

Friday Times

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Local

The value of the right phone number



By Nawara Fattahova

Many people are willing to pay thousands of dinars for a unique phone number. Although mobile phones can save hundreds of numbers so the caller no longer has to dial the digits individually and just has to click on a name to call, people are still buying expensive special numbers.

Abdullah, owner of a phone shop in Riggae, sold a phone number for the incredible price of KD 14,500 four years ago. "This was the highest price paid to me for a phone number. The number was special and consisted of six similar digits," he told Kuwait Times.

"Last year I sold a few phone numbers for thousands of dinars. I remember I sold one for KD 7,500, one for KD 7,000 and another for KD 5,500. I consider this year very good for selling special numbers, especially since people haven't traveled and didn't have to repay their loans for many months, so they have money to buy expensive numbers," explained Abdullah.

According to him, a majority of customers buy these special numbers for commercial purposes. "I think they need to have special numbers for their work, so customers can memorize their phone numbers easily. Most of these clients work either in the real estate field or in the automotive sector. Other customers buy these expensive numbers as gifts," he added. "The best season for selling these numbers is between June and September, while from November till the end of June, work is slow."

Abdullah refused to give more details on how he man-

ages to get the special numbers that he is selling. "I have my way of getting these numbers from telecommunication companies," he concluded.

For some professions, a special number is important. "In my work as a journalist, I always need to contact people in key positions and high-ranking officials to get statements and comments for my articles. Many of these officials would not answer a call from a strange number, as they are already annoyed by many people calling

them. This was my situation in the past. But then I bought a special number for KD 1,500, and all officials and VIPs are now answering my calls. This is the effect of the special number," stressed Faisal, a journalist at a local daily.

In 2019, there were over 7.5 million mobile phone users in Kuwait - Zain with 2.8 million subscribers, Ooredoo with 2.6 million and STC with 2.1 million.



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Virtual verses

374 works of renowned calligraphers exhibited online

By Ben Garcia

The International Virtual Exhibition for the Art of Arabic Calligraphy, under the sponsorship of Nasser Al-Saeed Foundation, is an online art exhibition with the participation of 32 countries and 103 artists from around the world. The exhibition's gallery has more than 374 works of renowned calligraphers worldwide. The exhibition was made possible through the efforts of Farid Al-Ali, President of Kuwait Islamic Arts Center based at the Grand Mosque of Kuwait.



Farid Al-Ali, President of Kuwait Islamic Arts Center at the Grand Mosque of Kuwait. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

"The idea started when we were all under the lockdown and curfews because of the pandemic. I organized a series of virtual meetings with other artists and art lovers and encouraged them to continue propagating art and culture even if we are all facing difficult situations," he said. "I don't agree to the idea that we should stop advocating and doing something for arts and culture. If we stop, it will substantially affect generations of people to come," Ali told Kuwait Times.

Artists all over the world are inseparable parts of their societies, so it is not surprising to witness their positive contributions to social and human causes. Hence the endeavors of many calligraphers to contribute to humanitarian efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic by

spreading beauty and disseminating Quranic verses, prophetic sayings and wisdom that inspire hope, resilience and ability to withstand the current conditions until the crisis is over.

"Calligraphers sought to achieve such a goal through written works inspired by the textual meaning to formulate aesthetic and iconic forms, all to be showcased digitally to allow the message of this exhibition to reach as many people as possible without breaching social distancing precautions. We hope this initiative brings us a step closer to each other despite geographical boundaries, as it features works by calligraphers from all over the world," Ali said.

Local

Friday, November 27, 2020

**Aesthetic therapy**

"This exhibition also aims to send a message of solidarity emanating from the principles of Kuwait's culture and stemming from its Arabic and Islamic roots - a message to strengthen brotherhood and promote collaboration in the face of the challenges posed by the pandemic. It reminds us of the values that give us strength in facing difficulties of any kind," he added.

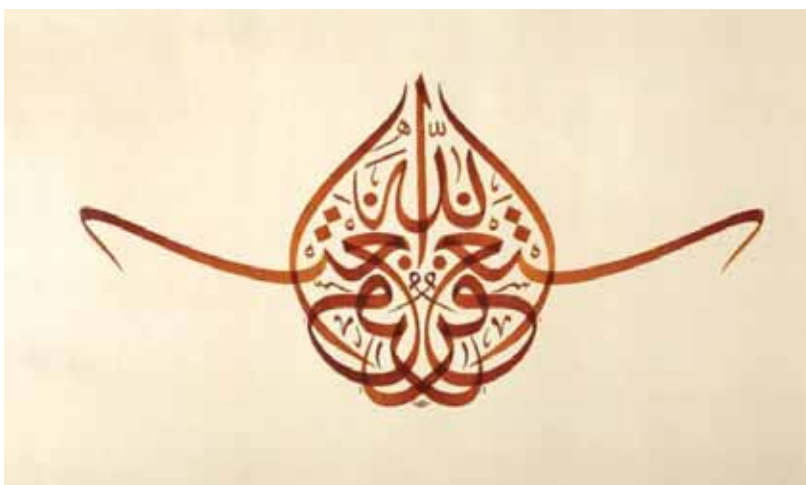
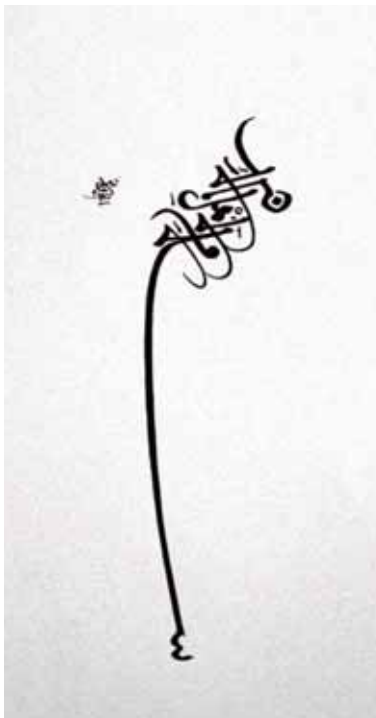
The exhibition is a professionally designed virtual tour that includes verses from the Holy Quran as aesthetic therapy. "These are inspiring words interpreted through calligraphy by various artists from different countries. They can be understood by anyone because it's translated into English. It will help ease their burden, get motivated and always trust in the wisdom of Allah Almighty and be thankful to what we have and the messages of hope from Allah," Ali said.

"The visitor may notice some inconsistency in the resolution of the works exhibited here and other issues that fall beyond the will of the organizers, due to the circumstances of the participating calligraphers. Some of the works were written in difficult circumstances, which make us thankful to everyone who contributed to this exhibition by organizing, participating or sponsorship, and we thank in particular Nasser Abdul Mohsen Al-Saeed Foundation for their cooperation and generous support for cultural projects," he said.

Ali expressed gratitude to his fellow Kuwaiti calligraphers who participated in the success of



this virtual exhibition, particularly Mashael Al-Trabelsi, Ayman Hassan, Jassem Maraj and Jasser Al-Shammari. "I would also like to thank the assisting team, Shaaban Haridi and Amr Taha, in addition to Khaled Khalawi, the technical official," Ali added.



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Local

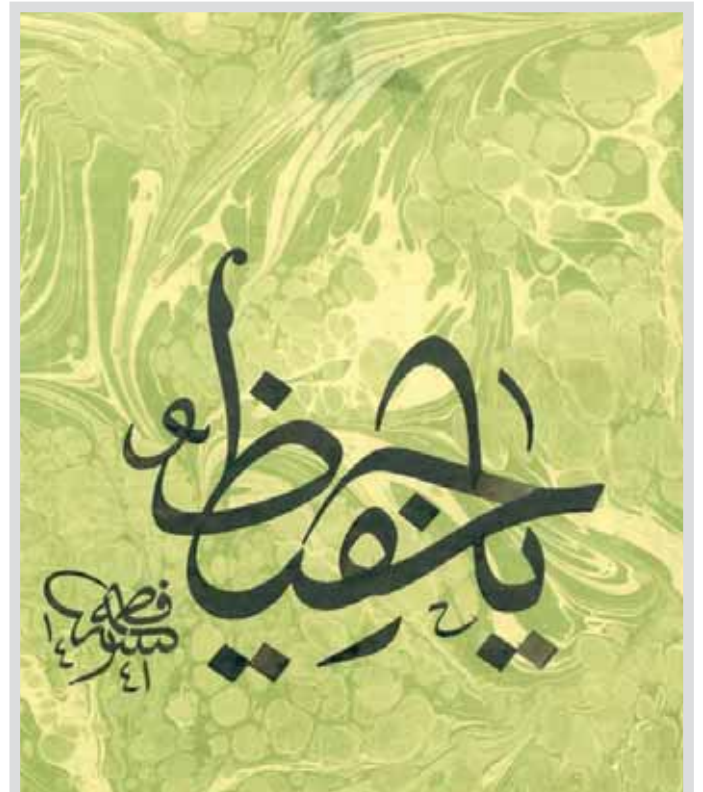
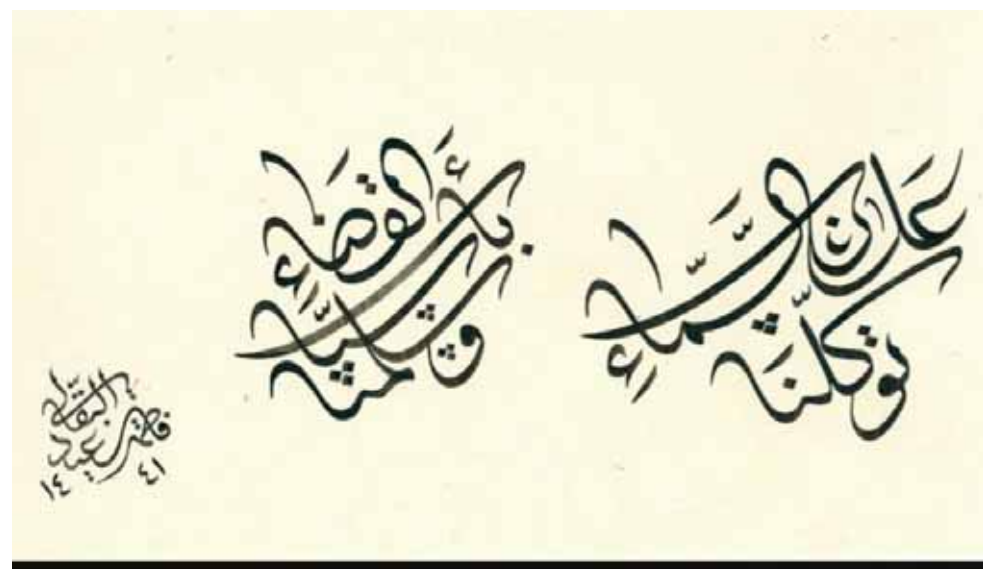
About **Farid Al-Ali**

Born in 1957, Ali is the Director of the Kuwait Islamic Arts Center and member of the Int'l Society of Art (UNESCO). He is also a member of the Egyptian Society for Arabic Calligraphy, member of Emirates Formative Arts Society and member of the Arabic Formative Arts and Graphics Society. He has participated in over 50 domestic exhibitions, over 13 philanthropic exhibitions in Kuwait, Spain and Canada, and participated and represented Kuwait in 60 exhibitions around the world.

Ali has also organized 21 solo exhibitions in Kuwait, Oman, Turkey, India, China, Tehran, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Beirut, Cairo, Al-Mansourah, Alexandria, Jordan, Paris, Sarajevo and London. He won the International Prize of Quran at the 11th gathering for the Holy Quran in Tehran in 2003. He has designed and written many inscriptions in mosques in Kuwait, Egypt, Iran, India and China.

Ali published a book titled (Formation in Holy Articulation) in 1997, received an appreciation certificate from HH the Crown Prince of Kuwait and conducted many art workshop and lectures locally and regionally. He published his second book (Mohammediyat) in 2005, prepared and presented 'Naqsh' program for Almishkat TV and organized many calligraphy exhibitions and contests.

He has been a jury member for many calligraphy contests, designed the facade of the Islamic Studies Department using the Kufic script, designed the new facade of the Public Authority of Awqaf in collaboration with Muthanna Al-Obaidi, designed the mural for the National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature celebrating the Arabic language and designed the inscriptions at Saad bin abi Waqqas Mosque in Kaifan.



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Local

Amir commends success of liver transplant by all-Kuwaiti team

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent yesterday a congratulatory cable to Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Humoud Al-Sabah, expressing pride in the first successful liver transplant carried out by an all-Kuwaiti medical team. In the cable, HH the Amir commended the team's efforts to help a Kuwaiti patient in her 50s by carrying out this operation.

He added the success of the process had shown that national medical staff had the capabilities and the will to carry out their important duties. The Amir thanked the staff for their efforts and wished for the swift recovery of the patient. HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables.

This was the first liver transplant by a Kuwaiti team and the 12th of its kind in the country. The patient suffered from complications of cirrhosis. General surgery and liver transplant consultant Dr Mohammad Jamal said the woman was repeatedly admitted to the ICU, and was scheduled to travel abroad for the procedure, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not possible. As she was in dire need for a transplant to save her life, extra efforts were made to find a donor.

Jamal said the procedure is considered a historic medical achievement, the result of professional planning that doctors worked on after many years of studying and preparing. He said the patient is in good health and is improving, and the transplanted liver is functioning well. He thanked Sheikh Basel for his support. —KUNA



KUWAIT: The liver transplant was the first by an all-Kuwaiti team. —KUNA

MoH conducts 4,000 tests for bank employees

KUWAIT: The health ministry's general health department announced that it had taken about 4,000 coronavirus swabs from employees in the banking sector. The department will continue running group swab tests across the country, especially for employees who come in direct contact with clients, head of the department Dr Fahad Al-Ghemlas told KUNA yesterday.

The ministry's teams are spread over different locations in the country to run PCR tests, especially in heavily infected areas, to prevent further spread of the disease, he added. Ghemlas noted that the department has been cooperating with Kuwait Banking Association to test employees of 23 banks since June. Meanwhile, he called on employees to take all safety measures against the virus, and to immediately report any symptoms of sickness. —KUNA



KUWAIT: A health official collects a swab sample from a bank employee to test for COVID-19. —KUNA

Kuwait blood bank helps save life of patient in UAE

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Central Blood Bank (KCBB) announced yesterday it had provided assistance to save the life of a patient residing in the UAE by donating a rare blood type. Head of transportation services at the Kuwaiti Health Ministry Dr Reem Al-Radhwan said the donation was carried out by browsing KCBB's database stretching back to 1989.

After identifying the rare blood type - Jk-null - the donation was sent to Abu Dhabi to assist in an open-heart surgery, Radhwan said. The donation is part of a Kuwait-run project to provide rare blood type donations to GCC and Arab nations. The first donation was in 2016 between Kuwait and the UAE and the second in 2017 between Kuwait and Qatar. —KUNA

Kuwait reports 330 new COVID cases, one death

KUWAIT: Kuwait listed 330 new coronavirus infections yesterday, taking the total number of cases to 141,547, while one fatality was recorded over the past 24 hours, upping the death toll from the outbreak to 872, the health ministry said. The number of people hospitalized with the virus currently stands at 5,925, with 80 of them in intensive care units, said ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad, adding that some 7,458 swab tests were conducted in the past day, taking the total to 1,075,651 tests. The ministry earlier reported 717 more people recovered from the virus over the past day, raising the total of those who have overcome the disease to 134,750. The spokesman urged citizens and expatriates that abiding by health precautions, mainly following social distancing rules, is the only way to halt the spread of the virus. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Force warned citizens and residents in the country to exercise caution due to the unstable weather conditions. The authority stressed its readiness to handle any situation arising from these conditions, urging the public to contact 112 in case of any emergency. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Local

Appeals court allows ex-MP Dahoum to contest election

Pollster expects Islamists to win 13 seats

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The appeals court yesterday overturned a ruling by the lower court to allow former Islamist opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum to contest next month's general polls, but the verdict was immediately challenged by the government. The court also confirmed rulings in favor of three other candidates who were allowed to run after an interior ministry commission had disqualified them on the grounds of previous court verdicts.

The court also confirmed the disqualification of five candidates, in addition to a sixth candidate Khaled Al-Mutairi, who was allowed by the lower court but barred by the appeals court. On Tuesday, the appeals court confirmed the disqualification of six candidates and allowed female candidate

Nadia Al-Othman to run in the polls.

The government and some candidates immediately challenged the rulings to the court of cassation, the country's highest court, whose rulings are final. The final verdicts must be issued before the end of next week ahead of the Dec 5 elections.

Meanwhile, Masarat, a local pollster and research center, projected that around 13 Islamist candidates will win seats in the 50-seat National Assembly, four seats more than they held in the outgoing Assembly. Masarat said its projections were based on surveys conducted with voters. It said that it expects Islamists to win two seats each in the first and second constituencies and three seats each in the third, fourth and fifth constituencies. The pollster did not count the supporters of Islamists, who are expected to win more seats.

Candidates urged in their virtual campaigns for a quick solution to the decades-old housing problem, saying Kuwaiti families have to wait for as long as 20 years to get a house. New candidate Hamad Al-Munawer said Kuwaiti couples pay between KD 50,000 and KD 70,000 in rent during this long waiting period, which greatly benefits real estate merchants.

Munawer said the government must build five new cities to accommodate the large number of couples on the waiting list, and raise housing allowance to KD 400 per month. The candidate said if the government accelerates its construction plan, Kuwaitis could get their houses within a year. New candidate Hamad Rouh Eldin charged that the housing problem is manipulated and the "government deliberately increases the size of the problem" to serve vested interests, pointing out that 90 percent of land in Kuwait is owned by the state.



Saleh Al-Ajairi

Ajairi hospitalized with coronavirus

KUWAIT: Astronomer Saleh Mohammad Saleh Abdelaziz Al-Ajairi was admitted to Jaber Hospital after being infected with coronavirus. Ajairi, born on June 23, 1920, has made immense contribution to astronomy and added to scientific knowledge through his research and many books he authored. He also prepared an almanac named after him. Towards the end of the 1960s, Ajairi built an observatory at his own expense in Kuwait in Andalus, bringing its dome from the US in 1973. In 1980, he was honored by the late Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Shooters compete in Crown Prince tournament

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah annual shooting tournament will come to a close at the Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex tomorrow. Secretary General of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Obaid Munahi Al-Osaimi said HH the Crown Prince asked Capital Governor Sheikh Talal Al-Khalid Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah to represent him at the closing ceremony.

Osaimi said today and tomorrow will see competitions in the trap and skeet categories for men, along with the women's competition. Rifle and pistol competitions will run from 9:00 am till 1:00 pm today, along with the preliminaries of the 50m three position rifle for men, 25m rapid pistol and archery. Results of the first day of



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti shooters Khaled Al-Majed (left) and Majed Al-Dhafiri compete during the Crown Prince's annual shooting tournament at the shooting club in Sulaibiya yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

competition were as follows:

Men's 10m air rifle: 1st: Abdullah Awad Al-Harby from the Military Sports Association; 2nd: Khalid Nasser Al-Fadhli from the National Guard; 3rd: Ali Farhan Al-Mutairi from the Shooting Club.

Men's 10m air pistol: 1st: Saad Mane Al-Ajmi - National Guard; 2nd: Hamad Abdullah Al-Namshan - National Guard; 3rd: Ali Saad Al-Mutairi - Shooting Club.



CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi receives a letter from HH the Amir delivered by the Amir's envoy Sheikh Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. — KUNA

Sisi hails Kuwait's regional policies

CAIRO: Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi praised yesterday Kuwait's "rational" policies in handling challenges facing Arab countries, likening the security of the Gulf region to Egypt's. This came as the president received a letter from HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, delivered to him by Kuwait's Foreign Minister and Acting Information Minister Sheikh Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, his spokesman Bassam Radi said in a statement.

HH the Amir's message affirmed his government and people's pride in the strong historical ties that bind both countries and their people

and Kuwait's keenness to boost cooperation with Egypt, particularly in line with efforts to maintain peace and security on a regional scale.

The Egyptian president requested to convey his greetings to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf, stressing Egypt's keenness to develop close and distinguished bilateral cooperation. He also expressed keenness to exchange expertise in light of the two countries' sustainable development plans.

The Kuwaiti foreign minister praised Cairo's pivotal role in asserting security and stability in the region and its historical role with regards to Kuwait. He mentioned the "constructive influence" of the Egyptian community within the Kuwaiti society, who he said, "live side by side with their Kuwaiti brothers". Alongside bilateral relations, the talks also discussed developments in Iraq and Syria, according to the spokesman. —KUNA



Thousands flee as powerful cyclone buffets south India

Backlash in Indonesia as transgender woman put in male jail cell

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LIMA: Relatives carry the coffin of a suspected COVID-19 victim at the Nueva Esperanza cemetery, one of the largest in Latin America, in the southern outskirts of Lima. — AFP

Global virus cases pass 60 million

Sombre Thanksgiving in US as COVID death toll mounts

WASHINGTON: Americans readied for a subdued Thanksgiving holiday yesterday under the pall of a worsening coronavirus crisis, with death tolls hitting new highs worldwide as infections multiply to surpass more than 60 million. While vaccine breakthroughs have raised hopes for an end to the pandemic, much of the world is still facing a gloomy winter holiday season dampened by lockdowns, economic anxiety and the devastating losses of from a disease that is claiming thousands of lives daily.

In the United States, Americans suffered their highest daily death toll in six months on the eve of the Thanksgiving holiday, a time when families normally gather in large numbers for decadent feasts of turkey, mashed potatoes and pie. It is also tradition to serve hot meals to the needy, a service provided by food banks and homeless shelters that have become especially vital in a year when the pandemic has wiped out jobs and incomes.

"After weeks and months of the COVID and all these issues of unemployment, it's nice to feel a sense of belonging," said Samitha Antwi, a woman who picked up a packaged meal distributed by the Los Angeles Mission ahead of Thanksgiving. "A hot meal, it warms your heart. We call it, in my community, soul food," added Linn Hohl, another woman in line. The US government's health protection agency has for the first time called on Americans not to travel for the holiday - a call that not all have heeded.

In his Thanksgiving address on Wednesday, US President-elect Joe Biden also appealed for his "weary" countrymen to dig deep and soldier through the remaining months until vaccines are available. "There is real hope, tangible hope. So hang on. Don't let yourself surrender to the fatigue," Biden urged. More than 60 million infections and 1.4 million deaths have now been recorded around the world since the new coronavirus emerged in China late last year, according to a tally compiled by AFP from official sources.

