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# WHO gives nod to China vaccines, boosting drive

**Pfizer jab 100% effective on adolescents • Russia registers COVID vaccine for animals**



**RUSSIA:** This handout picture taken on Dec 9, 2020 shows specialists working on the development of a coronavirus vaccine for animals (Carnivak-Cov) at a laboratory of the federal center for animal health. — AFP

GENEVA: Two Chinese coronavirus jabs are safe and effective, WHO experts said yesterday after reviewing partial data, providing a potential boost to countries from Australia to Europe struggling to roll out vaccines fast enough. Fewer than 600 million jabs have been given out across the world, three months after vaccination programs began in earnest in Western countries and leaders hailed the drugs as the only safe way out of punishing lockdowns.

Vaccine specialists at the World Health Organization did not issue any advice on how to use China's jabs, saying they would wait until a decision had been taken on whether to grant them emergency licenses. The experts said the vaccines from Sinovac and Sinopharm "lacked data" for older age groups and people with medical conditions other than COVID.

Another vaccine maker, Pfizer-BioNTech, was pushing ahead with its plans to ramp up production and rollout - saying yesterday new data from the US showed its jab was 100 percent effective on 12 to 15-year-olds. The firm said it wanted to start vaccinating youngsters in the US before the start of the next school year. The US has already rolled out almost 150 million vaccine doses, far more than any other country. But it has also suffered more than 550,000 deaths, the highest death toll in the world. Globally, the virus has killed more than 2.8 million people since it

emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019.

Kuwait registered five deaths and 1,282 new positive cases of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours. Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said this takes the country's death toll to 1,313, while total cases swelled to 232,103. He added 1,330 more people recovered from the virus, taking total recoveries to 226,580. Sanad revealed 241 people are in intensive care units, while 14,210 others are receiving medical treatment. He pointed out that 9,175 swab tests were conducted in the past 24 hours, taking total tests to 3,056,468.

Large parts of Europe are battling high infection rates, with most of the continent still living under lockdowns or other restrictions. French President Emmanuel Macron, who has repeatedly vowed not to reintroduce a national lockdown, is under increasing pressure. In Paris, intensive care beds are running low and infection rates are approaching last year's peak, pushing medics to breaking point.

The cycle of restrictions and infections is not over in China either, where a city on the Myanmar border faces lockdown - the first such move in months. All residents in the city of Ruili will be tested for the virus and everyone will have to observe "home quarantine" for a week after six cases were detected, say officials.

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## Saudi plans fiscal overhaul with \$3.2tn investment

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia announced plans Tuesday to pump investments worth \$3.2 trillion into the national economy by 2030, roping in the oil-reliant kingdom's biggest companies in a major new economic diversification push. The announcement by de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman underscores an effort to jumpstart the domestic economy as the top crude exporter battles high youth unemployment and a coronavirus-triggered downturn.

"The total investment injected... into the national economy is expected to reach 12 trillion riyals (\$3.2 trillion) by 2030," Prince Mohammed said in a speech carried by state television. Twenty-four of the kingdom's biggest companies, including energy giant Aramco and petrochemical firm SABIC, will lead the investment drive by contributing five trillion riyals over the next decade, the crown prince told reporters later at a virtual briefing.

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## Biden picks first Muslim as federal judge

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden nominated several black women, an Asian American and the first Muslim ever to federal judgeships Tuesday in a push for diversity in the US court system. Breaking with predecessor Donald Trump's four-year effort to staff federal courts with largely white male conservatives, Biden unveiled his first 11 picks for judges, with only two of them men, neither of them white.

## Manousheh leaves tables in Lebanon

BEIRUT: Scattering spinach and hot chili onto fluffy flatbread in Lebanon's capital, 54-year-old Abu Shadi bemoans better times before the economic crisis when all Lebanese could afford his simple meals. The veteran baker is famed for his take on Lebanon's manousheh, a circle of freshly baked dough sprinkled with anything from thyme to meat, then folded in half and rolled in paper to go. But Lebanon's worse financial

crunch in decades has sent prices soaring, and Abu Shadi says many of his customers of three decades can no longer afford even this modest pastry. "Since I started working at this oven in 1987, it's been nothing but goodness and blessings. But today, all that has gone," he said.

On the phone, he warmly receives a stream of orders. He jokes with a customer as he waits for his breakfast, and from inside his shop waves at an acquaintance as they drive by in their car. Looking up from time to time from the flatbreads he heaps with filling, he greets the old and young as they walk by. He hums loudly, only pausing to compliment an elderly lady on her blonde hairstyle.

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**Zahid Quraishi**

Zahid Quraishi, 45, would become the first ever Muslim to serve as a federal district judge if approved by the Senate. Quraishi is of Pakistani ancestry and currently serves as a magistrate judge in New Jersey. "Judge Quraishi has defended and served our country with distinction in numerous roles - and will make history if confirmed as the first Muslim American federal judge," said New Jersey senator Cory Booker.

At the top of Biden's list was nominating Judge

Ketanji Brown Jackson, who is African-American, to the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, which is known to handle major cases. If confirmed by the Senate, Jackson, 50, would replace Merrick Garland - who is now Biden's attorney general - and be in a good position to become a candidate for the Supreme Court if a vacancy opens up. No black woman has yet served on the nine-justice high court.

"Ketanji Jackson Brown is one of the best judges in the nation. Brilliant and with deep values. That she is now joining our second highest court is fitting and awesome," tweeted Neal Katyal, a former acting US solicitor general at the Department of Justice. Biden nominated two other African-American women to federal appeals court vacancies.

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## Italy expels 2 Russians after spies caught

ROME: Italy expelled two Russian officials yesterday after an Italian navy captain was caught red-handed by police selling secret documents to the Russians. The Italian frigate captain was arrested on spying charges after officers tailing him saw him late Tuesday in Rome in a "clandestine meeting" with a Russian military officer, according to a police statement.

The two men met in a car park, according to media reports. Special operations police stopped them both but arrested only the navy officer, accusing him of passing on "confidential documents" in exchange for money.

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## Qatar steps up vaccinations as cases spike

AL WAKRAH, Qatar: Qatar is stepping up its coronavirus vaccination drive, officials said yesterday, with new daily cases almost quadrupling since January and prompting calls for a renewed lockdown. While the coun-

try's death toll per capita is low, almost 5 percent of deaths since the beginning of the pandemic were during the past week, with authorities blaming the more potent British strain.

Medical experts have called for a return to the strict summer lockdown that saw new daily cases plummet from 2,355 at the end of May to 235 by July 31. But Rashid Andaila, a manager at a vaccination point south of Doha, said the vaccine drive was gathering steam, with a second

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**BEIRUT:** Abu Shadi cuts a freshly baked garnished flatbread before serving it to a customer in his bakery in the Ras Beirut area of the capital on March 27, 2021. — AFP



**AL WAKRAH, Qatar:** A health worker inoculates a man against the coronavirus at a drive-through vaccination center yesterday. — AFP



## Local

# Amir receives letter from Saudi King on historic ties

## Sheikh Nawaf hosts state officials at Bayan Palace



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah reads a letter from King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, during his meeting with Saudi State Minister and Cabinet Member Prince Turki bin Mohammad bin Fahad bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. — Amiri Diwan and KUNA photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Saudi State Minister and Cabinet Member Prince Turki bin Mohammad bin Fahad bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace yesterday. His Highness the Amir also received Saudi Arabia's State Minister and Cabinet Member Prince Turki bin Mohammad bin Fahad bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, who handed him a letter from King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia. The letter maintained the significance of boosting brotherly and historic bilateral relations, as well as issues of mutual significance and recent developments on the regional and global spectrums. His Highness the Amir, in turn, extended his greetings to Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz.

His Highness the Amir also separately received Kuwait's National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah and Directorate General of Civil Aviation's former head Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah.

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah also received Saudi Arabia's State Minister and Cabinet Member Prince Turki bin Mohammad bin Fahad bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, who echoed a message from King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia. The message underlined the significance of boosting brotherly and historic bilateral relations, as well as issues of mutual

significance and recent developments on the regional and global spectrums. His Highness the Crown Prince also separately received Speaker Ghanem, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali and Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem.

Also yesterday, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received Saudi Arabia's State Minister and Cabinet Member Prince Turki bin Mohammad bin Fahad bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud at Bayan Palace. The encounter was also attended by Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, Deputy Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah and Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Kuwait Prince Sultan bin Saad Al-Saud. — KUNA



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets Saudi State Minister and Cabinet Member Prince Turki bin Mohammad bin Fahad bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

## WHO gives nod to China vaccines...

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Australia, largely free of COVID infections, still faces a huge challenge to get jabs into arms, especially since some countries have started blocking exports to what they regard as a low-risk region. So far, just 670,000 doses have been administered, well below initial plans to vaccinate four million people by the end of March.

Even further behind is war-torn Yemen, which accepted its first delivery of jabs yesterday. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said it had seen a "dramatic influx" of critically ill COVID-19 patients in Aden and other parts of Yemen. With

the rest of the world scrambling to catch up with the US, the positive signals from the WHO on the Chinese jabs could be crucial. However, WHO experts pointed out that neither had yet received authorization by what the UN agency considered "a stringent regulatory authority".

Russia announced yesterday it had registered what it said was the world's first coronavirus vaccine for animals, describing the step as important to disrupting mutations. The agriculture oversight agency Rosselkhozadzor said the vaccine called Carnivak-Cov had been tested beginning October on dogs, cats, mink, foxes and other animals and was proven to be effective. "All test animals that were vaccinated developed antibodies to coronavirus in 100 percent of cases," said Konstantin Savenkov, deputy head of Rosselkhozadzor. "It is the world's first and only product for preventing COVID-19 in animals," he said. — AFP

trillion riyals will come from a new "national investment strategy", which will soon be announced, Prince Mohammed said.

The initiative will help boost economic growth, create hundreds of thousands of new jobs and strengthen the private sector, he added. The program is part of a mammoth 27 trillion-riyal (\$7 trillion) investment plan over the next decade, which will include huge government spending to spur the domestic economy, the prince said. It is designed to "promote the development and diversification of the national economy", the state-run SPA news agency said, adding that it will "strengthen cooperation between public and private sectors". — AFP

Qatar reported 780 new infections yesterday as well as two deaths, bringing the total COVID-19 death toll in the country to 291, while active cases reached 571 per 100,000. Nearly one in five of yesterday's new cases were among residents and citizens returning from abroad, official statistics showed.

And despite the accelerating vaccine drive, some officials have called for a renewed lockdown. "A full lockdown, like we had during last summer when roads were empty and people worked at home, is the best way to stem the virus' spread," Ahmed Al-Mohammed, chair of Qatar's intensive care service, told state television this week.

The number of coronavirus patients in intensive care has more than doubled since March, he added, with 338 people in ICU beds as well as a further 1,668 patients receiving acute care. — AFP

## Biden picks first Muslim as...

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Among those chosen for federal district courts, two more were African Americans (one of them male), two were Asian Americans, one was of Hispanic origin and two were white women. The nominations as a whole "represent the broad diversity of background, experience, and perspective that makes our nation strong," Biden said in a statement.

## Manousheh leaves tables...

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But nowadays, Abu Shadi turns down the heat in his oven once he has baked enough manaeesh (plural form of manousheh) to save on gas. Long gone are the days when he fired up the oven at 8:00 am, and did not turn it off till 3:00 pm. "The manousheh is both a father and mother to the Lebanese people. It's food for the rich and the poor," he said. "Sadly at the moment, the poor can no longer afford to eat it," he said.

Tens of thousands have lost their jobs or a huge part of their income in the financial crunch, which has caused the Lebanese currency to lose more than 85

The group is also diverse in its origins, including nominees with experience as public defenders, who provide free legal counsel to people who cannot afford it but face civil or criminal charges. Under the US Constitution, the president nominates people to serve on the Supreme Court and other federal courts for life, and the Senate votes on whether to confirm them.

Trump managed to win the appointment of more than 200 conservative judges during his term, working closely with then-Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell on an issue that has been dear to US conservatives for decades. This includes three Supreme Court justices named by Trump. — AFP

percent of its value. A manousheh "used to cost between 1,000 to 1,500 pounds (\$0.66 to \$1), but now it's 5,000." The new price is less than \$0.50 at the black market rate for a lucky few with access to dollars, but most Lebanese earn wages in the local currency - and see that as up to five times the normal price.

The baker says that for three decades, customers have streamed in at weekends, ordering up to seven or eight manaeesh to take away for a traditional family breakfast. But over the past few months, those customers have stopped coming altogether. "Manaeesh are now only for the well off," he said. "Whoever earns 30,000 or 40,000 pounds a day is not going to spend 5,000 on a thyme manousheh. They have other expenses." But Abu Shadi has been forced to raise his prices to cover the increasing cost of supplies, from flour and cheese to the paper he wraps the manousheh in. — AFP

sources, named the navy officer as Walter Biot, and said he worked in the military policy unit within the office of the Chief of the Defense Staff. That unit handled "all confidential and classified documents", including NATO dossiers, the Corriere della Sera newspaper said. It also reported that Biot received €5,000 (\$5,860) in cash from his Russian contact.

A NATO official referred queries to Italian authorities, saying: "We don't comment on intelligence issues." The navy captain took pictures of secret documents on his computer screen and passed the files onto a pen drive which police confiscated, according to the AGI news agency. In London, Britain's Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab expressed "solidarity" with Italy and condemned "Russia's malign and destabilizing activity that is designed to undermine our NATO ally".

Police said the suspected spy was discovered after long investigations led by Italy's domestic intelligence agency AISI, with support from the Chief of the Defence Staff. — AFP

## Saudi plans fiscal overhaul with...

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He said the companies, many of them listed, had agreed to lower their dividends and redirect the money into the domestic economy in exchange for incentives such as subsidies. The Public Investment Fund (PIF), the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund, will provide three trillion riyals. And the remaining four

## Qatar steps up vaccinations...

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drive-through clinic opened on Sunday for second doses. "Our capability is 5,000 at each site," he said. "This stage of the vaccine (program) is getting bigger and bigger."

Over 25,000 vaccine jabs were administered on Tuesday, bringing the total to 816,484 doses, according to official data. Qatar has a mostly expatriate population of 2.75 million. "We are expecting more people will come," Andaila said, as dozens of cars and trucks queued with the Al-Janoub World Cup stadium in the background.

## Italy expels 2 Russians after...

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The Russian, an embassy official, avoided custody thanks to diplomatic immunity, police said.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio summoned Russian ambassador Sergey Razov yesterday morning to lodge a formal protest. The diplomat was notified of "the immediate expulsion of the two Russian officials involved in this very serious affair", Di Maio said. Eleonora Tafuro, a Russia expert at the ISPI think tank in Milan, said such incidents in Italy were rare. "It is very serious ... and really takes us back to the Cold War period," she told AFP.

The ANSA news agency, quoting investigative



## Local

# US State Department highlights human rights issues in Kuwait

## Govt took significant steps forward, but cases of abuse remain

**KUWAIT:** The US Department of State released the 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in Kuwait, which highlights some "significant human rights issues" including reports of torture; political prisoners; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; restrictions on free expression, the press, and the Internet, including censorship, Internet site blocking, and criminalization of libel; interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; restrictions on freedom of movement; trafficking in persons; among others.

The report indicates that the Kuwaiti government took significant steps in some cases to prosecute and punish officials who committed abuses, whether in the security services or elsewhere in the government, however impunity was still a problem in corruption cases. Furthermore, it charges that there continued to be reports of torture and mistreatment by police and security forces against detained members of minority groups and noncitizens, the report notes.

Several noncitizens claimed police or Kuwaiti State Security (KSS) force members beat them at police checkpoints or in detention. Numerous activists representing a particular group of stateless persons known as "Bedoon" reported mistreatment at the hands of authorities while in detention. There continued to be allegations from individuals that they were subjected to unlawful detention and physical and verbal abuse inside police centers and State Security detention centers.

### Prison conditions

According to the National Assembly's Human Rights Committee, prisons lacked the minimum standards of cleanliness and sanitation, were overcrowded, and suffered from widespread corruption in management, resulting in prisoner safety problems and drug abuse by inmates. International observers who visited the Central Prison corroborated reports of drug use and trafficking.

In order to decrease overcrowding in the prisons, in February the government asked the governments of Iran, Egypt, Iraq, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka to repatriate any their nationals who had served more than half of their prison terms and have them serve the remainder of their sentences at home. Iraq and Iran reportedly repatriated at least 13 and 130 of their citizens, respectively.

In February the Public Prosecution and legal experts warned of the risk of disease outbreaks due to COVID-19 in overcrowded prisons. The report indicated that prisons have the capacity to accommodate 3,432 inmates, while the number of inmates at that time was 4,420. That same month, a female inmate at the Central Prison died of COVID-19. According to government figures from November, 433 prisoners had been infected with COVID-19 and 370 had recovered.

In May, several prisoners reportedly went on a hunger strike over the spread of COVID-19 in the prisons and inadequate health conditions. The strike at the Central Prison reportedly went on for several weeks.

### Freedom of speech

The Public Prosecutor investigated numerous COVID-19-related cases concerning the alleged dissemination of false news. In March an Egyptian national was arrested and deported after posting a video criticizing measures taken by the government to stem the spread of COVID-19. A second Egyptian national was also arrested and deported for writing on social media that the Egyptian authorities should have imposed equivalent measures against Kuwaiti citizens. Between March and April, the Ministry of Interior referred a total of 17 website administrators to be investigated for allegedly disseminating inaccurate news and rumors regarding COVID-19 in violation of the law. In March the Ministry of Interior referred 23 social media accounts of individuals and groups for investigation for allegedly posting misinformation concerning COVID-19. In April the Ministry of Information announced that it had referred 25 websites to the Public Prosecutor, mostly for "offending the government" over its handling of COVID-19. As of May, 40 news websites had been referred since the beginning of the pandemic.

In March, Minister of Information Mohammad Al-Jabri announced that the administrators of 14 websites had been referred to the Public Prosecutor for violating the 2016 E-Media law by spreading rumors regarding the government's COVID-19 response. Also in March the Criminal Court began hearing the case against former MPs and professor Abdullah Al-Nefisi for insulting the UAE on Twitter.

### Freedom of movement

Bedoon residents and foreign workers faced problems with, or restrictions on, foreign travel. The government restricted the ability of many Bedoon residents to travel abroad by not issuing travel documents, although it permitted some Bedoon residents to travel overseas for medical treatment and education, and to visit Saudi Arabia for the annual Hajj. The Ministry of Interior issued Article 17 passports (temporary documents that do not confer nationality) to some Bedoon for these purposes as long as they held valid identification documents issued by the Central Agency for Illegal Residents and did not have security restrictions placed on their file.

In July the Ministry of Interior revealed that approximately 17,000 Bedoon had paid 3,000 dinars (\$9,770) each in bribes between 2014 and 2018 to obtain Article 17 passports. As part of the investigation into the crimes, Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior General Sheikh Mazen Al-Jarrah was arrested for accepting bribes. In November the Ministry of Defense announced that it was requiring all Bedoon military personnel to turn in their passports by the end of the month. Those who wish to reapply for a passport would need to provide a justification for travel, identity documentation, and pass a medical exam. Press reports estimated the number of Bedoon residents in the military to be 3,500. In July the Ministry of Interior announced travel bans against 14 citizens over corruption, money laundering, and embezzlement. Press reported that among the 14 were members of the ruling family, two former ministers, and four sitting deputy ministers.

In August the government reopened the airport at 30 percent capacity but announced a ban on commercial flights from 31 "high risk" locations to curb the

spread of COVID-19, including Egypt, India, and the Philippines. This ban precluded the admission into the country of noncitizens directly from these 31 locations, including those previously resident in the country, although they could enter the country after spending 14 days in a country without a ban. The government later clarified that citizens, their domestic workers, and immediate relatives were permitted to return to the country at any time, even if they were traveling from one of the banned locations, provided they carried proof of a negative COVID-19 test.

### Stateless persons

According to press figures, there were approximately 88,000 Bedoon residents in the country. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International estimated the Bedoon resident population at more than 100,000. The law does not provide stateless persons, including Bedoon persons, a clear path to acquire citizenship. As of November government sources announced no Bedoon or foreigners had been naturalized during the year. The judicial system's lack of authority to rule on the status of stateless persons further complicated the process for obtaining citizenship, leaving Bedoon with no access to the judiciary to present evidence and plead their case for citizenship.

The Central Agency for Illegal Residents oversees Bedoon resident affairs. In November the Council of Ministers issued a resolution extending the agency's expired term by one additional year. Bedoon residents, Bedoon rights advocates, MPs, and human rights activists protested the decision, arguing that the Agency had not been effective in resolving matters pertaining to the Bedoon. They argued that conditions for Bedoon residents had dramatically deteriorated under the agency's leadership. They pointed to dozens of Bedoon community members, especially youth, who had committed suicide in recent years due to dire social and economic conditions. The agency received tens of thousands of citizenship requests by Bedoon residents for review since its establishment in 2010.

