

'A lot will depend on how developments unfold in H2 2020: Vice Chairman



KUWAIT: Faisal Al-Ayyar (second left) addresses KIPCO's annual Shafafiyah 'Transparency' Investor' Forum



KUWAIT: At its Annual Shafafiyah 'Transparency' Investor' Forum, KIPCO – the Kuwait Projects Company (Holding) – said that it would remain cautious in 2020, as it closely monitor the business impact of the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and the oil price drop we have witnessed so far in the average price of the barrel compared to 2019. At the company's investors' forum, KIPCO presented a review of its activities in 2019 and its outlook for 2020. In line with the health authorities' guidelines regarding social distancing, the event was broadcast live to an audience of shareholders, financial analysts and institutional investors.

Annual General Assembly

The forum followed the company's General Assembly meeting where KIPCO's shareholders approved a cash dividend of 10 percent (10 fils per share) and elected the Board of Directors for a three-year term.

Highlights of 2019

As part of its review of 2019, KIPCO highlighted that while growth remained somewhat flat, net profit grew 6 percent to KD 30 million (\$99 million) for the year ended 31 December 2019, compared to KD 28.3 million (\$93.4 million) reported in 2018.

The company highlighted the continued support of its shareholders, as demonstrated by the successful completion of its rights issue in the summer of 2019. KIPCO raised KD 95 million (\$314 million) in equity, with a 17 percent oversubscription in the company's shares. KIPCO also issued a landmark seven-year \$500 million (KD 151 million) bond during 2019 under its \$3 billion Euro Medium Term Note (EMTN) Program. The demand of \$3.6 billion on the order book was KIPCO's largest ever in international debt capital markets, representing a 7.1 times oversubscription. The bond was issued at a fixed rate coupon of 4.229 percent, the company's lowest ever coupon rate. The bond, executed in under three weeks, resulted in the extension of KIPCO's debt

maturity from 4.1 years to 4.7 years, and the reduction of the company's annual cost of funding by around \$26 million once the July 2020 notes are repaid.

Performance of Group companies

KIPCO highlighted the performance of its main operating companies. Burgan Bank registered a 3 percent increase in net profit and successfully issued \$500 million Perpetual Tier 1 Capital Securities with a yield of 5.75 percent.

Gulf Insurance Group's net profit was up 12 percent and gross written premiums (GWP) increased 8 percent. The company continues to be among the top five insurance companies in the Middle East in terms of GWPs.

United Gulf Holding recorded a revenue growth of 8 percent. Its subsidiary, Kamco Invest, reported a 47 percent growth in revenue following the completion of its merger with Global Investment House.

United Education Company, meanwhile, continued to grow its facilities and student base, registering a revenue growth of 6 percent. KIPCO's real estate arm, United Real Estate, registered a revenue growth of 10 percent, with its financial performance impacted by the losses incurred from the revaluation of property.

Qurain Petrochemical Industries (QPIC), meanwhile, registered a 13 percent growth in revenue for the first nine months of the financial year. QPIC acquired a 60 percent stake in Jassim Transport Company in June 2019, and the company is moving into petrochemical upstream projects with good potential. The Saudia Dairy & Foodstuff Company (SADAFCO), a subsidiary of QPIC, registered a net profit increase of 21 percent and a revenue growth of 11 percent for the first nine months of the financial year.

As for OSN, KIPCO announced that an operational turnaround has been achieved. The pay-tv company is now able to deliver its products to 25 countries in the region through 'OSN Streaming', its OTT platform, thereby giving the company a larger reach. The streaming application

includes Disney+ as of April 2020. Furthermore, OSN continues to have exclusive content rights to seven major Hollywood studios, and work is underway to produce original Arabic content.

The streamlining of OSN's business is being carried out successfully, with content cost rationalized and savings of \$120 million against the contractual value in 2019. The pay-tv company also recorded a 28 percent reduction in general and administrative expenses and staff costs in 2019 compared to the year before. The management team was strengthened in the necessary areas of expertise.

Digital journey

KIPCO noted that 2019 saw the beginning of several digital journeys in its core operating companies, which will continue in 2020. Burgan Bank launched its new online bank smart phone application with easy-to-use, secure features.

