

Friday Times

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Shots fired at Saudi Embassy in Netherlands; no one hurt

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Local

Child faces separation from 'adoptive' mom

By Ben Garcia

A 10-year-old boy, abandoned by his Bangladeshi father and Filipino mother and raised by another expatriate couple in Kuwait, now faces separation from the only parents he's ever known due to a lack of official documents. Rasoul Haidar's story is a sad, complicated tale of abandonment, illegal residency and uncertainty complicated by the global pandemic.

Haidar was born in Kuwait in March 2010, according to Theresa, the woman who has raised him. Haidar's birth parents both lived and worked in Kuwait. It's unclear if his parents were legal residents at the time and if his birth was registered. According to Theresa, the father was an illegal resident and was deported when Haidar was eight months old.

Haidar's mother, a coworker of Theresa, asked her to watch the boy so she could travel home to the Philippines for a holiday. The boy's biological mother never returned from the 'holiday' and Theresa has looked after the boy ever since. He has become part of her family and she considers him as her son.

But legally, he has no identity, no papers, no birth certificate, no way to be in Kuwait and more importantly, no way to go home with Theresa to the Philippines. This presented only a few problems during Haidar's first years. He is homeschooled by Theresa's daughter and the family live a simple, quiet life.

But now Theresa faces a major difficulty in keeping her family together. Her husband died during the pandemic and she turned 60 this year. She's currently working part-time as a gift wrapper but does not have a full time job, and now her visa has expired. Theresa has lived and worked in Kuwait for 33 years but is ready to return home. She is doubtful that she will be able to renew her residency, since Kuwait announced recently that all those aged 60+ without a bachelor's degree cannot renew work visas after Jan 2021.

"Because of the new law, I want to leave Kuwait, but the problem is my adopted son. My husband's last wish was for me to bring home our adopted son to the Philippines. We have two more children in the Philippines, my eldest, who is now married, and my youngest daughter. I have here with me my other daughter who is working, in addition to our adopted son, whom we treat as part of the family," Theresa said. "If my visa will not be renewed or transferred to a new sponsor this year, I will be illegal in Kuwait while waiting for the resolution of my adopted son's case," she noted.

Theresa has appealed to the Philippines Embassy for help with Haidar's case. She claims his mother gave her the boy's birth certificate and a paper granting her custody prior to leaving Kuwait. However, she's unable to produce these papers and has not been able to locate either the father in Bangladesh or the birth mother in the Philippines.

Without papers, Haidar has been raised illegally in Kuwait. He cannot attend school, cannot visit a doctor or emergency room and cannot leave the country. "He is now 10 years old, and from the time we got him till now, we've been educating him, so he knows how to read and write and identify almost everything. Thanks to social media and devices," Theresa said.

Embassy responds

Kuwait Times inquired at the Philippines Embassy about any possible solutions for Theresa and Haidar. "If the mother of the child is a Filipina and the father is Bangladeshi and both parents are no longer to be found and the adoptive parents don't know their whereabouts, the law says the child cannot be taken to the Philippines regardless of who raised him," a Filipino official told Kuwait Times.

"According to the Geneva Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1961 UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and 1930 Hague Convention on Certain Questions Relating to the Conflict of Nationality Laws - the custody and citizenship of a foundling child must be placed at the country of birth or the country where he/she was born. The country where he/she was born must give him/her nationality that is based on international law," he said.

"And I want to explain here regardless of how many times it will come out in the newspaper; the laws of three countries - the Philippines, Bangladesh and Kuwait - must be



Theresa with her 'adopted' child Haidar

respected, plus the international law will prevail here, especially if the parents of the child are not cooperating," the official added. "The only solution is to look for the (biological) parents of the child. They must execute documents and affidavits on their willingness to waive custodial rights and allow the adoption of the child," he mentioned.

KRCS distributes 300 food baskets to families in Kuwait



Food packages are distributed to needy families in Kuwait. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) announced yesterday the distribution of 300 food baskets containing various basic staples as part of a plan to support 5,000 needy families. The process of dis-

tributing food baskets comes within KRCS' role in helping families in need and relieving their hardship during the pandemic, in order to support all government efforts exerted at the present time, head of KRCS' local aid

department Mariam Al-Adsani said.

She added that the food basket includes rice, sugar, dates, cooking oil, chicken and canned food enough for one month. Adsani expressed gratitude

towards companies, institutions, philanthropists, citizens and residents, who took the initiative to donate to needy families through KRCS. She urged them to continue their donations. — KUNA

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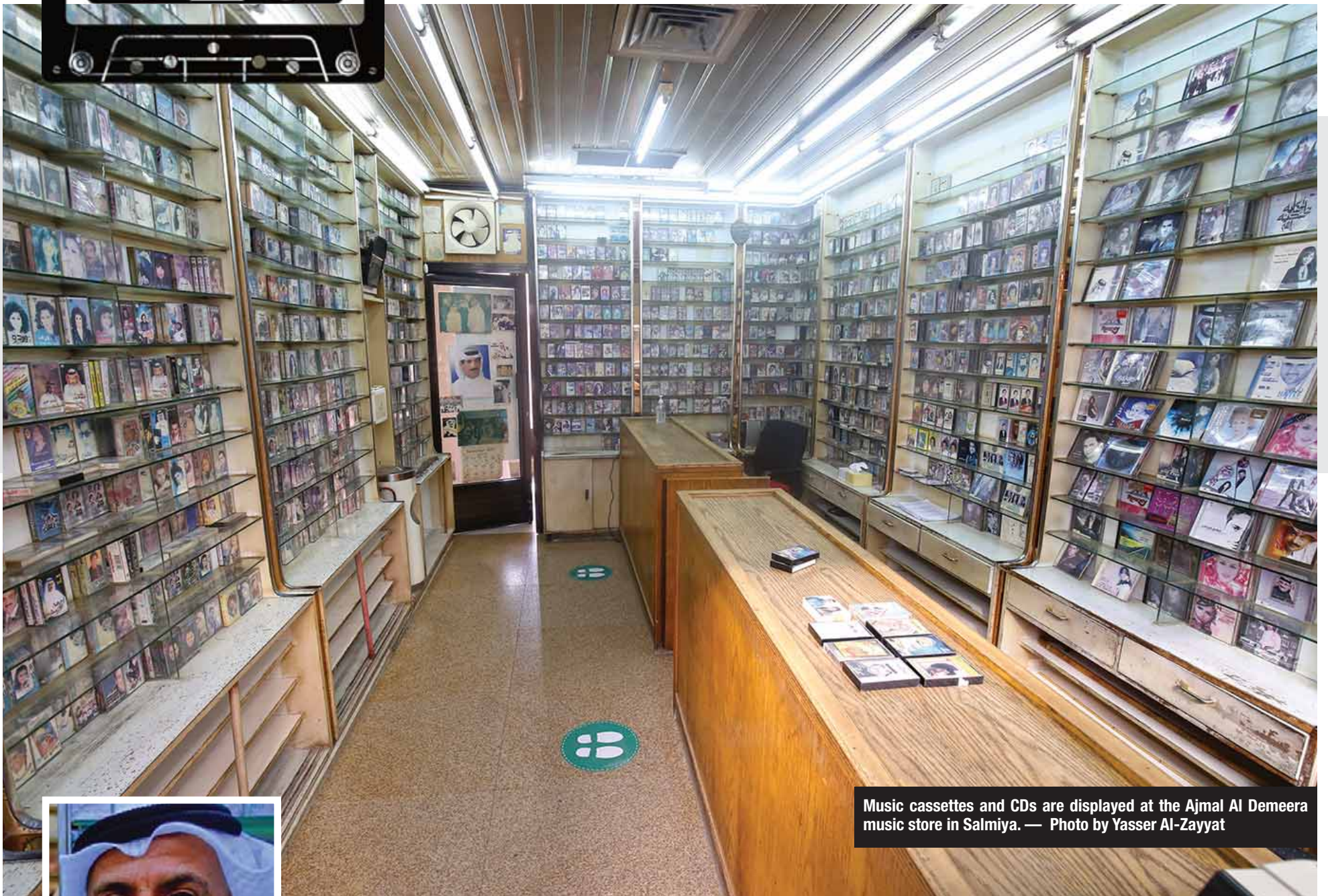
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Streaming killed the **CASSETTE STAR**



Music cassettes and CDs are displayed at the Ajmal Al Demeera music store in Salmiya. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Abu Ahmad, owner
of Ajmal Al Demeera

By Nawara Fattahova

Modern technology has killed numerous industries, and music recording is one of them. All the stores that I know from my childhood have disappeared, as they don't have any customers anymore. It is hard to find a shop selling cassettes and CDs these days, and many people believe such shops do not even exist anymore. When I asked my friends whether they knew about any music or video recording shops, they made fun of me, questioning who would buy these things in this digital era.

Local

Friday, November 13, 2020



From the seven cassette shops I knew, I only found one shop that has survived - Ajmal Al Demeera. Entering the small shop located in Salmiya next to Barayeh Salem brought back nostalgic memories from childhood - the times when we bought music albums or recorded special collections, as there was no Internet.

Ajmal Al Demeera opened 45 years ago. "This shop was the main sales point for many singers' albums in the past who

became popular. Since the beginning, our shop was well-known for selling folk music from private parties and recording birthday parties, weddings and other private concerts. It was and is still functioning as an archive for many old songs, including Kuwaiti folk music," Abu Ahmad, the owner of Ajmal Al Demeera, told Kuwait Times.

I wanted to know how this shop was still surviving. Are there customers who still buy cassettes or CDs? "Yes - those who have

this shop? "Manufacturing companies can only make a minimum of 10,000 copies of a cassette, and this is impossible to sell nowadays. So companies stopped recording cassettes and even CDs. Now when I have the last copy of a certain album, I don't sell it," said Abu Ahmad.

Ajmal Al Demeera can transfer songs and videos from cassettes to a memory stick to preserve rare or artistic works. "Kuwaitis who travelled to Europe for extended vacations drove long distances there. They used to have an entire suitcase full of cassettes to listen to Kuwaiti songs, but now it's much easier as they simply carry one or two flash drives," concluded Abu Ahmad.



older vehicles with cassette players. Also, those who have gramophones at home seek old records. Before the cassette there was something called a cartridge, and players may still be present in some classic vehicles. I'm in constant contact with these clients," stressed Abu Ahmad.

"We have special musical parties recorded exclusively for us, which are not available online. We have some old rare songs that are not available on the Internet, and many people like them. Kuwait was always known for these special folk parties and even the most popular Egyptian singer - the late Um Kulthoum - came to Kuwait and participated in one of these folk parties, and she was wearing a traditional Kuwaiti dress," Abu Ahmad said.

"CDs started replacing cassettes during the early 2000s, especially since the voice quality was better than cassettes. Automakers hastened this transformation by replacing cassette players with CD players that were smaller in size," he pointed out.

So are there companies that supply to



Local



KUWAITI ARTISTS PARTICIPATE IN JORDAN'S 'NO TO CRIME' ART EXPO

By Ben Garcia

Two Kuwaiti artists - a mother and daughter - participated in an international art exhibition organized by the Caesar Union for Literature and Arts and Jordan's Ministry of Culture. Najat Al-Reyahi and her daughter Anfal Bo Hamad were proud to be the only Kuwaiti artists participating in the "No to Crime" art exhibition virtually.

"We are very proud to be part of the art exhibition with a theme denouncing any form of crime," Najat said. "She demonstrated her willingness to participate when she heard about the exhibition," the mother told Kuwait Times, referring to her daughter Anfal, a popular artist with Down syndrome.

Participating countries included Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Bangladesh, Yemen, Turkey, Algeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. "Our participation is a demonstration of our desire to help end any form of crime wherever it occurs all over the world. Paintings can send

a strong message to people. It's a form of awareness, that no matter where you come from, we all want to coexist peacefully and lovingly, so we support such programs by any country and by all means," Najat said.

Protective mother

From January this year, Anfal has had limited public exposure, as Najat tries her best to protect her daughter from being exposed to the coronavirus. "The art exhibition was the latest of many virtual exhibitions we joined all over the world to keep us busy. Anfal is a Down syndrome patient and they are vulnerable to viruses, and I will never allow anything to happen to her," she said.

"When we go out, I take her along, but she stays in the car. I only allow her to walk in our neighborhood; otherwise we have stayed at home for almost a year now. I am a very protective mother. I also told my son and husband to stay home because if one person in the family is infected, we will all be in trouble. I want to protect my daughter because she has a condition that has very low immunity," Najat said.



Najat Al-Reyahi and her daughter Anfal Bo Hamad pose with their "No to Crime" artwork. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Najat remembered HH the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. "We would get a gift once in a while from Baba Sabah for Anfal. We also met him several times. When he died, we couldn't hide our emotions. Anfal and I cried, because as much as we wanted to attend his burial, we couldn't leave the house because of the pandemic. We haven't visited his grave yet, but are planning to do so in winter," she said.

Talented artists

Anfal, 23, is very talented in many ways. She is a photographer, dancer and stage performer. Her mother calls her a girl with extraordinary talents, and many people in Kuwait admire her for being very active, organized and jovial. "She laughs and smiles with everyone at home and those she knows.

She is cheerful but moody as well. What I like about her is that she follows my orders and never lets me down," Najat said. Najat was a fine arts teacher for several years, but retired early to concentrate on the needs of her daughter.

During the pandemic, the duo participated in several art exhibitions outside Kuwait virtually. "As her mother and mentor, we participated in several art expos. We participated twice in Saudi Arabia, thrice in Jordan, twice in Kuwait organized by a group related to persons with disabilities and once in Qatar. We are happy to be part of art exhibitions and are selling her paintings. People are buying too - in fact a hospital in Saudi Arabia wants one of her paintings. Also during the pandemic, she joined Quran recitation online and got a gift," Najat beamed.



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Local

Kuwait donates 15 ICUs to Yemen to face COVID

ADEN: The Kuwait Relief Society has donated 15 intensive care units (ICUs) to Yemen to help it confront the coronavirus pandemic. The medical aid will be distributed to eight quarantine centers in six Yemeni governorates, as part of the 'Kuwait Besides You' campaign that has been ongoing for six years. Ali Al-Walid, Yemeni Health Ministry Undersecretary, told KUNA Wednesday during a ceremony held in Yemen on this occasion.

The aid includes fully equipped ICUs with their supplies of oxygen, monitoring devices, beds, protection materials to medical teams and respirators, he said. Walid, on behalf of the Yemeni government and Yemenis, expressed gratitude to HH the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, government and people for their support to Yemen in all development sectors.

Meanwhile, Yemeni Minister of Local Administration Abdulraqueeb Fateh told KUNA that the continuation of Kuwait's generous backing to Yemen has shown that the new Kuwaiti leadership is continuing the humanitarian approach adopted by the late Amir and humanitarian leader Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. He noted that Kuwait's support will contribute to enhancing health capabilities, raising the efficiency of the health sector to confront any potential wave of coronavirus, and overcoming the shortage of supplies from which the sector suffered during the first wave of the pandemic.

Fateh pointed to several Kuwaiti projects to be carried out in Yemen in different sectors, mainly the health sector, during the next period. He, on behalf of the Yemeni government and people, voiced appreciation to His Highness the Amir of Kuwait and the Kuwaiti government and people for this continued humanitarian support to their Yemeni brothers. —KUNA



KRCS rebuilds homes damaged by Beirut blast

BEIRUT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) began a project to reconstruct over 150 houses destroyed by Beirut's Aug 4 explosion, funded by the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD) and Kuwaiti donors. The project is executed in cooperation with the Lebanese Red Cross to ease the suffering of those affected by the tragedy, head of KRCS' delegation to Lebanon Dr Musaad Al-Anezi told KUNA yesterday. KRCS is also aiding families and hospitals to face the explosion's impact by providing food, medicine and medical equipment, he added. Immediately after the explosion, Kuwait sent 18 airplanes carrying about 820 tons of humanitarian aid to Lebanon. —KUNA

Photo of the Day



Minarets of old mosques are seen in Kuwait City. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait: IAEA plays key role in peaceful use of nuclear energy

NEW YORK: Kuwait said the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) played a major role in the peaceful use of nuclear energy to achieve peace and prosperity, as well as enhancing global nuclear safety systems. Counsellor Tareq Al-Bannai, addressing a UN General Assembly's session regarding IAEA's report Wednesday evening, said the Vienna-based UN agency was emphasizing the "atom for peace" formula as well as highlighting the close link between science and technology on one side and international peace and security on the other.

As member of IAEA's board of governors, the fifth membership since joining the agency in 1964, said Bannai, Kuwait would always work towards honoring aspirations of member states to reach sustainable development and addressing international pressing issues. The world, he added, was facing an enemy that disregarded "history, geography, ethnicity or a climate, a cross-border enemy careless about a political, economic or social regime and is posing a universal and existential threat to mankind".

Bannai, who said the meeting was held amidst critical circumstances due to the coronavirus pandemic, welcomed a UNGA summit early next month to discuss ways of confronting COVID-19. He said IAEA's 2019 report was shedding light on cooperation between Kuwait and the UN agency including in the establishment of the low-enriched uranium bank, to which Kuwait con-

tributed \$10 million, as well as Kuwait's contribution to the upgrading of Yukiya Amano's laboratories.

He also cited a framework agreement between the IAEA and Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) for the period 2020-25. The agreement, he added, promoted cooperation on environment protection, assigning KISR's environment and life science center as a focal point with IAEA in the use of nuclear technologies.

Bannai, meanwhile, said the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) guaranteed rights of all countries to produce and develop nuclear energy for peaceful use, as well as elimination of nuclear weapons. "Our world is facing many challenges and tensions in this regard but dialogue and solving conflicts by peaceful means are the best tools to address them," he said. He called on North Korea to abide by international treaties and relevant UN Security Council resolutions to achieve stability in the Korean peninsula.

Bannai also called on Iran to fully cooperate with the IAEA and comply with UNSC resolution 2231. He said establishing a Middle East free of nuclear arms and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has always been objective of Kuwait and the Arab countries, because it would contribute to regional stability. He called on importance of Israel's joining the NPT and to place all facilities to IAEA's safeguard measures. —KUNA

Local

Cabinet briefed over coronavirus, elections

Health panel calls to punish violators of COVID measures

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The health committee headed by Health Minister Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah yesterday briefed the Cabinet's extraordinary meeting about the latest developments on the coronavirus pandemic, and reiterated the need to observe strict health measures. The committee stressed the need for observing social distancing of two meters in public places and a total ban on gatherings and social meetings.

The committee also insisted on the need for people to wear facemasks in a proper way and called for amending legislation to penalize those who violate the measures, especially by not wearing masks. The committee also called

for the need to identify all infected cases, isolate them and provide them with all necessary care. It called for tracking people who came in contact with infected persons and place them in quarantine.

The committee also briefed the Cabinet about the nature of coronavirus infections at local hospitals and the significant rise in the number of coronavirus cases around the world, where the number of cases rose by 8 percent last week and the number of deaths increased by 21 percent.

Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh, who heads the election committee, also briefed the Cabinet about preparations for the Dec 5 polls, insisting that polling will take place under strict health measures.



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah chairs a virtual Cabinet meeting yesterday. —KUNA

Kuwait FM meets British, US envoys

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister and Acting Information Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met at foreign ministry yesterday the British and US Ambassadors to Kuwait, Michael Davenport and Alina Romanowski, respectively. They discussed bilateral relations and means of further cementing cooperation in many "vital and important" sectors of mutual interest, a foreign ministry statement said. The meeting was attended by Assistant foreign minister for Europe Waleed Al-Khubaizi and Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for Minister's office Ahmad Al-Shuraim. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets British Ambassador Michael Davenport and US Ambassador Alina Romanowski yesterday. —KUNA

Court to hear first challenge against barring candidates

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: A court will begin Sunday reviewing the first challenge against the disqualification of candidates from running in next month's parliamentary polls, former MP and candidate Bader Al-Dahoum said yesterday. Dahoum's lawyer filed a petition yesterday challenging the decision of a special election commission set up by the interior ministry to review the credentials of candidates.

Dahoum, a former opposition Islamist lawmaker, said on Wednesday that he was informed by the interior ministry that he cannot run in the election without specifying any reason. Later, it was explained that he was barred after being condemned by the court for taking part in storming the National Assembly building in 2011 following a protest. The ministry action was blasted by a number of opposition lawmakers. MP Abdullah Fahhad, running in the fourth constituency, held the prime min-

ister and the interior minister responsible for "this oppressive and selective" action. He said the government should refrain from "political exclusion and interfering in the polls".