According to Bedoon advocates and government officials, many Bedoon residents were unable to provide documentation proving ties to the country sufficient to qualify for citizenship. Since the government considers Bedoon illegal residents, many lacked identification cards, which prevented them from engaging in legal employment or obtaining travel documents.

Although Bedoon residents are by law entitled to government benefits including free healthcare and education, and ration cards, community members have alleged it was often difficult for them to access those services due to bureaucratic red tape.

The government alleged that the vast majority of Bedoon residents concealed their "true" nationalities and were not actually stateless. Agency officials have extended incentive benefits to Bedoon who disclose an alternate nationality, including priority employment, and the ability to obtain a driver's license. In 2018 approximately 12,700 Bedoon admitted having a claim on another nationality.

Bedoon leaders alleged that when some members of the Bedoon community attempted to obtain government services from the Central Agency, officials would routinely deceive them by promising to provide the necessary paperwork only if the Bedoon agreed to sign a blank piece of paper. Later, Bedoon reported, the agency would write a letter on the signed paper purportedly "confessing" the Bedoon's "true" nationality, which rendered them ineligible for recognition or benefits as Bedoon. In March the Court of Cassation ruled that all decisions issued by the Central Agency for Illegal Residents fall under the jurisdiction of the judiciary and as a result are challengeable in the courts. The Central Agency is tasked with granting or revoking government identification, birth, death, or marriage certificates, recommendations for employment, and other official documentation, whereas the Supreme Committee for the Verification of Citizenship at the Ministry of Interior manages all citizenship revocations and naturalizations. Nonetheless, many Bedoon and activists on their behalf continued to accuse the Agency of not complying with the law and failing to implement court rulings requiring it to register Bedoon residents and issue them required documents.

According to international observers, some Bedoon residents underwent DNA testing purportedly to "prove" their Kuwaiti nationality by virtue of blood relation to a citizen. Bedoon residents are required to submit DNA samples confirming paternity to become naturalized, a practice critics said leaves them vulnerable to denial of citizenship based on DNA testing. Children of Bedoon fathers and citizen mothers are typically rendered stateless, as the law does not allow women to transmit nationality.

### Domestic Violence

Rape carries a maximum penalty of death, which the courts occasionally imposed for the crime; spousal rape is not a crime under the law. Authorities did not effectively enforce laws against rape. Violence against women continued to be a problem. The law allows a rapist to avoid punishment on the condition that he marry his victim and that her guardian consents that the perpetrator not be punished. There were reports alleging that some police stations did not take seriously reports by both citizens and noncitizens of sexual assault and domestic violence, which service providers stated contributes to a culture of underreporting by survivors.

When reported, police typically arrested perpetrators and investigated allegations of rape and, in a limited number of cases, prosecuted the accused. For example, in January police arrested a Bangladeshi national for kidnapping and raping a foreign resident woman. In February, three men were arrested and referred to the Public Prosecutor after abducting, raping, and holding a teenage girl captive in an apartment. In August a man was arrested after stabbing his aunt several times in her sleep, reportedly with the intent to kill her. In September a woman was killed by her second brother while recovering in the hospital after an initial attempt on her life by another brother over "family disputes." Press reports indicated the brothers intended to kill their sister because they did not approve of her marriage. Both brothers were detained by police. In December a man was arrested for stab-

bing his sister to death. He was charged with premeditated murder and his case was referred to the Public Prosecutor.

Although the government does not regularly publish statistics on domestic violence, domestic violence cases against women were regularly reported by local NGOs. Service providers observed that domestic violence was significantly underreported to authorities but press publicized some high profile cases. In July the Court of Cassation upheld a death penalty sentence for a citizen who was charged with killing his pregnant Saudi wife three years ago. In March a man was arrested for murdering his wife and burying her body in the desert.

Women's rights activists documented numerous stories of citizen and women foreign workers seeking help to leave an abusive situation who faced obstacles because no shelters for victims of domestic violence existed. A woman may petition for divorce based on injury from spousal abuse, but the law does not provide a clear legal standard regarding what constitutes injury. In domestic violence cases, since for any type of physical assault, a woman must produce a report from a government hospital to document her injuries in addition to having at least two male witnesses (or a male witness and two female witnesses) who can attest to the abuse. Advocates reported that women who reach out to police rarely get help because officers were not adequately trained to deal with domestic violence cases. Victims were generally sent back to their male guardians, who in some instances were also their abusers.

In August the National Assembly approved the country's first-ever domestic violence law. The law criminalizes domestic violence and provides victims with legal, medical, and rehabilitation services. It defines domestic violence as any form of physical, psychological, sexual, or financial mistreatment done by one family member against another. The law also calls for the establishment of a domestic violence shelter, and requires the Ministry of Social Affairs to begin compiling statistics on domestic violence in the country. The Ministry of Social Affairs was expected also to establish special teams to investigate domestic violence claims.

In January press reported that a foreign resident woman had filed rape charges against the Ambassador of her home country for an incident dating back to 2018. Reports indicated police refused to file the charges because the Ambassador maintained diplomatic immunity and the location of the alleged crime—the Ambassador's residence—was outside their jurisdiction. In February the Criminal Court sentenced a security officer at Kuwait International Airport to seven years imprisonment for rape in an airport inspection room. He was also ordered to pay compensation. As of November there were 34 rape cases registered at the courts. Final verdicts were issued in four of these cases. Final and appealable rulings for convicted cases included death penalty and jail terms from five years up to 15 years and life imprisonment.

As of November there were 420 cases of violence against women registered at the courts. Final verdicts were issued in 46 of these cases. Final and appealable rulings for convicted cases included jail terms from five years up to 15 years and life imprisonment.

Officials did not report any so-called honor killings during the year. In February the Criminal Court confirmed that honor killings as described in article 153 of the penal code would henceforth be treated as cases of premeditated murder, rather than as misdemeanors. In February the Criminal Court issued the death penalty against a man who alleged he had killed his daughter because he had suspicions regarding her "honor." In the ruling, the judge clarified that the honor killing section of the law was not applicable in this case because the father had not caught his daughter "in the act."

Human rights groups characterized sexual harassment in the workplace as a pervasive and mostly unreported problem. No specific law addresses sexual harassment. The law criminalizes "encroachment on honor," which encompasses everything from touching a woman against her will to rape, but police inconsistently enforced this law. The government deployed female police officers specifically to combat sexual harassment in shopping malls and other public spaces. Perpetrators of sexual harassment and sexual assault faced fines and imprisonment.

### Minority groups

Approximately 70 percent of residents were noncitizens, many originating from other parts of the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and South and Southeast Asia. Societal discrimination against noncitizens was prevalent and occurred in most areas of daily life, including employment, education, housing, social interaction, and health care. The Ministry of Interior used administrative deportation, which is not subject to judicial review, to deport noncitizens for minor offenses, such as operating a taxi without a license.

In March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Interior established the "Leave Safely" campaign, which aimed to deport approximately 200,000 residence violators. The program granted violators an amnesty period through April 30, waiving all penalties and fees. The government also provided free tickets back to violators' home countries. In May unrest was reported at two migrant worker shelters for Egyptian nationals awaiting repatriation. Residents were barred from leaving the shelters due to authorities' fear the workers would transmit coronavirus to the general population, despite reports of limited access to water and electricity inside the facility. Kuwaiti Special Forces dispersed the crowds with tear gas and arrested several Egyptian laborers.

According to the PAM, as of November only 4.8 percent of the total workforce in the private sector were citizens. Most citizens (81.5 percent) worked in the public sector where they constituted 76.8 percent of the total workforce, in part because the government provided lucrative benefits to citizens, including generous retirement.

### Forced Labor

Employers confined some domestic and agricultural workers to their workspaces by retaining their passports and, in the case of some domestic workers, locked them in their work locations. Workers who fled

abusive employers had difficulty retrieving their passports, and authorities deported them in almost all cases. The government usually limited punishment to administrative actions such as assessing fines, shutting employment firms, issuing orders for employers to return withheld passports, or requiring employers to pay back wages.

In January a group of foreign workers employed at a company contracted by the Ministry of Communications filed a complaint with the PAM over four months of unpaid salaries for 200 employees. The group also alleged that the company forced them to pay an illegal fee of 900 dinars (\$2,930) for their residence permits under threat of expelling them from their housing. In July the Ministry of Education announced it was moving to suspend the licenses of six private schools for not paying teachers' wages.

Some incidents of forced labor and conditions indicative of forced labor occurred, especially among foreign domestic and agricultural workers. Such practices were usually a result of employer abuse of the sponsorship system (kafala) for foreign workers. Employers frequently illegally withheld salaries from domestic workers and minimum-wage laborers.

Domestic servitude was the most common type of forced labor, principally involving foreign domestic workers employed under kafala, but reports of forced labor in the construction and sanitation sectors also existed. Forced labor conditions for migrant workers included nonpayment of wages, long working hours, deprivation of food, threats, physical and sexual abuse, and restrictions on movement, such as withholding passports or confinement to the workplace. As of November private sector and domestic labor employers filed approximately 15,000 reports claiming that employees "absconded." Domestic workers filed approximately 425 complaints against their employers in accordance with the domestic labor law. As of November, PAM statistics indicated that 2634 domestic helper-related complaints had been filed. Numerous domestic workers who escaped from abusive employers reported waiting several months to regain passports, which employers had illegally confiscated when they began their employment. In July the PAM announced it would no longer accept private sector complaints over absenteeism, after reports some employers were filing them maliciously as a pretext to violate labor laws.

PAM operated a shelter for abused domestic workers. As of November according to a government source, the shelter had a capacity of 500 and housed 461 female domestic workers, victims of abuses or persons who were otherwise unwilling to continue to work for their employers and preferred to leave the country.

There were numerous media reports throughout the year of sponsors abusing domestic workers or injuring them when they tried to escape. Some reports alleged that abuse resulted in workers' deaths. Female domestic workers were particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse. Police and courts were reluctant to prosecute citizens for abuse in private residences but prosecuted some serious cases of abuse when reported, particularly when the cases were raised by the source country embassies. According to a high-level government official, authorities prosecuted several cases of domestic worker abuse. In August a female citizen was detained for torturing an elderly Sri Lankan maid by burning various parts of her body. Her three underage sons were also involved. Security forces freed the Sri Lankan migrant woman and transferred her to the Sri Lankan embassy to complete legal procedures. The case was pending as of November. In September the government announced it was opening an investigation into the death and alleged torture of a separate Sri Lankan domestic worker. The sponsor and his wife were under investigation.

In January the Philippines imposed a full ban on new workers bound to the country after the death of Filipina domestic worker Jeanelyn Villavende. The Philippine government noted that an autopsy showed Villavende was raped and beaten before she died at the hands of her employers in December. The Public Prosecutor detained because of her death a couple who had employed Villavende and referred the case to the Criminal Court on charges of premeditated murder, which carries the death sentence. The defendants denied the charges in a February court appearance. The government lifted the worker ban in February after coming to agreement over a standardized work contract that gave additional protections to workers. On December 30, the wife was sentenced to death by the Criminal Court and the husband was sentenced to four years for attempting to cover up the crime. Under the law, all death sentences are automatically reviewed by the Appeals Court.

Numerous media reports highlighted the problem of residence permit or visa trading, wherein companies and recruitment agencies collude to "sell" visas fraudulently to prospective workers. Often the jobs and companies attached to these visas do not exist, and workers are vulnerable to exploitation in the black market where they are forced to earn a living and repay the cost of their residence visa. Arrests of traffickers and illegal labor rings occurred almost weekly. In July the Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of State for Economic Affairs announced that the ministry had suspended the licenses of 2,207 companies and institutions in connection with visa trading. In August the PAM stated it had referred more than 400 companies to the Public Prosecutor over visa trading allegations since the beginning of the pandemic. Since workers cannot freely change jobs, many were unwilling to leave their initial job, even if their position existed only "on paper," or due to low wages, wage nonpayment, or unacceptable working conditions. Workers who left their employers due to abusive treatment, nonpayment of wages or other practices associated with visa trading risked falling into illegal residency status, being accused of "absconding," and being deported.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought increased public and press attention to visa trading. Civil society groups, press outlets, and MPs called for the government to increase its efforts to protect victims and punish traders and their enablers. In April and May, the Ministry of Interior announced numerous visa-trading investigations into government officials and those with government ties.



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# Decade of violations caused huge human suffering in Syria: Kuwait FM

## \$6.4 billion pledged at Brussels Syria conference

KUWAIT/BRUSSELS: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah headed Kuwait's delegation participating in the fifth edition of the Brussels Conference on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region' held online Tuesday. During the meeting, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah delivered a speech saying that through the past 10 years, Syrian people suffered many violations and practices against human rights and international laws causing huge human suffering. The Syrian refugee crisis is considered the largest crisis in the world, as there are about 5.6 million registered Syrian refugees in the region and about 6.2 million displaced inside Syria, he said.

Kuwait believes that the situation in Syria has become more complicated due to the interference of external parties and difficulties facing the peace talks sponsored by the UN, the Foreign Minister added. Sheikh Al-Sabah expressed hope of conference outcomes, which will contribute in alleviating the suffering of Syrian people, especially since the absence of a political solution calls to find a peaceful one that ends the Syrian conflict. In this regard, the State of Kuwait reiterates that military solution is not a resolve to the Syrian crisis, where the only effective solution is a comprehensive political one in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and Declaration of Geneva 1/2012.

The pledge announced at 2019 Brussels Conference, amounting \$300 million for a period of

three years (2019, 2020, 2021), is being implemented, and committed to fulfilling stated commitments for 2021, he stressed. Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah concluded with hope on current conference outcomes that will provide noticeable results that will contribute in achieving sustainable peace and true reconciliation between Syrian people.



Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah

### \$6.4 billion

The fifth Brussels virtual Conference on Syria chaired by the European Union and the United Nations concluded Tuesday evening with total pledges of 5.3 billion euro (\$6.4 billion) for 2021, including 3.6 billion euro (\$4.4 billion) in grants. Of this amount, 3.7 billion euro (\$4.3 billion) were announced by the EU; 1.12 billion euro (\$1.31 billion) coming from the European Commission and 2.6 billion euro (\$3 billion) from EU Member States.

For the years 2022 and beyond, 1.7 billion euro (\$2 billion) will be in grants. Janez Lenarcic, EU Commissioner for Crisis Management announced at the end of the meeting. In addition to grants, international financial institutions and donors have announced loans in concessional terms in the

amount of 5.9 billion euro (\$7 billion), he added. "The international community must not lose sight of the plight of the affected civilians. The EU is stepping up its humanitarian assistance to save lives on the ground. We are renewing our commitment to helping the Syrian people and the hosting communities," said Lenarcic.

Earlier, EU High Representative Josep Borrell speaking at the conference said "Today, we reaffirm the support of the international community for United Nations Security Resolution 2254. Over 85 delegates from more than 55 countries and over 25 international organizations gathered virtually, reaffirming the resolution's core message: Syrians must decide the future of Syria."

"European Union has made clear, we cannot and we will not normalize anything while violence and repression continues. Nor can we accept that elections as currently planned by the regime should lead to any measures of international normalization, no," stressed Borrell Mark Lowcock, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator - represented the UN at the event. In his video message Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary General Session stressed on the need for a political solution after ten years of conflict in Syria. Meanwhile, Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sophie Wilmes and Minister of Development Cooperation Meryame Kitir announced today 18 million euro (\$21 million) in additional humanitarian aid for the Syrian people. — KUNA

### News in brief

#### 620,000 people vaccinated

KUWAIT: The number of people who have received the COVID-19 vaccine in Kuwait reached around 620,000, Al-Rai Arabic daily reported yesterday. This means that Kuwait has already vaccinated around 22.3 percent of the targeted group which is estimated at around 2.775 million, bearing in mind that reaching social immunity requires around 60 to 70 percent of the population to receive the vaccine, which is between 1.665 million and 1.942 million. The vaccination process is expected to speed up after the Cabinet recently approved opening a new drive-thru vaccination center the southern island of the Jaber Causeway, said sources quoted in the report.

#### Kuwait backs Egypt, Sudan

KUWAIT: Kuwait expressed its backing of Egypt and Sudan amid the Renaissance Dam dispute, saying their security was an integral part of the Arab region's national security. Kuwait stands in "solidarity" with both countries in their "tireless efforts" to ensure regional stability and resolve the dispute, "in a manner that preserves the water and economic rights of the Nile River countries," read a Foreign Ministry statement. This should be in accordance with international law and in a manner that enables all sides to achieve their ambitions for development, the ministry added.

## Kuwait fully behind OPEC+ measures to curb oil output

KUWAIT: Kuwait reiterated its full support of OPEC+ efforts measures to ensure global oil supply and demand balance through its commitment to reduce output levels, as agreed, the oil minister said yesterday. Kuwait's Oil Minister Dr Mohammad Al-Fares made the comments prior to his virtual attendance of OPEC+ Joint Ministerial Committee for Production Control

(JMCMC) talks yesterday and OPEC+ ministerial talks today. Minister Fares, also Minister of Higher Education, said OPEC+ takes a "vigilant approach," decided on a monthly basis, to keep pace with ever-changing market developments. He commended the ongoing efforts and cooperation between OPEC and non-OPEC partners to support the stability of oil markets and promote a global economic recovery by maintaining stable



Dr Mohammad Al-Fares

global energy flows. He also praised the collective decision, taken during the previous meeting, to extend current production cuts for an additional month - until the end of April 2021 - and Saudi Arabia's initiative to continually reduce output during this period. This will support stability in oil markets, he emphasized, applauding the efforts and consultations that Saudi Arabia has led intensively with Russia and the rest of the countries participating in the OPEC+ agreement. On a recovery on global oil market indicators, the minister said he was "cautiously optimistic" about a gradual recovery and return to normal life, especially in light of the roll-out of coronavirus vaccines worldwide. — KUNA

## ABK encourages staff to take COVID-19 vaccines

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) reinforced its ongoing support of the COVID-19 vaccination drive in line with the Ministry of Health's agenda which includes prioritizing vaccinations of frontline employees. The bank launched an awareness campaign on the importance of taking the COVID-19 vaccination, in addition to highlighting guidelines in compliance with CBK Workplace Return Protocol. The bank also had medical experts, Dr Khaled Al-Saeed, a member of the vaccinations committee and Dr Ghada Ebrahim the Director of Public Relations and Media at the Ministry of Health, talking to staff through a recorded message on the importance of being vaccinated, and how the vaccine will ensure a safer community by mitigating the chances of spreading or carrying the virus.

To further encourage staff to register for the vaccine, and to foster a healthier work environment,

ABK offered one-day paid special leave for each scheduled COVID-19 vaccination appointment to all employees, giving them a day of rest to recover from the vaccine symptoms. The bank simplified the leave registration mechanism by automating the process and ensuring ease of access and application through mobiles and electronic devices. The bank has also added a 'lucky draw' into the 'Get Vaccinated' campaign for those who have been vaccinated, with chance to win prizes.

Afrah Al-Arbash, Acting GM - Human Resources Division at ABK, commented, "We are encouraging employees to register and take the vaccine as soon as possible, as this is the first step towards a healthier lifestyle for employees, the society, and the business. By getting vaccinated, we can rapidly work towards reviving the economy and accelerate its recovery while advocating the health and wellbeing of our community."



Afrah Al-Arbash

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## NAFO inaugurates online Kalolsavam

KUWAIT: National Forum (NAFO) Kuwait, a leading non-profit, socio-cultural organization in the country, recently held the inauguration ceremony for its online Kalolsavam 2021. The ceremony commenced with a prayer by Nivedita Anil Kumar. The inauguration of the online cultural competition schematized by the association was presided over by NAFO President CP Rajiv Menon. Renowned Mohiniyattam dancer Gopika Varma, a member of the Travancore Royal family in the Indian state of Kerala, inaugurated the function by lighting the traditional ceremonial lamp from her residence in Kowdiar Palace in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala State.

The main attraction was the online interactive session with Varma in which she shared her inspirational thoughts and gave advice to upcoming young dancers of NAFO about Mohiniyattam, lifestyle in Royal Palace of Travancore and shared a few beautiful personal

moments with NAFO members. Another highlight of the inaugural ceremony was congratulatory messages from Padmabhushan singer K S Chitra and silver-screen actress Anjali Nair, who congratulated NAFO for the efforts taken in holding an online Kalolsavam amidst the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and the related health and safety restrictions. They conveyed their best wishes to all participants in the kalolsavam.

