

Friday Times

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for the **COVID-19 vaccine**

[See Page 40](#)



Kuwait extends partial lockdown until April 22

[See Page 9](#)

Local

The pressure of workplace fashion



JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

sahar@kuwaittimes.net

The alarm sounds in the morning - you wake up, go to the bathroom, wash your face, brush your teeth and maybe take a quick shower if you have time. Then you drink your coffee and check your phone quickly before going to the wardrobe to make your first decision of the day - what shall I wear?

This daily question might be annoying and hellish for many people in general and employees specifically when selecting their work attire. I am a journalist and love my job for so many reasons -including that I do not really have to stand in front of my closet for two hours to pick what I want to wear.

After changing the diaper and clothes of my 18-month-old baby in the morning (which takes me around 20 minutes amid the nagging, refusal and stubbornness), fixing breakfast and convincing him to eat it, running after him to put on his shoes and jacket, and preparing his bag to drop him to my mother-in-law's place before heading to work - I end up not having energy to even comb my hair. In my work, our dress code is business casual most days and very formal only during interviews or when dealing with the public.

Many women who aren't as lucky as I am. In the Arab world, there is so much pressure on how women dress and present themselves, and in Kuwait the pressure is probably doubled. Working women in Kuwait are pressured to wear luxury brands, put on extremely strong and expensive perfume or bakhour, regularly put on makeup and fix their hair and nails, even if they have 10 children. I do understand some jobs require to be fully dressed, such as bankers, lawyers and managers. These people get used to it as it's part of their daily routine, but it's not easy at all, as it takes so much energy and money each and every morning.

Skirt or pants? Tights or bare legs? Sandals or high heels? These were the questions I used to ask myself every morning when I selected my attire for work or going out. But since I became a mom, I choose to be comfortable in my own skin and wear flexible and casual outfits for my everyday routine - and yes sometimes I'm woefully off-base in my fashion choices, just to suit my son's needs.

I am not saying it is wrong that a woman should take care of herself, but I am sure that there must be compromises. The problem is women pressure other women when they are not looking perfect or do not meet their standards. They will be considered outcasts or not from their pack. Even men amongst themselves in the diwaniya judge other men based on how expensive their dishdasha, watch and shoes are. Unfortunately, sometimes people are judged on appearances, not on their content. I am not saying that someone should neglect or not take care of themselves, but I am saying that appearances should not be based on how we deal with other people.

I refuse to be pressured by society just to meet its high standards that costs so much money and effort. I prefer to expend all these on my family and son. Now it is his time, and I am ready to compromise my manicure/pedicure weekly sessions, my monthly visits to the hairdresser and my elegant looks for him to be well cared for and happy. And I think it's unfair that society puts women in a position where they have to choose between their responsibilities towards their families and the way they look in public.

Photo of the Day



Photo showing an unusual angle of the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Causeway, highlighting the architectural beauty of the structure. Captured from southern island by photographer Hasan Mahmud Shimul @hasan_m_shimul To have your photo featured in the Kuwait Times or Friday Times as photo of the day, send a high resolution image to local@kuwaittimes.com. Photo must be unedited and high resolution and related to Kuwait.

Confidence in vaccines grow in Kuwait



IN MY VIEW

By Nawara Fattahova

nawara@kuwaittimes.net

When the availability of coronavirus vaccines was first announced, many people worried about getting the vaccine. But after almost three months of vaccinations in Kuwait, people have started to slowly change their opinion regarding vaccines. Most people who had doubts thought they will wait to see what happens to those who got vaccinated. After the number of those who have received the vaccine since December reached more than 600,000, more people have started considering getting vaccinated, as no cases of death or serious health complications have been registered.

Many rumors about people who have died or experienced serious side effects after getting vaccinated have spread on social media. These rumors increased the doubts about the safety of the vaccine. It is the role of the government to raise awareness on the importance of getting vaccinated, but no official campaigns have been seen yet.

So the private sector partially took the initiative to encourage people to get the vaccine. Some companies

announced special promotions for vaccinated customers, such as three months of subscription for their services. Another store selling outfits and gift items announced a 20-percent discount for vaccinated customers.