MP Khaled Al-Otaibi said it was illegal to bar candidates for political motives, while MP Adel Al-Damkhi accused the interior minister of excluding reformists. The interior ministry announced on Wednesday that it had disqualified 34 candidates over several reasons, mostly for receiving final court rulings over financial cases. The ministry said it will not publish the names of those barred, but at least half of the candidates confirmed on Twitter they were officially disqualified and vowed to challenge the decision in court. Those who confirmed include mostly new candidates like Talal Dashti, son of self-exiled former MP Abdulhameed Dashti, lawyer Hani Hussein, tribal activist Ayedh Bukhousah, and lawyer Salah Al-Hashem, brother of MP Safa Al-Hashem, who filed to contest from his sister's constituency. MP Saadoun Hammad and former MP Yusef Zalzal, who were reportedly disqualified, denied the reports on their Twitter accounts.

Meanwhile, the information ministry yesterday invited candidates to register to be allowed to explain their election programs on the state-run Kuwait TV free of charge. The ministry said broadcasting of election programs of candidates will begin on Nov 14 and will continue for about 10 days. Candidates have been extensively using online media and interviews with private television stations to reach out to voters after the government banned traditional election rallies and tents.

Kuwait reports 773 coronavirus cases, 4 deaths

KUWAIT: Kuwait recorded 773 new coronavirus cases and four deaths yesterday, according to the ministry of health. The new figures raised the total number of cases to 134,932 and deaths to 830, the ministry's official spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad told KUNA. He added 110 patients are in ICU, as the total number of patients receiving medical care reached 8,509. He said 7,272 swab tests were done in the past 24 hours, raising the total number of tests to 993,416. Earlier yesterday, the ministry announced the recovery of 688 people, raising the total number of recoveries to 125,593. —KUNA





7 dead as Typhoon batters Philippines

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Yerevan reels from defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh

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THE HAGUE: This picture shows the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in The Hague after it was shot at yesterday. Several shots were fired at the Saudi embassy in the Dutch city of The Hague but no one was hurt. —AFP

Shots fired at Saudi embassy

Saudi king urges 'firm stance' against Iran

THE HAGUE: Several shots were fired at the Saudi embassy in the Dutch city of The Hague but no one was hurt, police said yesterday. "Just before 6am we received a message that a shot had been fired at a building in The Hague. There were no injuries," police said on Twitter. A number of bullet casings were found at the scene after the incident, the Dutch news agency ANP quoted police as saying.

Local media said there were 20 bullet holes in the building and showed pictures of some holes in windows. There was no confirmation of the number of shots by police. Officers have sealed off the scene and forensic teams are conducting an investigation, police said. The motive for the shooting was not known. The incident comes a day after a bomb blast struck a World War I commemoration attended by French and other diplomats in the Saudi city of Jeddah Wednesday, wounding at least two people.

'Firm stance' against Iran

In another development, Saudi Arabia's King Salman urged world powers yesterday to take a "firm stance" against its arch-rival Iran, as expectations mount that US President-elect Joe Biden will seek to revive a 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran. Riyadh appears wary of Biden's pledge to revisit the nuclear pact between major powers and Iran, a landmark deal that was negotiated when he served as vice president under Barack Obama.

The king's remarks come a day after the UN nuclear watchdog,

the IAEA, warned that Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium has risen to more than 12 times the limit permitted under the 2015 deal since President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from it. "The kingdom calls on the international community to take a firm stance towards the Iranian regime," the king said in his annual address to the Shura Council, the top government advisory body.

"This firm stance must guarantee that the Iranian regime is prevented from obtaining weapons of mass destruction, the development of its ballistic missile program and threatening peace and security," he added in a speech delivered in the early hours. The king did not directly address Biden in his speech. Trump quit the deal in 2018, launching a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran—including crippling unilateral sanctions—that was welcomed by the kingdom.

Sunni powerhouse Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran are locked in a decades-old tussle for supremacy in the Middle East, and are on opposing sides in regional conflicts from Syria to Yemen. The International Atomic Energy Agency warned on Wednesday that Iran's explanations over the presence of nuclear material at an undeclared site in the country were "not credible." While the IAEA has not identified the site in question, diplomatic sources have indicated to AFP that it is in the Turqubad district of Tehran, previously identified by Israel as an alleged site of secret nuclear activity.

Threat of arms race

Observers warn that Iran's actions could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. The kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, declared in 2018 that if Iran develops a nuclear bomb, "we would follow suit as soon as possible". US intelligence agencies are examining efforts by Saudi Arabia, which has vast uranium ore reserves, to build up its capacity to produce nuclear fuel that could help the kingdom develop a bomb, the New York Times reported in August.

In his speech, the king also condemned Iran-linked rebels in neighboring Yemen for repeatedly firing on civilians in the kingdom with drones and ballistic missiles. Saudi Arabia leads a military coalition against the rebels in a five-year-old conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people and driven millions from their homes. The UN has described the conflict as the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

King Salman also reiterated his support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He did not address recent normalization deals between Israel and Saudi allies Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Sudan. Despite its clandestine links with Israel, Saudi Arabia has refused to officially recognize the Jewish state without a resolution to the Palestinian issue. The king's speech comes just days before the G20 summit, which will be hosted virtually by Riyadh on November 21 and 22. — Agencies

International

Hundreds of disillusioned Lebanese doctors leave; a blow to healthcare

Exodus undermines country's status as Mideast healthcare hub

BEIRUT: Fouad Boulos returned to Beirut in 2007 from the United States having trained there in pathology and laboratory medicine. He was so confident that Lebanon was the right place to be that he gave up his American residence green card. Fourteen years later he is leaving his homeland with his wife and five children and returning to the United States to try his luck starting from scratch.

In the past year, Lebanon has been through a popular uprising against its political leaders, the bankruptcy of the state and banking system, a COVID-19 pandemic and, in August, a huge explosion at the port that destroyed swaths of Beirut. Some of those who can leave the country have done so, and an increasing number of them are doctors and surgeons, many at the top of their profession. With them goes Beirut's proud reputation as the medical capital of the Middle East.

"This is a mass exodus," said Boulos, Associate Professor of Clinical Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the American University of Beirut (AUB). "It will keep on going," he told Reuters. "If I had hope I would have stayed but I have no hope - not in the near nor in the intermediate future - for Lebanon." As he spoke at his mountain residence in Beit Mery, a forested area with sweeping views over Beirut, his wife

helped pack up their last possessions, ready to return to the United States.

Suitcases lined the hallway, and one of his daughters was online saying final farewells to school friends and her teacher. "It breaks my heart. It was the hardest decision I ever had to make, leaving everything behind," Boulos added. Many highly qualified physicians, who were in demand across the United States and Europe before they returned to Lebanon after the 1975-90 civil war, are throwing in the towel, having lost hope in its future. They are not only seeing wages fall, but also face shortages of equipment, staff and even some basic supplies in their hospitals as Lebanon runs out of hard currency to pay for imports.

Bleeding talent

Sharaf Abou Sharaf, head of the doctors' syndicate, said the departure of 400 doctors so far this year creates a major problem, especially for university hospitals where they both practice and teach. "This bleeding of talent does not bode well, especially if the situation lasts long and there are others who are preparing to leave," he said. Caretaker Health Minister Hamad Hassan agreed. "Their expertise was built over many years and is very hard to lose overnight. We will need many years to return the medical sector to



BEIRUT: A man walks past a building damaged by port blast, that collapsed due to heavy rain in the Lebanese capital Beirut's Karantina neighborhood. — AFP

its former glory," he told Reuters.

Protests that erupted last year and brought down the government had raised hopes that politicians, selected by a system in which leaders of Christian and Muslim sects shared the top jobs, could be pushed aside. Then came the Aug 4 blast, when large amounts of poorly stored ammonium nitrate exploded, killing 200 people,

injuring 6,000, making 300,000 people homeless and destroying large parts of the capital Beirut including several hospitals. "The explosion was the final nail in the coffin," Boulos said. "It crystallized all the fears, all the pain and all the difficulties that we were living through," added the medic, who trained at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. — Reuters

Nowhere to go: Iraqis desperate as camps close

MOSUL: Iraq has started closing camps housing tens of thousands of people, including many who fled their homes during the final battle against Islamic State, but aid groups warn this could create a second wave of displacement with dire consequences. Among those having to leave are 50-year-old Umm Ahmed and her two sons, who have lived at the Hammam al-Alil camp since 2017 when their house in Mosul was destroyed in an air strike by the US-led coalition as it battled to retake the city from Islamic State.

"I don't have any income, no one provides for us. The camp became our home," said Umm Ahmed, who cannot take on manual work due to a disability. She says her sons both have mental health problems. Islamic State upended the lives of millions of Iraqis when they took swaths of the country in 2014 and imposed a brutal rule that in some places like Mosul would last three years. "Before ISIS, my son used to clean the streets and we would survive with whatever income he managed to get. But now, he is too ill to work," said Umm Ahmed.

Hammam Al-Alil, 25 kilometers south of Mosul, is one of several camps due to shut this

month. The operation had been scheduled for earlier this year but was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, according to Khalid Abdul Karim, who heads the displacement and migration office in Mosul. Each family would receive 1.5 million dinars (\$1,263.03) in aid during the first year and the authorities are coordinating with international aid organizations to ensure they receive assistance once they settle elsewhere, Abdul Karim said.

But aid organizations say it will be harder to reach the most vulnerable if spread across the country, and some could face violence and arrest on returning home if they have relatives who were affiliated with armed groups, including ISIS. Around 100,000 people are at risk of becoming homeless as the closures were not properly planned and coordinated, the Head of Support for Iraq at the humanitarian organization Norwegian Refugee Council, Ahmad Azzam, told Reuters.

Packed up her belongings, an Iraqi woman from the province of Baji says she has no relatives to take care of her and her children. Her husband died during the war and she has been living in the camp since. Her children, like thousands of others born under Islamic State rule, have no identification papers, without which they will struggle to access basic services, including education. "Whether they give us support money or not depends on their conscience," Umm Ahmed said as she watched her neighbors load their things onto a pickup truck and set off towards an uncertain future. — Reuters

Iran's response over undeclared site not credible: UN agency

VIENNA: The UN's nuclear watchdog said Wednesday that Iran's explanations over the presence of nuclear material at an undeclared site in the country were "not credible." The news comes as observers watch to see whether Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election will lead to detente between Iran and Western powers.

Despite Iranian authorities providing some information about the site, "the agency informed Iran that it continues to consider Iran's response to be not technically credible," the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in a report seen by AFP. "A full and prompt explanation from Iran regarding the presence of uranium particles of anthropogenic origin... at a location in Iran not declared to the agency is needed," the report said.

While the IAEA has not identified the site in question, diplomatic sources have indicated to AFP that it is in the Turqzabad district of Tehran, previously identified by Israel as an alleged site of secret atomic activity. A source familiar with the issue said there was no indication the site had been used for processing uranium but that it could have been used for storing it as late as the end of 2018. Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Kazem

Gharib Abadi, wrote on Twitter that "any hasty comments should be avoided". "Interactions are ongoing with a view to finalize the resolution of the matter," he added.

'Sabotage'

The report did not provide any new information about two separate locations where the IAEA took samples in September and where undeclared nuclear activity may have taken place in the early 2000s. The analysis of those samples is ongoing. It however confirmed that Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium is now more than 12 times the limit set down in a 2015 deal with world powers, even if the rate at which the stockpile is expanding has slowed since the last report. The 2015 accord has been progressively unraveling since US President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal in May 2018 and went on to re-introduce crippling economic sanctions on Iran. In retaliation, Iran has been breaking the limits on its nuclear activity laid down in the deal since May 2019.

As well as breaching limits on the stockpile amount and enrichment level of uranium laid down in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran has been using more advanced centrifuges than permitted under the deal. Wednesday's report confirmed that, in line with previous statements by Iranian officials, centrifuges had been installed at an underground part of the Natanz nuclear facility after another part of the site was damaged in an explosion in July which Iran blamed on "sabotage". — AFP

International

US election system is 'probably the most archaic', says Russia

Russia threatens retaliatory sanctions against France, Germany

MOSCOW: The US system of electing presidents is archaic and distorts the will of the people, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said. Joe Biden won the popular vote by more than five million ballots in the US last week but that translated to an extremely tight margin in the electoral college that ultimately decides the president.

Compared to other significant countries in the world, the US electoral system is "probably the most archaic", Lavrov said. During an online press conference yesterday he said the system "significantly distorts the will of the population". Incumbent Donald Trump has refused to concede, instead mounting a series of legal challenges over the results. Russian President Vladimir Putin—unlike many world leaders—has not congratulated Biden on the win because of the court disputes.

Putin by comparison sent a congratulatory note

to Trump in 2016 within an hour of his claim of victory. Lavrov on Wednesday explained that Russia could not congratulate Biden until official results were announced. "The State Department has also not yet recognized the presidential election," he said, noting that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called for patience until all of the ballots are counted. Putin has already won four presidential elections and recently changed the constitution to allow him to remain president until 2036. Biden will be the fourth US president since Putin came to power in 2000.

Russia vows to retaliate

In another development, Russia said yesterday it will soon introduce retaliatory sanctions on German and French officials over the poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny. The 44-

year-old anti-graft campaigner collapsed on a flight in Russia in August and was transported to Germany where experts concluded he was poisoned with the Soviet-designed nerve agent Novichok. The European Union slapped sanctions on several Russian officials in October saying the attack could not have been carried out without the complicity of Moscow's security services.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Thursday the Kremlin had confirmed sanctions in response and that they would soon be announced to Germany and France. "Since Germany was the driving force behind the European Union's sanctions connected to Navalny, since these sanctions directly concern senior staff of the presidential administration of the Russian Federation, our response sanctions will mirror them," Lavrov said. Navalny has said he believes Russian President

Vladimir Putin approved the poisoning, while the Kremlin has strenuously denied involvement and accused Germany of refusing to cooperate in an investigation.

Lavrov on Thursday added without providing evidence that Moscow had "reason to believe" the nerve agent could have entered Navalny's system during the flight to Berlin's Charite hospital or while he was in Germany. Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh called the suggestion that Navalny was poisoned in Germany "the most idiotic of them all". Doctors who treated Navalny before he was flown to Berlin said last week the opposition figure had not been poisoned but instead was suffering from metabolic issues and pancreatitis. Navalny remains in Germany for treatment but has vowed to return to Russia after making a full recovery. —Agencies

Armenia reels from defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh

YEREVAN: On Yerevan's emblematic Republic Square, a giant screen continuously broadcasting videos to the glory of Armenian soldiers fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh has been quickly, quietly removed. The announcement early Tuesday of a peace deal that cedes swathes of the disputed region to Azerbaijan has traumatized Armenians. Shock at the news has made way for a mix of incomprehension, despair, helplessness and rage.

"Armenians are broken, still standing but knocked out," says Jenny, a student who has been deeply affected by the loss of territory in Nagorno-Karabakh, a region of Azerbaijan seized by ethnic Armenian separatists in a 1990s war. "We lost. And what happened is much worse than a mere military defeat." "It's our history, our culture, our soul that we're losing. Not to mention the useless sacrifice of thousands of our men, killed or injured," adds Jenny, who says she would like "to wake up from this bad dream."

For Teni Vardanyan, an artist, "what happened is a terrible catastrophe and couldn't have been imagined even in our worst nightmares." Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has repeatedly justified a decision he describes as "unspeakably painful" by saying there was no choice, with even the army asking for the end of hostilities as Armenia faced a crushing defeat. But anger has spilled over onto the streets. In the early hours of Tuesday morning, several hundred protesters stormed the government building and parliament, calling Pashinyan a "traitor." And several thousand demonstrated in Yerevan on Wednesday. For the most part, though, most are just stunned. "We've all been hit in the heart," says Arman, a journalist, describing the initial disbelief felt by his loved ones, followed by despair. Every family in Yerevan has a brother, cousin or friend on the front line. The subject is at the heart of all conversations in a fiercely patriotic country with a tumultuous history that includes the mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Over the last few weeks, people had been receiving a constant drip-drip of alarming news on their phones, such as daily death tolls or videos of Azerbaijani drones that destroyed armoured vehicles and killed soldiers in the trenches. —AFP

Women, Islamists lose seats in Jordan election

AMMAN: Women and Islamists lost out in Jordan's parliamentary vote this week, according to results announced yesterday by the electoral commission. The election for the 130-seat parliament - 15 of which are reserved for women—was marked by low turnout and overshadowed by the novel coronavirus pandemic, which has dealt a heavy blow to the Arab country's already debt-ridden economy.

Only 29.9 percent of the around 4.5 million eligible voters cast ballots in Tuesday's election, choosing among 1,674 candidates, of which 360 were women. The last election in 2016 saw a turnout of 36 percent. Parliament has limited authority in Jordan, where the king has wide powers to rule by decree, but it has provided a platform for the opposition when it has not boycotted elections. Only the requisite 15 women were elected, down from 20 in the outgoing parliament, Independent Election Commission chairman Khaled al-Kalaldeh told a news conference in Amman.

A hundred newcomers will join the new parliament, including around 20 retired senior military officers, though the house remains dominated by businessmen and representatives of powerful tribes. Kalaldeh said the Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood and largest opposition faction, took eight seats, half the number it held in the previous parliament. But IAF secretary general Mourad al-Adayleh told AFP his party had in fact won 10 seats, including two on another list.

The IAF fielded candidates this year in some seats despite the banning of its parent organization in a Saudi-backed move earlier this year. In 2010 and 2013, it boycotted polls. The election went ahead despite a rise in novel coronavirus cases in the kingdom, but measures were imposed to combat

Armenia detains critics of Karabakh peace deal

YEREVAN: Armenia yesterday arrested 10 leading opposition figures for violently protesting against a Russian-brokered peace deal that ended weeks of fighting with Azerbaijan and sparked fury with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Prosecutors announced the arrests hours ahead of a fresh demonstration called by the opposition against the



AMMAN: Jordanian municipal workers remove campaign posters a day after parliamentary elections in the capital Amman. —AFP

the virus' spread during polling, including mandatory mask-wearing and social distancing. A curfew was put in place after the poll aimed at reducing celebratory gatherings that could spread the virus.

But images on social media showed rallies were held in various parts of the country in honour of winning candidates. Supporters of losing candidates also flouted the curfew, according to social media posts, which showed people attempting to close off roads with burning tyres and rubbish bins. Security forces said some 10 people who took part were arrested. Resource-poor and dependent on foreign aid, Jordan has built up a public debt that exceeds 100 percent of gross domestic product. Unemployment stood at 23 percent in the first quarter, before the pandemic fully hit. —AFP

accord that sees Armenia give up swathes of disputed territory in Nagorno-Karabakh to their long-standing foe.

The 10 politicians face up to a decade behind bars for their role in "illegal violent mass disorder", prosecutors said in a statement, after protesters stormed and ransacked government buildings on Tuesday over Pashinyan's agreement to end the fighting. "We consider this to be an act of political persecution," said Lilit Galstyan from the opposition Dashnaksutyun party, which saw at least two of its members detained. "This government has no moral right to stay in power." —AFP

International

Ethiopia claims 'liberation' of west Tigray; humanitarian crisis looms

Ethiopian refugees flood into Sudan

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopia's military has defeated local forces in the west of Tigray state, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said yesterday, accusing his foes of atrocities during a week of fighting that threatens to destabilise the Horn of Africa. Air strikes and ground combat have killed hundreds, sent refugees flooding into Sudan, stirred Ethiopia's ethnic divisions and raised questions over the credentials of Abiy, Africa's youngest leader who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.



PM accuses local forces of atrocities

"The western region of Tigray has been liberated," tweeted Abiy, 44, who comes from the largest ethnic group the Oromo and once fought with the Tigrayans against neighboring Eritrea. "The army is now providing humanitarian assistance and services. It is also feeding the people," he added. With communications down, transport blocked and media barred, independent verification of the status of the conflict was impossible. There was no immediate response from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which rules the mountainous northern state of more than 5 million people.

Abiy accuses the TPLF of starting the conflict by attacking a federal military base and defying his authority, while the Tigrayans say his two-year rule has persecuted them. Abiy said some of his soldiers had been found dead in the town of Sheraro, shot with their legs and

arms tied behind their back. "This kind of cruelty is heartbreaking," he said. The prime minister did not say how many bodies were found or provide proof. Reuters could not verify his allegation and there was no immediate response from the TPLF, which has accused federal troops of being "merciless" in bombing Tigrayans.

More than 10,000 Ethiopian refugees have crossed into Sudan since fighting started and aid agencies say the situation in Tigray is becoming dire. Even before the conflict, 600,000 people there were reliant on food aid. The United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said aid agencies were unable to restock food, health and other emergency supplies due to lack of access. "Shortages of basic commodities are reportedly appearing, impacting the most vulnerable first and the most," it said.