NAFO General Secretary Vijayakumar Menon welcomed the guests to the online inauguration of the Kalolsavam program and then handed the floor to Bhavana Menon, the compere for the evening. Advisory Board member Rajeev G Pillai delivered the felicitation address and wished all participants the best of luck in the competitions. Cultural program convener Unnikrishna Kurup presented the highlights of NAFO Kalolsavam 2021, and summarized the guidelines for all competitions. NAFO Kids Nila Ajay, Nandakishore Girish entertained the online spectators with their melodious songs, which were scripted by the NAFO Ladies Wing officials. Around 100 NAFO families participated in the online inauguration, and the program concluded with the formal vote of thanks by Joint Treasurer Rajeev Nair.







US orders diplomats out of Myanmar as violence spirals

## Homeless but not forgotten in Britain's COVID job drive



NIAMEY: Picture shows a fire in a street and projectiles on the ground as Niger's opposition supporters protest after the announcement of the results of the country's presidential run-off in Niamey. —AFP

# Niger troops foil 'attempted coup'

## Soldiers behind putsch arrested, two days before presidential inauguration

NIAMEY: Elite troops in Niger thwarted an "attempted coup" early yesterday, a security source said, just two days before the historic inauguration of Mohamed Bazoum as president of the chronically unstable Sahel nation. Residents earlier reported hearing gunfire in the middle of the night near the presidency in the capital Niamey. "There were some arrests among a few members of the army who are behind this attempted coup," said the source, speaking on condition of anonymity. "The Presidential Guard retaliated, preventing this group of soldiers from approaching the presidential palace," the source said. A resident of Niamey's Plateau district, which includes the president's official residence and offices, told AFP: "It was around 3 am, we heard shots from heavy and light weapons and it lasted 15 minutes before stopping, followed by shots from light weapons." "The gunfire lasted about 20 minutes," another resident said. A third resident spoke of "intense shooting, with heavy and light weapons".

Online newspaper actuniger.com reported that calm had returned by around 4 am. In short video clips posted on social networks, only several seconds in length, sporadic bursts of gunfire could be heard

in the pitch dark. It was not immediately possible to verify the videos independently. The US embassy said it was suspending consular services until further notice and advised its employees not to come to work, and the French embassy similarly urged French nationals to stay at home.

The alleged coup comes ahead of Bazoum's inauguration on Friday—the first elected transition in Niger's history since independence from France in 1960. Bazoum is a former interior minister and right-hand man of outgoing president Mahamadou Issoufou, who is voluntarily stepping down after two five-year terms, a move that has been warmly praised by France and others. Bazoum's victory in the second round of elections on February 2 was confirmed by the constitutional court this month. The runner-up, former president Mahamane Ousmane, contested the results, claiming that he was the real winner. Ousmane had called for "peaceful marches" across the country, but authorities banned a planned opposition protest yesterday in Niamey the day before.

### Troubled nation

Niger is the poorest country in the world, accord-

ing to the benchmark of the UN's 189-nation Human Development Index (HDI). It has suffered four coups in its history, most recently a February 2010 putsch which toppled then president Mamadou Tandja. The Sahel country has also been struck by repeated jihadist attacks, from insurgents who have advanced from Mali in the west and Nigeria in the southeast. More than 300 people have been killed in three attacks in the west since the start of the year.

In the most recent of these, 141 members of the Tuareg community were massacred on March 21 in Tahoua, a vast desert region abutting Mali. Bazoum has ruled out any talks with the insurgents. Niger's armed forces are poorly equipped and trained, and number just 25,000 in a country twice the size of Texas.

The plan is to double this to 50,000 men within five years, but funding is key. Last year, violent protests broke out over a military procurement scandal officially estimated to have cost nearly 32.6 billion CFA francs (49.7 million euros/\$55.1 million). On March 8, Issoufou, the outgoing president, was awarded the coveted Ibrahim Prize-Africa's top prize for leadership. —AFP

## Pandemic delays gender parity by a generation: WEF

GENEVA: The pandemic has rolled back years of progress towards equality between men and women, according to a report released yesterday showing the crisis had added decades to the trajectory towards closing the gender gap. A range of studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, who have lost jobs at a higher rate than men, and had to take on much more of the extra childcare burden when schools closed.

The effects will be felt in the long-term, according to the World Economic Forum, which in its annual Global Gender Gap Report found that the goalposts for gender parity appeared to be moving further away. "There has been sort of a rollback to traditional behaviors inside the home, and that then creates a double shift for women who are working," WEF managing director Saadia Zahidi told a virtual press conference. The organization, which usually gathers the global elite in the plush Swiss ski resort of Davos each year, had found in its previous report, published in December 2019 right before the pandemic hit, that gender parity across a range of areas would be reached within 99.5 years.

But this year's report shows the world is not on track to close the gender gap for another 135.6 years. "Another generation of women will have to wait for gender parity," the WEF said in a statement.

The Geneva-based organization's annual report tracks disparities between the sexes in 156 countries across four areas: education, health, economic opportunity and political empowerment.

### Workplace equality in 267 years

On the plus side, women appear to be gradually closing the gender gap in areas such as health and education. But inequality in the workplace—which has long appeared to be the stickiest area to fix—is still not expected to be erased for another 267.6 years.

And the pandemic has not helped. The WEF pointed to a study by the UN's International Labor Organization showing that women were more likely to lose their jobs in the crisis, in part because they are disproportionately represented in sectors directly disrupted by lockdowns. Surveys by pollsters Ipsos have meanwhile shown that women were carrying a greater share of the burden of increased housework and childcare during lockdowns.

"We find that women around the world are now spending (the equivalent of) a full-time job doing childcare," Ipsos chief operating officer Natalie Lacey told yesterday's press conference.

"This has taken its toll. The level of stress that women are feeling is higher than men," she said. Women were also being hired back at a slower rate than men as workplaces opened up again, according to LinkedIn data referenced in the report. "It has been a very tough year for working women," LinkedIn vice president Sue Duke told the press conference. At the start of the pandemic, women "saw a real dip in hiring... (and this) is recovering slower than male hiring," she said, lamenting especially a "marked decline in the hiring of women to leadership roles."

Yesterday's report also highlighted the severe under-representation of women in the ballooning tech sector. "If



we want a dynamic future economy, it is vital for women to be represented in the jobs of tomorrow," Zahidi said.

### Political gender gap growing

It was in the political sphere that the march towards gender parity did the biggest about-face, with several large-population countries seeing the political gender gap widen, the WEF study found. Women still hold just over a quarter of parliamentary seats worldwide, and only 22.6 percent of ministerial positions.

On its current trajectory, the political gender gap is not expected to close completely for another 145.5 years, the report found. That marks a 50-percent hike from the estimated 95 years in the 2020 report, released at the end of 2019. WEF pointed out. Progress across the categories varies greatly in different countries and regions. The report pointed out that while Western European countries could close their overall gender gap in 52.1 years, countries in the Middle East and North Africa will take nearly 142.4 years to do so. —AFP

## Bust of Dagestani poet Rasul Gamzatov opened in Cairo

A bust of the outstanding Dagestani poet Rasul Gamzatov (1923 - 2003) was opened on Sunday, March 28, in the Egyptian capital Cairo. The ceremony took place in the city center, in the El-Hurriya park near the Cairo Opera House. Russian Ambassador Georgy Borisenko, Deputy Governor of the Egyptian capital General Mohammed Sultan, representatives of

the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, cultural and scientific workers, Russian diplomats and journalists took part in the celebration.

The monument was created by the Egyptian artist and sculptor, a member of the Association of graduates of Russian and Soviet universities, Osama Al-Serui. He presented the sculpture as a gift to the city administration. As the Russian ambassador noted in his speech, the opening of the monument will become one of the most striking events in the framework of the cross-year of humanitarian cooperation between Russia and Egypt. "Undoubtedly, this will help to familiarize the Egyptians with the richest cultural heritage of Russia," Borisenko said.





## International

Homeless but not forgotten  
in Britain's COVID jab drive

126,000 people in UK fell prey to the virus over a year

WINCHESTER, UK: Mac is only 25, normally too young to be eligible for the British government's COVID inoculation campaign at this stage. But he's still terrified of catching the virus. "I don't want to die from COVID!" he says. Mac is homeless, and therefore qualifies for priority vaccination to ensure the most vulnerable are also protected. They include other younger people with acute medical conditions or learning difficulties. Homeless since the age of 18, Mac has been offered a first jab in April at a shelter in the southern city of Winchester, the ancient capital of England known for its cathedral and an elite private school.

For all its history and gentility, Winchester is no stranger to the problem of homelessness, which has grown across Britain following years of budget cuts following the 2008 global financial crisis. "If I wasn't sleeping in the night shelter I wouldn't have been offered it at all," Mac said, his long blond curls peeking out from under a hoodie. "There are many people I know living in tents, in the countryside. Around here is very rural, you would never find them."

Mac and others at the shelter were found thanks to the community outreach work of local doctor Alex Fitzgerald-Barron. "The homeless are high health-risk patients because they are in a multitude of diagnostic categories," he said, listing mental health problems and frequent pneumonia, along with oral and skin infections.

"They are at high risk of hepatitis C because of injecting drugs," Fitzgerald-Barron added. "They are much more likely to end up in hospital if they catch COVID—and to die from it."

## Leave no one behind

Britain last week marked the anniversary of its first coronavirus lockdown, paying tribute to the more than 126,000 people who have died—one of the world's worst tolls. A year ago, the government ordered everyone to stay at home. For those without a home, it directed local councils to throw open emergency shelters and paid for rooms in hostels. But complaints were rife that social distancing was impossible in cramped shelters, hastening the spread of COVID-19.

And the homelessness charity Shelter has warned



LONDON: The vaccination campaign is currently targeting people aged over 50 in the general population — AFP

that the "economic fallout of 2020 may turbo-charge this crisis" as the latest lockdown is wound down. The easing of restrictions is possible thanks to the vaccination campaign, which is currently targeting people aged over 50 in the general population.

More than 30 million people have now received at least a first dose, and the government intends to cover every adult with at least one shot by the end of July. "It's so important that nobody gets left behind in this national effort," Health Secretary Matt Hancock said, when he announced in mid-March that the campaign would start prioritizing the homeless. "We know there are heightened risks for those who sleep rough." But Fitzgerald-Barron had already begun to target the homeless, using his medical judgment to classify them as "extremely vulnerable", one of the first groups inoculated alongside the very old.

## Second doses deadline

While other medics work out of mobile clinics, the Winchester doctor uses a small fridge that he plugs into his car, loaded with the day's doses. When Fitzgerald-

Barron arrives at a shelter, he plugs the fridge into the mains electricity. He started offering jabs in February, making face-to-face contact with 114 homeless people, 74 of whom agreed to be vaccinated. He considers that number "a good result", made possible only by a "personal relationship of trust". "I had to be in front of them to explain what it is," Fitzgerald-Barron says. More than other groups, according to people involved, the homeless are often scarred by past encounters with officialdom and more prey to anti-vaxx hoaxes.

"I think this is all a big conspiracy to control the population," said one woman, Leighan, 35, who refused the invitation from Fitzgerald-Barron. For those like Mac who did take up the doctor's offer, the worry is what happens after the lockdown is lifted and the pandemic is considered over. "The government hasn't yet set out their (homelessness) strategy as the pandemic eases," said Jasmine Basran, policy and public affairs manager at the charity Crisis. Despite the government's pledges last year of financial support, when the first lockdown finished in June, "some people were turned away from support" by local councils, she said. —AFP

At Moldova-Romania  
frontier, pandemic  
lays bare inequality

CHISINAU, Moldova: At the hospital in the small Moldovan town of Leova, exhausted doctors see no end to the pandemic: cases are rising, and vaccinations have only just begun. The first Moldovan was vaccinated at the start of March—more than two months after European Union member countries began inoculating their populations—and only thanks to donations from neighboring Romania, with which it has historically close relations. The two countries might share the same language, but offer a glimpse at the difference a border can make.

So far, non-EU member Moldova has received barely enough doses for three percent of its population, while Romania, an EU member since 2007, has already administered almost three million.

"If Romania was not part of the EU, it would certainly have had a much harder time getting vaccines," says Sorin Ionita, a political analyst with the think tank Expert Forum.

Romania's liberal Prime Minister Florin Citu has said that the European Commission's handling of procurement helped avoid "chaos" in which "the highest bidder" would have received the most vaccines. It is part of the reason why Bucharest has refrained from criticizing the bloc's vaccine rollout, unlike other Eastern members like Hungary and Poland, Ionita says.

This conciliatory position "is part of a broader policy of Bucharest, which, supported by a Europhile population, does not seek a fight with Brussels", he adds.

## 'Our only chance'

Moldova, a part of Romania until the Soviet Union annexed it in 1940, remains one of the poorest countries in Europe and has so far relied on vaccine donations—about 72,000 so far—from Bucharest.

It received another 38,000 doses under the global Covax mechanism to help low- and middle-income countries fight the pandemic. In total, these donated vaccines would be enough to give about 110,000 people at least one dose, out of a population of 3.5 million.

The outlook remains bleak as "vaccination represents the only chance" to contain the pandemic, says Andrei Malasevski, the hospital director in Leova, a city of about 8,000 nestled on the banks of the meandering Prut river that forms the border with Romania. "We didn't have the so-called 'waves'. The pandemic only grew and it continues to do so," he says. So far more than 4,800 people have died in the small nation.

At the Emergency Institute in Moldova's capital Chisinau, one of the biggest hospitals in the country, the number of ICU beds was expanded from 24 to 62



CHISINAU: Two men wearing protection suits transport a COVID-19 patient's dead body to the hospital's morgue from the COVID-19 ICU unit at the "Emergency Institute" in Moldova's capital Chisinau. — AFP

to cope with the influx of COVID-19 patients.

The unit has nevertheless been 90 percent occupied for months and doctors and nurses are stretched to the limit, says Adrian Belii, head of the ICU unit and one of the country's most prominent physicians. The health system was already strained before the pandemic, in part because vast numbers of doctors and nurses have left to work in the EU.

Many sought employment in Romania when salaries for healthcare workers there doubled in 2018.

"It is too early to consider vaccination of risk categories, let alone the general population," Belii says. If Moldova was a member of the EU, "as a large segment of the population dreams of, things would have been different," he adds.

## Help from Russia?

While the number of cases continues to climb, Moldova's pro-European president Maia Sandu said she would try to "obtain rapid access to the Sputnik V vaccine" from Russia—an announcement that sparked fierce discussions among Moldovans. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union more than 30 years ago, Moldova has been torn between Russia and the EU, and geopolitics is now shaping the pandemic response too. Disinformation campaigns are rampant, and local media have reported that healthcare workers in the pro-Russian region of Gagauzia refused the AstraZeneca vaccine, saying they would rather wait for Moscow's Sputnik V.

"We are very politicized. And when some hospitals say that they won't use a vaccine from Europe because they want the Russian one, we have a problem", Malasevski says. Once vaccines are available for a larger part of the population, sociologist Victor Mocanu believes that mistrust will yield to the economic need of families dependent on remittances from the diaspora. "The approximately one million Moldovans who work abroad will want to be vaccinated as soon as possible as they won't be able to travel without a certificate," he predicts. —AFP

NY state passes bill legalizing  
recreational marijuana

NEW YORK: New York state lawmakers passed a bill Tuesday legalizing recreational marijuana, with Governor Andrew Cuomo saying he would sign it into law. New York will join 14 other US states and the District of Columbia in permitting cannabis use after the bill was backed by both state chambers, where Cuomo's Democratic Party holds strong majorities.

"For too long the prohibition of cannabis disproportionately targeted communities of color with harsh prison sentences," Cuomo said in a statement. "This landmark legislation provides justice for long-marginalized communities, embraces a new industry

that will grow the economy, and establishes substantial safety guards for the public." Cuomo's office has said the change could net an additional \$350 million in annual tax revenues and create tens of thousands of jobs.

The law will allow adults 21 and over to purchase cannabis and grow plants for personal consumption at home, with a plan to divert some funds to drug treatment and education. New York would automatically clear records of people with past convictions of marijuana-related offenses that would no longer be criminalized. —AFP

## News in brief

## Harris thanks Guatemalan president

WASHINGTON: US Vice President Kamala Harris thanked the Guatemalan president Tuesday for monitoring the border with Honduras, during a telephone call to discuss the recent surge of Central American migrants into the United States, the White House said. Harris, appointed last week by President Joe Biden to work with Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to address the root causes of the influx of migrants, highlighted Alejandro Giammattei's efforts to "secure Guatemala's southern border," the White House said in a statement. — AFP

## Yemen receives first vaccines: UN

ADEN: War-torn Yemen received the first shipment of COVID-19 vaccines yesterday, the UN children's agency said, a week after the country's coronavirus committee warned of a public health "emergency". The AstraZeneca doses arrived in the southern port city of Aden, Yemen's de facto capital, where the internationally recognized government is based after being routed from Sanaa in the north by Houthi rebels. "Yemen received 360,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses shipped via the Covax facility," UNICEF said in a statement, referring to the World Health Organization-backed scheme to provide jabs to countries in need. — AFP

## EU-mediated Georgia crisis talks fail

TNILISI: The second round of European Union-mediated talks between Georgia's ruling party and the opposition failed yesterday to resolve a political impasse sparked by elections last year, an EU mediator said. The EU-aspirant nation in Europe's extreme southeast has been gripped by a political crisis following October's parliamentary elections which the opposition has denounced as rigged, staging mass protests to demand snap polls. The stalemate worsened last month after police arrested the opposition leader in a violent raid on the headquarters of his United National Movement (UNM), the Caucasus country's main opposition force, leading the prime minister to resign. — AFP

## Bolivia to speed up vaccinations on border

LA PAZ, Bolivia: Bolivia said Tuesday it will speed up its vaccination campaign in areas that border with Brazil, where a new variant of the coronavirus has emerged. "We have instructed the Ministry of Health to proceed with the vaccination of all border populations in the country, starting with these, which are the most exposed populations [and] that are adjacent to Brazil," said President Luis Arce. "We are not exempt from the fact that there may be a strain, a virus that is being generated and reproduced without control, so we have to take precautions," said the president. — AFP

## Candidate murdered in Mexico

MEXICO CITY: Gunmen killed a local election candidate in a central Mexican state plagued by cartel-related violence, his party said Tuesday, the latest in a wave of murders linked to the June polls. Alejandro Galicia, who was running for municipal councilor in Guanajuato state, was shot dead Monday when returning from a tour of the area, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) said. A local PRD leader was also seriously wounded in the attack, it said, calling for a full investigation. — AFP

## Colombian ex-rebel sentenced

BOGOTA: A Colombian court has sentenced a former FARC fighter to nearly 29 years in jail for the kidnapping and murder of a three-man Ecuadorian press team in 2018, the prosecutor's office said Tuesday. Jesus Vargas, who goes by the alias Reinel, was given a sentence of 28 years and eight months, it said—the first person convicted in the case. Reporter Javier Ortega, 32, photographer Paul Rivas, 45, and their driver Efraim Segarra 60, were abducted in March 2018 while covering a story on violence along the Ecuador-Colombia border. They worked for Ecuador's influential El Comercio newspaper. — AFP



NEW YORK: Protestors celebrate outside US District Court Southern District of New York on Tuesday after Juan Antonio "Tony" Hernandez, brother of the president of Honduras Juan Orlando Hernandez was sentenced to life for drug trafficking offenses. — AFP

Honduran president's  
brother gets life in US  
jail for drug-pushing

NEW YORK: Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez's brother was sentenced to life in prison by a New York judge Tuesday for large-scale drug trafficking after a trial that implicated the leader of the Central American country. Tony Hernandez, 42, was found guilty in October 2019 on four counts—including conspiring to import cocaine into the United States, possessing machine guns and making false statements. Judge P. Kevin Castel said a life sentence for the former Honduran congressman who trafficked more than 185 tons of cocaine into the United States, some branded with his initials "TH," was "richly deserved."

President Hernandez, however, described the ordeal as a scandal, calling the sentencing "outrageous" and stating that it was "incredible that the false testimonies of confessed murderers are heard and valued in this way," referring to some of the convicted killers who served as witnesses. Prosecutors had demanded life in prison, stressing that Tony Hernandez had "shown no remorse" and was "a central figure in one of the largest and most violent cocaine trafficking conspiracies in the world." His defense team had called for the mandatory minimum sentence of 40 years. Hernandez, who served as a member of the Honduran Congress from 2014 to 2018, was arrested at a Miami airport in November 2018. His family in Honduras also insisted on his "innocence" Tuesday evening, and said that he would appeal, in a statement released by the Honduran presidency.

## Co-conspirator

During the trial, US prosecutors said President Hernandez had been a "co-conspirator" in his brother's crimes, although he has not been formally charged by the US judicial system. Government attorneys said the president took millions of dollars in bribes from drug lords including jailed Mexican kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman. President Hernandez has repeatedly denied all allegations of drug trafficking.

