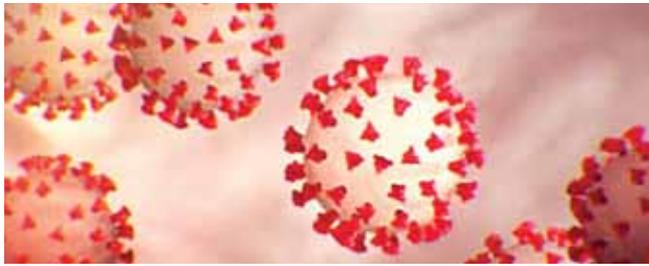


Friday Times

ISSUE NO: 18259

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9 Kuwait registers 8 deaths, 746 new COVID-19 cases



23 India cinemas reopen, hoping to lure back movie-mad fans



39 Astros stay alive; Dodgers' 11-run salvo routs Braves



KUWAIT: Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad takes a flu vaccine during a vaccination campaign launched against winter diseases at the Abdullah Center Youssef Al-Abdulhadi Clinic in Yarmouk yesterday. — KUNA



Health Ministry launches vaccine campaign against winter flu season

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Local

Social distancing: Word of the year



KAFFEEKLATSCH

By Shakir Reshamwala

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You read it here first - when dictionaries start compiling lists to select the 'word of the year', 'social distancing' is likely to be the top contender. Of course it is a combination of words, but you get the drift. The term has been trending since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, and is showing no signs of fading away, unlike 'deep dive', 'synergy' and other annoying buzzwords. There are other claimants to the crown too - all COVID related - like 'superspreader', but 'social distancing' is going to endure, like some other recent words of the year, including 'selfie' and 'twerk'.

Another great thing is that this term is both a noun and a verb - I know this factoid will make most people go meh, but it gets wordsmiths like me excited. Some prefer the term 'physical distancing' to 'social distancing', but I think the former lacks the cachet the latter term has. Overall, the authorities, media and people in general have taken a shine to the term 'social distancing' and have overwhelmingly adopted it for everyday use.

But the real reason social distancing is so much in the news is mostly because of a lack of it. If everyone adhered to guidelines to stay apart, the term would've died a natural death. But it seems people don't want to give each other space - and roam around mask-less to boot.

Reminds me of the bumper stickers that go "If you are close enough to read this..." followed by an assortment of punch lines, mostly to do with hitting the brakes, backing off or being sued. I wouldn't be surprised if t-shirts are made emblazoned with slogans like "If you are close enough to read this, you are not social distancing" in small letters. There you go - a great business idea!

How much to social distance is also an issue - is it two meters, 1.5 meters of just one? Most folks see this as mere semantics, but for governments and health authorities, it's a matter of setting official policy, which determines how many people can safely gather in enclosed spaces, which in turn has real repercussions on businesses like restaurants, event halls and other places where people congregate, like places of worship.

It's a different story that whatever distance is finally set, it is going to be flouted. We have seen repeated appeals and even warnings by the government to avoid gatherings, but the papers are full of reports of people coming together for weddings, election primaries, funerals, etc. To add insult to injury, noses are still being rubbed, so what can be said about shaking of hands or pecking of cheeks?

With the pandemic showing no signs of abating, social distancing is here to stay. Now it is our responsibility to make sure it is actually implemented, so that when we look back a few years from now, we can claim that we acted out the word of the year, like we did with selfie, and helped to snuff out COVID-19... or we ignored it for that matter, like we did with, er, twerk. Socially distant twerking selfies, anyone?

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: This August 18, 2020 file photo shows people lined up - with little to no social distancing observed - to board a public transportation bus at a bus stop in Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

The risks of lowering the guard



OFF THE RECORD

By Sajeev K Peter

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It seems complacency has taken over most of us in Kuwait these days. Have we overcome the fear of coronavirus? Has the caution we exercised in the initial months of the outbreak of the pandemic given way to a 'come what may' attitude? Are we dropping the guard? One may begin to think on these lines if you look around public places in Kuwait where people frequent these days: streets, malls and restaurants. You may see people moving around without facemasks and some of those who wear masks would invariably hang them around their neck and chin as if it were a kind of ritual. Wearing a face mask in public spaces has been mandatory in Kuwait ever since the government reported the first cases of coronavirus in February this year.

Avoiding virus infection while using a public transport system in Kuwait has become a challenge these days. While travelling, many people appear to have grown careless and have begun to ignore the mandatory warning of wearing a facemask. Even hand sanitizer bottles have van-

ished from many public transport buses now. Oblivious of passengers who sit in front and back seats, some commuters would sneeze and cough, releasing potentially infectious respiratory droplets into the air.

People have begun to show signs of reluctance to maintain social distancing with families gradually returning to some of the activities they stopped when the pandemic broke out.

It is not advisable to become complacent while living with the threat of COVID-19, especially when the entire world is grappling with a second wave of coronavirus. In Kuwait, we thought that the COVID-19 had peaked and the curve had begun to flatten. But the recent spurt in cases suggests that while we may be approaching the peak, we have not reached there yet.

Non-compliance of health regulations has reached a tipping point prompting the government to consider an amendment to the law to impose instant fines for people not wearing facemasks and not abiding by health guidelines.

It is true that we need to live with the virus and adapt to the new normal even as we await the vaccine. But, with the virus still spreading and remaining potentially dangerous, it is essential for us to continue physical distancing along with other safety measures. Because the risks of lowering the guard at this juncture may be very high and fatal.

Kuwait Times

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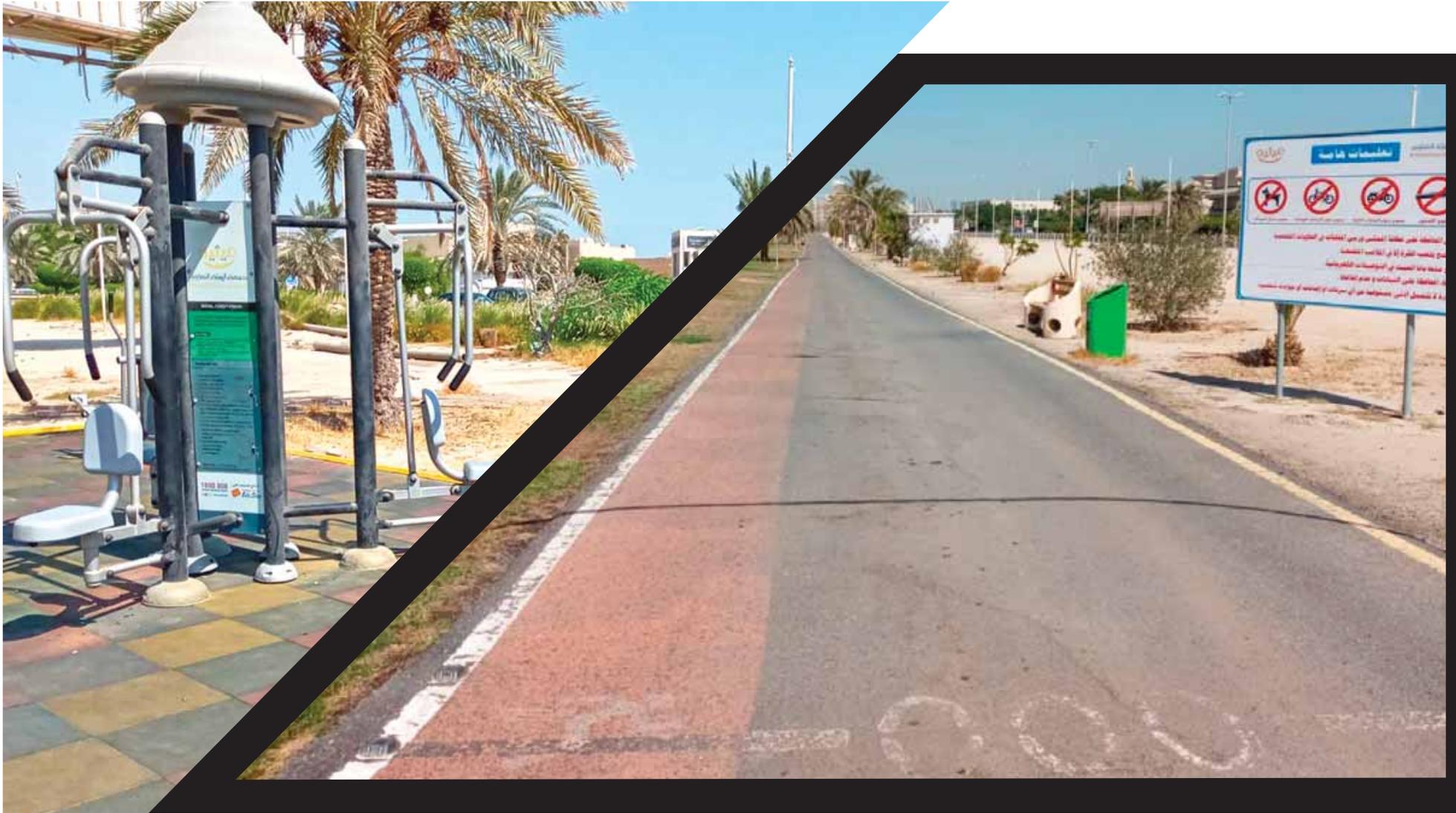
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OUTDOOR EXERCISE IS BACK FOR WINTER SEASON





KUWAIT: Workout machines were refurbished at several public parks and walkways around Kuwait, in time for the outdoor winter season when moderate weather conditions allow people to exercise in the open. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Local



Key to finding job in times of uncertainties: keep applying

Local recruiter urges candidates to stay informed with anti-COVID protocols

By Ben Garcia

People are losing their jobs during these extraordinary circumstances that have shown everyone is dispensable. The once stable job is no longer dependable, but people are optimistic and are trying their best to survive. Gretel Trinidad, a human resource expert, says there is no harm in trying and getting things done. “Experiment with something new - do not be afraid,” she said. “Apply for a job related to services at hospitals and or food-related businesses - these are the strongest sectors nowadays.”

Many economists are predicting a recession, but it is better to keep applying and sending resumes to companies, even in times of uncertainties like the present time. “Many companies have stopped hiring, but bear in mind that they might always need one or two workers. If there’s no CV to be found on their files, they will hire somebody else and you’ll miss the opportunity,” Trinidad told Kuwait Times.

“So my advice is if you are planning to change your job or look for a new one, send your CV to several companies, so the moment they need employees, you’ll be just within reach. The immediate reaction of bosses when they need staff is to hire those whose CVs are already filed. If they call you and you are qualified for the position, you will be at a great advantage and will most likely be hired. So do not stop sending your CV, and be ready to be called any time,” Trinidad said.

The job market is very fickle. “My advice to employees is to keep your job and do what is right for the company you are in today. Bear in mind that companies nowadays are in a wait-and-watch mode. There is no job security - we may

have a job today, but tomorrow the company can tell us we are no longer required. So be prepared for any eventuality,” she said.

Trinidad, who is a local recruiter in Kuwait for the past five years, said people should try to maintain and build a good network online. “The trend now is online. Whatever you do, it’s always good to be online. It may be a good to start building a network, which will eventually help you in the event you are terminated. You will not need to worry about being fired because you already have a good fallback plan. Be prepared for a home-based job too as this will be the name of the game in the coming years,” she said.

Trinidad said companies are searching for individuals who can help them get back on track. “Companies are looking for someone who can help them grow. If you have words in your CV that are not very encouraging, maybe you will not be hired. Do not say ‘you need help’, rather how ‘you can help’ the company,” she explained.

According to Trinidad, it is also wise for applicants to know the health protocols and precautionary measures being implemented by the government or companies against COVID-19. “It is likely that the company owner or HR manager will ask questions related to the pandemic, so be prepared to answer queries about the virus. I advise jobseekers to read and stay informed,” she pointed out. “You’ll be more competent if you boost your skills and knowhow - your salary will depend on your abilities,” Trinidad concluded.

“Experiment with something new”

Japanese city mourns Kuwait’s late Amir

NIHONMATSU: Japan’s Nihonmatsu City, which will host Kuwaiti teams in the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympic Games next year, has offered condolences on the passing of the late Amir His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and expressed gratitude for his support given to the disaster-hit region. It also flew the Japanese and the city flags at half-mast at the city hall in honor of the late Amir, officials from Nihonmatsu City and the city’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry said in a statement to the press yesterday. Mayor Keiichi Miho sent a letter to Kuwaiti Ambassador to Japan Hassan Mohammad Zaman following Sheikh Sabah’s demise, in which he said, “I would like to offer my sincerest condolences to the people of Kuwait on receiving the news of the passing of His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.”

“After the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, we received a generous amount of support from Kuwait for reconstruction. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude once again,” said Miho. With the approach of the Tokyo Olympic Games, Nihonmatsu City in Fukushima Prefecture, located about 200 kilometers northeast of Tokyo, was registered as an ‘Arigato (Thank You) Host Town for Supporting Reconstruction’ for Kuwait. “While we were in the midst of preparing our Host Town with the hope of showing our gratitude to the Kuwaiti teams, related personnel, and all the citizens of Kuwait, we heard the tragic news of his passing,” the mayor said. “I would like to express my deepest gratitude for Kuwait’s kindness, and on behalf of the people of Nihonmatsu City, I extend my heartfelt sympathy at this difficult time,” Miho noted.

Both Nihonmatsu City and the city’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry asked Akira Tanaka, who was former Representative of Japan Cooperation Center for the Middle East’s ‘Japan Desk’ in Kuwait and played a role in connecting Kuwait and the city, to sign the condolence book at the Kuwaiti Embassy on behalf of Mayor Miho, Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Junichi Yamaguchi and Vice-President Hideharu Ohta. Following a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and tsunami disaster that devastated the region in 2011, upon instructions by the late Amir, Kuwait offered Japan a donation of 5 million barrels of crude oil worth about \$500 million, of which nearly 40 percent was allocated to Fukushima Prefecture to support its recovery efforts. In addition, the late Amir donated \$3 million in reconstruction assistance to ‘Aquamarine Fukushima.’ — KUNA



NIHONMATSU: Flags flown at half-mast at the city hall building in Nihonmatsu, Japan, in honor of Kuwait’s late Amir His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA

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Local

Kuwait's envoy delivers letter from Amir to French President

PARIS: Kuwaiti Ambassador to France Sami Al-Suleiman met with Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department at the French Foreign Ministry Christophe Farno, where he handed him a letter from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to French President Emmanuel Macron. In a statement during the meeting yesterday, Suleiman thanked France for its kind feelings and support to Kuwait after the passing of His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. He expressed his appreciation of the statement made by French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and the visit of Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly to Kuwait, where she met with His Highness Sheikh Nawaf and delivered a cable of condolences from President Macron. Meanwhile, Farno said France and Kuwait built strong relations in the era of His Highness Sheikh Sabah. He also noted that the late Amir was a man of wisdom and peaceful leadership, who was respected by the whole world. —KUNA



PARIS: Kuwaiti Ambassador to France Sami Al-Suleiman hands over to Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department at the French Foreign Ministry Christophe Farno, a letter from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to French President Emmanuel Macron. —KUNA

Six firms closed for shipping subsidized food

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Commerce and Industry said on Wednesday that its inspectors have closed six companies specialized in shipping food supplies as they were planning to send locally-subsidized catering overseas. Legal measures are being completed against these firms to refer them to the commercial prosecution as they violated the executive regulation No 117 of 2013, the ministry added in a press statement. It stressed that it will not allow shipping these supplies outside the country. It pointed out that its teams, in cooperation with Kuwait's General Administration of Customs, conducted investigations over several companies across the country to make sure that they do not ship any subsidized commodities outside. It affirmed that it will take legal measures against the violators. —KUNA

Kuwait Fire Force ready for rainy season

KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Force installed several floating hydraulic water pumps in the southern artificial island of Sheikh Jaber Causeway, during a ceremony held on Wednesday in the presence of Deputy Premier, Interior Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh. The new pumps will assist firefighters in dealing with emergencies during heavy rains, as they are capable of pumping 66,000 gallons of water per minute, Kuwait Fire Force said. Chief of the Kuwait Fire Force Lt Gen Khalid Al-Mikrad and other officials also attended the event.



KUWAIT: Deputy Premier, Interior Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh (left) Chief of the Kuwait Fire Force Lt Gen Khalid Al-Mikrad (right) attend the event. —Kuwait Fire Force photos



The new hydraulic water pumps are tested.

KRCS hands 10,000 food baskets to Gazans

GAZA: The Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) started packing 10,000 food baskets received from Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) to distribute them to Palestinian families affected by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the besieged Gaza Strip. Abdulaziz Abu Eisha, head of PECS' disaster department, said in a press statement that the Kuwaiti-funded project aimed at alleviating sufferings of people affected by the pandemic. This aid also targets those quarantined and affected by the curfew and lockdown that raised unemployment rate and poverty, he added. The Kuwaiti assistance came in response to calls launched last August to all international and Arab institutions following registering coronavirus cases in the Strip, he noted. He thanked Kuwait, its leadership and people as well as the KRCS for the rapid response to provide relief aid to the Palestinian people, amid the Israeli blockade and the spread of the pandemic. He also expressed heartfelt condolences to Kuwait over the demise of the late Amir His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The PRCS will begin distributing the food baskets to the Palestinian families next week. —KUNA



Local

Health Ministry launches winter flu vaccination campaign



KUWAIT: A senior citizen prepares to take his vaccine as part of the vaccination campaign.



People wait for their turn to take their vaccines against winter diseases. —KUNA photos

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Health launched its seasonal vaccination campaign for winter against the seasonal flu and pneumococcal pneumonia. The vaccines will not protect against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) but can help reduce the severity of flu symptoms. This year's fifth annual vaccination campaign comes under special circumstances with the spread of COVID-19 disease, said Buthaina Al-Mudhaf, Assistant Undersecretary for Public Health Affairs at the Ministry of Health. The campaign kick-started yesterday at the Abdullah Center Youssef Al-Abdulhadi Clinic in Yarmouk.

Winter vaccination campaigns have yielded positive effects in the past four years, Mudhaf said, adding that the number of flu cases dropped, while the death rates from disease and its complications decreased from 1.3 percent in

2015 to 0.4 percent in 2019. She noted that the Ministry has administered around 150,000 doses of the flu vaccine and about 75,000 pneumonia vaccines, expecting an increase in vaccination demand this year due to the dangers COVID-19 poses on public health.

Meanwhile, Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said that according to WHO's statistics, vaccination currently prevents between 2 and 3 million deaths annually, indicating that the global death rate from measles declined by 80 percent. "Vaccinations protect society from infection with vaccine-preventable diseases such as cervical cancer, cholera, hepatitis B, influenza, measles, meningitis, mumps, whooping cough, pneumonia, polio, rubella, typhoid, and others," he said.

He stated that this campaign targets the most common win-

ter respiratory infectious pathogens, such as the influenza virus, mainly influenza A(H3N2 + H1N1), as well as influenza B and pneumococcal pneumonia. "More than 95 percent of deaths due to seasonal flu happen among the groups of people at risk," he explained. "As for pneumococcal pneumonia, the number of annual deaths is estimated at 1.6 million cases, while 85 percent of infections are among the adults at risk groups."

Ibrahim Al-Saleh, Head of the Preventive Health Department at the Ministry of Health, urged the public to take the initiative to vaccinate at the nearest health center, adding that the ministry has imported 400,000 doses, and distributed more than 100,000 doses against the flu and 70,000 doses against pneumonia to 34 clinics and vaccination centers. —KUNA

Health requirements firmly applied on arrivals, govt says

KUWAIT: Government Spokesman Tareq Al-Mezrem re-affirmed that coronavirus preventive measures and all relevant health requirements were strictly applied on all arrivals to Kuwait. In statements to the press on Wednesday, Mezrem pointed out that it was mandatory on all arrivals to provide a new negative PCR test certificate. Moreover, Health Ministry teams were conducting random PCR tests for a number of arrivals of different nationalities at the airport, he said. The government official also noted that even after passing these measures, all arrivals were obliged to stay in home quarantine for 14 days. He underlined that the relevant authorities were also taking into considerations other measures related to the

people coming from the countries with which Kuwait had previously suspended flights owing to the coronavirus.

Mezrem dismissed as untrue circulated information on social networking sites about exempting some Arab travelers who were stranded in a Gulf country from the health requirements for entering Kuwait. The government had not intervened or coordinated with any side on this regard, he stressed. He reiterated that the government would always be firm in applying ministerial decisions relevant to coronavirus preventive measures and would not allow the entry of any traveler without meeting the health requirements in place. —KUNA



Government Spokesman
Tareq Al-Mezrem

Kuwait registers eight deaths, 746 new COVID-19 cases

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health announced yesterday 746 new novel coronavirus (COVID-19) infections in the past 24 hours, raising the total to 114,015. Meanwhile, deaths reached 684 with the addition of eight fatalities. Spokesperson of the Ministry of Health Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said that there were 133 patients receiving treatment at intensive care units, while the total number of patients still receiving treatment amounted to 7,485. Health authorities conducted 8,554 swab tests in the past 24 hours, raising the whole count to 809,491, Dr Sanad added. The Health Ministry had announced earlier that the recovery of 610 COVID-19 patients in the past 24 hours, bringing the tally to 105,846. —KUNA



Trump's teen son caught coronavirus, first lady reveals



BANGKOK: Pro-democracy protesters give the three-finger salute as they gather yesterday. — AFP

Hundreds defy Thai crackdown

Protesters gather despite emergency decree, arrests

BANGKOK: Hundreds of Thai protesters gathered in defiance of a sweeping crackdown yesterday after authorities moved to crush months of pro-democracy demonstrations by imposing emergency powers and rounding up leading activists. Protesters chanted "Prayut get out!" and "Free our friends!" as they confronted police at Ratchaprasong, a busy junction in central Bangkok, despite a new decree banning groups of more than four people.

Student leaders had earlier taken to social media to urge supporters to take to the streets. "Come out in force - only giving moral support from home is not enough," said the Free Youth Movement, which had organized massive demonstrations in recent months. The government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha, a former army chief who initially took power in a 2014 coup, has been the target of mounting, student-led protests which are also taking aim at Thailand's unassailable monarchy.

After the emergency measures were announced early Thursday, riot police dispersed hundreds of protesters who camped overnight outside the prime minister's office.