Arrests and protests

The United Nations' refugee agency's representative in Ethiopia, Ann Encontre, told Reuters negotiations were underway with both sides for humanitarian corridors to be opened. A "major emergency" may be brewing with so many people escaping to Sudan, she warned. About two dozen vehicles of non-essential UN and other workers were pulling out of Tigray and returning to the capital Addis Ababa in convoy. Abiy has so far resisted calls by the United Nations, the African Union and others for a ceasefire and talks.

His army chief of staff Birhanu Jula was quoted by state-affiliated Fana broadcaster as saying that the federal troops' Northern Command had survived a five-day siege and was recapturing places including Dansha, Humera airport and Baeker. "I would like to thank these members of the army for being a model of our heroic defence force and their persistent battle, though deprived of food and water for four or five days," he said, accusing the TPLF of using people as a human shield.—Reuters



ADDIS ABABA: Men donate blood during a blood donation rally organized by the city administration of Addis Ababa yesterday. Hundreds of Ethiopians gathered in the capital yesterday to donate blood for troops fighting in the northern Tigray region. — AFP

22 wedding guests killed in Pakistan's rickshaw accident

PESHAWAR: Twenty-two wedding guests were killed when the rickshaw they were riding in fell into a canal in northwestern Pakistan, police said Wednesday at the end of a recovery mission. The three-

wheeler was overloaded with 29 people when the accident happened on Monday, near the city of Dera Ismail Khan. "We have recovered 22 bodies which include 16 women and six children", Muhammad Ramzan, a senior police official, told AFP.

The victims were from the same extended family, and at least seven of them were from the same household, he added. Seven people were rescued. Bilal Muhammad Faizi, a spokesman for the local rescue agency, confirmed the death toll and said the last bodies were retrieved on Wednesday. Rickshaws are a common mode of transport across Pakistan, and accidents occur frequently. Pakistan has one of the world's worst records for fatal traffic accidents, mostly blamed on poor roads, badly maintained vehicles and reckless driving. — AFP

Rwandan 'genocide financier' pleads not guilty at UN court

THE HAGUE: The alleged financier of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, Felicien Kabuga, pleaded not guilty on Wednesday as he made his first appearance at a UN court after a quarter of a century on the run. Once one of Rwanda's richest men, Kabuga allegedly helped set up hate media that urged ethnic Hutus to "kill the Tutsi cockroaches" and funded militia groups.

Now in his 80s, he was arrested in France in May and transferred to the court in The Hague in October to face charges of a key role in the killing of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The frail Kabuga sat in a wheelchair behind a glass screen in the courtroom, wearing a coronavirus mask. A court official helped him adjust his headphones. His defense lawyer Emmanuel Altit said Kabuga was "very tired" and "preferred not to speak", when asked by judge Iain Bonomy if the former businessman wanted to enter a plea.

"Given the situation, I would be grateful if you could consider this lack of response as a plea of not guilty on all the counts, under the rules and procedures," Altit told the court. Kabuga, who until his arrest near Paris was one of the world's most wanted men, had already denied the charges in his court appearances in France. The Rwandan faces seven counts including genocide, incitement to genocide, extermination and persecution. The UN court will later decide if he will be transferred to its branch in Tanzania for trial.

'Contributed to deaths'

The UN says 800,000 people were murdered in a 100-day rampage that began in April 1994 in Rwanda, in scenes of horror that shocked the world. An ally of Rwanda's then-ruling party, Kabuga allegedly helped create the Interahamwe Hutu militia group and the Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), whose broadcasts incited people to murder. The lengthy indictment, read out by a court official, said that "RTLM broadcasts contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of persons identified as Tutsi civilians."

The radio station also identified the hiding places of Tutsis where they were later killed, it said. Kabuga controlled and encouraged the station's content, failed to stop the broadcasts, and defended it when the minister of information criticized the broadcasts, the indictment said. He is also accused of helping to buy machetes that were distributed to genocidal groups, and ordering them to kill Tutsis. Kabuga spent years on the run using a succession of false passports, with investigators saying that he had been helped by a network of former Rwandan allies to evade justice. Following his arrest in a small apartment near Paris, his lawyers argued that Kabuga - who says he is aged 87 but according to the arrest warrant is 84 - should face trial in France for health reasons. But France's top court ruled he should be moved to UN custody on a warrant issued in 1997 by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). —AFP

International

ICU beds full as COVID surges in Indian capital

Weekend festival 'a worry'

NEW DELHI: After his 92-year-old grandmother started coughing and her blood oxygen levels plummeted, Varun Kaushik took her to two top private hospitals in New Delhi on Monday. Neither took her in, even after one of them found her positive for COVID-19. Kaushik said several other hospitals told him and his family on the phone that they did have free beds, but not in the intensive care units (ICU) his grandmother needed. He finally admitted her to a non-ICU COVID bed in a government hospital, 10 hours after leaving home.

Her condition was stable yesterday, according to Kaushik. The family's ordeal is a warning sign for a city where infections are surging even though they are dropping elsewhere in the country. Delhi's 20 million residents celebrate their biggest festival, Deepavali or Diwali, this weekend. Despite a ban, thousands of fireworks are likely to be set off, increasing already bad air pollution and raising the risk posed by COVID-19. The capital reported 8,593 new COVID-19 infections on Wednesday, its highest daily tally yet. The average pollution reading was 299 yesterday on a scale of 500, where any number above 300 is classified as very poor and can cause respiratory illnesses. ICU facilities in the city are in such short supply that some hospitals are squeezing more beds into existing wards ahead of the weekend. "We are firefighting because Diwali is looking like a super spreader event in front of us and the public just doesn't see the threat," said a senior health department

official in Delhi, declining to be named.

New Delhi's sprawling bazaars have been swarming with shoppers ahead of Diwali and the wedding season after the government relaxed regulations in a bid to breathe life into the lockdown-hit economy. Mask-wearing is common but social distancing is not, and infections may spike in coming days. The city was one of the first in the country to restart economic activity after the lockdown that started in March, letting restaurants, malls and other businesses restart to avoid spiraling joblessness.

More beds

India has so far reported around 8.6 million coronavirus infections - the world's second highest after the United States - and 127,571 deaths. But overall, it has been adding fewer cases daily since a mid-September peak, and its fatality figure of 92 per million people is well below the world's tally of 160 and the United States' 711. Still, the state-run Indian Council of Medical Research says the recent fall in cases nationally could be undone if there is a resurgence in infections around Diwali. Federal authorities have asked the local government in the capital to prepare resources to handle as many as 15,000 cases a day and test more aggressively. Over half of the city's 16,511 COVID hospital beds were occupied as of Wednesday, government data showed, with more than 24,000 other patients isolating at home. There is no separate data for ICU beds. Delhi's gov-



KOLKATA: Passengers queue to buy tickets before boarding trains at a suburban railway station in Kolkata, as the local train services resume in West Bengal state. —AFP

ernment said hundreds of more beds have been reserved for COVID-19 patients in nearly two dozen private and government hospitals. More than 100 ICU beds are also being added in government set-ups. "Most of the cases are coming from working class people, those aged between 20 and 50, those who are very active," Delhi Health Minister Satyendar Jain told Reuters partner ANI, indicating these

victims may not need critical care. He did not respond to e-mailed questions from Reuters. All ICU beds at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, one of the top private hospitals in the city, are now occupied, said Dhiren Gupta, a senior pulmonologist. In government-run Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, doctors have packed beds into ICU wards to the closest permissible limit. —Reuters

Spain COVID death toll passes 40,000

MADRID: Spain's coronavirus death toll surged to over 40,000 on Wednesday with infections passing the 1.4 million mark, while the rate of new cases continued to grow, health ministry data showed. With 349 people dying in the past 24 hours, the death toll now stands at 40,105 in Spain, which has the fourth-highest death rate within the European Union after the United Kingdom, France and Italy. Spain passed the grim landmark a day after logging 411 deaths, the highest daily death toll of the second wave.

Over the past 24 hours, health authorities also registered more than 19,000 new cases, bringing the overall number of people infected to 1,417,709, the second-highest figure within the EU after France. Pressure on hospitals is increasing with around a third - 31.78 percent - of all intensive care unit (ICU) beds taken up by Covid-19 patients. Despite the figures, top health official Fernando Simon said Tuesday there were signs of a "clear stabilization" in the 14-day incidence rate although it would take "several days" for that to be reflected in the death toll and bed-occupancy rates in ICUs. He said the figures had stabilized "at around 525 cases per 100,000 inhabitants". By Wednesday, that rate had fallen to 514 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, with Health Minister Salvador Illa cautiously welcoming the numbers. "The figures are starting to confirm a stabilization," he told a news conference. —AFP

As COVID-hit Brits escape, minorities face rural racism

LONDON: Being stared at, photographed in secret, and even having a bottle thrown at you - all because you went for a quiet walk through the British countryside. These are just some of Maxwell Ayamba's experiences while introducing Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people to rural beauty spots for the past 15 years, many of whom had never ventured beyond the cities they resided in. "During one of our walks, a lady walker secretly took our picture ... and when she was confronted she said, 'I have not seen so many Black people at one time in the countryside,'" said the 55-year-old Ghanaian researcher and journalist.

Months of coronavirus restrictions and Black Lives Matter protests, sparked by the death of George Floyd in the United States, have put renewed focus on racial injustice, from access to nature to health inequalities. Though the great outdoors has surged in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, green spaces, known to improve mental health, are not equally distributed or easily accessible by all, according to British walking charity Ramblers.

The richest 20% of areas in England have five times more green spaces compared to the poorest parts of the country, a recent Ramblers report found - with people of BAME background making up only 1% of visitors to national parks. "For the first time this year, a lot of people realized the countryside and nature are really important for our health and mental wellbeing," said Black history writer Louisa Parker, 48, who lives in rural southwest England. "I think that has also raised questions around who has access to the

countryside, who belongs there, who's accepted there," said Parker, who is also a British-Ghanaian diversity consultant. Government reports showed that Black and Asian people in England are up to 50% more likely to die after being infected by COVID-19 as they tend to live in poor, overcrowded households in cities and have jobs that put them at greater risk. With limited access to nature, BAME communities are left with fewer options to stay safe from the virus through social distancing. About 17% of the population - some 9.5 million people - lived in rural England in 2018, the latest official figures showed. BAME communities made up just 2% of that number, while the rest of the population was white.

Ayamba said his monthly walking group in northern England aimed to promote the wellbeing of older BAME people but also served as a "civil protest". "Black people have been excluded from nature and access to the countryside. To see Black faces in the British countryside feels out of place because the 'cities are where they belong'. We are walking to reclaim the land." The pandemic has also exposed a spatial divide in countries like South Africa, where satellite images showed that white neighborhoods had more green spaces than Black townships.

'White middle-class club'

A 2019 review by the government's environment department found that many Black and ethnic minority people viewed the countryside as an irrelevant white, middle-class "club". About 70% of white children spent time outside once a week compared to 56% of non-white children in 2018-19, the report said, citing figures from environmental group Natural England. "For many black and ethnic minority people, they are experiencing a lack of belonging, perhaps they're experiencing the 'white middle-class club' when they're visiting or living there," said Tom Fyans from countryside charity CPRE. "We've seen how important the countryside and green spaces are to your health and wellbeing. Everyone has a right to that," said Fyans, head of campaigns and policy. "It's not just for the privileged few who can afford to live in certain areas." —Reuters

International

Hospitals again under pressure; US COVID-19 cases on the rise

A record 65,368 people hospitalized

WASHINGTON: After several weeks of rapidly rising coronavirus cases, hospitals around the United States are once again overwhelmed, forcing local authorities to take new measures to cope with the pandemic. On Wednesday a record 65,368 people were in the hospital with Covid-19 across the country, marking the second day in a row and second time ever that the tally passed the 60,000 mark, according to the COVID Tracking Project. Around the country officials were scrambling to staunch the spread.

In New York state, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that any establishment with a liquor license, including bars and restaurants, would have to close at 10:00 pm beginning Friday. The rule will also apply to gyms. New York City was the early epicenter of the nation's coronavirus pandemic, but hotspots have since popped up across the country, leaving practically no geographical region unaffected. One such locale is the border city of El Paso in western Texas, a state where coronavirus cases have now exceeded one million.

More than 1,000 people are hospitalized in the county of El Paso alone, a substantial portion of the state's nearly 6,800 hospitalizations. "These are dark times," Ogechika Alozie, chief medical officer at the city's Del Sol Medical Center, told CNN Wednesday. "I think the biggest word is just fatigue. And there's frustration." Cases are so high that Texas Governor Greg Abbott has requested a military medical center be converted for intake of non-COVID patients in order to free up space in hospitals. County officials, meanwhile, have requested additional mobile morgues.

Deaths on the rise

The situation in El Paso is typical of the difficulties local governments are facing in the United States, where President Donald Trump has downplayed the epidemic and left handling of the health

crisis to state, county and city officials. In late October an El Paso County judge ordered non-essential businesses closed for two weeks, a measure fought by El Paso's mayor and the state attorney general. Trump has placed much of his hopes of fighting the coronavirus pandemic on rapid development of a vaccine. Positive Phase 3 trials of a vaccine developed by Pfizer mean inoculations are likely to begin by the end of the year or in early 2021.

But with no vaccine at present, the US is facing troubling circumstances. The number of deaths each day is still far from levels seen in the spring, however the US recorded more than 1,300 fatalities in 24 hours on Wednesday. The coronavirus death rate has "declined since the spring partly because hospitals and staff were so overstretched back then. As cases take off across the country, we will increasingly start seeing those limitations again," said emergency medicine specialist Craig Spencer on Twitter.

New restrictions

The US contamination curve has undergone three notable waves: a first in the spring with an epicenter in New York, a second in the summer that hit the US south particularly hard, and a third since mid-October with records being set in the Midwest. In North and South Dakota, more than one in 2,000 residents is currently hospitalized with COVID-19, according to the COVID Tracking Project. North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum this week authorized health workers who test positive to continue working in COVID units in order to cope with the "enormous pressure" on the state healthcare system.

In Minnesota, Governor Tim Walz ordered bars and restaurants to close at 10:00 pm and placed a 10-person limit on gatherings. Restrictions are popping up beyond the Midwest as well, such as



CHICAGO: A sign along the sidewalk in an area lined with bars and restaurants in the Wicker Park neighborhood encourages people to stay home in Chicago, Illinois. With the COVID-19 pandemic reaching record highs in the state, all indoor dining and drinking has been banned. — AFP

in Utah, where wearing a mask in public is now mandatory statewide. President-elect Joe Biden pleaded Monday once again for Americans to wear face coverings, telling viewers in a televised speech that "a mask is not a political statement, but it is a good way to start putting the country together." He has pledged to tackle the health crisis from day one of his administration, which begins January 20. — AFP

Warmer seas keep hurricanes stronger for longer: Study

TOKYO: Warmer seas caused by climate change are making hurricanes stronger for longer after landfall, increasing the destruction they can wreak on impact, a new study has found. Researchers warn the finding suggests inland communities—which may be less prepared than coastal regions to face hurricanes—are increasingly at risk.

The effects of climate change on tropical storms including hurricanes are still being studied, although the warming planet is already known to be making storms bigger and stronger. So academics at a Japanese university looked at data on North Atlantic hurricanes from 1967-2018 and examined their "rate of decay"—how long they took to weaken—in the first day after landfall. They sought to understand what impact warming seas might have on storms when they make landfall—typically when they begin to lose strength.

"We show that the decay timescale has almost doubled in the past 50 years—a huge increase," Pinaki Chakraborty, a professor at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate Uni-

versity who led the study said. That could mean destruction would "no longer be confined to coastal areas, causing higher levels of economic damage and costing more lives", he warned. The researchers looked to see whether the longer rate of decay correlated with sea temperatures, which vary year to year, though they are rising overall.

They found a clear link: when sea surface temperature was higher, storms stayed stronger on land for longer. But correlation does not equal causation, they said. So how to test the relationship? They turned to computer modeling, "building" four hurricanes that developed in identical conditions except for sea surface temperature. When each reached the equivalent strength of a Category 4 hurricane, they "switched off" the moisture supply to the model storms—simulating their transition from sea to land—and watched how each behaved.

"Although the intensity at landfall is the same for all four hurricanes... the intensities of the hurricanes that developed over warmer oceans decay at a slower rate," the study said. To test the proposition further, they modeled the four hurricanes under the same conditions—but this time when they made their simulated landfall, the researchers removed any stored moisture in the storm. These "dry hurricanes" lost intensity significantly faster, and notably all at the same rate, despite having developed over seawater of differing temperatures. Why might this be happening? The answer lies in moisture, which fuels the engine of a hurricane, the researchers said. — AFP

Amnesty, HRW slam migrant arrival chaos in Canary Isles

MADRID: Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have called for urgent change to overwhelmed migrant services in Spain's Canary Islands, where more than 2,000 people arrived at the weekend. Arguineguin port on Gran Canaria "is overwhelmed and reports say 'return orders' are being processed without any legal assistance," London-based Amnesty said in a statement. "Spanish authorities should immediately alleviate overcrowded and unsanitary conditions on the Arguineguin pier," HRW said in a separate statement.

Judith Sunderland, HRW's acting deputy director for Europe and Central Asia, said she had visited the port on November 7 - and that numbers had more than doubled since then. "What I saw.. was a row of crowded tents where people are held for days on end, sleeping on the ground, 30 or 40 people sharing a portable toilet," she said. "I cannot imagine the situation now with over double the peo-

ple.. these conditions do not respect people's dignity or basic rights, nor do they reflect well on Spain." A spokeswoman for the regional government said they were trying to relocate the migrants to better facilities although there were still around 1,800 people at the port.

On Saturday alone, more than 1,400 people arrived on the Spanish archipelago, the highest-ever number. That one-day figure even outpaced arrivals during the 2006 crisis when a total of 30,000 people reached the islands off the northwestern coast of Africa. Last week, Spain's Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska said the temporary encampment at Arguineguin port, which was initially set up to process arrivals and carry out virus tests, would be closed "in the coming weeks" and the migrants relocated to "military sites" in Las Palmas, the island's capital.

The announcement came as he visited the island with the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, who called for Spain to step up the repatriation of any migrants who do not qualify for refugee status. Local press reports cited by Amnesty and HRW said the authorities were reportedly processing deportations without offering legal assistance to the migrants—a move denied by the Spanish interior ministry. "This is a serious irregularity which must be ended immediately," said Amnesty's Spain director Esteban Beltran. — AFP

International

Joe Biden names chief of staff, presses ahead with transition

President Trump refuses to acknowledge defeat

WASHINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden pressed ahead with his transition Wednesday despite Donald Trump's refusal to acknowledge defeat, naming a seasoned Democratic operative as chief of staff in his first public White House personnel choice. Biden tapped longtime aide Ron Klain, who previously served as his first chief of staff while vice president, acknowledging the two had a long road ahead in fighting the coronavirus pandemic as well as healing a deeply divided nation.

"His deep, varied experience and capacity to work with people all across the political spectrum is precisely what I need in a White House chief of staff as we confront this moment of crisis and bring our country together again," Biden said. He made the announcement after visiting the Korean War Memorial in Philadelphia earlier in the day for a solemn wreath-laying ceremony to mark Veterans Day in the US. President Trump attended a separate, simultaneous ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery outside Washington, in what should have been a moment of national unity but instead highlighted the Republican's refusal to acknowledge election defeat.

The president made no public remarks during the somber wreath-laying ceremony, his first official appearance since the November 3 vote. Since media called the race four days ago Trump has not addressed the nation other than via Twitter and a written statement released to mark Veterans Day, and has not

conceded to Biden, as is traditional once a winner is projected in a US vote. With COVID-19 cases shattering records across the country and states imposing new restrictions in a push to contain the virus before winter arrives, Trump seems to have all but shelved normal presidential duties.

Instead, he has remained shut up inside the presidential mansion, claiming that he is about to win and filing lawsuits alleging voter fraud that so far have been backed up by only the flimsiest evidence. Early Wednesday he was tweeting fresh evidence-free claims of election wins and ballot tampering, despite the consensus from international observers, world leaders, local election officials and US media that the vote was free and fair.

Some Republicans were adding their voices to growing calls for the president to concede, with experts warning his refusal to do so was undermining the democratic process and holding up the transition to Biden, who takes office in January. Among them was the Republican secretary of state for Montana, Corey Stapleton, who heralded the "incredible things" Trump accomplished in office. "But that time is now over. Tip your hat, bite your lip, and congratulate @JoeBiden," he tweeted.