A lawyer who came to power in January 2014 and is in his second term, Hernandez has styled himself as a champion in the fight against drugs. During his brother's trial the US government successfully argued that Tony Hernandez was a large-scale drug trafficker who worked from 2004 to 2016 with others in Colombia, Honduras and Mexico to import cocaine into the US by plane, boat and submarine. Hernandez made millions of dollars from the trafficking and used the proceeds to influence three presidential elections, according to US attorneys. The prosecution also said Hernandez was involved in at least two murders of rival drug traffickers in 2011 and 2013. Defense lawyers unsuccessfully questioned the credibility of witnesses, many of them former drug traffickers, some of whom had been convicted of murder. — AFP



NEW YORK: In this file photo a recreational marijuana smoker indulges in smoking weed in the Bushwick section of the Brooklyn borough of New York City. — AFP



## International

## US orders diplomats out of Myanmar as violence spirals

## Suu Kyi in good health; Japan suspends new aid

**YANGON:** The United States yesterday ordered the departure of non-essential diplomats from Myanmar, amid growing violence following the military coup to oust civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Daily protests demanding the restoration of the elected government have been met with a military crackdown that has left more than 520 civilians dead in the weeks since the February 1 coup. The junta's violent response has triggered international condemnation and threats of retaliation from some of Myanmar's myriad ethnic armed groups. The US State Department said it was ordering the departure of "non-emergency US government employees and their family members". The decision was taken to protect the safety and security of staff and their families, the State Department said.

Meanwhile, Myanmar's ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi appears in good health despite two months of detention, her legal team said yesterday as diplomatic pressure on the military junta ramped up.

The 75-year-old Suu Kyi has not been seen in public since she was deposed by the military and detained in the early hours of February 1. But a member of her legal team, Min Min Soe, was summoned to a police station in the capital Naypyidaw for a video meeting with her yesterday. Suu Kyi is facing a raft of criminal charges and conviction could see her barred for life from political office. "The physical situation of DASSK (Suu Kyi) seemed good according to her appearance on video screen," her legal team said in a statement.

World powers have repeatedly condemned the violent crackdown on dissent and hit top junta cadres with sanctions. But the pressure has not swayed the generals. Saturday, the annual Armed Forces Day, saw the biggest loss of life so far, with at least 107 people killed.

The spiraling bloodshed has angered some of Myanmar's 20 or so armed ethnic groups, who control large areas of territory mostly in border regions. Three of them—the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army (AA) — on Tuesday threatened to join protesters' fight unless the military reined in its crackdown. While the trio has yet to act on their warning, two other outfits—the Karen National Union (KNU) and the



This handout from Kawkaik Open News taken and released yesterday shows children taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Kawkaik township in Myanmar's Karen state. — AFP

Kachin Independence Army (KIA) — have stepped up attacks on military and police in recent days.

A police station in Bago was reportedly hit with a rocket attack that injured five officers on Tuesday, though it was not clear who was responsible. The KNU, one of the biggest rebel groups, took over an army base in eastern Kayin state at the weekend, prompting the military to respond with air strikes.

## Wounded cross border

Around 3,000 people fled through the jungle to seek safety across the border in Thailand after the weekend strikes. The Thai foreign ministry said late Tuesday about 2,300 have returned to Myanmar, while about 550 remain in Thailand. Karen activists have accused the Thai authorities of pushing people back and accused them of blocking UN refugee officials from the area. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha insisted that there was "no influx" of refugees and that the kingdom's authorities had not "scared them off with guns or

xsticks". Some Karen people injured in the weekend strikes sought medical treatment Tuesday on the Thai side of the border—the most serious case was a 15-year-old with a collapsed lung and broken rib.

Thai police said they had intercepted 10 parcels containing 112 grenades and 6,000 rounds of ammunition in northern Chiang Rai province that had been destined for Myanmar's notorious border town Tachileik. The UN Security Council will hold an emergency session on Myanmar on Wednesday, requested by former colonial power Britain. The 15 members will meet behind closed doors, beginning with a briefing from the UN's special envoy on Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener. Meanwhile, Japan has halted new aid to Myanmar in response to the coup, according to the country's foreign minister, but is stopping short of sanctions imposed by some nations on military and police commanders. Japan is a top aid donor to Myanmar, and Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi said the suspension of assistance would send a "clear" message.—AFP

## Reset to rivalry: China and West drift further apart

**BEIJING:** It only took one meeting for hopes of a reset in US-China relations under a Biden presidency to evaporate—instead alliances are fast forming on either side of an old dividing line: democracy.

The mood music ahead of the mid-March meeting in the Alaskan town of Anchorage between the two countries' top diplomats was upbeat, but their meeting quickly collapsed into mud-slinging in a pattern that has not let up since. Instead, the US has cozied up to its 'Quad' allies in China's backyard—Japan, India and Australia—while cajoling the EU, UK and Canada into aiming sanctions at Chinese officials over their treatment of Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang region. China has swung back with tit-for-tat sanctions of its own against several European Union and UK lawmakers, while sealing deals with Iran and reaffirming friendships with Russia and North Korea.

That has opened up a chasm between Beijing and the West, one increasingly explained in ideological terms but framed by bigger fears of competition over tech, trade and defense. "We are heading towards a bipolar order and a new Cold War between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys,'" said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, political science professor at Hong Kong Baptist University. Biden is hankering after allies to counterbalance China's rise, a departure from the unilateral actions and trade wars of the Trump era, with human rights and democracy emerging as galvanizing causes for the new anti-Beijing bloc. "There is a new sacred union of democracies on (the issues of) Xinjiang, Hong Kong, human rights in China," Cabestan said. On Tuesday, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken again labeled China's treatment of its Uyghur population a "genocide" and vowed to rally allies to the defense of human rights.

## Poles apart

But the Biden administration's retreat of the traditional ground of 'freedom' has deeper aims for democracies challenged by China, said Hua Po, an independent Beijing-based political analyst. Even if the US and their allies have divergent interests, "they agree on the question of human rights. It is a symbol of solidarity," Hua said, amounting to a "multifaceted policy of encirclement" on the strategic, technological and commercial fronts. In the first face-to-face meeting between China and US diplomats on March 18 in Anchorage, Alaska, civilities quickly fell aside. China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi furiously attacked US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, saying the United States "does not represent international public opinion, and neither does the Western world." Foreign minister Wang Yi has since embarked on a frenzy of friend-making, largely with countries also at loggerheads with the West and the US in particular.

Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov was received in China last Monday in a meeting which saw both countries agree that "there is no single model for democracy". Wang followed up with a tour of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, where he received Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's support for China's policies in the Xinjiang region, where it has been accused of detaining over a million Uyghur Muslim people. On Saturday, Wang signed a 25-year strategic and commercial cooperation pact between China and Iran with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif.

"Beijing is demonstrating that it has friends and other options," said Bonnie Glaser, Senior Adviser for Asia at the Washington Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).—AFP

## Wounded Myanmar refugees tell of air strike horror

**MAE SUAT, Thailand:** Civilians wounded in Myanmar air strikes on rebel positions spoke of their terrifying ordeal after trekking through jungle to seek medical treatment across the border in Thailand. Military jets hit targets in eastern Kayin state over the weekend, as Myanmar reeled from the deadliest day so far in the junta's crackdown on anti-coup protests. The strikes targeted territory held by the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the nation's largest ethnic armed groups, which had earlier seized a military base. They marked the Myanmar military's first use of air strikes against the KNU in 20 years and sent around 7,000 Karen villagers fleeing for safety, according to the armed group.

Naw Eh Tah, one of a handful who managed to cross the Salween River—which marks the border with Thailand—on Tuesday to seek medical treatment, described the moment the bombs hit. "We didn't hear the plane—if we did, we would have run," the 18-year-old told AFP at the small Sop Moei district hospital in Thailand's northern Mae Hong Son province. "By the time I realized what was happening, the explosion hit the roof of my house. "When I got hit, I couldn't walk—I had to climb to hide."

## 'Bombs dropped so quickly'

Her legs lacerated by shrapnel, Naw Eh Tah trekked for a day through dense tropical jungle to the river. "We crossed because I can't stay—the Myanmar army is all trying to get us," she said.

"I have never seen it (air strikes) before. I am so afraid." The youngest to cross on Tuesday, a 15-year-old, was also the most seriously hurt, with a broken rib and collapsed lung. Saw Lab Bray, 48, suffered shrapnel wounds all over his body when he was hit in KNU stronghold Day Puh Noh.

"I tried to run away but the bombs dropped so quickly," he told AFP from a hospital wheelchair, describing how he saw six people wounded and a man die. "I fell on my side and was coughing blood. I'm afraid because I cannot run, I cannot move." Doctor Chakri Komsakorn said the refugees looked like "they have been through war" with many shrapnel wounds becoming infected due to a lack of medicine.

## Australia misses vaccine target amid slow rollout

**SYDNEY:** Australia will fall well short of its initial COVID-19 vaccination target, Prime Minister Scott Morrison admitted yesterday, claiming European export restrictions were partly to blame. Largely coronavirus-free Australia has been heralded globally as a pandemic success story, but it is one of the few rich nations to have an extremely limited vaccination rollout. So far, just 670,000 doses have been administered in Australia, according to official statistics, far below the initial plan to jab four million people by the end of March.

Morrison said that target had been "dispensed with" months ago, and that strangled exports of three million doses from Europe were "obviously going to impact the early success". "It's not a race," he said, accusing critics of "wanting to play politics with vaccine and distribution". Critics have warned that Australia's slow vaccina-



Karen villagers, injured during air strikes in the area following the February military coup, resting after receiving medical treatment while taking shelter in a jungle near Day Pu No in Hpa-pun in eastern Myanmar's Karen state. — AFP

He added that "many appear to have been starving for many days". Chakri also said he had heard there were people with more serious wounds still trapped on the Myanmar side of the river, unable to cross because of the severity of their injuries. Karen groups say as many as 3,000 people fled across the river into Thailand after the air strikes before being sent back to Myanmar, though Thai officials insist they were not forced back. The Thai foreign ministry said late Tuesday about 2,300 have returned to Myanmar and about 550 remain in Thailand.

## 'Guns and sticks'

Mae Hong Son Governor Sithichai Jindaluang told a news conference that refugees who had not been badly affected by the bombings agreed to go back when asked. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said they had not been "scared off with guns or sticks" and insisted the kingdom would not turn people away if the situation worsened. The air strikes came as the junta struggled to quell nationwide protests demanding a restoration of the elected government and the release of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, ousted in the February 1 coup.

Some 50 Myanmar refugees who fled air strikes to neighboring Thailand "voluntarily" returned across the border yesterday, Thai authorities said, despite reports of continued bombings in their home state. Myanmar's military has launched air attacks in eastern Karen state for four straight days—the first such strikes in the area in more than 20 years—forcing 7,000 people to flee their homes.—AFP

tion rate risks new clusters emerging and an indefinite delay in reopening the country's borders.

Richard Holden, an economist at the University of New South Wales, said that Morrison "has to say 'it's not a race'". "Because if it was, we would have been lapped multiple times and be battling it out for 75th place," he tweeted. "Of course it's a race—against the



MELBOURNE: An elderly man leaves a COVID vaccination center in Melbourne yesterday as Australia's Prime Minister acknowledged the country would fall well short of its four million initial COVID-19 vaccination target. — AFP

## News in brief

## Japan raises alert as volcano erupts

**TOKYO:** A volcano in southwestern Japan has erupted, flinging large rocks hundreds of meters from the crater and prompting the meteorological agency to raise its alert level. Kyodo news agency reported early yesterday. There were no immediate reports of injuries after the eruption of Mount Otake in Kagoshima prefecture, according to Kyodo. The report said the Japan Meteorological Agency had raised its alert level to a three on a scale of five, meaning that people should not approach the crater. A first eruption reportedly took place just after 10 pm Tuesday, with a second near 3 am yesterday.—AFP

## Vietnam jails four activists

**HANOI:** Four activists have been jailed for up to ten years after Vietnamese courts found them guilty of spreading "anti-state propaganda". Vietnam's communist government is swearing in a new cabinet, with top leaders taking office in the next few days. It is also preparing for legislative elections in May for the rubber-stamp national assembly that has around 500 members. Pressure on human rights activists has coincided with these political events, observers say. In the southern Central Highlands province of Lam Dong on Tuesday, activist Vu Tien Chi, 55, was jailed for 10 years for sharing and posting online articles allegedly defaming the Communist Party and Vietnamese leaders.—AFP

## China locks city on Myanmar border

**BEIJING:** A Chinese city near the border with Myanmar has imposed a lockdown after six coronavirus cases were reported yesterday—the first significant cluster of COVID-19 disclosed in almost two months. Three asymptomatic cases in Ruili, a city of over 210,000 people, were also recorded as Myanmar nationals, aged between 24 and 28, according to health authorities in Yunnan province. Ruili is a major crossing point from Muse in neighboring Myanmar, which has seen escalating unrest since a February 1 military coup, raising fears that people may flood across the border if the violence intensifies.—AFP

## Indonesia jet's voice recorder found

**JAKARTA:** The cockpit voice recorder from a crashed Indonesian passenger jet has been found, the country's transport ministry said yesterday, more than two months after the accident that killed all 62 passengers and crew. Officials said a press briefing "regarding the discovery of the Cockpit Voice Recorder" from the Sriwijaya Air Boeing 737-500 would be held later. The 26-year-old plane—previously flown by US-based Continental Airlines and United Airlines—plunged around 3,000 meters (10,000 feet) into waters off Jakarta just minutes after takeoff on January 9. Divers had been searching the Java Sea for the missing voice recorder—one of the plane's two "black boxes"—which records flight crew conversations.—AFP

## Mexican smuggled in killed migrants

**LOS ANGELES:** A Mexican man accused of smuggling into the United States 13 immigrants who died in a horrific car crash near the border this month has been arrested and charged with federal crimes, prosecutors said Tuesday. The SUV crash—when a packed vehicle collided with a truck in California after crossing the frontier on March 2—made global headlines, and came amid a fresh surge of migrants attempting to enter the country from Mexico and Central America. Jose Cruz Noguez was taken into custody while entering the US Monday after being identified to law enforcement by another suspected smuggler, prosecutors said in a statement.—AFP

virus and outbreaks, and for economic recovery." Early in the pandemic, Morrison had boasted that Australia would be "at the front of the queue" for vaccines after a slew of deals with pharmaceutical firms AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Novavax. His government had set an initial target of having all adults fully vaccinated by October. Yesterday, Morrison indicated that the target had changed, saying "we are on track for our first dose for everyone by the end of October".

The crisis has resulted in some political finger-pointing, with state authorities yesterday angrily rejecting Canberra's claim that they were to blame for the delays. New South Wales premier Gladys Berejiklian—an ally in Morrison's conservative Liberal party—said she was not happy with such "untrue" and "extremely unfair" suggestions. Queensland premier Annastacia Palaszczuk described them as "outrageous". Australia has largely avoided widespread coronavirus transmission but has regularly had to scramble to contain outbreaks originating from hospitals and hotel quarantine for overseas arrivals. Around two million people are currently in lockdown in greater Brisbane—Australia's third-largest city—after around a dozen cases were detected.—AFP



THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2021

# Business

## Zain main and active partner in executing digital transformation

Zain Kuwait CEO Eaman Al-Roudhan participates in a panel discussion as part of EGOV8

**KUWAIT:** Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, took part in a panel discussion that came as part of the first day of the eighth eGovernment Forum (EGOV8). The event, sponsored by Zain, was hosted by NoufEXPO in a virtual format titled 'Integrated eGovernment: an urgent post corona need' and came under the patronage of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

The event's opening ceremony witnessed the participation of HH the Prime Minister's representative, Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Communications and Information Technology Dr Rana Al-Fares, Senior Vice President, President of Huawei Middle East - Huawei Charles Yang, NoufEXPO General Manager Yousef Al-Marzooq, and many prominent government officials and private sector executives.

EGOV8's first day featured a panel discussion titled: "Unified Permits System - Launch of Integrated e-Services and Government Process Reengineering Initiative", which witnessed the participation of Zain Kuwait CEO Eaman Al-Roudhan, Chairman and CEO of the Communications and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA) Salim Al-Ozainah, General Manager of Kuwait Municipality Ahmad Al-Manfouhi, President of the Federation of Kuwaiti Engineering Offices and Consultant Houses Bader Al-Salman, and Senior Vice President of SAP Middle East North Ahmed Al-Faifi.

During the panel discussion, Zain Kuwait CEO Eaman Al-Roudhan said: "I'm very pleased to take part in this panel today alongside my colleagues, who wonderfully summarized the necessary steps for successful implementation of digital transformation within the government, whether in relation to Kuwait Municipality in particular or the general roadmap for accelerating digital transformation within the public sector as a whole".

Al-Roudhan explained: "I would like to stress on an important point that we learned from our experience at Zain, which is a leader in both technology and digital transformation in the Kuwaiti market. We have taken a number of successful and

"Kuwaiti market is mature, advanced, and ready for digital transformation"

effective steps in executing digital transformation internally at Zain, as well as having successful partnerships in the same area with the public sector. We have built many fruitful partnerships between Zain and various government entities, including for example the smart meters project with the Ministry of Electricity and Water, and the recent "Shlonik" app for enforcing home quarantine measures in partnership with the Ministry of Health, and much more".

Al-Roudhan added: "it is imperative to have a unified and integrated platform for digital transformation to link government entities together. Our topic of discussion today, the Unified Permits System, is an example that I believe can go beyond merely issuing permits. Instead, the system can be utilized in a plethora of other post-permit purposes, including renewal, upgrades, updates, and more. One of the most crucial lessons we learned from our experience is the importance of the preparation and design phase of such platforms. Specifications and requirements must be unified, and this is an important factor in making this platform as success". Al-Roudhan continued: "the fact that every government entity adopts a different set of specifications and requirements for their platforms is simply not practical. Unfortunately, this is the reality today, as most government entities started implementing their own digital transformation process recently, but without unified systems, platforms, and filing systems. In order to avoid having to re-invest from scratch, plans for such specifications and requirements should be carefully unified and integrated as a first step to achieve the desired digital transformation outcomes with

utmost efficacy".

Al-Roudhan further explained: "the hardest part of executing digital transformation is training users who will benefit from such systems (in this case customers or citizens), as well as training the government entity's human resources who will operate, manage, and maintain the systems. In addition, there are financial investments needed for the software and hardware necessary to operate these systems". Al-Roudhan added: "another important note we learned from our experience and always stress on is the importance of reviewing processes. A common mistake that happens globally when implementing digital transformation is the automation of manual systems and existing non-electronic processes as they are straight into electronic systems. When doing this, digital transformation systems and platforms lose a great deal of flexibility and efficiency. Here lies the importance of carefully reviewing processes and existing systems, whether for the permits system or others. And in case there are more than one entity involved, the integration process has to be simplified first, then the processes must be automated in the right manner. Like this, we can achieve the desired outcomes of digital transformation".

Al-Roudhan mentioned: "the last point I would like to stress on is the importance of cybersecurity systems. We are in need of building sustainable teams and systems for cybersecurity, as we live in a fast-paced tech world. It is vital to unify cybersecurity systems against hacks, leaks, and weak points. These systems and all their related processes and workflows must be continuously and periodically reviewed in order for them to be sustainable, as these systems are an extremely



Zain Kuwait CEO Eaman Al-Roudhan



important part of the overall success of the automation of any integrated system".

Al-Roudhan concluded: "the private sector has a big and crucial role in government digital transformation projects in Kuwait. The Kuwaiti market is very mature from a technical point of view, and perhaps the best evidence on this is the rapid rate of smartphone usage in the nation. There's also a recent study that outlines that the size of the e-grocery business in Kuwait during 2020 exceeded the Saudi one. We all know the difference between Kuwait and KSA in terms of geographic size, population, spending expenditure capacity, and more. This is a clear indication of the maturity and readiness of the Kuwaiti market for digital transformation, and I believe it is important that we accelerate the plans we discussed to achieve digital transformation within the government".

This year, the forum came in an all-virtual format to abide by health guidelines imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Zain's support to the event for the fourth consecutive year affirmed its keenness on actively shouldering the various local efforts that contribute to developing the nation's infrastructure and progressing national economy. This is especially true during such unprecedented times that demand doubled efforts and more collaboration between the public and private sectors to combat the pandemic's impacts on health, economic, and social fronts.

## Hitachi buys US software firm GlobalLogic

**TOKYO:** Japan's Hitachi said yesterday it will fully acquire US software company GlobalLogic in a deal worth \$9.6 billion as it looks to expand its digital services offerings. Hitachi will pay \$8.5 billion for the firm, but the cost will be bumped up by the additional repayment of GlobalLogic's outstanding debt, the Japanese company said.

The purchase comes with Hitachi increasingly focused on tech offerings, including through its Internet of Things unit Lumada. "Through the acquisition, Hitachi expects the addition of GlobalLogic's advanced digital engineering capabilities, and its solid client base including major technology companies, to strengthen the digital portfolio of Lumada," Hitachi said in a press release. "Digital transformation continues to be a priority for organizations everywhere, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only expanded demand for new data-driven business models, customer experiences, and connected ecosystems," the company added.