OSN rebranded its streaming application to 'OSN Streaming' and added Disney+ to its offering. The application enjoys a 4.4 star rating on the Apple Store, ranking higher or equal to its competitors. Its IMDb rating is at 8.7 stars, putting it ahead of many of the other OTT platforms worldwide. Gulf Insurance Group, meanwhile, has invested in digital distribution channels through enhancing its website and web portal, and the acquisition of a stake in 'yallahcompare'. The insurance group has taken several key initiatives to strengthen and develop its digital products and services, including motor telematics.

Initial 2020 observations

In its initial 2020 observations, KIPCO said that its core insurance business presented a stable picture, with lower claims being offset by slower revenue growth. The performance of the investment book, however, would be hard to predict due to the volatility of the market.

In the media sector, KIPCO said its business had outperformed the outlined budget in the first five months of the year, with increased customer consumption and lower churn. The closure of re-

tail outlets because of the lock down has impacted new sales numbers.

KIPCO noted that for its banking operations, uncertainty in the loan book quality will remain. Due to market volatility, it would be hard to predict the performance of the investment book, noting that regulatory directives are uncertain. KIPCO said that fundamental matters affecting the real estate and hospitality sector include population size and restrictions on travel and mobility in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Needless to say, KIPCO's businesses operating in the petrochemical sector will be impacted by the moves in oil prices.

Outlook for 2020

In its outlook for 2020, KIPCO said that with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for businesses to adapt in order to continue to provide their services, all teams across the Group companies have risen to the occasion and adapted to working from home.

KIPCO said it would continue to monitor the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is significant and evolving. Faisal Al-Ayyar, KIPCO's Vice Chairman (Executive) said: "We remain cautious about 2020, as we closely monitor the business impact of the pandemic and that of the drop in oil prices. During the COVID-19 crisis, we have been working with the management teams in our Group companies to ensure that we continue to serve our customers in the best way possible, and minimize the financial impact that the pandemic will have on our businesses. While we continue to be operationally ready for a full-scale launch of business in the different markets we operate in, we are also mindful that new business opportunities that may present themselves as a result of these difficult times that the world is living."

He added: "Although the execution of new initiatives, in some instances, has been constrained for our companies, we believe that a lot will depend on how developments unfold in the second half of 2020. Reporting profitability would be an achievement for any business."

Sports

Napoli win 6th Italian Cup beat Juventus on penalties

‘There’s a God of football,’ says Gattuso

ROME: Gennaro Gattuso hailed the ‘God of football’ after he lifted his first coaching trophy as Napoli beat Juventus 4-2 on penalties to win the Italian Cup for the sixth time on Wednesday. The final had ended 0-0 in an empty Stadio Olimpico in Rome. Paulo Dybala and Danilo both missed their spot-kicks for record 13-times Italian Cup champions Juventus with Arkadiusz Milik slotting in the winner for Napoli past veteran keeper Gianluigi Buffon. It is the first trophy for the southerners since 2014, and also a maiden coaching trophy for Gattuso, who took over from Carlo Ancelotti in December.

For former Italy World Cup winner Gattuso his first coaching success comes after the death of his 37-year-old sister Francesca from a rare illness. “In life you cannot accept some things, but football has given me a lot and a great passion,” said the 42-year-old former AC Milan great. “I feel I have a great responsibility. I know I cannot give up and I have never done in my career. “I saw a team tonight that wanted to win, we deserved it. “There’s a God of football, who makes you reap all that you’ve sown. “I am proud of what my lads have done. Now we must continue with this spirit also in the championship, to recover the disadvantage.”

Napoli have been reborn under Gattuso and are now sixth in the league table as they target

the Champions League places when Serie A returns this weekend after a three-month absence due to the coronavirus. But the defeat was a worrying sign for Maurizio Sarri’s Juventus, who also lost the Italian SuperCup final last December to Lazio. The 61-year-old former Napoli coach had also been chasing his first coaching trophy in Italy, and second in his career after leading Chelsea to the Europa League last season. “There is disappointment for the lads, for the club, for the fans,” said Sarri. “At this moment we lack brilliance to make the game dangerous, and without that brilliance, it becomes more difficult.”

Ronaldo lacking sharpness

The final was played behind closed doors, in the silence of Rome’s Stadio Olimpico which should have hosted Italy versus Switzerland in Euro 2020 on June 17. Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo missed a chance to break the deadlock after five minutes, having also missed a penalty in a goalless semi-final, second leg match against AC Milan last weekend. “It’s unusual two 0-0 draws for us but that just shows the lack of sharpness after such a long break,” said Sarri.