Some of the most powerful figures in the Republican party — among them Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Senate leader Mitch McConnell — have backed Trump in his bid to undermine Biden's victory, however. "There will be a smooth transition to a second Trump



WASHINGTON: In this file photo, former US Vice President Joseph Biden (right) joined by Ebola Response Coordinator Ron Klain (L), speaks at the Eisenhower Executive office building in Washington. President-elect Joe Biden's campaign has confirmed yesterday, Ronald Klain will be the White House chief of staff. — AFP

administration," Pompeo said in a sometimes testy news conference Tuesday, while McConnell has said the president was "100 percent within his rights" to challenge the election in court. — AFP

Biden reassures Asia allies on defense commitments

SYDNEY: US President-elect Joe Biden rang round allies in Seoul, Sydney and Tokyo yesterday, vowing to repair frayed partnerships and reaffirming mutual-defence pacts thrown in doubt by the current White House. A day after Biden's series of "America is back" calls with European leaders, the former vice president spoke to Australia's Scott Morrison, South Korea's Moon Jae-in and the recently installed Japanese leader Yoshihide Suga.

All three men had already congratulated Biden on his recent election victory over Donald Trump, despite the incumbent's refusal to concede. Biden's call with Suga included a stark warning from the Japanese prime minister that the "security situation is increasingly severe" around the region, according to an account of the call from Japanese officials. Suga's unusually frank analysis was met with Biden expressing his "deep commitment to the defense of Japan" and to decades-old treaty obligations, according to his transition team.

During the four-year Trump administration, America's regional allies often questioned whether the mercurial president would uphold long-standing promises to defend them in the event of a military conflagration. In a move likely to cause protest in Beijing, Biden reportedly confirmed this defence commitment extended to the Senkakus, an uninhabited island chain claimed by both Japan and China which has been a potential flashpoint for decades.

In a separate 14-minute call with Moon, Biden was said to have described the US-South Korea alliance as "the linchpin of security and prosperity" in the region, and vowed to work together on "shared challenges" such as North Korea and climate change. Trump had publicly mulled withdrawing troops from Japan and South Korea, where more than 20,000 US military personnel are currently stationed to deter any North Korean military action. — AFP

Facebook, swamped with misinformation, extends advert ban

CALIFORNIA: Facebook Inc on Wednesday said its post-election ban on political ads would likely last another month, raising concerns from campaigns and groups eager to reach voters for key Georgia races in January that will decide control of the Senate. The ban, one of Facebook's measures to combat misinformation and other abuses on its site, was supposed to last about a week but could be extended. Alphabet Inc's Google also appeared to be sticking with its post-election political ad ban.

"While multiple sources have projected a presidential winner, we still believe it's important to help prevent confusion or abuse on our platform," Facebook told advertisers in an email seen by Reuters. It said to expect the pause to last another month though there "may be an opportunity to resume these ads sooner." Facebook later confirmed the extension in a blog post. Baseless claims about the election reverberated around social media this week as President Donald Trump challenged the validity of the outcome, even as state officials reported no significant irregularities and legal experts cautioned he had little chance to overturn Democratic President-elect Joe Biden's victory.

In one Facebook group created on Sunday, which rapidly grew to nearly 400,000 members by Wednesday, members calling for a nationwide recount swapped unfounded accusations about alleged election fraud and state vote counts every few seconds. "The reality is right now that we are not through the danger zone," said Vanita Gupta, chief executive of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

Google declined to answer questions about the length of its ad pause, although one advertiser said the company had

floated the possibility of extending it through or after December. A Google spokeswoman previously said the company would lift its ban based on factors such as the time needed for votes to be counted and whether there was civil unrest. The extensions mean the top two digital advertising behemoths, which together control more than half the market, are not accepting election ads ahead of two hotly contested US Senate runoff races in Georgia, including ads aimed at increasing voter turnout.

Democratic and Republican digital strategists railed against those decisions, saying the bans were overly broad and failed to combat a much bigger problem on the platforms: the organic spread of viral lies in unpaid posts. The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, along with the Senate campaigns of Georgia Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, called for an exemption for the Georgia races so they could make voters aware of upcoming deadlines.

"It is driving us absolutely bonkers," said Mark Jablonowski, managing partner of DSPolitical, a digital firm that works with Democratic causes. Eric Wilson, a Republican digital strategist, said he thought the companies' concerns about ads on the election outcome did not require a blanket ban. "This is something that deserves a scalpel and they're using a rusty ax," he said. Facebook Director of Product Management Rob Leathern acknowledged the frustration in a series of tweets, but said the world's biggest social network lacked "the technical ability in the short term to enable political ads by state or by advertiser."

Viral lies

The companies declined to say when they would lift other "break-glass" election measures introduced for unpaid posts, like Facebook's demotions of content that its systems predict may be misinformation. Facebook spokesman Andy Stone said those emergency measures would not be permanent, but that rollback was "not imminent." Google's YouTube, which is labeling all election-related videos with information about the outcome, said it would stick with that approach "as long as it's necessary." — Reuters

Hong Kong MP resignations a 'blatant challenge' to authority

15 legislators set to quit the chamber in protest

HONG KONG: China warned yesterday the mass resignations of pro-democracy lawmakers in Hong Kong were a "blatant challenge" to its authority over the city. Fifteen legislators were set to quit the chamber in protest at the Beijing-sanctioned ousting of four colleagues, leaving the assembly a muted gathering of government loyalists. The resignations come with the city's beleaguered pro-democracy movement and avenues of dissent already under sustained attack since Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law this year.

Half of the group had made good on their pledge yesterday afternoon, which sparked a furious response from Beijing's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office. "It once again showed their stubborn confrontation against the central government and a blatant challenge to the power of the central government. We severely condemn this," a statement said. "We have to tell these opposition lawmakers, that if they want to use this to advocate a radical fight, and beg for foreign forces to interfere, and once again drag Hong Kong into chaos, that's a wrong calculation."

Inside the chamber, government loyalists discussed a transport bill, but without any of the rambunctious debate that has been the mark of

Hong Kong's semi-democracy in recent years. "Hong Kongers - prepare for a long, long time where there is only one voice in society," pro-democracy lawmaker Lam Cheuk-ting told reporters outside. "If you are a dissident, get ready for even more pressure."

Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, a Beijing appointee, on Wednesday was granted the power to turf out any legislator who she deems insufficiently patriotic, without recourse to the city's courts. She immediately made use of those powers, kicking out four lawmakers she said were a threat to national security, and sparking criticism both at home and abroad, with the United States threatening further sanctions on regime figures.

Chris Patten, the city's last colonial governor, said the move demonstrated Beijing's "total hostility to democratic accountability, and those who wish to stand up for it". China's foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin rejected the international criticism. "We urge the relevant people to strictly abide by the basic norms of international law and international relations, stop any form of interference into China's internal affairs, of which Hong Kong affairs are a part," he said.

The exodus of opposition lawmakers neutered



HONG KONG: A general view shows the main chamber of the Legislative Council in Hong Kong yesterday. Hong Kong's legislature sat empty of pro-democracy lawmakers yesterday after the bloc announced it would resign in protest at Beijing - turning the semi-autonomous city's once-feisty legislature into a gathering of Chinese loyalists. — AFP

one of the last forums for dissent in Hong Kong, as its once-boisterous media reels under a crackdown unleashed by the national security law and Beijing loyalists target the legal system that has

underpinned the city's success as a finance hub. Restrictions on gatherings, partly because of the coronavirus, have also put the lid on the kind of huge rallies that roiled the city last year. —AFP

Trump election loss robs Taiwan of a powerful, belligerent friend

TAIPEI: Donald Trump's departure from the White House will leave many US allies breathing easier, but his fiery anti-China rhetoric will be missed by many in Taiwan. Over the last four years, Trump's unpredictability and often confrontational attitude towards China over trade, the coronavirus and Hong Kong have earned him fans in self-ruled Taiwan, which has spent decades under threat of invasion from its authoritarian neighbor. That danger has ramped up since the 2016 election of Tsai Ing-wen, who views Taiwan as a sovereign nation, not part of "one China".

Her stance infuriates Beijing, which is now buzzing the island with an unprecedented number of fighter jets and surveillance aircraft. A Joe Biden presidency promises a return to the kind of liberal internationalism that has been the mark of US foreign policy for decades-which some in Taiwan worry will mean going soft on China. "I am disappointed that finally there was a president of a big country who strongly supports Taiwan, like Trump, but he lost the election," said Shanna Lee, a 24-year-old office worker in Taipei. "No other world leader dares to scold China and speak up for Taiwan as Trump does."

Relations between Washington and Taipei warmed dramatically under the Republican, beginning soon after the votes were counted. As president-elect in 2016 he received a call from Tsai to congratulate him on his win. The call-of the kind routinely carried out by heads of government-infuriated Beijing, which rails at anything that appears to confer legitimacy on Taiwan as a sovereign state. Over the next few years, Trump approved \$18 billion

of military sales to the island, including Harpoon anti-ship missiles and MQ-9 Reaper drones.

And in August, he dispatched the highest ranking US official to visit Taiwan since Washington recognized the communist government of China in 1979. Ahead of the US election, a YouGov poll of 12 Asian countries and territories, found that only in Taiwan did a majority of respondents say they wanted Trump to win. The sense in Taipei has been that Trump has raised the island's profile at a time when Beijing continues to pick off its few remaining diplomatic allies, and to block Taiwan from bodies like the World Health Organization.

'Pandora's Box'

On social issues like gay rights, the progressive Tsai has much in common with the Democratic Party, and she was swift to congratulate Biden on Twitter. But while the president elect said on the campaign trail he would expand ties with Taiwan, analysts say the international round of fence-mending that will likely define the early days of his presidency may see Washington dial back on China.

The odds of another congratulatory phone call between Tsai and Biden "are relatively low," said Sung Wen-ti, a lecturer in Taiwan studies at the Australian National University. The biggest concern for Taipei is that a Biden administration will distance itself from Taiwan to "secure Chinese cooperation on things like climate change and nuclear proliferation," Michael Mazza, visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, told AFP.

But others say there has been something of a bipartisan realignment when it comes to Taiwan and China, and that the days of Washington treading softly around Beijing may be over. "Trump has already opened the Pandora's box," said Su Tzu-yun, analyst at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research in Taipei. "The US has defined China as a major challenge in Asia and urged allies to work together to contain China... Biden has even called Chinese President Xi Jinping a thug. "The US policy of containing China will not change." — AFP

Trolls get creative after WHO allegedly censors Taiwan

TAIPEI: Alleged censorship of Taiwan on the World Health Organization's Facebook page inspired some creative trolling yesterday, with special characters and foreign scripts called up to bypass the block - which mysteriously also censored Winnie the Pooh, sometimes said to look like Xi Jinping. The deluge came after Taiwan politicians and social media users shared screenshots showing messages containing "Taiwan" or "Taiwan can help" failing to upload underneath a banner advertising a WHO live-streaming Q&A event on the coronavirus.

Taiwan has previously accused the global health body of prioritizing politics over health, saying Chinese "obstruction" had prevented it from attending a key meeting focused on the coronavirus. The self-ruled island of 23 million has seen remarkable success in combating the pandemic, with only seven deaths and fewer than 600 confirmed cases. But it is frozen out of the WHO by Beijing, which regards Taiwan as its own territory and has vowed to take it by force if necessary.

Social media users in Taiwan used extra characters to get around the block, and to proclaim that "Taiw@n can help!" the global health body combat the virus. In Hong Kong - also increasingly in the shadow of authoritarian Beijing - others posted "Taiwan" in the Vietnamese script that is similar to the Roman alphabet. Others complained they were unable to share the words "Winnie the Pooh" - AA Milne's self-described "bear of very little brain", who has been used in the past to poke fun at China's President Xi Jinping on social media. — AFP

International

Seven dead; Typhoon triggers Manila worst floods in years

Major floods in Philippines capital as Vamco batters Philippines

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday ordered government agencies to hasten relief efforts after a powerful typhoon killed at least seven people and unleashed some of the worst flooding in years in the capital Manila. Duterte cut short his attendance of a virtual meeting of Southeast Asian leaders to inspect the damage from Typhoon Vamco, moments after a speech during which he urged his counterparts to urgently combat the effects of climate change.

year, which killed 25 people and destroyed thousands of homes earlier this month.

"Rest assured, the government will not leave anybody behind," Duterte said in a national address, pledging shelter, relief goods, financial aid and counseling. Nearly 200,000 people were evacuated before Vamco arrived late on Wednesday packing winds of 155 kilometers per hour and gusts of up to 255 kph. It has since weakened and exited the mainland. Duterte told Southeast Asian leaders the devastation of recent weeks was "a stark reminder of the urgency of collective action to combat the effects of climate change".



At least
40,000 homes
flooded in
Manila suburb

The typhoon, the eighth to hit the Philippines in the past two months and 21st of the year, forced residents to scramble onto rooftops to await rescue after tens of thousands of homes were submerged. Those killed across the main island of Luzon, home to half of the country's 108 million population, included people who drowned, an elderly man hit by a tree and three workers crushed when a warehouse collapsed. It struck areas still reeling from Goni, the most powerful typhoon in the world this

'Overwhelming'
Nearly three million households in and around Manila were without power as people waded through waist-high floods, carrying valuables and pets. Coastguard swam through brown floodwater as high as electricity poles in some areas, while rescue workers used rubber boats and makeshift floats to move children and the elderly to safety. In some suburbs east of Manila, residents took refuge atop flooded homes. "The flood reached the entire second floor of our house. For more than eight hours, we stayed at our neighbor's house," call center worker Albert Rano, 35, told Reuters.

"Aside from some clothes and laptops, nothing is left." The typhoons have battered the Philippines as it faces an uphill struggle to breathe life into its withering economy while keeping coronavirus infections under control. Roughly 40,000 homes had

protest leader, Tattap Ruangprapaikitseree, 23, said of the deference generations of Thais have shown for the monarchy.

"They see that they're human, the king is human, not a god." Like many Thais his age, Thitiwat grew up watching the nightly royal news on television. He saw people kneel as royal cars passed on streets lined with royal portraits. The monarchy was the one thing he always put faith in, he said. "It's the same love I have for my dad and mum," he said. "For me, the monarchy is god." A decade ago, he himself joined street protests - by royalist "yellow shirts" - to bring down an elected populist government. He was among thousands who prayed and slept outside the hospital when King Bhumibol Adulyadej fell sick in 2016. And when King Bhumibol died after a seven-decade reign, Thitiwat - like the rest of Thailand - dressed in black for a year. But Thailand has changed dramatically since protests that began in July against Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha - a former army chief. Anti-establishment demonstrations have evolved into demands to curb the powers of the monarchy, which critics accuse of abetting military domination, taking excessive authority, lavish spending and allowing a crackdown on critics. The protesters have emphasized that they seek to reform the monarchy not abolish it, though royalists distrust them.—Reuters



MARIKINA CITY: Rescuers pull a rubber boat carrying residents through a flooded street after Typhoon Vamco hit in Marikina City, suburban Manila yesterday. — AFP

either been fully or partially submerged in the Marikina area, a situation its mayor, Marcelino Teodoro, said was "overwhelming" and the worst since a typhoon flooded large swathes of the capital in 2009.

"The local government cannot handle this," Teodoro told DZMM radio, requesting motorized boats and airlifts. Residents posted images on social

media of flooded homes and the disaster agency said parts of 36 cities and towns were inundated. Flights and mass transit in Manila were suspended and port operations stopped. Government work was halted and financial markets shut. Vamco was headed towards Vietnam, where devastating floods and mudslides over the past month have killed at least 160 people in central areas. — Reuters

'The monarchy is god': Thai royalist in divided kingdom

BANGKOK: The words the Thai king spoke to Thitiwat Tanagaroon have been tattooed on his arm: "very brave, very good, thank you". The 50-year-old restaurant manager never imagined he would win praise from King Maha Vajiralongkorn when he brandished a royal portrait at an anti-government protest last month. Nor had he expected online attacks and calls for him to be fired from his job. "There are a lot of people who still love the monarchy and worship the monarchy but they don't come out," he told Reuters. "Whoever comes out gets harassed."

Just months ago, criticizing Thailand's monarchy was taboo and few dared brave harsh royal insult laws. Now, defending the monarchy can also draw criticism - a monumental shift in a kingdom where the institution has been promoted for decades and must be revered according to the constitution. The Palace did not respond to a request for comment on changing attitudes since protests began in July. "The new generation and youth, they're not into it,"

Father heard 'noises' before teen vanished in Malaysia: Inquest

KUALA LUMPUR: The father of a French-Irish teenager whose body was found in the Malaysian jungle told an inquest yesterday he heard noises in the family's holiday chalet before she disappeared. The body of Nora Quoirin, a 15-year-old with learning difficulties, was discovered unclothed last year after a massive hunt through the rainforest.

Authorities insist there was no foul play but her parents believe she was abducted from the resort where they were staying near Kuala Lumpur, saying the teen would not have wandered off alone. Testifying at the inquest into her death, Sebastian Quoirin said he "heard some muffled noise coming from the chalet" late at night on the day the London-based family arrived.

"I could feel it was close... I cannot describe the nature of the noise," he said, speaking via video-link as he could not attend the hearing in person due to the coronavirus. The 48-year-old Frenchman did not get up to investigate, however, saying he was in a "state of semi-consciousness". The teen's mother, Meabh Quoirin, made similar claims in her testimony Wednesday. They discovered their daughter was missing the next morning.

A 10-day hunt involving hundreds of rescuers followed, before the schoolgirl's body was found close to the resort.

A window latch on the chalet was broken, but the teen's father did not believe she could have climbed out alone as she struggled with mobility and balance. "She has no survival instincts. I could not understand how she could have got out of the chalet and ventured out of the resort herself," he said. He said the teen's feet were uninjured when her body was discovered, which would be unusual if she spent days wandering in the jungle, and believes she could have been kidnapped and then dumped.

"The abductors could have realized she was a liability following the extensive police search and widespread media attention," he said. The family have criticized authorities for responding slowly after the teen's disappearance but police say they conducted a thorough probe and there is no indication of kidnapping. An autopsy found the teen had probably starved and died of internal bleeding - but her family pushed for the inquest, which is expected to continue into December.— AFP

Friday Times Lifestyle

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This aerial view shows cars (bottom) driving past fields of flowers during the Taoyuan Flower Festival in Taoyuan. —AFP

S African song 'Jerusalema' is global lockdown hit

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Laser-guided lightning may help prevent wildfires

Small, portable laser pointers could be used to guide lightning strikes, with a study suggesting the technology may prevent bolts from sparking wildfires, a researcher told AFP yesterday. A team of international scientists have shown storm clouds could be “short-circuited” by using a hollow laser-like a pipe of light — to deliver particles into the clouds and draw lightning strikes, research co-author Professor Andrey Miroshnichenko from the University of New South Wales in Canberra told AFP. In lab tests, the team—which also included scientists from the Australian National University (ANU) — successfully used a laser tractor beam to direct the path of an electrical discharge to specific targets, Miroshnichenko said.

In the past, high-powered lasers were needed to achieve similar results, making the technique dangerous, costly and inaccurate. But the new research suggested that small, handheld lasers could be used in the field within the next decade, he said. “It turns out that to deliver particles, you do not need

high-intensity lasers, even low intensity like your laser pointer will be already enough,” Miroshnichenko said. Using a tractor beam with a hollow center, micro-particles in the air could be heated up and delivered to a specific point and trigger an electrical discharge.

Although it is yet to be tested outside a lab, the technique could potentially be used to control dry lightning strikes, infamous for sparking large blazes including several major bushfires in Australia and the western US in the past year, Miroshnichenko added. “We can imagine a future where this technology may induce electrical discharge from passing lightning, helping to guide it to safe targets and reduce the risk of catastrophic fires,” co-researcher Vladlen Shvedov, from the ANU Research School of Physics, said. The research, published in Nature Communications last month, also involved Texas A&M University in Qatar and the University of California in Los Angeles. —AFP



This undated handout photo released by UNSW Canberra shows Professor Andrey Miroshnichenko from UNSW Canberra (left) and Dr Vladlen Shvedov from the Australian National University (ANU) in a laser lab at the University of New South Wales in Canberra. —AFP

New PlayStation hits market ready for battle with latest Xbox

Sony's PlayStation 5 went on sale yesterday, just two days after rival Microsoft released its newest Xbox, with the next-generation consoles vying for holiday season dominance as the pandemic boosts gaming demand. With pre-orders pointing to a record launch, market leader Sony is counting on big-ticket exclusive games like “Spider-Man: Miles Morales” to keep the edge over its US challenger. With coronavirus cases rising in many countries, launch events are off the table, and crowds of eager customers out of the question. While the new Xbox hit shelves worldwide on Tuesday, the PS5 was available from yesterday in Australia, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, North America and South Korea, but gamers elsewhere will have to wait until November 19.

In Sydney, just a handful of customers were collecting their pre-ordered consoles yesterday morning. “It's Covid, so I guess not many people want to rush to a launch,” said Theo Pasialis as he collected his PlayStation. Jonathan De Botton, one customer, said the atmosphere was a world away from the PS4 launch, when lines of customers stretched into a shopping mall food court. Today was “completely different,” he told AFP. “It was a mid-night launch... It was a good time,” he added. Today, by comparison, it was “a bit of a ghost town”.