The number of infections - roughly equivalent to the population of Italy - likely only reflects a fraction of the actual total, as many countries lack testing capacity. While low-income frontline workers often face the biggest risks, the virus has also infected the world's wealthiest and most powerful. Yesterday, Sweden's Prince Carl Philip and his wife Princess Sofia became the latest royalty to go into self-isolation after testing positive for COVID-19, the palace said.

Ski season cancelled?

In Europe, where many countries have imposed sweeping shutdowns in recent weeks, ski holidays were fast becoming the latest victims of the pandemic. Germany said Wednesday that it would extend its virus curbs until 2021 and plans to seek a deal with European partners to close ski slopes until January 10.

Infected tourists at European ski resorts were a major source of virus spread around the hard-hit continent earlier this year. The statement from Chancellor Angela Merkel dovetailed with French plans announced one day earlier to shutter ski resorts through the year's end. "I will say this openly that it won't be easy, but we will try," Merkel said.

The move put Berlin and Paris on a collision course with resort operators and holiday hotspot Austria ahead of the crucial Christmas season. In non-EU member Switzerland, however, ski resorts are open - although police have been spotted patrolling to ensure that skiers respect anti-COVID measures such as wearing masks and social distancing. While the UK and France are talking about easing their lockdown measures soon, Russia is still resisting stay-at-home orders despite registering record infections and deaths from the virus.

In the poor Balkan region, soaring rates of infection are stretching already weak healthcare systems, but governments are hesitant to inflict any further economic damage with harsh measures. Countries who have had strong success against the virus are also cracking down on new outbreaks. South Korea closed bars and nightclubs this week as it braces for a third major wave, with virus cases at their highest level since March. And New Zealand was tackling a cluster of six COVID-19 positive players of Pakistan's visiting cricket squad. — AFP

International

COVID-19 vaccines finally at hand after year-long sprint

Coronavirus has claimed 1.4 million lives

PARIS: Less than a year after an unknown coronavirus that has claimed 1.4 million lives began spreading across the globe, a number of highly promising COVID-19 vaccines are on the cusp of release. Health authorities could give a green light for emergency use within weeks, which would mark the most rapid vaccine development for a pandemic in history – but many questions remain.

When will a jab be available?

After months without a visible breakthrough, everything sped up in November, when several pharmaceutical companies made encouraging preliminary announcements about the efficacy of their vaccines. The European Medicines Agency (EMA), charged with overseeing drug approval in the European Union, told AFP that it could approve the first COVID-19 vaccines by the end of the year, or early in 2021. France, Spain and Italy have all sketched out distribution plans on that basis.

Across the Atlantic, vaccination campaigns could start in the United States as early as mid-December, assuming the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approves an accelerated timetable for rollout. Chinese authorities have already begun jabbing high-risk patients, and in Russia two vaccines were validated for use even before the final phase of clinical trials had begun. Researching, testing, approving, manufacturing and distributing a new vaccine usually takes a decade or longer.

The breakneck pace of development, resulting in half-a-dozen COVID-19 vaccines, saw an unprecedented blitzkrieg of public and private research backed by a huge sums of money and provisional orders for billions of doses. But all parties involved insist that corners have not been cut. The EU's regulatory agency, for example, acknowledged an effort "to speed up" the evaluation process, but insisted it was "ensuring the same high regulatory standards for quality, safety and efficacy" as for any other drug.

But this extraordinary achievement will not mean that a waiting world will be vaccinated right away. "Initial supply of #COVID19 vaccines will be limited, so #healthworkers, older people and other at-risk populations will be prioritized," World Health Organization (WHO) head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus recently tweeted. The world's poorest countries, he warned, should not have to wait until wealthy ones that have reserved billions of doses are served. "The urgency with which vaccines have been developed must be matched by the same urgency to distribute them fairly," he said, highlighting the risk that the poor and vulnerable will be "trampled in the stampede" to get inoculated.

Which vaccine is best?

Too early to say. Since November 9, four drug makers have announced that their vaccines work, most of them more than 90 percent of the time. The first to report Phase 3 results was the US-German collaboration between pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and German biotech start-up BioNTech, followed by the US firm Moderna, a British partnership between AstraZeneca and Oxford University, and Russia's state-run Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology.

But the rush for results in anticipation of a huge global market means the announcements were made by the companies themselves, and have yet to be backed up by publication in peer-reviewed journals, which can take months. All the vaccines unveiled are near the end of so-called Phase 3 clinical trials, the final step in a process that tests safety and efficacy on tens of thousands of volunteers of different ages and ethnicities spread across the world.

Basically, the efficacy of a vaccine is determined by comparing the number of people who get sick with COVID-19 in a group of vaccinated volunteers compared to another group that

receives a placebo instead of the active drug. The threshold for releasing the findings — the number of people infected with COVID-19 — was different in each case: 170 for Pfizer/BioNTech, 95 for Moderna, 131 for AstraZeneca/Oxford, and only 39 for the Gamaleya Institute.

Pfizer reported 95 percent efficacy, with only eight of the 170 COVID-19 patients coming from the vaccinated group. For Moderna — with 94.5 percent efficacy — it was almost identical, while Gamaleya's Sputnik V vaccine reported 91.4 percent efficacy. The calculations for AstraZeneca's two-dose vaccine were more complicated. Across two separate trials with slightly different protocols, the drug worked 70 percent of the time. But in a group whose first jab was a half-dose rather than a full one, the efficacy rate rose to 90 percent, putting it in the same league as the others. The counter-intuitive result — less vaccine conferring more protection — stemmed from the reaction of the immune system, the company said.

But the success rate is not the only criterion in determining which vaccine will be adopted in different circumstances. Cost and logistics are also factors. AstraZeneca's double jab, for example, is by far the least expensive, at about 2.5 euros (\$3) per dose. It also has a significant advantage when it comes to transport and storage. Moderna's vaccine must be kept at -20 degrees Celsius, while Pfizer's requires an even chillier -70C to remain viable. AstraZeneca's vaccine, by contrast, can be stored at the temperature of a normal fridge.

What questions remain?

There are plenty, including some big ones. "We knew that a vaccine would be essential for bringing the pandemic under control," Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted. "But it's important to emphasise that a vaccine will complement the other tools we have, not replace them." That said, the WHO chief, added, "the light at the end of this long, dark tunnel is growing brighter." The biggest question mark hanging over all of these vaccines is how long immunity lasts. All the results were reported only a few weeks after the vaccines were administered.

"How long will protection last?"

Will vaccination result in virus 'escape' mutations which limit vaccine effectiveness over time? Penny Ward, a visiting professor in pharmaceutical medicine at King's College London, told journalists, listing things we still need to know. A handful of reinfections, in which people recovered from COVID-19 only to become infected by a slightly different strain, also raise questions about the duration of immunity. Scientists also still don't know if the vaccines will be as effective with high-risk individuals, especially the elderly, who are far more susceptible to life-threatening symptoms.

Yet another "known unknown" is whether an effective vaccine simply eliminates the symptoms, or whether it also prevents someone from transmitting the virus to others. In other words, even if it protects you from getting sick, will it protect others you come into contact with from catching the bug? Here again, AstraZeneca may have an edge on the competition.

"The Oxford/AstraZeneca team has been collecting weekly nasal and throat swabs from all trial participants to look for asymptomatic infections," Eleanor Riley, a professor of immunology and infectious disease at the University of Edinburgh, told the Science Media Centre in London. The drug maker found "early indication" that the vaccine could reduce virus transmission. Contacted by AFP, AstraZeneca noted that not all 23,000 people in their trial were tested for asymptomatic cases, but did not say how many were.



MAINZ: Pharmaceutical vials made by German glass company Schott are pictured at the company's headquarters in Mainz, western Germany. As expectations grow that the first COVID-19 jabs will be administered in a matter of weeks, German glassmaker Schott is quietly doing what it has been for months: churning out vials that will hold the vaccine. — AFP

How many in the pipeline?

The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified 48 "candidate vaccines" at the stage of clinical trials in humans by mid-November, but only 11 at the most advanced Phase 3 stage. Besides the four that announced results this month are several Chinese vaccines from state-run laboratories, made by Sinovac, Sinopharm and CanSino. The WHO has identified another 164 vaccine projects that are still in the pre-clinical phase of development.

What kind of vaccines?

Some methods for making a vaccine are tried-and-tested, while others remain experimental. Inactivated traditional vaccines use a virus germ that has been killed, while others use a weakened or "attenuated" strain. These vaccines work when the body treats the deactivated pathogen as if it were a real threat, producing antibodies to kill it without endangering the patient with full infection. So-called "sub-unit" vaccines contain a fragment of the virus or bacteria they are derived from to produce a similar immune response.

"Viral vector" varieties deliver fragments of viral DNA into cells, often hitching a lift off of other virus molecules. For example, a measles virus modified with a coronavirus protein — the apparatus SARS-CoV-2 uses to latch on to human cells — can be deployed to provide immunity to COVID-19. Both Pfizer's and Moderna's vaccines are based on cutting-edge technology that uses synthetic versions of molecules called messenger RNA to hack into human cells, and effectively turn them into vaccine-making factories.

Is there a vaccine against mistrust?

Whichever vaccine is the first to be distributed, there's a final question that scientists are powerless to answer but that could determine the success of their efforts: in an era of deep mistrust of authority, how many people will refuse to be vaccinated? According to a study last month in the Royal Society journal Open Science, a significant percentage of people in many countries subscribe to conspiracy theories about the origin of the vaccines, or the virus itself. In Mexico, for example, more than a fifth of those questioned said they thought the pandemic itself was "part of a plan to impose vaccinations worldwide". A survey published earlier this month by the World Economic Forum covering 15 countries found that the number of people willing to be vaccinated had dropped since August from 77 to 73 percent. — AFP

International

Adults, children 'must move' to stay fit in COVID era: WHO

WHO issues first physical activity guidelines since 2010

GENEVA: All adults should do a minimum of 150 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week, even more vital for well-being and mental health in the COVID-19 era, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Wednesday in its first guidance in a decade. It recommended that children and adolescents have an average of one hour of daily physical exercise and limit time in front of electronic screens.

And people of all ages must compensate for growing sedentary behaviour with physical activity to ward off disease and add years to their lives, the WHO said, launching its "Every Move Counts" campaign. "Increasing physical activity not only helps prevent and manage heart disease, type-2 diabetes and cancer, it also reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety, reduces cognitive decline including Alzheimer's and im-

proves memory," Ruediger Krech, WHO director for health promotion, told a news briefing.

Yet one in four adults and a "staggering" four out of five adolescents do not get enough physical activity, which can include walking, cycling, gardening and cleaning, the WHO said. "These guidelines emphasise what many are experiencing during the COVID restrictions that are applied all over the world.

And that is that being active every day is good not only our bodies but also our mental health," said Fiona Bull, head of WHO's physical activity unit.

"Phone a friend and do classes online to-

gether, help your family members, do it as a family. And when you can, get outside," she said.

Research into the ill-effects of sedentary behavior has grown in the past decade, leading to the new advice, Bull said. "That is limit sedentary time, and do more activity to offset sedentary time, particularly for those who do long hours of sedentary, which includes a lot of people who have got office-based work environments," she said. "For children we also recommend they limit sedentary time, particularly screen time."

Pregnant women and postpartum mothers

are now included in the recommendations of 150 to 300 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic activity per week for adults. This brings health benefits for both the mother and baby, according to Juana Willumsen, a WHO technical officer. "For example there is a 30% reduction in gestational diabetes amongst women who are physically active during pregnancy," she said.

Adults above 65 are advised to add muscle strengthening and activities focusing on balance and coordination to help prevent falls later. Devices worn on the wrist or hip that track physical activity are helpful for all, Bull said. "Monitoring how active you are is very good feedback," she said. "That is important because we tend to think we might be more active. We tend to underestimate how much time we spend sedentary." —Reuters



Children should have 1 hour daily exercise

COVID-19 treatments: Progress, no panacea

PARIS: Nearly a year after a mysterious pneumonia emerged in China and began its global spread, there is still no silver bullet treatment for COVID-19 despite an unprecedented effort to discover new medicines or repurpose existing drugs. A single family of cheap, widely available medications — corticosteroids — has proven its effectiveness, but some other drugs that were initially hyped have disappointed.

What works? Dexamethasone

This is the only treatment that has reduced mortality from COVID-19, although it has only been shown to work for patients who are severely ill in hospital and need oxygen therapy. The World Health Organization (WHO), as well as the European Medicines Agency (EMA) have been recommending dexamethasone for these patients since September, based on the findings of a large British clinical trial called Recovery. Dexamethasone can actually inhibit the immune system, so it should not be given to those in the early stage of the disease. But this is why it works in those who are very ill — it acts to tame a runaway immune response, which can trigger the inflammation characteristically seen in severe forms of disease. And it appears that it's not just dexamethasone.

Research published in early September in the American medical journal *Jama* showed that other drugs in the same corticosteroid family could also be effective, reducing mortality by 21 percent after 28 days for patients with severe COVID-19. This led the WHO to recommend "systematic" use of corticosteroids in severe and critical patients. Anticoagulants — Like corticosteroids, these drugs are used only in the most severely ill patients. The goal is to prevent blood clots, one of the serious complications of COVID-19. What doesn't work well enough —

Remdesivir

For a time this antiviral treatment had the hopes of the world riding on it. The drug, developed for Ebola, was initially thought to be very promising. The European Commission announced that it had ordered 500,000 doses in October, while the US granted it permanent authorization for use. Its manufacturer, US pharma giant Gilead, has said the drug boosted 2020 third quarter sales by almost \$900 million

(756 million euros). But it has not lived up to expectations. On November 20, the WHO said remdesivir should not be used to treat COVID-19 patients no matter how serious their illness, saying it had "no important effect" on survival chances. That does not mean it is proved to be ineffective, but rather that it had not been shown to improve patient outcomes. There were also concerns about possible side effects, particularly affecting the kidneys, as well as the drug's cost. The WHO advice was based on four international randomised clinical trials involving more than 7,000 patients hospitalised with COVID-19. What does not work at all.

Hydroxychloroquine

This drug became a lightning rod for politicized debates over the pandemic. Used as a treatment for malaria or autoimmune diseases, depending on the country, hydroxychloroquine was touted as something of a miracle cure by its proponents — notably US President Donald Trump — despite a lack of evidence that it worked. Among scientists, controversial French professor Didier Raoult argued vociferously in favour of the drug.

Hydroxychloroquine was at the centre of an academic scandal, when the prestigious medical journal the *Lancet* had to retract a study that suggested negative effects from the drug, after concerns were raised about the underlying data. The retraction of research critical of hydroxychloroquine only served to galvanize supporters of the drug. But study after study has shown that it is not effective against COVID-19 including the British trial Recovery, whose results were published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in October.

Lopinavir-ritonavir

Used against HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, this one-two antiviral punch has shown to be ineffective at treating COVID-19 in hospital settings, according to the Recovery trial, which published its results in the *Lancet* in October.

Still under investigation

Tocilizumab: Scientists hope this immunosuppressant, currently used against rheumatoid arthritis, will be able to prevent potentially deadly inflammation in serious cases. So far, however, studies have not yet provided a definitive answer. Researchers from Imperial College London announced on November 19 that tocilizumab appeared to be having a beneficial effect, according to preliminary results from their clinical trial. The larger-scale Recovery trial may reveal more in the coming weeks.



MULHOUSE: Employees of the Lantz funeral company, wearing face masks as protective measures, close the coffin of a victim of the COVID-19 at a hospital in Mulhouse, eastern France. —AFP

Synthetic antibodies

When the body fights off viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 it develops antibodies — proteins that are programmed to target specific pathogens. These anti-bodies can be synthesized in a lab and could in theory be given to patients sick with COVID-19 to boost their own natural immune response. Trump received this still experimental treatment, manufactured by the American biotechnology company Regeneron, when he was hospitalized with the virus. This treatment, and one of the same type manufactured by Eli Lilly, have received authorization for emergency use in the US. But their effectiveness continues to be evaluated, with the Regeneron treatment included in the Recovery trial.

Plasma

Plasma taken from the blood of recovered patients showed some early promise when given intravenously to people sick with COVID-19. It has already shown to help speed recovery from Ebola as well as SARS, which is caused by the same family of pathogens as the novel coronavirus. Recovery has an ongoing clinical trial for plasma treatment. —AFP

International

Friday, November 27, 2020

Turkish court jails over 300 for life in a mass coup trial

Multiple life sentences issued to 27 disgruntled pilots

ANKARA: A Turkish court jailed more than 300 former pilots and other suspects for life in a mass trial stemming from a bloody 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Fethullah Gulen, a US-based Muslim preacher who was once an Erdogan ally, is accused of ordering the failed putsch. His movement has been proscribed as a terrorist group by Ankara, but the 79-year-old denies all charges.

A total of 251 people died and more than 2,000 were injured in what has turned into the defining moment of Erdogan's rule and contemporary Turkish politics. The chaotic attempt was swiftly followed by a fierce government crackdown spanning years and resulting in tens of thousands of arrests. Turkey's largest courtroom was packed with dozens of security personnel and the presiding judge ordered one protesting defendant to "Sit down!" several times before reading the verdict.

He issued multiple life sentences to 27 disgruntled air force pilots who bombed the capital Ankara and civilians who orchestrated the coup attempt from inside the Akinci military base near the capital. Court documents subsequently obtained by AFP showed 337 defendants handed life sentences for murder, violating the constitutional order and attempting to assassinate Erdogan. Sixty suspects were given jail sentences of various lengths while 75 were acquitted.

'Justice has been served'

"Justice has been served," Ufuk Yegin, who represents a victims' families association, told AFP. "It was a very important trial for the Turkish judicial system and for the country," added Muaz Ergezen, another lawyer for the victims. "It is a trial that will go down in history." The then chief of staff general Hulusi Akar—now the defense minister—and other

top commanders were held hostage at the military base overnight before their rescue on the morning of July 16, 2016. F-16 fighter jets struck the parliament building, the road near the presidential palace and the headquarters of the special forces and the Ankara police.

Erdogan was on vacation in southern Turkey at the time. The bombs killed 68 people in the capital and injured more than 200. Nine civilians also died trying to stop the plotters at the entrance to the base. Gulen, Adil Oksuz—a theology lecturer who officials claim was a key coordinator of what was happening on the ground—and four others are being tried in absentia. Oksuz was detained shortly after the coup bid but released later and is now on the run. Yesterday's verdict culminates a trial that began in August 2017 involving nearly 500 suspects. Businessman Kemal Batmaz, accused of assisting Oksuz, was among dozens of defendants handed multiple aggravated life sentences for playing leading roles in Erdogan's attempted overthrow. An aggravated life sentence has tougher terms of detention and replaced the death penalty after it was abolished in 2004 as part of Turkey's drive to join the European Union. The putsch bid was stamped out quickly, but its legacy still haunts Turkey. A fierce government crackdown that followed has muzzled the media and seen tens of thousands arrested in nationwide raids. More than 100,000 public sector employees, including teachers and judges, were sacked or suspended because of their suspected links to Gulen. These arrests continue, although they are less sweeping. Despite the large number of suspects, a separate coup-related trial is even bigger, focusing on the presidential guard's activities and involving 521 suspects. Ten of a total 289 trials into the failed overthrow of Erdogan are still under way, state news agency Anadolu reported. —AFP



ANKARA: Families wait to enter the Sincan Penal Institution at the 4th Heavy Penal Court near Ankara yesterday. A Turkish court handed down verdicts to nearly 500 suspects in one of the main trials stemming from the bloody 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. — AFP

Woman charged with hiding money transfers to Syria-based militants

WASHINGTON: US federal prosecutors have charged a New Jersey woman with concealing multiple efforts to transfer money to Islamist militants in Syria connected to the Nusra Front, a onetime al Qaeda affiliate based in Syria's Idlib province. Maria Bell, 53, of Hopatcong, New Jersey, was accused in a criminal complaint of knowingly concealing her involvement in providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, namely al-Nusra. Bell was scheduled to appear by video conference on Wednesday afternoon before a US Magistrate Judge in Newark. Rahul Sharma, a public defender expected to represent her, declined to comment.

The US Attorney's office in Newark alleges in court filings that starting around February 2017, Bell used mobile phone apps to communicate with, advise and facilitate money transfers, to al-Nusra, also known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). An affidavit signed by FBI agent Matthew Hohmann says Bell also used encrypted apps to provide information to al-Nusra which could "support acts of terrorism." This included advice on operational security, communications and gun purchases.

When offering the militant group assistance, Hohmann alleged, Bell cited her own professional experience, including specialized firearms training she underwent while serving on active duty in the US Army and the Army National Guard. The FBI affidavit alleged that Bell regularly used encrypted apps to communicate with a Nusra member with whom she had an online relationship. It said she allegedly exchanged "thousands of encrypted communications" with the alleged Nusra member. The FBI said that she planned to meet him in Turkey and sent at least 18 payments totaling \$3,150 to his associates via wire transfer. If convicted, Bell faces up to 10 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. — Reuters

Australian-British lecturer freed in Iran prisoner swap

SYDNEY: An Australian-British academic jailed for spying by Iran has been released after two "traumatic" years behind bars, in a swap for three Iranians linked to a botched Bangkok bomb plot. Middle East scholar Kylie Moore-Gilbert said Thursday that departing Iran was "bittersweet" despite "injustices" endured during more than 800 days detained in the country's toughest prisons. "I came to Iran as a friend and with friendly intentions," she said, praising the "warm-hearted, generous and brave" Iranian people, despite what she called a "long and traumatic ordeal".

The 33-year-old was arrested by Iran's hardline Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in 2018, after attending an academic conference in the holy city of Qom in central Iran. She was later charged with espionage and sentenced to ten years in jail. Her release was secured as part of a prisoner swap for three men: Masoud Sedaghatzadeh, Mohammad Khazaei and wheelchair-bound Saeid Moradi, who blew off his own legs with homemade explosives.

All three were linked to a failed plot to assassinate Israeli diplomats in Thailand in 2012. Thai corrections authorities on Thursday confirmed that Sedaghatzadeh and Moradi were transferred back to Iran as prisoners, while Khazaei was granted a royal pardon in August. The first images of a freed Moore-Gilbert emerged from Iranian state television late Wednesday, sparking elation from friends and family who had campaigned for her freedom and maintain her innocence.