'Violation of my rights'

Three top activists were among nearly two dozen arrested, including Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak, according to Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul - another prominent figure, whose own arrest was live-streamed on Facebook. Anon Numpa, another leading activist, said he was forcibly taken by helicopter to Chiang Mai in northern Thailand "without my lawyer". "This is a violation of my

rights and is extremely dangerous to me," he wrote on Facebook. It was not immediately clear how those arrested were accessing their social media accounts.

On Wednesday, there were unprecedented scenes as protesters crowded around the royal motorcade carrying Queen Suthida and Prince Dipangkorn, raising the three-fingered gesture of defiance adopted from "The Hunger Games" books and films. "In the past when the royals drive by, we cannot even walk around the area. We have to stop everything and kneel on the ground," a protester told AFP. "I am so surprised. It is happening now, we are changing a lot and it has moved forward. We are breaking taboos."

The emergency measures also allow the seizure of "electronic communications equipment, data, and weapons suspected to cause the emergency situation", a government spokesman said in a statement. "These are orders banning gatherings of five or more people... and banning distributing of news through electronic media that can affect national security," the spokesman said.

The order was imposed after thousands of demonstrators rallied Wednesday around Bangkok's Democracy Monument ahead of a scheduled drive-by of the royal motorcade. While police cordoned most of the protesters away from the royal route, dozens were still present as the convoy passed.

Queen Suthida, sitting next to Prince Dipangkorn Rasmijoti, could be seen staring from a limousine as protesters flashed the three-fingered salute. Such overt challenges to the monarchy are unheard-of in Thailand, where the royal family's influence perme-

ates every aspect of society. Leading opposition figure Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit decried the crackdown, calling for the government to "free all arrested people". "The government must quickly find a way to respond to protesters' demands, otherwise the situation will fan out nationwide," he said.

Turbulent history

The king spends much of his time in Europe, but has been in Thailand in recent days for an annual Buddhist ceremony and the anniversary of his father's death. Enormously wealthy, he is supported by the powerful military - which has long positioned itself as the defender of the monarchy - as well as the establishment elite. There have been several popular uprisings in the turbulent modern history of Thailand, which has endured long stretches of political unrest and more than a dozen military coups since 1932.

In the latest protests, leaders have repeatedly said they wish only for the monarchy to adapt to modern times. Their demands include the abolition of a strict royal defamation law - which shields the king from criticism - and for the monarch to stay out of politics. Since these protests started, dozens of activists have been arrested, charged with sedition, and released on bail.

Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri said the premier had ordered police to press charges against protesters who obstructed the royal motorcade, and "those who had acted in a way that defames the monarchy". "They must face legal procedures without exception." — AFP

International

Setbacks and subtle victories: One year of Lebanon protests

Political leaders have been heckled and shamed

BEIRUT: Lebanon's protest movement has made some important gains since it burst out onto the streets a year ago, even if its revolutionary fever has died down. Demonstrations that erupted last Oct 17 over a planned tax on calls made via messaging apps quickly evolved into an unprecedented nationwide uprising against political leaders viewed as inept and corrupt.

Politics in multi-confessional Lebanon is dominated by former warlords from the 1975-1990 civil war who have exchanged their military fatigues for suits, or were replaced by relatives. The cross-sectarian protest movement initially generated hope of sweeping changes, and less than two weeks later the government resigned under street pressure.

But a grinding economic crisis and measures to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus combined to take the wind out of the "revolution" camp's sails, before a cataclysmic explosion at Beirut's port on Aug 4 sparked a brief street revival. The cabinet, in power for just over seven months, resigned over the port catastrophe, and a new government has yet to be appointed.

But activists insist change is underway, even though the traditional ruling class is still firmly entrenched. Political leaders have been heckled and shamed inside shops and restaurants over the past year, and are aware of the growing tide against them. "They are afraid of being targeted by demonstrators and have disappeared" from public places, said political scientist Ziad Majed. He hailed the protest movement for sparking "a change in mentalities" towards a more secular approach to politics, even as Lebanon's confes-

sional system remains in place.

'Accelerating effect'

Since the protests erupted, citizen-powered media initiatives have gained a boost as an alternative to mainstream Lebanese outlets that are mostly funded by or aligned with one of the country's political leaders. Megaphone, a largely volunteer-run online platform founded in 2017, is among the most prominent. It was created to counter "the hegemonic media discourse that is controlled by political money or political interest," said Jonathan Dagher, an activist and journalist who volunteers at the organization.

Some structures that formally operate outside the state's ambit have also started to undergo changes. The Beirut Bar Association, long controlled by representatives of ruling parties, elected independent candidate and protest sympathizer Melhem Khalaf as its president last November. The protest movement has also had an impact on policy decisions.

Parliament passed two major anti-corruption laws this year - a significant move for a body usually mired in political deadlock. "The protest movement as well as international pressure had an accelerating effect," former MP Ghassan Moukheiber said. And in a major victory, the World Bank announced last month that it was cancelling a loan to fund a dam in Lebanon that environmentalists and activists said could destroy a valley rich in biodiversity.

Meanwhile, some politicians' rhetoric has clumsily tried to align with the street, largely due to mounting international pressure as they seek a



BEIRUT: In this file photo taken on Nov 14, 2019, a Lebanese anti-government protester, draped in a national flag, sits on the rooftop of 'The Egg' building overlooking the Mohammed Al-Amin Mosque and the Martyrs Square in the capital's downtown district. — AFP

financial bailout for Lebanon to stem its economic crisis. Threats of Western sanctions against individual players have caused some alarm among the hereditary political class that now ostensibly supports calls for a secular civil state. Demonstrators have long demanded such a move, railing against a confessional system of politics that distributes posts according to sectarian affiliation.

Revolutions 'take time'

Lebanon's political barons are widely accused of decades of nepotism and corruption, and many blame what they see as incompetence for the Aug

4 explosion. Authorities say the blast was caused by a vast stock of ammonium nitrate that caught fire after it languished at the port for years. After the explosion, protesters hanged cardboard cutouts of the political elite from mock gallows in a display of rage.

They included an image of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah - a gesture almost unthinkable even 12 months ago. "Revenge, revenge, until this regime reaches an end," protesters chanted. Politicians largely stayed out of public view in the wake of the blast, avoiding visits to the disaster site or hard-hit neighborhoods. —AFP

Revolutionaries drift apart in rudderless Lebanon

BEIRUT: When Lebanon's protest movement erupted in Oct 2019, Jennyfer, Teymour and Dayna marched in the same euphoric crowd, united in their determination to bring down their corrupt leaders. A nightmarish year - which saw Lebanon's economy go into tailspin and a cataclysmic explosion destroy swathes of Beirut - has left the three young people with different outlooks on life and country.

Lebanon is now suffering though one of the darkest periods in its chaotic history, and soaring poverty combined with a seemingly inexorable brain drain make for a bleaker future yet. Faced with this reality, advertising executive Jennyfer Harb gave up on change, entrepreneur Teymour Jreissati went looking for it abroad, while writer and activist Dayna Ayyash stayed to fight the good fight. Their diverging trajectories illustrate the challenges facing an activist movement that was born with a bang but fizzled out as a series of crises drained it of much of its revolutionary energy.

'Why keep fighting?'

When protests broke out in Beirut on the evening of Oct 17 over a new tax on WhatsApp calls, Jennyfer was leaving a movie theatre, wearing a dress shirt she had picked for a work presentation. "We looked around us and saw fires," the 26-year-old told AFP from her Beirut home, which was damaged by the deadly August explosion. She ran home to change and rushed back out to join the protests. "I didn't understand anything at the time but it felt so good to be in rage," she said. Jennyfer stopped going to work for two months to stay on the streets all day. "It was a beautiful dream - the dream of a new beginning, of something better," she said. Then Lebanon's worst economic crisis in decades started to bite and the fatigue set in. "I became so consumed," she said. "I could not keep up with all this activism."

After the August 4 port blast - Lebanon's worst peacetime disaster, widely blamed on state negligence - Jennyfer hoped for a second wind to the street activism. But only a few days after surviving the explosion, Jennyfer said she was badly beaten by army troops while protecting a child from their batons. "At that moment it hit me," she said. "They are so powerful that they could shut you up," she said of a ruling elite that is seemingly oblivious to domestic and foreign pressure for change. "Why keep fighting?"

Leaving Lebanon

For exactly 292 days, by his own count, Teymour Jreissati put everything in his life on hold to help organize a protest group. The

33-year-old handed over the management of the furniture company he had spent 10 years building to his business partner. "I barely saw my children," he said. He converted his Beirut office into a daily meeting spot for protest leaders to plan the next move. Teymour was on the streets almost every day, even when the crackdown turned heavy-handed.

He started receiving warnings from the security services and threats from political party loyalists. "We will stab you in the back and you won't know where the knife came from," Teymour said, quoting one of the phoned-in threats. Then came a more chilling warning, which broke his resolve, he said: "We know where your son goes to school."

With the economic collapse also killing his business, by June Teymour was planning his move to France. He and his family moved to Nice just one week before the port blast disfigured Beirut and killed five of his friends. "Not a single human being should be living what the Lebanese people are living," he said.

When the streets erupted on Oct 17 last year, Dayna was out in a flash. "It was righteous, unadulterated rage," said the 31-year-old founder of the activist group Haven for Artists. "Finally that tight knot in my throat wasn't just in my throat, it was around everybody's throats, eliciting this reaction." Within two days she would shift from just participating in rallies to helping blockade a main Beirut flyover - a moment she said challenged the "illusion" that the system in Lebanon was untouchable. "It was so much power given back to us," she said. —AFP

International

Cyprus speaker resigns over passports scandal

Fallout from Al Jazeera report continues

NICOSIA: The speaker of the Cypriot parliament resigned yesterday after he was secretly filmed allegedly trying to facilitate a passport for a fugitive investor. Demetris Syllouris insisted he was innocent of any wrongdoing but said he had decided to step down for the good of the office, after the corruption allegations broadcast by Al Jazeera tarnished Cyprus's image as a European Union member.

"I have not violated the law in any way, but my resignation removes any pretext that my presence in the office of speaker hinders in any way the smooth functioning of parliament," Syllouris said in his resignation letter. Earlier this week, Syllouris had said he would only abstain from his duties from Oct 19, pending the results of a police investigation, but eventually gave in to mounting pressure for him to go. He said people had taken political advantage

of his initial decision not to resign.

"My decisions were based on the firm belief that I have not done anything legally wrong and that my possible resignation would leave the impression to the contrary," said Syllouris, who was elected to parliament on the ticket of the Solidarity Movement, a small, nationalist breakaway from the ruling conservative party.

On Tuesday, the government announced it will scrap its controversial "golden passports" scheme for foreign investors from next month over the alleged abuses uncovered by Al Jazeera. The scheme - which has generated seven billion euros (\$8.25 billion) - will be brought to an end on Nov 1, 2020. The Qatar-based broadcaster aired an hour-long program showing its reporters pretending to represent a Chinese businessman keen to acquire a Cypriot passport despite having a criminal record at

home. Lawmaker Christakis Giovanis, who was also secretly filmed in the Al Jazeera report, already resigned from parliament and the positions he held in the island's main opposition party, the communist AKEL.

Hundreds of people protested in the capital Nicosia on Wednesday, against the alleged corruption in public life highlighted by the passports expose. Under the soon-to-be-scraped scheme, the government grants a passport in exchange for an investment of euro 2.5 million (\$3 million). Even before Al Jazeera published its story, some 30 people had been referred for investigation to a special committee. Last week, Cyprus said it was revoking seven passports for "false representation" by investors on their application. The country is re-examining the cases of all roughly 4,000 people who successfully applied for a passport under the scheme. —AFP



Demetris Syllouris

Campaigning starts for tense Ivory Coast presidential vote

ABIDJAN: Campaigning started in Ivory Coast yesterday for a tense presidential election, with incumbent Alassane Ouattara seeking a controversial third term and the opposition pushing for a boycott and civil disobedience, sparking fears of violence. Many observers fear a crisis may be sparked by the Oct 31 election comparable to the one in 2010-2011 when 3,000 people died and the West African nation was plunged into chaos.

"All the Ivorian opposition says No, No, No," to a third Ouattara mandate, was the message displayed at an opposition rally in Abidjan at the weekend that attracted tens of thousands of people. There are four candidates in the running - 78-year-old Ouattara; 86-year-old former president Henri Konan Bedie; former prime minister Pascal Affi N'Guessan and former parliamentarian Kouadio Konan Bertin. The constitutional council rejected a further 40 would-be candidates including ex-president Laurent Gbagbo, 75, and former rebel leader Guillaume Soro, 47, both of whom played key roles in the crisis that engulfed the country after disputed elections in 2010 and claimed some 3,000 lives. Gbagbo was freed conditionally by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague after being cleared in January 2019 of crimes against humanity during that crisis. He is currently in Brussels pending the outcome of an appeal against the ICC ruling. The opposition has cried foul over Ouattara's attempt to secure a third term in office despite the two-term constitutional limit. After his re-election in 2015, Ouattara announced in March that he would not seek a third term. But he changed his mind after his preferred successor, prime minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly, died of a sudden heart attack in July. Ouattara and his supporters have argued that a 2016 revision of the constitution reset the limit on the number of terms.

Demonstrations against Ouattara's decision to run again have turned violent and left around 15 people dead, reviving memories of the murderous crisis a decade ago. Several high-profile figures, including Konan Bedie and former prime minister Affi N'Guessan, have called for "civil disobedience" in recent weeks. A wing of Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front party (FPI) led by Affi N'Guessan who is one of the contestants, on Wednesday asked supporters not to accept voters' cards. —AFP

Fears of Internet blocks ahead of tense Guinea poll

DAKAR: Internet freedom monitors have their eyes trained on Guinea ahead of its tension-filled election on Sunday, fearing that the government will restrict access to social media to weaken the opposition. The concerns come after months of political unrest in the West African state, where President Alpha Conde, 82, is bidding for a controversial third term.

Defying critics, he pushed through a revamped constitution in a referendum on March 22, which he argued would modernize the country, but which also allowed him to sidestep a two-term limit for presidents. Worryingly for rights activists, internet disruptions accompanied the referendum - a speech-crimping scenario they say will likely play out again.

"It's very rapidly become an element in how elections are decided in Guinea," said Alp Toker, the founder of Internet-monitoring group NetBlocks. "March was an inflection point," he added, noting that he thought fresh election-related restrictions were likely. Alpha Diallo, president of the association of Guinean bloggers, also told AFP that there are "certainly going to be social-media cuts" this week.

Warnings of disruptions have already appeared ahead of Sunday's poll. French mobile internet service provider Orange, which operates in Guinea, recently texted its Guinean customers about potential disruptions between Oct 10 and 15, citing work on a submarine cable, AFP journalists in Conakry said. Diallo's group is deploying electoral observers on Sunday, he said, who are trained to use virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass possible restrictions. But at a press conference in Conakry this week, he warned that Internet restrictions would nonetheless hinder the work of observers. "We are not going to allow what happened last time," he said, explaining that his group would document all blocks.

Submarine cable

Guinea is a poor but resource-rich nation of 13 million people, which has enjoyed little stability between coups since its independence from France in 1958. Conde became the country's first democratically-elected leader in 2010, but critics increasingly accuse him of veering towards authoritarianism. Mass protests against a Conde third term from October last year were met with a ruthless crackdown, in which dozens of people were killed. Neither Conde's office, nor Guinea's telecommunications ministry responded to several requests for comment about internet restrictions. Internet blackouts and social-media shutdowns are common-



CONAKRY: A supporter of Guinea President Alpha Conde reacts during a campaign rally yesterday. —AFP

place across the African continent, and further afield, during times of heightened political tension. Amnesty International, for example, pointed to shutdowns in Benin, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Mali and Zimbabwe last year alone.

But Guinea is a relative latecomer to the tactic, experts say. Before the March referendum, the country's telecoms infrastructure firm Guilab announced repairs to its submarine internet cable, but it postponed the work after an outcry. But on March 21 - without announcement - access to apps such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp was disrupted, according to a report by NetBlocks. The report added that the disruption originated from Guinea's leading mobile internet service providers, Orange and South Africa's MTN.

"The social (media) cuts are 100-percent manufactured because you see that the connection itself is working perfectly," Toker said. MTN did not respond to requests for comment; Orange said it only interrupts access under "express official written order from a competent authority authorized by law". "We cannot comment on any specific situation in Guinea or elsewhere," the firm added. "What they are aiming at with this is people's expression," said Diallo, from the Guinean bloggers' association.

The African Union's special rapporteur on freedom of expression, Lawrence Mute, admonished Guinea for Internet disruptions in an April statement. "Internet and social media shutdowns violate the right to freedom of expression and access to information," he said. Francois Patuel, a researcher on policing and surveillance in West Africa, said earlier disruptions were a "gross violation of freedom of expression". "The authorities must refrain from ordering further shutdowns," he said. —AFP

International

Hundreds of fighters head home in Yemen prisoner exchange

Two Americans, 240 rebel backers also freed in apparent swap

SANAA: A landmark prisoner exchange between the government and Houthi rebels began yesterday, with hundreds of combatants heading home on flights crisscrossing Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The swap is a rare sign of progress in the process to end the conflict which broke out six years ago in Yemen, where the Houthis still control much of the north despite the intervention of Saudi Arabia and its allies since 2015. In the rebel-held capital of Sanaa, the returning fighters arrived to a red-carpet welcome, greeted by a military band and senior officials standing together with family members. "Death to America, Death to Israel," they shouted, the slogan of the Houthis who have battled the government and the might of the Saudi-led coalition. The warring sides agreed to exchange 1,081 prisoners under a deal struck in Switzerland last month, the largest number since the start of the war in 2014.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, which is handling the logistics of the complex two-day operation, said that five planes had so far delivered more than 300 combatants to cities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. They travelled between Sanaa, the government-held city of Seiyun, and the Saudi city of Abha, it said.

Positive sign

UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths, who attended last month's talks in Switzerland, hailed the successful start of the operation. "Today's release operation, led by the ICRC, is another sign that



SEIYUN, Yemen: Released prisoners walk towards a plane of the International Red Cross on the tarmac of an airport in this government-held city in the eastern province of Hadhramaut yesterday. — AFP

peaceful dialogue can deliver," he said. "I hope the parties will soon reconvene under UN auspices to discuss the release of all conflict-related prisoners and detainees." The ICRC said its teams were stationed at the airports involved in the transfer, and had kitted out the detainees with clothes, hygiene supplies and money for their transport home. "The ICRC has been conducting one-on-one interviews and medical checks with the detainees to be sure they want to be

transported home and are healthy enough to do so," a spokeswoman said. An AFP correspondent watched the first planes depart from the capital.

One of them was headed for the city of Abha in neighboring Saudi Arabia with released prisoners of war from the ranks of the coalition that supports the Yemeni government, rebel officials said. Those on board included 15 Saudis and four Sudanese. The Yemeni government and the Iran-backed rebels resolved to swap some 15,000 detainees as part of a peace deal brokered by the UN in Sweden back in 2018. The two sides have since undertaken sporadic prisoner exchanges, but this week's swap is the first large-scale handover since the war began. "The transaction will be executed, with God's help, on the scheduled dates today and tomorrow," Abdel Kader Mortaza, the rebel official in charge of prisoner affairs, said in a tweet earlier yesterday. The exchange comes after the release Wednesday of two Americans held captive in Yemen, in an apparent swap for some 240 Houthi supporters who were allowed to return home after being stranded in neighboring Oman.

The rebels also sent back the remains of a third American who died in captivity. The fate of the 240 Yemenis, who had travelled to Oman for medical treatment in what was supposed to be a confidence-building move during the 2018 talks in Sweden, had become a major grievance for the rebels and a symbol of the deep distrust between the two sides. — AFP

Trenches stretch along Karabakh frontline

BAKHARLY, Azerbaijan: Bayran Khalilov knew trouble was brewing when Azerbaijani government men came to dig trenches in his backyard facing the mountains of Nagorno-Karabakh. The grizzled veteran of the original Karabakh conflict between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis that killed 30,000 in the 1990s knew the shells were about to start falling again. "These men came about one or two months ago and started digging," he said in front of an L-shaped trench as wide as his narrow frame and deep enough to cover him standing. "They said it was for your own basic safety," the 68-year-old told an AFP team that was granted access to frontline areas by the Azerbaijani government. "But we all then knew something was about to start." The origins of a flare-up in fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh that has now killed hundreds and threatens to involve regional powers Turkey and Russia are hotly contested and difficult to independently verify.



BAKHARLY: Mikhail Ismailov shows his trench during ongoing fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Wednesday. — AFP

Both sides accuse the other of striking first on Sept 27 over the ethnic Armenian region of Azerbaijan. Khalilov's account suggests that at least some in Azerbaijan's border regions were preparing for heavy fighting weeks before it broke out. But none of the people AFP spoke to in the frontier village of Bakharly knew what prompted Azerbaijani officials to start preparing trenches along the front. "We are very grateful they did," Khalilov said.

'Holding on'

The shelling is all around Bakharly. The dusty settlement at the foot of the Caucasus mountains once housed 800 families displaced by decades of strife. Only about 100 men remain in Bakharly today. Many who have stayed struggle to find the right words to explain what keeps them in the settlement under the shells. "Why we are here - that is the most important question," Sakhilov Askerov said after showing off the trench dug behind his simple wooden house. "Our boys are up there fighting," he said of the mountains. "By staying here, we feel that we are also fighting, holding on to our land," the 66-year-old said.

Bakharly represents the outer reaches of Azerbaijani control in the central section of the conflict zone. The fields beyond it are part of a no-man's land of the informal front. Mikhail Ismailov walks two kilometers along these fields daily to buy a few flatbreads he carries back home in a plastic bag. He said the village endures "countless" bouts of shelling each night. "This morning, they shelled our soldiers. Luckily they survived, with God's help. I always watch our soldiers from here," he said from his backyard. "Every evening, we sit here and watch the fighting, first the shells coming from the Armenian side and then those going out from our side."