"Against this backdrop, the demand for GlobalLogic's services is growing rapidly, and the combined company has greater access to this massive market opportunity." With 20,000 employees in 14 countries, GlobalLogic brings a network of design studios and software product development centres as well as hundreds of clients. The news, officially announced at the close of the trading day, was earlier reported by the Nikkei financial newspaper, and sent Hitachi stock plunging, ending the day down more than seven percent.

But Bloomberg Intelligence senior analyst Takeshi Kitaura said the acquisition "makes sense" given Hitachi's ambitions in the sector. "The company has a client network, which will help Hitachi grow further," he told Bloomberg News. The Nikkei report said Hitachi's purchase was likely to be a record acquisition for a Japanese electrical equipment firm. It comes after the firm's mammoth buyout, completed last year, of Swiss-Swedish engineering giant ABB for 704 billion yen (\$6.4 billion). —AFP

## Biden to unveil \$2tn 'once-in-a-century' infrastructure plan

**WASHINGTON:** President Joe Biden proposes a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan aimed at modernizing the United States' crumbling transport network, creating millions of jobs and enabling the country to "out-compete" China.

The first phase of Biden's "Build Back Better" program, which he will unveil in a speech in Pittsburgh, will detail massive investment spread over eight years. It plans to inject \$620 billion into transport, including upgrading 20,000 miles (32,000 kilometers) of roads and highways, repairing thousands of bridges and doubling federal funding for public transit. The president, whom Donald Trump tried to caricature as "Sleepy Joe" and a man without strong ideas or motivation, intends to make the bold infrastructure plan one of his flagship policies.

"He views his role as laying out... a broad vision, a bold vision for how we can invest in America, American workers, our communities," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

## A hydrogen future for planes, trains and factories

**PARIS:** Hydrogen could potentially power trains, planes, trucks and factories in the future, helping the world rid itself of harmful emissions. Here is a look at where the industry stands in various sectors:

### Cars and trucks

Hydrogen fuel cell electric cars are already on the road. Toyota launched the Mirai sedan, the world's first mass-market hydrogen fuel-cell vehicle, in late 2014 while Hyundai unveiled its Nexa SUV in 2018.

The starting retail prices are high for the average consumer, however, at around \$50,000 in the United States and higher in Europe. Other hurdles are a lack of recharging stations and the need for large reservoirs that eat up seating space.

Several automakers and equipment manufacturers have nonetheless unveiled substantial investment plans to improve the vehicles and develop race cars as well. A likely place to start is with freight transport, where hydrogen could replace diesel fuel. Vehicles can be refilled quickly, they have substantial autonomy, weight is not a problem and they are allowed in urban centres that might

The investment would be partly paid for by raising corporate tax from 21 percent to 28 percent. "The President is proposing to fundamentally reform the corporate tax code so that it incentivizes job creation and investment... and ensures that large corporations are paying their fair share," a senior administration official said ahead of the speech.

The new legislative offensive comes soon after Congress passed a nearly \$2 trillion COVID-19 economic stimulus plan. And Biden's speech is set to open a bitter battle in Congress, where the Democrats hold only a narrow majority and will face strong opposition from the Republicans.

The coming months will test the negotiating skills of the Democratic president, a veteran of Washington politics and deal-making, to the limit, and the chances of his infrastructure plan passing into law remain uncertain.

### 'Urgency of the moment'

"It's an important initiative to start the process with the president being very clear that he's got a plan, and that he's open to hearing what others think," the administration official said. "But what he is uncompromising about is the urgency of the moment and the need to really deliver for the American people and make good on building back better in this moment." The plan also vows to "spark

otherwise be off-limits to heavy trucks.

Hyundai has already rolled out prototypes, and GM, Traton (Volkswagen) and Toyota are accelerating the development of their own models. US start-up Nikola created a short-lived buzz with its promise of a hydrogen-fuelled truck before acknowledging it still had a long way to go. Several companies propose buses that run on hydrogen fuel cells, but the sector is still at the experimental stage.

### Train prototypes

Hydrogen-fuelled trains are tipped as a good alternative to diesel for trains that cannot run on electricity. They will need a dedicated refueling network however. French manufacturer Alstom has been testing such a train in Germany since late 2018, and is ready to build rolling stock.

SNCF and four French regions are expected to sign a contract for the trains this week, with a goal of putting a prototype on the rails in 2023, followed by pilot programs in 2024-25.

### Airplanes: 2035

The air transport sector is betting on hydrogen to cut 2005 pollution emission levels in half by 2050. Two main paths are being explored at present, the first being directly as a fuel for jet engines, which will mean overcoming serious technical obstacles and modifying the design of aircraft.

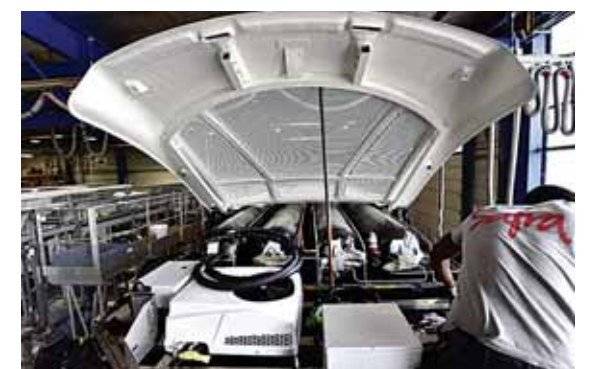
Even at -253 degrees C (-423 F), hydrogen takes up four times as much space as kerosene, which is what planes use at present. A second possibility is



With much of the country's creaking infrastructure dating back to the 1950s, the dream of new roads, bridges, railways and airports is shared by many Americans.—AFP

the electric vehicle revolution" by building a network of 500,000 EV chargers, replacing 50,000 diesel transit vehicles and electrifying 20 percent of the famous yellow school buses.

And it aims to make infrastructure more resilient to climate change. With much of the country's creaking infrastructure dating back to the 1950s, the dream of new roads, bridges, railways and airports is shared by many Americans. But building a political consensus to transform Biden's plan into reality is no easy task. —AFP



A technician works on the hydrogen tank of an under construction hydrogen bus, at the plant of the Albi's Automobile Company for Repair and Manufacturing (Societe Albigeoise Fabrication Reparation Automobile - SAFRA), in Albi, southwestern France.—AFP

to combine hydrogen with carbon dioxide (CO2) to produce a synthetic fuel that can be used by itself or with kerosene without major engine modifications. The European aircraft manufacturer Airbus has made hydrogen-fuelled planes a strategic priority, and is targeting 2035 as the date for at least one of three concepts to come to fruition. German aerospace research group DLR and Boeing are interested in the hybrid fuel concept, but the sector does not have the luxury of putting all its eggs in one basket, notes Sheila Remes, head of sustainable development at the US planemaker. —AFP



## Business

# Commercial Bank of Kuwait holds annual general assembly meeting

## Key achievements of bank reviewed as it marks 60-year journey

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The Commercial Bank of Kuwait held its Annual General Assembly Meeting yesterday, which was attended by 90.46 percent of shareholders. During this meeting the key achievements of the Bank was reviewed as 2020 marks the Bank's 60-year journey since incorporation. "There is no doubt that millions have been deeply affected by the combined health and economic challenges of COVID-19. I want to thank health workers and all those who serve on the frontlines, including Al-Tijari team. You kept us safe and supported essential services and continue to do so today despite significant challenges on all fronts," Chairman Ahmad Duaij Al-Sabah said during the meeting.

Banking serves a higher purpose, and this has never been more true than in 2020. "As a socially responsible Bank, we have a critical role to play in handling the circumstances, implications and crises posed by the pandemic. This role is represented in endeavors for recovery - to provide advice and services to the thousands of customers we serve, to help our economies grow and our communities thrive," added Al-Sabah.

### Execution in a period of unprecedented challenge

2020 brought many challenges, but also showcased the Bank's ability to face such challenges effectively and efficiently. "We benefited from investments in digitalization capabilities to quickly shift our operations during a period of significant disruption and uncertainty. Many of our team members seamlessly transitioned to working remotely, while those who needed to be on site to perform essential work were able to do so safely. Our team was steadfast in the face of challenges, and made a difference in the banking experience and lives of our clients," he pointed out.

Al-Tijari provided most of the banking services through mobile app, on-line or self-service kiosks. "In every decision we made, we put the well-being of our staff and customers at the forefront. Guided by medical advice from the Ministry of Public Health, we implemented health and safety precautions at every location across Kuwait. Though recent news of vaccination efforts is encouraging, COVID-19 remains a challenge and we will continue to focus on the safety of our customers, staff, and the community," stressed Al-Sabah.

As part of its prominent corporate social responsibility program, Al-Tijari has undertaken many initiatives and participated in social efforts to serve the society and mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on both retail and corporate customers. These efforts include the following:

The Bank has taken the necessary measures for implementing the Central Bank of Kuwait's initiative and Kuwait Banks Association's decision to defer the payment of installments for retail, small and medium-sized



KUWAIT: Commercial Bank of Kuwait Chairman Ahmad Duaij Al-Sabah addresses the bank's Annual General Assembly Meeting yesterday. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

companies for 6 months. This decision also stipulated cancellation of the interest arising from this deferral as well as any other applicable fees in line with Government's efforts to mitigate customers' burdens and protect small and medium sized enterprises.

The Bank contributed in the National Fund established by Kuwait Banking Association for raising KD 10 million by Kuwaiti Banks for supporting the efforts of the Ministry of Health in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic outbreak, Bank launched "Double Your Reward" Campaign duly approved by Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor to boost social solidarity. The Bank matched the amount donated by customer by 100 percent and the charitable societies and organizations participating in the campaign were credited this amount to their accounts at the Bank.

In terms of the financial performance, the Bank continues to deliver decent results at operating profit level with return on equity before provision at 12.9 percent. "In the year 2018, we adopted a proactive policy of early recognition of any expected problems and achieved non-performing loans level of zero. In continuation, we allocated most of the operating profit to create specific provision against some loans where the management had concerns. The specific provision was used to transfer those loans to memorandum account and resultant net profit attributable to the shareholders of the bank is zero. Thus, we maintained the non-performing loans at zero for the third consecutive year. It is a demonstration of our commitment to operate within our risk appetite

but maintain strong capital and liquidity positions," he further said.

### Resilient and focused on the future

While meeting the operational challenges posed by the pandemic, the Bank made progress on critical strategic initiatives to position itself for growth in the years to come. The pace and scope of the Bank's digital journey accelerated. Investments to train and up skill our teams were also increased.

New initiatives were taken during 2020 to introduce new features like, but not limited to, launching Fitbit Pay and Garmin Pay; allowing customers to pay from their wearable devices on POS, launching new account opening; an end to end automated process without visiting the branch, cheque deposit service upgrade; customers need not to deliver the cheques to the branch, Tijari wallet; allowing customers to digitize their cards on Android devices. Tokenization of cards enabling NFC/contactless payment for our customers. New value added services were introduced to our Smart Machines and Self Service Kiosks. Last but not least, network infrastructure and the Data Center revamping to enhance the needed capacity, security and flexibility for future development and digitalization.

### Synopsis of 2020 financials

CBK generated an operating profit, before provisions, of KD 91.5 million for the year 2020. "In line with the Bank's prudent policy of proactive recognition of problems, the operating profit was mainly allocated to the pro-

visions. The resultant net profit attributable to the shareholders of the Bank is zero for the year 2020 (2019: KD zero). As at the end of the year, total loan loss reserve held with the Bank amounted to KD 136.5 million. The Bank will continue to pursue its right to recover loans transferred to the memorandum account by taking appropriate measures required in this regard," explained Al-Sabah.

### Financial highlights

Undoubtedly, the consequences of COVID-19 have adversely impacted the Bank's performance. The key financial performance indicators are as below: Operating income of KD 131.6 million and operating profit KD 91.5 million for the year ended 31 December 2020, decreased by 17.1 percent and 15.7 percent against year ended 31 December 2019 respectively. However, the cost to income ratio is efficiently maintained at 30.5 percent as compared to 31.6 percent of December 2019.

Customer loans and advances at KD 2,279.1 million, increased by 0.5 percent. However, the total assets at KD 4,388.8 million decreased by 9.9 percent, on year to year basis. Robust regulatory ratios, comfortably exceeded the Central Bank's statutory requirement, Capital Adequacy Ratio 18.4 percent, Liquidity Coverage Ratio 162.6 percent, Net Stable Funding Ratio of 107.3 percent and Leverage ratio of 11.7 percent.

### Looking ahead to 2021 and beyond

"The need for advice and the value of relationships amidst changing market conditions have never been higher. To attract new clients and drive growth, banks will need to invest in their infrastructure and advice capabilities to enable the right conversations with clients at this pivotal moment for so many families and businesses. We believe our strategy positions us well to succeed in this evolving market. While clients will continue to embrace digital techniques, we will continue to enhance our capacity in this area," noted Al-Sabah.

"Our Bank is well positioned for the changes occurring in the market for financial services and in the broader economy. We've transformed our culture around our clients at a time when relationships are becoming entrenched as the primary value proposition for financial institutions, which positions us well in future," he added. "I am incredibly proud of our team for their efforts during the crisis and the Executive Management endeavors for enhancing the Bank's robust stand in the Kuwaiti Banking sector. I also want to express the Bank's appreciation to our shareholders for their ongoing support and to our customers for the opportunity to serve them. We will continue to strive to maintain your support and trust. Many thanks to all the regulatory authorities, especially the Central Bank of Kuwait for their constant support," concluded Al-Sabah.

## Fossil fuel stocks lost \$120bn in decade: Analysis

PARIS: Share offerings in fossil fuel producing and related companies lost \$123 billion in the last decade, underperforming a baseline world equities index by 52 percent, according to analysis released yesterday. The trend was in stark contrast to gains made in renewable energy initial public offerings (IPOs), according to the analysis by industry think tank Carbon Tracker, which lays bare the yawning losses faced by investors in high-carbon energy.

Issuance of fossil fuel offerings fell by 85 percent from \$70 billion to \$10 billion in the period analyzed from 2012-2020. This contrasted with a record \$11 billion in renewable public equity offerings, it found. In all, investors bought almost \$640 billion of equity issued by fossil fuel producers, utilities, pipelines and service providers—a drop of 20 percent in value despite nearly a decade of bullish equities, the analysis showed. Mark Campanale, founder and executive director of Carbon Tracker, said that investors were mistaken in thinking that the historic low oil prices witnessed at the height of the pandemic last year were an aberration.

"They're thinking that actually fossil fuel stocks have gotten bombed out, that the bottom is purely cyclical and there's going to be a recovery post COVID, that there's going to be a huge bounce," he told AFP. "Whereas in fact there's this fundamental structural change taking place in the energy system from high carbon to low carbon and it's being driven by technology."

The analysis looked at stock market fortunes of fossil fuel companies and compared them against renewable companies and against the MSCI All Country World Index (ACWI) as a benchmark. It found that an investor who bought into all fossil fuel and related equity issuances from 2012 until 2020 would have seen their investments outperformed by the ACWI by 52 percent. Campanale said that many people were likely losing money due to fossil fuels' relative losses in equities markets. "If you're a member of a pension scheme that has a default passive fund manager that replicates the market, you're almost certainly going to be buying one of these IPOs," he said. "It will be costing you money because of the huge underperformance."

The report showed that investors were largely missing out on the opportunity to increase the value of their assets by buying renewable offerings. Only one percent of the total equity raised by companies during the period analyzed came from renewable and clean tech offerings. —AFP

## Total's Mozambican gas plans delayed, not doused by attacks

PARIS: A deadly assault by Islamic State-linked militants in Mozambique could delay plans by Total to build a massive liquefied natural gas facility, analysts warn, although the project is still likely to go forward. Dozens of civilians were killed in the assault and capture of the key northern town of Palma by militants, and thousands fled the area. Total, a French energy major, announced Saturday that it was suspending operations at the facility, located just a dozen kilometers from Palma. The announcement came just days after Total announced it was resuming construction, which had been suspended for months owing to previous violence.

The Mozambique LNG project envisages building a massive facility capable of chilling and compressing natural gas into a liquid state, which makes it much easier to transport large amounts by ship. The facility will also be capable of storing liquefied natural gas (LNG) and loading it onto ships. Total and its partners plan to invest \$20 billion in the project, and raised nearly \$15 billion in financing last year, the largest amount ever for a project in Africa. Last month, Total chief executive Patrick Pouyanné insisted that the project, which it inherited from the US energy firm Anadarko, was still on track to begin operations in 2024.

He indicated having reached agreement with Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi on creating a 25-kilometre (15-mile) secure zone around the site before work resumes on the site. That objective will be much more complicated now that militants have taken control of Palma.

### 'Perhaps two years'

Joseph Hanlon, an expert on the region at Britain's

## H&M 'dedicated to regaining trust' in China after boycott

STOCKHOLM: Swedish clothing giant H&M said yesterday it was doing "everything" to resolve a boycott in China that was sparked by its decision to stop sourcing cotton from Xinjiang over forced labor concerns. H&M and other fashion brands have been under fire in China for statements voicing concern about allegations of labor violations in cotton fields in the far west region. Chinese celebrities and tech firms pulled partnerships with H&M, Nike, Adidas, Burberry and Calvin Klein. H&M was even erased from Chinese shopping apps. "We are working together with our colleagues in China to do everything we can to man-



PARIS: The logo of French oil company headquarters Total in La Defense business district, near Paris. French energy giant Total has suspended its gas operations in northern Mozambique following a brazen jihadist attack close to its site that left several people dead, the company said. — AFP

Open University, said it was unlikely Total would return in the short term as the government had failed to provide security for the facility. "It will take perhaps two years for US, Portuguese and other trainers to create a functioning army" capable of maintaining security, Hanlon estimated. But Michel Cahen, a specialist on Portuguese-speaking parts of Africa at France's National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS), said: "I don't think Total will abandon" the project.

"But it could put it on ice for the time needed—one year, two years" for security to be established in the region, he said. "We are now expecting the project to start in the second half of 2025," said analyst Pranav Joshi at Rystad Energy. "I don't have any doubts that the project will advance and enter into service despite the very high level of political risk and what just happened in Palma," said Francis Perrin, director of research at the Institute of Strategic and International Relations in Paris.

He noted that Total's diverse portfolio means it is not dependent upon the project. "They currently have 10 natural gas liquefaction facilities in operation that cover the major regions of the world," said Perrin.

age the current challenges and find a way forward," H&M said in a statement. "We are dedicated to regaining the trust and confidence of our customers, colleagues, and business partners in China," it said.

Australian Olympians were the latest to be embroiled in the row yesterday as the country revealed its uniforms for the upcoming Tokyo Games. The Australian Olympic committee faced criticism as it rolled out ASICS-branded sportswear, with the company facing questions over its use of cotton from the Xinjiang region. The vice president of the Olympic Committee said it had been assured that none of the cotton came from that region. Rights groups say more than one million Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim ethnic minorities have been held in internment camps in Xinjiang, where they have also been forced to work in factories.

### 'Very important market'

H&M makes around six percent of its revenue in China, which is home to nearly 10 percent of its

Even without Mozambique, Total "will remain a major in LNG," he added. LNG is a very important element of Total's strategy to diversify and reduce the carbon impact of its operations.

### Stepping on the gas

Burning natural gas produces considerably less CO2 responsible for global warming than oil and coal, and demand for the fuel has been increasing. It even rose last year as the Covid-19 pandemic dampened energy demand overall. Total has risen to number two globally in the fuel among private energy firms, behind Shell.

While important for the firm, it doesn't have all its eggs in the LNG basket, however.

"Total has other interests in Africa. It has only spent a small part of the \$20 billion project cost, and can still walk away," said the Open University's Hanlon. If Total can indeed walk away, the Mozambican government finds itself in a tough situation—it has bet big on natural gas to improve its economy. ExxonMobil has apparently gone cold on its Mozambique gas project, while Italy's ENI is only moving forward with a portion of its own project at the moment.

"Mozambique is waking up to the realization that billions of dollars flowing into the state budget and local pockets was only a dream," said Hanlon. The energy consultancy WoodMackenzie has estimated that Total's project alone could generate \$3 billion per year in revenue for the government by 2030.