"We are relieved and ecstatic," the family said in a statement. "We cannot convey the overwhelming happiness that each of us feel at this incredible news." In footage broadcast by Iran's Irib news agency from Tehran airport, Moore-Gilbert was seen wearing a headscarf and a face mask, accompanied by the Australian ambassador. Seemingly aware of the camera, she removed the mask to confirm her identity. Irib also showed footage of three men—one of them in a wheelchair—draped in Iranian flags and being greeted as heroes by officials, including the deputy foreign minister.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he had spoken to Moore-Gilbert and confirmed she would receive health and psychological support on her return to Australia, which has been complicated by COVID-19 restrictions and 14-day mandatory quarantine. "She is an amazing Australian who has gone through an ordeal that we can only imagine and it will be a tough transition for her," he said at a virtual press conference. The University of Melbourne Islamic studies lecturer herself said in a statement she faced a "challenging period of adjustment" at home in Australia. Letters smuggled out of prison told of Moore-Gilbert's deep psychological and legal struggles. She wrote that the first 10 months she spent in a wing of Tehran's notorious Evin prison had "gravely damaged" her mental health. —AFP

International

Powerful cyclone buffets S India, pushing thousands into shelters

‘The danger is not over yet,’ authorities warn

PUDUCHERRY: A powerful cyclonic storm hurtled into India's southeastern coast yesterday, uprooting trees and packing strong winds and rains as tens of thousands of people took refuge in shelters. The centre of Nivar made landfall at 3:05 am local time near Puducherry with winds of up to 130 kilometers per hour. Thousands of state and national emergency personnel were deployed in the southern regions of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Puducherry as authorities suspended power supply across several cities to prevent damage to the electricity grid.

One woman in Tamil Nadu died after a boundary wall collapsed following heavy rains late Wednesday, local media reported. Initially classified as a “very severe cyclonic storm” as it swirled in the Bay of Bengal, Nivar weakened after landfall into a “severe cyclonic storm”, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said.

It is forecast to move north and further weaken over the next few hours, the weather bureau added. The danger “is not over yet as some part of the cyclone is still over the sea though center is over the land,” the IMD tweeted. The fierce winds uprooted trees and toppled electricity pylons while downpours lashed parts of the region, causing flash floods. Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu recorded nearly 244 millimetres (9.6 inches) of rain since Wednesday morning, with a severe weather warning for further thunderstorms in place for the state.

Tamil Nadu minister R.B. Udhayakumar said late Wednesday that around 175,000 people were moved to shelters across the state as local authorities declared a public holiday Wednesday and Thursday, shutting everything except emergency services. Flight operations at Chennai airport were suspended until yesterday morning and metro train services halted. In Puducherry, home to 1.6 million people, the rain-soaked streets and markets were deserted and Lieutenant Governor Kiran Bedi appealed to locals to stay indoors and abide by authorities’ instructions. “Move to high places wherever you have to. There are relief centres. Please move there,” Bedi said in a video message on Twitter.

The navy said its ships, aircraft and crew were on standby to assist with disaster relief. But people in some pockets along the coast were reluctant to abandon their homes and fishing boats and move to government shelters. In Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai, authorities said they were also closely observing the level of reservoirs and lakes to avoid a repeat of 2015 flooding which killed several hundred people.

Lake Chembarambakkam outside Chennai discharged extra water because of the heavy rains amid warnings to residents in low-lying areas. No evacuation orders were issued in Sri Lanka but heavy rains were forecast, particularly in the north of the island nation. Fishermen there were advised



PUDUCHERRY: People waded along a waterlogged road after heavy rains following Cyclone Nivar landfall, in Puducherry yesterday. Accurate forecasting and the evacuation of several hundred thousand people helped avert any loss of life after a cyclone clobbered southeast India, authorities said on November 26, as rescuers worked to restore power and clear fallen trees. —AFP

not to go out to sea. More than 110 people died after “super cyclone” Amphan ravaged eastern India and Bangladesh in May, flattening villages, destroying farms and leaving millions without elec-

tricity. But the death toll was far lower than the many thousands killed in previous cyclones of that size, a result of improved weather forecasting and better response plans. —AFP

Paris train gunman says he was looking for US soldiers

PARIS: The Moroccan gunman on trial for an attempted terror attack on a Paris-bound train five years ago said Wednesday he had aimed at the heads of American soldiers but could not shoot. On August 21, 2015, after drinking a coffee at the station in Brussels, Ayoub El Khazzani told the court that he boarded the Amsterdam-Paris high-speed Thalys train concealing an AK-47 automatic rifle and 300 rounds of ammunition.

Speaking at his trial for the first time, he said he was under orders from Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who had travelled with him to Europe from war-torn Syria to guide the cell behind the deadly attacks in November 2015 in Paris and in March 2016 in the Belgian capital Brussels. “I took my seat. I started looking for the people he had spoken to me about, American soldiers, people from the European Commission. Honestly it was to kill them,” the 31-year-old Khazzani told the court. He said he eventually located his American targets. The presiding judge asked him: “How did you recognize them?” “Abaaoud had told me they were young and burly, that they spoke English,” Khazzani replied. —AFP

New Delhi's poisonous air a perennial crisis of its own making

NEW DELHI: Thousands of families who live near a smouldering waste landfill in a northern corner of India's capital have boarded up their doors and windows because they say the air outside is so toxic that they would be coughing all day. New Delhi has the worst air of any capital on the planet, according to IQ AirVisual, a Swiss-based group that gathers air quality data globally.

Jahangirpuri is one of its most polluted parts, choking daily in the murky mix of smoke from burning rubbish, exhaust fumes from trucks coming in and out a large depot and dust rising from unmetalled roads. “We're dying a slow death. But we can't think of going anywhere else because our work is here,” said daily wage worker Naresh Yadav, a 33-year-old migrant worker from poverty stricken Bihar state.

This month, as winds dropped leaving pollutants trapped in the air, the levels of PM2.5, tiny particulate matter that is sucked deep into the lungs, have averaged 390 in Jahangirpuri - six times more than the amount deemed safe by the World Health Organization. Delhi has blamed farmers burning crop stubble in the neighboring states for its sickly air, and the federal capital's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said this week it was worsening the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.

But, more than half the pollutants in Delhi's air are the result of vehicular emissions, toxic waste and smoke from the thousands of small unregulated industrial units and dust from the never-ending construction, according to a breakdown by environment groups. “Delhi cannot build a wall to prevent

polluted air coming from its surrounding states, but it has to check its own sources of pollution - be it dust, illegal industries, polluting factories, polluting vehicles or waste and biomass burning,” said Vimlendu Jha, founder of environment group Swachha.

A ban on garbage burning is routinely flouted in the teeming Jahangirpuri neighborhood and there are illegal, small paint and dye shops operating from homes in the area polluting the air and water. On Wednesday, in the Ghazipur area, another mountainous waste landfill site, rising to over 60 meters (197 ft), caught fire, releasing poisonous smoke into the atmosphere. “We're facing breathing difficulties due to the smoke coming out from the landfill site that's been on fire since yesterday,” said Vivek Shukla, 34, a resident.

Lack of officers

Across town, a small number of government environment officials sit in large office blocks surrounded by stacks of files and complain of being overburdened with paperwork. For a sprawling metropolis of 18 million, there are only 40 field staff to enforce environment standards. MP George, a scientist at the government's Delhi Pollution Control Committee told a webinar earlier this month that the capital's air monitoring systems were superior to some other heavily polluted cities. “But staff crunch is there, no doubt,” George said. The Delhi government has now advertised for about 60 environmental scientists to strengthen its field staff, but recruitment is typically a slow process due to bureaucracy and a lack of resources.

Critics say Delhi's fight against pollution is ad-hoc and based on quick fixes. When the air quality plummets as happened soon after the Hindu festival of Diwali earlier this month, the city administration despatched fire trucks to spray water on the streets to stop dust from flying. Next, it hired contract workers to stand at hundreds of traffic intersections to persuade drivers to shut off their engines, saying it would help curb emissions. Few bothered. “These measures will not solve the problem,” Jha said. “Pollution levels will start coming down only if policymakers start looking at the root causes of Delhi's toxic air.” —Reuters

International

Ethiopia PM orders final offensive against dissident Tigray's leaders

Deadline for surrender expires

ADDIS ABABA: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed yesterday ordered Ethiopia's army to launch a final offensive against Tigray's dissident leaders in their regional capital Mekele, saying the deadline for surrender had expired. Abiy, the winner of last year's Nobel Peace Prize, late Sunday gave the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) 72 hours to lay down their arms.

The ultimatum was rejected by the leaders of the region, whose forces have been fighting federal troops in the country's north for three weeks, displacing over 40,000 people and killing hundreds. Ethiopia's army—which in recent days said it was advancing on Mekele with tanks—had been directed “to conclude the third and final phase” against the TPLF, Abiy said.

“In this final phase, great care will be given to protect innocent civilians from harm. All efforts will be made to ensure that the city of Mekele, which was built through the hard work of our people, will not be severely damaged,” Abiy said. He said “thousands” of TPLF militia and special forces had surrendered to federal forces before the deadline lapsed. It was not immediately clear how close the army was to the city. A communications blackout in Tigray and restrictions on reporting have made verifying claims from both sides difficult.

‘Carefully devised’ strategy

Diplomats briefed on the fighting told AFP

Wednesday that federal forces were at least 30 kilometers (18 miles) from Mekele to the north and the south. The threatened assault and fears for Mekele's half a million inhabitants accelerated diplomatic efforts this week to mediate, with the UN Security Council holding its first meeting on the crisis on Tuesday. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres urged “the leaders of Ethiopia to do everything possible to protect civilians” as the US, EU and other international powers encouraged mediation through the African Union, headquartered in Addis Ababa.

Amnesty International and other rights watchdogs warned bombarding Mekele could constitute a war crime. Abiy stressed that Ethiopia's defense forces had “carefully devised” a strategy to defeat the TPLF in Mekele without harming civilians or public property. “We call on the people of Mekele and its environs to disarm, stay at home and stay away from military targets” and assist by handing over TPLF elements in their midst, Abiy said.

Resistance

Abiy, who ordered troops into Tigray on November 4 following alleged attacks by TPLF forces on federal military camps in the region, has resisted appeals for talks and his government had flatly refused to negotiate. As international pressure mounted this week, Abiy issued a strongly-worded statement rejecting outside “interference”



DANSHA: A member of the Amhara Special Forces sits at the 5th Battalion of the Northern Command of the Ethiopian Army in Dansha, Ethiopia. — AFP

in what he labeled an internal “law enforcement” operation.

“We therefore respectfully urge the international community to refrain from any unwelcome and unlawful acts of interference and respect the fundamental principles of non-intervention under

international law,” he said. Since the fighting began, more than 40,000 people have fled to eastern Sudan and rockets have fallen on the Eritrean capital Asmara and Ethiopian cities outside Tigray, spurring fears the conflict could destabilize the wider Horn of Africa region. — AFP

Tigray - the Ethiopian northern powerhouse

NAIROBI: Ethiopia's northern Tigray, where the federal army launched a military offensive against the regional leadership on November 4, has long had an outsized influence in the Horn of Africa nation.

Rugged north

Tigray is the northernmost of Ethiopia's ten regions, more than 600 kilometers from the capital Addis Ababa and administered under the system of “ethnic federalism” which divides the country according to language and ethnicity. It is a landscape of rugged highlands and agricultural lowlands in which the majority is Tigrayan, a group that accounts for less than six percent of Ethiopia's population of 110 million. Tigray borders Eritrea to the north with which Ethiopia has fought a frontier war in the past. The regional capital, Mekele, lies in the east of Tigray with a population of around 500,000 inhabitants, roughly one-tenth of the region's mostly rural populace.

Cultural and religious heritage

Tigray has played a major role in Ethiopia's cultural and religious history, its heritage making it a major tourist draw for the country. The ancient city of Axum is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and was the centre of a powerful kingdom from the 1st-9th century AD. It was Christianised by the Egyptian Church in the 4th century. The city houses a famous obelisk, 24 metres high, that pre-dates the Christian era and is possibly as old as the 5th century BC.

Axum is also a sacred place for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians because Emperor Menelik I, considered to be the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, is believed to have brought the Ark of the Covenant there from Jerusalem, containing the Ten Commandments. It is believed the Ark remains in Axum today, hidden from sight in the Church of St. Mary of Zion, the most sacred place in the Ethiopian Orthodox religion. Mountainous Tigray is also home to dozens of other churches carved into the faces of rocky spires.

Economic engine

Tigray is an agricultural region producing several crops, including sesame for export, as well as being home to major national industries. Ethiopia's biggest cement company, a major gold producer, and one of the country's largest textile factories are all located in Tigray, and have all had their bank accounts frozen since mid-November. The federal government accuses the companies of providing financial support to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which it is battling.

Political power, military might

The TPLF dominated Ethiopia's political and security structures from 1991-2018, between the collapse of the brutal Marxist Derg regime, that it helped defeat, and the arrival in power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. For much of that period Ethiopia was run by the talismanic Tigrayan leader Meles Zenawi. However, when Abiy—who is from the Oromo ethnic group—took over he began to strip power and influence from the TPLF. In response, its leaders withdrew to their northern stronghold and began to oppose his rule. In September, the TPLF won all seats in an election held in defiance of Addis Ababa, which had ordered a postponement due to the coronavirus pandemic. The vote became one of the triggers of the current conflict. — AFP

Burkina Faso's incumbent Kabore wins presidential election

OUAGADOUGOU: Burkina Faso's President Roch Marc Christian Kabore has won a second term after gaining an outright majority in the first round of elections, the country's electoral board announced yesterday. “Mr Kabore... with 57.87 percent of the vote, is provisionally elected president of (Burkina) Faso in the first round,” said Newton Ahmed Barry, head of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI).

Eddie Komboigo, the candidate of a once-ruling party, came second in Sunday's vote with 15.48 percent of the ballot, followed by Zephirin Diabre, considered by pundits to be the best-placed opposition hopeful, with 12.46 percent. Kabore, 63, has been under fire for his response to a five-year-old jihadist insurgency that has rolled in from Mali. But he was the favorite and by winning an overall majority in the first round he avoids a runoff vote in which he would have had to stand against a single candidate backed by a united opposition.

The elections on Sunday were for Burkina's legislature as well as its presidency, where executive power in the former French colony is concentrated. The paramount court, the Constitutional Council, has a week in which to confirm the outcome. One of the poorest countries in the world, Burkina Faso is struggling with a jihadist campaign that has claimed at least 1,200 lives since 2015 and forced around a million people to flee their homes. Opposition parties say the vote was marked by fraud and flawed procedures, threatening to reject “results stained by irregularities.” — AFP

International

French apex court backs closure of Muslim NGO for 'inciting hatred'

President vows to crack down on radical Islamist activity

PARIS: France's highest administrative court yesterday rejected appeals against the dissolution of a Muslim NGO and the six-month shuttering of a mosque ordered by the government after the beheading of a teacher by an Islamist radical. President Emmanuel Macron has vowed to crack down on radical Islamist activity in France following the October 16 murder of teacher Samuel Paty who had showed his class cartoons of the Prophet.

The Council of State ruled that the dissolution of the BarakaCity NGO as ordered by the government could be justified on account of comments "inciting discrimination, violence and hatred" by the group's head, it said in a statement. The government had ordered the dissolution of BarakaCity in late October, accusing it of links to "the radical Islamist movement" and "justifying terrorist acts". It said that the group had published violent and discriminatory comments on its own social media accounts and through that of its founder and leader Idriss Si-hamedi. But the group, which insists it has a strictly humanitarian mission to help millions of people around the world, denied the charges and appealed the decision.

In a separate ruling, the court also confirmed the closure for six months of the mosque in Pantin, to the north of Paris, following an appeal against the government's ruling by the local Muslim association. The court said that the closure was justified as the comments made by the mosque's officials and the ideas it discussed were a "provocation" that could lead to acts of violence. It has notably been accused of sharing a video posted by the father of a pupil at Paty's school that publicly attacked the teacher for showing the cartoons in class.

An imam who was on duty at the time had received training in a fundamentalist institute in Yemen and has since left the mosque. The mosque's lawyers William Bourdon and Vincent Brengarth expressed dismay at the ruling saying that it was prepared to give guarantees to allow its rapid reopening. Macron's approach has won praise from supporters inside France who say he is showing the courage to confront radical Islamist activity that has been ignored for too long. But critics, including some in English-language media, have accused the president of going too far and adopting a heavy-handed approach towards France's largest religious minority. — AFP



CONFLANS-SAINT-HONORINE: A man looks at flowers layed outside the Bois d'Aulne secondary school in homage to slain history teacher Samuel Paty, who was beheaded by an attacker for showing pupils cartoons of the Prophet (PBUH) in his civics class, in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, northwest of Paris. — AFP

Russia accuses West of meddling in Belarus

MINSK: Russia's foreign minister yesterday accused the West of interfering in Belarus as he met strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko who has faced months of protests over his disputed re-election. Sergei Lavrov held talks with Lukashenko and other top officials in the capital Minsk, in the latest show of Russia's support for authorities in its ex-Soviet neighbor.

Thousands of protesters demanding Lukashenko's resignation have taken to the streets of Minsk every weekend since an August 9 election that saw the 66-year-old claim a sixth term in office. Protesters believe political novice Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, 38, who took her jailed husband's place in the presidential race, was the true winner. Moscow has continued to back Lukashenko since the protests erupted, with several meetings between senior officials from both sides in recent months.

Speaking at a press conference with his Belarusian counterpart Vladimir Makei, Lavrov accused the United States and several European countries of "gross interference" in the domestic affairs of Belarus. "The wise Belarusian people are able to sort themselves out without any outside prompting and intrusive offers of unsolicited mediation," Lavrov said. Lukashenko has accused Western countries of orchestrating the demonstrations and conspiring to have him removed after 26 years in power.

Lavrov said the West is "using dirty methods of so-called color revolutions, including manipulating public opinion, supporting forces that are openly anti-government and promoting their radicalisation". Several Western leaders have refused to recognize the results of the election and voiced support for Tikhanovskaya, who fled to EU member Lithuania shortly after the vote. The European Union has slapped sanctions on Lukashenko and a number of his allies citing election rigging and a violent police crackdown on demonstrators. — AFP

To ban or not? France debates virginity tests

PARIS: France is split over plans to ban virginity testing, with some campaigners calling the procedure barbaric and others warning of violent repercussions for some Muslim women. Women in at least 20 countries are subjected to virginity tests, sometimes by force, as families, lovers or potential employers use them to assess their virtue, honor or social value, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

In Europe, the tests are issued in Belgium, the Netherlands, Britain, Sweden and Spain, according to the WHO. In France, it is most commonly used by Muslims and also by some Roma families who want proof of virginity pre-wedlock. The United Nations says the test is painful, inaccurate and a violation of human rights, with no place in modern society. But not everyone agrees, with some experts predicting unintended fallout from France's proposed ban, which is part of a wider Islamic separatism bill due in parliament next month.

Doctors say it could mean women paying excessive fees for illegal tests or risking violent repercussions from family members, partners or putative in-laws if they lack proof. "Penalizing doctors is to close the only door for patients, where they could have found help and advice," said Ghada Hatem-Gantzer, a gynaecologist in Paris and chief medic at the Maison des Femmes, a local women's violence shelter. "It is undoubtedly promoting a black market for certificates that dubious pharmacies will charge dearly for," she said.

Before issuing a virginity certificate, a doctor usually in-

spects a woman's hymen - the thin tissue that may partially cover her private part - checking for tears or measuring the opening. It is not clear how many tests are carried out each year, but doctors say they mostly check teenaged girls or young women, often under family pressure. "There is no data, either official or unofficial, on the number of requests for virginity certificates," said Martine Hatchuel, another Paris-based gynaecologist.

"Personally I have around two to four requests per year...almost always very young girls brought by their mothers." Doctors say single women fear rejection if they cannot show a certificate to families where traditional gender expectations hold sway when it comes to sex before marriage. "Their motivation is always: 'it is my parents/my step family/my in-laws who demand it, if it were up to me I wouldn't ask for anything,'" said Hatem-Gantzer. But she said the girls and young women who came to her were unanimous in declaring: "I don't want to stay an old maid."

Muslims

The French government does not collect such data but think tanks and statistical groups say France has Europe's largest Muslim minority: about 5 million or 7-8% of the population. Virginity certificates can help protect women who are suspected of having illicit sex from possible retribution, said Liza Hammer of Collectif Nta Rajel, a French feminist collective for North African emigres. "If you want to deal with this issue then women must be taken care of, not prevented from having a piece of paper they need to save their lives," she said. Under draft legislation, President Emmanuel Macron is proposing a year in prison and a 15,000-euro (\$17,875) fine for any medical professional who issues a virginity certificate. The rules are part of legislation aimed at reinforcing secular values and fighting what Macron calls an "Islamist separatism" that he said threatens to overrun some communities. France's interior and health ministries were not available for comment. — Reuters

International

Biden urges safe Thanksgiving amid coronavirus; Trump pardons ex-aide

Trump again touts false claim of stolen election

WILMINGTON: President-elect Joe Biden pleaded with Americans on Wednesday to take steps to remain safe over the Thanksgiving holiday as COVID-19 cases soar, while President Donald Trump pardoned a former aide who twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI. Biden gave a presidential-style speech acknowledging people's fatigue with restrictions amid the coronavirus pandemic, but urged them to exercise caution as caseloads surge.

"I know the country has grown weary of the fight. We need to remember - we're at war with the virus, not with one another," Biden said as he urged Americans to forgo the type of big family gatherings normally associated with Thursday's holiday, wear protective masks and maintain social distancing. The Democratic former vice president again said he would take immediate steps to address the coronavirus pandemic when he takes office on Jan. 20. During the campaign, Biden accused Trump, a Republican, of panicking and surrendering in the face of a public health crisis.

Shortly after Biden spoke, Trump pardoned his former national security adviser Michael Flynn, who had pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with the former Russian ambassador in Washington. It marked the latest in-

stance in which Trump has used his power of executive clemency to benefit a friend or associate. Prominent Democrats responded quickly and angrily. "President Trump's pardoning of Michael Flynn, who twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his dealings with a foreign adversary, is an act of grave corruption and a brazen abuse of power," House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a statement.

More than 261,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, with the daily toll on Tuesday surpassing 2,000 for the first time since May, as infections and hospitalizations surge nationally. The United States leads the world in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Biden said the United States faced "a long hard winter" but that it was during the most difficult circumstances that "the soul of our nation has been forged." He said he hoped the recent positive news on vaccine development - the first shots potentially could be made available to some Americans within weeks - would serve as an incentive for people to take simple steps to get the virus under control.