The consoles go on sale with the pandemic creating a massive spike in demand for gaming from people stuck at home and looking for a distraction



This combination of file photos shows the PlayStation logo (top) on display on the final day of the E3 Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles and the Xbox logo displayed at the Microsoft Xbox E3 2012 media briefing in Los Angeles.

or a way to pass the time. Just how long that boom will last remains unclear, with news this week of progress on a virus vaccine prompting a gaming sector sell-off on stock markets, as investors anticipated a return to normal life. For Sony, the stakes with its new console are significantly higher than for Microsoft, as gaming generates the lion's share of the Japanese firm's profits and about a third of its sales. Gaming accounts for just 10 percent of Microsoft's sales, by comparison. But Sony's margin on the PS5 will be slim, possibly even loss-making, analysts say—with the company counting on sales of games, services and online subscriptions to turn a profit. Sony expects to sell 7.6 million PS5 consoles by the end of March—beating the performance of the PS4. And it will be relying heavily on the US market to achieve that, with Japan's video game market more focused on mobile and still dominated by Nintendo, said Serkan Toto, an analyst at Kantan Games.

“You're talking about a relatively small market in Japan... driving Sony to centralize the PlayStation business in one area, and that area is the United States,” he told AFP. Toto said he expected the PS5 to outperform the PS4. “I think that the PlayStation 4 was so successful that Sony has cultivated a much bigger fan base for PlayStation content,” he said. The PS5 is priced at



This handout file image released by Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc in the US shows the PlayStation 5 console. —AFP photos

\$500, like the Xbox Series X, while a version without a disk reader costs \$400. That is more than the \$300 price tag for Microsoft's less powerful Xbox Series S, which also has no disk reader. —AFP

Milan Fashion Week to go ahead with digital catwalks

Milan's Fashion Week will go ahead early next year with shows likely to continue employing virtual catwalks because of the coronavirus, organizers announced on Wednesday. While the men's shows will run from January 15 to 19, women's Fashion Week will be held from February 23 to March 1, the Italian Chamber of Fashion announced. The fashion shows “will become more digital or more physical, depending on the evolution of the pandemic”, chamber president Carlo Capasa told the Pambianco Summit, a conference for the fashion industry held online this year. Fashion is Italy's second-largest manufacturing industry and has been hard hit by the fallout from the global pandemic.

Fashion houses have had to rethink their marketing strategies and boost their digital offerings, and event organizers have been forced to innovate. Last month, the British Fashion Council cancelled its men's Fashion Week in London, which had been scheduled for January, because of the pandemic, Brexit and what organizers said was a desire to rethink the event. Instead, they are encouraging men's designers to take part in the women's week from February 19 to 23. Milan's last fashion week in September, in which 156 collections were presented between online presentations and physical fashion shows, resulted in some 45 million views, Capasa said. “This has been an Italian resilience operation,” he said, adding that organizers “hope to be able to return soon to the moments of physical encounters”.

According to a survey by Confindustria Moda, the sector's main employers' group, the industry in Italy lost 29 billion euros (\$34 billion) in global revenue in the first nine months of the year. In the third quarter, those companies surveyed recorded a 27 percent drop in sales, following decreases of 39 percent and 36 percent in the second and first quarters, respectively, said Confindustria Moda President Cirillo Coffen Marcolin. —AFP

MILAN FASHION WEEK

S African song 'Jerusalema' is global lockdown hit

When coronavirus placed the world in lockdown, a gospel-influenced anthem with Zulu lyrics brought people together through social media, lifting spirits and instantly becoming a global phenomenon. Today, "Jerusalema" has clocked more than 230 million YouTube views in less than a year—and lured an army of people into mimicking its dance moves. "The feedback was crazy," says 24-year-old South African artist Master KG, who co-wrote and performs the disco-house track with Nomcebo Zikode. The viral "Jerusalema dance challenge" saw thousands across the world posting clips of themselves copying the video choreography.

Front-line medical workers, soldiers, stiff-limbed clergymen, diners at swanky European restaurants and even the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra—everyone seemed to want to shake a leg. Lucius Banda, organizer of the annual Sand Music Festival on the shore of Lake Malawi, says "Jerusalema" became a "Covid anthem"—a source of joy at grim times. The chart-topping song on Sunday bagged the Best African Act at this year's MTV European Music Awards. "We are exceptionally proud of our ambassadors... representing our motherland in such a unifying and unprecedented manner," tweeted South Africa's arts and culture minister, Nathi Mthethwa. A remix featuring Nigerian star Burna boy was recently awarded diamond status in France for clocking 35 million streams since its release in June this year.

Live performance

Master KG, whose real name is Kgaogelo Moagi, told AFP

that he was continuing with life as normal despite the song's huge success. "I'm not feeling like superman or that I'm the man of the moment. It's just the same," he said last week at the Sand Festival. "I know now I am having the biggest song in the world but that doesn't change me, it doesn't change how I look at things, how I look at people. Because music is music." Festival-goers braved a heavy downpour on November 1 to catch "Jerusalema" performed live for the first time since the pandemic hit southern Africa in March. German musician Rafael Loopro, who performed at the festival, lamented the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on live music performances.

"I was saying to him (Master KG) that I was sorry that this song became big this time because he could have been playing all over the world." "But he didn't even know that the song was on number one in Germany," Loopro said, adding that the last time an African song had topped the charts in his country was three decades ago. "It's an amazing song and he is an amazing guy. He is very down to earth."

Palestinians

Many people may have danced or hummed along to the song with no idea about the lyrics. The words mean "Jerusalem is my home, guard me, walk with me, do not leave me here—Jerusalem is my home, my place is not here, my kingdom is not here."

Defenders of the Palestinian cause have taken this to describe the yearning of young Palestinians who want to make Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem the capital of a future state.



Master KG (right), The South African DJ behind the global pop hit "Jerusalema", performs at the Sand Festival held on the beaches of Lake Malawi, in Salima. —AFP

"Palestinian refugees will one day return to their ancestral, indigenous land despite apartheid Israel," the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement said in a tweet. It dedicated a rendition of the dance by the young of Jerusalem to "our friends in South Africa." —AFP

'Come Away' lets Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan take flight with multiracial cast

Alice in Wonderland and Peter Pan are brother and sister in the new fantasy film "Come Away" that puts a new spin on two of the best-known British children's classic stories. And that's not all. Both Peter and Alice are played by multi-racial young actors, with David Oyelowo playing their father and Angelina Jolie playing their mother in turn of the 20th century England. "They are iconic characters in beloved fairy tales, but we've never seen them put together," said Oyelowo, best known for playing American civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. in "Selma."

"These are fictional fantasy characters that race is not

something that is tied to their representation on film," he added. "I think there are far more people who are going to celebrate what we do in this film than the few and small voices who take umbrage with it." "Come Away" is released in US movie theaters on Friday and in the UK on Dec 4. Director Brenda Chapman said she was initially looking to cast a white man in the role, until Oyelowo's name came up. "This is something new. And it opens up the world to so many more people (by making) these characters more relatable," said Chapman, who described herself as a middle-aged white woman.

Keira Chansa said the chance to play the young Alice was refreshing. "I've always watched the films and read the books, and it was always a white girl," she said. "So to be able to experience it, to be somebody who looks like me, is a big change in the world and makes a big difference." —Reuters



File photo shows David Oyelowo speaks on stage.



File photo shows Angelina Jolie gestures during a photocall ahead of the European premier of 'Maleficent Mistress of Evil' in Rome. —Reuters photos



BTS group

BTS to celebrate New Year with first show since coronavirus shut-down

South Korean boyband sensation BTS will welcome in the New Year with their first live concert since they were forced to call off a world tour because of the novel coronavirus, their management company, Bit Hit Entertainment, said yesterday. The concert - "2021 New Year's Eve Live" - will be on Dec. 31 just outside the South Korean capital, Seoul, and will include other groups on the Big Hit label including NU'EST, GFriend and ENHYPEN.

Limited seating will be available, in line with government coronavirus safety guidelines, though Big Hit did not specify numbers. The show will be streamed online. "It will be the first concert to feature Big Hit artists in one grand event, capped with the countdown to welcome in the New Year," Big Hit said. The seven-member BTS had to call off their tour of nearly 40 concerts in Asia, Europe and the United States, which had been due to begin in April, as the coronavirus spread around the world.

They played a virtual concert last month, drawing more than 990,000 viewers from 191 countries, and fetching some 50 billion won (\$45 million) in ticket sales. Since their 2013 debut, the band has ridden a global K-Pop wave with catchy, upbeat music along with lyrics and social campaigns aimed at empowering young people. Their latest hit was "Dynamite", their first song entirely in English, which topped the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart in September. —Reuters



A lawyer chats with his hostess during a talk show at the Gardenya FM radio station studio at the Arbat refugee camp, 20Km east of Sulaimaniyah, Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region's second-biggest city. — AFP photos



Gardenya FM radio journalist Sherin records a program at the station's studio.

'In our hearts': Radio keeps Syria refugees in Iraq close to home

Speaking into a microphone in her modest studio, Sherin Mohammad goes live with the news. But this is no typical radio station: Gardenya FM is run by, and for, Syrian refugees. Broadcast from the refugee camp of Arbat in northeast Iraq, Gardenya FM features news programs and talk shows, produced by a team far from their native Syria. Nearly 500 kilometers (300 miles) away from her home town of Qamishli, Sherin concludes her news round-up, waits for the catchy jingle to end and sets down her clunky headphones on a white wooden desk. The 31-year-old fled Qamishli in 2014 so she could stay with her husband, desperate to avoid the military conscription imposed by the Syrian government.

Their painful displacement came with a silver lining: she could realize her lifelong dream of being a journalist. "I wanted to be a reporter back in Syria but it wasn't on offer at my local university, so I became a teacher," she told AFP. In 2018, Italian NGO UPP proposed setting up a local radio station in Arbat, and Sherin jumped at the opportunity. She has dedicated herself since then to providing reliable information to fellow refugees on the Syrian conflict, which erupted in 2011 with protests against the rule of President Bashar Al-Assad. The war has profoundly divided communities both inside and outside Syria, with various sides trading accusations of fabricating news. Sherin wants to be the antidote. "Everyone has smartphones and they can read any old thing published about Syria," she said, including "fake news spread by the regime".

Going local

Gardenya broadcasts locally at 101.3 FM, but the team also posts on the station's Facebook page, which has several thousand likes. Through it, Sherin said, loved ones still in Syria could see what life is like for Arbat's 9,056 residents, many of whom sensed their displacement would be long-term and began replacing tarp tents with cinderblock structures in 2017. "We want to give real information to those still in our homeland through our Facebook page so that people see we don't live in tents," she added. Strolling through these one-room cement homes with a bounce in his step is Khalil, another Gardenya FM reporter.

He is well-known: fellow refugees greeted him warmly, and someone handed him a flatbread with thyme for breakfast. Youssef, a 19-year-old trainee, trailed behind. "This is how you build a network," Khalil explained to him. "We use our friends, our relatives, our journalist colleagues who are in the country and those on the front" to gather information, said Khalil. But for the former English teacher from Amuda in northeast Syria, the most interesting people to speak to are the Syrian Kurds who travel back and forth between their homeland and safe haven in Arbat. One of them, Goran, was Gardenya FM's latest interview subject.

Covered in flour after a long morning making flatbreads to sell in the camp, Goran answers Khalil's questions, then has a few of his



Journalists at Gardenya FM radio Khalil (left) and Youssef return after a report to the station's studio at the Arbat refugee camp.

own: Is the border still open? Could he travel back to check on his wife, still stuck in their Syrian home town? "With Covid-19, we have little information. The radio can tell us every day what's going on," Goran said.

Rebuilding, with radio

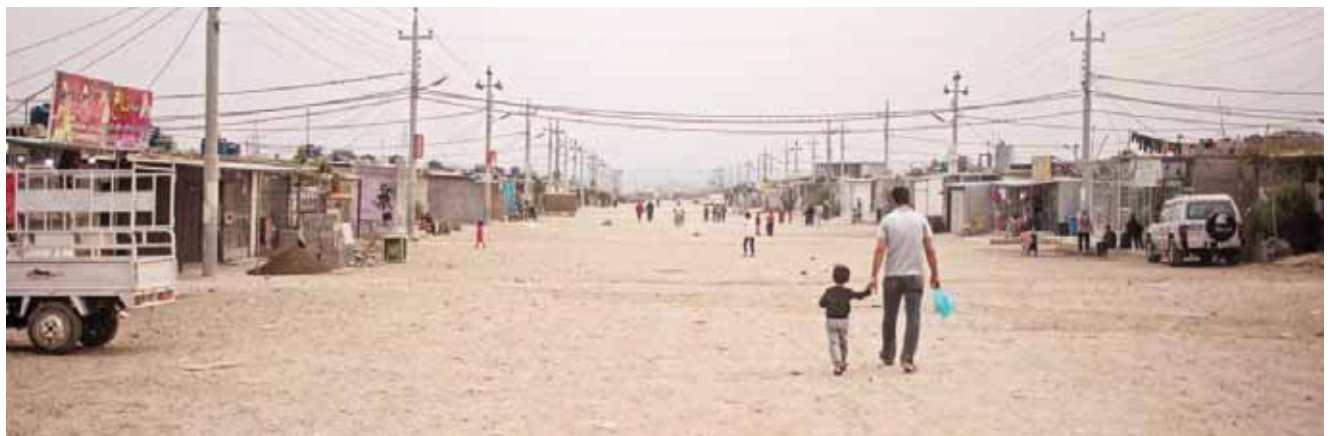
Although Goran misses his family, he said he couldn't imagine trying to live in Syria again. "Why move back? There's no electricity, no salary, the US dollar is so expensive," he said. "At least here, there's work," he told AFP from his cinderblock bakery. According to the International Organization for Migration, there are 230,000



Journalists at Gardenya FM radio Khalil (right) and Youssef (center) greet an inhabitant of the Arbat refugee camp.

Syrian refugees living in northern Iraq, 40 percent of them in camps, with the rest in rented homes or other housing arrangements. Officially, none have permanently returned to Syria.

Syria's government is hosting a summit on Wednesday and Thursday to encourage returns, with 5.5 million Syrians still seeking refuge outside their homeland. But infrastructure and public services are lacking across the war-ravaged country and rights defenders warn that some areas are still unsafe for large-scale repatriations. "Syria remains in our hearts," said Khalil. "Building (Arbat) with our own means is our way of saying that we can rebuild a Syria without Assad," he added. "That's what the radio is for, too." — AFP



A father and his daughter walk down a central walkway at the Arbat refugee camp.

C African artists keep traditional music alive in a broken culture

The jangle of guitars and throb of the bass push the speakers to their limits as Chouchou and his band, Zokela, take the stage at a dance bar in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). Urged on by Chouchou, an audience enlivened by lashings of warm beer gets to its feet and the place starts to rock. Dancers shake their hips, kick high in the air and leap to the beat of the “motenguene”—an old music and dance style handed down by the Pygmies. Its name translates into “the dance of the caterpillars,” which Pygmies gather for food in ancestral forests in the southwest.

It is one of four such traditions in the CAR, along with the “bird dance” from the north, the “fish dance” of the southeast and the “savannah dance” of central regions. The motenguene is among just a handful of homemade forms which still survive in a local music market swamped by imported sounds. But for Chouchou and his band, motenguene is more than music. They are on a quest to revive a rare cultural heritage—and help mend a nation scarred by conflict and division.

‘That traditional thing’

Dan One, a young rap musician, describes motenguene as “that traditional thing.” “We tend to draw on Western music or on west African music,” he said. “Young people copy other countries but they don’t know how to promote their traditional culture.” Zokela have been trying to revamp motenguene’s image for nearly 30 years. In their shows, traditional bead necklaces and antelope skins are usually swapped for city-slicker clothes, while the kora—a delicate, long-necked harp lute favoured in much of West Africa—has given way to the electric guitar. “We are using this dance to distinguish ourselves a bit from our brothers in Congo, Ivory Coast and Cameroon,” Saint-Pierre Dibaba Alagomme, the founder of Zokela, tells AFP.

Underneath the gloss of national pride is hope that the CAR, after decades of violence, corruption and nepotism, can find common roots in culture. In 2013, a coalition of armed groups from the Muslim minority ousted president Francois Bozize, plunging the country into a maelstrom of communal bloodshed. Violence between Muslims and Christians claimed thousands of lives, on top of older griev-



Zokela orchestra dancers in traditional costume during a performance in Bangui, Central African Republic. — AFP photos

ances in a nation beset by deep-rooted clan rivalry.

‘A cultural crisis’

“The crisis that we’re going through today in the Central African Republic is primarily a cultural crisis,” argues Yvon Eka, a promoter in Bangui and motenguene fan. “People in the north don’t have the same culture as those in the center. Everyone has their own turf and wants to defend it. Unfamiliarity with someone else’s culture breeds mistrust,” he adds. Yet motenguene music could help “to cre-



A traditional kora player during a demonstration in Bangui, Central African Republic.

ate bonds among the South, the North, the East and the West,” Eka suggests. “Culture is the identity of a country.” Locally known musicians including RV Texas and Muziki try to revive the popularity of the motenguene by adapting it to today’s tastes, and Zokela and others have toured abroad several times. And like their peers, the musicians have run up against every conceivable obstacle in their careers. Three civil wars between 2003 and 2013 severely damaged the social fabric of the country, but the biggest problem for emerg-



A Zokela orchestra dancer in traditional costume during a demonstration in Bangui.

ing artists is a desperate lack of resources.

The CAR has no professional record industry and musicians must make do with the meagre fees from playing clubs and private functions such as weddings. These events bring an average income equivalent to 75 euros (about \$90) to be shared by 12 to 15 people, in a country where the average pay is roughly 27 euros a month. Music producers prepared to risk investment at a loss are few and far between. Recordings cut in such local studios as exist are largely too amateur to be considered for export. “In the Central African Republic, it’s not easy. We don’t have good training for technicians and the musicians don’t know their job very well, which leads to production difficulties,” says Mermoz Tetto, 27, a sound engineer and composer.

Copyright payments

To worsen matters, professional musicians are owed copyright fees dating back more than 35 years. In 1985, the national office for authors’ rights, Bucada, was founded, but it remains an empty shell to this day. “The creative spirit is there, but you still need a minimum of awareness for artists to understand their rights and duties,” Eka adds. This year, however, the balance has begun to tilt in favor of change.

The government has drawn up a national cultural policy with the help of the International Organization of La Francophonie, an 88-member community of nations with a shared French-speaking heritage. “We started with the realization that the public consumes a lot more products from abroad, because there is no promotion of Central African culture as such,” says Philippe Bokoula, director general of the ministry of arts and culture. In July, a law was passed to make the Bucada operational. “The major part of the finance will come from the state, while we spread awareness among the radio stations and consumers and draw up charts with a scale of tariffs,” Bokoula says. Yet, the initiative—awaited for decades—remains in limbo, pending the publication of a government decree to make it operational. Performing artists and their fans say they are not holding their breath. “The last time a law was passed, we waited 15 years for the decree,” Eka observes. —AFP

Rare Russian pink diamond sells for \$27 million

A rare pink diamond derived from the biggest raw stone of the color ever found in Russia was sold for \$26.6 million on Wednesday at Sotheby’s in Geneva. Dubbed “The Spirit of the Rose”, the 14.83-carat stone’s final sale price including commission set a world record for a purple-pink diamond. It took just a few minutes for the bids to reach 21 million Swiss francs after the marble-sized stone came up in an online auction, with the final buyer remaining anonymous. Sotheby’s

auctioneer Benoit Repellin called the diamond a “wonder of nature” and added that prices for the pink gems are going up as they become increasingly rare.

The “Spirit of the Rose” was faceted from a 27.85-carat stone found in 2017 by diamond mining firm Alrosa in Russia’s Sakha republic in northeast Siberia. It took around a year of painstaking work to cut the finished diamond to shape while preserving its pink color. Pink diamonds are the rarest of the precious gems and the most in demand on the global market. The world record for a pink diamond dates back to 2017, when a stone known as the CTF Star Pink was sold in Hong Kong for \$71.2 million.

Five of the 10 most expensive diamonds ever sold have been pink, Sotheby’s said, with all sold within the past decade. Just this month, the biggest pink diamond mine in the world stopped production, as Australia’s Argyle deposit that accounted for more than 90 percent of global supply was exhausted. — AFP



This file photo in Geneva shows the “The Spirit of the Rose” a rare 14.83 carats vivid purple pink diamond, during a press preview ahead of sales by Sotheby’s auction house. — AFP

CUBA'S CLASSIC CARS: YOUR TICKET TO RIDE

Cuba might not have a lot of things in common with its US neighbor, but in the six decades since the two nations cut economic ties, vintage American cars have - ironically - become one of the country's most recognizable symbols. Offering a vivid reflection of Cuba's dusty stuck-in-a-timewarp image, they have also become a popular tourist attraction.