“Ronaldo’s in the same shape as the others, like Paulo Dybala and Douglas Costa, he is lacking the sharpness to do what works best for him.” Napoli had the best chances of the first half with Lorenzo



ROME: Napoli’s players and staff celebrate after winning the TIM Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) final football match Napoli vs Juventus on June 17, 2020 at the Olympic stadium in Rome. — AFP

Insigne’s curling effort denied and Buffon clearing Diego Demme from close range. Buffon pulled off a last-minute save on Nikola Maksimovic to send the game into penalties with extra-time scrapped to minimize injuries after the coronavirus shut-

down. Sarri said he hoped the players would now “put the anger and hunger from this disappointment” into their Serie A challenge with the eight-time reigning champions just one point ahead of second-placed Lazio in the table. — AFP

Serena set for US Open; officials vow safety, star power

NEW YORK: Serena Williams committed to play at this year’s US Open on Wednesday as US Tennis Association officials vowed they can safely stage the first Grand Slam since the coronavirus pandemic shutdown. With top men’s stars questioning the wisdom of the staging the event, the USTA said the tournament will be held August 31 to September 13 without spectators at New York’s National Tennis Center, which in April became a temporary hospital facility to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

“I really can’t wait to return to the US Open 2020,” Serena Williams said in a video message. “I think the USTA is going to do a really good job of ensuring everyone is going to be safe. “This is crazy. I’m excited.” The Flushing Meadows fortnight will be the first Grand Slam event staged since the deadly virus outbreak shut down global sport. Wimbledon was cancelled and the French Open was postponed until September. The site will also host the ATP/WTA Western and Southern Open, typically staged in Cincinnati, the week before the US Open with a similar safety “bubble” that includes testing for players and their entourage.

The USTA expects an 80% drop in net operating income as a result of having no spectators for the US Open but will provide \$60 million in prize money for the two events in New York

combined plus another \$3.3 million each to the ATP and WTA. “We have the resources we can do this for a one-off year,” USTA chief executive officer Mike Dowse said. Novak Djokovic has been among several top players critical of the idea of staging the US Open as scheduled given the severe US impact of COVID-19, although cases in the New York area have been declining for several weeks.

‘The right decision’

“It’s the right decision for tennis,” Dowse said. “Our fans told us unequivocally they’re excited to see the best players in the world.” Williams will be chasing her 24th Grand Slam singles title to match Margaret Court’s all-time record. “I’m confident a lot of athletes want to return to play,” said US Open tournament director Stacey Allaster. “It’s going to be great, exciting tennis for our fans around the world.” Players will be tested for COVID-19 when they arrive at the tournament hotel, which opens August 15, and at least once a week thereafter, with those electing to stay at private homes being tested more often as they enter the Open grounds, which are available August 16.

“We’re confident we can pull this off,” said Dr. Brian Hainline, USTA Medical Advisory Group chairman. “We know how we can start doing things in a manner that doesn’t necessarily prevent one person from getting the disease but we can prevent a major outbreak of COVID-19.” The USTA board of directors never discussed having players sign a waiver to participate, Hainline saying the possibility of contracting the virus inside the bubble was “highly unlikely” but anyone in contact with a person who tests positive was looking at “very likely an every other day event” for testing. — AFP

Going viral: sport’s winners and losers from COVID-19

HONG KONG: It’s March and as the coronavirus halts global sport, the media team at Juventus, the Italian football champions, are scrambling to react. After close discussions between Turin and their satellite office in Hong Kong, a plan emerges: tailored social media campaigns, targeting different countries, to keep locked-down fans engaged even when there are no live games.

The result was a record rise in followers, including a marked uptick in China - a triumph for the club in trying times, and a lesson for others who may have neglected their digital profile. “We think that we are on the right track,” Federico Palomba, Juventus’s managing director for Asia-Pacific, told AFP at their office in Hong Kong. “All the effort and the investment that we did now are paying off, because we can cope with this situation.” As professional sport, including Italian football, tentatively returns, the shutdown has revealed winners and losers in the digital sphere, and laid bare the importance of a strong online presence.