Since winning the Nov. 3 election, Biden has offered a message of healing and reconciliation after Trump's tumultuous term, while the president still refuses to concede and falsely claimed



WASHINGTON: In this file, former US National Security Advisor General Michael Flynn arrives for his sentencing hearing at US District Court in Washington, DC. —AFP

again on Wednesday that Biden's victory was stolen. Without mentioning Trump, Biden addressed the messy aftermath of the vote. "Our democracy was tested this year," Biden said. "In

America, we have full and fair and free elections and then we honor the results. The people of this nation and the laws of the land won't stand for anything else." — Reuters

Different 'super spreader': Facebook struggles with election disinformation

SAN FRANCISCO: The US presidential election is finished: votes cast, the transition - though delayed - begun. But on Facebook, the fight against election misinformation continues, thanks to "super spreaders" - accounts that disseminate rumors and fabrications, falsely spreading the idea that the 2020 election was beset by organized, extensive fraud by the Democratic Party.

The US nonprofit Avaaz has identified 25 pages in particular, including those of Donald Trump Jr and Eric Trump - the president's sons - White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany and combative conservative commentators Dan Bongino, Lou Dobbs and Rush Limbaugh, along with pro-Trump organizations such as Turning Point USA. These are sowing doubt about the President-elect Joe Biden's White House win earlier this month - taking their lead from the building's current resident, who has also taken to social media to tweet that he will not "concede" and to outline his so-far unfounded claims that the election was "stolen."

Unproven allegations of fraud from these accounts have been "liked," commented on and shared more than 77 million times since November 3, according to a study from Avaaz. And that doesn't take into account the Facebook accounts of the "super-spreader" in chief, Donald Trump himself, nor that of his former adviser Steve Bannon, which was recently removed by the network. The social media giant has increased efforts to stop the spread of disinformation. It restricted and in some cases banned the publication of some political ads, highlighted reliable sources of information and tackled foreign manipulation campaigns.

Going viral

Thanks to those measures and others, Facebook was able to avoid a repeat of the 2016 presidential campaign, when organized disinformation campaigns permeated the network ahead of Trump's election. But these efforts were not enough to stop run-of-the-mill rumor circulation. "The superspreaders in this list, with the helping hand of Facebook's algorithm, are central to creating this flood of falsehoods that are now defining the political debate for millions across the country," explained Fadi Quran, Avaaz campaign director. Private Facebook groups have also contributed to the far-reaching spread of misinformation, according to Avaaz.

Such groups - often made up of Trump supporters or those who also believe his allegation of a "stolen" vote - have exploded in the aftermath of the election, Avaaz reported, and they can be difficult to monitor and manage. Facebook on November 5 suspended a group called #StopTheSteal, which had attracted some 350,000 members in 48 hours. "The false rumors about election fraud continue as they being passed through these networks. So it's less big accounts... it is more the millions of people who continue to push this narrative to one another," said Claire Wardle, US director of the First Draft NGO.

Fact-checking

AFP works with Facebook's fact-checking program in almost 30 countries and nine languages. Around 60 media work worldwide on the program. Content rated "false" by fact-checkers is downgraded in news feeds so fewer people will see it. If someone tries to share a post found to be misleading or false, Facebook presents them with the fact-checked article. But Facebook has been widely criticized for its reluctance to take a more rigid stance, including by some employees, according to the US publication The Information. According to an article published Tuesday, the site in 2018 compiled a list of 112,000 government and political candidate accounts that should be exempt from verification efforts, but says it is unclear if the list remains active, and Facebook has not confirmed its existence. — AFP

US blacklists Libya rebel militia tied to murders, torture

WASHINGTON: The US Treasury announced sanctions Wednesday on a Libyan rebel militia loyal to eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar which is allegedly behind multiple murders, kidnapping and torture. The Treasury said Mohamed al-Kani and the Kaniyat militia "is responsible for the murder of civilians recently discovered in numerous mass graves in Tarhuna." Libyan government forces discovered 11 mass graves in June around Tarhuna, southeast of Tripoli. Tarhuna was the main staging point for Haftar's abortive offensive aimed at seizing the capital from the UN-recognized Government of National Accord.

On November 7 the government's missing persons authority said it had unearthed 17 bodies from a newly-discovered mass grave near the town. Government forces have blamed Al-Kani's militia, and have said that victims showed signs of being tortured and burned, and some buried alive, according to the Treasury. "Mohamed al-Kani and the Kaniyat militia have tortured and killed civilians during a cruel campaign of oppression in Libya," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement. The sanctions seek to freeze any property of those named under US jurisdiction and to block their access to the world trade and banking system. — AFP

International

Indonesian man collapses during flogging for 'rape'

Backlash in Indonesia as transgender woman put in male jail cell

EAST ACEH: An Indonesian man collapsed as he was flogged nearly 150 times yesterday for raping a child in conservative Aceh province, where public whipping is a common punishment for violating Islamic law. The 19-year-old grimaced and cried out as a masked sharia officer lashed his back with a rattan stick in the town of Idi. He pleaded for the punishment to stop and was briefly treated by doctors before the flogging restarted.

The man was arrested earlier this year on charges he molested and raped the victim, whose age was not revealed. He was sentenced to 146 lashes, a particularly high number reserved for the most serious crimes. "The maximum sentence is meant to be a deterrent," Ivan Nanjar Alavi, an official from the East Aceh prosecutor's office, told reporters. Aceh, on the western tip of Sumatra, is the only region in Muslim-majority Indonesia to impose Islamic law under an autonomy deal with the central government that ended a long-running separatist insurgency.

Also yesterday, a 40-year-old and a 21-year-old man were whipped 100 times each for having sex with underage partners. Aceh's public whippings—widely criticized by rights groups—can attract hundreds of spectators, but crowds have dwindled in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The province allows whipping for a range of charges—including gambling, adultery, drinking alcohol, and having gay or premarital sex. It has wide support among Aceh's mostly Muslim population.

Backlash in Indonesia

In another development, Indonesian rights groups have slammed police for placing a transgender woman in a jail cell with a man, saying it underscored widespread discrimination in the world's biggest Muslim majority nation. Social media influencer Millen Cyrus, 21, who has one million followers on Instagram, was detained with a male friend on drug-possession charges in the capital Jakarta at the weekend. Cyrus told local media this week that she hoped she would be moved from the male holding cell. Authorities have since placed her in a solitary cell. But they defended the initial decision by pointing to the suspect's government identity card which said Cyrus was male.

"The perpetrator's status was male as acknowledged in his identity card," said Jakarta police spokesman Yusri Yunus. "However, given the situation, (authorities) placed her in a special cell alone." The move sparked a backlash on social media and rights groups said it highlighted



IDI, Indonesia: A man is publicly flogged by a member of the Sharia police after he was found guilty of raping a child in Idi Rayeuk, East Aceh yesterday. — AFP

the challenges faced by gay and transgender Indonesians. Two years ago, police in the conservative province of Aceh made headlines when they publicly humiliated a dozen transgender women by forcibly cutting their hair as they made the group wear male clothing and speak in a masculine voice.

"We're demanding that police respect the rights of suspects during investigations with non-discriminatory and non-transphobic perspectives," said Arus Pelangi at Indonesia's Transgender Network. "Police discriminated against her gender identity ... by placing (Cyrus) in a men's detention cell." The Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (ICJR) said authorities need to do a better job of respecting transgender people. "Authorities should have been able to see the vulnerability of a suspect," said ICJR researcher Maidina Rahmawati. "If they were confused about where to place (Cyrus), they should have involved psychologists or social workers who are able to assess (her) needs." — Agencies

way to spread ideology, especially of the extreme right but not only them, a way to launder money... there are currencies created in games that can be exchanged for legal tender," he said. "It can be a form of communicating. It's encrypted. It can also be a way to test attack scenarios," he continued.

De Kerchove also raised concerns over "algorithmic amplification", where platforms such as Facebook and YouTube put "problematic" and "borderline" content up high, exploiting emotional reactions to boost user engagement. This is one aspect the EU executive wants to tackle in its Digital Services Act by demanding more transparency from digital titans. The European Parliament is also discussing a proposal which would require content deemed to have a terrorist character deleted online within one hour. The fight against terrorism has shot up the EU agenda since recent jihadist attacks in France and Austria. Another concern, a controversial one, is a push by law enforcement in EU countries to have encrypted communications, of the sort offered by WhatsApp, readable by authorities with a warrant. But that has run up against unease by defenders of free speech and civil liberties and privacy advocates, who fear abuse and a backdoor that can be used by hackers and criminals, as well as authoritarian administrations. On that, de Kerchove offered reassurance. "Nobody in Brussels wants to reduce encryption," he said. "On the contrary, we are in favor of more encryption." —AFP

Video games are 'under-regulated': EU anti-terror czar

BRUSSELS: Online video games can be used to propagate extremist ideologies and even prepare attacks, the EU's anti-terrorist coordinator told AFP in an interview in which he urged more regulation. The official, Gilles de Kerchove, made the argument ahead of the European Commission's presentation on December 9 of a proposed Digital Services Act that aims to rein in Big Tech excesses and internet hate speech. "I'm not saying that all the gaming sector is a problem. There are two billion people playing online, and that's all very well," said de Kerchove, a Belgian appointed to his post 13 years ago.

But, he warned, "you have extreme-right groups in Germany that have come up with games where the aim is to shoot Arabs, or (Hungarian-born US billionaire George) Soros, or Mrs (German Chancellor Angela) Merkel for her migration policy, etc." "That can be an alternative

COVID-19 forges path to new life for Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jews

JERUSALEM: For many, the pandemic has been a time of devastating isolation, but for some ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews it has pushed them to integrate in the world outside their narrow communities. Lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings in Israel have shaken the rhythm of ultra-Orthodox, or haredi, life—especially the continuous cycle of communal Torah study in religious schools known as yeshivot. For some, that disruption has had a profound impact.

Yoav, a young man who asked that his last name be withheld, said the coronavirus pandemic triggered a spiritual crisis that led him to embrace a life outside his clannish, conservative surroundings. "The corona gave me the opportunity to leave this world," he told AFP. Removed from his daily routine of study in a yeshiva, Yoav found himself stuck at home with a father unbending on matters of religious observance. "The tensions were constant," he said. "For years I had known that this life was not made for me and then I understood that I had to leave." He had heard about Hillel, a non-profit which since 1991 has helped haredi youth seeking a different life.

He called them, moved out of his family home and has been living with 13 other young people aged 18 to 25 in the organization's large Jerusalem shelter. Residents are supported by mentors from the non-profit and by social workers, who give psychological and financial assistance and offer courses to help them integrate into non-haredi society. Young haredim "don't know anything about the modern world, they don't know anything about the other sex; you have to teach them everything," said Etty Eliyahu, the shelter's director. "We're here to help them find their place in the world," she said.

Cut off from more secular Israeli society, haredim adhere to a rigid interpretation of Judaism and an equally strict social code. Most males study scripture throughout the day. Women, who receive a broader education, are kept apart from men outside their family until marriage, which usually takes place at a relatively young age. Haredi women have higher workforce participation than their husbands, who typically remain dedicated to religious studies. Hillel is generally approached each year by around 350 youngsters, mostly between the ages of 19 and 25, but requests doubled in 2020 as the pandemic took hold, the organization's director, Yair Hess, told AFP.

With the closure of the yeshivot, he said, haredi youth have spent more time than usual with their families, creating a "pressure cooker" which exploded in many homes. Rabbi Shimon Bitton, who runs a religious secondary school in central Israel, shares this view. The seminary "was like a protective greenhouse for these young people", said the 38-year-old educator. But the Covid-19 pandemic has shaken up their daily lives, forcing some to look for work to help their families in financial difficulty. "They found themselves in a world they did not know and wanted to discover it," he said. —AFP

Lifestyle

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A civil defense volunteer wearing a COVID-19 coronavirus-themed helmet takes part in an awareness campaign at a market in New Delhi on Wednesday. — AFP

Fossil reveals 'buck-toothed toucan' that lived with dinosaurs

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Devil horns meet sutras in Taiwan's Buddhist death metal band



This picture shows members of Taiwanese death metal band 'Dharma' practicing during a rehearsal in Taipei. —AFP photos



Jack Tung, drummer and founder of Taiwanese death metal band 'Dharma' practicing during a rehearsal in Taipei.



Jack Tung, drummer and founder of Taiwanese death metal band 'Dharma' praying at Baoan temple in Taipei.



Members of Taiwanese death metal band 'Dharma' practicing during a rehearsal in Taipei.

The gig began with a nun chanting on stage but suddenly erupted into a wall of noise unleashed by distorted guitars and screamed sutras—the unique sound of Taiwan's first Buddhist death metal band. The island has a vibrant metal scene but few outfits are quite as eye-catching as "Dharma". The band aims to deliver enlightenment via the medium of throaty eight-string guitars and guttural roars. Dressed in robes-black, of course—they use traditional Sanskrit sutras as lyrics. But everything else screams death metal, from bloody face paint on stage, to growled vocals, relentless riffs and double-kick blast beats. Founder and drummer Jack Tung first came up with the idea 14 years ago after listening to a recording of Tibetan lamas reciting sutras. "The way it's sung is like in metal, with some voice distortion," he told AFP, referencing the often throaty low nature of Tibetan chanting. "This is very similar to death metal music which I like."

Get behind me Satan

On the face of it, death metal and Buddhism might not appear to be the most natural of bedfellows. Early death metal bands—and to a more significant extent their black metal cousins—often reveled

in Satanic and occult themes. While many were simply trying to shock, some bands—especially out of Scandinavia—were committed Satanists or vehemently anti-religion. But like any genre, the scene evolved to welcome a vast array of views and philosophies. Miao-ben, the Buddhist nun who opened a recent Dharma gig in Taipei with traditional chanting, said she had no issue taking the stage alongside such music. "Buddhism is not set in form. Having Buddha in our hearts is more important," she told AFP. Unlike more dogmatic faiths, she added, Buddhism is syncretic. "This is just another form of Buddhist sutra ceremony," she said of the set-list.

'Be respectable'

Bringing Dharma together was not easy. "I asked many people and nobody wanted to be in a 'religious' choir," laughed Tung, a practicing Buddhist. He decided to work on the songs first, primarily with guitarist Andy Lin, who also grew up in a devout family, and find remaining band mates later. They sought the advice of Buddhist Master Chan Song, who provided interpretations of the ancient text and rituals. Among Master Song's students was

Joe Henley, a Canadian who moved to Taiwan 15 years ago and is now the lead singer.

"Buddhism has become a regular part of my life now," said Henley, explaining his decision to convert. "I want to do this right. I wanted to be respectable." The band's first single "Sapta Jina Bhasitam Papa Vinasana Dharani", an incantation about peace and wellness, is currently being mastered at a Polish studio and will be released next month. "We are getting a lot of attention, I guess because we are doing something new," said Henley. "I am enjoying the ride, enjoying the experience."

Evangelist aim

Tung, who declined to give his age, grew up when Taiwan was a dictatorship and authorities heavily censored rock and metal. The island transitioned towards democracy in the 1980s and 1990s and Tung devoured whatever he could find. Bands like Guns N' Roses and Cinderella introduced him to rock while pioneers such as Sepultura and Napalm Death got him hooked on the more extreme metal. Taiwan has since morphed into one of Asia's most progressive democracies with vibrant artistic communities and sub-cultures. The island's most fa-

mous metal act "Chthonic", which utilizes traditional instruments like the erhu alongside guitars, has toured globally and is fronted by Freddie Lim, a now prominent politician.

Younger generations, especially those in the cities, have embraced a distinctly Taiwanese identity and are less likely to be as religious as their parents. Tung hopes to change that in whatever way he can via music. "We have democracy and lots of freedom and we live in a very open society," he explained. "But social morality has declined". Dharma's live act is deliberately infused with Buddhist traditions. The sutras are projected on screens so fans can read them. Their face paint embodies the fierce looking deities found in many temples that fight evil spirits. "You can't defend god by being nice and polite," said Tung. Celine Lin, 27, came to Dharma's gig with a friend and was looking up Buddhist texts on her phone during the break. "The music blew my mind," she enthused. "It got me interested in sutras and their meanings." That is music to Tung's ears. "If we can influence one person who came to see our performance... I consider the performance a success," he said. —AFP

Depp denied appeal against 'wife beater' UK libel loss

Hollywood star Johnny Depp was on Wednesday refused permission to appeal against a UK court decision which upheld claims made by The Sun newspaper that branded him a "wife beater". The 57-year-old "Pirates of the Caribbean" actor was also ordered to pay the newspaper's £628,000 (\$840,000, £705,000) legal costs, court documents detailed. Depp sued the tabloid's publishers News Group Newspapers Ltd (NGN) and the author of a 2018 article over claims he was violent to actress and model Heard, 34, during their volatile two-year marriage. The case, which laid bare Depp's chaotic battle with drink and drugs and shattered his global reputation, was dubbed "the biggest English libel trial of the 21st century".

Judge Andrew Nicol, who presided over the libel case, dismissed the actor's appeal and ordered the paying of the defendants' costs on the basis that he was not persuaded the grounds

for appeal had a "reasonable prospect of success". Despite the rejection of this appeal, Depp's legal team could still take the case directly to the UK's Court of Appeal. According to the court order Depp was ordered to pay £520,000 of the defendants' bill by December and a further £108,235 by 22nd January 2021. Depp took issue with a 2018 article in the Sun which questioned whether author JK Rowling could be "genuinely happy" casting wife beater Johnny Depp in the Harry Potter franchise's Fantastic Beasts spin-off. While the legal odds had initially appeared to be stacked in Depp's favor, the High Court in London found, early this month, that the article had been proven to be "substantially true".

The judge said he found that 12 of 14 alleged instances of abuse of Heard by Depp had indeed occurred. Depp vowed to appeal against the decision calling it "surreal" in a statement and adding that "his life and career will not be defined by this moment in time". The actor also announced that he had agreed to resign from his role as Gellert Grindelwald in the Harry Potter franchise spin-off "Fantastic Beasts" at the request of Warner Bros. "Johnny Depp will depart the Fantastic Beasts franchise. We thank Johnny for his work on the films to date," the studio said in a statement at the time. —AFP



Johnny Depp



People play chess on a giant chess board at Hyde Park in Sydney. —AFP photos



A photo shows the web page of Chess.com showing more than 46 million members with 7.5 million matches played today and over 156,000 people online.

Queen's Gambit accepted: Hit show sparks chess frenzy

It miniseries “The Queen’s Gambit” has led to a surge of interest in chess, with one popular website registering millions of new players and academies reporting unprecedented demand. Netflix said the show, which follows the turbulent career of a fictional female child prodigy in the 1950s and 1960s, has become its most-watched ever and is currently the number-one ranked program in 63 countries. Gaming site Chess.com said the series had prompted a wave of interest—already piqued by the pandemic and top-flight chess players appearing on the Twitch gaming platform—with new daily registrations up 400 percent. “Since the release of ‘The Queen’s Gambit’ we have seen roughly 2.5 million new members join,” the website’s Nick Barton told AFP. “Nearly each day of November we’ve set a new company record for the most members joining.”

Worldwide, Google reported searches for “chess” are at their highest level in 14 years. It is just the latest burst of popularity for a game that is believed to have originated in India in the seventh century and was played—and occasionally banned—by medieval European kings, before be-

coming more established in the late 1800s. In modern times, chess had a resurgence during the Cold War. That period forms the backdrop for “The Queen’s Gambit”, and the story of a youthful American taking on a wily Soviet grandmaster is inspiring another generation of players. “There has been a massive surge in adults interested,” according to chess master and Sydney Academy of Chess director Brett Tindall, who called it “unprecedented”. Tindall told AFP he has fielded calls from 40–50 adults looking for lessons in the last few weeks, and when carrying academy-branded kit he reports being stopped in the street and asked his opinion about the series.

More women playing

On school visits, normally ambivalent teachers have gone out of their way to approach him, and some students are tuning in too—even though the series features heavy alcohol and drug abuse. “I was at a school this morning, and few kids were talking about it, and I was like: ‘guys, I don’t think you’re really meant to be watching this show,’” he said. Chess.com’s Barton said the show’s focus on female lead Beth Harmon—played by Anya Taylor-

Joy—had prompted more women to register than usual. They were now also spending more time on the site than men. “These shows really help to increase the curiosity value and newcomers are attracted to the game,” Vijay Deshpande, secretary of the All India Chess Federation, told AFP.

“We have a lot of good chess players in the country and the number has grown during the lockdown. Young people are hooked to technology and they were attracted to online chess.” Grandmaster and former US champion Jennifer Shahade has said she “loved” the show and had been inundated with people asking her for lessons or tips. “I’m honestly just blown away by all the positive attention chess is getting right now. People get us in a way they haven’t before,” she said on a recent podcast. “Chess is something people need right now—the introspection, the delightful escape into a smaller world of 64 squares,” she said. According to Tindall, the interest goes beyond just the game.

The series’ opulent settings, Cold War kitsch and period chess equipment seem to have captured people’s imagination. “We sell lots of different types of (chess) clocks. I have a lot of older style clocks

and recently people want to get the clocks from the show... I’m not joking,” said Tindall. “A while ago, we were just trying to clear them out. They aren’t really used in competitions any more. We use digital ones.” Most chess commentators have given the show high marks for authenticity—perhaps unsurprising, given Russian grandmaster Garry Kasparov and US chess author Bruce Pandolfini were consultants. “It’s the best thing I’ve seen about chess,” said French grandmaster Anthony Wirig during an online event about the show.

The “Queen’s Gambit” of the title refers to a popular opening that offers a white pawn as a barbed lure to black, which can accept or decline. Australian grandmaster Ian Rogers said the lead character Beth Harmon resembles US prodigy Bobby Fischer, who also faced a formidable Soviet opponent. Fischer’s politically tinged matches against the USSR’s Boris Spassky were watched on television by millions. “However Harmon’s struggles with pills and alcohol are all her own,” Rogers told the Sydney Morning Herald. “Nowadays Harmon would be banned by WADA’s drug testers long before she reached the top.” —AFP

Virus hogs centre stage as Greece’s theatres wait in the wings

“Obviously very few will survive,” says actor Yiannis Yiaramazidis, staring at the empty stage of the small theatre where he works in downtown Athens. With small theatres and cinemas closed, concert halls dark, and tours and premieres cancelled because of coronavirus restrictions, Greece’s live entertainment scene, already weakened by a decade-long economic crisis, is walking a tightrope. Yiaramazidis, 36, is particularly worried about new regulations brought on by the pandemic such as one allowing producers to not pay actors for rehearsals. He is no stranger to job insecurity, as his income from acting was already not enough to make ends meet before the pandemic, and he always supplemented it with part-time work.