Yank tanks

Cuba is one of the few countries in the world where most private automobiles are older than their owners. Due to a 58-year-long (and counting) US trade embargo, you'll struggle to find any American cars under the age of 60 in cities such as Havana or Santiago de Cuba. Instead, the spluttering Buicks, Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles and Plymouths that prowl Cuba's traffic-light thoroughfares hark back to an age when streamlined art deco was in vogue and Detroit had yet to succumb to stiff competition from Japan and Germany. That these cars are still functioning is a testament to the ingenuity of their owners.

Starved of access to spare American parts and unable to afford modern replacements from Japan or Europe, the Cubans have been forced to adapt and be creative. Many of their geriatric cars have been reconfigured and hybridized. What looks like a '55 Chevy on the outside, might well be hiding a Lada engine or the salvaged parts of a Mexican truck underneath. As a result, a large proportion of the 'Yank tanks' that limp asthmatically around the streets of Cuban cities look (and sound) as if they've already got one wheel in the knacker's yard. But they're not all old bangers. Some Cuban cars have been lovingly coaxed back to life.

Gran Car and other tours

Gran Car is a state-run taxi company that uses renovated American autos to ferry tourists around Cuba's larger cities. Although they charge higher fares than regular taxis, the vintage vehicles are kept in super-slick condition, boldly reflecting the lost grandeur of the 1950s. Forget exploding engines or invasive body rust: Gran Cars are well-polished and effortlessly stylish beasts. Shop around and you'll soon be pondering over whether to jump into a bubble gum pink Ford convertible or a bright orange Chevy with leather seats. As well as taxi duties, Gran Car also offers city tours with a congenial chauffeur (usually a wise-cracking muchacho in a guayabera shirt) acting as your unofficial guide.

The tours are particularly popular in Havana, where drivers wait - fastidiously polishing their automobiles - in Parque Central or down by the cruise port to tout for business. Bank on around CUC\$40 (US\$40) for a one-hour tour taking in Havana's main sights, including an obligatory ride along the Malecon sea-drive, dodging giant waves. Since the relaxation of business restrictions in 2011, some private tour providers have jumped on the vintage car bandwagon. Havana Super Tour run out of the venerable Casa 1932 in Centro Habana, and uses old cars that reflect the pre-revolutionary themes of their excursions, such as art deco architecture and a US mobster tour that runs clients around Havana's once notorious casinos and nightclubs.

Gran Cars are well-polished, effortlessly stylish beasts that are used as official taxis.—Lonely Planet



You'll struggle to find any American cars under the age of 60 in cities such as Havana or Santiago de Cuba.— Shutterstock

Almendrones

For travelers with an itchy desire to go under the radar of Cuba's confusing dual economy, a ride in a Cuban-style taxi is an eye-opening experience. Known officially as colectivos but affectionately dubbed almendrones or maquinas by people on the street, shared taxis run along fixed routes in big cities such as Havana where they charge economical fares in the local moneda nacional (standard rides cost MN\$10 or US\$0.40). Almendrones are nearly always old American cars that haven't benefited from a 21st-century botox injection. And when we say old, we mean old. Stiff doors, belching exhausts, and a top speed of about 40km/h is par for the course in these metaphoric dinosaurs of Detroit.

Almendrones are generally the domain of Cubans who squeeze in five at a time. Tourists rarely use them because they don't understand the complicated mecanica (local way of doing things) required to hail one, a bizarre and untranslatable system of semaphore-like hand signals. However, with a bit of Spanish and a Cuban friend willing to furnish you with 'the knowledge' it's a unique only-in-Cuba experience you won't forget in a hurry.

From Russia with love

Guidebooks and magazine spreads would have you believe that no street in Cuba is bereft of a shabbily roman-

tic Pontiac with an oily muchacho behind the wheel. But the most common car in Cuba is not a handsome Chevrolet Bel Air or a curvaceous Buick, it's the slightly less sexy Russian Lada closely followed by its oft-forgotten ugly cousin, the ghastly Moskvitch.

Considered something of a cheap joke outside Cuba, Ladas were a prestigious status symbol in the 1970s and 80s when they were given out to Communist Party workers



Officially known as colectivos, the less-polished almendrones are shared taxis used by locals that run along fixed routes in big cities. — Shutterstock

to reward good work. In a country where nothing gets thrown away, plenty of these boxy Soviet-style Fiats remain. These days, a large proportion of Ladas do business as private yellow and black taxis. Prohibited from waiting at the official taxi ranks outside tourist hotels (which are reserved for Gran Cars or modern yellow Cubataxis), Lada taxis spend their days roaming the streets looking for fares. For economy-minded tourists, it is perfectly acceptable to hail one (no complicated hand signals are required) and negotiate a fare before getting in. As far as quality goes, don't expect seat belts or air-conditioning. But what these Russian relics lack in comfort, they make up for in durability - and price.

Ladas aren't the only Fiat copies in Cuba. Another remnant of the Cold War is the Polski 126, a car that was licensed by Fiat but manufactured and assembled by Cuba's former amigos in Poland. Diminutive, yet culturally iconic, the Cubans subsequently nicknamed the cheap, well-built Polski the polaquito (little Pole) and imported it in droves; the country claims to have an estimated 10,000 registered Polski owners. Notwithstanding, despite the car's cute image and ruthless petrol efficiency vis-a-vis the diesel-guzzling 'Yank tanks', it's unlikely you'll ever see one gracing the front cover of a glossy travel magazine.

—www.lonelyplanet.com



Dubai Miracle Garden





An aerial view shows giant flower and living plant sculptures, at the Dubai Miracle Garden, the world's largest flower garden, in the United Arab Emirates. The Miracle Garden, home to giant floral structures and millions of flower and plant varieties, was open for visitors from November 1. — AFP photos

Kids Page

Word Search

Eat Your Vegetables

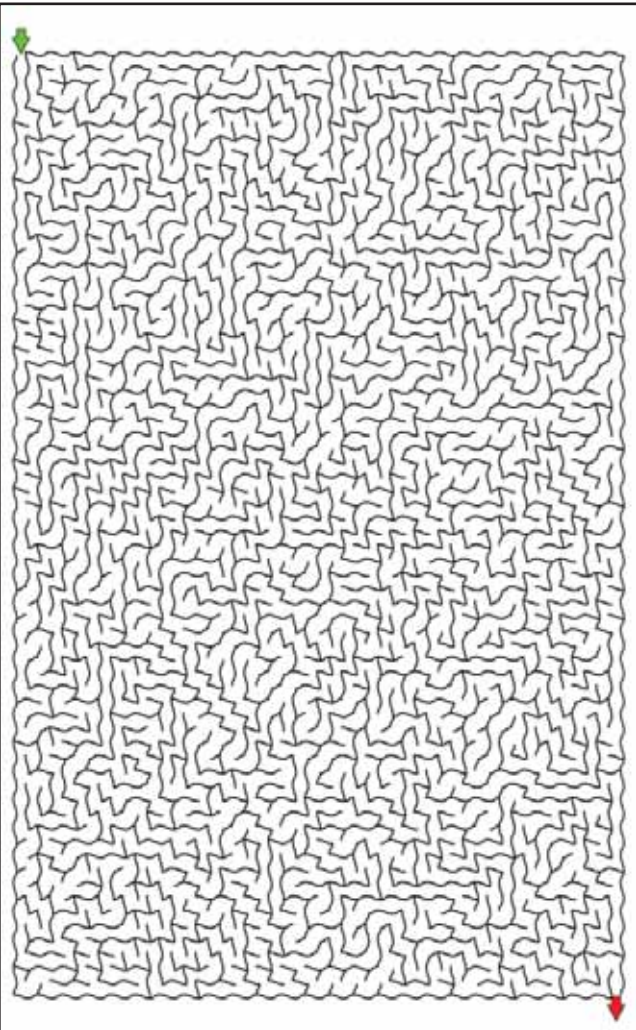
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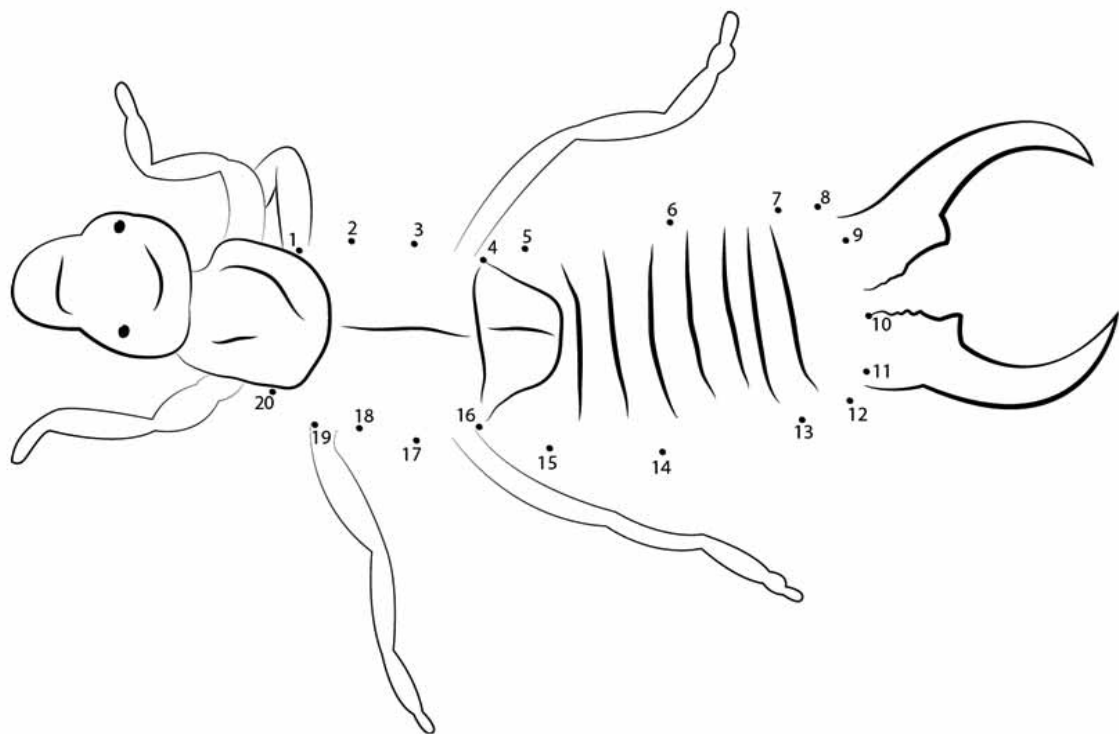
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Kids Mazes



Join the dots



Word Scramble

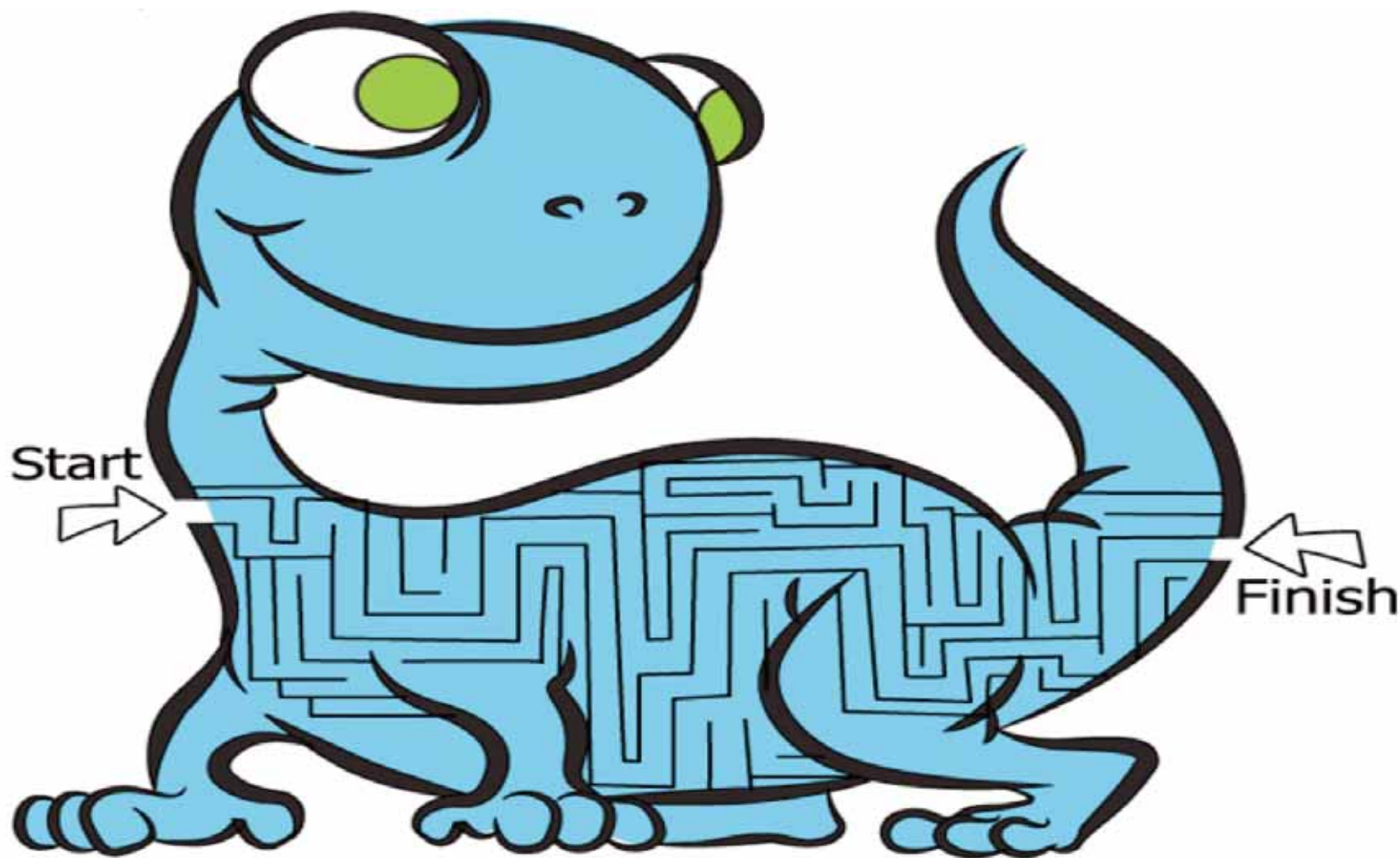


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Word Scramble

Help! The school computer had its memory scrambled and we need your help to get things back in order. Can you unscramble the computer terms and write the correct word on each line?

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SAEHRC	_____	UADOLF	_____
LLCORS	_____	NTERPRI	_____
BOKEDYRA	_____	IONC	_____
UNMSAERE	_____	SOTWRFEA	_____
VSIRU	_____	NLDDWOAO	_____
EVASER	_____	SOEUM	_____
FOTN	_____	RSDAWSPO	_____
MONORIT	_____	EACCH	_____
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(P.Subramanyam, B.Com., B.L.) Advocate Proddatur - 516360, Kadapa Dt., A.P. India.)
(C 5814)

I, Husein Akber Sajjad Husen Kothambawala, Passport No. N7016963 hereby change my name to Hussain Akbar Kothambawala in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by my correct spelling Hussain Akbar Kothambawala.
(C 5815) 11-11-2020

I, George Mathew Kizhavaramannil with permanent address Kizhavaramannil, Thottapuzhassery, presently residing at Kuwait holding Indian passport no. L5937644 to be split my current name as Given name: George Mathew, Surname: Kizhavaramannil for all purpose vide affidavit no. 736/2020 dated 02/11/2020 sworn before K.T. Thomas notary Pathanmthitta, Kerala, India. **(C 5813)**

I, Shaik Nizam s/o Shaik Yakub Sab, R/o: Door no. 15/413, Habibullah street, Kadapa city & dist., A.P., 516001, hereby state that my name and date of birth in my passport no. L3856619, were recorded as Shaik Nizamulla & 10-12-1960. My actual & correct name & D.o.B. as per my Pan card are Shaik Nizam & 03-08-1973.
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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Partly cloudy to cloudy with light to moderate freshening at times easterly wind to north easterly wind with speed of 15 - 45 km/h with a chance for rising dust with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times.

BY NIGHT: Partly cloudy with light to moderate freshening at times north easterly wind with speed of 12 - 40 km/h with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times.

WEATHER WARNING	Thunder Rain	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	28 °C	24 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	28 °C	24 °C
ABDALY	29 °C	19 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	29 °C	22 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	28 °C	26 °C
SALMIYAH	28 °C	24 °C
AHMADI	- °C	- °C
NUWAISIB	30 °C	26 °C
WAFRA	29 °C	22 °C
SALMY	30 °C	19 °C

SFC. CHART	12/11/2020 0000 UTC
MSL Analysis (hPa) Valid 0000 UTC 12 NOV 2020	

4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	11/13	Partly cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times	27 °C	21 °C	NE-N	12 - 40 km/h
Saturday	11/14	Mostly Sunny	28 °C	18 °C	NW-VRB	10 - 30 km/h
Sunday	11/15	Partly cloudy	27 °C	15 °C	VRB-NE	08 - 30 km/h
Monday	11/16	Partly cloudy with a chance for blowing dust	30 °C	18 °C	SE-NW	15 - 45 km/h

PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	04:47
Sunrise	06:09
Zuhr	11:32
Asr	14:33
Sunset	16:55
Isha	18:14

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	28 °C
MIN. Temp.	21 °C
MAX. RH	90 %
MIN. RH	52 %
MAX. Wind	S 46 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	4.48mm

All times are local time unless otherwise stated.

UP:0

EMERGENCY 112

Business

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2020

34 Market authority threatens to blacklist major gold hubs



35 Huge trade pact to be signed at Southeast Asian summit



36 Chinese shoppers spend big in post-virus Singles' Day binge



In this file photo taken on June 26, 2015, an Emirates Airbus A380 aircraft sits on the tarmac at Bandaranaike International Airport in Sri Lanka. — AFP

Emirates posts first loss in 30+ years

Airline has announced several rounds of layoffs

DUBAI: Dubai-based Emirates airline yesterday posted its first loss in more than three decades, saying it had been badly hit by the coronavirus lockdown that brought air transport to “a literal standstill”. The Middle East’s largest carrier said it suffered a \$3.4 billion loss in the six months to September, forcing it to slash its workforce.

“In this unprecedented situation for the aviation and travel industry, the Emirates Group recorded a half-year loss for the first time in over 30 years,” the airline’s chairman and chief executive, Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum said in a statement. “No one can predict the future, but we expect a steep recovery in travel demand once a COVID-19 vaccine is available, and we are readying ourselves to serve that rebound.”

The airline, which had to temporarily suspend operations ear-

lier this year before building back its vast network, saw revenue fall 75 percent to \$3.2 billion. Over the half-year to September, it carried just 1.5 million passengers, down 95 percent from the same period last year. The carrier said that its bottom line found some support with a “strong cargo business” as it repurposed its fleet to accommodate the need for supplies around the globe, including medical equipment.

“As passenger traffic disappeared, Emirates and (air services arm) Dnata have been able to rapidly pivot to serve cargo demand and other pockets of opportunity,” Sheikh Ahmed said. “This has helped us recover our revenues from zero to 26 percent of our position same time last year.” The airline has announced several rounds of layoffs, without disclosing numbers.

In yesterday’s statement, it said that the Emirates Group’s employee base - which includes ground-handling firm Dnata - “is substantially reduced by 24 percent to an overall count of 81,334 as at 30 Sept 2020.” “This is in line with the company’s expected capacity and business activities in the foreseeable future and general industry outlook,” it said.

Before the virus hit, Emirates airline alone employed some 60,000 staff, including 4,300 pilots and nearly 22,000 cabin crew, according to its annual report. Tourism has long been an economic mainstay of Dubai, which welcomed more than 16 million visitors last year. Before the pandemic, the aim was to reach 20 million this year. Previously, Emirates served a global network spanning over 158 destinations in 84 countries. Currently, it flies to 99 destinations. — AFP

Business

Market authority threatens to blacklist major gold hubs

LBMA sets out anti-money laundering and gold sourcing standards

LONDON: The world's most influential gold market authority is threatening to stop bullion from countries including the United Arab Emirates entering the mainstream market if they fail to meet regulatory standards, a letter seen by Reuters showed. In the letter dated Nov 6 addressed to countries with large gold markets, the London Bullion Market Association (LBMA) laid out standards they must meet on issues such as money laundering and where they source their gold - or be blacklisted.