That is an enormous amount for a country with a gross domestic product of around \$15 billion currently. Experts are divided over whether the insurgency is being driven by the prospect of gas riches. Some believe Islamic State militants took over an existing local insurgency. "Local people saw the development of ruby mines and the initial gas development, and realized there were no jobs for them: the gas and ruby money was not trickling down to them," said Hanlon. But CNRS's Cahen believes it isn't a struggle to control the gas resources. "If Total is attacked, it is because it has allied itself with the Mozambican government," he said. —AFP

stores. China had become H&M's third biggest market before the boycott. The company has not released the figures on the financial impact of the boycott or which measures it has taken in response to the controversy. "China is a very important market to us and our long-term commitment to the country remains strong," H&M said, noting it has been presented in the country for more than 30 years. "We want to be a responsible buyer, in China and elsewhere, and are now building forward-looking strategies and actively working on next steps with regards to material sourcing." The statement was issued on the sidelines of quarterly results which showed a net loss of 1.07 billion kronor (104 million euros, \$123 million) in the December to February period due to the coronavirus pandemic. In late March, about 1,500 of the company's 5,000 stores were temporarily closed due to coronavirus restrictions, H&M said. Sales, however, jumped 55 percent in March compared to the same month last year. — AFP



## Business

# Deliveroo shares falls 23% on London stock market launch

## App-driven meals delivery group faces criticism over its treatment of riders

**LONDON:** Deliveroo shares slumped 23 percent as it launched on the London stock market yesterday, with the app-driven meals delivery group facing criticism over its treatment of riders. The Deliveroo IPO was London's biggest stock market launch for a decade, valuing the group at £7.6 billion (\$10.4 billion, 8.9 billion euros), after the eight-year-old British company enjoyed surging sales during the coronavirus pandemic as locked-down people ordered in.

Deliveroo said earlier this week that it had seen "very significant demand from institutions across the globe", but some asset management firms decided against buying any shares, citing the job insecurity and conditions of its riders. It skidded on its market debut, with shares plunging to £3.02 after an initial public offering of £3.90 per share.

Trading opened down 15 percent before institutional investors—the first allowed to buy and sell Deliveroo shares—pushed down its price further. Deliveroo is selling just over one-fifth of the group, while the general public can start trading in its shares from April 7.

"I am very proud that Deliveroo is going public in London—our home," founder and chief executive Will Shu said in a statement ahead of the start of trading. "In this next

phase of our journey as a public company we will continue to invest in the innovations that help restaurants and grocers to grow their businesses, to bring customers more choice than ever before, and to provide riders with more work."

Amazon-backed Deliveroo maintains that its riders—around 100,000 across 800 cities worldwide—value the flexibility the job affords. However, its business model has come under scrutiny, including in Britain, France and Spain, over conditions. The highly anticipated float has been overshadowed by small-scale protests, strikes and rallies in Australia, Britain and France, with more set to follow.

### London boost

Deliveroo's listing is seen as a major boost to London's financial sector, known as the City, which earlier this year lost its European share trading crown to Amsterdam following Brexit. The stock market float is set to be London's largest since Swiss miner Glencore's IPO in 2011 valued at almost £37 billion. Deliveroo has said that a portion of its stock is being made available for customers, with delivery riders and restaurant partners also able to participate. The company is adopting a dual class share structure, giving Shu

20 votes per share while all other shareholders get one vote per share.

"Concerns over working conditions for its riders were... cited as one of the reasons for the reluctance to invest," said Michael Hewson, chief market analyst at CMC Markets UK. However, he added, "there are probably a number of others, including the dual class structure which restricts the voting rights of ordinary shareholders and gives CEO Will Shu, majority control over any significant board decisions."

Hewson added that "recent weakness in the share price of a number of its peers in the US, like DoorDash, appears to have taken some of the shine off the sector". Britain's antitrust regulator last year approved Amazon's 16-percent investment in Deliveroo after an in-depth probe concluded it would not harm competition. In 2020, more than six million people ordered food and drink every month via Deliveroo's app from 115,000 cafes, restaurants and stores.

But it still ended up with a hefty loss owing to rising costs. Pressure has meanwhile intensified on the wider "gig" economy to improve staff conditions after Uber earlier this month granted its UK drivers worker status, with benefits including a minimum wage. A world first for the US ride-



**LONDON:** A Deliveroo rider cycles through central London. Deliveroo shares slumped 15 percent at the start of its entry in the London stock market yesterday as the app-driven meals delivery group faces criticism over its treatment of riders. —AFP

hailing giant, Uber moved after Britain's Supreme Court ruled that its drivers were entitled to worker's rights. —AFP

## NBK adds exclusive benefits to youth under premium family banking

**KUWAIT:** National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen to provide the latest and most advanced banking services to all its customers, especially from the youth segment, for which the bank is committed to offer an exceptional banking experience. In this context, the bank is providing exclusive benefits for the youth under Premium Family Banking Customers.

The exceptional benefits provided to the youth from the family members of Premium Family Banking Customers feature access to best-in-class digital investment services with SmartWealth by NBK Capital. SmartWealth is an online investment platform that offers global and comprehensive long-term investment and saving services, with financial advice, access, and exposure to global markets in a cost-effective manner. The minimum amount to begin investing with SmartWealth is usually \$5,000. However, youth under

Premium Family Banking have the exclusive ability to start investing at only \$100 per month, with a minimum 36-month subscription. This aims to develop better financial habits in the younger generation and positions investing as a way to work towards their goals.

In addition, the youth above the age of 15 can get a supplementary credit card free of charge, and choose between getting a NBK Multicurrency Prepaid Card free of issuance fees or NBK Visa Prepaid Card for of charge. They can also benefit from the offers and rewards available for Al Shabab Package before transferring student allowance, and enjoy an easy account opening process at National Bank of Kuwait - London and National Bank of Kuwait - Egypt prior to studying abroad.

On this occasion, Mohammed Akram Hashim, Head of Segments, Consumer Banking Group, National Bank of Kuwait, said: "NBK seeks to provide distinguished and exclusive services to our customers from the youth segment as part of our focus on offering them an exceptional banking experience including digital services and the unique rewards program tailored to meet their expectations."

Hashim added: "We seek to instill the culture of saving in the youth as part of our strategy to achieve financial inclusion. To this end, we have enabled them to open a SmartWealth account, which provides simplified smart

investment solutions to help the youth begin building their financial futures."

Family Banking provides an array of exceptional benefits to family members of Privilege Banking Customers, including: Dedicated Relationship Manager, NBK Visa Infinite Credit Card free of charge for the 1st year, reduced fees on NBK Prepaid Cards and safety deposit boxes, free access for family members at many airport lounges worldwide, as well as a higher amount of 0% interest loan for newly employed family members who transfer salaries. For the family members of Thahabi Packages Customers, they also receive a variety of exclusive services including: Dedicated Personal Banking Officer, NBK Visa Signature Credit Card free of charge for the 1st year, reduced fees on NBK Prepaid Cards and safety deposit boxes, in addition to a higher amount of 0% interest loan for newly employed family members who transfer Salaries. All family members are eligible to enjoy NBK Family Banking services, up to 6 members in total.



Mohammed Akram Hashim

## Huawei releases its 2020 annual report

**SHENZHEN, China:** Huawei released its 2020 Annual Report yesterday. Growth slowed, but the company's business performance was largely in line with forecast. Huawei's sales revenue in 2020 rounded off at approximately \$136.7 billion, up 3.8 percent year-on-year, and its net profit reached \$9.9 billion, up 3.2 percent year-on-year.

Despite operational difficulties brought about by US sanctions in 2019 and 2020, Huawei has and will continue to invite KPMG to independently and objectively audit our financial statements. The document produced by KPMG is a standard unqualified audit opinion. No matter the circumstances, we will continue to embrace transparency by disclosing operational data to governments, customers, suppliers, employees, and partners.

In 2020, Huawei's carrier business continued to ensure the stable operations of more than 1,500 networks across more than 170 countries and regions, which helped support telework, online learning, and online shopping throughout COVID-19 lockdowns. Working together with carriers around the world, the company helped provide a superior connected experience and moved forward with more than 3,000 5G innovation projects in over 20 industries like coal mining, steel production, ports, and manufacturing.

Over the past year, Huawei's enterprise business stepped up efforts to develop innovative scenario-based solutions for different industries and create a digital ecosystem that thrives on joint creation and shared success. During the pandemic, Huawei provided technical expertise and solutions that were vital in the fight against the virus. One example is an AI-assisted diagnostic solution based on HUAWEI CLOUD that helped hospitals the world over reduce the burden on their medical infrastructure. Huawei also worked with partners to launch cloud-based online learning platforms for more than 50 million primary and secondary school students.

With the rollout of HarmonyOS and the Huawei Mobile Services (HMS) ecosystem, Huawei's consumer business moved forward with its Seamless AI Life strategy ("1 + 8 + N") to provide consumers with an intelligent experience across all devices and scenarios, focusing on smart office, fitness & health, smart home, easy travel, and entertainment.

"Over the past year we've held strong in the face of adversity," said Ken Hu, Huawei's Rotating Chairman. "We've kept innovating to create value for our customers, to help fight the pandemic, and to support both economic recovery and social progress around the world. We also took this opportunity to further enhance our operations, leading to a performance that was largely in line with forecast."

"We will continue to work closely with our customers and partners to support social progress, economic growth, and sustainable development."



Ken Hu

## Pakistan embassy in Kuwait in collaboration with Meezan Bank and Pakistani Banking & Finance Professionals in Kuwait organized a webinar on Riba-free Financing and investment opportunities in Pakistan through Roshan Digital Account.

**P**akistan embassy in collaboration with Meezan bank (a Kuwaiti shareholding bank in Pakistan) and Pakistani Banking and Finance Professionals in Kuwait (PBFPPK) organized a webinar on "Riba-free Financing and investment opportunities in Pakistan through Roshan Digital account". The program commenced at 12:00 P.M. with recitation of Holy Quran by Ahmed Ali Siddiqui, followed by the welcome remarks of Mr. Muhammad Irfan Siddiqui The Founding CEO of Meezan bank. In his opening remarks Mr. Siddiqui gave a brief introduction about himself and Meezan bank. He mentioned that Meezan bank is 35% owned by Noor Financial Investment Company and 65% by Pakistan Kuwait Investment Company (which is 50% owned by Kuwait Government).

During his welcome remarks Mr. Siddiqui appreciated His Excellency Syed Sajjad Haider the ambassador of Pakistan to Kuwait, for taking initiative of inviting the attention to hold webinar on Roshan Digital Account in order to raise awareness among nonresident Pakistanis. Mr. Siddiqui also extended gratitude and welcomed the efforts of the ambassador Sajjad Haider's for further strengthening Kuwait Pakistan bilateral relations, which resulted in recent development of Pakistani medical staff arriving and joining Ministry of health of Kuwait. Mr. Ahmed Siddiqui then invited His excellency Syed Sajjad Haider the ambassador of Pakistan to Kuwait for his speech. His Excellency Syed Sajjad Haider thanked all the panelists and participants. He confirmed the medical staff arrival in Kuwait. He emphasized that nine million non resident Pakistan reside all over the world and this requires more focus to create awareness on Roshan Digital Account. He also reiterated, since Meezan bank is Kuwaiti investment in Pakistan and has eight hundred branches in all over the Pakistan therefore an awareness campaign should take place to highlight among Kuwaitis that this one of the best performing bank belongs to Kuwait. He also suggested to have information on the NRPs from Kuwait who have opened account with Meezan bank. He suggested that Pakistani missions in different countries should also play their role in creating awareness on Roshan Digital Account. He also mentioned that he always encourages his colleagues and staff to open RDA. He mentioned that NRPs from Kuwait can be potential customer for Roshan Digital Account to increase number of accounts with Meezan bank a Kuwaiti investment. The registration for the webinar was above four



hundred and these registered participants also prospective customer, he mentioned. He reiterated that the housewives should also be targeted to create awareness of Roshan Digital Account. He mentioned that Roshan Digital Account have received remittances above five hundred million dollars during first five months after state bank of Pakistan took this initiative last year. Ambassador Sajjad Haider also suggested to hold such webinar more frequently to raise awareness on RDA. After his speech the representative of State Bank of Pakistan Syed Irfan Ali (Managing Director deposits protection corporation of State Bank of Pakistan) elaborated on the features and benefits of the initiative Roshan Digital Account. He welcomed the suggestion of the ambassador Syed Sajjad and affirmed that his suggestions will be taken care off. His speech followed by the further elaboration by Mr. Muhammad Raza Group head customer service Meezan bank, on the functionality of Roshan Digital account and it's Sharia compliant feature. He gave a presentation on the Roshan Digital Account opening process. He also gave brief on the Riba-free investment financing opportunities in Pakistan. He mentioned that the most appealing and interesting segment of the webinar to him was the speech of His excellency Syed Sajjad. At the end of the webinar Q&A session took place and above mentioned panelist including Muhammad Tahir Bashir President Pakistani Banking and Finance Professionals in Kuwait answered the questions of the participants which were not answered by the back end team during the webinar. The webinar was concluded at 1:15 P.M. with closing remarks of Mr. Siddiqui and the ambassador Syed Sajjad.

## Ooredoo Group to sell 4,200 towers in Indonesia in \$750 million deal

**DOHA:** Ooredoo Q.P.S.C. ("Ooredoo" or the "Group") yesterday announced that its Indonesian operating company, PT Indosat Tbk. ("Indosat Ooredoo"), has signed a sale and leaseback agreement with PT EPID Menara AssetCo ("Edge Point Indonesia") for more than 4,200 telecommunications towers. PT EPID Menara AssetCo is an Indonesian subsidiary of Edge Point Singapore, which is wholly owned by Digital Colony, a leading global digital infrastructure investor with extensive experience owning and operating cellular towers.

Indosat Ooredoo has agreed to sell this portfolio of towers in a transaction valued at \$750 million, including a supplementary offer, making it one of the largest deals of its kind in Asia. The sale will unlock capital to create value for shareholders and continue to build Indosat Ooredoo's strong growth momentum through improvements to network performance and the launch of innovative new digital solutions to enhance the customer experience. The sale is part of Ooredoo Group's strategy to move to a more efficient and flexible asset light model and unlock the trapped value of its infrastructure portfolio. Prior to this deal, Ooredoo had a global portfolio of approximately 27,000 owned towers, representing an infrastructure portfolio of significant value for the Group. Monetizing these assets to create more value for both shareholders and customers is a key focus of Ooredoo's current strategy.

Aziz Aluthman Fakhroo, Managing Director of Ooredoo Group, said: "Congratulations to Indosat Ooredoo on this sale and leaseback agreement with Edge Point Indonesia, which aligns perfectly with our new strategy and its focus on creating more value for shareholders and customers. This strategy incorporates a shift towards an asset-light model that will help us unlock significant capital and enable us to focus on our core mission of delivering outstanding digital and enterprise services to our customer base. I extend our gratitude to the Government of Indonesia for its progressive policies that leave a positive impact on the industry, its operators and its people."

Edge Point Indonesia was declared the winning bidder of a competitive tender process conducted by Indosat Ooredoo. The transaction is expected to close in Q2 2021 subject to customary conditions, including shareholder approval by Indosat Ooredoo at an EGM, which is planned to be held on May 6th. Indosat Ooredoo will lease back space on the towers for a period of 10-years to meet its ongoing requirements. President Director and Chief Executive Officer of Indosat Ooredoo, Ahmad Al Neama, added: "I am delighted that Indosat Ooredoo has agreed this deal, which furthers our strategy to create more value from our infrastructure assets. The deal marks the third and final sale of assets from our high-quality tower portfolio and continues our transition into a leading digital telecoms company. We are confident the leaseback agreement, with its attractive terms, will continue to meet our ongoing tower needs, while the capital that we have unlocked will provide further fuel to power our growth momentum. Indosat Ooredoo and Edge Point Indonesia will work closely together going forward and build a strong and long-lasting strategic partnership." J.P. Morgan acted as financial advisor to Indosat Ooredoo throughout the transaction.



# CLINIC PAGE



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## Lifestyle | Features

## Moroccan illustrator using comics for #MeToo campaign

Young Moroccan cartoonist Zainab Fasiki draws on a whiteboard in a Casablanca studio where she is holding a workshop that mixes art with a homegrown illustrated #MeToo campaign. "We are here to change this rape culture, which says the victim deserves what they get while the criminal is innocent," says Fasiki, 26, her eyes flashing with indignation. A dozen students and professionals have joined forces with Fasiki, a pioneer in comics and illustration in Morocco, in response to a web series titled #TaAnaMeToo that depicts women's real-life ordeals.

As part of the series—"Ta ana" means "Me Too" in Moroccan Arabic dialect—she illustrated the harrowing testimony of a 22-year-old woman who for years was raped by her brother, to the indifference of her parents. Unlike in the broader #MeToo movement, the Moroccan women who have agreed to share their stories for the campaign have preferred to remain anonymous. Series producer Youssef Ziraoui says rape victims in Morocco not only have to deal with a sense of "shame" and the risk of being cast out by their families, but can face charges for sex before marriage under Moroccan law if they go to the police.

The participants in the Casablanca workshop are looking for creative comebacks to some of the toxic reactions the



Zainab Fasiki, a Moroccan cartoonist and activist for women's rights, poses with her latest book entitled 'Hshouma' in the western Moroccan coastal city of Casablanca. — AFP photos

campaign has elicited. "Choose a negative comment and respond to it," Fasiki says, as the group gets to work on tablets or with paper and pencil. Fasiki, who calls herself an "activist" (an artist and activist), says art is "a major instrument of change". "Images have power, particularly on social media."

#### 'Revolution, resistance'

The illustrator, her dark hair cropped in a short bob, says she became a feminist at age 14, when she began to feel that often "being a woman is a sin" in the

North African country. "There is a culture where men correct women, keep an eye on them—it's a patriarchal system," she says. "Men treat us as if we weren't humans who are responsible for our choices." She is pushing through her illustrations for "changes to laws written by men, for men, to control women's bodies", she adds. The self-taught Fasiki says her artistic training involved reading comics as a child, drawing in her bedroom as an adolescent, and "meeting authors at comics festivals" when she was old enough to travel.



Zainab Fasiki, a Moroccan cartoonist and activist for women's rights, attends a workshop in the western Moroccan coastal city of Casablanca.

Fasiki became known on social media for her nude self-portraits and for illustrations showing "the female body as it is, without taboos". Her book "Hshouma" (modesty) — a term she says covers "the culture of shame" around women's bodies in Morocco—took her to a wider audience, in a country where sex education is also taboo. "Some feminists think that drawing the naked female form doesn't serve the cause," she says. "I think it's a revolution—a form of resistance in the face of a patriarchy-based history."

#### Stifling talent

Fasiki says she was unable to find a local publisher for "Hshouma", and the book's first edition was instead published in Paris in 2019. Florent Massot, her French publisher, told AFP the book had had "good sales" in Morocco. "Zainab is very courageous," he said. "She is always very positive even though she gets insulted a lot on social media." Fasiki is preparing for an exhibition at a contemporary art museum in Tetouan, and will also be teaching at a fine arts school in the northern Moroccan city.

She says she is looking forward to countering "artists who preach against artistic nudity", and wants to "develop the female presence in art". First and foremost, that requires helping girls "escape the control of their family", says Fasiki, adding that she was influenced by French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir and her seminal work "The Second Sex". "When I started to publish (my work) on social media, my family told me, 'either you stop or we don't consider you a member of the family anymore,'" she says. But she was undeterred. "This type of control over children, who are doing nothing wrong apart from living their passion, has destroyed thousands of talents," she says. — AFP



## 'Game of Thrones' play in the works for 2023

"Game of Thrones" is headed to Broadway, its production team announced Tuesday, with plans to bring key characters from the wildly successful cult series to the stage in 2023. George R.R. Martin, author of the literary saga that started it all, is collaborating on the theatrical piece with British playwright Duncan MacMillan and director Dominic Cooke. The play will take place during "a pivotal moment in the history of the series," read a statement from the team, which includes producers Simon Painter, Tim Lawson and Jonathan Sanford, who presented "The Illusionists" on Broadway in 2014.

"Our dream is to bring Westeros to Broadway, to the West End, to Australia... and eventually, to a stage near you," Martin said in a statement, referring to the fictional world where the tales take place. Martin said work on the project began before the pandemic. The saga's defining moment that will underpin the play is the Harrenhal tournament, which is to have taken place roughly 17 years before the first season of the HBO series. The production is to feature "many of the most iconic and well-known characters" from the books and the series, which came out over eight seasons from 2011 to 2019.—AFP

## 'Big Brother' still huge in Brazil, 21 seasons on

Brazilian TV is perhaps best known for its "telenovelas," but another kind of show has been captivating the country and holding a mirror up to its changing face for 21 seasons: reality franchise "Big Brother Brazil." "BBB," as it is affectionately known, is a cultural phenomenon in Brazil, with extensive media coverage devoted to every twist and a national conversation that has drawn in politicians, celebrities and even football superstar Neymar, who regularly stays up late in France tweeting about the show. The nightly series has an average audience of 40 million viewers this season-up 5.1 million from last year—and 50-percent audience share for its time slot, just after the religiously followed telenovela, or prime-time soap opera, on TV Globo, Brazil's largest broadcaster.