Armenian forces insist that they only return fire and otherwise try to respect a humanitarian ceasefire struck in Moscow on Saturday. But the fighting along the front is omnipresent and becomes especially fierce at night. "Every evening when the shelling starts, we come here to stay safe, so that we don't die," Ismailov said while showing AFP the inside of his trench. "There is no fear. Our soldiers are fighting over there - why should I be scared here. We shouldn't be scared." —AFP

Oxford scientists develop 5-minute COVID antigen test

LONDON: Scientists from Britain's University of Oxford have developed a rapid COVID-19 test able to identify the coronavirus in less than five minutes, researchers said yesterday, adding it could be used in mass testing at airports and businesses. The university said it hoped to start product development of the testing device in early 2021 and have an approved device available six months afterwards.

The device is able to detect the coronavirus and distinguish it from other viruses with high accuracy, the researchers said in a pre-print study. "Our method quickly detects intact virus particles," said Professor Achilles Kapanidis, at Oxford's Department of Physics, adding that this meant the test would be "simple, extremely rapid, and cost-effective".

Rapid antigen tests are seen as key in rolling out mass-testing and re-opening economies while the coronavirus is still circulating, and those that are already in use are faster and cheaper but less accurate than existing molecular PCR tests. Siemens Healthineers on Wednesday announced the launch of a rapid antigen test kit in Europe to detect coronavirus infections, but warned that the industry may struggle to meet a surge in demand. Although the Oxford platform will only be ready next year, the tests could help manage the pandemic in time for next winter. Health officials have warned that the world will need to live with coronavirus even if a vaccine is developed. —Reuters

International

'Things will get worse': London goes into stricter lockdown

UK changing lockdown tiers to fight fast virus spread

LONDON: London, the world's international financial capital, will enter a tighter COVID-19 lockdown from midnight today as Prime Minister Boris Johnson seeks to tackle a swiftly accelerating second coronavirus wave. The respiratory pandemic, which emerged in China last year and has killed over a million people worldwide, is spreading in most parts of Britain, whose official death toll of 43,155 is the highest in Europe.

Anger, though, is rising over the economic, social and health costs of the biggest curtailment of freedoms since wartime. One former government adviser warned some people would have trouble clothing their children soon. Health Secretary Matt Hancock said London, which has a population of 9 million, as well as the adjacent, heavily populated county of Essex, would be put on "high" alert level, up from "medium", at one minute past midnight (2301 GMT Friday).

The main impact of the move to "high" is that people cannot meet other households socially indoors in any setting, for example at home or in a restaurant. Travel should be reduced where possible, Hancock said. "Things will get worse before they get better," Hancock said. "But I know that there are brighter skies and calmer seas ahead - that the ingenuity of science will find a way through and until then we must come together." Britain's move to halt socializing in its capital means that London and Paris - Europe's two rich-

est cities - are shortly to be living under the shadow of state-imposed restrictions as the second wave of the outbreak spreads through Europe. President Emmanuel Macron announced night curfews for four weeks from Saturday in Paris and other major cities.

London, the world's center for international banking and foreign exchange trading, is only rivalled by New York when it comes to financial clout. The worst-hit London areas are Richmond, Hackney, the City of London, Ealing, Redbridge and Harrow. London Mayor Sadiq Khan said: "I must warn Londoners: We've got a difficult winter ahead."

'People not coping'

Manchester, in the north of England and one of Britain's largest cities, had been tipped to be moved to "very high" alert from "high", but Hancock said talks with local leaders were continuing so no decision had yet been made. Johnson, who scored a landslide election victory in December, says his government is fighting a war against the virus and that some sacrifices are necessary to save lives.

But opponents say his Conservative government was too slow to act when the virus first struck, failed to protect the elderly in care homes, and bungled the testing system. In areas put on the high alert level, socialising outside households or support bubbles is not allowed indoors, though work



LONDON: A shopper talks on her mobile phone as she walks past a sign displaying the local COVID alert level as "medium" on a bus stop along Victoria Street yesterday. —AFP

can continue and schools continue to operate. The "very high" alert level forbids socializing, forces pubs and bars to close and prohibits travel outside the area.

The government's former homelessness adviser, Louise Casey, said Britain faces a "period of destitution" in which some families "can't put shoes on" children. "Are we actually asking people in places

like Liverpool to go out and prostitute themselves, so that they could put food on the table?" Casey told the BBC. Liverpool in England's northwest is already in the highest-risk tier. "There's this sense from Downing Street and from Westminster that people will make do," Casey added, referring to the national government's headquarters. "Well, they weren't coping before COVID." —Reuters

'Corona chaos' as Germans baffled by virus rules

BERLIN: When COVID-19 first struck Europe earlier this year, Germany's federal system was credited with taking early and targeted measures that helped contain the virus better than many other countries. But as the second wave gathers momentum in Europe's biggest economy, cracks in the federal system are starting to show. With different states implementing different travel restrictions, quarantine rules and test strategies, a confusing patchwork of regulations is leading to what the weekly Focus magazine has described as "corona chaos".

The leaders of Germany's federal states have met regularly with Chancellor Angela Merkel to agree rules and regulations, but ultimately each state has the right to decide whether to impose them or not. One measure that has really left Germans scratching their heads is a travel ban agreed last week that theoretically prevents people from risk areas within Germany from booking overnight accommodation in another state. But five of Germany's states have refused to comply with the ban, while others have tweaked it to suit their own needs. Someone living in the capital Berlin, considered a risk zone, can travel to surrounding state Brandenburg for a day trip or to go shopping, but cannot stay overnight. —AFP

Kyrgyz president resigns to end post-election crisis

BISHKEK: Kyrgyzstan's President Sooronbay Jeenbekov resigned yesterday, saying he wanted to bring an end to the crisis sparked by disputed parliamentary elections earlier this month. Protests had erupted after the election on October 4 was won by parties loyal to Jeenbekov but opponents said was hit by vote-buying. The results were later annulled but this did not quell the tensions.

"I am not clinging to power. I do not want to go down in the history of Kyrgyzstan as a president who allowed bloodshed and shooting on its people. I have taken the decision to resign," Jeenbekov said in a statement released by his office. More than 1,200 people were injured and one killed during the clashes in the wake of the elections between protesters and police.

The move came as supporters of Prime Minister Sadyr Japarov - who was serving jail time for hostage-taking only last week - gathered once more yesterday to demand Jeenbekov's immediate resignation. "The current situation is close to a two-sided conflict. On the one hand, the protesters, on the other, the law enforcement agencies," Jeenbekov said in the statement. "Military personnel and law enforcement agencies are obliged to use weapons to protect the residence of head of state. In this case, blood will be shed. It is inevitable. I urge both sides not to succumb to provocations."

'Return to peaceful life'

The president had on Wednesday finally accepted the nomination of Japarov as prime minister, in a move seen as the first step towards calming the crisis. But Japarov insisted that the president should step down. Jeenbekov called on Japarov and other politicians "to withdraw their supporters from the capital of the country so the people of Bishkek (can) return to a peaceful life." Jeenbekov had previously pledged to resign after overseeing fresh parliamentary elections in the country. But Japarov and his supporters pressed for an immediate resignation.

Kyrgyzstan has been dogged by political volatility for much of its three decades of independence. A landlocked republic of 6.5 million people, it has now seen three presidents unseated by unrest since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The chaos has worried its ally Russia, coming as post-election protests rock ex-Soviet Belarus and clashes persist over the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Russian President Vladimir Putin's deputy chief of staff Dmitry Kozak flew in for talks with Jeenbekov and Japarov this week, with Moscow emphasizing that the chaos must be brought to an end. —AFP



Sooronbay Jeenbekov

International

Trump, Biden in competing town halls with president in uphill battle

President seeks to jolt his struggling campaign 19 days before election

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump and challenger Joe Biden will participate in dueling town halls instead of clashing face-to-face in their second debate, as the US president seeks to jolt his struggling campaign 19 days before the election. The split screen spectacle follows Trump's three-day campaign tour of battleground states once doctors gave him the medical all-clear less than two weeks after he announced he contracted the coronavirus.

But even as Trump sought to mount a closing argument against Biden at a boisterous rally Wednesday in Iowa, promising an "incredible" third quarter for the struggling economy, the pandemic remained front and center. Trump's teenage son Barron contracted the coronavirus, First Lady Melania Trump revealed Wednesday in news that startled in part because it had been kept from the public for so long.

She said the 14-year-old, who goes to a private school near Washington, did not experience symptoms and has since tested negative. "Barron Trump, you know, he had the Corona 19," the president said in Des Moines. "He had it such a short period of time I don't even think he knew he had it."

The news, which had been kept under wraps despite global attention on Trump's own health,

thrust public attention firmly back on the pandemic and in particular on an outbreak within the supposedly highly secure White House over the last two weeks.

The issue plays a prominent part in simultaneous town hall events on major TV networks, as cases spike in several states and the US toll surpasses 216,000 dead. The competing prime-time appearances were organized after a head-to-head debate between Trump and Biden due to be held Thursday was scrapped in the aftermath of Trump's Covid-19 diagnosis.

Reality show experience

But while team Trump might be relieved that the president regains an opportunity to draw a contrast with his opponent, NBC faced criticism for letting the president bigfoot Biden in the same 8:00 time slot. "Having dueling town halls is bad for democracy," tweeted Katie Couric, a longtime host of NBC's "Today" morning show.

"Voters should be able to watch both and I don't think many will," she said, adding the matchup will benefit Trump "because people like to watch his unpredictability." David Canon, chair of the political science department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, agreed.

But he said Trump may have committed a



DES MOINES: Supporters cheer and hold up signs as the US president speaks at a Make America Great Again campaign event at Des Moines International Airport in Des Moines, Iowa on Wednesday. — AFP

"tactical error" by backing out of a virtual debate with Biden.

"He needed the debates more than Biden did," Canon told AFP. "He's the one that needs to change the momentum in the election." Trump

negotiated to go on NBC at an outdoor setting in Miami after Biden had arranged his own event on ABC in Philadelphia. Previously Trump has appeared uncomfortable in town hall settings where ordinary voters ask questions. — AFP

Dems urge early voting as Trump stokes fears of contested election

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden supporter Cindy Kalogeropoulos took no chances when her absentee ballot arrived on Sept 29. The Michigan retiree filled it out, drove 7 miles to the nearest drop box and hung around to make sure election officials picked it up - all within 48 hours of receiving it.

In neighboring Ohio, Biden backers Eric Bjornard, 42, and his wife Abigail moved quickly too. The couple hand-delivered their mail ballots to their local elections office last month, five weeks ahead of the Nov. 3 election. Democratic leaders have been urging Biden supporters to show up in huge numbers and vote early amid concerns that nothing short of a decisive victory will prevent Republican President Donald Trump from contesting the results, potentially opening the way for state legislatures, the courts or Congress to decide the outcome.

Telling voters to have faith in the democratic process while simultaneously acknowledging that a landslide may be the only way to oust a defiant incumbent is proving to be a delicate balancing act, more than a dozen Democratic Party officials and Biden campaign advisers told Reuters.

Trump has repeatedly and without evidence declared mail voting to be riddled with fraud and the election "rigged" in favor of Democrats, all the while refusing to commit to ceding power peacefully if he loses. The Democratic operatives said they're concerned that amplifying Trump's claims could backfire and suppress turnout by making Biden voters believe their ballots won't



People line up to cast their ballots during early voting for the upcoming presidential elections outside of The Atlanta Hawks' State Farm Arena in Atlanta, Georgia. — Reuters

count. What has emerged is an approach that aims to emphasize the power voters hold to send Trump packing if they act early. In Ohio, for example, David Pepper, head of the state Democratic Party, said his team is using Trump's attacks on voting to motivate Biden supporters to return their mail ballots immediately or to vote early in person.

"We are telling people: 'You hear what he is saying, so go and vote, you can stop him,'" Pepper said. "We are flipping the narrative." Ohio election officials were overwhelmed with vote-by-mail requests for the state's April presidential nominating contest, when in-person voting was sharply curtailed there due to the coronavirus pandemic. Ballots for some voters arrived too late.

Election officials say they're better prepared this time around. Still, Democratic phone banks, text messages, mailings, social media and TV and radio ads are exhorting Ohio voters to act now to "Make It Count". Polls shows the race tied in a state that Trump won by 8 points four years ago. — Reuters

Can algorithms make US elections fairer?

NEW YORK: Needing to redraw North Carolina's legislative districts under a court order, lawmakers last year employed a state lottery machine to select a new map at random. Courts had ruled the previous map unfair, due in part to testimony by mathematicians and computer scientists who showed how the plans had been drawn to weaken the state Democratic Party.

To fix the issue, the lottery machine was loaded with maps deemed to be more equitable, drawn by a computer program written by Jowei Chen, a University of Michigan professor of political science.

"Back in the day, this was something that would take you weeks to do with pen and paper," Chen told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Now, my laptop can draw one computer-simulated map in a minute." The techniques of Chen and other researchers are coming under the spotlight ahead of the US election on Nov 3, after which officials will be using 2020 Census data to redraw the lines for thousands of legislative districts. Redistricting is done every 10 years to reflect changing demographics as reported in the census, also done every 10 years.

"It'll be consequential for the political playing field over the whole next decade," said Sam Wang, a professor of neuroscience at Princeton University and founder of the Princeton Gerrymandering Project, a group studying election mapping. — Reuters

International

As 2020 campaign enters home stretch, Fauci pulled into fray

Despite Fauci's dislike, both presidential hopefuls politicize top medical expert

WASHINGTON: Anthony Fauci, America's top infectious diseases expert, prides himself on steering clear of politics. But with unrivaled credibility on the novel coronavirus that both Donald Trump and Joe Biden are eager to associate with their campaigns, the scientist is being pulled into the closing stage of their battle for the White House.

Just weeks before election day, the Trump campaign released an ad portraying Fauci as praising his actions on the pandemic. This prompted the 79-year-old doctor to issue rare public criticism of a move by the president that in turn was seized on by Biden, who has pledged to listen to his advice if elected. Fauci, the longtime head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has become a revered figure on the left while facing widespread criticism from the right this year. US politicians from both major parties sought to make use of his reputation.

Fauci has successfully navigated this political minefield, largely avoiding direct criticism of Trump, whose relentless optimism about the coronavirus contrasts with his straight talk aimed at highlighting health dangers to the public. The final stretch of the 2020 electoral campaign however is posing a unique challenge.

"It's frustrating to him to see himself be politicized, when he spent... 40 years not being political and trying to avoid that issue," Zeke Emanuel, chair of the Department of Medical Ethics and Health Policy at the University of Pennsylvania, said. Asked why Fauci's endorsement has been so sought after, Emanuel said: "Integrity and credibility—it's just that simple. The man has integrity, he says what he sees in the science, and therefore he has credibility."

'Last-ditch effort'

In the Trump ad, a narrator says that, "President Trump tackled the virus head on, as leaders should." It then cuts to a clip of Fauci

saying: "I can't imagine that... anybody could be doing more."

Fauci hit back, saying that, "In my nearly five decades of public service, I have never publicly endorsed any political candidate." He also criticized the ad for taking his "broad statement" on federal health officials out of context—an assertion backed up by his full remarks. Trump campaign communications director Tim Murtaugh stood by the ad. "These are Dr Fauci's own words," he said. "The words spoken are accurate, and directly from Dr Fauci's mouth." The dispute did not end there.

Fauci said on CNN that he thinks the ad should be pulled, while Trump referenced the doctor's errant Major League Baseball opening day pitch to criticize him on Twitter: "Tony's pitching arm is far more accurate than his prognostications." Todd Belt, director of the Political Management Program at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, said of the ad: "This was a last-ditch effort to burnish Trump's credentials on how he's handled the pandemic."

"Biden leads Trump by double digits... in terms of who people trust to handle the coronavirus pandemic," Belt said. Fauci has at times spoken positively about the US coronavirus response in general, and Trump's actions specifically. But he has warned of rising case numbers in recent days—a message that runs counter to Trump's claims of successfully handling the crisis.

Regardless, the Trump campaign is using Fauci to defend the president's coronavirus record, such as with a list posted Sunday on the campaign's website that contrasts the doctor's statements with criticism from Biden.

Politicizing Fauci

"DR FAUCI HAS REPEATEDLY SAID THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION DID EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO SAVE LIVES," the list's title says. The politicization of Fauci has also occurred



This file combination of pictures shows US President Donald Trump and Anthony Fauci. — AFP

on the left, though not on the same scale. Biden has criticized Trump for allegedly not listening to Fauci. And his Democratic running mate Kamala Harris contrasted her trust in the doctor with her lack of faith in Trump when it comes to a coronavirus vaccine during the recent vice presidential debate.

Biden has also seized on the ad controversy, tweeting that, "Donald Trump is running TV ads taking Dr. Fauci out of context and without his permission." "Here's something that will be very different if I'm president: I'll actually listen to Dr. Fauci's advice and expertise, not attack him for telling the truth," the Democrat wrote on Twitter a day later. — AFP

Biden noncommittal but some Dems favor expanding Supreme Court

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden says he is "not a fan" but won't rule it out if he wins the US presidential election—expanding the number of justices on the Supreme Court to counter those named by Donald Trump. Under the Constitution, justices on the nation's highest court are nominated to lifetime posts by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

Congress sets their number, and after some seesawing in the country's early days it has remained steady at nine since 1869. Barring a surprise, the Republican-controlled Senate will in the coming days approve Trump's nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to replace Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the liberal icon who died on September 18.

That would bring the number of conservative justices on the bench to six, including three nominated by Trump, potentially cementing a conservative majority for decades to come. Senate Democrats have decried "rushing" through a nomination just weeks away from a presidential election, but there is little they can do about it.

However the possibility of a Democratic victory on November 3 has given rise to the question of expanding the court, so-called "court-packing." "We should leave all options on the table, including the number of justices that are on the Supreme Court,"



FORT LAUDERDALE: Democratic Presidential Candidate Joe Biden arrives to speak at a campaign event in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on Wednesday. Biden says he is "not a fan" but won't rule it out if he wins the US presidential election—expanding the number of justices on the Supreme Court to counter those named by Donald Trump. — AFP

said Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a rising star in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

The suggestion of adding justices to the venerable body has raised Republican hackles. Senator Mike Lee, a Republican from Utah, said it would "delegitimize the court."

"Before long it looks like the Senate in Star Wars, where you've got hundreds of people on there," Lee said. Most Americans appear to oppose expanding the court.

In a YouGov poll, 46 percent said they opposed increasing the number of Supreme Court justices while just 21 percent said they supported it. — AFP

Ex-Trump Pentagon boss Mattis mute on 2020 endorsement

SYDNEY: Former US defense secretary Jim Mattis refused to endorse his former boss Donald Trump yesterday, urging voters to look for leaders who show "competence and compassion".

"I will decline your offer to endorse a candidate," the retired four star general told a virtual event with Sydney's Lowy Institute, joking that "retired generals need to retire their tongues during election season". But the former marine went on to detail several qualities he looks for, and which seem to be at odds with Trump's bare-knuckled political brand.

"What I would look for most in a leader is competence and compassion," he said. "I would look to the character and competence of the leader, compassion, empathy with their people, all their people."

Mattis also cited former president Harry Truman's promise to be "the president of those who did not vote for him"—a message that Democratic nominee Joe Biden has channelled in recent days, as he tries to win over undecided and swing voters. Since resigning from office Mattis has drawn fierce criticism from Democrats for his perceived failure to criticize Trump, and for an insistence on dodging political questions despite being a former Trump political appointee. — AFP

Trump's teen son Barron caught coronavirus, first lady reveals

News underlines how much Trump is struggling to divert attention from pandemic

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump's teenage son Barron contracted the coronavirus, First Lady Melania Trump revealed Wednesday in a shocking piece of news underlining how much the Republican president is struggling to divert attention away from the coronavirus pandemic in the final stages of his reelection fight.

Melania Trump wrote in a statement that after she and the president tested positive for Covid-19 two weeks ago, "Naturally my mind went immediately to our son." She said the 14-year-old, who goes to a private school near Washington, did not experience symptoms and has since tested negative.

"Barron Trump, you know, he had the Corona 19," Trump said Wednesday night at a rally in Iowa. "He had it such a short period of time I don't even think he knew he had it."

The news, which had been kept under wraps despite global attention on Trump's own health, thrust public attention firmly back on the pandemic and in particular on an outbreak within the supposedly highly secure White House over the last two weeks. Trump, who spent three nights in hospital but returned to a punishing schedule of pre-election rallies on Monday, has been trying to move voters away from the subject in the closing 20 days of his campaign against Democratic frontrunner Joe Biden. "Barron's fine," Trump told reporters earlier at the White House as he left for the rally in Iowa. Then he abruptly switched to his preferred subject of the expected confirmation by Senate Republicans of his conservative nominee for the Supreme Court, Amy Coney Barrett.

Reality show experience

Trump negotiated to go on NBC at an outdoor setting in Miami

after Biden had arranged his own event on ABC in Philadelphia. In the past, Trump has appeared uncomfortable in town hall settings where ordinary voters ask questions. But as a former reality TV show star and a keen follower of viewing figures, the president will at least be keen to attract a bigger audience than Biden.

The two were meant to have met on stage for their second debate in a town hall format where the two candidates would have fielded questions from voters. However, in an unprecedented decision, debate organizers said they wanted to switch to a virtual format for safety reasons after Trump contracted the coronavirus. When he rejected the new conditions, the debate was called off.

NBC said it had received a statement from the clinical director at the National Institutes of Health, Anthony Fauci, that there was "a high degree of confidence" that Trump is now "not shedding infectious virus." Trump and the NBC host will be socially distanced at the outdoor venue and the audience will wear masks, NBC added.

Biden has been frequently testing for coronavirus and reporting negative results since Trump's Covid-19 diagnosis on October 1.

Shouting match

The first of three scheduled presidential debates was widely criticized for descending into an angry shouting match as Trump attempted to inflict a late wound to Biden's campaign. At a rally in Pennsylvania on Tuesday, Trump accused Biden of "choking like a dog" during the debate, and unleashed a tirade of lurid insults at his challenger, calling him mentally "shot."