The move by the LBMA is the first time a market or state authority trying to tackle the illegal or unethical production and trading of gold has raised the prospect of cutting off the bullion industry in a major financial center. "Our goal is to work jointly with these key markets to advance global standards, not to disengage from them. However, we are also committed to act if there is not meaningful and effective improvement," LBMA Chief Executive Ruth Crowell told Reuters when asked about the letter.

The LBMA letter did not target any center in particular, but four people involved in drafting it told Reuters the gold industry in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was the main focus. The letter is addressed to China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, Turkey, UAE, the United Kingdom and the United States, all of which the LBMA has identified as major gold centres.

"The whole bullion centers initiative is because of serious issues in Dubai," one of the sources said. "Unless they shape up, the LBMA by early next year will say refiners can't source from Dubai." The LBMA is a trade group rather than a state agency but it holds

sway over the market because the large international banks that dominate gold trading typically only deal with metal from refineries the association has accredited.

Critical priority

The UAE is one of the world's largest gold hubs and exports bullion worth billions of dollars to refiners accredited by the LBMA each year. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental anti-money laundering monitor, has criticized its controls, as have non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A Reuters investigation last year found gold worth billions of dollars had been smuggled to Dubai from Africa, much of it mined by artisanal laborers who often work in difficult conditions. Once the gold has reached the UAE, it can then enter the global market.

Cash transactions are also common in the UAE and the FATF said in April that the country was not doing enough to prevent money laundering. "The UAE will certainly look into the questions and concerns raised by the London Bullion Market Association once it is in receipt of the letter," the Gulf state's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation said in response to questions from Reuters. "The UAE recognizes the importance of its bullion industry and of developing increasingly robust mechanisms to address the challenges brought about by financial crime," it said.

The Gulf state has tightened financial regulations to try to overcome a perception among some foreign investors that it is a hot spot for illicit money. It passed an anti-money laundering and terrorism financing law in 2018 and has worked with its ally the United

States to sanction Islamist militant groups. The UAE foreign ministry said further strengthening its regulatory framework was a critical national priority. The Dubai Multi Commodities Centre (DMCC), a government body that sets standards for the gold industry and accredits some refineries, declined to comment.

Strategic goals

The LBMA said the countries it is sending the letter to were chosen because they process large amounts of recycled gold, a particular money laundering risk because the origin of gold bars and scrap jewellery can be easy to obscure. The letter states the LBMA's strategic goals are to ensure responsible sourcing of recycled gold, an end to cash transactions and support for artisanal and small-scale miners.

It asks recipients to declare their support for the LBMA's standards by Dec 11 and share an action plan for their implementation by the end of January, if they have not been met. "A lack of cooperation or unwillingness to publicly commit to these standards and share a proposed timeline with the LBMA will mean LBMA may no longer permit GDL Refiners to source material which has originated from or passed through the International Bullion Centre," the letter said. GDL, or "good delivery", refiners are those accredited by the LBMA, whose rules prohibit handling gold from unethical sources. Governments and the United Nations have previously imposed sanctions on countries such as Venezuela or on individuals and companies in nations including Democratic Republic of Congo, where gold has been used to fund conflicts. — Reuters

UK economy sees record rebound after recession

LONDON: Britain's economy enjoyed a record rebound in the third quarter following its deepest ever recession, official data showed yesterday. Gross domestic product (GDP) expanded by 15.5 percent in the July-September period, as an initial coronavirus lockdown was eased, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. Activity bounced back after shrinking by almost a fifth in the second quarter on the initial COVID-19 lockdown.

But the economy is still grappling with the virus fallout according to the data, which was published one day after Britain's COVID-19 death toll passed the grim milestone of 50,000 - the highest in Europe. Growth slowed in September with a month-on-month expansion of just 1.1 percent, after the end of the government's restaurant discount scheme for the virus-plagued hospitality sector.

Output was also hit after more localized measures to control the virus spread were imposed in September in parts of northern and central England, as well as in Scotland and Wales. England-wide restrictions, which began last week, are meanwhile serving up a fresh dose of economic mis-



LONDON: In this file photo taken on Sept 20, 2020, a waiter serves customers at tables outside a restaurant in Soho. — AFP

ery in the current fourth quarter.

Slowdown in autumn

"Today's figures show that our economy was recovering over the summer, but started to slow going into autumn," said finance minister Rishi Sunak. "The steps we've had to take since to halt the spread of the virus mean growth has likely slowed further since then. "But there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic on the health side - including promising news on tests and vaccines."

Sunak last week announced a new multi-billion-pound support package, ex-

tending his government's furlough jobs scheme to the end of March. The Bank of England (BoE) at the same time injected an extra £150 billion in cash stimulus to lift growth. Britain plunged into a historic downturn after imposing a lockdown on March 23 that lasted until mid-June.

The economy shrank by a record 19.8 percent in the second quarter after a 2.5-percent contraction in the prior three months, meeting the technical definition of a recession. The unemployment rate meanwhile jumped to 4.8 percent in the third quarter as the pandemic destroyed a record number of jobs. — AFP

COVID vaccine 'best science news' of 2020

GENEVA: Data indicating that a vaccine being developed against COVID-19 is highly effective is the "best science news of the year", a pharmaceutical industry association chief said, voicing hope that other vaccine candidates would show equally good results. "A vaccine that has 90 percent efficacy and is pretty safe, that is a historic breakthrough," the head of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations (IFPMA), Thomas Cueni, said.

American pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech announced Monday that their vaccine had proven 90 percent effective in preventing COVID-19 infections in ongoing Phase 3 trials involving more than 40,000 people. "This was the best science news of the year," IFPMA's director general told AFP in an interview.

Hopes are also high that one or several of the vaccines under development will also help rein in the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed nearly 1.3 million people out of the over 51.5 million infected. There are currently more than 40 candidate vaccines against COVID-19 being tested on humans, with a handful in the most advanced Phase 3 trials. Cueni acknowledged that more data was needed on the Pfizer and BioNTech candidate, which is based on an innovative technology that has never been approved for use before. The companies based their announcement on interim results from the last step in their clinical trial before officially applying for approval.

Cueni voiced confidence that any major safety concerns with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine would have been known. "We still need to see the (full) efficacy and the safety data," Cueni said, but stressed: "There is now genuine reason for optimism that these vaccines are basically considered safe." — AFP

Business

Huge trade pact to be signed at Southeast Asian summit

China seeks to draft rules of Asia-Pacific trade

HANOI: Fifteen Asia-Pacific nations are set to sign an enormous free trade deal at an online summit that started yesterday, with the pact seen as a coup for China in extending its influence across the region. Once signed, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will be the world's largest trade pact in terms of GDP, according to analysts. The pact, which was first proposed in 2012 and viewed as a Chinese-led rival to a now-defunct US trade initiative, loops in 10 Southeast Asian economies along with China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia. "After eight years of negotiating with blood, sweat and tears, we have finally come to the moment where we will seal the RCEP Agreement this Sunday," said Malaysia's trade minister Mohamed Azmin Ali, ahead of the virtual meeting. Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc also confirmed the pact would be signed this week during opening remarks at the online summit. India had been due to sign the pact but pulled out last year over concerns about cheap Chinese goods entering the country, though it can join at a later date if it reverses its position.

The RCEP - whose members account for around 30 percent of global GDP - would be a "major positive step forward for trade and investment liberalization" in the region, said Rajiv Biswas, Asia Pacific chief economist at global business consultancy IHS Markit. "RCEP will be the world's biggest free trade area measured in

terms of GDP," he told AFP. The pact's expected signing comes as the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) fight to mitigate the crippling cost of the coronavirus, which has ravaged their economies and left many battling a severe public health crisis.

Thorny issues

The pact is also seen as a mechanism for China to draft the rules of Asia-Pacific trade, following years of US retreat under President Donald Trump. "It certainly lends advantage to China's geopolitical ambitions," said Alexander Capri, a trade expert at the National University of Singapore Business School. But US President-elect Joe Biden may engage more actively with the region, Capri added, in much the same way as former President Barack Obama did. "Think of the Biden administration as sort of a continuation of the Obama administration, certainly when it comes to the pivot to Asia," he said. While the region waits to see how its relationship with the US will unfold, it is battling several other thorny issues-including disputes over the South China Sea. The flashpoint waters - claimed in their entirety by Beijing but also contested by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan - will also be on the agenda at the summit.

But as several nations battle serious COVID-19 outbreaks, and with many promised priority access to Chinese-made vaccines, a stand

comparison service, its Android mobile operating system and its advertising business. The 165-strong group - which says it is the largest-ever to write in concert to EU competition chiefs urging action - comprised 135 companies that offer online services plus 30 industry associations.

Signatories to the letter, seen by Reuters, included longstanding Google critics Yelp, Expedia, Trivago, Kelkoo, Stepstone and Foundem - whose complaint triggered the EU shopping probe against Google. The European Commission said it had received the letter and would reply in due course. It added that it monitored the market carefully to assess the effectiveness of remedies offered for Google Shopping.

"While we compete amongst ourselves for the best consumer experience, there is one common competitor that does not compete fairly - Google," the letter said. "Google gained unjustified advantages through preferentially treating its own services within its general search results pages by displaying various forms of grouped specialized search results (so-called OneBoxes)," it added.

OneBoxes outline information and images in boxes placed near the top of search results and are often ways for local businesses to get more visibility. For example, a search for local jobs might throw up a box offering Google's job-search service, or a results for a flight query might have a box offering Google's flights-search service. "With this exclusive use of OneBoxes, Google artificially keeps users within its own service and prevents them from visiting competing, more relevant services," the letter said. —Reuters



HANOI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (center on left screen) addresses counterparts with Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (right screen) at the ASEAN-India Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) yesterday. —AFP

against Beijing is seen as unlikely. Instead, the focus will be on economic development in the bloc, with many of its tourism and export-reliant countries suffering badly. "The road ahead is not a bed of roses," said Vietnamese President Nguyen Phu Trong at the summit, warning that leaders would be expected to work together to control infections and support people who are suffering. The RCEP could help ease

the financial pain, said Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, an assistant professor at the Centre of Multilateralism Studies in Singapore's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. "In the light of COVID-19, RCEP could enable ASEAN to bounce back more quickly as such a deal allows firms to diversify their supply chains and increase resiliency of the regional economies," she added. —AFP

165 Google critics call for swift EU antitrust action

BRUSSELS: A group of 165 companies and industry bodies have called on EU antitrust enforcers to take a tougher line against Google, saying the US tech giant unfairly favors its own services on its web searches. The group includes US and UK companies as well as peers in 21 EU countries. It sent a joint letter to EU antitrust chief Margrethe Vestager yesterday, saying Google was giving its own services, such as those for accommodation, travel and jobs, preferential placement in its search results and urging swift action to stop the practice.

Google, a unit of Alphabet, has refuted assertions that it unfairly favors its own services. It says that its users are not locked in and that competition to its services is just one click away on the Internet. "People expect Google to give them the most relevant, high quality search results that they can trust," a Google representative said. "They do not expect us to preference specific companies or commercial rivals over others, or to stop launching helpful services which create more choice and competition for Europeans."

Vestager has levied fines totaling euro 8.25 billion (\$9.7 billion) against Google in the past three years for abusing its market power to favor its shopping

IEA cuts 2020 global oil demand forecast

PARIS: The International Energy Agency (IEA) yesterday cut its 2020 global oil demand forecast, citing a resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic, with vaccines unlikely to have much of an impact until well into next year. The IEA said that as a result of fresh restrictions imposed by governments in an effort to curb the disease, it expected full-year 2020 global oil demand to come in at 91.3 million barrels per day (mbpd) - down by 8.8 mbpd compared with the drop of 8.4 mbpd given in last month's regular report.

The rebound next year will be slightly better, however, with an increase of 5.8 mbpd, up from last month's 5.5 mbpd. "Vaccines are unlikely to significantly boost demand until well into next year," the IEA cautioned. It noted that reports of progress in the search for a vaccine had caused "considerable excitement," giving oil prices - and the financial markets generally - a massive boost.

"However, it is far too early to know how and when vaccines will allow normal life to resume. For now, our forecasts do not anticipate a sig-

nificant impact in the first half of 2021," it said. "In the here and now we continue to see surging caseloads, particularly in Europe and the United States," it added.

'Largely steady'

The IEA, set up by the developed economies after the oil price and supply shocks of the early 1970s, said oil output rose slightly to 91.2 mbpd in October as OPEC and major non-OPEC countries stuck by a deal to cut production. "Production from countries participating in the OPEC+ agreement held largely steady," it noted. On Wednesday, OPEC itself revised down its forecasts for global oil demand this year and next due to the economic disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

OPEC expects global demand for crude oil to decline by 9.8 mbpd in 2020, compared with its previous forecast for a drop of 9.5 mbpd. For 2021, OPEC expected a rebound of 6.2 mbpd but this represented a cut of 300,000 bpd on its previous estimate, leaving global demand at 96.3 mbpd. Under the terms of the deal between OPEC and non-cartel producers, principally Russia agreed in April, the so-called OPEC+ group pledged to cut output by 9.7 mbpd from May 1 until the end of June. The cuts were then to be gradually eased from July, to 7.7 mbpd through to December and then 5.8 mbpd from January. —AFP

Business

Chinese shoppers spend big in post-virus Singles' Day binge

Millions shop at online stores to scoop up bargains

BEIJING: Chinese shoppers splurged more than \$100 billion in the world's biggest shopping event of the year, in a huge spending spree that suggests the country's all-important army of consumers is fighting back after months of pandemic agony. Hundreds of millions used online stores to scoop up bargains in the Singles' Day consumer marathon that dwarfs the US "Black Friday" phenomenon.

Everything from jewelry and video games to furniture and food was sold on the country's biggest e-commerce platforms run by tech titans Alibaba and JD.com. While "Singles' Day" - so-called for its annual 11.11 date - has long been a 24-hour event, its creator Alibaba has expanded it to an 11-day promotion beginning Nov 1. Alibaba said yesterday it took 498.2 billion yuan (\$74.1 billion) worth of orders during the extravaganza, a 26 percent rise on the same period last year, while JD.com recorded sales valuing 271.5 billion yuan.

However Alibaba did not publish a tally for Wednesday's takings, making it hard to directly compare sales. Last year, sales on Alibaba platforms alone for the 24-hour period totaled \$38.4 billion. This year's event took on even more significance as it was seen as a bellwether of consumer sentiment in the world's number two economy as it recovers from the pain of coronavirus lockdowns.

"We have benefited from the robust recovery of consumption in China," Jiang Fan, president of Alibaba's Tmall and Taobao shopping sites, said in a statement yesterday. As the country emerges from the effects of the virus and containment measures, the recovery in retail sales has lagged that seen in industrial sectors, but analysts have said it is gaining pace. And the temptation of a bargain helped that recovery.

'I assume I have saved a lot'

"I deliberately stayed up until after midnight so I could buy the robotic vacuum cleaner that I had been eyeing for weeks now," Liu Yu, a worker in Beijing, told AFP. "It was originally over 4,000 yuan, but it only cost a bit over 2,000 on Singles' Day - what a bargain." And Sam, a Tianjin-based student, said: "I was waiting for this day - I had put tons of stuff in the cart already days before Singles' Day, and when the day came, I didn't even check what the discount actually was, I just clicked 'confirm' and bought them all. 'I assume I have saved a lot.'"

Conceived in 2009 by Alibaba as an antidote to Valentine's Day, the event falls on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, and was meant to be an occasion for individuals to treat themselves to something new. But it has expanded to encompass much of China's entire retail sector, including traditional bricks-and-mortar stores,



HENGYANG, China: Workers sort packages for delivery at a warehouse of China Post Group in central China's Hunan province yesterday, a day after the end of the Singles' Day shopping festival. — AFP

which also offer Singles' Day promotions.

The United States was the top source of imported products purchased on Alibaba platforms during this year's festival, despite trade and diplomatic tensions between Beijing and Washington. E-commerce services offering nearly every conceivable product at the click of a button have taken over China's retail sector in re-

cent years, with COVID-19 pushing even more Chinese to choose online shopping over crowded supermarkets and malls. But Chinese regulators cast a gloom over the biggest e-commerce stretch of the year by announcing draft antitrust rules that signal a looming crackdown on high-flying Internet giants, causing tech shares to tumble. — AFP

Trump admin says still searching for TikTok resolution

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump's administration said Wednesday it was still working to resolve its security concerns over Chinese-owned app TikTok after the firm sought to delay a deadline to sell its US operations. Chinese company ByteDance has until yesterday to restructure ownership of the app in the United States to meet national security concerns, but it filed a petition in a Washington court this week asking for a delay.

The company said in a Tuesday statement that it had asked the government for a 30-day extension because of "continual new requests and no clarity on whether our proposed solutions would be accepted," but it had not been granted. On Wednesday, the US Treasury Department said in a statement it "remains focused on reaching a resolution of the national security risks arising from ByteDance's acquisition of Musical.ly."

ByteDance had established TikTok in the United States three years ago by buying Musical.ly - a lip-syncing video app that was already present in the country - and merging the two platforms together. The Treasury department disputed the firm's allegations of a lack of clarity from the government, saying "we have been clear with ByteDance regarding the steps necessary" to reach a resolution. —AFP

'Humanitarian e-commerce' thrives in Somalia

MOGADISHU: Muslima Abdirahman, a Somali mother of nine, escaped death twice in the past two years while shopping for groceries in Mogadishu, where insurgents regularly carry out suicide bombings on busy streets and markets. She shudders at the memories: "I wiped my tears with my veil and went home on foot without buying anything."

But earlier this year Abdirahman traded her dangerous errands for online shopping, thanks to the World Food Program's "humanitarian e-commerce" system in Somalia - part of its global shift from distributing food to handing out cash. Conceived as a way to protect women in Somalia from security threats - be it bombings in the capital city or harassment in a camp - it is also now helping to prevent large crowds gathering at aid distribution sites during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abdirahman compares the prices of products such as cooking oil and salt offered by retailers on an app called e-Shop created by WFP, spending the monthly \$60 stipend she receives from the agency as she sees fit. This frees up time for working as a cleaner and for childcare, she said. Her neighbor Ilhan Adow, who also uses the WFP app, says she uses the hours she saves to breastfeed her children, do chores and rest.

WFP launched e-Shop in 2018 but only introduced home delivery in April this year, a month after COVID-19 reached

Somalia. WFP sped up implementation of this option so that needy families could reduce their potential exposure to the virus, said Cesar Arroyo, head of WFP in the country.

Dignity

Years of conflict, and the threat of Al-Qaeda-linked Islamists battling to overthrow the government, leave many Somalis dependent on aid. But e-Shop has changed the dynamic, said Arroyo. "Years ago, when we were handing out food, people accepted it but you could see in their body language how the dignity wasn't there," he said. "Now... they are the ones deciding where and what to buy."

Hundreds of retailers sell on the app. Transactions are recorded to comply with the government tax system. Purchases are verified on delivery using biometrics. Six million dollars in transactions, and more than 51,000 deliveries, have gone through the system. It operates in Mogadishu, including in camps for people forced from their homes by violence, and in all Somalia's main towns. WFP has long used electronic vouchers for distributing cash aid for Syrian refugees, but Somalia is the first place where it has used an app and home delivery system. The UN agency, which won the Nobel Peace Prize this year, hopes to roll out online shopping elsewhere, said Arroyo. "If it works in Somalia it can work anywhere else."

Nearly 100,000 out of the 500,000 people receiving cash aid monthly from the United Nations in Somalia are using e-Shop. The number of app users has doubled, from 47,000 at the end of March, before home delivery launched, to 94,000 by late October. Abdirahman said COVID-19 was yet another reason she preferred shopping online. "We were afraid of catching corona," she said. "We were lucky to get this application." —AFP

Sports

Hamilton poised to clinch 7th title and set up contract talks

Lewis positions himself to be 'best of the best'

ISTANBUL: Lewis Hamilton can seal a record-equaling seventh drivers' world title, position himself to be "best of the best" and set up long-awaited negotiations for a new Mercedes contract at this weekend's Turkish Grand Prix. The Briton needs only to prevent his Mercedes teammate Valtteri Bottas outscoring him by eight points to retain his crown and, in the eyes of many including former Ferrari rival Felipe Massa, move on to become the most successful in F1 history.

A seventh championship would draw him level with Massa's erstwhile Ferrari team-mate Michael Schumacher for titles, but with the record for wins, poles and podiums, as well as consecutive points finishes, he will in many eyes already be the "greatest of all time". Brazilian Massa, who himself missed out on a title triumph when Hamilton claimed his first in Sao Paulo in

2008, has no doubt that the Englishman, whose contract expires later this year, will deserve that soubriquet and a salary to match it. "Lewis can really be the best of the best and everybody will say that for years and years, or maybe decades, or whatever," he told the F1 Nation podcast.