Branded the "Biggest of the Bigs," the 21st season is set to be the longest yet, with 100 episodes—and also the most lucrative. Sponsors' logos are

## Oscars plan UK, France venues for nominees over pandemic travel fears

Next month's pandemic-affected Oscars ceremony will include venues in the United Kingdom and France for international nominees unable to travel to Los Angeles, sources familiar with the plan told AFP Tuesday. While Oscars presenters will remain at the previously announced main location in downtown Los Angeles' Union Station—just a short drive from Hollywood—producers are "planning something special" for the British "central hub," one source said. Another "satellite hub" is planned for Paris.

The Academy Awards—the biggest and final night of Hollywood's sprawling award season—had faced growing criticism after producers earlier this month said no video calls would be allowed for those unwilling or unable to attend in person. Eight of the nominated actors this year are British, including 83-year-old Anthony Hopkins for "The Father"—a play adaptation about dementia written by French director Florian Zeller, who is also nominated for his screenplay.

Under the previous plans, all nominees would have been required to travel to California despite facing potential travel restrictions, lengthy quarantine requirements and the inherent risks of flying during a pandemic—or face being left out of the show entirely. With the new policy, satellite links will now be provided for international nominees around the world who have no way of getting to Los Angeles—although video calling will still be kept to a minimum.



In this file photo the main entrance of Union Station in Los Angeles, where part of the 2021 Oscars Ceremony will take place. — AFP

omnipresent in the show's custom-built villa-turned-national fishbowl, where contestants have been filmed around the clock by 11 cameras since January 25. Three 30-second commercial spots are all it takes for Globo to cover the prize money awarded the eventual winner: 1.5 million reais (\$260,000). But beyond the numbers, BBB is a veritable institution in Brazil, one whose many fans—including world-famous celebrities such as Neymar and singer Anitta—react in real time on social media to every episode.

#### 'Like a World Cup'

"When Big Brother Brazil comes along each year, everyone watches the same thing, and gets to talk about it, much like

Recent award shows including February's Golden Globes have been slammed for their heavy use of remote calling for nominees, particularly after the start of Daniel Kaluuya's acceptance speech for best supporting actor briefly lost audio. Oscars producers have spoken of their desire for a ceremony that "will look like a movie, not a television show," promising a spectacular introduction and planning to film proceedings in high-definition, widescreen format.

#### 'The virtual thing'

The 93rd Academy Awards will take place on April 25, concluding a much-delayed Hollywood awards season. Organizers are still urging all nominees who are able to attend the Los Angeles ceremony in person to do so, and have asked attendees to observe a 10-day quarantine during which they will be asked to avoid crowds, gyms and restaurants. The night will feature extensive Covid-19 testing precautions for nominees and their guests.

"We are going to great lengths to provide a safe and enjoyable evening for all of you in person, as well as for all the millions of film fans around the world, and we feel the virtual thing will diminish those efforts," wrote the producers in a letter to nominees two weeks ago. —AFP



Handout photos released in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil by O Globo TV shows contestants from Brazil's Big Brother (BBB) reality television show.



## NETFLIX, 'LUPIN' AND EU RULES SPARK A TV REVOLUTION

"Lupin", a French reboot set in postcard Paris, has made Omar Sy a global star and fulfilled a long-lost dream for Europeans: the confidence to take on Hollywood. But, in a devilish twist worthy of the gentleman thief himself, the leap forward for European productions comes thanks to Netflix, a quintessentially American success story. Netflix is investing massively to become a global television player, but when it comes to making shows in Europe, the company, along with rivals Disney Plus and Amazon Prime, actually has no choice.

Since 2018, a European Union rule has dictated that platforms offer their subscribers at least 30 percent European content, and that they invest in local shows. And, while the Netflix revolution is mostly welcomed, this brave new world of binge watching and algorithmic program guides has triggered soul-searching among Europe's creators.

#### Greenlit in Paris

According to the company, Netflix has 100 films and series in various stages of production across the European Union with production teams and senior execu-

pandemic, which forced the broadcaster to halt production on its signature telenovelas and resort to reruns of greatest hits. "It works because it's a reality show that manages to plug directly into the Brazilian tradition of telenovelas, which have always reflected the country's reality at any given time," said Michel Alcoforado, an anthropologist and founder of the consumer research consultancy Consumotoca. "You can't understand BBB without understanding the 'B' for Brazil." Unlike a telenovela, however, BBB has a democratic element, with the audience empowered to vote on who remains in the house and choose the eventual winner.

#### Breaking the contestant mold

This year, the show is being broadcast to a deeply divided country, riven by two years of non-stop confrontation under far-right President Jair Bolsonaro and a pandemic that has claimed more than 300,000 lives in Brazil while exacerbating its inequalities. At such a deeply polarized time, "BBB has revived a national conversation on fundamental issues for society such as racism, machismo or LGBT rights, which had disappeared from dinner table discussions," Alcoforado told AFP. The show wasn't always a platform for discussing diversity.

"All the contestants used to have similar profiles: guys with big muscles and women straight from a magazine cover," said Felipe Oliveira, a contestant on BBB's eighth edition who now works at ID\_BR, an organization that promotes racial equality in the workplace. "BBB's strength is that it managed to reinvent itself. Society has changed over the past 20 years, and BBB knew how to keep up with the trend," added Oliveira, 34. "When I was on the show, I probably spent more than an hour talking about affirmative action. But they edited it out. Today, they maximize that kind of thing, like when Gil (a current contestant) spoke out against homophobia"—one of many viral moments from "BBB21." — AFP



# India's forgotten African tribe seeks sporting glory



This picture shows youths of the Siddi community running while participating in an athletes program at Jambur village, in Junagadh district of Gujarat. — AFP photos

Rohit Majgul has weathered racism and rejection in India as part of a marginalized community tracing its roots back to Africa-but he still dreams of bringing sporting glory to his country. The 16-year-old is part of a group of teens practicing martial arts in an overgrown and sun-baked field near the remote hamlet where his family ekes out a precarious living on manual labor. Growing up around open drains and swarms of flies in Jambur village, he and other members of the local Siddi community were abused for their distinctive dark features and curly hair.

Majgul, a school dropout, sees his judo training as the only way to escape a life riddled with gruelling poverty and discrimination. "No-one believes me when I say I am Indian," he told AFP. "They think I am African, they call me by different abusive names, they tease me." "I have

descended from the Bantu peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. Some are believed to have been brought over during the Islamic conquest of the subcontinent as early as the eighth century. Many others were likely brought by the Portuguese to India between three and five centuries ago, researchers say.

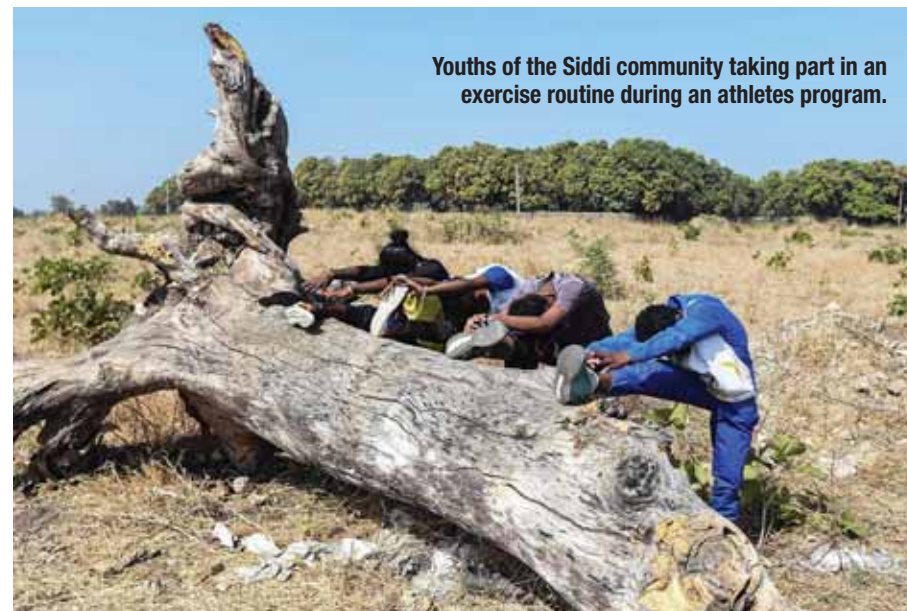
### 'No-one cares about us'

When British colonial authorities abolished slavery in the 19th century, Siddis fled to the jungles in fear of their safety. Gradually they settled on the western coast, working as farmhands and laborers while adopting local culture and languages. India is now home to around 250,000 Siddis, according to researchers, with most living in Gujarat and Karnataka-two coastal states both facing the eastern tip of Africa from across the Arabian Sea. But they are still

viewed as outsiders. Those living in Gujarat are Muslim, making them targets for further discrimination in Hindu-majority India.

"No-one cares about us. There are no facilities in our village-no piped water, no proper toilets, nothing," said Majgul. Near his home, children with tangled, unwashed hair ran barefoot across narrow alleys lined with shanties. Hope

came in the form of a scheme launched in 1987 by a government eager to boost the country's dismal Summer Olympics tally, with Indian athletes taking just nine gold medals in the last century. "We were exploring whether the Siddis had a genetic advantage," athletics coach R.



Youths of the Siddi community taking part in an exercise routine during an athletes program.

Sundar Raju, who was part of the project, told AFP. "Normally an Indian athlete takes some years before making it to the national level, but the Siddis were doing so in barely three years."

But authorities ditched the project seven years later, after realizing the impoverished Siddi were more interested in a linked program that encouraged Indians to pursue sporting careers by giving them highly sought-after government jobs. "They came from such poor families that the moment they secured jobs under a sports quota they grabbed the opportunity and left the training midway," Raju said.

### 'I used to curse my fate'

In the years since, some Siddis in Gujarat instead eked out a living by staging dance performances for tourists or

also mentoring 50 aspiring athletes from the community.

"We felt that this particular group has high potential but has been highly neglected," said Nitish Chiniwar, founder of the Bridges of Sports Foundation. Shahnaz Lobi, an aspiring shot-putter from Jambur, jumped at the chance to pursue a sporting career after watching her laborer father struggle to feed his family. "I used to curse my fate. But one day I got to know about the sports trials and I took part in them," she said. Lobi told AFP that she dreamt of competing in the 2024 Olympics. "I was selected and sent to the state sports academy. I have no friends there but it doesn't bother me. I just want to win an Olympic medal and let the world know I am Indian." — AFP



Youths of the Siddi community taking part in an exercise routine.

also been thrown off the bus because of my color, but I quietly endure everything because I want to do well in sports and carve my own identity." Two years ago, Majgul won silver in judo at the Asia-Pacific Youth Games.

His determination to represent India on the international stage was boosted by a government push to identify athletes in the Siddi community, which is believed to



Youths of the Siddi community Rohit Majgul (right) and Firdos Majgul practising judo.



Izamam Majgul (left), member of the Siddi community, practicing with coach Hasan Majgul during an athletes program.



Shenaz Lobi (right), along with other members of the Siddi community, taking part in an exercise routine during an athletes program.

## Tsarist-era Moscow grocery store set to close

A historic grocery store operating in central Moscow for more than a century selling exotic foods in an

ornate hall may soon close, Russian media reports said Tuesday. Eliseevsky's general manager Natalia Kharitonova told state news agency TASS that the chain which operated the store "will end cooperation with Eliseevsky in April". She said they were negotiating with several potential new partners but Russian state media cited a representative of the store saying it will close on April 11. When contacted by AFP, the store did not comment.

For several days, social media users have been complaining of empty shelves

and deserted aisles under the store's glittering chandeliers. "Empty shelves at the Eliseevsky: we've never seen that, not even during the war" or during economic struggles after the fall of the Soviet Union, a report on state channel Rossiya 1 said last week. The store is located in an 18th century building on the prestigious Tverskaya street, just hundreds of meters away from the Kremlin. Founded in 1901 by wealthy merchant Grigory Eliseev, the store was popular with the nobility for its European wines and cheeses, and exotic fruits.

After the Soviets came to power it was renamed "Gastronom no1" but remained abundant with rare foods, even during the times of shortages. In the early 1980s, its director was arrested as part of a corruption investigation, then sentenced to death and executed. True to its historic past, customers today are served in the extravagant hall by staff dressed in vintage white and burgundy uniforms. — AFP

## ARCHBISHOP DENIES HARRY AND MEGHAN WERE MARRIED EARLY

The archbishop of Canterbury appeared to contradict a claim by Prince Harry's wife Meghan that he married them before their televised wedding, in an interview published in an Italian newspaper yesterday. Harry, a grandson of Queen Elizabeth II and the youngest son of her heir Prince Charles, married the US actress in a star-studded wedding on May 19, 2018. But in an interview with Oprah Winfrey broadcast earlier this month, Meghan revealed that they swapped vows in private before Archbishop Justin Welby three days before the public event.



In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, speaks to members of the media at Windsor Castle in Windsor, west of London. — AFP

"I had a number of private and pastoral meetings with the duke and duchess before the wedding," Welby told La Repubblica daily. "The legal wedding was on the Saturday (May 19). I signed the wedding certificate, which is a legal document, and I would have committed a serious criminal offence if I signed it knowing it was false. "So you can make what you like about it. But the legal wedding was on the Saturday. But I won't say what happened at any other meetings." In the Oprah interview, Meghan said that "three days before our wedding, we got married". "No one knows that. But we called the archbishop, and we just said, 'Look, this thing, this spectacle is for the world, but we want our union between us,'" she said. — AFP



This file illustration picture shows Google map application displaying Covid-19 restrictions along your route on a smartphone in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

## Google Maps to show more eco-friendly routes

Google on Tuesday said it will start showing users of its free Maps navigation service travel routes less damaging to the environment as just one of some 100 coming upgrades. Improvements to Google Maps tap into artificial intelligence for features including figuring out more fuel-efficient ways to get around. "Soon, Google Maps will default to the route with the lowest carbon footprint when it has approximately the same ETA (estimated arrival time) as the fastest route," vice president of product Dane Glasgow said in a blog post.

"In cases where the eco-friendly route could significantly increase your ETA, we'll let you compare the relative CO2 impact between routes so you can choose." Google worked with the US Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Lab to build a routing system that takes into account traffic congestion and steepness of roads to minimize fuel consumption, according to Glasgow. Google is also going to start alerting Maps users when a travel route is heading for a low-emission zone where higher-pollution vehicles such as diesel cars are not allowed.

Those alerts will launch in June on the Maps mobile app in Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. Maps was also tweaked to provide users more comprehensive views of travel options that may be more eco-friendly than driving. And, air quality information along the way is being added to some routes displayed by Maps, launching first in Australia, India, and the United States. Google is also working to keep people on course once inside locations such as airports, shopping malls or train stations, according to Glasgow. — AFP



## Sports

# NFL chief sees fans back as 17-game schedule confirmed

## 'Football is simply not the same without fans'

LOS ANGELES: NFL chief Roger Goodell said Tuesday he expects stadiums to operate at full capacity next season as the league confirmed plans for an expanded 17-game schedule. Speaking on a conference call during the NFL's owners meeting, Goodell said the league wanted fans back following a 2020 campaign in which stadiums were often empty due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are also discussing our plans to welcome back all of our fans for the 2021 season across the country at all NFL stadiums," Goodell said. "All of us in the NFL want to see every one of our fans back. Football is simply not the same without fans, and we expect to have full stadiums in the upcoming season."

Spectator policies varied across the league's 32-clubs last year, with some shutting out fans altogether while others operated at a reduced capacity. Goodell's comments came as the NFL confirmed that the regular season will be expanded to include 17 games from 2021.

The much-anticipated move follows the league's record-breaking media rights deals announced earlier this month. Each NFL team will now play 17 regular season games and three preseason games for the first time, the first change to the season's structure since 1978.

A 17-game season had been on the cards since the 2020 collective bargaining agreement between the NFL and the NFL Players Association. On March 18, the NFL announced a raft of media rights deals expected to generate more than \$100 billion over the next 11 seasons, which included an agreement with Amazon Prime Video for rights to Thursday night games.

"This is a monumental moment in NFL history," Goodell said. "The CBA with the players and the recently completed media agreements provide the foundation for us to enhance the quality of the NFL experience for our fans. And one of the benefits of each team playing 17 regular-season games is the ability

for us to continue to grow our game around the world."

The 17th game will see teams from opposing conferences playing the team that finished in the same place from the corresponding division in 2021, with AFC teams being the home team for the new seasons.

For example, the Buffalo Bills, who finished top of the AFC East last season, will take on the Washington Football Team, winners of the NFC East, in their 17th game in 2021. NFL clubs will host 10 games per season overall — either nine regular season games and one preseason game, or eight regular season games and two preseason games.

Each team will play divisional rivals home and away and four teams from another division within its conference on a rotating three-year cycle. Although some players have been critical of the move, questioning the physical toll that an extra regular season game may take, Goodell insisted the league had taken safety considerations into account.



LOS ANGELES: In this file photo taken on August 24, 2020 the NFL logo is seen on a football packaging in Los Angeles. — AFP

"What we are actually doing is following the data and following the science to make sure that we are doing things well both from a health and safety standpoint as well as seeking to get better in every way," Goodell said. —AFP

## Nuggets punish sluggish Sixers

LOS ANGELES: Jamal Murray scored 30 points as the Denver Nuggets put on a show for returning fans on Tuesday with a 104-95 defeat of the Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia 76ers. Murray's haul included five-of-11 three-pointers in a one-sided victory for the Nuggets, who roared into a 44-22 first quarter lead at Denver's Ball Arena and never looked back.

Murray added six rebounds, four assists and three steals while Nikola Jokic delivered a towering all-round display, with 21 points, 10 rebounds and five assists. Michael Porter Jr had 27 points with 12 rebounds while Paul Millsap (10 points) also chipped in with a double-digit performance off the bench.

Denver's third straight victory, which followed wins over the in-form Atlanta Hawks on Sunday and the New Orleans Pelicans last week, leaves them in fifth place in the Western Conference with 29 wins and one loss.

The game was watched by a crowd of just over 4,000 fans, mostly frontline workers and first responders. It was the first time fans have attended a Nuggets game since the Covid-19 pandemic erupted last year. In on-court remarks following the win, Murray said the support had swept Denver to Tuesday's victory.

"We missed you guys so much," he told the crowd. "You guys bring a whole different energy to the game. Every time the fans are in the building it gets to me, I get a little excited. When we're into it and the crowd's into it, we're a hard team to beat. We haven't had a home court advantage in over a year."

### 'Running in quicksand'

Nuggets coach Michael Malone however was unhappy that his team allowed the Sixers to creep within six points late in the fourth before finally



DENVER: Michael Porter Jr of the Denver Nuggets dunks the ball during the game against the Philadelphia 76ers on Tuesday at the Ball Arena in Denver, Colorado. — AFP

pulling away. "I'm getting tired of watching us build big leads, play the right way, and then just for some reason relax and allow the game to become more interesting than it should have been," Malone said. "We have to somehow develop a killer instinct."

Jokic admitted the Nuggets' concentration had strayed towards the end of the game. "We didn't have the focus to finish the game," he said. "We thought it was going to be easy. We had a big lead, and started playing loose. We won the game which is the most important thing but we need to have better focus."

The Sixers meanwhile were left reflecting on a second straight loss following their 10-point defeat to the Los Angeles Clippers last week. Australian star Ben Simmons was restricted to just 11 points while Tobias Harris added 12. Tyrese Maxey led the Sixers scoring with 13 points from the bench.

"It was one of those games where it looked like we

were running in quicksand," Sixers coach Doc Rivers said afterwards. "They attacked us early and we never really recovered from it. They were better prepared and definitely more ready as a group. They were better. No excuses, we just didn't play very well."

Elsewhere on Tuesday, the Los Angeles Clippers saw their six-game unbeaten streak halted with an upset home loss to the Orlando Magic. Kawhi Leonard's 28-point display was not enough to stop the Clippers from slumping to a 103-96 defeat against an Orlando side that relied on big contributions from the bench, with Terrence Ross (15 points), Otto Porter Jr (13) and Mo Bamba all making double figures. In Arizona meanwhile, the Phoenix Suns were 117-110 winners over the Atlanta Hawks. Devin Booker finished with 21 points for Phoenix while team-mate Deandre Ayton had 13 points and 14 rebounds. — AFP

## Barty, Medvedev march on in Miami, Korda run continues

MIAMI: World number one Ashleigh Barty advanced to the semi-finals of the Miami Open on Tuesday as Russian top seed Daniil Medvedev booked his place in the quarter-finals of the men's tournament. Barty battled through her third three-setter of the fortnight to oust seventh seeded Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus in 2hr 16min on the Grandstand Court.

The Australian will face Elina Svitolina of Ukraine in the semi-finals following her gruelling 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3 win. Fifth seed Svitolina advanced to the last four after defeating Latvia's Anastasija Sevastova 6-3, 6-2 later Tuesday.