"He can't stand up to the lunatics running his party," Trump told the large, raucous crowd in Johnstown. Furthering his long-running



In this file photo taken on August 27, 2020, US First Lady Melania Trump (left) looks at her son Barron Trump after US President Donald Trump delivered his acceptance speech for the Republican presidential nomination on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

narrative that 77-year-old Biden is too frail for the presidency, Trump, 74, tweeted a crudely faked picture purporting to show Biden in a wheelchair. The attack came as Biden stepped up his own courting of the important elderly vote, telling an event at a retirement center in Florida on Tuesday that Trump has "never been focused on you." — AFP

Floods kill 40 in India, damage crops

MUMBAI: Floods brought by heavy rains and overflowing rivers across large swathes of western and southern India have killed at least 40 people since Wednesday and damaged rice, cotton and other crops, officials said. The worst affected state was Telangana, where excessive unseasonal rainfall on Wednesday and yesterday flooded its capital Hyderabad, home to major IT companies and startups such as Microsoft, Accenture, Amazon and TCS.

In Telangana 30 people died, while in neighboring western state of Maharashtra 10 people were killed because of wall collapses, electrocution and drowning in overflowing streams, officials from the two states said yesterday. Authorities in Hyderabad declared a holiday yesterday and asked residents to stay indoors.

Daily life has been disrupted in Hyderabad as many parts of the city lost power in the flooding. Residents posted pictures on Twitter of floating cars, waterlogged homes, offices and streets.

A few districts in Maharashtra state re-

ceived more than 100 mm rainfall in the last 24 hours and the state, including its capital Mumbai, is likely to receive heavy to very heavy rainfall today, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said in its daily forecast. The rains have damaged rice paddies in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, while cotton, soybean and pulses were damaged in Maharashtra and Karnataka, traders said. "Soybean, pigeon peas and black matpe crops have been damaged just before harvesting. The quality of the harvested crop has also deteriorated," said Nitin Kalantri, a trader from Latur, in Maharashtra. Telangana and Maharashtra have so far in October received 143 percent and 78 percent more rainfall

than normal respectively, according to data compiled by IMD.

Eight members of a family, who were standing in their balcony to watch the rain, were also washed away due to sudden flooding in Hyderabad. Two of them were found dead and the search is on for the remaining six, the Times of India reported. Personnel from the army and the National Disaster Response Force have been deployed to evacuate stranded residents. Weather officials blamed the sudden deluge on a depression in the Bay of Bengal. Telangana state is the hardest hit area but the flooding has also affected neighboring Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. — Agencies



HYDERABAD: Children push a bicycle making their way on a flooded street following heavy rains in Hyderabad yesterday. — AFP

US destroyer sails through Taiwan Strait, provoking China

WASHINGTON: A US warship sailed through the Taiwan Strait in what the American military described as a "routine" passage Wednesday, but enraging China, which claims sovereignty over the island and surrounding seas. Ties between Beijing and Washington have deteriorated in recent months, over issues including trade and Hong Kong, with the self-ruled island of Taiwan a long-running source of tension.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Barry passed through the Strait on October 14, according to a statement by the US Pacific Fleet. "The ship's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," the statement said.

"The US Navy will continue to fly, sail and operate anywhere international law allows," it added. Any US Navy operations in the Taiwan Strait, which separates China from the island, provoke a strong response from Beijing, which considers Taiwan to be an inviolable part of its territory. In an angry riposte, the Chinese People's Liberation Army said it tracked the USS Barry by sea and air "throughout the entire process."

"We warn the US to stop its words and deeds that provoke trouble and disturb the situation in the Taiwan Strait," Eastern Theatre Command spokesman Colonel Zhang Chunhui said. The island has been governed separately since the end of a civil war in China in 1949. Taiwan has its own flag, currency and military, but it is not recognized as an independent nation by the UN. — AFP

International

NZ's Ardern says she'll step down as party boss if she loses election

Opinion poll shows Ardern has comfortable lead over Collins

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's prime ministerial hopefuls clashed yesterday in their last debate before a general election that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said if she does not win, she will resign from the leadership of her Labour Party.

An opinion poll yesterday showed Ardern, 40, had a comfortable two-digit lead over her main rival, National Party leader Judith Collins, and was on course to win tomorrow's election on the back of her success in tackling the novel coronavirus in New Zealand. In addition to her pandemic response, Ardern has won support at home and global admiration for her response to last year's attack by a white supremacist on two mosques and a fatal volcanic eruption. The closely watched INews-Colmar Brunton poll yesterday showed support for Ardern's party slipped 1 percentage point to 46 percent from the previous poll on Oct 8 but maintained a 15-point lead over the National Party, which slipped a point to 31 percent.



WELLINGTON: New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on her campaign trail speaking to students at Victoria University in Wellington ahead of general elections. — AFP

Facebook shuts NZ party's page ahead of election

WELLINGTON: Facebook shut down the page of conspiracy-embracing political party Advance New Zealand yesterday just two days out from a general election, accusing it of spreading misinformation about the coronavirus. The action against a registered political party in the midst of an election campaign is unprecedented in New Zealand and comes as Facebook shows an increased willingness to act against false claims made on the social media giant.

"We don't allow anyone to share misinformation on our platforms about Covid-19 that could lead to imminent physical harm," a Facebook spokesperson told AFP, accusing Advance New Zealand of "repeated violations" of that policy. Advance NZ co-leader Billy Te Kahika said the takedown occurred while he was addressing followers online, accusing Facebook of meddling in Saturday's vote. "Facebook have now officially interfered with the New Zealand 2020 elections," he said after hurriedly posting a live video to his personal Facebook page. "They did it in the middle of a broadcast and it's unbelievable, guys. This is amazing... they've actually carried through with the threat." Facebook has been criticized in the past for taking a hands-off approach to dealing with falsehoods published on its platforms.

But in recent weeks, the Mark Zuckerberg-headed company has

This means Labour would have 59 seats in parliament, just short of the 61 needed to form a government on its own. Labour's likely coalition partner, the Green Party, bounced back to its highest level since 2017 with a support of 8 percent, which would give it 11 seats.

If the parties join hands that would produce the country's first pure left-leaning government since 1999. Labour's other current coalition partner, the nationalist New Zealand First, led by Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, got an uptick to 3 percent but that still leaves it on course to exit parliament with no seats.

"I will make whatever New Zealand voters deliver, work," Ardern said in the debate when asked if she would work with Greens or NZ First. "What I am very clear on is that we will get things done faster, with a strong mandate and that's what I'm asking for Labour."

Ardern said Collins' assertion that child poverty had become worse was "factually incorrect" and said she was spreading misinformation by saying Labour would introduce a wealth tax.

Ardern also declared if her party loses, she will not stick on as leader of opposition. "My message would be if people don't want to see me resign, then vote for Labour," she told media after the debate. Despite her success in handling crises, questions have been asked of Labour's credentials to tackle the looming economic crisis. Collins has focused her campaign on the financial challenges ahead as unemployment rises, recession looms and the government's coronavirus support packages expire.

The 61-year-old conservative has warned a left-leaning coalition would mean more taxes and a business-unfriendly environment. "We are moving into very difficult economic times. We need a party that understands business and makes decisive decisions about what happens in our economy. So our plan is all focused on the economy," Collins said. Ardern's popularity as preferred prime minister has jumped to 55 percent, leaving Collins behind at 20 percent, the polls showed. — Reuters

clamped down on misleading political claims, fake accounts pushing partisan agendas and hate speech such as Holocaust denial. Facebook recently banned a politician from India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP for hate speech, and on Thursday blocked links to a New York Post article purporting to expose corrupt dealings by US Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden.

Addressing its move against Advance New Zealand, it said policies on coronavirus misinformation would be enforced "regardless of anyone's political position or party affiliation".

'This is war'

Te Kahika has amassed a huge following using the online platform, spurring him to enter politics. The former blues musician's social media videos claiming the Covid-19 pandemic is fake and part of a conspiracy to enslave people became wildly popular since he began posting them earlier this year. Between late June and early October, the Advance NZ Facebook page generated more than 5.3 million views, according to data from social media tracker CrowdTangle. They are stunning figures for a new political entrant in a nation of just five million people.

Advance NZ's page views exceed the 2.8 million for New Zealand's main opposition National Party and 5.2 million for Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party over the same period. Advance NZ's Facebook posts have also generated far more activity than those of the two mainstream parties. Advance NZ's posts have been shared 148,000 times, compared with fewer than 110,000 combined for the mainstream parties, according to the CrowdTangle data. However, the huge online presence does not appear to have translated into votes, with an opinion poll released Thursday putting Advance NZ's support at just one percent.—AFP

News in brief

HK raids media tycoon's office

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police raided a private office of pro-democracy media mogul Jimmy Lai yesterday, in a move he said had disregarded the rule of law. Lai, 71, is among more than two dozen people who have been arrested under a draconian national security law imposed by Beijing at the end of June to quell massive, often violent pro-democracy protests over the past year.



Media tycoon Jimmy Lai

"It seems that they are looking for every possible reason to charge me," Lai told reporters. "The police didn't even wait for the lawyer to

come before they took things away, so that's not rule of law," he added. In August, Lai was detained under the new law on suspicion of "collusion with foreign forces" and the offices of his newspaper Apple Daily were raided. — AFP

German tourist cold case

SYDNEY: Australian authorities have announced a Aus\$1 million (US\$700,000) reward for information that helps solve the murder of a young German tourist in a small country town in 2005. School teacher Simone Strobel was last seen at a caravan park in the small east coast city of Lismore after a night out with her boyfriend and friends in February of that year. The 25-year-old's body was discovered under palm fronds at a nearby sports ground six days later. No one has ever been charged over her death. This week's reward comes on top of a 10,000 euro (US\$12,000) offer announced by officials in Bavaria — her home state — in 2014. Australian police this year credited an Aus\$2 million reward with helping crack the 32-year-old cold case murder of American tourist Scott Johnson. — AFP

Afghan 'war crimes' reporting

SYDNEY: Police yesterday dropped a lengthy investigation into a journalist who exposed alleged war crimes by Australian special forces in Afghanistan. Federal police said prosecutors found there were "reasonable prospects of conviction" in the case against Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalist Daniel Oakes, but determined it was not in the public interest to proceed with criminal charges. The decision came more than three years after the ABC published the so-called "Afghan files", which alleged Australian troops had killed unarmed men and children in Afghanistan. Police were investigating Oakes and his producer, Sam Clark, for obtaining classified information from a government whistleblower—even controversially raiding the ABC's Sydney headquarters last year. — AFP

Lifestyle

Friday Times

www.kuwaittimes.net

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2020



A Halloween pumpkin archway is displayed at the 'Halloween at Descanso' event which runs until the end of the month at Descanso Gardens in La Canada Flintridge, California. —AFP

Mahmoud Yassin dies aged 79

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Egyptian religious singer Mahmoud al-Tohamy addresses his students during an Islamic chanting class.



Egyptian religious singer Mahmoud Al-Tohamy laughs with his students during an Islamic chanting class, at Prince Taz Palace in the historic center of the capital Cairo.



Egyptian religious singer Mahmoud al-Tohamy addresses his students during an Islamic chanting class. —AFP photos

EGYPT SINGER ADDS MODERN TOUCH TO ISLAMIC CHANTING

Egypt's Mahmoud al-Tohamy is a master of Islamic chanting, a 1,400-year-old art form known as "inshad"—but that hasn't stopped him from performing the "Game of Thrones" theme song. At age 41, Tohamy is inspired by the mystical Sufi branch of Islam and deeply committed to the spiritual essence of the ancient performance of devotional poetry and odes. But he has also earned global renown as an artistic pioneer who fuses inshad with other styles to create experimental and mesmerizing works of music. While the strictest interpretations of the art of chanting bans the use of accompanying musical instruments, Tohamy has worked with Western-style rock bands and classical music orchestras. His latest projects, he told AFP in Cairo, are all about mixing "classic Arabic with popular music," including genres from rock and pop to house.

"I have mixed the art of traditional religious singing with touches of other Western and Eastern music," said the master. "We will be able to spread the classic Arabic in the West as well as in local youth culture," he said of the chants, or "anasheed", which are traditionally performed solo or a capella. "Western and foreign audiences have an ear for inshad, more than local audiences. They may not understand the words, but they certainly feel the music."

Fusing styles

Tohamy was born to a family of religious chanters in the southern governorate of Asyut. His father was the singer Yassin Al-Tohamy, one of Egypt's most beloved religious artists. Tohamy has since 2014 run a music school in Cairo to pass the religious artform on to a new generation. Teaching a class recently, he wore a light summer shirt, denim shorts, a cap and sunglasses, rather than the traditional loose robes and turban. "Here I am among my children and young chanters, who may perceive the turban and robes with unease, which could impact our interactions," he said.

He now reserves the traditional attire for more conservative audiences, such as in the rural Upper Egypt regions, he said. He recently held a class—including young men, women and even children—in the spacious courtyard of the Mamluk-era Prince Taz Palace in central Cairo. There, their languid chanting echoed from the palace's murals bearing intricate inscriptions of Kufic calligraphy and vibrant Islamic art. So far nine groups of students have graduated from the school after attending classes on melodic science, rhyming prose and Arabic phonology over a period of four to six months. "Our school welcomes everyone with talent from all ages, nationalities and races," Tohamy told AFP.



Egyptian religious singer Mahmoud al-Tohamy addresses his students during an Islamic chanting class.

World acclaim

Inshad has meanwhile gained ever more fans abroad, as has Tohamy. Over the years, he has performed at international music festivals with the aim of "reintegrating religious chanting in humanist art". In 2017, he collaborated on three songs for the US album "Origin" which won a prize at the Global Music Awards. Several of his youthful graduates performed on the French TV talent show "The Voice Kids". Tohamy has recently collaborated with Egyptian musician Fathy Salama, a Grammy Award winner, for the joint project "Sufism vs modernity", earning wide global attention.

They had planned to perform in Italy and Norway, but the shows have been delayed by the coronavirus pandemic. During the gathering at Taz Palace, he asked students to perform to the score of the blockbuster television fantasy series "Game of Thrones". Tohamy emphasized that students must be devoted to the essence of the musical form, and not give in to the trappings that come with its growing international appeal and commercialization. "It has become common for professional religious singers nowadays only to rely on talent and experience, without proper knowledge," he said. Tohamy described himself as "a lover of Sufism", which includes ritualistic dancing, singing and the recital of prayers and is decried by some fundamentalist branches of Islam as "heretical". The master chanter, however, said that Sufi Islam and its art forms have "played a major role in correcting beliefs and ideas in times of extremism, violence and terrorism".—AFP

US book stores launch 'Boxed Out' campaign against Amazon

The American Booksellers Association has launched an advertising campaign against Amazon to alert the public to what it calls the growing danger that book stores are under from the online goliath during the coronavirus pandemic. The campaign, the first of its kind, was sparked by Amazon's "Prime Day" on Tuesday and Wednesday, during which Amazon offers bargains on products. Since the pandemic began, 35 book stores belonging to the ABA have had to shut their doors for good, the association told AFP, adding that some 20 percent of independent bookstores are under threat of closure.

"When these independent bookstores close Covid will be listed as the cause of death, but the pre-existing condition for many may be listed as Amazon," the association said in a statement. Dubbed "Boxed Out," the campaign plays on the delivery boxes that have become the hallmark of Amazon home deliveries. For Allison K. Hill, the director general of the ABA, the rise of the online commercial giant represents "the loss of local jobs and local tax dollars; the loss of community centers; and the loss of opportunities for readers to discover books and connect with other readers in a meaningful face-to-face way." According to the ABA, in 2019, 104 bookshops opened during the year. Only 30 have opened in 2020. The ABA campaign was launched on social media but also in bookshops themselves, of which 1,750 are ABA members. Some, like Solid State Books, in Washington, have covered their front windows with a giant brown cardboard, reminiscent of the Amazon delivery boxes. "Buy books from people who want to sell books, not colonize the Moon," said the logo on the cardboard, referring to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos' space travel side-project, Blue Origins. Another caustic message read, "If you want Amazon to be the world's only retailer, keep shopping there." Turnover from sales from bricks-and-mortar bookstores was down 31 percent in the first seven months of 2020, according to the census office. At the same time, in the third quarter of 2020 online sales were 16.1 percent of all retail sales, a record and up by a third from the first quarter, the same source said.—AFP

Mahmoud Yassin, star of Egypt's golden age of cinema, dies aged 79

Iconic actor Mahmoud Yassin, one of the stars of Egypt's golden age of cinema, has died aged 79. A pillar of the country's film industry during the second half of the 20th century, Yassin was involved in more than 250 productions over a period of four decades. Yassin's son and artist, Amr, on Wednesday posted a picture of his father on Facebook, and said: "He passed away, to the mercy of God, the father of the artist Mahmoud Yassin. I ask for your prayers." Yassin had been suffering from age-related health problems that had prevented him from working and appearing on screen for eight years. His last movie appearance was in the 2012 comedy drama "Geddo Habibi" ("Grandpa, My Darling") and he had been scheduled to participate in the Egyptian comedy series "Sahebat Al-Saada" with Adel Imam in 2014, but was unable due to illness and the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

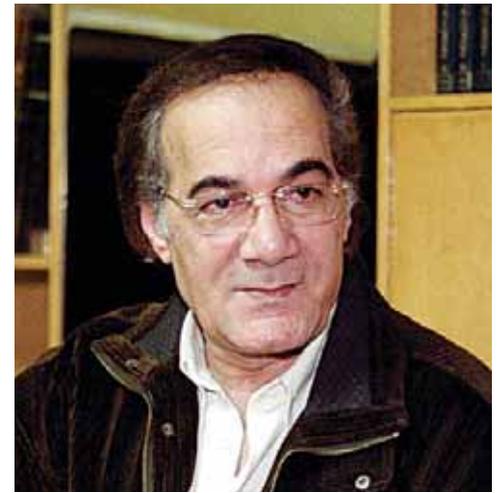
Egyptians and the Arab world knew Yassin through a number of important roles in cinema

and television, particularly during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These included the films "The Thin Thread" with Faten Hamama, "A Nose and Three Eyes" with Magda Al-Sabahi, "Bottom of the City" with Nadia Lutfi, "Mawlid Ya Dunya" with singer Afaf Rady, and "Remember Me" with Naglaa Fathi. Among his most notable cinematic works was the movie "The Bullet is Still in My Pocket," which told stories from the 1973 Arab-Israeli October War, and "Something from Fear," an Egyptian cinema classic. Yassin was distinguished by his melodious voice and performances in the Arabic language. He also commented on national and official events and played powerful roles in religious and historical soap operas.

He was married to the Egyptian actress Shahira, and together they had Amr and actress daughter Rania, who married Egyptian actor Mohamed Riad. In a statement, Shahira said her husband had been in pain as a result of a fracture to his pelvis and had blockages in

some of his brain arteries which affected his memory, speech, and movement and had led to his Alzheimer's disease.

She said that the last thing he had remembered was the death of his colleague artist Nour El-Sherif in 2015. Yassin was born in Port Said in 1941 and was attached to the theater through the preparatory stage at the Theater Club in the city. His dream at that time was to appear on stage at the National Theater. He moved to the Egyptian capital Cairo to attend university and graduated from the faculty of law, later fulfilling his dream of joining the National Theater where he performed in prominent plays such as "Leila and Majnun," "Khedive," and "Happened in October." He took small roles in the cinema at the end of the 1960s until his big break in the movie "We Do Not Sow Thorns" with Shadia in 1970. On television, he took part in dozens of series, including "The Dawah," "Tomorrow Flowers Bloom," and "Husband's Memoirs."—www.arabnews.com



This file picture taken on December 10, 2001 shows Egyptian actor Mahmoud Yassin posing for a picture at his home in Giza. —AFP

Shares in managers of K-pop's BTS soar on market debut



A commercial poster showing K-pop group BTS members is reflected in a mirror at a duty free shop in Seoul yesterday. —AFP

Shares in the management agency of K-pop sensation BTS rocketed on their stock market debut yesterday, making an instant billionaire of its chairman and boosting the seven band members' own fortunes. The initial public offering of shares in Big Hit Entertainment saw staggering demand, with the public section oversubscribed more than 600 times and applicants receiving only a tiny fraction of their requests. The firm's centrepiece asset BTS have risen to global stardom in recent years, cementing their prominence in the US, the world's biggest music market, in August with their all-English track "Dynamite" topping the Billboard Hot 100.

The IPO price was set at 135,000 won (\$118) but opened at double that on the KOSPI exchange and within minutes spiked to its daily limit of 351,000 won, platforms showed. It later fell back to close at 258,000 won but Big Hit still had a market capitalization of 8.7 trillion won — \$7.6 billion—putting it among South Korea's top 40 most valuable companies, just behind cosmetics-maker Amore Pacific and Hana Financial Group. Big Hit founder and CEO Bang Si-hyuk—who retains a 36 percent stake in the firm—was worth \$3.8 billion at the peak, according to

Bloomberg News. At a listing ceremony, he thanked "all the fans who have always loved and believed in Big Hit's artists and content" and "our remarkable artists of whom we're so proud".

The flotation also boosted the BTS members' own wealth—Bang gave each of them more than 68,000 shares in August, worth around \$20 million at the day's high and totaling 1.4 percent of the company. Analysts had expected the shares to power upwards. "Considering all the information about the firm now available, the IPO price could be the lowest price we will ever see," Park Sung-ho of Yuanta Securities told AFP.

Some investors cashed in straight away. "I received two shares and just sold them. With 260,000 won in profit, I will just buy a winter coat," said one poster on the South's biggest internet portal Naver. Others warned it would continue to decline after the initial euphoria, with one comment reading: "The entertainment industry is such a fast-changing sector and a management agency entirely dependent on only one group is not that attractive businesswise."

Reporting for duty

There is one inescapable hurdle looming for the newly listed agency: mandatory military service for all seven boy band members, who made their debut in 2013. South Korea requires all able-bodied men to serve in uniform to defend it against security threats from the nuclear-armed North, usually for 18 months. Under the existing conscription laws, BTS member Jin—real name Kim Seok-jin—aged 27, will have to report for duty by the end of 2021. The other six members, born between 1993 and 1997, will have to follow in the coming years. South Korea is currently debating exemptions for stars such as BTS, who have been at the forefront of the Korean Wave cultural phenomenon in recent years and are estimated to generate billions for the country's economy.