In a world where sponsors and broadcasters demand evidence of a large, engaged fanbase, and where sport is competing with myriad entertainment options, winning on the pitch is no longer enough, experts say. Melissa Johnson Morgan, associate professor at the University of Southern Queensland’s School of Management

and Enterprise, said the traditional model of relying on revenues from ticket sales, broadcasters and sponsors is outdated. “Sports that have also got direct-to-consumer models... already selling and packaging content and extra commentary and out-takes, and offering that and subscription-based services, I think they’ve done well (in the pandemic) because they’ve already diversified,” she said.

‘Savvy about their audiences’

Top of the class is the NBA, which mobilised a flood of game footage, talk shows and Q&A sessions with players, and capitalized on Netflix’s release of Michael Jordan’s “The Last Dance” series - a big hit with live sports-starved fans. Formula One had drivers compete in virtual races, tennis players and cricketers popped up in a variety of online conversations, while golfer Adam Scott’s “Nine holes with a mate” was a hit on Instagram. “I think the NBA probably does it the best and that’s why they’ve coped, because they don’t rely on that one model - they’re not relying on ticket sales,” Johnson Morgan said.

“They’re very savvy about their audiences around the world so they’re generating content in many, many languages.” Other sports fared less well. Johnson Morgan said Australia’s favorite competitions were among those that failed to engage fans, perhaps because administrators were preoccupied with restarting play. The coronavirus could force sports to look at more sophisticated ways to attract fans, after lockdown accelerated the trend towards 24-hour, on-demand entertainment. “I think they’ll have to be more immersive. Consumers have realised that they can entertain themselves without leaving their house,” she said. — AFP

Sports

Felix double sends Atletico Madrid to La Liga top four

Atletico thrash Osasuna 5-0

PAMPLONA: Portugal youngster Joao Felix scored twice as Atletico Madrid moved into the Champions League places with a 5-0 La Liga thrashing of Osasuna on Wednesday. Felix, 20, was making his first appearance since the Spanish top-flight returned from its coronavirus hiatus having been suspended for the weekend's draw at Athletic Bilbao and had been suffering from an ankle sprain since May. "I felt good, coming back from injury after three months without playing and scoring two goals is very good for me," Felix told broadcaster Movistar.

The northerners remain in 11th after the defeat with an outside chance of making the Europa League but are also 10 points away from the relegation zone. The hosts' coach Jagoba Arrasate was without captain Oier and Adrian Lopez who scored the equalizer at high-flying Real Sociedad, who can go back above Atletico on Thursday with a win at Alaves. The visitors' coach Diego Simeone made four changes from Sunday's match in Bilbao including handing Felix, who joined the side from Benfica for 126 million euros (\$141 million) last summer, a start alongside Diego Costa in attack.

Felix will return to the Portuguese capital in August as UEFA announced the Champions

League will be completed in Lisbon with a 'final eight' format after Atleti knocked holders Liverpool out of the competition in March. Left-back Renan Lodi had the best of the early chances as his whipped effort in the eighth minute was straight at goalkeeper Ruben Martinez. Costa's claims for a penalty were ignored despite the former Chelsea striker complaining he had been held back in attempting to reach Lodi's effort.

Felix opened the scoring 20 minutes later after Lodi found space again down the left flank. Lodi played the ball back to Saul Niguez in the box, his shot was deflected to Felix's path who smashed the ball to the top corner. The hosts' best chance of an equalizer came six minutes before the break but David Garcia's long-range shot could only hit the advertising boards. Felix doubled his account 10 minutes into the second half. Costa was fed the ball in the area and he squared it to Felix who side-footed home with ease for his eighth goal of the campaign in all competitions.

Felix was substituted on the 69-minute mark as Simeone sent on holding midfielder Thomas Partey, who has been linked with a move to Arsenal. Despite Felix leaving the field his side made sure of three points as Marcos Llorente, Alvaro



PAMPLONA: Atletico Madrid's Portuguese forward Joao Felix (center) challenges Osasuna's Spanish defender Aridane Hernandez (left) during the Spanish league football match CA Osasuna against Club Atletico de Madrid at El Sadar stadium in Pamplona on June 17, 2020. —AFP