MIAMI GARDENS: Ashleigh Barty of Australia returns a shot to Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium on Tuesday in Miami Gardens, Florida. — AFP

After taking a close first set, Barty appeared to be on the brink of victory after grabbing a 3-1 lead in the second set tie-break. Sabalenka staged a superb recovery however to snatch the tie-break 7-5, forcing a decisive third set.

Barty regrouped in the third though and with Sabalenka clearly in pain clutching her stomach, rammed home her advantage to complete a deserved win. The victory leaves Barty one semi-final win away from retaining her world number one ranking, though the Australian insisted she was not preoccupied with holding on to top spot.

"It's an amazing thing to be No 1 in the world at the moment, but I promise you that's not what makes me happy," Barty said afterwards. "It's a focus of course. I want to try to do the best that I can, but it's not a distraction or a pressure in any way."

### Medvedev downs Tiafoe

Medvedev meanwhile had an easier ride in the men's tournament, easing past Frances Tiafoe of the United States in straight sets, 6-4, 6-3. Medvedev hammered down 11 aces in the win, breaking Tiafoe three times en route to victory.

Medvedev will face Roberto Bautista Agut in the last eight after the Spaniard eliminated John Isner in three sets to avenge his 2019 quarter-final loss in Miami. Bautista Agut saved a match point at 5-6 down in the third set tie-break to claim a 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (9/7) win. "I think I played a brilliant set the first set, and then with John you feel always under pressure," Bautista Agut said. "It was a really tough fight until the last point."

The biggest upset of the day saw world number 87 Sebastian Korda continue his giant-killing run by knocking out Argentina's fifth seed Diego Schwartzman, winning 6-3, 4-6, 7-5. "I played an incredible match today," said Korda, the Florida-born son of former Australian Open champion Petre Korda.

"I think mentally I was great out there. I stayed calm. Even when in the tight situations I believed in myself and I went for it," the 20-year-old added. — AFP

## Kuwait bowling championship winners crowned



By Abdullatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait Bowling Club Sheikh Talal Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Secretary General Mohammad Al-Farsi awarded the winners of the first local bowling championship, which lasted 40 days with 63 players participating. Mohammad

Khalid Habeeb was the winner, Saleh Habeeb the runner-up and third place went to Aseel Al-Roumi.

Sheikh Talal lauded the competitive spirit during the tournament, which is part of preparations of the national team for international events. He said the technical and administrative departments are keen on enhancing the technical and physical

conditions of players according to a plan that includes training and holding local tournaments to create a competitive spirit among players under the current extraordinary circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said the club is keen on implementing all precautionary measures to safeguard the safety of all.

## Japanese karate champion testifies she was bullied

TOKYO: A Japanese karate champion who will compete at the Tokyo Olympics testified before an ethics commission yesterday, alleging that a federation official hit her in the face with a bamboo sword. Ayumi Uekusa, who will compete in the women's over 61kg kumite category as karate makes its Olympic debut this summer, said she was the victim of a bullying campaign by Masao Kagawa, the technical

director of the Japan Karatedo Federation.

It is the latest "power harassment" scandal to hit Japanese sport, with the country's wrestling federation apologizing to four-time Olympic champion Kaori Icho in 2018 over bullying claims. Uekusa, a world champion in 2016, claimed in a blog post on Sunday that Kagawa began using a bamboo sword as part of her training, with the aim of forcing her to dodge his swings and thrusts.

But Uekusa says she and other athletes suffered bruised eyes after Kagawa hit them in the face with the sword while training without protective headgear. Kagawa has denied the allegations. She also claimed Kagawa frequently shouted at her and admonished her about her private life, damaging her self-esteem and leaving her unable to train because of stress.

"Meeting my instructor became so tough, bursting into floods of tears on my way to the dojo became part of my daily life," she wrote on her blog. "Training was such a stifling environment that I suffered mental stress, and there were times when I couldn't go to training and just stayed at home."

Japanese media reported that both Uekusa and Kagawa testified in front of the federation's ethics committee in Tokyo yesterday, with Uekusa telling reporters she had "talked thoroughly" about what had happened. The Mainichi Shimbun daily said Kagawa denied the charges on Sunday night, telling the paper "I would never do such a thing as jabbing an Olympic athlete in the face and injuring them". — AFP



## Sports

# Ronaldo helps Portugal past Luxembourg in World Cup qualifiers

## Belgians join Qatar protests in Belarus rout

**PARIS:** Cristiano Ronaldo helped Portugal to a hard-fought 3-1 win over Luxembourg on Tuesday with his first goal of the 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign, while Belgium became the latest team to join the protests over human rights in Qatar before hitting eight past Belarus.

Juventus forward Ronaldo bagged his 103rd international goal five minutes after the break to stop his side falling foul of a Luxembourg team whose recent performances have defied their small status and tiny population.

Ronaldo had been controversially denied what looked to have been an added-time winner in Saturday's draw against Serbia in Belgrade, but he was not to be denied when he tapped home Joao Cancelo's cross.

Luxembourg beat the Republic of Ireland last time out and another shock result looked possible when Gerson Rodrigues put the hosts in the lead with a glancing header half an hour into the Group A contest at the Stade Josy Barthel.

Diogo Jota put the European champions back on level terms in first-half stoppage time with a close-range header of his own, finding himself unmarked to nod home Pedro Neto's cross. Ronaldo put Portugal ahead and then Joao Palhinha added a third to save Portugal's blushes and put them top, level on seven points with Serbia, who won 2-1 at Azerbaijan earlier on Tuesday thanks to an Aleksandar Mitrovic brace.

The 36-year-old Ronaldo is now six goals short of Iranian Ali Daei's all-time record of 109 international strikes. "The goal before half-time came at the worst time," said Luxembourg coach Luc Holtz. "That is the turning point because I would have liked to return to the dressing room at 1-0. After, the

individual quality made the difference."

### Belgium join Qatar protests

Belgium's players donned t-shirts in support of migrant workers building the stadiums for next year's finals in the Gulf state and then smashed Belarus 8-0 to move top of Group E despite coach Roberto Martinez playing a second-string side.

Germany, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands have recently staged similar protests, and the Belgian gesture mirrors the one made by their Dutch neighbors with t-shirts emblazoned with the message 'Football supports change'. Human rights groups have been critical of the treatment of migrant workers, claims Qatar disputes.

On the field in Leuven Belgium made easy work of their opponents, Michy Batshuayi starting a deluge of goals in the 14th minute. Two braces from Hans Vanaken and Leandro Trossard — the Brighton winger's first for his country — and further strikes from Jeremy Doku, Dennis Praet and Christian Benteke gave Belgium a thumping win. It leaves them three points ahead of the second-placed Czech Republic after they lost 1-0 to Wales in Cardiff in a match which finished with 10 men on each side.

### Dutch close in on Turkey

The Netherlands closed the gap on Group G leaders Turkey to one point after they won 7-0 in Gibraltar. Frank de Boer's team were far from their best but got maximum points after taking a long time to break down their minnow opponents, who were playing in front of a home crowd thanks to Gibraltar's successful coronavirus vaccine program.

Steven Berghuis opened the scoring three min-



**LUXEMBOURG:** Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo scores a goal during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification Group A football match between Luxembourg and Portugal at the Josy Barthel Stadium, in Luxembourg City, on Tuesday. —AFP

utes before the break and in the second half the Dutch managed to make their superiority count. Luuk de Jong made it two with a 55th-minute tap-in and then three goals in as many minutes from Memphis Depay, Georginio Wijnaldum and Donyell Malen put the Dutch five ahead.

Donny van de Beek lashed home the sixth from close range before Depay added his second of the night to complete the scoring with two minutes

remaining. They move closer to the Turks, who beat the Netherlands in the group's opening round of fixtures, thanks to Davis Ikauniks's late strike which allowed Latvia to draw 3-3 in Istanbul. The Dutch are level on six points with Norway and Montenegro, who lost 1-0 at home to the Norwegians. Croatia moved top of Group H thanks to their 3-0 win over Malta. They are level on six points with Russia, who fell to a 2-1 defeat at Slovakia. —AFP

## Benin refuse to play in COVID row, referee collapses

**JOHANNESBURG:** Benin refused to play a key Africa Cup of Nations qualifier in Sierra Leone Tuesday after challenging positive COVID-19 tests for five of their players. A dramatic final day of qualifying for the 2021 tournament in Cameroon also saw a referee collapse, leading to a match between the Ivory Coast and Ethiopia being abandoned 10 minutes from time.

There were five qualifying places up for grabs and Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania took four with Benin or Sierra Leone set to join them. Rows over COVID-19 tests have plagued African football since last year with host national teams and clubs accused of producing false positive results to deprive opponents of stars.

Talks between Sierra Leone, Benin and Confederation of African Football (CAF) officials in Freetown failed to resolve the standoff as both squads remained in their hotels. Benin hold a three-point lead over Sierra Leone in Group L and both teams have a chance of finishing runners-up to Nigeria.

Meanwhile, Ghanaian referee Charles Bulu collapsed 80 minutes into a Group K match in Abidjan and was removed on a stretcher and taken to hospital. His condition was not immediately known. Originally chosen as the fourth official, Bulu handled the game because a fellow Ghanaian failed to arrive at the match venue. An Ivorian was drafted in as the fourth official, but Ethiopia questioned his neutrality as a replacement for Bulu and refused to continue playing.

### Madagascar fail

Ethiopia, who were trailing 3-1 at the time, still



**ANYAMA:** Rescuers carry Ghanaian referee Charles Bemle Bulu after a discomfort during the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations qualifying football match between Ivory Coast and Ethiopia at the Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Anyama on Tuesday. — AFP

qualified as shock 2019 quarter-finalists Madagascar were held 0-0 in Toamasina and had to settle for third place. Willy Boly and Franck Kessie gave the Ivorians a two-goal half-time advantage and after Getaneh Kebede reduced arrears on 74 minutes, Jean Kouassi quickly scored a third goal for the hosts.

Guinea-Bissau beat Congo Brazzaville 3-0 in Bissau to overtake them and claim the second Group I ticket to the finals behind Senegal. Piqueti broke the deadlock on the stroke of half-time and Frederic Mendy and Jorginho netted in the closing stages to seal a third straight qualification.

A Faisal Bangal own-goal condemned Mozambique to a 1-0 defeat in Maputo by Cape

### More clubs

The changes are essentially all about creating a new format for the group stage, replacing the existing structure in place since 2003. At the moment 32 clubs enter the group stage and are split into eight groups of four teams, who play each other home and away with the top two in each group advancing to the last 16.

It is understood the plans will see the number of teams in the group stage increase to 36, with discussions ongoing about who the additional berths will go to. British newspaper The Times reported that two extra spots will go to the clubs with the best coefficient who fail to qualify via domestic competitions but have qualified for the second-tier Europa League.

However European Leagues, a body representing the interests of clubs and leagues in 30 countries, is against places being attributed on historical merit and insists the make-up of European competitions "should reflect the current state of domestic competition". France, which is Europe's fifth-ranked nation but currently only has two guaranteed places in the group stage, should get an extra spot.

### The 'Swiss system'

The plans will see a complete overhaul of how the group stage works. Teams will all be placed into one giant pool and will each play 10 games in a so-called 'Swiss system' more commonly associated with chess. For the draw clubs will be split into four pots of nine based on UEFA coefficients. Teams will play against 10 different sides, with five games at home and five away. At the end of this phase, the top eight sides will go through to the last 16, with the bottom 12 eliminated. Meanwhile the sides finishing between ninth and 24th position will play two-legged play-offs, with those between ninth and 16th drawn against a side finishing from 17th to 24th. The winners of those ties will complete the last-16 line-up, with the losers dropping into the Europa League. — AFP

Verde, who qualified from Group F behind a Cameroon team that drew 0-0 with 10-man Rwanda in Douala. Aoubakar Kamara scored in first-half stoppage time for Mauritania to earn a 1-0 win over the Central African Republic in Bangui.

In matches where only pride was at stake, Senegal needed a stoppage-time Cheikhou Kouyate goal to salvage a 1-1 draw with Eswatini in Thies and Nigeria outplayed Lesotho 3-0 in Lagos. Victor Osimhen netted for the fifth time in qualifying to give the Nigerians a half-time advantage that was stretched by goals from Oghenekaro Etebo and Paul Onuachu. Group E winners Morocco defeated Burundi 1-0 in another dead rubber with Munir el Haddadi netting just before half-time. — AFP

## Saudis ease past Palestine in 2022 World Cup qualifier

**DOHA:** Saudi Arabia eased past Palestine 5-0 on Tuesday to go top of Group D in the second round of Asian qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. The two sides had featured in a goalless draw when they clashed earlier in the competition at Al Ram in 2019, but the Asian giants proved far superior on their home turf with Saleh Al-Shehri grabbing a second-half brace at the King Saud University Stadium in Riyadh.

Earlier, Yasser Al-Shahrani found himself in a perfect position to score with a header to put the Saudis ahead in the 37th minute after Palestine goalkeeper Toufic Ali failed to collect a cross by Fahad Al-Muwallad. Muwallad increased the lead six minutes later as the Palestinians started wilting under sustained pressure, the winger scoring on his second attempt after his initial effort after a back-heel pass by Shehri was deflected by goalkeeper Ali.

Shehri then grabbed two goals within a space of seven minutes early in the second half, taking his personal tally to three in just his fourth cap with the senior team. Saudi captain Salem Al-Dawsari completed the rout with an 88th-minute penalty after Palestinian defender Ahmed Qatmish had handled the ball.

The three points took Saudi Arabia's tally to 11 after five matches, overtaking Uzbekistan who have nine. The Palestinians had shocked Uzbekistan 2-0 in their opening match and forced a draw against Saudi Arabia for their four points, but are now languishing at the bottom of the group after failing to build on their fine start. The remaining matches will be played in Saudi Arabia in June in a centralized format due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Buffon banned one match

**MILAN:** Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon was on Tuesday handed a one-match ban for blasphemy which would rule him out of next weekend's Turin derby. The 43-year-old Italian World Cup winner had been fined 5,000 euros (\$6,000) last month by the Italian Football Federation, but escaped a ban. However, the FIGC's Court of Appeal upheld the Federal Prosecutor's appeal and imposed a ban, meaning Buffon will be ruled out of Saturday's game at Torino. Buffon was overheard using a "blasphemous expression" towards teammate Manolo Portanova during Juve's 4-0 league win over Parma on December 19. — AFP

#### Rice demands action

**LONDON:** Declan Rice on Tuesday said England players could consider boycotting social media in the future if the current abuse of Premier League stars is not resolved. Former Arsenal and France star Thierry Henry left all of his platforms earlier this week after saying enough had not been done to tackle racist abuse across social media sites. A host of Premier League players including Manchester United duo Marcus Rashford and Anthony Martial and Chelsea's Reece James have been subjected to vile online taunts. Calls for social media companies to take stronger action against internet trolls have so far produced an underwhelming response in the eyes of many Premier League players. — AFP

#### Lazio lose appeal

**MILAN:** Lazio lost on Tuesday their appeal against a decision not to punish Torino for failing to travel to Rome for their Serie A fixture because of a coronavirus outbreak. Italian football chiefs rejected Lazio's appeal, confirming the match which was due to take place on March 2 would now be rescheduled. Regional authorities in Turin had placed Torino under quarantine after eight of their players tested positive for the UK variant of COVID-19, but Serie A refused to postpone the match. After a 45-minute wait, Lazio players were informed by the referee that Torino were considered to have forfeited and the match had been abandoned. — AFP

#### 2026 Olympics logo unveiled

**MILAN:** Organizers for the 2026 Milano-Cortina Olympics on Tuesday unveiled the 'Futura' logo for the Winter Games following a public vote. Featuring the numbers two and six in a single trace like ice against a white background, the logo won 75 percent of the vote over a second 'Dado' design, a dice featuring the red and green colors of the Italian flag. A total of 871,566 people from 169 countries cast their vote in the online ballot, the first of its type for an Olympic logo, organizers of Milano-Cortina 2026 said. The logo represents sustainability and the future is a victory for all. — AFP

## What will reformed UEFA Champions League look like?

**PARIS:** Plans to radically reform the UEFA Champions League are set to be confirmed in April, despite a delay caused by certain leading European clubs looking for more say over commercial rights. An announcement had been expected at an executive committee meeting of European football's governing body on Wednesday, but UEFA said no official decision would be taken before April 19.

A statement late on Tuesday from the powerful European Club Association (ECA) revealed it had been behind the setback. The ECA, whose chairman is Andrea Agnelli, also the chairman of Juventus, said it "unanimously agreed that it was not yet in a position to formally endorse key changes... for the period post 2024 in isolation."

"If European football is to meet the challenges it currently faces," the statement added, "the foundations for ECA and UEFA's future relationship also need to be given due consideration at the same time." According to sources close to the negotiations, certain leading clubs want greater control of UEFA Club Competitions (UCC), the subsidiary company which advises UEFA itself on commercial matters.

Half of the board members of UCC are appointed by UEFA. The other half are appointed by the ECA. The current protocol defining the relationship between the ECA and UEFA is also set for renewal in 2024, hence the sticking point. However, plans for what the reformed version of European football's elite club competition — supposed to stave off the threat of a breakaway Super League — will look like are already an open secret. This is how things are set to change:



## Dodgers eye World Series repeat

### Major League Baseball's new season begins today

**LOS ANGELES:** The Los Angeles Dodgers are determined to follow their long-awaited World Series victory by completing back-to-back championship wins as Major League Baseball's new season gets under way today.

A year after COVID-19 plunged the sport known as America's pastime into chaos, baseball returns for a full 162-game regular season with the Dodgers desperate to repeat their breakthrough 2020 victory. Last season, the pandemic and a subsequent protracted row over player benefits meant that the season was slashed to just 60 games, starting in July and ending in September.

Most games took place in empty stadiums, before playoffs held at neutral locations, with the Dodgers finally ending their 32-year wait for a title in the unfamiliar surroundings of Globe Life Field at Arlington, Texas.

Although limited numbers of fans were allowed at the World Series, the Dodgers were denied the opportunity to celebrate their title in front of their home fans at Dodger Stadium. Dodgers manager Dave Roberts says the National League West giants are keen to correct that anomaly this season.

"We want to do it again to ultimately enjoy all the fruits of winning a championship," Roberts said. "Understanding the situation, what the climate was last year, we couldn't. But that's something that's a carrot out there for all of us to understand. Number one, we have a lot of work to do."

With Los Angeles being one of the worst-affected US cities in the pandemic, lockdown restrictions also meant the

Dodgers were unable to celebrate the World Series title with a parade.

#### First of many?

Veteran third baseman Justin Turner, who was dramatically pulled from the closing stages of the Dodgers' World Series-clinching game six last year after testing positive for COVID-19, wants last year's breakthrough win to be the first of many.

"We finally accomplished what we were trying to accomplish over my last seven years," said Turner. "Seeing the banner go up, getting that ring, is going to be a good feeling. That's what every kid dreams of, winning the World Series. We were able to accomplish that last year and now the goal is to win a few more."

The Dodgers will be able to call on arguably the strongest roster in baseball as they chase a repeat. As well as an all-star hitting line-up that includes former MVPs Cody Bellinger, Mookie Betts and World Series MVP Corey Seager, the Dodgers pitching staff includes three Cy Young Award winners in Clayton Kershaw, David Price and Trevor Bauer, the Dodgers' blockbuster off-season acquisition. "We have a chance to do something really special and win a championship," Roberts said. "If you look at the talent, potentially, it could be as good as any team that the Dodgers have ever fielded."

The Dodgers open their campaign on the road in Denver against the Colorado Rockies, with a home opener against the Washington Nationals set for April 9. The biggest threat to the Dodgers' chances of repeating could well come from within the NL West, where the San Diego Padres have bolstered their pitching resources with the



**LOS ANGELES:** Mookie Betts of the Los Angeles Dodgers hits a home run in the fourth inning against the Los Angeles Angels on Tuesday in Los Angeles, California. — AFP



arrival of Japan's Yu Darvish and Blake Snell, one of the stars of the Tampa Bay Rays' march to the World Series last season.


The American League challenge meanwhile is likely to be headed by the New York Yankees, who are chasing a first title since 2009. The Yankees have reached the playoffs for four straight seasons, losing twice in the AL Championship Series, and twice in the Division Series.

Nevertheless manager Aaron Boone believes the pieces are now in place for the Bronx Bombers to end their wait for a 28th championship. "We understand we're a talented team, but we also understand we haven't done anything yet," Boone said this week. "A lot of guys have been here now for a few years and experienced a lot of highs and playoff success, playoff failures and disappointing ends to the season. We've gone through a lot as a

team and we've added to the mix some ingredients we think can get us over the hump. I've felt this way the last couple years: We have a very hungry group and we want to kick the door in in the worst kind of way."

Unlike last season, fans will be in attendance at Yankee Stadium and elsewhere across the league, though most teams will operate at reduced capacity due to COVID-19. — AFP



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