Such dispensations are available for Olympic medalists and award-winning classical musicians, but not for pop stars, with authorities so far only considering a two-year deferral. Nearly 60 percent of South Koreans would support such a postponement, a survey showed yesterday, which would give BTS members only a temporary respite. If they are forced to leave the stage it could blow a hole in Big Hit's finances: BTS were responsible for 97 percent of its revenues last year, according to the IPO prospectus. Big Hit acknowledged their anticipated absence as a "risk factor". It is looking to expand activities such as "contents licensing sales" that do not require the artists' "direct participation" to try to cushion the blow. But it acknowledged their time off-camera "could have a negative impact on the company's profitability and growth". —AFP

Gal Gadot 'whitewashing' row sparks Cleopatra history debate



In this file photo actress Gal Gadot arrives for the 2019 Met Gala at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. —AFP

News that Israeli actress Gal Gadot will play Cleopatra has prompted Hollywood's latest "whitewashing" row—and renewed a historical debate over the ancient Queen of Egypt's ancestry. Gadot, best known for "Wonder Woman," is confirmed to produce and star in a new big-screen epic from Paramount, taking up the role made famous by Elizabeth Taylor in the 1963 classic "Cleopatra." The biopic will retell the "story for the first time through women's eyes, both behind and in front of the camera," Gadot tweeted. "Wonder Woman" director Patty Jenkins is on board, as is "Shutter Island" writer Laeta Kalogridis. But the announcement immediately prompted social media criticism of the white, Israel-born star's casting as an African queen. "Hollywood has always cast white American actresses as the Queen of the Nile. For once, can't they find an African actress?" tweeted author James Hall. The furor taps into wider criticism of Hollywood's history of casting white actors in non-white roles on the apparent assumption of higher box office appeal, a practice commonly referred to as "whitewashing." —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Japanese cinema must adapt to survive, warns rising star director

Japanese cinema needs an overhaul. At least that's what acclaimed director Koji Fukada thinks, calling for less reliance on manga adaptations, more money for arthouse and better treatment of workers. The 40-year-old's latest film "The Real Thing" was chosen for the main selection at this year's Cannes film festival, four years after he won a jury prize for emerging talent. The glitzy French gathering was scrapped this year because of the coronavirus, but that has given Fukada more time to reflect on his concerns about the film industry at home. Among them is what he sees as an over-reliance on adapting popular graphic novels rather than commissioning original ideas, he told AFP in an interview.

He is not opposed to manga adaptations—his latest movie is one—but he warns that the genre's ubiquity has "a negative effect on diversity." "It's difficult to produce non-commercial films in Japan, where a lot of importance is given to their marketability," he said. Japan's film industry long found the greatest international success through its animated output, most famously those produced by the multi-award-winning Studio Ghibli.

That trend has shifted in recent years, however, with Hirokazu Kore-eda's 2018 drama "Shoplifters"—the story of an impoverished family forced into crime to survive—nominated for the Best Foreign Film category in the Oscars last year. But the country offers no government funds for arthouse movies, and studios prefer to minimize risk by backing what they see as sure-fire hits. "At this rate,

Japanese cinema is going to go down the drain," Fukada warned. He has made around a dozen films, ranging from his 2010 hit comedy-drama "Hospitalite" to 2016's award-winning "Harmonium".

They tackle subjects from xenophobia and loneliness to regret and revenge, subtly revealing secrets and lies hidden within families. But in recent months he has turned to activism, launching a crowdfunding campaign for arthouse cinemas in Japan, which he said were "in danger of extinction" even before the pandemic. "They are often owned by people who barely earn any money and are only motivated by their love of film," he said. "It's not sustainable. We have to come up with a funding system that can withstand a second, or third wave of coronavirus."

Tackling loneliness

So far, his campaign with fellow director Ryusuke Hamaguchi has raised more than 330 million yen (\$3.1 million). He has also sought to raise awareness of working conditions in Japanese cinema. "Some directors think that making a film is a battle," he said, describing having been punched, kicked and insulted when he started his career. While the #MeToo movement and associated calls for better treatment have made their mark on Hollywood and other film industries around the world, Japan still offers "a hostile climate" for those who call out harassment, according to Fukada.

A selection of his work will be screened as part of a special showcase at this year's Tokyo International Film Festival, which



This photograph shows Japanese film director Koji Fukada posing for AFP in Tokyo. — AFP

kicks off on October 31. "In the era of coronavirus, we thought that the public should have the chance to review his films," festival director Kohei Ando told AFP, praising Fukada's "critical eye on society and its absurdities." His films often confront themes of isolation—now in sharp focus as people are forced to stay home during the pandemic. Fukada said he has paid close attention to the devastating effect the pandemic has had on society, noting a rise in suicides in Japan in recent months. "Our everyday life, the things that we cherished, our loved ones, have been taken from us in one swoop," he said. His work, he said, tries to address universal subjects—including loneliness. "It is in every one of us, and we try to live with it, to put a lid on it," he said. "But there is always a moment where it re-emerges, and forces us to ask ourselves about the meaning of life." — AFP

To fight virus' spread, Vienna turns to bike couriers

Hoping to increase the number of coronavirus tests, the Austrian capital Vienna has a new weapon: instead of pizzas, bike couriers are now delivering Covid-19 tests. "In the city we're speedier than cars, because we can get through dense traffic faster and don't need to look for parking spaces," said Marcus Hanould, a 25-year-old messenger bike courier who until three weeks ago was delivering takeaways. To test and trace potential cases faster, more than 100 bike messengers working for courier service Veloce are now delivering the city's free "gargle tests" to around 1,000 people every day.

Like many countries across Europe, Austria is battling to contain a surging number of coronavirus cases, with Vienna currently accounting for about a third of the country's overall infections.

Donning a mask, goggles and a fresh pair of surgical gloves, Hanould hands each of the five members of the Mihailovic family a cup of saline solution, instructs them to gargle for at least half a minute, then spit the solution into test tubes which he'll take to a lab at the end of his eight-hour shift. Veloce's bike messengers have been delivering Covid-19 tests since the beginning of October, in part due to heavy criticism that testing and contact tracing in the city of 2 million has been slow and inefficient, allowing the virus to spread rapidly.

By the end of the month, the city wants to scale up to about 200 couriers, in addition to other types of tests, such as drive-through sites and ordinary testing teams being dispatched to those who have to quarantine. "It tastes like when we took a holiday by the sea," the family's 12-year-old daughter, who tested positive in a wide-scale testing drive at her school last week, tells her younger siblings. Hanould was trained to administer and correctly store the test samples in his insulated backpack as well as how to protect himself from contracting Covid-19, but refers patients to the city's free health hotline when it comes to medical questions. "I recognized right away that he must have arrived by bike, because he carries the same backpack I had when I worked as a pizza delivery boy," the family's father, Mihalo, said. — AFP



Marcus Hanould, 25-year-old bicycle courier of Veloce company, waits for Mihalo Mihajlovic and his family to take the tests for Covid-19 before he brings them back to a laboratory in Vienna, Austria. — AFP photos



Marcus Hanould rides his bike to a residential building to deliver Covid-19 tests and bring them back to a lab in Vienna.



Marcus Hanould prepares tests for Covid-19 before testing a family in Vienna.



Marcus Hanould handles tests for Covid-19 from a family before he takes them back to a laboratory.

'Emily in Paris': The myth of 'la vie en rose' lives on

Love it, hate it or love to hate it: the smash-hit Netflix series "Emily in Paris", which perpetuates long-held fantasies about the City of Light involving berets and pleasure-loving Frenchies, leaves no one indifferent. After "An American in Paris," "Funny Face," "Moulin Rouge" or "Amelie", the rose-tinted, romanced vision of Paris-with Instagram a new arrival-is once again laid out in all its glory in one of the most-watched series of the moment. Many French critics have castigated the 10-episode series, tired of seeing Parisians portrayed as suspicious concierges, unfriendly bakers or waiters, or snobbish, lazy and/or flirty colleagues.

The American heroine, meanwhile, doesn't seem to ever take the metro and lives in an attic room once supposedly used for maids that is implausibly big, above a handsome neighbor who is just as implausible. It is a sugarcoated reality that irritates Lindsey Tramuta, an American writer who has lived in Paris for 15 years. Tramuta has written "The New Paris" and "The New Parisienne" in which she tries to show there is much more to the city than old-worldly brasseries and corner cafes.

'Instagram-filtered playground'

"We are in 2020 and we are still recycling the old cards," she says, pointing to an economic and social reality that is overlooked in a city that has experienced jihadist attacks, the Yellow Vests protest movement and mass strikes. "It is not a harmless series of cliches," she adds. "When Paris is portrayed incessantly that way, for generations, it contributes to a problematic long term understanding of the place itself." One of these problems is the so-called Paris syndrome, which people have come to call the acute disappointment felt by some tourists when they arrive in the capital and see it as it is.

For Tramuta, the rose-tinted portrayal "is an example of the way Paris is exploited by film companies, luxury brands, authors, it

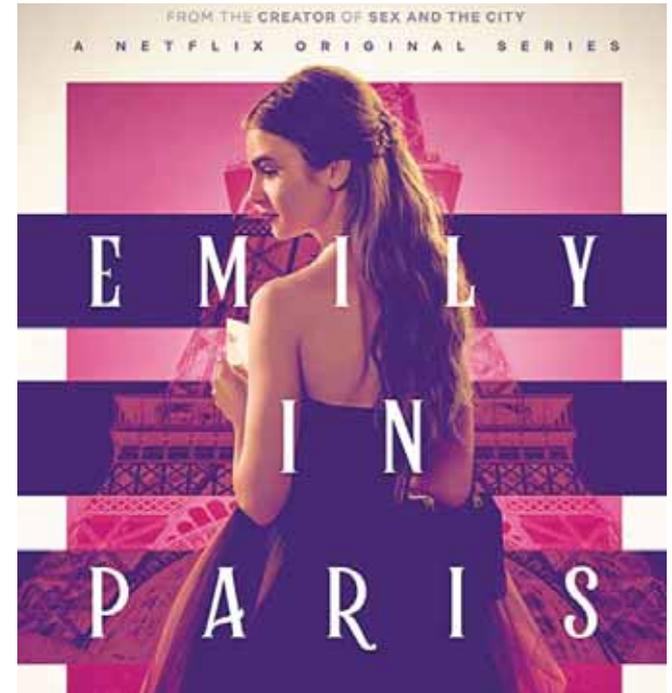
makes the city look like an Instagram-filtered playground". Criticized too for magnifying the French-US culture clash, "Emily in Paris" has nevertheless found success in recycling the decades-old cliches and Netflix is entirely at ease with that. "If Emily had come to your city and not 'in Paris', what would the big cliches of the series be?," it joked on Twitter. "Take Emily in Marseille = it's always sunny, the old port smells of sardines and Jul wanders the streets," it added, referring to a rapper born in the French southern city.

For Agnes Poirier, the author of "Left Bank," a book on Paris's post-war intellectual and cultural life, "cliches all have an element of truth or they wouldn't be cliches. "Also, cliches die hard. "And in comparison to American cities, yes, Paris looks and feels romantic and the French have a different and more tolerant attitude to extramarital affairs and marriage."

'Silly and funny'

But, she adds: "Paris and Parisians fascinate for what are now, alas, purely historical reasons," referring to the books or films that have created the image of "the city of love", of unrestrained sexuality or of living the good life. Ines de la Fressange, a fashion designer and co-author of the bestselling lifestyle book "La Parisienne," says it might all be a dream Paris, but with "a little bit of truth in it all" nevertheless.

"We often forget that Americans see Paris as a type of Disneyland-Emily takes a selfie with a pain au chocolat," says the former model. "But in New York, we too are amazed by the Empire State Building. "Right now, Paris is suffering from a lack of tourists. If cliches on gastronomy, elegance and beauty make people want to come here, it's not a problem." And the series, created by Darren Star who also made "Sex and the City", has sparked a deluge of tweets from foreigners saying they want to live in Paris after having seen the series. "It is a silly and funny rom com that a lot of foreigners can relate to,"



says Lane Nieset, an American freelance journalist who specializes in travel and gastronomy and has lived in Paris for nearly two years. "For the Americans, the French still represent the epitome of class and sophistication. And at a time of coronavirus pandemic when "they can't travel, it makes them dream, it is an escape". — AFP

India cinemas reopen, hoping to lure back movie-mad fans

Cinemas in movie-mad India tentatively re-opened yesterday but with worries about coronavirus and only old films showing, early punters were few and far between. The pandemic has clobbered theatres worldwide but in India, home to the planet's most prolific movie industry, it has upended a culture that treats the stars of the silver screen almost like gods. After the recent loss of several luminaries to coronavirus, cancer and even suicide-as well as a Bollywood drugs scandal-the industry is desperate for some good news. But it may have to wait, with some states still keeping theatres closed-including Maharashtra and its movie mad capital Mumbai-and film studios offering no new releases.

At the Sharada Cinema in Bangalore on Thursday, there was only a small trickle of customers for the morning showing of action fantasy "Kaanadante Maayavadanu". One of those in line was businessman Chandrashekhar Naidu, who said he was "excited" to return to the cinema after the almost seven-month-long coronavirus-imposed hiatus. "I prefer watching movies on big screens, mobiles don't give you that much pleasure," the 55-year-old told AFP. The Indian Express daily quoted unnamed industry executives as saying that advance bookings were very low, and some cinemas scrapped previously scheduled morning screenings.

India's largest operator PVR-which lost \$30 million in the last quarter-on Thursday was only screening movies for employees, police and their families, before opening to the public on Friday at selected locations. "Right now, what we are working on is getting the confidence of people back by letting them know that the cinemas are safe and secure," said Lalit Ojha, a regional director for INOX, the country's second-largest multiplex operator. "We are hoping to have a blockbuster release at Diwali," Ojha said, referring to next month's Hindu festival that usually spells a bonanza for theatres and retail businesses. A trip to the cinema remains an affordable pursuit in India, with as little as 75 rupees (\$1) buying three hours of drama, dancing and song in air-conditioned luxury. — AFP



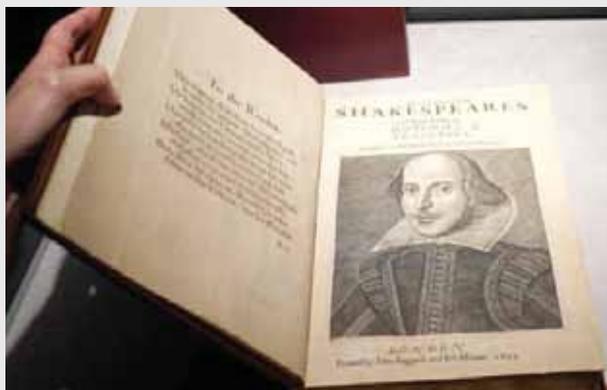
A movie goer (center) gets his temperature checked at the entrance of a cinema theatre in Bangalore yesterday, after cinema theatres reopened as the Covid-19 imposed lockdown eases further. — AFP photos



A worker sweeps the premises of a cinema theatre in Bangalore yesterday, after cinema theatres reopened as the Covid-19 imposed lockdown eases further.



People stand outside a closed cinema theatre in Amritsar yesterday, with some states still keeping theatres closed amid Covid-19 pandemic.



Shakespeare First Folio sold for record \$10 million

A copy of the first collection of plays by William Shakespeare was sold Wednesday for \$9.97 million at auction in New York, setting a new record for a work of literature. The price paid for the work, widely known as the First Folio exceeded by far the estimated range of \$4-6 million set by Christie's, which held the auction. The collection, printed in 1623 and containing 36 plays by the English master, is frequently described as the greatest literary work in the English language. It was published after the death of the Bard, who lived from 1564 until 1616, and was compiled by two of his friends, John Heminge and Henry Condell.

It contains major works which would probably have been lost were it not the collection, including "Macbeth" and "Twelfth Night." Several books have brought in higher prices, such as the Codex Leicester of Leonardo De Vinci, which Bill Gates bought for \$30.8 million in 1994. But none is a literary work of fiction. — AFP



Cuban Noris Perez and her daughter feed cats and dogs at a private animal shelter in Havana.



Cuban Noris Perez plays with dogs at a private animal shelter in Havana.— AFP photos

Cuban animal lovers hope new law changes attitudes

Havana's streets teem with abandoned animals and are littered with carcasses of chickens sacrificed in religious rituals, while, behind closed doors, dogs are thrown into illegal deadly fights. But things are changing in Cuba thanks to pressure from a growing middle class, and the island nation will soon pass a law to protect animal rights. In April, 2019, 500 people marched through Havana to demand a law protecting animals—it was the first independent and non-political demonstration authorized by the one-party state. A year and a half later, the communist government will next month pass its first law to protect animal rights, in a bid to wrestle the initiative from a movement with the potential to mushroom.

It's an important step for a civil society marveling at its demands being translated into law for the first time, and signals a cultural shift on an island of contradictions between tradition and modernity. Cuba's streets are full of dogs and cats in a poor state, often abandoned for economic reasons. The lucky ones are picked up by individuals or animal welfare groups who sometimes go hungry to feed them.

'You can never stop saving them'

In Havana's San Miguel del Padron neighborhood, 49-year-old housewife Noris Perez organizes her life around 23 cats and 38 rugged dogs, the first of which was rescued eight years ago from a pavement where it was suffering from epileptic fits. The large dogs live in kennels on the roof while the smaller ones and cats call the kitchen home. At meal times, a cacophony of barks and purrs fills the air as Perez hands out an individual bowl to each and every one. "All this I do alone" with a little help from her husband, daughter and sometimes some neighbors, she says. The hardest part is feeding them, given that the average Cuban wage is \$40 a month and shortages are frequent.

In the Nuevo Vedado neighborhood, Grettel Montes de Oca, 48, lives with 55 cats and four dogs that roam freely all over her house, except the living room. "I have a friend that says this is the ugliest dog in the world," she laughed while stroking Yoki, an old black dog with damaged teeth and tatty coat that indicate a past of mistreatment. A professional dancer, Montes de Oca had never owned a pet until she picked up a black cat in 2007. "Once you start



Cuban Noris Perez plays with dogs at a private animal shelter in Havana.



A dog is seen at a private animal shelter in Havana.



A man trains a cocks to fight in Havana.



A man cuts the nails of a dog at Don Silver private salon of canine esthetic in Havana.



A man trains a cock to fight in Havana.



A man trains his dog to participate in a canine beauty contest in Havana.



A man dries a dog's hair at Don Silver private salon of canine esthetic in Havana.



Cocks are seen during a fight in Havana.



Cuban Daynoris Encinosa combs a dog at a private animal shelter in Havana.



A man dries a dog's hair at Don Silver private salon of canine esthetic in Havana.

saving them, you can never stop," she said. She's set up a foundation to protect animals that is tolerated by authorities, although not legal. An animal rights law "is the dream of all animal defenders, especially in Cuba where we've been fighting for 33 years for that." "We are amongst the most backward countries in Latin America and the Caribbean," she added. "It's as if animals don't exist in Cuba."

New activism

The change can in part be attributed to the arrival in 2018 of 3G internet on mobile telephones that has allowed people to mobilize via social media, notably to promote animal rights, gay rights and fight against gender-based violence. The emergence of a middle class due to the development of the private sector since 2010 following Cuba's opening up to tourism has also contributed. A growing number of people now have the means to buy a car or washing machine. Some even have enough disposable income to treat their pets to a makeover—there are around

10 canine beauty salons in Havana. Like several other Latin American governments in recent years faced with a more demanding middle class, the Cuban state has been forced to consider their wishes.

The new law is on the home straight in the hands of the agriculture ministry. "The Decree Law will be approved in November ... by the State Council and will be ratified by the National Assembly," said Yisell Socorro, a ministry lawyer. The aim of the new law is to "guarantee the physical and mental integrity of animals." "Respect for animals, the need to avoid mistreatment, abuse, acts of cruelty and above all the realization that animals are sensitive beings that feel pain and pleasure," added Socorro. The national animal welfare committee, meanwhile, is focusing on "an educational process" "We don't want to have to punish anyone for cruel or denigrating acts towards animals," said the committee's president Maria Gloria Vidal. While offenders could be hit with fines and even prison sentences, the main aim is to change attitudes because "the science of animal welfare is something new."



A dog is trained to participate in a canine beauty contest in Havana.



A man trains his dog to fight in Havana.



Dogs are trained to fight in Havana.

Animal sacrifice

There's also the issue of confronting a religious tradition of animal sacrifice amongst the Santeria cult—a religion created in Cuba that mixes Catholicism with the Nigerian Yoruba faith brought to the island nation by slaves. "It would be practically impossible to ban animal sacrifice in Cuba as it's part of this religion's rituals," said Vidal. "But we can work to guarantee the wellbeing of the animals that are reared and used in these rituals" so that those are "carried out in the quickest, less stressful way possible for the animals."

It's not unusual to come across decapitated chickens or pigeons in the streets of Havana as Santeria is the most popular religion on the island. Depending on which divinity is invoked and the favor sought—such as good health or a child—rams, goats, roosters, pigeons, hutias (a rodent), dogs and cats can all be sacrificed in secret rituals, said Yank Benavente, 38, a Santeria priest known as a babalawo. However, he insists he would never sacrifice any of his own animals—he owns around 30 doves and two dogs—and takes great care of those he buys for sacrificial purposes. "I'm incapable of treating them badly, to leave them thirsty or hungry," he said. The possibility of giving up the practice is out of the question, though. "It's part of culture, religion, I can't see how the law can influence this."

'No-one can stop this'

Even more controversial is the question of cock and dog fights. Often organized in secret at out of town loca-



Men work with dogs at Don Silver private salon of canine esthetic in Havana.

tions, these combats to the death between two specially trained animals are often so savage that the victor also succumbs to its injuries. "Dog combats are totally banned," said Vidal. That's not the case for cock fighting, though. It's an activity that is so anchored in Cuban culture that the family of late revolutionary hero Fidel Castro owned a fighting ring. It will remain legal "in very specific cases of associations or organizations, for a competition or an event."

For one fan, who spoke on condition of anonymity, "in cock-fighting there are rules ... which makes it a sport that is nothing like dog fighting." Even a dog fighting fan, who also insisted on anonymity, admitted that "watching two dogs fight is not good." However, he said he enjoyed the spectacle on which people can place bets worth thousands of dollars, and even risk their homes. "No-one can stop this, dog fights will go on," he said defiantly.