Individuals also played a role in encouraging the public to get vaccinated. Some social media influencers and celebrities took the vaccine and launched a campaign to encourage others to do so. They posted photos of themselves taking the vaccine with captions to not let the vaccinations stop.

The ministry of health announced last month that the number of people registering to get the vaccine is rapidly increasing daily. An MoH statement two weeks ago said one million of the population has registered for vaccination, so the number now is definitely higher.

Also, many people decided to get the vaccination after announcements by airlines and governments that they will only let vaccinated passengers or tourists to enter. This presents a kind of fear for people who are refusing to get vaccinated - that if they decide to travel, they won't be able to do so without the vaccine. Many people expect more restrictions in the future that will force everyone to get vaccinated.

The government also announced letting vaccinated passengers to only stay seven days at home quarantine instead of the additional seven days in institutional quarantine after arriving to Kuwait. This applies for those who got two vaccination and two weeks pass after the last vaccination or those who got one vaccination and five weeks passed after this vaccination.

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PHOTO FEATURE



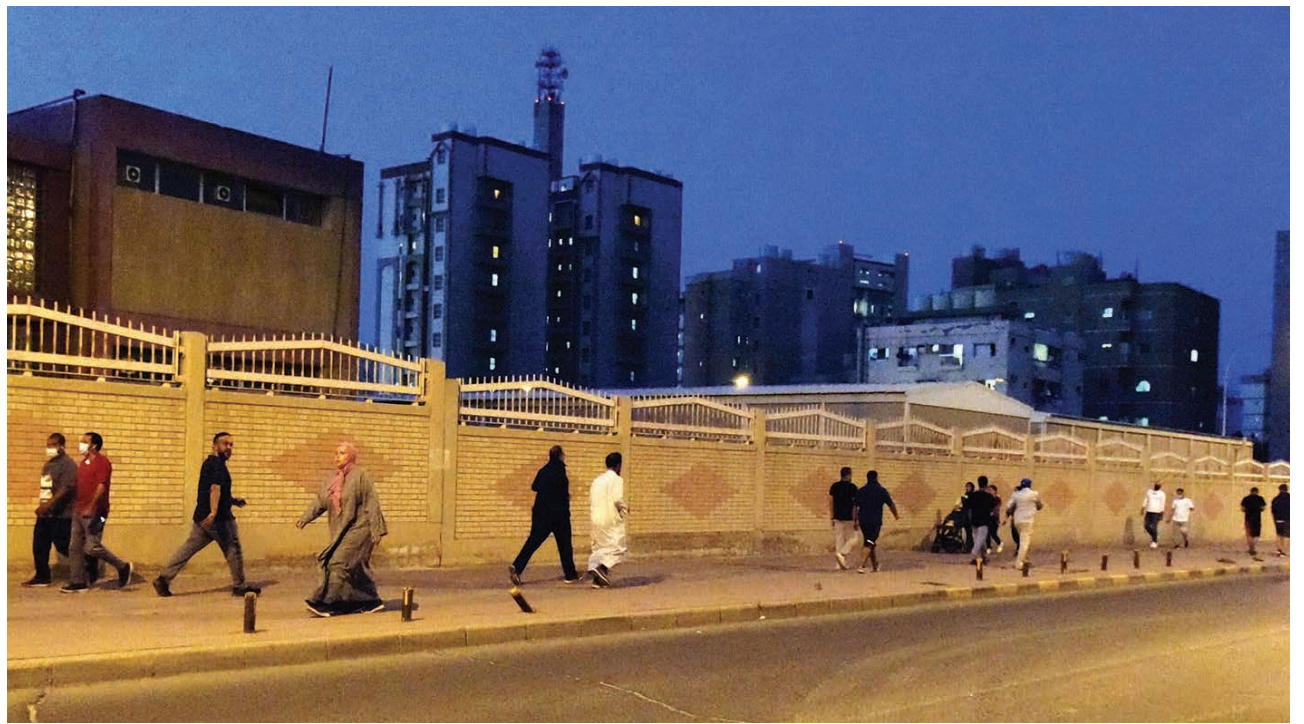
Walking for health and happiness



A partial curfew in Kuwait from 6pm until 5am has fueled a growing trend of afternoon and evening walking. People all over the country walk in the morning and afternoon hours before the curfew starts and then again during the official 'walking hours' from 6pm to 8pm. Walking has proven benefits including improving physical and mental health outcomes and reducing stress.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Fouad Al-Shaikh