Morata and Yannick Carrasco scored in the final 11 minutes. The away side's Slovenia goalkeeper Jan Oblak became the first non-Spaniard to

reach 100 La Liga clean sheets with his performance. Atleti host Real Valladolid on Saturday and Osasuna travel to Valencia on Sunday. —AFP

Guardiola embarrassed by 'treatment' of black people

MANCHESTER: Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said he is "embarrassed and ashamed" at the historic treatment of black people as the Premier League's return was marked by protests against racial injustice on Wednesday. Players and coaches from all four sides in action took a knee prior to kick off to show their support for the Black Lives Matter campaign. The action came in response to worldwide protests after the killing of African American George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis. Black Lives Matter was also emblazoned on the back of shirts instead of player names. "We should send a thousand million messages for the black people. It's more than 400 years we do what we do to these lovely people," Guardiola told Sky Sports.

"I'm embarrassed and ashamed of what the white people have done for the black people. "Just because you are born a different color, how people can think they are different? All the gestures are good and positive. Everything we can do to make it conscious, it is not acceptable. "We have to do a lot of things for the black people which we have not done so far." Raheem Sterling has been a leading campaigner in the fight against racism in football and the City winger backed the united front as a significant step forward. "I see it as a massive step for the Premier League to allow something like that to happen," said Sterling. "It shows we are going in the right direction." Sterling scored his first goal of 2020 to open the scoring as City restarted with a 3-0 win over Arsenal. The England international admitted his side took some time to get to grips with their new surroundings in front of an empty Etihad stadium and said he struggled to hold back from celebrating his goal too wildly with teammates. — AFP

Champions League to be completed with 'final eight' in August

PARIS: The 2019-2020 Champions League, suspended since March because of the coronavirus pandemic, will be completed in a 'final eight' format in Lisbon in August, UEFA said on Wednesday. Europe's top club competition will be decided by a series of one-off matches from the quarter-final stage beginning in the Portuguese capital on August 12, with the final on August 23, European football's governing body confirmed following a meeting of its executive committee. Similarly, the Europa League will be completed with a 'final eight' across four German cities, with the final in Cologne on August 21.

The closing stages of the women's Champions League will also go ahead in an eight-team straight knock-out tournament in Bilbao and San Sebastian, in Spain, from August 21 to 30. "Football is leading the return to a more normal life here in Europe," said UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin, but in all cases it remains to be seen if any supporters will be allowed to attend matches. Games around Europe are currently being played behind closed doors amid strict health guidelines, and Ceferin said no decision would be made on whether to let spectators in "until mid-July".

"If I would answer today then we don't think we could have spectators at the Europa League and Champions League quarter-finals, semi-finals and finals but things are changing rapidly," he said. "A month ago I couldn't even answer if we could play the competition. Now we will play it, hopefully." With the European death toll from the coronavirus easing and numerous EU countries this week opening their borders again to visitors, there is some hope that matches can be played before crowds. Ceferin added: "We don't know if (it would be) only the local fans, if no fans, or even if fans from different clubs could travel."

Istanbul awarded 2021 final

The men's Champions League final was initially due to be

played in Istanbul in May before the COVID-19 crisis took hold. The Turkish city will now host the 2021 final instead, with Saint-Petersburg, Munich and London hosting the following three years. UEFA said all matches would be split between Benfica's 65,000-capacity Estadio da Luz, and the nearby 50,000-seat Estadio Jose Alvalade, home of Sporting. Portugal's credentials to host the mini-tournament were boosted by the fact that it has not been as badly hit by the pandemic as other western European countries, and it has no clubs left in the competition. The Portuguese league recently resumed matches behind closed doors. "UEFA has shown the confidence it has in the Portuguese people," said Fernando Gomes, head of the country's football federation.

'No Plan B'

There are still restrictions in place in wider Portuguese society, as the country eases its lockdown, but UEFA is confident there will be no need for another change of plan between now and August. "For now things look well, and we hope everything will be fine until we organise the final eight. There is no reason to have a Plan B but we are assessing the situation, not week by week but day by day, and we will adapt when the time comes, if necessary," said Ceferin.

The draw for the Champions League quarter-finals will take place on July 10. There are still four last 16, second legs to be completed, and it is possible those games could also be moved to Portugal. Atletico Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain, RB Leipzig and Atalanta all qualified for the quarter-finals before the competition was suspended. The remaining last 16, second legs are: Juventus v Lyon; Manchester City v Real Madrid; Bayern Munich v Chelsea and Barcelona v Napoli. If needed, the games will be played in the Portuguese cities of Porto and Guimaraes.