“This will now become the new standard,” says Yiaramazidis after rehearsing his part in a play based on a Franz Kafka novel under the direction of Savvas Stroumplos. The troupe hopes to be able to return

to the stage in March, but the only way to achieve this goal is to rehearse one by one—a “very weird” situation, says Yiaramazidis as he gathers his things to make way for the next actor. The system is preferable to rehearsal by video link, says Stroumplos, who has also modified some scenes that required close contact between the actors.

His Attis theatre can accommodate an audience of only a couple of dozen people, so the new restrictions are a heavy burden. While the performing arts are suffering across Europe and beyond, they are especially hard hit in Greece, with its economy dominated by micro-businesses. The live entertainment scene is one of myriad mini-theatres like the Attis and small independent concert halls. Many may have to bow out for good. “The majority of our members are struggling to survive, either because they have not received any state aid, or because this is too little anyway,” Kostas Stavropoulos, secretary of the Panhellenic Music Association, told AFP.

‘No plan for art’

A regular pay cheque is a rarity for Greece’s performers, who have been underpaid and often without insurance for decades because of the country’s grinding financial crisis. Without a regulated labor framework since the country’s series of EU bailouts—three between 2008 and 2015—many artists were left in limbo when the coronavirus pandemic broke out, invisible to the state and ineligible



Photo shows Director Savvas Stroumplos. —AFP

for financial aid. “The situation is deteriorating day by day and things will be worse when the confinement ends,” Stavropoulos says. After the first lockdown, hundreds of venues were wiped out and those that were able to reopen did so under precarious working conditions. Culture Minister Lina Mendoni told parliament that it was impossible for some artists to get state aid as many work in the “shadow economy”. —AFP

Second chance: Faded K-pop star competes for comeback

When Ryu Sera made her debut with K-pop girlband Nine Muses, the years of intense training and ruthless competition seemed worthwhile, her dreams of stardom finally coming true. A few top 10 singles followed, but within four years she had been cast on the K-pop scrapheap, sacked by her management company as it reshuffled the band's line-up. An attempted solo career foundered, she was left in debt, battling depression and contemplating suicide. But six years after her dismissal, she has been given a second chance on a groundbreaking new television show for failed and former idols—and is speaking out against a structure that consumes young hopefuls with only a tiny minority surviving to stardom. “The K-pop industry has a factory-like mass-production system,” she told AFP.

K-pop is the latest and biggest instance of the so-called Korean Wave, as the South's popular culture gains overseas recognition—epitomized by the global success of boyband BTS, who topped the US Billboard singles chart earlier this year. The phenomenon earns billions of dollars for the world's 12th largest economy and scores of groups are launched each year to try to capture a slice of the pie. Unlike many groups elsewhere, K-pop bands are not normally formed by the members themselves who then try to secure a record deal, but are instead usually assembled by their managing agencies. They put the members through intensive training programs and control everything from their music and lyrics to their looks and many aspects of their daily lives. But most acts quickly disappear, leaving barely a trace on the score of musical history.



This picture shows South Korean singer Ryu Sera (second right) dancing with other competitors during a recording of a television show “Miss Back” in Seoul. — AFP photos

‘Like an addict’

Ryu was 22 when she passed an audition to become a trainee with Star Empire, a medium-sized agency in Seoul. She was among 40 to 50 contenders for a place in Nine Muses. “It was an endless contest with tests every week, and those who ranked bottom on dancing, singing skills and looks were kicked out.” At first, she often scored poorly for dancing and singing, but she “practiced like an addict”, she said. A year later she was chosen to be Nine Muses’ lead singer. Even after their debut, there was no let-up in the regimen, and she was subjected to constant reviews, often critical, of her appearance. “Managers would say things like ‘Why are you so fat?’... be-

cause I did not fall into their category of elegant, sexy women,” she said. “I doubt they are even aware that they hurt me with their words.”

But she complied with their demands: “When they told me to cut my hair, I did... There was an atmosphere that we should be grateful for being given a chance to become idols.” When her contract came up for renewal, she demanded that the Nine Muses members take part in every concept meeting, that they would have control over what clothes they wore, and no more members would be replaced. The producers did not offer her a new deal. “There are so many trainees, so many artists, so many young people that want to get into this industry,” she said. “So, they sometimes



South Korean singer Ryu Sera speaking during an interview with AFP in Seoul.

consider us replaceable products.” A Star Empire representative told AFP the firm and Ryu had been “unable to agree on new contract terms”, adding: “We wish her all the best.”

Illness and shame

In an attempt to build a solo career, Ryu borrowed money to produce her own albums and put on concerts, but without the backing of a major agency none of them generated a profit. “I felt like I had accomplished nothing and was being forgotten,” she said. South Korea is an intensely competitive society and has an unusually high suicide rate, with recent celebrity deaths including singers Goo Hara and Sulli, both of whom had been subjected to vicious cyber-bullying, and Kim Jong-hyun of the boyband Shinee. Ryu also considered killing herself. — AFP

Pandemic proofing offices

By Engineer Yousef Al-Samhan, Interior design consultant and CEO of MY12 Creations Interior Design and Contracting Co.

As many nations cautiously make their way toward relaxing Covid-19 lockdowns, many of us are starting to envision a time when we can stop working at our kitchen tables and return to the office. Yet, in the absence of a vaccine, aspects of modern workplaces will have to change if employees are to safely return to their desks. The first phase of resuming office life will involve making basic changes to keep employees safe and allay fears. We may have lived with the flu for many years, but this is the first time our generation has experienced a pandemic. We're now hyperaware of health risks, whether real or imagined. And employers are hypersensitive about the potential for liability if people get sick at work.”

For years, offices have crammed more employees into smaller spaces, while creating an open collaborative atmosphere. As companies plan to bring their workforce together again in the office, numerous calculations are being made to provide an environment that will keep workers safe, healthy and productive. After coronavirus: The office of the future is the office of the past: Say hello to the high-walled cubicles made famous in the 1999 film, “Office Space,” because they're about to make a comeback,

for years, offices have crammed more employees into smaller spaces, while creating an open collaborative atmosphere.

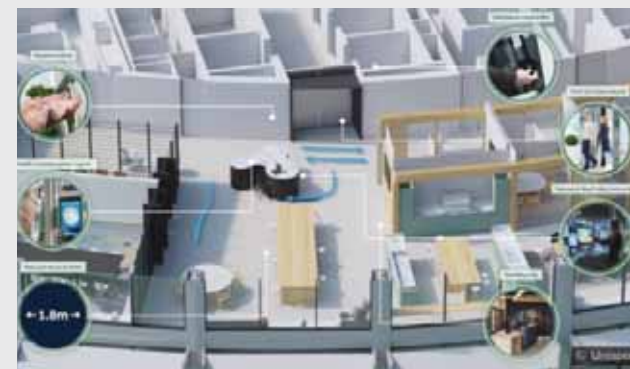
Think about tech companies that are highly dense and working in those ‘benching work stations, Now with Covid-19, things like “benching” are the opposite of what employees want to face as they return to work. As companies plan how to bring their workforce together again in the office, numerous calculations are being made to provide an environment that will keep workers safe, healthy and productive, and architects are thinking about the actual physical design of offices. “First and foremost, people need to feel safe,”

Changes can be like:

- Wider corridors with one-way foot traffic
- Better air filtration
- Touchless elevator controls
- Antimicrobial materials in new construction
- Videoconferencing even within the office to avoid the conference room

Distributed offices and rotating days

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many are heralding the end of the open-plan workplace and the return of small, private offices.



Huddle rooms, for example, could be used as offices until social distancing protocols are relaxed.

Offices that resemble hospitals

In the longer term, experts predict that society's heightened awareness of contagious diseases could usher in a new type of office - one that has elements in common with a hospital.

Health cops

And get ready for the health cop. Companies will have to deputize someone to be in charge of making sure employees follow the new rules about distancing.

Lifestyle | Features

Friday, November 27, 2020

Fossil reveals 'buck-toothed toucan' that lived with dinosaurs

The discovery of a creature described as resembling a "buck-toothed toucan" that lived some 68 million years ago has upended assumptions about diversity in the birds that lived alongside dinosaurs. At less than nine centimeters (3.5 inches) long, the delicate skull of the bird scientists have dubbed *Falcatakely forsterae* might be easily overlooked. In fact, it almost was, sitting in a backlog of excavated fossils for years before CT scanning suggested the specimen deserved more attention. It turns out that its tall, scythe-like beak, while resembling the toucan, is something never before seen in the fossil record. Birds in the Mesozoic era—between 250 million and 65 million years ago—had "relatively unspecialized snouts", Patrick O'Connor, lead author of a study on the new creature, told AFP.

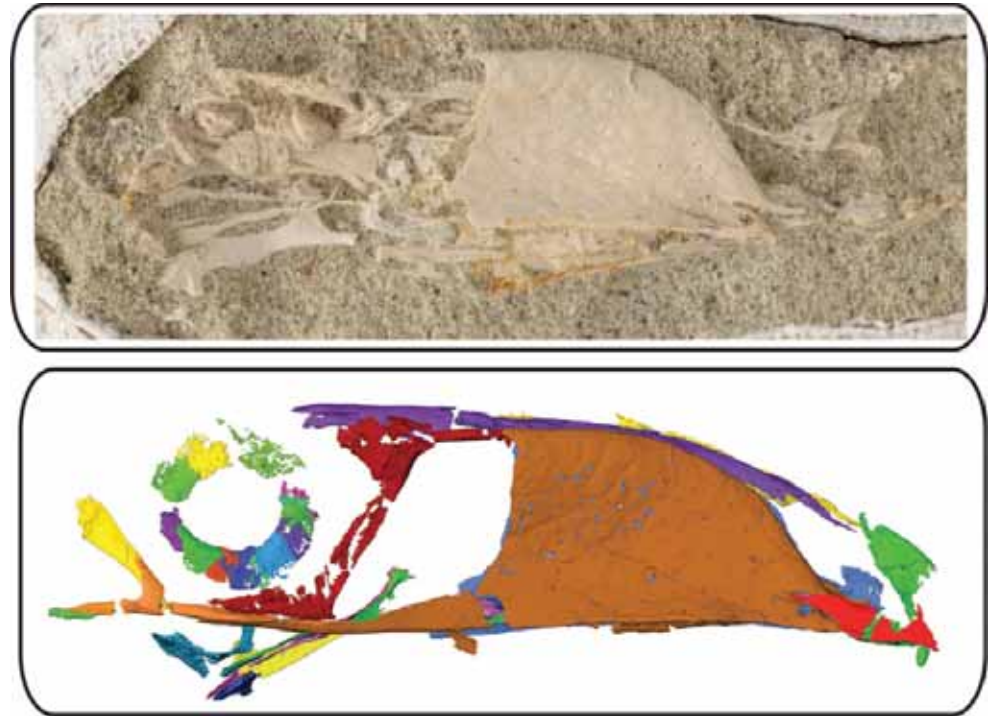
"*Falcatakely* just changed the game completely, documenting a long, high beak unlike anything known in the Mesozoic," added O'Connor, professor of anatomy and neuroscience at Ohio University. The skull, described in a study published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*, offered other surprises. While *Falcatakely* would have had a face quite familiar to us from such modern birds as toucans and hornbills, the bones that made up its face bear little resemblance to those modern creatures. "Despite an overall face shape similar to modern birds like toucans, the underlying skeleton is much more similar to non-avian theropod dinosaurs like *Deinonychus* and *Velociraptor*," O'Connor said. That "turns what we know

about Mesozoic bird anatomy upside-down."

'An almost comical profile'

Revealing these features was no easy task. The fossil was originally collected in 2010 in north-western Madagascar. When researchers finally turned their attention to it seven years later, they faced a problem: the skull and beak were far too fragile to extract for examination. So the team used a form of high-resolution imaging and digital modeling to "virtually dissect" the bones. They then used 3D printers to rebuild the skull and compare it with other known species. What they found was an almost touchingly improbable animal, according to Daniel Field, of Cambridge University's department of earth sciences, who reviewed the study for *Nature*.

It is not just the unexpected bill, but the fact that the beak in the fossil is tipped with a single preserved tooth, possibly one of many the bird would have had. "These features give the skull of *Falcatakely* an almost comical profile—imagine a creature resembling a tiny, buck-toothed toucan," Field wrote. None of the approximately 200 bird species known from the period "has a skull resembling anything like *Falcatakely*," he added. For O'Connor, the discovery is evidence of the potentially enormous gaps that remain in our knowledge of the birds that lived alongside dinosaurs. "There is a span exceeding 50 million years where we know next to nothing about avian evolutionary history," he said.



This handout picture shows a photograph (up) and a scan produced by high-resolution micro-computed tomography (μCT) of the skull of a *Falcatakely* fossil, the latter technology used to help detect delicate bones that could not be extracted without damaging them. — AFP

Finding intact fossils of birds from the period is comparatively rare because their lightweight skeletons were generally too delicate to be well preserved. The research team, which has been working in the area of Madagascar where *Falcatakely* was found since the mid-1990s, is continuing excavations, and O'Connor is excited

about what else might be discovered. He also hopes to explore just why *Falcatakely* had the beak it did. "Did it relate to processing food? Acquiring prey? Was it used as a signal by other members of the species? There are many questions left," O'Connor said. — AFP

Pakistan's lonely elephant Kaavan packs trunk for Cambodia

With music, treats and balloons, friends of Pakistan's only Asian elephant threw a farewell party for the creature ahead of its relocation to Cambodia following years of campaigning by animal rights activists. The plight of Kaavan, an overweight, 35-year-old bull elephant, has drawn international condemnation and highlighted the woeful state of Islamabad's zoo, where conditions are so bad that a judge in May ordered all the animals to be moved. Kaavan is set to be flown to a wildlife sanctuary in Cambodia on Sunday, said Saleem Shaikh, a spokesman for Pakistan's ministry of climate change, following months of veterinary care and a special training regime to habituate the elephant to a huge metal crate he will travel in.

But before flying out, the capital's animal lovers said goodbye, with performances from local bands who serenaded Kaavan ahead of the mammoth move. "We want to wish him a happy retirement," said Marion Lombard, the deputy mission leader for Four Paws International—an animal welfare group that has spearheaded the relocation effort. The Islamabad Zoo, where Kaavan has lived for decades since arriving from Sri Lanka, was decorated with balloons for the occasion and banners wishing the animal well. "We will miss you Kaavan," read one of the signs. Kaavan's plight was given a boost over the years by American pop icon Cher, who publicly campaigned for



A singer performs for Kaavan, Pakistan's only Asian elephant, during his farewell ceremony before travelling to a sanctuary in Cambodia later this month, at the Marghazar Zoo in Islamabad. — AFP photos

the elephant's relocation and called the decision to move him one of the "greatest moments" of her life.

Zoo officials have in the past denied Kaavan was kept in sub-standard conditions or chained, claiming instead the creature was pining for a new mate after his partner died in 2012. But Kaavan's behaviour—including signs of distress such as continual head-bobbing—raised concerns of mental illness. Activists also said Kaavan was not properly sheltered from Islamabad's searing summer temperatures, which can rise above 40 degrees Celsius (100 Fahrenheit). Kaavan's mate Saheli, who also arrived from Sri Lanka, died in 2012. — AFP



Musicians pose with Kaavan, Pakistan's only Asian elephant, during his farewell ceremony before travelling to a sanctuary in Cambodia later this month.



A wildlife caretaker feeds Kaavan, Pakistan's only Asian elephant.



(From left) Volunteer Marco Crema of the Italian Association “Croce Verde” which helps people in need, “Tre Galline” Executive Chef and coordinator of the “Solidarity Kitchens” project, Andrea Chiuni, two kitchen assistants and “Tre Galline” restaurant’s chef Luigi Rosato pose outside the restaurant in Turin, during the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus. — AFP photos



Michelin-starred Del Cambio restaurant chef Matteo Baronetto (left) and his assistant Vittorio di Palma prepare pasta with meat sauce in Turin, a dish that will be distributed to associations which help people in need.



Marco Crema (right), a volunteer of the Italian Association “Croce Verde” which helps people in need, delivers sealed aluminum trays of potato flan prepared by cooks from the “Tre Galline” restaurant.

TURIN RESTAURANTS UNITE TO SERVE ITALY’S NEEDY

In the kitchen of the Michelin-starred Del Cambio restaurant, chef Matteo Baronetto fusses over a boiling vat of paccheri-fat pasta tubes to be immersed in a light tomato sauce. But the delicious meals will not be served to patrons of this historic eatery in the Italian city of Turin, which is shut because of the latest coronavirus restrictions. Instead, they will be handed out to those in need. Baronetto is part of the “Solidarity Kitchens” project, a network of 21 restaurants, volunteers and charities in the

northern city that has served up about 35,000 meals since it began in late March. Project coordinator Andrea Chiuni, head chef of the Tre Galline (“Three Hens”) restaurant, said it did not take a lot of extra effort for professional chefs to whip up a simple, nutritious meal, even for hundreds.

“Above all, the cooks on our team are so happy to belong to this movement,” he told AFP. “It’s harder to get them to stay another 30 minutes for clients than to stay

longer to do this.” The idea of restaurants cooking for the poor during the pandemic has been replicated elsewhere in Italy and throughout the world. But perhaps nowhere else is it as organized as in Turin, which hopes the idea can be sustained and even expanded. The gamut of participating restaurants-whose chefs and staff donate their time and often use donated ingredients-runs from simple trattorias and restaurants serving ethnic food to Turin’s haute-cuisine institutions.

They began during Italy’s national lockdown earlier this year, and have continued when new regional restrictions were imposed, a response to a surge in cases that has seen the death toll pass 50,000. Their kitchens churn out meals like pasta with bechamel sauce, baked Savoy cabbage with cheese or other simple, protein-rich meals. Once finished, volunteers take the meals to groups that distribute them, including an order of Franciscan monks, and the lay Catholic association Sant’Egidio. Priest Mauro Battaglino of the Order of Friars Minor said more than 400 people were lining up each day at his premises-double the number before the pandemic. “After the lockdown the problems continued,” he said, citing people who lost their jobs or part-time work, as well as the homeless relying on handouts now reduced due to the lack of street traffic and tourists. “I don’t see this ending soon.”— AFP



“Tre Galline” restaurant chef Luigi Rosato (right) and his team prepare a baked potato flan.



Michelin-starred Del Cambio restaurant chef Matteo Baronetto (left) and his assistant Vittorio di Palma package a pasta dish with meat sauce.

THE SHOW CAN'T GO ON: VIRUS HALTS TRAVELLING CIRCUS

There are 50 animals to feed and no tickets to sell. The Zavatelli Circus has been blocked in Belgium for almost a year by the coronavirus epidemic. Now the family-run firm is appealing to local donors to help them feed the camels, horses and llamas they have grazing outside the southern Wallon town of Gembloux. "Just to buy food for the animals we need 500 euros (\$600) a week, it's a huge budget. We've had problems before, but never something like this," circus director Simon Dubois told AFP. In a normal year, the circus would have roamed the back roads of Belgium and northern France, but in 2020 it was stopped in its tracks by the partial lockdown of mid-March ordered to curb the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the measures were lifted, the circus was prepared to observe social-distancing rules by reducing the crowd size in the big top from 600 to 200, and separating the spectators. But potential venues were nervous. And so the Gembloux stopover began to stretch out and, with lockdown rules brought back in October to fight a second wave of infections, the situation is bleak. The colorfully painted trucks are aligned in tight rows on a parking lot and the 25 clowns, rope walkers, jugglers and animal handlers—mainly members of one extended family—are effectively unemployed.

Nicky Dubois, Simon's cousin, has given up rehearsing his acrobatic act, which normally takes place 10 meters (30 feet) off the ground. "For that, the big top has to go up," he said. Currently, it remains packed away. It has been a depressing period for a close-knit team. Nicky's brother Kevin, the tightrope walker, complained: "Normally



Kevin Dubois, juggler, trains in a parking as his circus is stuck since 9 months due to COVID-19 restrictions. — AFP photos

it's lively. A circus is joyful, there's good humor, we have a laugh while we're setting things up." And now Europe's winter is coming, when the circus would normally take a three-month break. "We had some money saved up, but we're dipping into that now. We have to eat every day ourselves, and then there's the animals..." Kevin said. When the local media reported the circus' plight, one neighbor delivered three big sacks of carrots. But the show itself can't yet go on. — AFP



This picture shows a circus stuck since 9 months due to COVID-19 restrictions.



Kevin Dubois, tightrope walker, trains in a parking.



Leyns Dubois, a young juggler of 16 years old trains in a parking.



Nicky Dubois, tightrope walker, carries food for the circus animals.

BOSNIAN 'ENERGY PYRAMIDS' BOOSTED BY DJOKOVIC VISITS

This picture shows a view of the Visocica hill, near Central-Bosnian town of Visoko. — AFP photos



A Bosnian tourist guide explains the tour of the so-called Bosnian Valley of Pyramids in the central-Bosnian town of Visoko.



A Bosnian tourist guide explains the tour of the so-called Bosnian Valley of Pyramids in the central-Bosnian town of Visoko.

With tree-covered slopes that rise to a pointed summit, the mountain overlooking the Bosnian town of Visoko resembles any other ordinary hillside in the Balkan state. Yet thousands of yearly visitors—including high-profile stars like Serbian tennis champion Novak Djokovic—don't see it that way. Despite scientists' efforts to debunk the claims, large numbers of people still believe the hill is part of an ancient man-made pyramid complex with healing powers. Djokovic, who is known for his new-age spiritual interests, has made two trips this year, hailing the site as a “paradise on earth.”

The mountain is now part of a controversial pyramid park founded by Semir Osmanagic, a 60-year-old self-styled explorer who “discovered” the site just outside of Sarajevo in 2005. “I saw this hill covered with fir trees and vegetation, its slopes perfectly oriented towards the cardinal points,” Osmanagic, wearing a leather jacket and Indiana Jones-style hat, told AFP on a recent weekend while leading a tour group through the site. “It was obvious to me that it was not a natural hill but the construction” of a “technologically superior civilization”, he said, insisting it is the “largest and oldest pyramid ever built”. Archaeologists have long ago disputed this theory as pseudo-science, saying the hill is a natural geological structure.



This picture shows the underground tunnel “Ravne”, near the central-Bosnian town of Visoko.