Drive-thru vaccination station near complete

KUWAIT: As Kuwait fights to tighten its grip on the growing COVID-19 infection rates, works are ongoing to prepare a drive-thru vaccination station on the southern island of the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Causeway, which the government is setting up in hopes of speeding up the vaccination process against the disease. During the Cabinet's weekly meeting on Monday, Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said that hospital admissions and the number of people needing critical care remain on an upward trajectory, while the recovery rate reached 93 percent. Looking to accelerate the national rollout of COVID-19 shots, the Cabinet approved the Health Ministry's request to open the new drive-thru vaccination station, the minister announced, urging the public to get inoculated and march towards "herd immunity."

— Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



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Local

Kuwait's Prime Minister receives visiting South African minister

Foreign Minister holds talks with South African counterpart

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received the visiting South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor yesterday. During the encounter held in the presence of Kuwait's Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister was handed a letter from South African President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad with the visiting South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, and the two sides discussed strengthening their countries' close and solid bilateral relations and reviewed all aspects of close cooperation, particularly on the economic, trade and investment spectrums. During the meeting, views were exchanged on recent developments on the regional and international fronts. Both were in mutual agreement on all the matters discussed. They also discussed cooperation on efforts to tackle the COVID-



Kuwait's Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor sign an agreement to establish a joint committee for the development and consolidation of bilateral relations.

19 pandemic and finding a solution to crises affecting the region.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad praised the prosperous and continuously progressing bilateral cooperation between the two friendly countries. Meanwhile, minister Pandor expressed her aspirations for the continuation of this cooperation, praising the wisdom

and balance of Kuwait's foreign policy and the efforts it makes to consolidate the foundations of regional peace and security. The talks were rounded off with the signing of an agreement to establish a joint committee for the development and consolidation of bilateral relations in all fields and at various levels. —KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah receives from South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor a letter from South African President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. —KUNA photos

Deputy FM takes part in Arab-Japanese political dialogue

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhafaeri yesterday headed the Kuwaiti delegation in the second online session of the ministerial meeting for the Arab-Japanese political dialogue. The session witnessed the participation of Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, Arab League Secretary-General Ahmad Abul Gheit and representatives of Arab states. During his speech and regarding the coronavirus situation that the world is going through, Dhafaeri praised the effective contributions of the Arab countries and Japan through the global initiative (COVAX) aimed at enabling countries around the world to obtain safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines. Dhafaeri also shed light on the historical and deep-rooted ties between Kuwait and Japan, hailing the bilateral relations between the two countries, which involved important and fruitful cooperation.

Furthermore, he noted that the total volume of trade exchange between Kuwait and Japan in the last two years 2019-2020 reached more than \$3 billion, adding that Kuwait was ranked third among oil-exporting countries to Japan, as Kuwaiti oil



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhafaeri attends the second online session of the ministerial meeting for the Arab-Japanese political dialogue. —KUNA

exports to Japan in 2019-2020 amounted in value to nearly \$11.3 billion. On the other hand, Dhafaeri stressed the Arab countries appreciate the humanitarian and assistance provided by Japan to the region's states, expressing the Arabs' keenness to upgrade these relations. Regarding the Palestinian cause, Dhafaeri reaffirmed Kuwait's position on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital on the borders of June 4, 1967. He also affirmed that Kuwait is keen to reach political solutions to the crises in Yemen, Syria and Libya, through dialogue based on International legitimacy

decisions and references in this regard.