Pet pampering

In a sharp contrast, at the Don Silver salon in the Santa Fe neighborhood, cocker spaniel Docky yawns as his claws are filed before receiving a shampooing to remove itchy ticks. On the next table, chihuahua Luna jumps as a hairdryer is turned on to style her coat. It was one of the first canine beauty salons to open in Cuba, in 2012, by owner Loretta Rivero, 50. She says "lots of people have put pressure" on the government to enact change.

"We fight, like people who want progress and change, against others who are more attached to tradition ... things that are basically from the third world." Some activists hope the animal rights law will herald change in other areas, such as gay marriage, which is set to be put to a referendum next year. — AFP



Cats and dogs are seen at a private animal shelter in Havana.



A practitioner of the Yoruba religion holds a dove during a religious ceremony in Havana.

UNSUITED TO NEW ERA? FATE OF FORMAL FASHION HANGS BY A THREAD

Italian luxury designer Brunello Cucinelli makes men's suits that sell for up to 7,000 euros (\$8,200). But even he - like most people across the globe - hasn't worn a suit for months, let alone bought one. "We've all been locked away at home, so this is the first jacket I have put on since March," Cucinelli told Reuters in Milan as he presented his latest collection in September, wearing a light grey blazer. Most people in "white-collar" jobs are working from home, with a newfound love of sweatpants, a trend that some experts expect to outlive the pandemic. And few, if any, weddings or parties are taking place. This seismic shift in behavior is having profound repercussions across the supply chain for suits and formal wear, upending a sartorial sector spanning every continent.

In Australia, the world's biggest producer of merino wool, prices have been in freefall, hitting decade lows. Many sheep farmers are in dire straits, storing wool in every available shed in the hope of a rebound. In northern Italy, the wool mills that buy from the farmers and weave the fabric for high-end suits have seen their own orders from retailers nosedive. In the United States and Europe, several retail chains specialising in business attire such as Men's Wearhouse, Brooks Brothers and TM Lewin have closed stores or filed for bankruptcy over the past few months, and more could follow.



Domenico "Mimmo" Spano checks his look in a mirror at his atelier in Manhattan, New York.

Players at all levels told Reuters they were being forced to adapt to survive, from farmers turning to other forms of agriculture to mills making stretchier fabrics for a new breed of suits that don't crease easily and are more resistant to stains. "People want to be more comfortable and are less inclined to wear a formal suit," said Silvio Botto Poala, managing director of Lanificio Botto Giuseppe, a wool mill in Italy's textile hub of Biella which counts Armani, Max Mara, Ralph Lauren and Hermes among its customers. "With Zoom conferences and smart working, you'll see men wearing a shirt, perhaps even a tie, but not many suits."

Merino farmers cling on

Fine wool prices in Australia have more



Dege & Skinner Managing Director William Skinner poses for a portrait in the Dege & Skinner tailors on Savile Row in London.

than halved during a tumultuous 18-month period, as usually healthy purchases of merino wool from Italian mills have almost ground to a halt. The benchmark price for merino wool fell to A\$8.58 (\$6.1) per kg in early September, auction results show, down from A\$20.16 in early 2019. It has since partly recovered to just over A\$10. Andrew Blanch, managing director of New England Wool in New South Wales, which sources wool from farms for Italian textile makers, said many buyers now had excess supplies.

"They've all got wool to get rid of before they even come back to the market here," said Blanch, speaking on the phone from wool auctions in Sydney's western suburbs. "If the shops aren't open, everything just backs up. A lot of the orders we had bought wool against just got cancelled by their clients in the U.S. and around Europe."

He said that China, which alongside Italy purchases most of Australia's more than A\$3 billion in annual wool exports, was now "the only show in town" even though Chinese buyers were also acquiring less wool.

Many merino sheep farmers are storing their wool in sheds or storage facilities; though some who are still emerging from a three-year drought are selling their bales into the weak market to stay financially afloat. "Not everyone is big enough to hold on to their wool clip and wait for the price to change," said Dave Young, a farmer near the New South Wales town of Yass. "We are in the position where we have to meet the market within a relatively short time after shearing." Young, who has about 4,500 sheep on his property, said he had re-focused some operations to provide lamb meat instead.

Wool weavers' gloom

A jump up the food chain to northern Italy, and Botto Poala expects his mill's sales to fall by 25% from 63 million euros last year and that they will take 2-3 years to recover. However his business is insulated to a degree because it mostly makes womenswear fabric;

others are more pessimistic. "For some businesses, we are talking a 50%-80% plunge in sales," said Ettore Piacenza, general manager of the Fratelli Piacenza wool mill, a centuries-old family business with an annual turnover of 52 million euros. He also heads the wool mills department of the local business association. Botto Poala said more than 50% of his mill's turnover now comes from wool that has been made stretchier by treating in a particular way or having lycra added to it. This is because whatever demand is left for suits, it is more likely to be for fabrics that are more resistant to stains and don't crease easily, while such cloth can also be used for casual wear, wool mills say. Italian luxury label Etro, for example, has just launched a "24-hour jacket" made of jersey and mixing wool and cotton.

'My clients are in PJs'

A gradual move towards casual wear has been going on for years. In 2019, even Goldman Sachs - a bastion of bespoke suits - relaxed the dress code for its staff. Not to mention the rise of the Silicon Valley hipster crowd. But COVID has turbocharged that shift - boosting sales of comfort clothing and sportswear at the expense of business attire. In the second quarter of this year, when much of the world was in lockdown, Nike was the hottest brand according to Lyst, a global fashion search platform that analyses the behavior of more than nine million online shoppers a month. It was the first time since the Lyst Index began that a luxury fashion brand did not take the top spot. Gap's Athleta unit, which sells tights, jogging pants, sweats and workout tops, was its best-performing fashion line in the three months to Aug. 1. Sales rose 6%, compared with a 52% fall at Banana Republic, known for dressier attire. Suits ranked among the highest-discounted and lowest-selling items in France, Italy and Germany in September, according to data compiled by StyleSage, which combs prices on websites. Cheaper to mid-market labels including Asos,



Head Shirt Cutter Tom Bradbury works in the Dege & Skinner tailors on Savile Row in London.



Cravats and bow ties are displayed for sale in the Dege & Skinner tailors on Savile Row, amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in London, Britain.

Topman, Guess and Hugo Boss had the steepest markdowns, at up to 50%.

The collapse in demand for office attire led storied US retailers, also including Jos. A. Bank and J. Crew, to file for bankruptcy over the summer and many more retailers face an uncertain future. Retail consultancy Coresight Research forecasts that 20,000 to 25,000 US stores could close by year-end, compared with about 9,800 in 2019. "I confess I have not purchased any office wear this year. I can tell you for a fact walking around the City, there are very few suits on display," said James Whitaker, a partner at law firm Mayer Brown in London.

Indeed business has been "extremely slow" even since the end of lockdown for Jasper Littman, a tailor trained in Savile Row, the London street renowned for its bespoke tailoring for men. Littman said his clients, mostly lawyers and bankers, "are sitting at home in their pyjamas". He usually makes about 200 suits a year, but has only made 63 so far in 2020. Customers are reluctant to risk riding the train to pick up even the suits that are already made with a deposit paid. "There's no point in them doing that, because they'd be taking delivery of a suit they can't wear." — AFP



Head Shirt Cutter Tom Bradbury looks at silk ties displayed for sale in the Dege & Skinner tailors on Savile Row, in London.—AFP Photos

Kids Page

Word Search

DIRECTIONS: Find and circle the city names in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.

US Cities



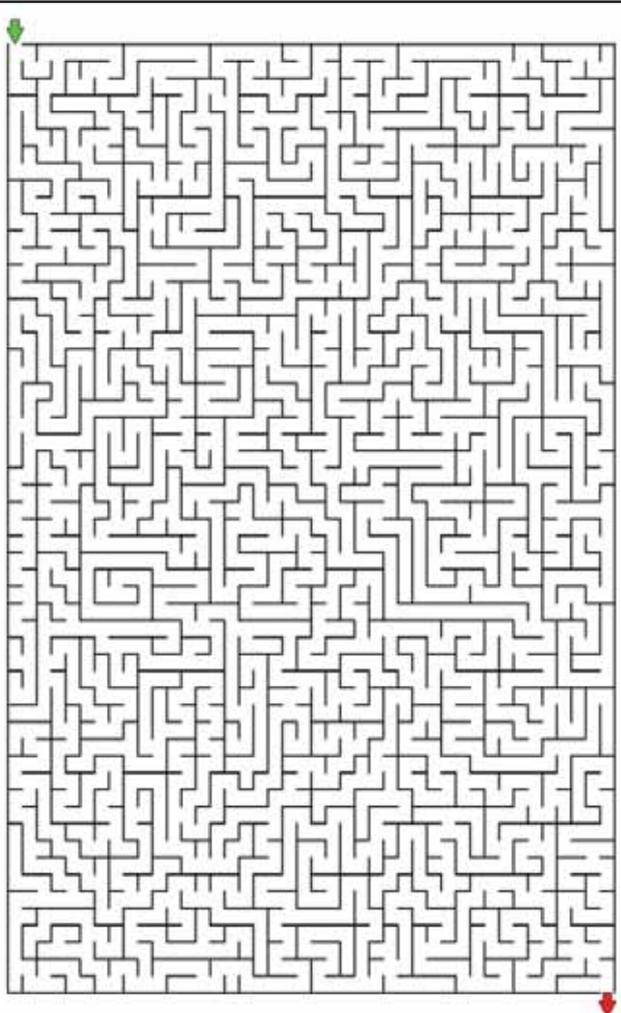
- Austin
- Baltimore
- Boston
- Charlotte
- Chicago
- Columbus
- Dallas
- Denver
- Detroit
- El Paso
- Fort Worth
- Houston
- Indianapolis
- Jacksonville
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- Los Angeles
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- Phoenix
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- San Antonio
- San Diego
- San Francisco
- San Jose
- Seattle
- Washington



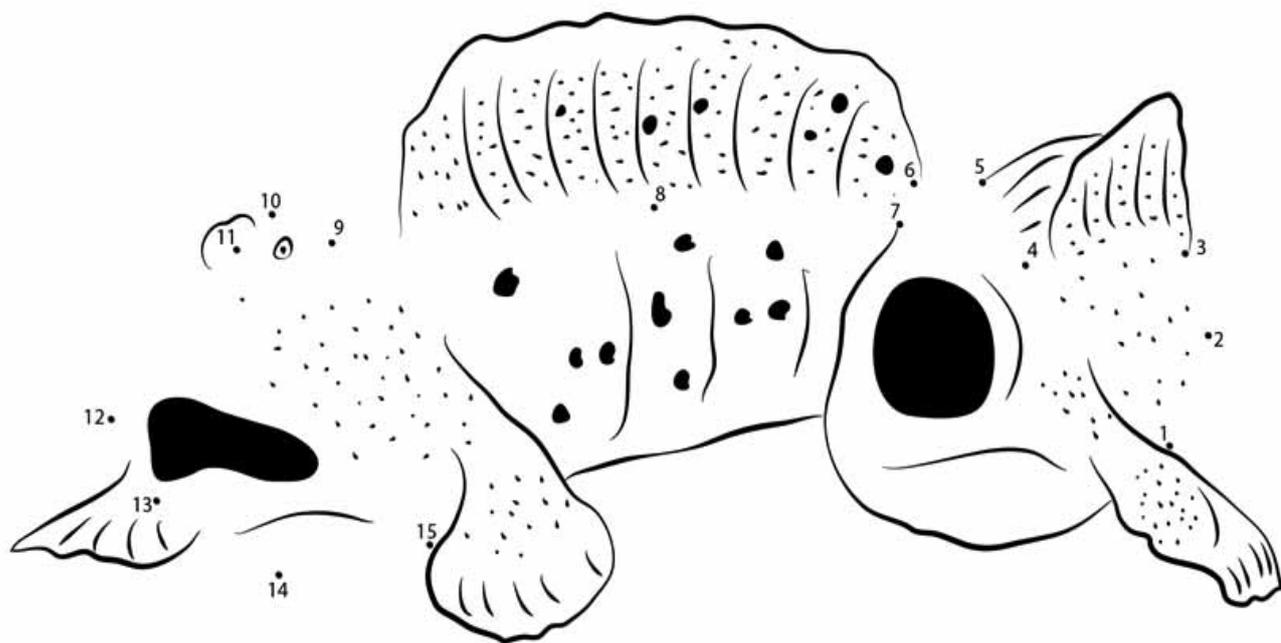
Color It



Kids Mazes



Join the dots



Word Scramble

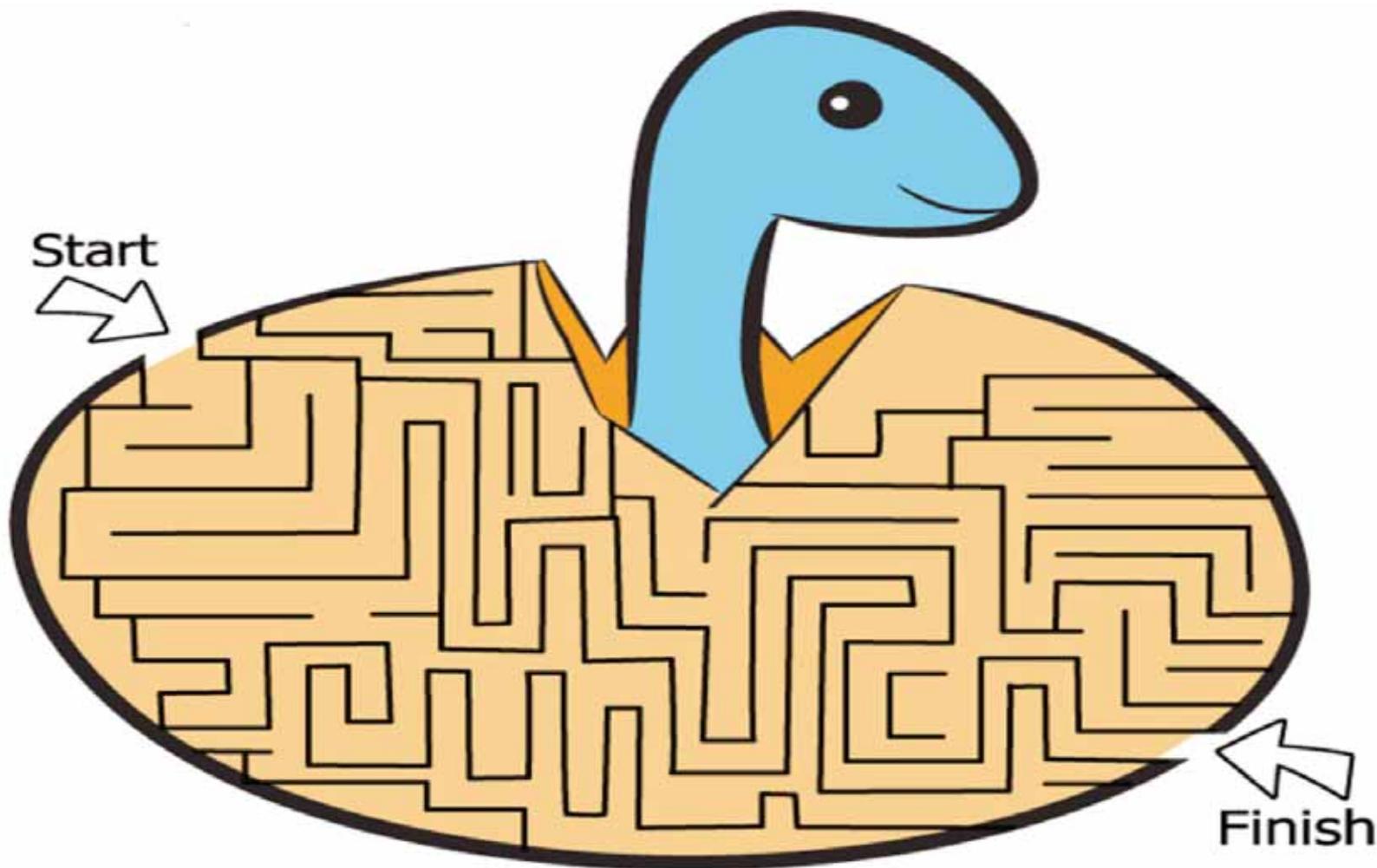


Harry Potter
Word Scramble

Somebody has cast a Gobbledegook 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 | _____ | LAEAYNZOLGD | _____ |
| DLTEOVROM | _____ | AAOCMYRDFLO | _____ |
| RDFFGRYONI | _____ | NLIGWOR | _____ |
| LRUESYDS | _____ | ILIVSNBEI | _____ |
| OEBDLMREU | _____ | DRNOGA | _____ |
| ANEYWREOLS | _____ | OCSOHL | _____ |
| RRSKAATD | _____ | ARHRY | _____ |
| LILEBEONR | _____ | CASR | _____ |
| IQCDIDUTH | _____ | IWZRDA | _____ |
| TRWFCICTHA | _____ | RWSGAOTH | _____ |

Find the way



CLINIC PAGE



Kuwait Times

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Friday, October 16, 2020

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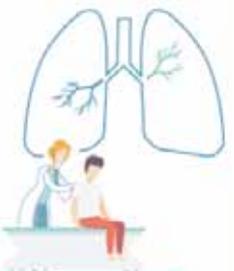
Health & Science

Friday, October 16, 2020

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Nayunipati to Ashok Kumar Nayanapati (Ashok Kumar - Given Name and Nayanapati - Surname) hereinafter in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by name of Ashok Kumar Nayanapati. **(C5805)**
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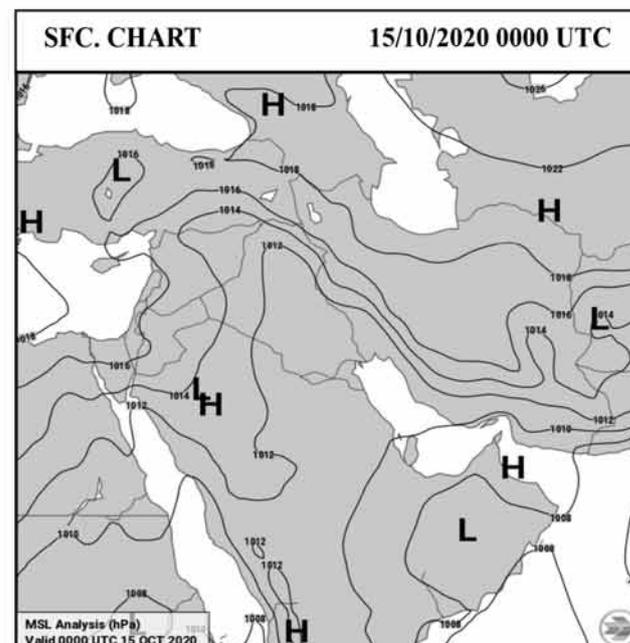
Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Hot to rather hot and Relatively humid over coastal areas with light variable wind to light to moderate south easterly wind with speed of 06 - 28 km/h .

BY NIGHT: Fair and Relatively humid over coastal areas with light variable wind to light to moderate south westerly wind with speed of 06 - 26 km/h .

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| WEATHER WARNING | No Current Warnings |
|-----------------|---------------------|

| STATION | MAX. EXP. | MIN. REC. |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| KUWAIT CITY | 35 °C | 23 °C |
| KUWAIT AIRPORT | 36 °C | 17 °C |
| ABDALY | 38 °C | 20 °C |
| BUBYAN | 32 °C | 18 °C |
| JAHRA | 37 °C | 18 °C |
| FAILAKA ISLAND | - °C | - °C |
| SALMIYAH | 32 °C | 26 °C |
| AHMADI | - °C | - °C |
| NUWAISIB | 36 °C | 21 °C |
| WAFRA | 38 °C | 18 °C |
| SALMY | 35 °C | 18 °C |



4 DAYS FORECAST

| DAY | DATE | WEATHER | Temperatures | | Wind Direction | Wind Speed |
|----------|-------|-------------------|--------------|-------|----------------|--------------|
| | | | MAX. | MIN. | | |
| Friday | 10/16 | Hot to rather hot | 38 °C | 18 °C | VRB-NW | 08 - 28 km/h |
| Saturday | 10/17 | Hot to rather hot | 38 °C | 20 °C | NW-VRB | 08 - 30 km/h |
| Sunday | 10/18 | Hot to rather hot | 37 °C | 21 °C | NW-VRB | 06 - 28 km/h |
| Monday | 10/19 | Hot to rather hot | 37 °C | 18 °C | NW | 10 - 30 km/h |

PRAYER TIMES

| | |
|---------|-------|
| Fajr | 04:30 |
| Sunrise | 05:50 |
| Zuhr | 11:34 |
| Asr | 14:51 |
| Sunset | 17:18 |
| Isha | 18:35 |

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

| | |
|--------------------------|------------|
| MAX. Temp. | 37 °C |
| MIN. Temp. | 17 °C |
| MAX. RH | 53 % |
| MIN. RH | 06 % |
| MAX. Wind | SW 21 km/h |
| TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR. | 0 mm |

All times are local time unless otherwise stated.

UP.0

Business

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2020

34 G20 pledges to do 'whatever it takes' to support global economy**35** Using AI, Canadian city predicts who might become homeless**36** HK budget carrier joins 'flights to nowhere' trend

HK, Singapore agree to 'travel bubble'

Residents will be allowed to travel freely between the two financial hubs

HONG KONG: Hong Kong and Singapore yesterday said they had agreed "in principle" to set up a bubble allowing residents to travel freely between the two financial hubs as long as they test negative for the coronavirus. The announcement is a rare moment of good news for a tourism industry battered by the pandemic and offers a glimpse into how places with less severe outbreaks might be able to safely restart some travel.

The two cities released joint statements announcing the deal which they said would be implemented within weeks. "This milestone arrangement will help revive cross-border air travel between the two aviation hubs, in a safe and progressive way," Hong Kong's government said.

"Both our cities have low incidence of COVID-19 cases and have put in place robust mechanisms to manage and control COVID-19," Singapore transport minister Ong Ye Kung said, referring to the disease caused by the coronavirus.