In a letter to Bosnian authorities in 2006, European archaeologists denounced the support given to a “cruel hoax on an unsuspecting public” that “has no place in the world of genuine science”. But this did not prevent Osmanagic, previously a US-based businessman, from carrying out “archaeological excavations” on the hill with hundreds of volunteers from abroad. He bought a piece of surrounding land, which includes a network of tunnels he says emit a curative energy force, and a few years later opened the park through his “Bosnian Pyramid of the Sun” foundation.

Djokovic buzz

Today, the park is buzzing with visitors, who have come in even higher numbers since two recent trips from Djokovic. In July and October, Djokovic made pilgrimages to the park and invited “all athletes” to take advantage of the healthy oxygen levels. “I know there are many doubts and dilemmas about the authenticity (of the place),” he told AFP in October. But “in order to fully understand what is going on here... you have to come”.

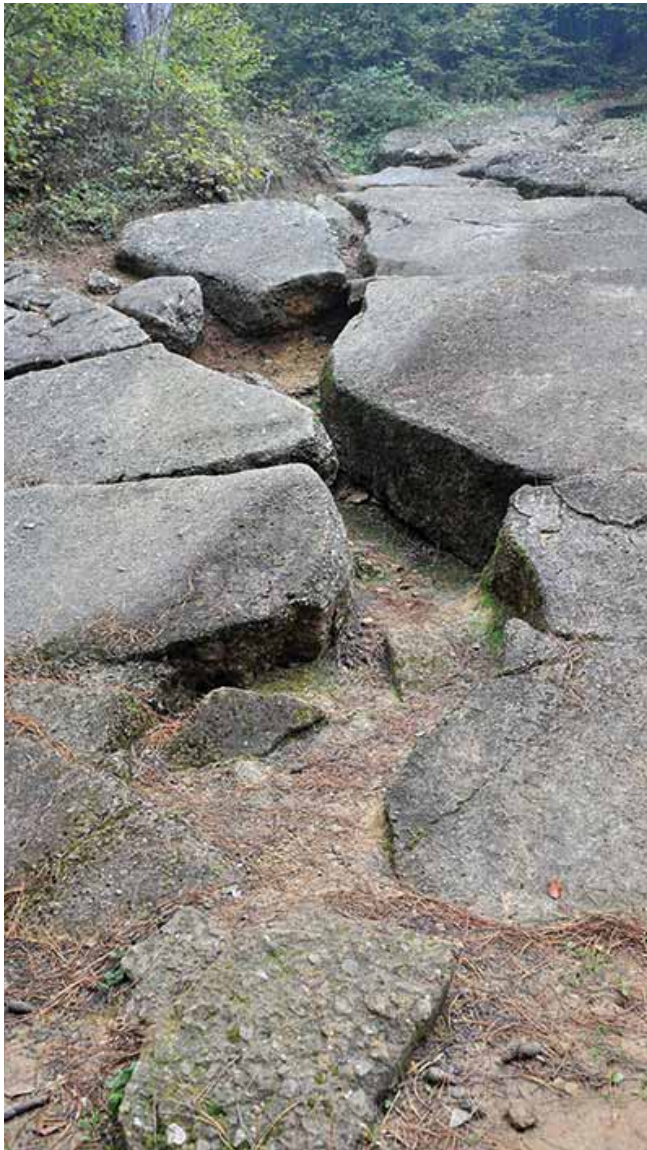
After a quiet spring subdued by the pandemic, weekend crowds are back at the park, consisting mostly of visitors from the region. “The beginning of the season was catastrophic,



Tourists visit the archaeological park “Ravne” near the central-Bosnian town of Visoko.

Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, November 27, 2020



A five euro (\$5.94) entry fee for the whole park also includes access to the underground tunnel network which Osmanagic claims emit healing electromagnetic waves. In his tour of the park, Osmanagic takes groups down to the chambers, urging them to hold their hands over a smooth rock and feel the “energy” rising. Dzenana Halepovic, a 67-year-old from Sarajevo, is a frequent visitor. In the tunnels “I feel good, I breathe well, I feel light. I simply feel like I’m receiving energy there”, she said.

Immunity booster

For Enver Imamovic, a professor emeritus of archaeology at the University of Sarajevo, the project is pure scam. The tunnels are likely “remnants of an ancient gold mine” while wedges of stones on the hillside, which believers consider to be the building blocks of the pyramid, are “nothing more than natural geological formations”, he told AFP. “Everything that is said about the pyramids is absolutely unacceptable”.

Founder Osmanagic has also been promoting the site as a place to “boost immunity” during the coronavirus pandemic. While he insists no cures are guaranteed, he cites other alleged miracles in which people have been healed of ailments like hypertension, diabetes or even cancer after a trip to the underground tunnels. In a destitute country with a weak health system whose shortcomings have been exposed by the coronavirus crisis, many are drawn to the hope of alternative medicine. Emina Kavaz, 53, says she is choosing the pyramids to treat her asthma. “I used to come every Saturday to go through the tunnels for between 40 and 60 minutes,” she told AFP. “The price... is insignificant compared to the result obtained.” — AFP



Touristic guide Semir Osmanagic (right) gives a tour to Serbia's tennis player Novak Djokovic at the archaeological park “Ravne”.



Tourists sit near a ceramic block as they visit the underground tunnel “Ravne” near central-Bosnian town of Visoko.



A woman gets out of the underground tunnel “Ravne”, near the central-Bosnian town of Visoko.



Tourists visit the archaeological park “Ravne” near the central-Bosnian town of Visoko.



A Bosnian guide explains to tourists the tour of the so-called Bosnian Valley of Pyramids in the central-Bosnian town of Visoko.

The archaeological park “Ravne” near the central-Bosnian town of Visoko.

but since Djokovic has been here, it's been a joy,” says Nermin Alihodzic, 47, who sells tourists colorful mini-pyramids and pieces of quartz. While the government stopped backing the park over a decade ago, local authorities have helped finance the construction of roads, parking lots and other infrastructure to encourage tourists.

Word Search

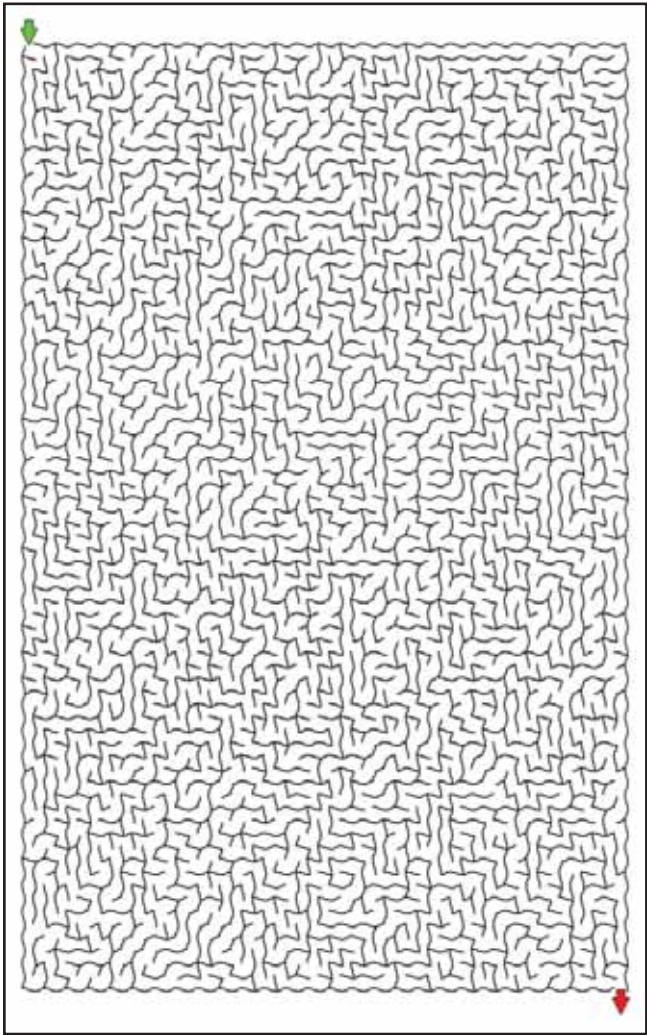
Alien Life
Word Search

DYXFRNEFMKGONNOITCUDBA
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|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Abduction | Galaxy | Sighting |
| Alien | Green | Spacecraft |
| Area Fifty One | Invasion | Telepathy |
| Close Encounter | Light Speed | Transporter |
| Conspiracy | Martian | Traveler |
| Dimension | Outer Space | UFO |
| Earthling | Planets | Voyage |
| Extraterrestrial | Ray Gun | |
| Flying Saucer | Sci-fi | |



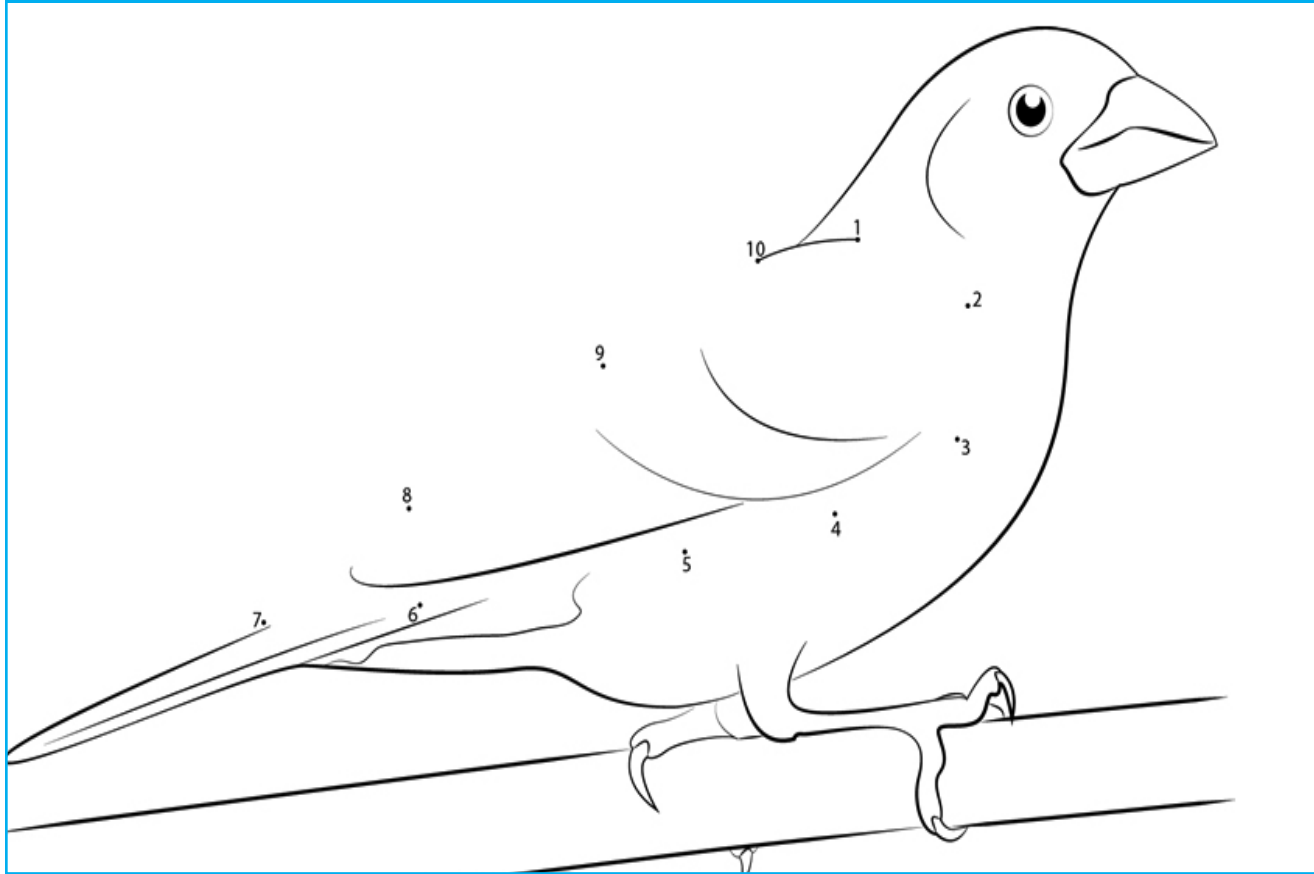
Kids Mazes



Color It



Join the dots



Word Scramble



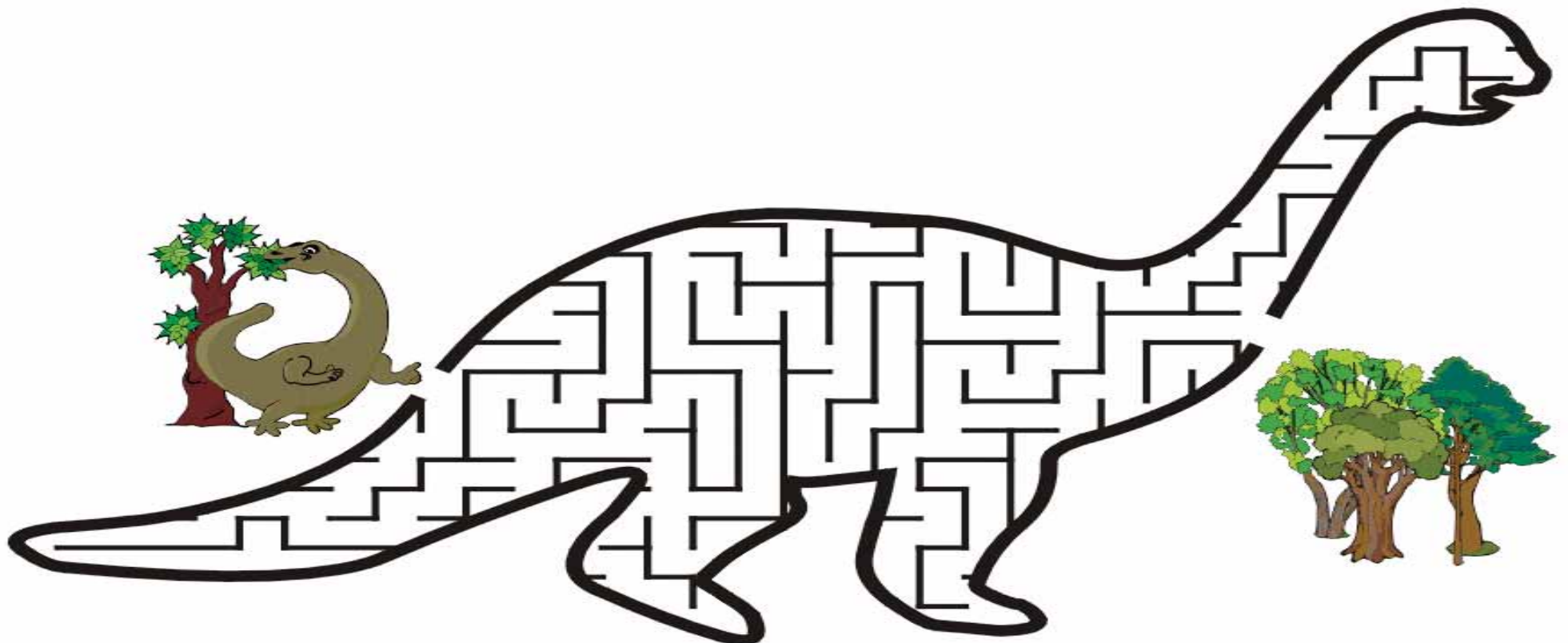
Harry Potter Word Scramble

Somebody has cast a Gobbledygook Spell on Harry and his words are coming out all mixed up. Can you figure out what he is saying? Watch out! Some of the words are actually two.

DIGHAR	_____	NPOTSI	_____
MUEGGL	_____	ENOEHIRM	_____
DANW	_____	LAEAYNIOLGD	_____
DLTEOVROM	_____	AAOCMYRDFLO	_____
RDFFGRYONI	_____	NLIGWOR	_____
LRUESYDS	_____	ILIVSNBEI	_____
QEBDLMREU	_____	DRNOGA	_____
ANEYWREOLS	_____	OCSOHL	_____
RRSKATD	_____	ARHRY	_____
LILEBEONR	_____	CASR	_____
IQCDIDUTH	_____	IWZRDA	_____
TRWPCICTHA	_____	RWSGAOTH	_____

Find the way

Help the dinosaur through the dinosaur maze to find more trees to eat.



Classifieds

Friday, November 27, 2020

Kuwait Times
Established 1961



CHANGE OF NAME

I, Shazeen Mahamad Shaif Alaji (Indian Passport no. T8991335 issued in Kuwait) D/o Alaji Mahamad Shaif Kasam, resident of Kurdhunda, Tal. Sangmeshwar, Dist. Ratnagiri, Maharashtra-415611 hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as, given name: Shazeen Mahamad Shaif, surname: Alji and Father's name as Mahamad Shaif Kasam Alji for all purposes. **(C 5819)**

I, Nuwair Mahamad Shaif Alaji (Indian Passport no. T2416290 issued in Kuwait) S/o Alaji Mahamad Shaif Kasam, resident of

Kamte Mohalla, Tal. Chiplun, Dist. Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as, given name: Nuwair Mahamad Shaif, surname: Alji and Father's name as Mahamad Shaif Kasam Alji for all purposes. **(C 5819) 27-11-2020**

LOST

Original document policy no. 633004362 of Mr. Zaheer Ahmed DV the State Life Insurance Corporation Of Pakistan, Gulf Zone is reported to have been lost. Anyone finding the same or claiming any interest in it should communicate with the Manager Kuwait State Life office. Ph: 22452208. **(C 5818) 25-11-2020**

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Warm and Clouds will increase gradually with moderate to fresh south easterly wind to southerly wind with speed of 25 - 55 km/h causing rising dust with a chance for rain that might be thundery later on.

BY NIGHT: Rather cold and Cloudy with moderate to fresh south easterly wind with speed of 20 - 45 km/h with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times.

WEATHER WATCH			Fresh wind	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.	SFC. CHART 26/11/2020 0000 UTC	
KUWAIT CITY	24 °C	20 °C		
KUWAIT AIRPORT	26 °C	15 °C		
ABDALY	27 °C	15 °C		
BUBYAN	23 °C	20 °C		
JAHERA	27 °C	15 °C		
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C		
SALMIYAH	23 °C	21 °C		
AHMADI	- °C	- °C		
NUWAISIB	24 °C	12 °C		
WAFRA	27 °C	14 °C		
SALMY	27 °C	14 °C		

4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	11/27	Warm and Partly cloudy to cloudy and rising dust over open areas with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times	27 °C	18 °C	SE-SW	20 - 45 km/h
Saturday	11/28	Warm and Cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times	24 °C	18 °C	SE-S	15 - 45 km/h
Sunday	11/29	Warm and Partly cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times	25 °C	17 °C	SE	15 - 45 km/h
Monday	11/30	Fair	22 °C	12 °C	NW	15 - 40 km/h

PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	04:58
Sunrise	06:21
Zuhr	11:35
Asr	14:30
Sunset	16:50
Isha	18:11

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	25 °C
MIN. Temp.	08 °C
MAX. RH	74 %
MIN. RH	20 %
MAX. Wind	S 21 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

All times are local time unless otherwise stated.

UP.0

Business

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2020

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First flydubai flight lands in Tel Aviv

Netanyahu, on hand for arrival, calls it ‘moment of history’



TEL AVIV: An airplane of budget airline flydubai lands at Israel's Ben Gurion Airport yesterday on the first scheduled commercial service between the two cities following the normalization of ties between the UAE and Israel. — AFP

TEL AVIV: A flight operated by budget airline flydubai landed in Tel Aviv yesterday, the first scheduled commercial service between the two cities following the normalization of ties between the UAE and Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on hand for the arrival of the inaugural flight after its nearly four-hour trip, called it “a moment of history”. “As-salaam alaikum (Peace be upon you),” he said to arriving passengers. “Come again and again and again.”

The United Arab Emirates in September signed a landmark US-brokered deal to formalize relations with Israel, the first such agreement by an Arab state in the Gulf. Commenting on the accord in a tweet yesterday, UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan said it would foster “prosperity and progress” in the Middle East.

With their economies hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic, the UAE and Israel are hoping for rapid dividends from the normalization deal, including an influx of tourists as Dubai enters its winter high season. “The start of scheduled flights will contribute to economic development and create further opportunities for investment,” flydubai CEO

Ghaith Al-Ghaith said when the service was announced earlier this month.

The Dubai carrier will fly the route twice daily, and Israeli airlines El Al and Israir are both expected to launch their commercial services between the cities next month. Etihad Airways, based in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi, has said it will begin flying to Tel Aviv in March 2021. The UAE became only the third Arab country to normalize ties with Israel, following Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. The two countries have already signed treaties on visa-free travel - although that is yet to come into force - along with accords on investment protection, science and technology.

‘Circle of normalization’

Since the historic agreement, Bahrain has also forged ties with Israel, while Sudan has agreed to do so in principle. The agreements shattered a longstanding Arab consensus that there should be no normalization with Israel until it reaches a comprehensive peace deal with the Palestinians. Several Gulf Arab states have for years been quietly building relations

with Israel on the basis of shared animosity towards Iran, with the US supporting the process.

Regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia has so far refrained from formalizing ties with Israel but has given the green light to overflights from the Jewish state, in an implicit sign of approval. Netanyahu reportedly met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salam in the futuristic Red Sea city of Neom on Sunday, fuelling speculation that the kingdom was moving towards normalization with the Jewish state. Riyadh has denied the any such meeting took place.

Asked whether he expected Saudi flights to one day be landing in Tel Aviv, Netanyahu said: “The circle of normalization will get wider, there will be more countries in the coming months.” After the UAE deal was announced by President Donald Trump in August, El Al flew a delegation of US and Israeli officials - led by Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner - to Abu Dhabi in an historic direct service between the two countries. That was followed by an official visit by a UAE delegation to Tel Aviv as well as a string of charter flights carrying business groups. — AFP

Business

Al-Safat Investment Co AGM approves relisting on Boursa

AlTerkait to shareholders: A promising future is in sight

KUWAIT: Chairman of Al-Safat Investment Co Abdullah Hamad AlTerkait stressed that the company is on the verge of a new phase of development and growth, in light of the balanced strategy it employs.

AlTerkait said that the Board of Directors spared no effort in cooperating with the executive management to relist Al-Safat Investment shares in Boursa Kuwait, particularly after bringing the company affairs in line with the relevant regulatory prerequisites and terms.