As well as Cologne, the nearby German cities of Duisburg, Duesseldorf and Gelsenkirchen will be used for the Europa League final eight, starting on August 10. Before that there are a host of last-16 ties to complete. None of the second legs have been played, while the first legs between Inter Milan and Getafe, and Sevilla and Roma, were postponed too - those ties will now be played as a single leg at a venue to be confirmed. The Europa League final was supposed to be played in the Polish city of Gdansk, which will now host next year's final instead. — AFP

Sports

City make winning return after joining 'race protest'

Manchester City beat 10-man Arsenal 3-0

MANCHESTER: Manchester City secured the first win of the Premier League's restart with a 3-0 victory over 10-man Arsenal at an empty Etihad on Wednesday as the English top flight's return was marked by protests against racial injustice. Both sets of players came together before kick-off to take a knee, as had Aston Villa and Sheffield United players in the first match after a 100-day stoppage due to coronavirus. "I'm embarrassed and ashamed of what the white people have done for the black people," said City manager Pep Guardiola. "We have to do a lot of things for the black people which we have not done so far." City's victory closes the gap on Liverpool at the top to 22 points and means the Reds cannot secure the title when they face Everton in the Merseyside derby on Sunday.

Arteta's plan undone

A minute's silence before kick-off remembered those who had lost their lives to COVID-19, including Guardiola's mother. Black Lives Matter was also emblazoned on the back of shirts where the stars names are normally printed, as the players took a knee around the centre circle. There was little return to normality once the game did kick-off to the hollow ring of an empty stadium as a torrential downpour added to the difficult conditions for the players.

"We expected it to be weird," said City's Raheem Sterling. "The first 10 minutes it was getting used to the atmosphere and getting the cobwebs off." However, City soon found their groove just as Arsenal were disrupted by two early injuries. Gunners' boss Mikel Arteta had made a bold team selection on his return to the Etihad, where he spent three-and-a-half years as Guardiola's assistant. The Spaniard left Alexandre Lacazette and club record signing Nicolas Pepe alongside David Luiz on the bench, while Mesut Ozil did not even make the squad despite a temporary rule change to allow nine substitutes on the bench.

Guardiola had voiced his concerns for players' welfare over the lack of preparation time to get up to full fitness. But it was Arteta's plan that was undone inside 20 minutes as Granit Xhaka and Pablo Mari hobbled off with Luiz replacing the latter. "Everything went wrong from the first minute when Granit got injured," said Arteta, who was left in no doubt of the work he has ahead to close the gap between his new employers and his old. As City began to turn the screw, only Bernd Leno in the Arsenal goal kept the score down before half-time.

However, Sterling made the breakthrough when Luiz failed to cut out Kevin De Bruyne's cross and the England international rifled home his



MANCHESTER: Arsenal's Gabonese striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (right) takes a knee alongside Manchester City's Belgian midfielder Kevin De Bruyne (center) and Referee Anthony Taylor ahead of the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Arsenal at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on June 17, 2020. — AFP

first goal of 2020. Five minutes into the second-half, Arsenal's tough task became an impossible one as Luiz pulled down Riyad Mahrez inside the box and was shown a red card. "It was not the team's fault, it was my fault. The coach is amazing,

all the players did amazing, it was just my fault," said Luiz, whose contract is due to expire on June 30. "I should have taken a different decision in the last two months to try and decide my future as early as possible but I didn't." — AFP

Premier League restarts with goal-line howler as players take the knee

LONDON: The Premier League restart was engulfed in controversy on Wednesday when goal-line technology made an unprecedented blunder after players took the knee to protest against racism at both matches. The English top-flight was put on hold in March due to the coronavirus pandemic and all 92 remaining games are being crammed into a six-week period.

The first match, between Aston Villa and Sheffield United, finished goalless and Manchester City won the later game against 10-man Arsenal 3-0. The big talking point at Villa Park came late in the first half when Villa goalkeeper Orjan Nyland appeared to carry Oliver Norwood's free kick over the line. Referee Michael Oliver's watch failed to signal the goal and the game continued. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry," said Sheffield United manager Chris Wilder. "Already the jokes have started.... It's all going to come out but we're pretty disappointed and we've got to get on with it."