Moreover, he expressed Kuwait's solidarity with Egypt and Sudan in their tireless efforts in preserving regional stability and their efforts to resolve the crisis of filling and operating the Renaissance Dam, in a manner that preserves their water and economic rights in accordance with international laws. The Kuwaiti delegation included Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Office of the Deputy Minister Ambassador Ayham Al-Omar and Deputy Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Arab Nation Affairs Counselor Nasser Al-Qahtani. —KUNA

Kuwait re-stresses no military solution to Syrian crisis

NEW YORK: The State of Kuwait has re-affirmed that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis that has resulted in some 13 million refugees and displaced people. Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, the State of



Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi

Kuwait's envoy, addressing a session of the UN General Assembly on the state in Syria, said that the aspired settlement for the crisis must involve all segments of the Syrian people. Such a settlement must attain legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, safeguard Syria's territorial unity, sovereignty and independence according to the UNSC Resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Declaration.

"We believe that the political process must proceed in tandem with confidence building measures namely real and tangible progress in the file of the detainees and missing ones," Ambassador Otaibi added. Regarding the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, the State of Kuwait has pursued a humanitarian approach, hosting donors' conferences in 2013, 2014 and 2015 and taking part in subsequent conventions of identical level.

Ambassador Otaibi has stressed on necessity of securing delivery of humanitarian aid to those in need in a secure and sustainable fashion and without any obstacle. The envoy condemned attacks that target civilians, as well as assaults waged by terrorist groups against populated areas. He stressed that to attain sustainable and comprehensive peace in Syria, there must be justice, accountability and prosecution of the criminals. Otaibi renewed support for the UN efforts for advancing the political process in Syria, urged all Syrian parties to cooperate for working out conciliation and appealed to the UNSC member states to put aside differences to tackle the file in a joint manner. —KUNA

Local

Kuwait extends partial lockdown until April 22

MPs demand questioning, dismissing speaker

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The council of ministers yesterday decided to extend the partial nightly curfew for another two weeks, ending April 22 but reduced it for one more hour, government spokesman said yesterday.

Tareq Al-Mazrem said starting from April 8, curfew will start at 7 pm and end at 5 am and this will apply during the holy fasting month of Ramadan, expected to start on April 13. During Ramadan, the cabinet allowed delivery services from restaurants, cafes and catering to operate between 7 pm until 3 am.

It also allowed people during Ramadan to exercise walking from 7-10 pm but only on foot without using vehicles. Shopping at cooperative societies and supermarkets is also allowed between 7 pm and midnight but through pre-booking.

In another decision, the cabinet allowed expats to leave only through land and sea ports.

The cabinet did not refer to a ban on the entry of foreigners into the country, meaning that the ban is still effective until further notice. In the meantime, opposition MPs yesterday submitted a draft law to allow lawmakers to question and even dismiss the speaker who is immune from accountability under the current law.

The move comes following Tuesday's accusations that assembly speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem violated the law and the constitution in a number of decisions the assembly had taken amid an opposition boycott.



MP wants expats at psychiatric hospital deported

MP Abdulaziz Al-Saqaabi proposed adding a new article to the national assembly internal charter that allows MPs to hold the speaker accountable for violating the constitution which could develop into dismissing him.

Meanwhile, former MP Obaid Al-Wasmi, a professor of law, said that questioning the assembly speaker is allowed under the law. He said that although there is no law to govern the process, at the same time there is no law to prevent that.

MP Bader Al-Mulla, a lawyer by profession, said he supports Wasmi's statement, adding that he will begin collecting signatures of MPs to dismiss the speaker if he does not announce that a law, to delay grilling the prime minister for over a year, passed illegally on Tuesday is null and void.

MP Bader Al-Humaidi said yesterday that he will propose legislation that calls on authorities to deport all expats receiving treatment at the psychiatric hospital in Kuwait. He said that he was informed by the health ministry that as many as 37,000 expats are receiving treatment at the psychiatric hospital at a huge financial cost.



Government spokesman
Tareq Al-Mazrem

Decline in COVID-19 infections among Kuwaiti citizens

KUWAIT: Ministry of Health (MoH) Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad on Wednesday announced a noticeable decrease of coronavirus infections among Kuwaitis compared with previous months. Speaking at a news conference, Sanad said the ratio of COVID-19 infection among Kuwaitis is less than 55 percent compared with 68



Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad

percent at some times over the last few months, warning against an increase in infections among residents. Field medical swabs still indicate a rise in the infection rate, he showed, calling for taking utmost measures of caution. Getting out of this crisis requires a common responsibility, receiving vaccination and continue abiding by preventive measures, he stressed.