AlTerkait praised the cooperation of the relevant regulatory authorities represented by Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Capital Markets Authority and Boursa Kuwait, noting that the efforts of these entities is of great help to companies in achieving the equation of preserving both their capabilities and shareholders' equity.

AlTerkait made these comments during the meeting of Al-Safat Investment Co general assembly which included discussion of the company relisting in Boursa Kuwait as a first step in the relevant mandatory arrangements and procedures, particularly after the upgrade of Boursa Kuwait to Emerging Market status.

He welcomed shareholders and attendees and said: "Today marks a historic date in the evolution of Al-Safat Investment Co, bringing to a close an eventful phase of various financial settlements and assets restructuring



Abdullah Hamad AlTerkait

ing which included liquidation of some entities and exiting others." He added that Al-Safat Investment Co is today at the threshold of a new phase full of challenges which require full awareness in order to provide the necessary cash flows and therefore maximize shareholders' equity. AlTerkait stressed that the tireless efforts of the board of directors in cooperation with the executive management laid the cornerstone for the company's start.

He said that those efforts were effective in setting Al-Safat Investment Co on the road of a new phase of success, development and competition imposed by the state of the market. He pointed out that the decision of the Court of Cassation concerning the Wakala Investment Contract with Qatar National



Al-Safat Investment Co holds annual general meeting.

Bank was highly fruitful as a result of those efforts, especially that the case had been before the courts for over ten years.

He expected the decision to reflect positively on the company's operational activities and its profitability, therefore achieving its desired goals, namely maximizing assets and boosting shareholders' equity.

Shareholders praised and approved the relisting of Al-Safat Investment Co's shares in Boursa Kuwait in accordance with the set

terms. AlTerkait thanked the Board members, the executive management and all staff for their efforts in overcoming the previous challenges and for successfully executing the plan to put the company back on the right course. He pointed out that the Board, through its futuristic outlook, is committed to the pre-set strategy of developing the company business, boosting its growth and ensuring the provision of what's best for Al-Safat Investment Co, and its shareholders.

Salesforce plans to buy Slack

NEW YORK: US software firm Salesforce plans to buy corporate messaging platform Slack, the Wall Street Journal reported Wednesday, leading to a jump in stock prices for the young company. Slack, which has enjoyed increased popularity since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, saw its shares surge 32 percent. Trade was temporarily suspended but prices were still up nearly 24 percent around 1:00 pm (1800 GMT).

Salesforce - which specializes in technology that allows businesses to communicate with clients - fell nearly three percent, however. The two companies have begun merger discussions for an agreement that could see

Slack valued at more than the present market capitalization of \$17 billion, the Journal reported. "If Salesforce does head down this path it would set off a chain reaction for more cloud software deals in 2021," Wedbush analyst Dan Ives said.

It could pave the way for more mergers in the cloud tech sector, Ives said, especially since the move could set up Salesforce as a competitor for Microsoft, which owns Slack rival Teams. Salesforce acquired data software company MuleSoft in 2018 for around \$6.5 million and data visualization tool Tableau for \$15.7 in 2019.

Slack, which purports to make it easier for teams of employees to collaborate online, has boomed as remote working has gained a cultural foothold during the COVID-19 pandemic. In its latest quarterly report, the company declared a 49 percent increase in revenue for May, June and July, to \$216 million. The platform counts 130,000 paying clients. — AFP

Teva fined over delaying sleep disorder drug

BRUSSELS: European Union regulators fined Israeli drug-maker Teva yesterday for colluding to delay a cheaper generic version of modafinil, a blockbuster sleep disorder drug. The European Commission said Teva was in breach of EU antitrust rules after it effectively agreed with drug-maker Cephalon, a company it now owns, to keep the cheaper drug off of the market.

Teva and Cephalon were fined a combined €60.5 million (\$72 million), but the company can appeal this through the European courts. The EU launched the case in 2011 and pressed charges in July 2017. Under the alleged agreement, Teva committed not to market a cheaper generic ver-

sion of modafinil, Cephalon's drug for sleep disorders, the EU said.

EU Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager said Teva's "pay-for-delay" agreement "harmed patients and national health systems, depriving them of more affordable medicines". In a similar case, in 2014 the commission hit French drugs giant Servier with a €331-million fine for colluding to delay a cheaper generic version of perindopril, a popular blood pressure treatment. Teva was also fined in that case.

Generic products are far cheaper than brand medicines and lead to huge savings to patients and health care providers while remaining just as effective. But in so-called pay-for-delay deals, drug makers secretly compensate generic rivals to thwart the introduction of cheaper versions of blockbuster drugs for an agreed time. Drug makers argue that the arrangement allows them sufficient time to recoup expensive research and marketing costs incurred to bring their products to the market. — AFP

Business

Indian farmers clash with police

Plight of farmers a major political issue in India

NEW DELHI: Indian police fired tear gas and water cannon yesterday in clashes with several thousand farmers marching to New Delhi to protest against recent agricultural reforms. The confrontation happened when police tried to stop the farmers, from the northern state of Punjab, crossing a bridge about 200 km from Delhi.

Armed with sticks and rocks, some of the farmers threw police barriers into the river below. The police opened fire with water cannon and tear gas, further enraging the protestors. After a two-hour stand-off, police eventually allowed the marchers to continue towards the capital. The plight of

farmers is a major political issue in India, with about 70 percent of rural households depending primarily on agriculture. Issues such as drought and mounting debt have been blamed for the suicides of thousands of farmers in recent years.

Legislation passed earlier this year means that farmers are now free to sell their produce to anyone at any price, instead of to state-controlled markets at fixed rates. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed this as a "complete transformation of the agriculture sector" that would empower "tens of millions of farmers" and encourage much-needed investment and modernization.

also urged quick action to "tackle the huge environmental threat it poses to Yemen & the Red Sea". "We need urgent progress now. The Houthis must work with the UN to avoid a devastating oil spill," he said in a tweet.

Catastrophe looms

The UN has said an oil spill could be "catastrophic", destroying Red Sea ecosystems, shutting down the fishing industry and closing Yemen's lifeline Hodeida port for six months. Independent studies show it could affect countries as far away as Djibouti and Eritrea as well as Saudi Arabia and expose more than 8.4 million Yemenis - many already vulnerable due to famine after years of war - to heightened pollution.

An earlier agreement on access struck in July failed to materialize, but UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said this week that the new accord was more formal and represents "an important step forward in this critical work". Houthi-run media quoted a senior official as saying a message had been sent to the United Nations welcoming the experts who would conduct the "urgent evaluation and maintenance".

"The national side (Houthis) are currently waiting for a letter from the United Nations to inform the date of the arrival of the team of experts, after they have been granted the necessary visas to enter Yemen, and to start implementing the work assigned to them alongside the national technical team," it said. "We hope that the United Nations will accelerate the implementation of the steps according to the agreement, and send the team of experts to carry out their duties quickly."

In June, the Houthis said they wanted guarantees that the value of the oil on board the Safer would be used to pay salaries of their employees. But the Yemeni government has said the money for the oil should be used for health and humanitarian projects in the shattered country, which is again on the brink of famine. — AFP

But the main opposition Congress party, which is in power in Punjab and backs the protests, has argued the change leaves farmers at the mercy of large corporations. "For nearly two months, farmers have been protesting peacefully in Punjab without any problem," Amarinder Singh, chief minister of Punjab, said yesterday. "I urge the BJP to direct their state governments not to indulge in such strong-arm tactics against the farm-

ers. The hands that feed the nation deserve to be held, not pushed aside," he added.

The protesting farmers had also blocked the movement of trains in Punjab for the last two months, before yielding to public and government pressure and lifting the blockade. Yesterday's stand-off resulted in a long traffic hold-up on one of India's busiest national highways linking New Delhi to several northern states. — AFP

Houthis confirm green light for tanker repair

DUBAI: Yemen's Houthi rebels confirmed they have given the green light for a UN mission to inspect and repair a long-abandoned fuel tanker which threatens to rupture and cause a massive oil spill. The UN has been trying to assess the "FSO Safer" for years, but the Iran-backed Houthis - who control much of Yemen's north after a war that erupted in 2014 - have so far denied access.

"An urgent maintenance agreement and a comprehensive evaluation of the Safer tanker was signed with the United Nations in order to avoid an environmental catastrophe," senior rebel commander Mohamed Ali Al-Houthi said in a tweet late Wednesday. The UN said earlier this week that the operation could begin by late January or early February, depending on when it could obtain the necessary equipment.

The 45-year-old vessel, abandoned near the western port of Hodeida since 2015, has 1.1 million barrels of crude on board, and a rupture or explosion would have disastrous environmental and humanitarian consequences. Apart from corrosion to the ageing vessel, essential work to curb explosive gases in its storage tanks has been neglected.

Greenpeace welcomed the development but said it was "long overdue". "Every day that the Safer is left unattended brings us another day closer to an humanitarian and environmental catastrophe that will further deepen the current tragedy in Yemen, and cause untold damage to the land, sea and air around the region," said spokesman Ahmed El Droubi.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab

ABK Congratulates Winners of the Salary Transfer Draw

'Transfer your salary and get a 0% interest loan'



Al Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced the names of 2 winners for the month of November for the "Transfer your Salary and Find Reasons to Smile" monthly draw campaign, held on 19th November

2020, under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The lucky winners who will each receive the equivalent of their monthly salaries are:

November 2020	CHERRY MAY VELASQUEZ FAJARDO
	ISMAEL MOHAMMAD AHMAD MOUSA

The final draw will be held on 10th December, 2020. The salary campaign offers ABK salary account customers a range of exceptional rewards. Kuwaiti salary account holders will receive cash gifts up to KD 1,000 provided they transfer a salary equivalent to/or higher than KD 500. Moreover, Kuwaiti customers are eligible for a 0% interest loan of up to KD 10,000 and expatriates up

to KD 5,000. These loans are subject to ABK's terms and conditions, as well as the Central Bank of Kuwait's regulations and policies.

For more information about the Salary Campaign and other ABK products kindly visit eahli.com or contact an ABK customer service agent via 'Ahlan Ahli' at 1899899.

Business

China wholesale market suspends sales, storage of frozen goods

Beijing claims coronavirus found on imported products, packaging

BEIJING: China's biggest wholesale food market has suspended the sale and storage of chilled and frozen meat and seafood as the government ramps up inspections of cold-chain goods after several new cases of coronavirus infections. The Xinfadi market in Beijing, which was at the center of an outbreak of COVID-19 cases in the Chinese capital in June, has disposed of products and disinfected over a hundred cold storage units and shut down their power, the state-backed Beijing News has reported.

Although Beijing has had no recent locally transmitted infections involving the market or cold-chain food products, the move comes after several handlers of imported frozen food in the cities of Qingdao and Tianjin contracted the virus in recent months. Tianjin is some 132 km south of Beijing while Qingdao is 550 kilometres south of the capital.

Market authorities will also conduct daily checks for the virus at warehouses and cold-storage facilities for fruits and vegetables, the Beijing News also said. The market, a complex of warehouses and trading halls spanning an area the size of nearly 160 soccer pitches, can trade 1,500 tons of seafood, 18,000 tons of vegetables and 20,000 tons of fruit on a daily basis, according to its website.

China has ramped up testing of frozen foods after saying it has repeatedly discovered the coronavirus on imported products and their packaging, triggering large-scale testing of food and staff, the suspension of certain imports and disruptions to trade flows.

Separately, a recent outbreak of more than 400 coronavirus cases in the northwestern region of Xinjiang has been traced back to cargo containers, Wu Zunyou, chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said on Wednesday. The state-owned Global Times quoted a Xinjiang official as saying the outbreak was linked to containers from Tajikistan. — Reuters



WUHAN: Passengers wearing facemasks walk to their train at Wuhan railway station on Wednesday. — AFP

Russian oil giant announces start of Arctic project

MOSCOW: Russian oil giant Rosneft on Wednesday announced the start of operations for its giant Vostok oil project in the Arctic, part of the country's strategic energy plan which has been criticised by environmentalists. "It is with great pleasure that I inform you of the start of the practical implementation of the project," Rosneft chief executive Igor Sechin told President Vladimir Putin at a meeting in Moscow.

He thanked Putin, with whom he has close relations, for the adoption of a law facilitating Russian investments in the Arctic. "The prospecting and exploration work are now underway, in accordance with our timetable," Sechin said, adding that the design work for a 770-km oil pipeline and a port had been completed.

The strategic plan for Russia's mineral resources stretches to 2035 and is banking on growing global demand, though it does predict that natural gas will partially replace oil and coal. "Mineral resources will remain a competitive advantage of Russia's economy, and will determine

the place and role of the country in the world," it says. Environmentalists urged the Russian government last year to stop granting licenses to exploit several Arctic deposits.

The Vostok project, the cornerstone of Russia's Arctic ambitions, brings together several Rosneft activities in the Russian Far North, near the northern sea route that the company intends to exploit to deliver to Europe and Asia. In February, Sechin promised Putin that the scheme would create a "new oil and gas province" on Siberia's Taymyr peninsula, the northernmost part of the Asian continent.

The complete project will represent a total investment of 10,000 billion rubles (\$111 billion), including two airports and 15 "industry towns". The project has also been forecast to create 130,000 jobs and allow access to estimated reserves of around five billion tons of oil. The construction alone will require 400,000 workers, Sechin said.

Last week Rosneft announced the sale of 10 percent of the project to Singapore's Trafigura group, without mentioning a price. The Russian group had previously said that there was interest in the project from India. Sechin said the Arctic endeavor would eventually produce 100 million tons of oil per year. Between now and 2024 he said that 30 million tons would be sent from the Arctic along the so-called Northern Sea route connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. — AFP

US extends TikTok sale deadline to December 4

WASHINGTON: The US Treasury on Wednesday said it had extended by seven days the Nov 27 deadline given to the Chinese owner of TikTok to sell the popular social media platform's American business. "The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) has granted ByteDance a one-week extension, from November 27, 2020 to December 4, 2020 to allow time to review a revised submission that the Committee recently received," a Treasury spokesperson said.

President Donald Trump's administration has expressed national security concerns over the app, claiming it could be used for Chinese espionage and threatening to ban it. The ban has been challenged in courts, including a case in Washington and a separate filing by the app's "creators" in a Pennsylvania court, which blocked the ban on October 30, though the government is appealing that order.

Trump, who lost his bid for re-election

this month, has claimed that TikTok - which has some 100 million US users - can be used to collect data on Americans for Chinese espionage, a claim denied by the company. The White House has said TikTok must become a US firm controlled by American investors to avert a ban. But any plan would likely need approval from Beijing, which has balked at giving up control of its social media star.

China's commerce ministry published new rules in August that added "civilian use" to a list of the types of technology that are restricted for export, which could make it more difficult for ByteDance to sell TikTok, which features clips of everything from dance routines to politics. A deal appeared to take shape earlier this year which would allow Silicon Valley giant Oracle to be the data partner for a newly incorporated TikTok Global, with Walmart joining as a commercial partner.

While Trump signaled his approval for the plan, it has not been finalized and the prospects remain unclear. The developments come amid heightened tensions between Washington and Beijing over trade and national security, with the US administration having also banned Chinese tech giant Huawei from obtaining US technology and from deals involving wireless networks. — AFP

Sports

Friday, November 27, 2020

Pakistan cricketers 'positive' for COVID-19 in New Zealand

Team receives 'final warning'; 6 squad members test positive

WELLINGTON: Pakistan's cricket tour of New Zealand was in the balance yesterday after six squad members tested positive for COVID-19 and the team received a "final warning" for flouting quarantine rules. New Zealand health authorities revoked the Pakistan players' ability to train while in isolation at their Christchurch hotel, making clear they would not tolerate risky behavior in a country that has largely eradicated the virus. "It is a privilege to come to New Zealand to play sport, but in return teams must stick to the rules that are designed to keep COVID-19 out of our communities," director-general of health, Ashley Bloomfield, said in a statement.

The health ministry said Pakistan's 53-member tour party, led by skipper Babar Azam, tested negative before leaving Lahore and were swabbed again after arriving for a spell of managed isolation on the South Island on Tuesday. Six tests came back positive and those affected were moved into stricter quarantine, it said, with New Zealand Cricket adding that four cases were new and two were regarded as "historical".

"While this is disappointing for the Pakistan squad, the testing outcomes and the actions taken show the government system is working," NZC said. Bloomfield said CCTV showed members of the tour party breaching social distancing protocols. "The team as a whole has been issued with a final warning," he said. "It's important to note that all incidents of breaches occurred within the facility and there is no risk to the public." The West Indies cricket team were also reprimanded by New Zealand health authorities for similar breaches earlier this month when they were in managed isolation.

'Robust procedures'

New Zealand has largely eradicated community transmission of coronavirus recording just 1,684 cases and 25 deaths in a population of five million. Aggressive testing, snap lockdowns and effective contact tracing mean domestic life has largely returned to normal, but border control remain strict. All overseas arrivals must undergo two weeks in quarantine, although New Zealand Cricket negotiated special privileges to allow the tourists to train together.

Health authorities said these had been revoked after several team members were seen on CCTV "breaching managed isolation rules, despite clear, consistent and detailed communication of expected behaviors". The tour is scheduled to begin with the first of three Twenty20 internationals in Auckland on December 18, followed by two Tests, but will be in jeopardy if there are any further breaches. NZC said it was having discussions with the tourists to ensure they understood the quarantine requirements. New Zealand's military helps manage border virus accommodation and air commodore Darryn Webb said there were robust procedures in place to deal with positive tests. "Our focus is on keeping the rest of the squad and our staff safe," he said. "For that reason, all other team members must remain in their rooms while investigations continue." Even before Pakistan arrived on Kiwi soil the tour had been hit by ill health, with Pakistan's dashing opener Fakhar Zaman ruled out at the 11th hour with a persistent fever. The 30-year-old left-hander tested negative along with the rest of the squad. —AFP



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti shooter Uqab Al-Shammari takes aim during the Crown Prince's annual shooting tournament at the shooting club in Al-Sulaibiya, north of Kuwait City yesterday. - Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Opportunity knocks as Pumas passion faces second All Blacks test

SYDNEY: Argentina were written off by everybody but themselves before the start of the makeshift Tri-Nations tournament but will put one hand on their maiden southern hemisphere test title if they can find a way to beat New Zealand again this weekend. The Pumas sent shockwaves around the rugby world two weeks ago when they deservedly earned their first win over the three-times world champions with a 25-15 victory in their first test in more than a year.

They followed that with a battling 15-15 draw with Australia last week in Newcastle and, equal on points but with a game in hand over their rivals, have their first major international silverware within their grasp. The odds would still have to be stacked against them but the Pumas have been defying expectations with missionary zeal and an iron will since landing in Australia.

Their economically struggling homeland, which is still reporting thousands of new cases of COVID-19 every day, suffered another blow on Wednesday when football great Diego Maradona died. "He's a big figure in our country and he epitomized a lot of the way the Argentineans are," coach Mario Ledesma said yesterday.

day. "We'll try to remember him the best way possible, on the field representing the colors." A second victory over the All Blacks, however unlikely it would have seemed just a few weeks ago, would plunge New Zealand rugby further into crisis.

Ian Foster is under huge pressure after his first five games in charge netted two wins, a draw and two defeats, and should the All Blacks suffer three successive losses for the first time since 1998 it could well signal a premature end to his tenure. Flyhalf Nicolas Sanchez has scored every point in Argentina's two matches, all but five from the kicking tee, so discipline will be essential if the All Blacks are to end their losing run, which includes a 24-22 loss to Australia. Sanchez was one of only five players retained in the starting side for Saturday's match as the Pumas face four matches in four weeks against top quality test opposition. [

Foster resisted the temptation to do the same, handing 12 of the players who started at Western Sydney Stadium two weeks ago the chance to redeem themselves. Flanker Akira Ioane, lock Scott Barrett and prop Nepo Laulala are the new faces as New Zealand look to end their season with a bang and a bonus point victory. "We have got another opportunity to finish the year on the level we want to," Foster said on Thursday. "We have got a chance to win the championship and that means a lot to us." —Reuters

ICC probes Lanka T20 league over alleged match-fixing

COLOMBO: The International Cricket Council is investigating an alleged attempt to fix Sri Lankan Premier League matches due to start yesterday, a media report said. The complaint alleges a former national cricketer approached a Lanka Premier League player, and is being looked at by the ICC's Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU), the mass-circulating Lankadeepa said. "The former national player who allegedly made the approach is currently overseas," the newspaper said, adding that he had once been accused, but later cleared, of match-fixing charges by the ICC.

The ICC said it would not discuss any ongoing investigation. The Sri Lanka board's anti-corruption unit too declined comment. The Twenty20 tournament opens Thursday without spectators, but under the close scrutiny of the ICC anti-

corruption officials, the national board and the sports ministry. Last week, Sri Lanka's former fast bowling coach Nuwan Zoysa said he would appeal a decision of an ICC-appointed tribunal which found him guilty of three offences relating to match-fixing after a two-year investigation.

Cricket-crazy Sri Lanka introduced a law against corruption in sport last year after then-sports minister Harin Fernando declared that the ICC considered the Indian Ocean island the world's most corrupt cricket nation. The Sri Lankan board and the ICC has conducted anti-corruption programs for players and officials and set up a 24-hour hotline to report any "suspicious or corrupt activity."

The tournament will be Sri Lanka's first top cricket since England abruptly pulled out of a two-match Test series in March as the coronavirus pandemic spread. The start was delayed three times because of coronavirus restrictions imposed by authorities to contain the virus which has claimed 94 lives and infected nearly 21,000 people. —AFP

Sports

Sailing Baghdad's river bends, young Iraqis rocking the boat

'I want to show everyone that we, Iraqi women, can succeed'

BAGHDAD: Mariam Khaled squinted her eyes, drew in her sail against the wind and set her white dinghy towards a point on the riverbank: Adhamiya, to be precise, in central Baghdad. With the orange sunset saturating the sky, a cluster of mostly teenage sailors, windsurfers and jet-skiers were making waves along the river Tigris. "It's a difficult sport that requires a lot of effort, and plenty of patience and perseverance," 16-year-old Khaled, a former junior swimming champion, told AFP. "But I want to show everyone that we, Iraqi women, can succeed," she added, after pulling her dinghy up the muddy bank.

The water sports are also revolutionizing how Iraqis interact with the historic Tigris and Euphrates, which gave the country its byname of the "land between the two rivers" millennia ago. Water levels in the twin rivers have dropped by half because of dams upstream in neighboring Turkey and Iran. One year in Baghdad, the levels drew so low that residents could squelch between the banks of the Tigris on foot.