After the match, Hawk-Eye Innovations, which runs the technology, apologized "unreservedly" over the incident. "The seven cameras located in the stands around the goal area were significantly occluded by the goalkeeper, defender and goalpost," the company said in a statement. "This level of occlusion has never been seen before in over 9,000 matches that the Hawk-Eye Goal Line Technology system has been in operation" A point apiece from the goalless draw behind closed doors did not suit either side. Aston Villa were seeking a precious win to lift them out of the relegation zone while Sheffield United are chasing a European spot next season.

Racism protest

Before kick-off, in front of a huge global audience, players and staff protested racial injustice for about 10 seconds in solidarity with worldwide demonstrations following the death of American

George Floyd. "In the first Premier League fixture of Project Restart both clubs hope that the act of 'taking a knee' will send a strong message of unity," the clubs said in a joint statement. Manchester City and Arsenal players mirrored the protest before kick-off at the Etihad. All players will wear the words "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) on the back of their shirts where names are normally printed for the first 12 matches of the restart. "We should send one thousand million messages for black people," City manager Pep Guardiola said. "I'm embarrassed, I'm ashamed for what the white people have done for the black people."

"It can't be solved in a few days. We have to do a lot of things for the black people that we have not done so far." City's home win means Liverpool, on the brink of their first English top-flight title for 30 years, cannot seal the deal when they return to action this weekend. A first-half goal from Raheem Sterling and second-half goals from Kevin De Bruyne and Phil Foden gave second-placed City a comfortable win. Arsenal's David Luiz was sent off early in the second half. "It was important to get the first goal and after that with the penalty and the sending off it was a completely different situation," Guardiola said.

If Jurgen Klopp's team beat Everton on Sunday they will be champions of England for the 19th time if they overcome Crystal Palace at Anfield next week. While the race for the Premier League title is a foregone conclusion, the battle for Champions League places next season and to avoid the drop are far more closely contested. Matches are being preceded by a minute's silence in memory of the victims of coronavirus. Britain is the worst-hit country in Europe, with more than 42,000 deaths. Three of the four managers to lead their sides on Wednesday have been touched by the virus.

Aston Villa boss Dean Smith's father died, while Guardiola lost his mother. Guardiola's former assistant Mikel Arteta returned to the Etihad for the first time as Arsenal manager three months after his positive test for coronavirus hastened the season shutdown. With all games being played behind closed doors, players will have to get used to the eerie silence in the usually raucous stands. Piping crowd chants into stadiums, cardboard cut-outs of supporters and live video fan walls add color but the Premier League's chief executive Richard Masters admitted there would be something missing without crowds. — AFP

Football fans demand change to 'unfair and unsustainable' model

PARIS: Supporters must be consulted over their return to stadiums but also football's current model which is "flawed, unfair and unsustainable", a collective of 27 national fan organizations across Europe said Wednesday. The resumption of leagues behind closed doors following the coronavirus shutdown has demonstrated "fans are the lifeblood of the game", said Football Supporters Europe (FSE), a grass-roots network of fans across the continent. "It is therefore more important now than ever for supporters to be included in discussions that will determine the immediate and long-term future of the game."

Among the statement's signatories were major supporters' groups from England, France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, who all urged "multi-stakeholder dialogue" on the game's long-term future. "The coronavirus crisis has yet again shown that the current model of football is flawed, unfair, and unsustainable," it read. "Football needs to change dramatically. Any reform process must include fan representatives, on local, national, and European level. "Fans must be engaged and involved in decisions that relate to the wider future of the game, including the necessary overhaul of governance structures and financial regulations." The statement also called for the safe return of spectators to be "accompanied by a meaningful consultation with fans' representatives at every level of the game on health safety protocols." Broadcasters have attempted to compensate for the absence of supporters by adding crowd sounds and chants to hide the drab atmosphere, efforts described by FSE as a "rebuke to match-going fans". — AFP



ROME: Napoli's Italian forward Lorenzo Insigne (center holding trophy), Napoli's Italian head coach Gennaro Gattuso (left) and players celebrate after winning the TIM Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) final football match Napoli vs Juventus on June 17, 2020 at the Olympic stadium in Rome. — AFP

Napoli grab the 6th Italian Cup

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