Despite all challenges facing those who deal with the pandemic, there are still hopes for a better future to get out of this crisis, he affirmed. On the occasion of National Doctors' Day; on March 30, Sanad expressed gratitude to all doctors and medical staff as well as all frontline workers for their efforts in facing the pandemic. He noted that the global indicators are still growing as figures have increased from 127.8 million cases to 128.8 million in two days. Earlier Wednesday, Dr Sanad announced five deaths and 1,282 new cases of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking the death toll to 1,313 and total infections to 232,103. —KUNA

News in brief

Temperatures rise over weekend

KUWAIT: Kuwait's weather during the weekend will witness a gradual rise in temperatures accompanied by dust-carrying winds over open areas and light rain, possibly thunderous, a forecaster said yesterday. Today's weather will be at a range of 34-36 degrees Celsius and Saturday's forecast is expected to be between 22-24 degrees Celsius, Abdulaziz Al-Qarawi of the Kuwait Control and Meteorological Center (KCMC) noted. —KUNA

Chamber calls for allowing expats in

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry has requested allowing expats with valid visas into the country similar to domestic helpers, in order to maintain inflation and wage rates in the Kuwaiti market, Al-Qabas daily reported yesterday.

Kuwaiti oil price down

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil dropped by 42 cents to reach \$63.90 per barrel on Wednesday from \$64.32 pb a day prior, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said. Elsewhere, the price of Brent Crude also witnessed a decline of \$1.43 to reach \$62.74 pb as did West Texas Intermediate, which saw a \$1.39 decrease to \$59.16 pb. —KUNA

Public sector Ramadan work hours no more than four and half hours

KUWAIT: Working time at public sector departments during the holy month of Ramadan should not exceed four and a half hours, the Civil Service Commission (CSC) announced in a circular yesterday. During this time, COVID-19 health measures should be observed, CSC added, but several public bodies, like the Health Ministry, may determine their own work schedule given the nature and requirements of each job. CSC went on to refer to its gradual post-COVID-19 recovery plan for public employees, approved by the Cabinet. It said that government bodies will continue to implement "flexible" working hours, without the need of being bound by official work schedules. —KUNA



Kuwait Audit Bureau spares treasury \$264 million spending

KUWAIT: Kuwait Audit Bureau's examination of planned expenditures spared the treasury (unnecessary) spending estimated at KD 80 million (\$264 million) in the current fiscal year. Fatma Al-Fahad, auditor at the pre-supervision department for economic affairs at the diwan, said in a press statement yesterday that the spared sum was double the savings achieved in the previous financial year.

She indicated that the bureau stopped (unnecessary) spending of KD 80 million (\$264) in the current fiscal year against KD 36 million (\$118 million) in the previous identical year, 122 percent higher, also noting that the personnel assigned for the task focused on cancelling or trimming amounts of products and prices, according to the diwan studies. Totally, the bureau examined 2,850 proposed transactions worth KD 3.4 billion (\$11.2 billion) for the fiscal year 2019-2020. —KUNA



Suu Kyi faces court as
UN envoy warns of
Myanmar civil war

As US newspapers slide toward abyss, a bidding war breaks out

Page 16



ORANGE, California: Police officers stand outside an office building where multiple people were killed in a shooting in Orange, California on Wednesday. —AFP

Four people shot dead in California

Suspect arrested in brutal New York assault of Asian woman

ORANGE: Four people, including a child, were shot and killed Wednesday evening at an office building in Southern California, police said. It is the third such shooting in the United States in weeks, with 18 people killed in two separate gun violence incidents in March.

The shooter, whose motivations are so far unknown, sustained a gunshot wound and was taken to hospital, police lieutenant Jennifer Amat said, adding the suspect was in a critical condition. She continued that officers were still working to determine whether the wound was self-inflicted or a result of an exchange of fire with police. Police did not release any more information about the victims, but said that a fifth individual—a woman—had been hospitalized and was in a critical condition.