Following the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003, Adhamiya became the heart of a Sunni insurrection and one of the most dangerous places in Baghdad. The dark years of Iraq's sectarian fighting from 2006 until 2008 pitted it against the Shiite district of Kadhimiya, just across the Tigris. The remains of victims who were thrown into the river back then still some-

times wash ashore—but today, Baghdad's river bends see much more life than death.

'Place of leisure'

Along the waterfront, restaurants and small funfairs are teeming with families who gaze out at the young athletes. "It's now a place of leisure and relaxation," said Ghazi al-Shayaa, a sports journalist. "It's a joy to see Baghdadis gathering here nearly every day to watch the swimmers or the boats go by," he said. The latest major round of violence in Iraq ended in 2017, when the government declared victory in its years-long fight against the Islamic State jihadist group.

The next year, Ahmad Mazlum came up with a crazy idea: setting up Iraq's first water sports federation. Its riverside headquarters in Adhamiya is identifiable by the rows of white dinghies and bright windsurfing sails. Half of the 10 dinghies are Iraqi-made, at around \$600 each. "An (imported) sailboat can cost \$10,000. So we had to build our own in a workshop we set up with the club members," said Mazlum, the federation's deputy head.

The around 100 mostly teenage members—eight of them girls—wear matching fluorescent athletics clothes, as bathing suits would likely contravene Iraq's widely conservative norms. Boys and girls train together under Anmar Salman, a regional rowing champion who re-



BAGHDAD: Members of the Iraqi Water Sports Federation are pictured on the banks of the river Tigris, in the Adhamiya district of Iraq's capital Baghdad. — AFP

cruited from fellow rowers and Iraqi swimmers to launch the sailing club.

'For the joy of it'

Aboard a motorized boat one late afternoon, he advised the young sailors on how to tack and deal with wind conditions. "Turn now!" called out the instructor with the neatly-trimmed beard.

The stretch of river where they practise has surprisingly robust winds of up to 15 knots, likely because the buildings on either side create a tunnel. Salman is planning to take his young trainees to qualifiers next year in Abu Dhabi for the Tokyo Olympics. But since they can only train up and down the river, they may not have the same versatility as sea sailors. — AFP

India ready for 'hard, aggressive' cricket as Aussie series begins

SYDNEY: India are promising to play "hard, aggressive" cricket when they emerge from coronavirus quarantine to face Australia in a blockbuster limited-over series beginning in Sydney today. The first of three ODIs, followed by three Twenty20s next week, comes after the visitors had to endure wrangling over quarantine requirements and an outbreak of the virus in Melbourne, which delayed confirmation of the tour until just weeks ago.

Virat Kohli's squad have been in isolation since their arrival a fortnight ago, although they have been allowed to train within a bio-secure bubble. It has been an equally odd build-up for Aaron Finch's Australia, with the likes of David Warner, Steve Smith and Pat Cummins, who played in the Indian Premier League, also undergoing the mandatory 14 days of quarantine, which ended yesterday. The lack of international cricket this year makes it hard to determine form, although Australia head into the white-ball series on the back of beating 50-over world champions England in September. India haven't played together since a tour of New Zealand in February, when they clinched the Twenty20 series but were whitewashed 3-0 in the ODIs. — AFP

India football stronghold mourns 'Our God' Diego

KANNUR: Even in the land of cricket, Diego Maradona's death came as such a shock that one Indian state declared two days of official mourning and fans flocked to a hotel room where the football deity once slept. The Argentine footballer, who died on Tuesday at the age of 60, is so revered in Kerala state that even the shells from some prawns he ate during his visit in 2012 have been freeze-dried and framed.

A steady stream of fans and journalists went to the Hotel Blue Nile in Kannur to leave tributes as the state government ordered the mourning period and a local musician sang a mournful tribute to the footballer on television channels. Hotel owner Ravindran Veleimbra recalled the day when Maradona entered the lobby. "Our God had walked in. He was in front of us," he told AFP. Maradona's visit brought chaos to the southern state, which bucks the trend in India by preferring football to cricket.

Veleimbra remembered how hordes of fans wearing Argentina's blue and white shirts packed the road outside, some having travelled hundreds of kilometres in cars, buses and on bikes. Thousands more packed a local stadium. Everything Maradona touched in Room 309 has been preserved, the owner said. "We have saved the cutlery, toiletries and even the bouquet that we gave him. The flowers have dried but it's all framed." The prawn shells that were part of the salad he ate are also displayed, along with footballs and a menu that the World Cup hero signed.



KOLKATA: A worker prepares a sculpture of late Argentinean football legend Diego Armando Maradona before an event to pay their respects after Maradona's death in Kolkata yesterday. — AFP

'Time for tears'

"People ask us specifically for a stay at the Maradona room. Everything that he touched is still intact and his fans want to experience that," Veleimbra said he would now set up a Maradona statue. "It's a day of mourning for us. He hugged me while he was leaving and to this day I can feel him around." Fans also headed to a Maradona statue in the eastern city of Kolkata that is also known as a football holdout. The Argentine superstar went to the eastern city of 15 million people in 2017 to unveil the 12 feet (3.6 metre) high statue showing him wielding the World Cup, which he won in 1986. Fans left flowers and messages at the foot of the bronze statue, which stands on a road leading to Kolkata's airport. — AFP

Sports

Friday, November 27, 2020

Holders Bayern, City book Champions League last 16

Sloppy Liverpool beaten at home by Atalanta

PARIS: Robert Lewandowski set Bayern Munich on the way to a 3-1 Champions League win over Salzburg on Wednesday as the holders joined Manchester City in qualifying for the last 16 with two group games to spare, while Liverpool went down to defeat and Marseille are now the owners of an unwanted record.

On a night when clubs marked news of the death of Diego Maradona by holding a minute's silence in memory of the Argentine before all Champions League games, Bayern eased to a record-extending 15th straight win in the competition. Lewandowski scored the opener just before half-time at an empty Allianz Arena, his 14th goal of the season and also his 71st altogether in the Champions League, leaving him level with Real Madrid great Raul in third place on the all-time list behind Cristiano Ronaldo (131) and Lionel Messi (118).

Kingsley Coman scored Bayern's second and then crossed for Leroy Sane to head in their third, before Mergim Berisha pulled a goal back for the Austrian champions. Marc Roca was sent off for Bayern, but they have a maximum 12 points and are guaranteed to advance as Group A winners, while Atletico Madrid sit second but continue to toil in Europe this season after being held 0-0 at home by Lokomotiv Moscow.

Pep Guardiola's City earlier secured progress as Phil Foden swept in from a Raheem Sterling back-heel to secure a 1-0 win away to Olympiakos in Greece, their fourth win out of four in Group C. City had 21

attempts on goal and their bluntness in attack is a source of concern, even if their European progress provides a tonic to their mediocre Premier League form. "It will come, we would love to do more, but one day it will come and will break everything," said Guardiola, whose side now just need a point from their final two matches to top the group.

Second-place Porto are on the brink of joining them in qualifying after a 2-0 win at Marseille, which was the French side's 13th consecutive defeat in the competition stretching over three campaigns going back to 2011-12. The Nigerian Zaidu Sanusi gave Porto the lead six minutes before half-time and Sergio Oliveira scored a second-half penalty after on-loan Liverpool midfielder Marko Grujic had been sent off for the Portuguese side.

Marseille, who had defender Leonardo Balerdi sent off, cannot now qualify for the last 16. "We have hit rock-bottom," said Marseille coach Andre Villas-Boas. Six-time European champions Liverpool are not yet sure of progressing to the next round after going down 2-0 to Atalanta at Anfield. Three weeks after beating the same side 5-0 in Italy, Liverpool struggled with a weakened starting line-up, and Josip Ilcic put Atalanta in front on the hour mark before German international Robin Gosens got the second goal.

"A deserved defeat in a difficult game," was how Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp summed up the game. Liverpool are top of Group D on nine points,



LIVERPOOL: Atalanta's Dutch midfielder Marten de Roon (left) tackles Liverpool's Portuguese striker Diogo Jota (center) during the UEFA Champions League football match between Liverpool and Atalanta Bergamo on November 25, 2020. —AFP

two points clear of Atalanta and Ajax, who were 3-1 winners at home to Midtjylland. Second-half goals by Ryan Gravenberch, Noussair Mazraoui and David Neres boosted Ajax's hopes, with Awer Mabil

getting a consolation from the penalty spot for the Danes who had captain Erik Sviatchenko sent off late on and are yet to register a point. Ajax go to Liverpool next week. —AFP

Perfect storm brewing over Schalke as chaos reigns supreme

BERLIN: Schalke 04 have been staring down a dark tunnel for months with no light in sight but this week things could get even worse for the Royal Blues. With in-form Borussia Moenchengladbach waiting for them tomorrow, Schalke desperately need to get their act together if they are to have any chance of slowing down their free fall. Club bosses on Tuesday suspended Amine Harit and Nabil Bentaleb over disciplinary issues while the contract of veteran Vedad Ibisevic will be dissolved at the end of December, the decision coming following a spat with an assistant coach on the training ground this week.

The club said Ibisevic's row had nothing to do with the decision but it is indicative of the prevailing atmosphere among players. They are frustrated by a disastrous run in the Bundesliga in 2020 that has seen them go 24 consecutive league games without a win. "I could sit in the changing room and cry," said Schalke's Mark Uth after last week's 2-0 loss to VfL Wolfsburg. "We are steps too late, never go into one-on-ones, don't even get booked. I don't know how we can win a football game like that." —Reuters

Ahly, Zamalek face off in historic 2020 CAF League final

CAIRO: The 2020 CAF Champions League final in Cairo today between Egyptian giants Al Ahly and Zamalek will be the first pitting fierce rivals from one country against each other. The match, to be held under the slogan "no to fanaticism", will bring together two of the clubs whose clashes have long dominated local and continental competitions. Former Arab League chief Amr Moussa once described Ahly and Zamalek as Egypt's "two largest popular parties".

Ahly have won the Champions League eight times and been crowned Egyptian Premier League champions on 42 occasions. Zamalek won the premier African club competition five times and have been Egyptian champions 12 times. Despite their popularity and wide fan bases, Egypt's most successful player, Liverpool forward Mohamed Salah, never played for either club, lining up with Al Mokawloon Al Arab instead.

Egyptian sports minister Ashraf Sobhi has called on the teams to face off at the Cairo International Stadium under the slogan "No to fanaticism". It is likely that fans will have to watch the match in clubs or youth centers, but not in popular neighborhoods or cafes. Security services have yet to decide how many supporters can attend the final amid fears of coronavirus and rioting. Ahly and Zamalek's historic rivalry has peaked in recent years, especially on social media after they met in the 2019 Egyptian Super Cup, a match Ahly won 3-2.

Supporters of Ahly then took to the street in several regions to celebrate before being "infiltrated" by fanatics, who were arrested. "Ahly and Zamalek

are like brothers and, unfortunately, the fanaticism is only among fans," said retired Zamalek and Egypt star Hazem Emam. "(FIFA's) decision on holding the FIFA Club World Cup in Doha next February has raised the intensity of the confrontation," said former Ahly player Walid Salaheldin.

Coronavirus fears

Coronavirus fears have loomed large after the infections of Ahly's Walid Soliman, Mahmoud 'Kahraba' Abdelmoneim and Saleh Gomaa and Zamalek's Mahmoud 'El Wensh' Hamdy and assistant coach Medhat Abdelhady. Two other Zamalek players, Hazem Emam and Mohamed Hassan, have recovered from Covid-19. Former star Emam says Ahly have switched to "collective football" since South African coach Pitso Mosimane took over in September, while Zamalek's recently hired Portuguese coach Jaime Pacheco has changed little.

Mosimane has previously beaten Zamalek in a final-guiding Mamelodi Sundowns of South Africa to a 3-1 aggregate victory in 2016. The South African will rely on goalkeeper Mohamed el Shennawy, star Mohamed 'Afsha' Magdy, Tunisian Ali Maaloul, Malian Aliou Dieng and Nigerian Junior Ajayi. "Mosimane has freed the players from restrictions imposed by former coaches, which tips the scales in his players' favour against Zamalek's players and their individual skills, especially (Achraf) Bencharki and Ferjani Sassi," said Salaheldin.

Pacheco, who returned to Zamalek six years after first coaching the White Knights, said he trusted his players, their strong personalities and ability "to please the fans". Zamalek won the Egyptian Super Cup last February against Ahly after a penalty shootout. The Zamalek stars include veteran Tarek Hamed, Tunisian Sassi, Moroccan Bencharki, Ahmed 'Zizou' Sayed and Mostafa Mohammed. Ahly reached the Champions League final by defeating Wydad Casablanca of Morocco 2-0 away and 3-1 at home while Zamalek overcame the other Casablanca giants, Raja, 1-0 away and 3-1 at home. The Cairo clubs faced off in the Champions League in 2005, 2008, 2012 and 2013 with Ahly winning five matches and the other three drawn. —AFP

Sports

Maradona's death plunges

'Ciao Diego': Naples weeps for Maradona



NAPLES: Photo shows a statuette of Argentinean football legend Diego Maradona with wings, at the shop of Gennaro Di Virgilio in the San Gregorio Armeno street where shops traditionally sell Christmas Nativity statuettes, a day after the death of Maradona.



KOLKATA: Fans hold candles as they pay homage to late Argentinian football legend Diego Armando Maradona in Kolkata yesterday.
—AFP photos



DOHA: In this file photo, Argentina's 1986 World Cup winning hero Diego Maradona wearing a traditional Arab headdress visits Al-Sadd club in Doha.



BUENOS AIRES: A fan mourns outside the Casa Rosada government house as he waits to pay tribute to Argentinean late football legend Diego Armando Maradona in Buenos Aires yesterday.

BUENOS AIRES: Fans worldwide paid tribute and Argentina was in mourning yesterday after Diego Maradona, one of the greatest footballers of all time, died aged 60 after years of drug and alcohol problems. Thousands of mourners, many in tears, and many wearing the World Cup winner's number 10 Argentina jersey, gathered in streets and at stadiums around Buenos Aires in a spontaneous celebration of the player and manager's riotous life.

Tributes poured in from around the world as supporters, players and government leaders from South America to Europe and Asia marked the passing of an undisputed maestro. The outrageously skilful Maradona, widely remembered for his "Hand of God" goal against England in the 1986 World Cup quarter-finals, died of a heart attack while recovering from surgery to remove a blood clot on his brain, a member of his entourage told AFP. Family members were summoned to Maradona's home north of Buenos Aires before his death was announced, triggering a wave of grief across the

country and worldwide.

Lionel Messi, Argentina's modern-day superstar, led the tributes as he said: "He has left us but he will never leave us because Diego is eternal." Brazilian legend Pele, 80, constantly compared with Maradona in the debate over football's greatest player, said he hoped they would one day "play together in the sky". Hundreds of people were already queueing outside the presidential palace in Buenos Aires when Maradona's coffin arrived late on Wednesday to lie in state during a three-day period of national mourning.

Despite major coronavirus problems in Argentina, with more than 1.3 million cases, fans gathered at landmarks including Buenos Aires' Obelisk monument and Argentinos Juniors' Diego Armando Maradona Stadium, where he started his career. Elsewhere, underlining Maradona's global appeal, Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan and Indian cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar were among those to offer tributes, and one fan held back tears as he spoke to AFP in Beijing.

Sports

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world into mourning

'Hand of God'

Maradona, born in Lanus, just south of Buenos Aires, on October 30, 1960, also played for Boca Juniors, Barcelona and Napoli in a career marked by wild highs and lows. In probably his most famous moment, he leapt and used his fist to score past England's Peter Shilton in the 1986 World Cup quarter-finals, memorably describing the goal as "a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God".

Minutes later he weaved through six English defenders from the halfway line to score an unforgettable solo second which was later honored as FIFA's "Goal of the century". The two contrasting goals perfectly encapsulated the mixture of brilliant skill and often outlandish behavior that ran through Maradona's life. Maradona's career was crowned by his performances at that World Cup, when he captained Argentina to glory. After dismissing England he scored twice in the semi-final against Belgium, slaloming past four defenders for his second, and set up the 86th-minute winner in the final against West Germany.

It was to prove the highlight for Maradona, who inspired Argentina to the 1990 final only for West Germany to take their revenge. In 1994 - after an infamous, eye-bulging goal celebration against Greece - he failed a drugs test and was sent home in disgrace. Gary Lineker, who was in the beaten England team in 1986, said Maradona was "arguably the greatest of all time", adding: "After a blessed but troubled life, hopefully he'll finally find some comfort in the hands of God. #RipDiego." Excesses with drugs and alcohol had long taken their toll on Maradona's health. He was admitted to hospital three times in the last 20 years for serious health issues due to his addictions.

'Ciao Diego'

Maradona grew up in poverty, but his extraordinary talent was clear from a young age at Argentinos Juniors and Boca. He moved to Barcelona but was singled out for rough treatment by opposing defenders and soon fell out of love with the Spanish club. It was in Naples where Maradona would enchant an entire city by leading the then unfashionable Napoli to their only two Italian league titles in 1987 and 1990, befriending a mafia family along the way. "Always in our hearts. Ciao Diego," Napoli tweeted, while the club's president and Naples' mayor both called for Napoli's Stadio San Paolo to be renamed after Maradona.

In recent years, Maradona, reduced to hobbling by the ravages of his career and lifestyle, had coached in the UAE, Mexico and Argentina without ever hitting the heights of his playing days. Maradona married his long-time girlfriend Claudia Villafane in 1984. They had two daughters, Dalma and Gianinna, but the relationship was punctuated by Maradona's extra-marital affairs and they divorced in 2004. He also had a son, Diego Junior, born in Naples in 1986, although he only acknowledged paternity in 2004. In 2000, FIFA ran an online Player of the Century poll. Maradona gained 54 percent of the vote and Pele was second with 18 percent. FIFA declared them joint winners. —AFP



DUBAI: File photo shows Argentina's football legend Diego Maradona during the ATP Dubai Open tennis tournament in the Gulf emirate.



BEIJING: A fan pays his respects to the late Argentinean football legend Diego Maradona at the Argentine embassy in Beijing yesterday. AFP

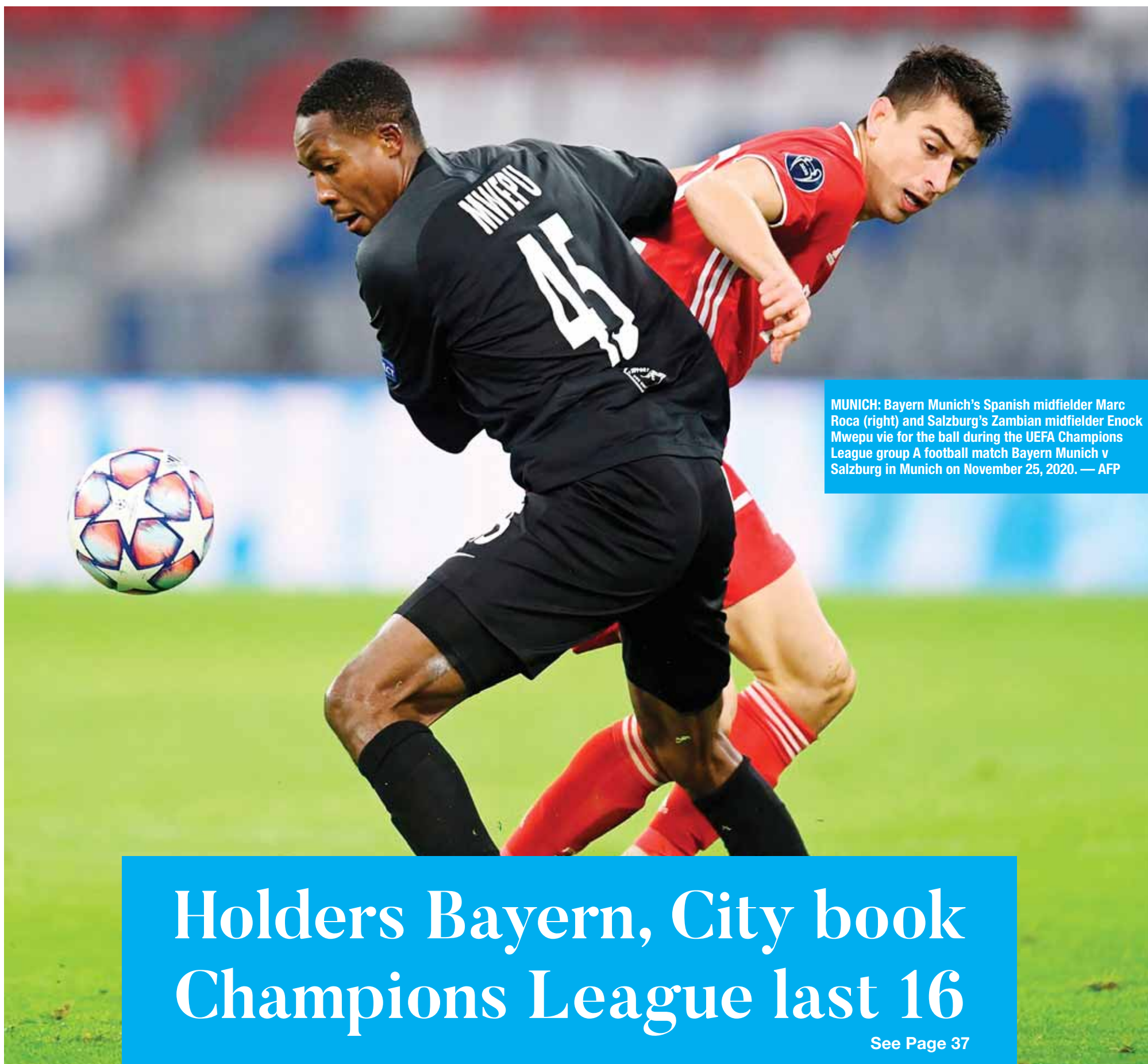


FUJAIRAH: In this file photo, former Argentinean footballer and manager Diego Armando Maradona (right) holds a jersey of the football club Fujairah FC, bearing his name on the reverse, during a press conference where he was announced as the upcoming manager for the team.

Sport Times

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MUNICH: Bayern Munich's Spanish midfielder Marc Roca (right) and Salzburg's Zambian midfielder Enock Mwepu vie for the ball during the UEFA Champions League group A football match Bayern Munich v Salzburg in Munich on November 25, 2020. — AFP

Holdings Bayern, City book Champions League last 16

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