"So, I think he is just preparing his two or three-year contract, which I think he deserves. "What he is doing... He shows that he definitely deserves it - to be different to all of the other drivers in terms of everything and even in terms of salary." Hamilton departed the Emilia Romagna Grand Prix at Imola earlier this month with an enigmatic suggestion, after his record-increasing 93rd win had secured Mercedes' unparalleled seventh consecutive constructors' championship, that he may not return to racing in 2021.

Bumper new deal

Notions of retirement were rejected by his team chief Toto Wolff, who is also out of contract this year. Massa suggested Hamilton is set for a bumper new deal ahead of any confirmed "salary cap" in the sport. "I remember when Michael was my team-mate and he was like that," he recalled. "Michael was completely different to everybody in terms of everything — in records, numbers and salary.

"For sure, Michael helped many other drivers to increase their salary. That's what Lewis is, in my view, trying to do. I think he is 'doing right' and he deserves it." In the simplest terms, Hamilton will be champion again if he beats Bottas, who trails him by 85 points with four races remaining. For the Finn to keep alive his own title bid, he must out-score Hamilton by nine points or

more. Given that Hamilton has beaten him at 10 of this year's 13 races to date and has been in the points at a record 46 consecutive races, Bottas faces a daunting challenge.

Even if he wins on Sunday at the Istanbul Park Circuit, returning to the calendar for the first time since 2011, Hamilton can still take the title by finishing second and clocking the fastest lap. With the title race reduced to a duel between the two 'silver arrows' drivers, many other teams have turned already to plans for next season - Ferrari boss Mattia Binotto deciding to stay in Italy to concentrate on car development. Sporting director Laurent Mekies will take charge, but maintain close contact with Binotto, missing his first race since taking over last year. "He has taken an innovative approach so his voice and input will be heard loud and clear," he said. —AFP

COVID-19 sidelines two, hinders others as Masters looms

AUGUSTA: COVID-19 safety protocols enabled Augusta National to stage the 84th Masters this week, but two players who contracted the virus withdrew and others have been impacted by it. A COVID-19 test, masks and social distancing are required for those entering Augusta National for the 84th Masters. "COVID-19 has been a health crisis unlike the world has faced in our lifetimes," said Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley, whose club contributed \$2 million to local efforts to combat the deadly virus.

"Our first responsibility is just to do everything we could to protect our Augusta National family and that started many months ago." Daily symptom and temperature checks help safeguard the year's final major event, postponed from April due to the virus pandemic. "There's just a lot of uncertainties, and we're facing it like everybody else," three-time Masters champion Phil Mickelson said. "Every organization is doing the best they can to accommodate this time. "But we're having the same challenges that everybody else has." Spain's Sergio Garcia, the 2017 champion, and Chile's Joaquin Niemann were forced to withdraw from the Masters after testing positive for COVID-19. World number one Dustin Johnson and 2013 Masters champion Adam Scott of Australia have already tested positive this season, Johnson returning to the PGA Tour only last week. "I had very minor symptoms," Johnson said. "I felt like I had a cold, a little bit of a fever for maybe 36 hours. But after that, I felt fine. The worst part about it was the quarantining in the room for so long."

That 11-day shutdown for the PGA Player of the Year and 2020 Tour Championship winner didn't prevent a runner-up effort at the Houston Open last week. "All the guys out here take it seriously," Johnson said of safety precautions. "They do a really good job and that's why we haven't had a problem." Scott missed two starts last month after testing positive and doesn't feel his game has recovered fully even though he only had mild symptoms for a couple of days. —AFP

Fajitas, feelings on Tiger's menu for champions meal

AUGUSTA: Tiger Woods opened his heart to fellow green jacket winners while serving sushi and fajitas at the Masters Champions Dinner, where legends gathered to share stories ahead of Thursday's start at Augusta National. It was the 15-time major winner's turn-thanks to his epic 2019 triumph for a fifth green jacket-to select the special extras for Tuesday's annual gathering, delayed from April like the tournament by the Covid-19 pandemic. "Awfully special for me," Woods said. Two-time Masters winner Ben Crenshaw said Woods shared his emotions after a victory that came after back injuries which threatened his ability to live a normal life, much less play golf. "Tiger last night was so wonderful," Crenshaw said. "He was very self-effacing and open and we really enjoyed it. We had a really nice time.

"He was very personal, very giving, very open about how he feels and people love that. We had fun." Crenshaw praised the changes he saw in Woods, who turns 45 next month. "It's a revelation that does come over a long period of time," he said. "It's tough to be Tiger Woods, one of the world's most famous athletes." At least one member of the select club of 33 living winners of the Masters was not on hand, with Spain's Sergio Garcia, the 2017 champion, having withdrawn from the tournament on Monday after contracting coronavirus.

Woods, the man who offered up milkshakes and cheeseburgers after his record-setting 1997 Masters victory at age 21, this year served spicy tuna and tempura shrimp, steak and chicken fajitas, wine and desserts of flan, churros and sopapillas. "To see Sam Snead and Gene Sarazen drinking milkshakes, that was awesome," Woods recalled. "Just to hear the stories of all the guys over the years... they're awesome stories." Woods will try to add to his own legendary tales by winning his 83rd US PGA Tour title this week to break the career record he shares with Snead and taking a sixth Masters victory to match the record set by Jack Nicklaus.

Watson 'scared to death' of hosting

Two-time Masters champion Bubba Watson recalled the pressure of his first hosting stint after winning in 2012, two years be-



AUGUSTA: A detail view of Tiger Woods' Nike shoes as he putts during a practice round prior to the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club on November 11, 2020 in Augusta, Georgia. —AFP

fore he captured a second green jacket. "I was scared to death. I didn't know what to do," he said. "There's no rules. There's no rule book. There's no regulations. You just show up. "Having the old guys here, the champions we look up to, it was a dream come true. I love hearing the stories." Watson still shakes his head in disbelief that he is among the select group. "I'll be still trying to figure out why I'm here," Watson said.

"We talk about legends and greats of the game and then somehow Bubba is in the locker room with them with the green jacket on. What an honor and a privilege." Watson looks forward to being the old man one day, explaining how he smashed a hook shot from the trees to set up his playoff victory over South Africa's Louis Oosthuizen in 2012.

"One day, 40 or 30 years from now, I'll be the guy telling random stories," Watson said. "People will be like, 'No, that didn't happen, you didn't hit that hook shot,' and I'll be like, 'Yeah, I did.'" Three-time Masters champion Phil Mickelson sees the dinner as one of the traditions that makes the Masters beloved by the world's top golfers. "The ability to spend time with, hang around and be a part of the champions from the past meant a lot to me then and I think it's one of the great traditions now," the 50-year-old said. "This tournament treats past champions better than any tournament in the world." —AFP

Sports

Nothing to shout - Olympic fans may face cheering ban

Tokyo Olympics trying to avoid the risk of spreading coronavirus

TOKYO: Fans may be asked not to cheer at the Tokyo Olympics to avoid the risk of spreading the coronavirus, a top official said yesterday. The comments follow a gymnastics test event in Tokyo on Sunday where mask-wearing spectators, urged not to shout or cheer, confined themselves to polite applause and murmurs of approval. Tokyo 2020 chief executive Toshiro Muto said fans arriving in Japan may be spared a mandatory two-week quarantine, saying it would be too hard to enforce. But he said officials were also considering urging fans not to shout or talk loudly, to minimize the risk of COVID-19 infections at the postponed 2020 Games.

"There's a possibility that we might ask the (Olympic) spectators to refrain from shouting or talking in a loud voice," Muto said after a committee meeting. "When we think of the impact, we believe it is an item for consideration, to reduce the risk of airborne droplets." However, Muto added that the "practicality and feasibility" of clamping down on cheering needed to be considered. While sports competitions around the world have resumed after shutting down for the pandemic, most are taking place behind closed doors.

Fans are allowed at sports events in Japan, usually in limited numbers, but they are advised not to shout and cheer. International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach, who will visit next week, on Wednesday said he was increasingly confident that a "reasonable number" of fans will

be allowed at the Games. Muto said officials were considering waiving quarantine for arriving fans and replacing it with a series of tests and health checks. Athletes' and officials' movements will be heavily restricted for two weeks after they enter the country, but this is difficult to implement for fans, he said.

Quarantine 'unrealistic'

"As the number of foreign spectators is so high, 14 days of quarantine and a ban on public transport use is unrealistic," he told reporters after a committee meeting. Instead, "pre-visit tests and health monitoring, careful screening at the border, post-entry checks on activities and health, (and) taking swift measures if symptoms appear" are among the measures being considered.

The Olympics were delayed for a year to next July by the coronavirus pandemic but despite a rising caseload worldwide, the outlook is brightening for the Games. Tokyo has begun holding test events, including a near-capacity baseball game and Sunday's four-nation gymnastics competition held in tightly controlled bio-secure conditions. Olympic chief Bach, whose visit next week will be his first since the Games were delayed, said the events were a positive sign.

"Having seen the different tests in Japan, we can become more and more confident that we will have a reasonable number of spectators also in Olympic venues," he said after an IOC executive



TOKYO: Zhou Ruiyu of China competes on the balance beam during the Friendship and Solidarity Competition gymnastics event in Tokyo - the first major international sporting event in the Japanese capital since the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

board meeting. "How many and under which conditions, it will... very much depend on future developments." Japan currently has a strict ban on practically all in-bound foreign tourism. Muto said any cap on the number of spectators, or rules for

visiting crowds, would be decided in the spring. At Sunday's gymnastics competition, around 2,000 fans in face masks remained socially distanced at an 8,700-capacity Olympic venue, while being encouraged not to shout. —AFP

Maradona leaves hospital following surgery

OLIVOS: Argentine football legend Diego Maradona left hospital on Wednesday followed by a convoy of supporters, eight days after undergoing surgery to remove a blood clot on his brain. Maradona did not speak to the crowd of journalists and chanting fans gathered outside in masks as he left the Olivos clinic in Buenos Aires by ambulance shortly after his doctor Leopoldo Luque told reporters he could go home. Private security personnel held up dividers to screen the ambulance before it left. A convoy of Maradona's supporters followed the ambulance after dozens had waited outside the clinic for days, holding photos of him and chanting their encouragement. One banner read "Eternally Thanks."

Luque had earlier published on Instagram a photo of himself hugging the 60-year-old, who wore a bandage on his head. Maradona is expected to continue his rehabilitation in Tigre, 30 kilometers (19 miles) north of Buenos Aires, near his daughter Giannina's home. "Diego has gone through perhaps the hardest time of his life," his lawyer Matias Morla said earlier Wednesday, adding it was a "miracle" that the clot "which could have taken his life, was detected." "What is needed now is family togetherness and being surrounded by health professionals," said Morla. "With the doctors and his family, Diego will be as he should be: happy." —AFP

Australia look to future with Pucovski, Green in India Test squad

SYDNEY: Highly-rated young prospects Will Pucovski and Cameron Green were yesterday included in an expanded 17-man Test squad to face India as Australia looks to the future. Opener Pucovski, 22, and all-rounder Green, 21, have been hammering on the door this season, impressing in the domestic Sheffield Shield with a host of former Australian greats urging their inclusion. The selectors - coach Justin Langer, Trevor Hohns and George Bailey - heeded the calls, but not at the expense of the out-of-form Joe Burns, who retains his spot alongside regular opener David Warner.

Rookie spinner Mitchell Swepson and seamer Sean Abbott, along with fast bowler Michael Neser, who has long been on the fringes, also made the grade and are in line for debuts. "It is such a positive sign for Australian cricket to have so many good young players stepping into contention," said Hohns. "Two of those many standout players were of course Cameron Green and Will Pucovski." "Their undeniable form demanded selection and we are very pleased to have these young men in the squad for what will be a tremendous Test series against an extremely formidable opponent."

World number one Australia, led by Tim Paine, play four Tests against Virat Kohli's second-ranked India starting with a day-night fixture in Adelaide on December 17. They then move to the traditional Boxing Day Test in Melbourne before heading to Sydney and Brisbane, with Kohli

set to miss the final three games to return home for the birth of his first child. India will need to quarantine for 14 days on arrival in Australia due to coronavirus concerns, and Kohli would have to repeat the exercise if he wanted to come back, making it highly unlikely he will do so. The two sides meet in three one-dayers and three Twenty20s from November 27 in the lead-up. Those matches will be followed by two Australia A fixtures against Indian sides in Sydney to prepare for the Tests.

Fine form

Pucovski, who was in the Test set-up last summer but has struggled with mental health issues, has plundered back-to-back double centuries in his last two games as an opener for Victoria to make his call-up all-but inevitable. He recently said he was in a good head space and ready to challenge for a Test berth once again, vying with incumbent Burns, who has had a lean spell. Batting all-rounder Green, described by Greg Chappell as the best he has seen since Ricky Ponting, has also been firing with a classy 197 for Western Australia last month. He is considered less likely to get a start, at least in the opening Test, with Travis Head and Matthew Wade currently filling the middle order, and Marnus Labuschagne and Steve Smith locked in at three and four.

The pace attack virtually picked itself, with Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood, and James Pattinson all regulars, and Neser and Abbott breathing down their necks. Swepson pressed his case with three consecutive five-wicket hauls in the Sheffield Shield and was preferred to Adam Zampa as Nathan Lyon's understudy. "Mitch Swepson is another who has excelled and is in fine form for Queensland. He gives the side a strong second spin option to Nathan Lyon and we feel he is ready and deserving of the opportunity," said Hohns. "Sean Abbott has also been outstanding at the start of the summer and comes in to his first Test squad as a very strong fast bowling option." —AFP

Sports

Ronaldo scores 102nd international goal; Portugal thrash Andorra 7-0

Finland ruin Thuram's France bow

PARIS: Finland spoiled Marcus Thuram's party on Wednesday after beating France 2-0 on the day the Borussia Moenchengladbach attacker emulated his father Lilian Thuram by making his debut for Les Bleus. Thuram was picked by Didier Deschamps for the friendly at the Stade de France over 22 years after his dad won the World Cup at the same ground, but despite a strong performance on the left wing could not stop the Finns from coming out on top. The 23-year-old hit the bar with less than 15 minutes gone and soon after flashed a difficult volley over as he and Lucas Digne caused continual problems down the left flank for the away side.

However, Marcus Forss stunned the hosts when he collected the ball after a Moussa Sissoko mistake and rammed home at Steve Mandanda's near post. France barely had any time to react before Onni Valakari doubled the away side's lead with a stunning effort after being left to stroll towards goal. Deschamps brought on Antoine Griezmann, Anthony Martial and N'Golo Kante just before the hour mark but could not break down the well-organised Finns.

The result will disappoint Deschamps but he will likely have been happy with the performance of Thuram, who made more of an impression than some of the more established international players on display, including Paul Pogba and Olivier Giroud. "It was a good first half despite the goals," Thuram told TV channel M6. "I'm trying to learn a lot alongside the other internationals... and to gain as much experience as possible. I hope that will continue." He could be in contention for World Cup holders France's upcoming Nations League

matches against European champions Portugal and Sweden.

Deschamps said last week that the son of his old France teammate had "gone up a level" since joining Moenchengladbach from French side Guingamp in July 2019. Thuram has scored three times in 11 appearances for the Bundesliga side this season and was the first footballer in Germany to take a knee in protest following the death of the 46-year-old African American George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis. Lilian Thuram is the most-capped player in the history of the French national team with 142 appearances and as well as winning the '98 World Cup also triumphed alongside Deschamps at Euro 2000.

Ronaldo continues goal quest

Cristiano Ronaldo continued his quest to snatch the all-time record for most international goals when he struck his 102nd Portugal goal in their in a 7-0 win over Andorra. France's opponents on Saturday in what could be a Nations League A, Group 3 decider strolled past their weak opponents in Lisbon despite not starting a single player from the team that beat Sweden 3-0 last month.

Ronaldo missed that match after testing positive for coronavirus and was introduced at half-time on Wednesday, but had to wait until there were only five minutes remaining to boost his record bid with a close-range header. Former Iran striker Ali Daei holds the record on 109 goals. Italy extended their unbeaten streak to 20 games after a second-string line-up comfortably beat Estonia a 4-0.



LISBON: Portugal's defender Domingos Duarte (left) vies with Andorra's midfielder Jordi Alaez during the international friendly football match between Portugal and Andorra at the Luz stadium in Lisbon on November 11, 2020. — AFP

Vincenzo Grifo scored his first senior international goal with a long-range drive in the 14th minute and Federico Bernardeschi put the hosts two goals ahead 13 minutes later when he drifted in from the right and crashed a low shot past Marko Meerits in the Estonia goal. Grifo stepped up and scored his second from the penalty spot when Roberto Gagliardini was tripped with 15 minutes remaining and Riccardo Orsolini added a fourth also from the spot four minutes from the end to complete the rout.

Frank de Boer's wait for a first win as Netherlands coach goes on after his team drew 1-1 with Spain in a friendly in Amsterdam on Wednesday. De Boer has now gone four matches without a victory since being appointed in September to succeed Ronald Koeman, who left to take over at Barcelona. A first-half goal by Benfica striker Luca Waldschmidt sealed Germany a 1-0 win over the Czech Republic, while two Michy Batshuayi goals helped Belgium to a 2-1 victory over Switzerland. — AFP

Pressure grows on FA to show diversity matters

LONDRES: A chorus of former players and football administrators urged the English Football Association to prove they are serious about diversity when they choose the successor to former chairman Greg Clarke. Clarke resigned on Tuesday after referring to "coloured footballers" when talking about diversity to British lawmakers on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport select committee.

The 63-year-old also claimed South Asians and Afro-Caribbean people have "different career interests" on the basis of the make-up of the FA's IT department, as well as describing homosexuality as a "life choice". England defender Tyrone Mings said hiring a black chairman would be a "huge step" but insisted the appointment should be made on the basis of equal opportunities for the right candidate.

Former Manchester United striker Andy Cole said the ball is firmly in the FA's court as to whether they show they are serious about diversity at the top of the game. "Unfortunately it has come around the way it has done," Cole told the BBC on Wednesday. "But they've been speaking about diversity for some time and now they are in a position to see how they can move forward at the FA, what are they prepared to do about it?" Former Manchester City defender

Nedum Onuoha said Clarke's words were that of someone who has lived in an echo chamber.

"It's outrageous to be honest - it sounds like something from 20, 30 years ago," Onuoha, now at Real Salt Lake, told the BBC. "That language has been inappropriate for decades now so it shows in some ways that perhaps he's lived in an echo chamber where things like this are acceptable to say." Another former FA chairman David Bernstein claimed English football's governing body had been "resistant to change" over many years. Bernstein is part of a group, also containing former Manchester United captain Gary Neville and Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham, who have called for independent regulation of football.

"The FA has been resistant to serious change over the years and frankly if you have an organization that is not modern, that has not been updated, then this sort of thing is much more likely to happen," said Bernstein. "I hope there are progressive people across the board who feel strongly about this. I think the FA has to think very carefully about the sort of person who is brought forward to lead the organization next time."

Bernstein said a diverse shortlist of candidates must be drawn up. "A fish rots from the head. If the head of the organization is not modernized and up-to-date and forward-thinking, then these sorts of things will happen, inevitably. "The shortlist needs to have diversity within it, so that the final selection is a real choice with people of different backgrounds available for choice." — AFP

Footballers are just 'puppets' for UEFA and FIFA, says Kroos

BERLIN: Germany midfielder Toni Kroos feels that footballers are just "puppets" used by governing bodies FIFA and UEFA and are powerless in discussions about competitions such as the Nations League or a possible new European Super League. "At the end of the day, as players we're just puppets for all these new things which are invented by FIFA and UEFA. Nobody asks us," Kroos said in his podcast 'Einfach mal Luppen'.

Kroos, who made his 100th appearances for Germany last month, is in the squad for Wednesday's friendly against the Czech Republic as well as Nations League matches against Ukraine and Spain. The 2014 World Cup winner feels if players had more say they "wouldn't be playing in the Nations League, nor a Spanish Super Cup in Saudi Arabia, nor a Club World Cup with 20 or more teams." The Real Madrid star said he feels such tournaments are planned "to suck out everything financially, and, of course, physically from every single player - and then some."

Last month, outgoing Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu claimed a European Super League could soon become a reality. Kroos said a league comprising Europe's top 18 clubs would be "a very, very interesting thing in sporting terms" which would generate large television audiences, but it risks widening the gap between the continent's elite and the rest. "It is also good to leave certain things just as they are when they are good," Kroos added, referring to the current Champions League, European Championship and World Cup formats as "top products". — AFP



LISBON: Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo (left) vies with Andorra's midfielder Moises San Nicolas during the international friendly football match between Portugal and Andorra at the Luz stadium in Lisbon on November 11, 2020. — AFP

Ronaldo scores 102nd international goal

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