“The situation has been stabilized and there is no threat to the public,” the Orange Police Department said in a post to their Facebook page. The incident began around 5:30 pm local time on the upper floor of a small office building in

the city of Orange. The block houses businesses including a counseling service, an insurance company, a financial consulting firm and a phone repair shop, local media reported. Police and the suspect exchanged fire, according to the Los Angeles Times. One man, who asked not to be identified speaking to local TV channel KTLA5, described the situation as “terrifying”.

Cody Lev told local media The Orange County Register that they heard three loud pops, followed by silence and then sirens. “I can tell you that we haven’t had an incident like this in the city of Orange since 1997,” Amat said, referring to a mass shooting event that saw four people shot dead.

She added: “It’s just such a tragedy for the victims, their families, our community and our police department.” California governor Gavin Newsom posted on Twitter: “Horrible and heartbreaking. Our hearts are with the families impacted by this terrible tragedy tonight.” “I’m deeply saddened by reports of a mass shooting

in Orange County, and I’m continuing to keep victims and their loved ones in my thoughts as we continue to learn more,” US Representative Katie Porter from California also tweeted. It comes after two other high-profile mass shootings earlier this month, which set off a renewed debate about gun control measures in the United States. On March 22, 10 people were killed in a shooting at a grocery store in Boulder, Colorado, less than a week after a man shot and killed eight people, including six women of Asian descent, at spas in Atlanta, Georgia.

Attack on Asians

Meanwhile, New York police on Wednesday charged a suspect in a brutal, videotaped assault of a 65-year-old Asian-American woman that sparked outrage amid a surge of anti-Asian violence in the United States. Police identified the man as 38-year-old Brandon Elliot, who was released from prison in 2019 on lifetime parole for stabbing his mother to death in front of his five-

year-old sister in 2002.

A spokesperson said NYPD officers arrested Elliot late Tuesday at a hotel in Times Square near the scene of the crime that is housing homeless people during the coronavirus pandemic. He was charged with felony assault as a hate crime in the early hours of Wednesday, police said in a statement.

The attack, which took place on a sidewalk in broad daylight in midtown Manhattan on Monday, was caught on CCTV footage from inside an adjacent building and showed bystanders seemingly looking on without intervening. In the video, posted online by police, the suspect can be seen walking up to the woman and kicking her in the stomach, knocking her to the ground. He then kicks her several times in the head before walking away. He “made anti-Asian statements” towards the victim, police said. The video also shows a man, who appears to be a delivery worker, watching the attack unfold from inside the building. — AFP

International

Palestinians fathering children from inside Israeli prison walls

Women in Gaza and West Bank turn to IVF program

KHAN YUNIS, Palestinian Territories: Cradling her newborn son in a thick white blanket on the patio of her Gaza home, Iman Al-Qudra knows it will be years before her baby boy, Mujahid, meets his father.

Her husband Mohammad Al-Qudra has been imprisoned in Israel since 2014, and for Iman to get pregnant his sperm had to be smuggled out of jail to be used in an in-vitro fertilization (IVF) program. Iman is one of several Palestinian women in the Israeli-blockaded Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank who in recent years have turned to IVF using sperm from an imprisoned husband.

It is a complex endeavor—Israeli prison officials voiced doubt it was even possible—and success is not guaranteed. For the Qudras, another Palestinian, who was being freed from the same prison in southern Israel where Mohammad is held, had to first agree to smuggle out the semen on the day of his release. He then had to swiftly get it past the Gaza Strip crossing, tightly controlled by Israel.

Next came Iman's IVF treatment, and then an anxious wait to see if it had worked. A specialist in reproductive health at the University Hospital of Toulouse (CHU), Louis Bujan, said it was "plausible" for sperm to remain viable during such a journey, regardless of refrigeration conditions. "It all depends on the quality of the sperm from the start," said Bujan, adding semen can be held in a container for more than 24 hours and remain viable.

'I wanted a boy'

After three attempts, Iman conceived in 2020, five years after last being given permission to see her husband during a prison visit. "I was afraid of being too old for another pregnancy by the time my husband was released," she said, surrounded by her three daughters, all conceived before Mohammad's imprisonment. "I wanted a boy" which an IVF treatment allowed her to choose, she said.