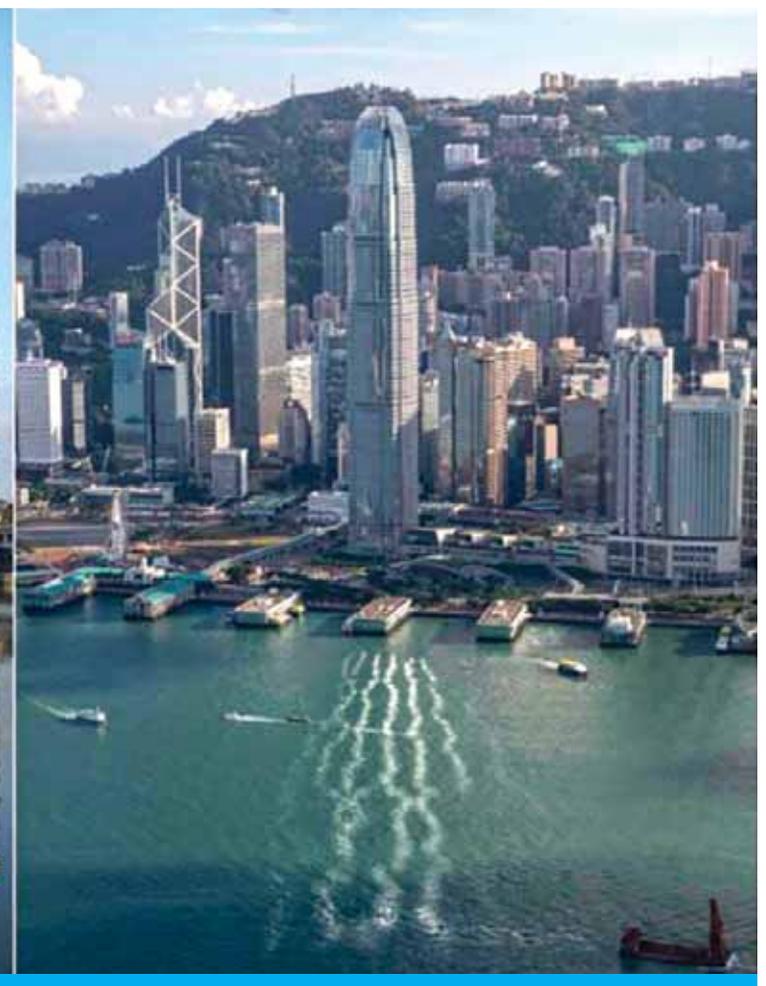
Shares in Hong Kong's flagship carrier Cathay Pacific which, like all airlines, has been hammered by the coronavirus closed more than six percent up yesterday. Singapore Airlines was trading up a more muted 0.5 percent.

No quarantine on arrival

The joint statement said there would be no limit on what type of travel will be allowed between Hong Kong and Singapore meaning tourists will be as welcome as business travellers.

Those travelling between the two hubs will need to have a negative coronavirus test result and travel on dedicated planes. They will not need to quarantine for a period of time on arrival. No transit passengers will be allowed on board the travel bubble flights. "Both governments are committed to fleshing out the full details of the (travel bubble) in the coming weeks and look forward to the resumption of travel between both cities, with the necessary safeguards in place to ensure that public health concerns of both sides are addressed," the joint statement said.

Industry groups welcomed the announcement and said they hoped similar bubbles would be forged. "Replacing quarantine measures with COVID-19 testing will help in re-opening borders,



Hong Kong is the 10th place that Singapore has made special travel arrangements with. — AFP

restoring the connectivity that jobs and economic activity depends on, and gives passengers greater confidence to travel," Conrad Clifford, from the International Air Transport Association, said in a statement.

The travel bubble between Singapore and Hong Kong also got a cautious welcome from

some public health experts—but they cautioned corridors only worked for those places that have got a handle on the disease. "Control and clear virus with strong public health measures, then set up travel bubbles with other places that have done the same," tweeted Devi Sridhar, chair of Edinburgh University's Global Public Health de-

partment. "East Asia and the Pacific showing a way forward and clear strategy," she added. Hong Kong's government has said it is seeking to form travel bubbles with 10 other destinations: Australia, France, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, South Korea, Switzerland, Thailand and Vietnam. — AFP

Business

G20 pledges to do 'whatever it takes' to boost global economy

Leaders agree in principle on debt restructuring framework

BRUSSELS/BERLIN/WASHINGTON: Financial leaders from the Group of 20 major economies on Wednesday underscored the urgent need to bring the spread of the coronavirus pandemic under control, and vowed to "do whatever it takes" to support the global economy and financial stability.

In a lengthy communique, G20 finance ministers and central bank governors also agreed in principle for the first time on a "Common Framework" to deal on a case-by-case basis with the rising number of low-income countries facing debt distress. The Paris Club of official creditors also backs the framework.

The move marks a significant step forward for China, which has become a major creditor to poor countries in recent years but had balked at the prospect of writing off any debts, according to sources familiar with the G20 deliberations. G20 officials also agreed - as expected - to extend by six months the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) that freezes official bilateral debt payments until year-end, and said they would consider another six-month extension in April.

"The common framework is a historic achievement and a major breakthrough in the international debt agenda," Mohammed Al-Jadaan, finance minister of current G20 chair

Saudi Arabia, told an online news conference during the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. "It facilitates timely and orderly debt treatment for DSSI-eligible countries, with participation of broad creditors, including the private sector," he said.

US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin urged G20 members to quickly endorse the framework, saying it would ease "debt write-downs when needed, help promote debt sustainability, and support policy reforms" in low-income countries with high debt burdens. Mnuchin, in a statement to the IMF's steering committee, also urged countries not to withdraw fiscal and monetary policy measures prematurely given remaining uncertainty about the path of the pandemic and its economic fallout.

Fresh economic forecasts reveal a troubling divergence between advanced economies, which are starting to recover from the pandemic and widespread lockdowns, and developing countries and emerging market economies, which face more dire straits and the growing risk of defaulting on their debts. The new debt restructuring framework will be finalized at an extraordinary meeting before a G20 leaders' summit next month, according to the communique issued after a virtual meeting. An earlier



WASHINGTON: Financial leaders from the Group of 20 major economies in this file photo. — Reuters

draft had the ministers adopting the framework, but officials were unable to reach agreement on that step this week. Officials again expressed disappointment about the continued absence of private-sector participation in the moratorium, and urged commercial lenders to join in when asked by countries.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said only three eligible countries had even

reached out to private creditors out of fear of marring their ability to borrow in the future.

She lauded China's involvement, which has been criticized for not including the state-owned China Development Bank in its treatment of the DSSI request, and said Beijing had now acknowledged it needed to "mature domestically" in how it handled coordination of its own lenders. — Reuters

How to hold the world's largest book fair in a pandemic

FRANKFURT: The Frankfurt book fair, the world's largest, is going ahead this week even after a spike in coronavirus infections turned the German city into a high-risk area. With authors signing books behind plexiglass, audiences wearing masks and industry events moved online, this year's edition is unlike any other.

The rapidly worsening outbreak, in a country that has so far coped relatively well with the pandemic, forced organizers to rewrite their plans several times. Just 48 hours before Wednesday's kickoff, fair director Juergen Boos and his team decided to ban audiences from attending readings and interviews in a concert hall that had been due to host 450 people at a time. "We had to react right away," Boos told AFP, after Frankfurt was colored red on the coronavirus map. It was a huge blow to a fair that last year drew 300,000 visitors and has already been drastically scaled back.

The on-stage author talks at the now eerily empty Festhalle arena are still taking place however and are being live-streamed. Also empty is the adjacent conference center, normally a hive of activity where booklovers could rub shoulders with top publishing executives and writers like Dan Brown and Cecelia Ahern.



FRANKFURT: An employee of the Frankfurt Book fair works on book shelves prior the opening press conference of the 2020 Frankfurt Book fair. — AFP

'Safe'

With many international visitors unable or unwilling to fly in because of the virus this year, organisers have built digital platforms for publishers and agents to discuss trends, sniff out the next bestsellers and haggle over translation rights. Literary happenings and political talks have also shifted online and can be followed by anyone with an internet connection.

But there are still ways to experience the "Buchmesse" in person. Hotels, museums, bars and bookshops across Frankfurt are hosting dozens of readings and discussions until Sunday to bring the fair to life, welcoming audiences of up to 50 people. Guests have to mask up, follow social distancing guidelines and share their contact details so they can be notified if someone at the event later tests positive. — AFP

SUVs targeted in new French 'weight tax'

PARIS: France will impose a new weight tax on heavy cars and sport utility vehicles as part of a plan to get automakers to reduce CO2 emissions, Environment Minister Barbara Pompili said yesterday.

"The weight tax that we're creating sends a strong and necessary message to take into account the environmental impact of the heaviest vehicles," Pompili said on Twitter. "The heavier cars get, the more materials and energy they consume, with more pollution," she said, adding that bigger cars also took up a disproportionate share of public space. Her office said that the tax, part of the 2021 budget, would apply to vehicles weighing more than 1,800 kilograms (4,000 pounds), at a rate of 10 euros for every additional kilogram. It will not apply to electric cars.

The move might not be enough for critics, since the largest SUVs make up only a small fraction of the French market, where the average car weighs around 1,200 kilos. The best-selling SUVs from Peugeot or Renault, for example, also weigh well

below 1,800 kilos. Only German models from BMW or Audi, which have seen only a few thousand sales in France so far this year according to the CCFA industry group, would be impacted, as well as some large luxury sedans.

France already levies high taxes on gas-guzzling vehicles that produce large amounts of carbon emissions, with the maximum amount increased earlier this year to 20,000 euros (\$23,400). A weight tax was among the 150 proposals generated from the "Citizens' Convention on Climate" set up by President Emmanuel Macron, who has promised bold action on tackling climate change. The convention had pushed for a tax on cars weighing 1,400 kilograms or more, "but this still is a step in the right direction," said Gregoire Fraty, one of the participants. SUVs, which have soared in popularity in recent years, have come under heavy fire from climate change activists.

The WWF reported this month that they had become the second-biggest source for the increase of greenhouse gas emissions in France between 2008 and 2018, second only to the airline industry. "The 4.3 million sold in France in that decade have the same carbon footprint as 25 million electric compact cars," it said. French officials blame heavier cars for the slowdown in progress on cutting emissions since 2016. — AFP.

Business

Using AI, Canadian city predicts who might become homeless

System could offer insights for other regions grappling with homelessness

TORONTO: As makeshift tent cities spring up across Canada to house rough sleepers who fear using shelters due to COVID-19, one city is leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to predict which residents risk becoming homeless. Computer programmers working for the city of London, Ontario, 170km southwest of the provincial capital Toronto, say the new system is the first of its kind anywhere - and it could offer insights for other regions grappling with homelessness.

"Shelters are just packed to the brim across the country right now," said Jonathan Rivard, London's Homeless Prevention Manager, who works on the AI system. "We need to do a better job of providing resources to individuals before they hit rock bottom, not once they do," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Canada is seeing a second wave of coronavirus cases, with Ontario's government warning the province could experience "worst-case scenarios seen in northern Italy and New York City" if trends continue.

Homeless people are particularly at risk of being infected and infecting others during the pandemic, due to weakened immune systems and poor access to shelter and sanitation, health experts say. Launched in August, the AI system analyzes the personal data of participants to calculate who faces having nowhere to sleep for an extended period, said Matt Ross, an information

technology (IT) expert with the city who helped build the program. As a test the system, called the Chronic Homelessness Artificial Intelligence model (CHAI), tracked a group of individuals for six months before its formal launch in August.

Over that period, CHAI saw a 93 percent success rate in predicting when someone would become chronically homeless, Ross noted, adding it is now meeting or exceeding that rate.

By using the system to anticipate who is likely to become chronically homeless, the city can prioritize how it works with those individuals to try and get them into safe housing or get them access to health services they might need, Rivard said.

'Mass homelessness'

Chronic homelessness refers to someone who has been staying in a shelter for 180 days or more in a year, Rivard explained. Those individuals use 12 times more resources than people who are occasionally homeless, he said, so addressing their situation can save time and money in the long run.

City staff are currently working with local shelters, community groups and homeless people on how best to use the new AI data, Rivard added. Annually, more than 230,000 people experience homelessness in Canada - "about 35,000 on any given night," said Tim Richter,



A general view of the site as the BC Supreme Court has granted an injunction to clear an encampment at a parking lot belonging to the Port of Vancouver, adjacent to CRAB Park, which began shortly after May 8 when the homeless camp in Oppenheimer Park was closed, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. —Reuters

president of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, an advocacy group.

Richter blames government cuts to affordable housing and other programs in the late 1980s and early 1990s for what he calls the "explosive growth" of "modern mass homelessness" over the past 30 years.

When city officials first suggested using a

computer program to predict chronic homelessness, it "raised some red flags" related to privacy, said Peter Rozeluk of Mission Services of London, a nonprofit that runs homeless shelters. "I suppose whenever anyone uses the term 'AI', it can seem dystopian, simply because of how the media and Hollywood has depicted artificial intelligence," Rozeluk said. —Reuters

News in brief

Marston's axes 2,150 jobs

LONDON: British pub chain Marston's yesterday said it will axe about 2,150 jobs after the government imposed stricter rules on the opening of venues owing to the coronavirus pandemic. The affected staff are currently on the UK government's furlough scheme that is paying the bulk of wages for millions of workers but which is being watered down from November. Marston's employs some 14,000 people across 1,400 pubs, restaurants and hotels in the UK. "Inevitably, and regrettably, recent restrictions will impact jobs," the group said in a statement. The government has ordered a majority of pubs currently allowed to remain open to shut each night by 10:00 pm. — AFP

Ryanair slashes winter flights

LONDON: Ryanair said yesterday that it will slash more flights this winter and temporarily shut bases in Cork and Shannon in Ireland, and Toulouse in France, due to coronavirus travel restrictions. The Irish no-frills airline said it will slash its November-March capacity from 60 percent to 40 percent of the prior year, having already announced in September that it was cutting October flights to the same level. The carrier's remaining routes will see fewer flights than normal over winter. Global air travel demand, which was decimated by the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, is now reeling once again from rebounding virus infections and renewed global moves to try and stop the spread of the deadly disease. — AFP

Brexit talks' fate hangs in balance at EU summit

BRUSSELS: European leaders were scheduled to meet to re-examine the post-Brexit talks yesterday under pressure from Prime Minister Boris Johnson to give ground or see Britain walk away with no trade deal. The 27 leaders have tried to keep Brexit off the agenda at their recent summits, trusting in EU negotiator Michel Barnier to defend their interests as the former partners hammer out a new relationship. But Johnson has warned that he could walk away from the negotiations unless the results of the latest two-day Brussels' summit point the way to a breakthrough. EU officials do not recognize his deadline, and insist they remain behind Barnier and united in their demands. But they still believe a way can be found in the coming weeks to reach an agreement on fair competition rules and fishing quotas that both sides can accept. During a cross-Channel call on the eve of the crunch talks, EU chief Ursula von der Leyen warned that there was "still a lot of work ahead of us" adding that Brussels wants a deal but "not at any price." "Conditions must be right, on fisheries, level-playing field and governance," she warned.

'Progress still not sufficient'

A Downing Street spokesman said that during the call Johnson, talking to von der Leyen and EU summit host Charles Michel, had "expressed his disappointment that more progress had not been made over the past two weeks." "The Prime Minister said that he looked forward to hearing the outcome of the European Council and would reflect before setting out the UK's next steps," the spokesman said. The British side has accused Brussels of try-

ing to force concessions by running down the clock, with the window narrowing on chances to agree and ratify a deal before the UK leaves the EU single market on December 31. UK negotiators want Barnier's team to produce draft legal texts to serve as the basis of the next rounds of talks, but EU officials say the sides are still not close enough on the remaining tough issues. European diplomats say Brussels is still hoping for a deal, but is looking for a sign from Johnson that he is serious about compromise on the EU priorities. "We need to lower the landing gear. We're approaching the runway. Is he thinking about landing or is he still at 10,000 meters?" one asked. According to draft summit conclusions seen by AFP, but likely to evolve before the end of the summit, the EU will express concern "that progress on key issues of interest to the Union is still not sufficient for an agreement to be reached."

They will invite Barnier to "intensify negotiations" to strike and implement a trade deal before January 1. Diplomats said there had been some movement from Britain, but not enough to warrant locking the negotiators into a so-called "diplomatic tunnel" to force the talks over the finish line. Some member states are pushing for the sides to agree on a "toolbox" of retaliatory measures that Brussels could take if it feels that Britain has broken its word on maintaining a level playing field in cross-Channel business. Britain left the European Union on January 31, but Barnier and UK negotiator David Frost have been locked in inconclusive talks on a follow-on arrangement for cross-Channel business. If no deal is reached, trade rules will revert to the bare bones of World Trade Organization regulations.

Fair competition

Both sides insist they are ready for this-and would prefer it to having to accept a deal that oversteps their red lines-but experts forecast severe economic disruption. Europe's three main concerns are agreeing on the rules of fair competition, agreeing how these rules will be policed and securing access to UK waters for EU fishing fleets. Britain wants to reassert sovereignty over its waters and refuse EU legal oversight over the deal-insisting it wants a simple trade deal of the kind the EU signed with Canada. —AFP

Business

Beefed up China scrutiny raises investment risk of 'Beast' Ant

Regulator sharpens focus on banks using Ant for consumer loans

BEIJING/HONG KONG: As Ant Group was working in August towards its giant IPO, at least two smaller Chinese banks with existing ties to the fintech firm decided to stop sourcing new consumer loans from it, people with knowledge of the matter said. Their moves came after regulators scrutinized banks that used Ant's technology platform excessively for underwriting consumer loans at a time when concerns about defaults and lenders' asset quality grew in a pandemic-hit economy, said the people.

The sharper regulatory focus over Ant's cash cow and rapidly growing consumer lending business to curb financial sector risk has emerged as a key concern for potential investors ahead of its likely \$35 billion float, the world's largest. For its lending business, Ant originates demand from retail consumers and small businesses and passes that on to about 100 banks for underwriting, earning fees from the lenders and putting its own balance sheet at minimum risk.

Ant's consumer lending balance was 1.7 trillion yuan (\$254 billion) as of end-June this year, or 21 percent of all short-term consumer loans issued by Chinese deposit-taking financial institutions. "The 'catch me if you can' type of game between regulators and Ant will always be there," said Dong Ximiao, chief analyst at the Zhongguancun Internet Finance Institute, a think tank backed by Beijing's Haidian district government. "But the trend of tight regulations won't go

backwards for sure," Dong said. "Regulators are now well aware of how harmful it would be to set free a beast like Ant."

With its unique business model and the absence of peers in China and elsewhere, analysts say Ant has mainly thrived as a technology platform away from banking sector's regulations despite its bouquet of financial offerings. Even in the run up to the IPO the company tried to burnish its tech credentials - it changed its name to Ant Group from Ant Financial - and is pushing brokerages to get tech analysts to cover the firm, two separate sources said.

However, regulators are becoming increasingly worried about banks' inadequate risk controls on the consumer loans business and their excessive reliance on external tech platforms such as Ant to tap customers. This year, regulators and the top court have unveiled new rules, including putting a cap on interest rates that tech platforms can charge for their own lending, to standardize practices and protect bank balance sheets.

Regulatory warning

The decision of two smaller banks to stop bringing in new consumer loan business via Ant came after the PBOC kicked off a survey in July to investigate the bad loan ratio of banks' such co-lending business, said the people. The people, who received the PBOC guidance and have



Alipay logo is pictured at the Shanghai office of Alipay, owned by Ant Group which is an affiliate of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba, following the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Shanghai. — Reuters

direct knowledge of the banks' actions, declined to be named and didn't want the lenders' names to be mentioned as they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Ant, an affiliate of e-commerce giant Alibaba, said the information about the action taken by the two smaller banks was "unsubstantiated" and that in the past two months the company had tied up with more banking partners.

"Our partner banks manage risk independently and together, we have been facilitating consumer loans with risk management perform-

ance and achieved the delinquency rate as low as 2.15 percent as of July 31, 2020, much lower than industry average," it said.

PBOC did not respond to Reuters request for comment. Starting as a payments processor in 2004, Ant built an empire by offering its users short-term loans that are credited within minutes and selling insurance and investment products.

Ant is targeting a valuation of about \$250 billion or more in its IPO, similar to the market cap of Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, the No 1 bank by assets globally. — Reuters

HK budget carrier joins 'flights to nowhere' trend

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's budget carrier HK Express joined airlines offering "flight to nowhere" yesterday with an inaugural journey filled with media and influencers, sparking criticism from environmentalists.

The low-cost airliner, now wholly-owned by Cathay Pacific, has been grounded for months because of the coronavirus pandemic. A preview flight carrying around 110 passengers took off on Thursday afternoon, circled Hong Kong and returned 90 minutes later.

With the aviation industry in deep crisis, several carriers-including in Australia, Japan and Taiwan-have been offering short flights that start and end at the same airport to raise cash. But the carrier described the flight as a refresher for when travel restarts in earnest. "You can see this as a warm-up exercise for passengers to get ready for the new normal," Iris Ho, public relations officer at HK Express told AFP.

"Passengers have not been flying for so long, and we want to educate them with our preventive measures and new arrangements on board." HK Express said it would offer three "nowhere" flights in November at a price of HK\$388 (US\$ 50) — considerably cheaper than similar sightseeing flights by other airlines. Tickets have already sold out.



HONG KONG: Staff members from budget carrier HK Express take part in a preview "Flycation" flight around Hong Kong yesterday during an inaugural "flight to nowhere" journey filled with media and staff, sparking criticism from environmentalists. — AFP

Passengers will be seated apart to employ social distancing. No food will be provided and all magazines are taken away. The airliner did not reveal how much carbon footprint each trip by the Airbus 320 left behind. But according to Cathay Pacific calculation, an equivalent 90-minute flight from Hong Kong to Taiwan's Kaohsiung emits some 0.06 tons of CO2.

Tom Ng, a campaigner from Greenpeace Hong Kong, criticized nowhere flights as "an unnecessary campaign that only does harm to the environment". "These flights serve no actual purpose but only wasting energy. They run in the opposite direction of environmental protection," Ng said, calling for the airliner to call off the future flights. Singapore Airlines ditched a similar idea after outcry over the environmental impact. — AFP

Unemployment rate ticks up in Australia

SYDNEY: Australia's unemployment rate rose slightly to 6.9 percent in September, as the coronavirus kept the brakes on hopes of a speedy economic recovery. The country's statistical agency said Thursday that unemployment grew 0.1 percent from 6.8 percent in August, with around 20,000 more people leaving the workforce entirely. Australia—with a population of 25 million—is experiencing its first recession in almost 30 years. The latest unemployment figures were slightly better than forecasts of 7 percent, but underlying figures suggest enduring economic pain.

The number of hours worked fell most notably in Victoria state, where the country's second-biggest city Melbourne remains under a months-long virus lockdown. Almost one million Australians have lost their jobs and many more have been forced to take pay cuts or seen hours slashed. The government and central bank have embarked on a vast stimulus spending program to avert a full-blown depression, putting the country on track to post a record budget deficit of Aus\$213.7 billion (\$152.7 billion) this year.

Last week, the government announced billions in tax cuts, with plans to bring forward reductions in income tax, offer new breaks to businesses and subsidize jobs for young workers. By 2024, overall gross debt is predicted to rise to over one trillion Australian dollars, or around half of the country's GDP, versus roughly a quarter in this year. In further measures aimed at supporting the coronavirus-buffed economy, the Reserve Bank of Australia has signalled it could cut record low interest rates of 0.25 percent even further when it next meets in early November. — AFP

Sports

Japan's Dentsu funded campaign for Tokyo games despite Olympics contract

TOKYO/NEW YORK: Dentsu Inc donated more than \$6 million to Tokyo's successful campaign to host the 2020 Olympics, according to bank records seen by Reuters, and it lobbied members of the International Olympic Committee on behalf of the city, according to three people involved in the lobbying. The activities created a potential conflict of interest for the Japanese advertising company, which had a separate contract with the IOC to market the games.

To assist in its effort, Dentsu endorsed the hiring of a Singaporean consultant by the Tokyo Olympic campaign. The company's role is laid out in transcripts of interviews company executives gave to investigators appointed by the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) to examine whether there had been any wrongdoing in the course of Tokyo's campaign. French prosecutors investigating corruption in global sports suspect that consultant, Tan Tong Han, played a role in bribing Olympic voters for Tokyo in 2013, according to two people familiar with the French probe. Tan did not respond to requests for comment from Reuters.

Until now Dentsu Inc, part of Dentsu Group Inc, has played down its involvement with the Tokyo campaign. In answer to questions from Reuters, the company said its employees only provided advice, when asked, on "several experts and consultants in the sports field," including Tan. But in the months leading up to the IOC vote to award the Olympics in 2013, Dentsu played a much more active role, according to the three people involved in lobbying and campaign bank records, even as it maintained its longstanding business relationship with the IOC. That placed it on both sides of a competitive bid, a possible conflict under IOC guidelines.

Article 10 of the IOC's rules of conduct for cities vying to host the games states that its top tier of ad-

vertisers and marketing partners "shall refrain from supporting or promoting any of the cities" in order to "preserve the integrity and neutrality" of the bidding process.

The IOC told Reuters last month that Dentsu was not a marketing partner between 2011 and 2013, when Tokyo was bidding to host the 2020 Olympics and therefore not subject to that rule. However, Kiyoshi Nakamura, a senior Dentsu executive, told JOC investigators in 2016 that his company was an IOC marketing partner at the time of the bid, according to the transcript of his interview seen by Reuters. The IOC did not respond to questions from Reuters on whether its ethics commission, the body which would make a ruling on any conflict of interest, looked at Dentsu's activities during Tokyo's 2020 bid. Nakamura told Japanese investigators that the IOC had what he called an "adult understanding" of Dentsu's role in working directly with the Tokyo campaign. "They (the IOC) told us not to do it publicly," Nakamura told investigators, according to the transcript of his 2016 interview seen by Reuters and not previously reported. He did not specify who at the IOC told the Tokyo campaign that.

In 2013, Dentsu transferred \$6.2 million into the Tokyo campaign's sponsorship account, according to bank records seen by Reuters. The previously undisclosed contribution was more than 10 percent of the total that bid sponsors provided.

In a statement to Reuters, Dentsu confirmed the payment, but declined to specify the amount. "We provided a donation in response to a request for support from the bid committee, after an adequate internal corporate process," Dentsu said in a statement. It did not say how the money was used.

Dentsu said its staff had provided "advice and information to the bid committee" when requested but

had no official consulting role. The company said its activities during Tokyo's campaign adhered to the IOC's rules of conduct and, to its understanding, did not infringe on the rule that prohibited IOC sponsors and marketing partners from supporting or promoting any candidate cities involved in an Olympic bid. The IOC told Reuters that Dentsu had been "contracted by the IOC to deliver services which were not linked to the candidature of any city." Winning the Olympics for Tokyo was one of Shinzo Abe's signature accomplishments as prime minister. The Tokyo Olympics, originally scheduled to take place this summer, has been delayed to 2021 because of the pandemic. Yoshihide Suga, who succeeded Abe last month, has said he would do "whatever it takes" to host the event next year.

The question of whether bribes were paid to secure the Tokyo games remains a focus for French investigators, who are scrutinizing Dentsu's role, according to a person with knowledge of the probe. Emmanuelle Fraysse, secretary general of France's National Financial Prosecutor's Office, declined to comment on an ongoing investigation. Dentsu said it had not been contacted by French prosecutors.

The IOC declined to comment on whether bribes were paid in relation to Tokyo's 2020 Olympic campaign. It said it was co-operating with the French investigation. Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary, Katsunobu Kato, said on Thursday the government could not answer questions about the Tokyo Olympic campaign's activities.

'This guy is very good'

Dentsu stood to benefit from an Olympics on its own turf. It played a central role in planning and promoting the Tokyo games and has raised a record \$3 billion-plus in corporate sponsorship for the event,

according to the IOC, putting it in a position to collect large commissions on the amounts paid by sponsors. The investigators hired by the JOC to look into whether any corruption took place in the Tokyo bid found no wrongdoing in a final report made public on Sept 1, 2016. The records from the JOC probe, including the transcript of interviews, were never given to French prosecutors, people with knowledge of that probe said. The JOC told Reuters that it was not able to share materials from the investigation with French investigators.

Former JOC chief Tsunekazu Takeda was put under 'formal investigation' by French prosecutors, a French judicial source told Reuters last year, because he signed off on hiring Tan, the Singaporean consultant. Takeda stepped down from both the IOC and the JOC last year. Takeda's lawyer, Stephane Bonifassi, said Takeda denied any wrongdoing.

Nakamura, who ran Dentsu's sports business at the time of the campaign, told JOC investigators that Dentsu "knew the most" about IOC members and wanted to assist the Japanese cause. Dentsu oversaw the lobbying of some IOC members for their votes, three former Tokyo bid lobbyists told Reuters, focusing on IOC members affiliated with swimming and track and field federations for which Dentsu already provided marketing services.

One of the lobbyists, Haruyuki Takahashi, who was formerly Nakamura's boss at Dentsu and himself a member of Tokyo's campaign, told Reuters that Nakamura was in charge of securing the support of Uruguay's Julio Cesar Maglione, an IOC member and the head of the international swimming federation, and Ukrainian former pole vaulter Sergey Bubka, a senior vice president at the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), the global governing body for track and field. —Reuters

Committee mulls improving Kuwait women's sports



By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Chairwomen of the women sports committee at the Kuwait Olympic Committee Fatima Hayat discussed means of developing women's sports during a meeting with the heads of three women's sports clubs in Kuwait. All parties decided to allocate more focus on age groups in order to prepare a promising generation of young athletes who can compete at the international level.



Hayat and committee member Sheikha Bibi Al-Salem Al-Sabah had visited the Qurain, Arabi and Qadisiya clubs, where they met officials to discuss the needs to improve women's sports, as well as obstacles facing female athletes.

Qadisiya's Secretary Hassan Abu Alaskan said several topics were discussed during the meeting with the aim of improving women's sports. He hoped the Public Authority for Sport would increase the financial allocation for clubs to enable them to spend



on games, particularly those for women athletes. Furthermore, he said Qadisiya club will study launching other women sports besides indoor football in coordination with concerned federations.

In the meantime, Arabi's Secretary General Fouad Almazidi appreciated the women sports committee's efforts, adding that Arabi club has already started handball, basketball, volleyball, table tennis, and indoor football training for female athletes two months ago.

Sports

Maguire off on bad night for England in Nations League

Mbappe gets France winner, Ronaldo-less Portugal wins

PARIS: England's prospects of returning to the finals of the Nations League suffered a big hit as Gareth Southgate's side lost 1-0 at home to Denmark on Wednesday, while Kylian Mbappe gave World Cup holders France a 2-1 victory in Croatia and Portugal won without Cristiano Ronaldo. Harry Maguire was sent off for England in the first half at Wembley for two clumsy yellow cards, and Christian Eriksen then converted a 35th-minute penalty on the occasion of his 100th cap to put the Danes ahead.

They held on to inflict a first home defeat on England in two years, with the hosts also having young Chelsea full-back Reece James sent off for dissent after the final whistle.

"He is a top player, he is a massive part of what we do," Southgate said in defense of Maguire, who has struggled for Manchester United since his involvement in a brawl on the Greek island of Mykonos in August. "He is having a period where is having a lot of stick thrown his way and he is big enough to deal with that."

England got to the four-team finals of the inaugural Nations League last year but their chances of getting there again this time are very much in the balance with Belgium two points ahead of Southgate's team and the Danes atop League A, Group 2. Belgium won 2-1 in Iceland on Wednesday with Romelu Lukaku scoring twice. They host England in Brussels on November 15.

In Zagreb, Paris Saint-Germain star Mbappe missed an open goal early on but got the winner in the 79th minute as France beat Croatia 2-1 in their latest re-run of the 2018 World Cup final. Antoine Griezmann had put France ahead with

Nikola Vlasic equalizing in the second half for Croatia before around 7,000 fans. Les Bleus have still never lost to Croatia and are level with Portugal on 10 points at the top of League A, Group 3.

Doubles for Jota, Lewandowski

Portugal, winners of the inaugural Nations League, shrugged off the absence of Ronaldo because of a positive COVID-19 test as they beat Sweden 3-0 in Lisbon. Liverpool's Diogo Jota set up Bernardo Silva for the opener then scored two of his own, one either side of half-time. "This team will always be better with Cristiano, but they showed they can still compete," said Portugal coach Fernando Santos.

Meanwhile, the prolific Robert Lewandowski scored a brace as Poland beat Bosnia and Herzegovina 3-0 in Warsaw. Karol Linetty got the other goal and Poland are top of Group A, a point above Italy and two ahead of the Netherlands. The Dutch came from behind to draw 1-1 with Italy in Bergamo, with Donny van de Beek netting for Frank de Boer's side after Lorenzo Pellegrini put Italy ahead.

Scotland continue revival

Below the top tier, Scotland continued their tentative revival by beating the Czech Republic 1-0 at an empty Hampden thanks to an early goal by Newcastle United's Ryan Fraser. After edging Israel on penalties to reach the Euro qualifying play-off final, Scotland beat Slovakia 1-0 at the weekend.

They are now unbeaten in eight matches and are four points clear of the Czechs at the top of League B, Group 2, and five ahead of Israel who



LONDON: Denmark's goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel (R) dives to save a header from England's midfielder Mason Mount (L) during the UEFA Nations League group A2 football match between England and Denmark at Wembley stadium in north London on Wednesday. —AFP

came from 2-0 down to win 3-2 in Slovakia with a hat-trick from PSV Eindhoven's Eran Zahavi.

In Group 4, Wales won 1-0 in Bulgaria with a late Jonny Williams goal. They are unbeaten in eight competitive games, and Ryan Giggs' side are top with 10 points, a point ahead of Finland. Stephen Kenny is still waiting for his first win as Republic of Ireland manager after a 1-0 defeat in Finland left his side out of contention for top spot in that group.

Before 8,000 fans in Helsinki, Fredrik Jensen scored the only goal, as he did when the sides met last month in Dublin. Also in League B, Northern Ireland kept Erling Braut Haaland quiet enough but a second-half Stuart Dallas own goal gave Norway a 1-0 win in Oslo in Group 1. Turkey came from 2-0 down to draw 2-2 with Serbia in Group 3, which is topped by Russia who were held 0-0 by Hungary in Moscow. —AFP

Premier League clubs reject 'Project Big Picture'

MANCHESTER: Premier League clubs on Wednesday rejected plans put forward by Liverpool and Manchester United for radical changes to the league's structures and finances and said they would conduct their own review of the game. The 'Project Big Picture' proposals would have seen an increase in funds for the 72 clubs in the Football League (EFL) but also include special voting rights for the biggest clubs in the Premier League and a reduction of teams in the top flight from 20 to 18. The plan has been fronted by EFL chairman Rick Parry and would have included a 250 million-pound (\$325.85 million) bail-out for his clubs, who face acute financial issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But at a meeting on Wednesday of all 20 Premier League clubs, the plans were rejected with a separate, broader-based review by the entire league initiated and a more limited bail-out for lower division clubs. "All 20 Premier League clubs today unanimously agreed that Project Big Picture will not be endorsed or pursued by the Premier League, or The FA," the league said in a statement.

"Further, Premier League Shareholders agreed to work together as a 20-club collective on a strategic plan for the future structures and financing of English football, consulting with all stakeholders to ensure a vibrant, competitive and sustainable football pyramid." The process will include the FA, the UK government and the EFL, added the statement.

Rescue package

The Premier League also said it had agreed to offer a rescue package to League One and League Two (third and fourth tier) clubs. "This offer will consist of grants and interest-free loans totaling a further 50 million pounds on top of the £27.2 million solidarity payments already advanced to League One and League Two this year, making a total of 77.2 million pounds," the statement said. "Discussions will also continue with the EFL regarding Championship clubs' financial needs. This addresses Government concerns about lower league clubs' financial fragility."

The UK government's Culture Minister Oliver Dowden, who is responsible for sport, has been urging the wealthier clubs to help out the lower league teams and said the offer was a "good start." "I urge them to work together and stay focused on helping clubs through the crisis," he said.

Despite the huge attention focused on the proposals, which were leaked on Sunday, neither of the two American owners, Liverpool's John W Henry or Manchester United's Joel Glazer, took part in the online meeting, leaving their executives to represent them. Premier League CEO

Richard Masters said the meeting had been "candid, constructive, positive in the end."

Although FA chairman Greg Clarke said on Tuesday that the Project instigators had talked about a possible breakaway from the Premier League, Masters said he had heard no such threats. "I don't think anybody has been talking about breaking away. So I want to make that clear," he said.

Feelings have been running high among owners and officials from the Premier League's smaller clubs, some of whom believe the top teams tried to railroad them. "Whilst there has been a lot of things said and done, a lot of speculation over the last four days, I don't think it's irreparably damaged the Premier League," Masters said.

The EFL, whose clubs had been largely in support of Project Big Picture given the promise of increased funds including a 250 million-pound rescue fund said it would meet with all its 72 clubs on Thursday to discuss the new bail-out offer.

"As we have maintained across the past 72 hours, there is a significant issue facing the English footballing Pyramid and therefore it is encouraging that there is an acknowledgment that a review of the current status quo is required," the EFL said in a statement.

"The EFL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to any wider debate with colleagues across the game as we seek to finally address impossible economic pressures and deliver on the objective of having a sustainable EFL in the long-term." —Reuters

Sports

Astros stay alive, Dodgers' 11-run first-inning salvo routs Braves

LA sets new Major League Baseball playoff record

LOS ANGELES: The Houston Astros stayed alive by the slimmest of margins Wednesday while the Los Angeles Dodgers rewrote the Major League Baseball playoff record book with a 15-3 rout of Atlanta in the battles for a World Series berth.

The Astros, facing elimination at 3-0 down in the best-of-seven American League Championship Series in San Diego, held off the Tampa Bay 4-3 as the Rays missed their chance to return to the MLB championship showcase for the first time since 2008.

In Arlington, Texas, the Dodgers erupted for a record-setting 11 runs in the first inning on the way to a dominant victory over the Braves that trimmed the deficit in their National League Championship Series to 2-1. Max Muncy's grand slam was the Dodgers' third homer of the first inning, capping the highest-scoring inning in post-season history.

The Braves had been on the wrong side of the prior playoff record, surrendering 10 runs in an inning against the St. Louis Cardinals last year. The Dodgers, buoyed by a late surge that saw them come up just short in an 8-7 loss to the Braves on Tuesday, came out firing. "The big thing for us was to carry that over," Muncy said of the momentum built from scoring seven runs in the final three innings on Tuesday night. "We were able to do that."

Mookie Betts led off with an infield single on the first pitch from Atlanta starter Kyle Wright and Corey Seager belted a double off the next pitch to score Betts. Wright retired two batters

before Will Smith's double scored Seager.

Joc Pederson and Edwin Rios homered on back-to-back pitches, with Pederson's blast scoring three runs. Wright walked Chris Taylor before he was replaced by Grant Dayton — who surrendered a run-scoring single to Seager and loaded the bases to set the stage for Muncy's 435-foot blast to center.

'Not many things cooler'

"There's not too many things that are cooler than that," Muncy said of notching a post-season Grand Slam in his home state. "But the biggest thing for me is our team got a 'W' and got guys back on track." The three homers were a record for a first inning in a playoff game, equaling the most in any post-season inning.

The Dodgers weren't done. Bellinger led off the second inning with a homer, and Seager sparked an three-run third with a lead-off homer as Los Angeles raced into a 15-0 lead. The five home runs were a record for the first three innings of a playoff game during which all nine Dodgers batters recorded a hit — Seager had three.

For Atlanta, Cristian Pache pulled one back with a solo homer down the left field line in the bottom of the third and two consolation runs came in the ninth. The Dodgers expect to have ace pitcher Clayton Kershaw on the mound after missing game two with back spasms when they try to level the series on Thursday.

In San Diego, Houston's George Springer smacked a towering two-run shot to left field to



ARLINGTON: Max Muncy #13 of the Los Angeles Dodgers hits a grand slam home run against the Atlanta Braves during the first inning in Game Three of the National League Championship Series at Globe Life Field on Wednesday in Arlington, Texas. — AFP

break a 2-2 tie in the bottom of the fifth inning as the Astros cut the series deficit to 3-1. "I'm just happy that we won a game and we're on until tomorrow," said Springer, who said he knew his effort was a homer as it came off his bat. "I was able to hit a high fastball there," he said. "It's a tight line, so I'm happy that it stayed fair."

Jose Altuve hit his 18th career playoff home run in the first inning and added a run-scoring double in the third. Tampa Bay tied it in the fourth when rookie Randy Arozarena belted a 3-

1 curveball from Astros starting pitcher Zack Greinke over the leftfield wall for a two-run home run.

They were the only runs allowed by Greinke, who struck out seven in six innings for his first playoff win since 2015. The Rays still have history on their side. Only one Major League team — the Boston Red Sox against the New York Yankees in the 2004 ALCS — has recovered from a 3-0 deficit to win a best-of-seven playoff series in 38 prior attempts. — AFP

PSG-Man United clash to go ahead behind closed doors

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's Champions League opener against Manchester United next Tuesday will go ahead, but without spectators, despite the French government introducing a nighttime curfew in the capital, the country's sports ministry told AFP.

"Exemptions will be possible, with or without spectators depending on the time," the ministry said on Wednesday when asked about sporting events going ahead after President Emmanuel Macron earlier announced the curfew.

Residents in Paris and its surrounding Ile-de-France region, along with eight other French cities, will not be allowed to be outdoors between 9:00 pm (19:00 GMT) and 6:00 am (04:00 GMT) from tomorrow, for a duration of at least four weeks, except for essential reasons. The measures were announced in response to COVID-19 infection rates reaching record levels.

The curfew will therefore not stop the Champions League game at the Parc des Princes from going ahead, but will ensure that it does so behind closed doors. Recent sporting events in and around Paris have seen crowds of up to 1,000 permitted to attend. — AFP

Patriots pull Newton from COVID-19 list

NEW YORK: Cam Newton was removed from the NFL's COVID-19 reserve list on Wednesday by the New England Patriots and the star quarterback is on pace to play Sunday against Denver. The 31-year-old run-pass threat, the NFL's 2015 Most Valuable Player, has been on the COVID-19 inactive list since October 3, which caused him to miss the Patriots' 26-10 loss two nights later at reigning Super Bowl champion Kansas City.

Newton is likely to practice with the Patriots (2-2) on Thursday and could be back on the field when the Broncos (1-3) visit on Sunday in a game postponed from last Sunday after other multiple Patriots positive tests.

New England struggled offensively without Newton as Brian Hoyer and Jarrett Stidham combined to toss three interceptions and produce the Patriots' fewest points since December 2018. Newton has completed 62-of-91 passes for 714 yards and two touchdowns and run 35 times for 149 yards and four touchdowns. — AFP

MLS game delayed over suspected virus case

NEW YORK: Minnesota United's Major League Soccer match against the Chicago Fire was postponed on Wednesday due to a suspected COVID-19 positive among the Minnesota team delegation. The postponement was made to allow for more testing and evaluation, MLS said in a statement.

The delay to an unspecified date came only minutes before the teams were to have stepped onto the field for a clash of clubs battling for playoff spots. At 5-8 with four drawn, the visiting Fire sit ninth in the Eastern Conference on 19 points, one ahead of Atlanta United for the last playoff spot in the 14-team East.

Minnesota remained 6-5-5 for 23 points, the Loons holding down fifth in the Western Conference, one point behind Los Angeles FC for the last home berth in next month's opening round of the playoffs. The Loons also had a home match against Dallas postponed last weekend after multiple positive COVID-19 tests on the squad.

The Chicago-Minnesota contest wasn't the only one postponed on Wednesday. Colorado's planned match against Seattle on Wednesday had already been delayed after an outbreak that has seen five Colorado players and 12 staffers test positive. The Rapids have had six matches in all postponed, one of them twice, and aren't scheduled to play again until October 24 at Kansas City. They haven't played since winning 5-0 over San Jose on September 23. — AFP

Bad night for England in Nations League

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LONDON: England's defender Harry Maguire (R) is red-carded for a tackle on Denmark's striker Kasper Dolberg (C) during the UEFA Nations League group A2 football match between England and Denmark at Wembley stadium in north London on Wednesday. — AFP