Specialist Abdelkarim al-Hindawi performed the procedure in Gaza City, where he said he has carried out several fertilizations of prisoners' wives. "Usually the sperm arrives hidden inside a pen or a

small bottle, passed (secretly) during visits," or sneaked out by a freed cellmate, he said.

"It has to be here within 12 hours, or it will no longer be viable," he said, adding the semen is then frozen for preservation at the clinic. Each attempt costs \$2,000, a huge sum in poverty-ridden Gaza, which has been under an Israeli blockade since 2007 when Hamas Islamists took power in the territory. The peeling walls of the Qudras' home in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza, are covered with portraits of Mohammad, looking youthful in contrast to his dated weapon and military uniform.

A member of Hamas's armed wing, Qudra was captured by Israeli forces during the 2014 war in Gaza and later sentenced to 11 years in prison for belonging to the movement, said Iman.

'Hope for others'

Salaheddine and Muhammad Zibn, who live in the northern West Bank, have only met their father once, during a prison visit when one was five years old and the other just two weeks, said their mother Dalal. She told AFP her children were the first conceived via IVF from a father detained in Israel, a claim supported by the Palestinian doctor who performed the procedure, Ghosson Badran.

"I am very proud to be the first because it is our right to have children," she said. "I gave hope to many women." Her husband Amar has been serving a life sentence for planning anti-Israel attacks for Hamas since 1997, Dalal Zibn said.

When her husband first proposed IVF, she said: "I did not understand the concept." "Then he convinced me and the doctors reassured me." Like Qudra, Dalal Zibn had daughters before her husband was jailed. In 2012 she decided to try IVF, in the hopes of having sons. The Israeli Prisons Service (IPS) views the stories of sperm-smuggling with skepticism.

"We have no information or evidence to support these allegations," IPS spokeswoman Hana Herbst told AFP, characterizing them as "rumors". "We do not know how it is possible to pass sufficient semen for a medical procedure," she added. —AFP



GAZA STRIP: Palestinians holds portraits of men held in Israeli jails during a rally in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners as part of an event marking Land Day near the Israel-Gaza border, east of Khan Yunis town in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

Yes, Israel 'occupies' West Bank, US says

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden's administration said Wednesday that Israel's control of the West Bank is indeed "occupation," clarifying its stance after the release of a report that seemed to downplay the term, adopting language used by Donald Trump's government. The State Department's annual report on human rights "does use the term 'occupation' in the context of the current status of the West Bank," State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"This has been the longstanding position of previous administrations of both parties over the course of many decades," he said. But under the staunchly pro-Israel Trump, the annual human rights report renamed the section on "Israel and the Occupied Territories" as "Israel, West Bank and Gaza."

The first of the reports issued under Biden, which was released Tuesday, kept the same formulation but stated that the language was not meant to convey any position. The top State Department official on human rights, Lisa Peterson, said that the report generally uses geographical names and that "Israel, West Bank and Gaza" was easier and clearer for readers. Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, broke past precedent by visiting a Jewish settlement in the West Bank and said he disagreed with the broad international consensus that such construction is illegal, with Trump signalling that Israel should be free to annex Palestinian land.

Trump also recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital as well as Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights from Syria. Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005 but maintains control over the crowded, Hamas-ruled territory's airspace and borders. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has indicated the United States will not reverse Trump's decisions on Jerusalem but will also do more to work toward an independent Palestinian state. — AFP

Lebanon in 'education catastrophe' with children out of school

BEIRUT: In crisis-hit Lebanon, the pandemic coupled with an economic downturn means that children left for months without schooling due to coronavirus restrictions may never return to the classroom, a UK-based charity warned. "The social and economic crisis in Lebanon is turning into an education catastrophe, with vulnerable children facing a real risk of never returning to school," Save the Children said in a report published yesterday. The risk is real not only for Lebanese families, more half of whom live in poverty, but also for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian and Syrian refugees who already struggled to access education before Lebanon's multifold crisis made it more difficult, it said.

"Poverty is a steep barrier to children's access to an education, as many families cannot afford learning equipment or have to rely on children to provide an income," the charity said. More than 1.2 million children in Lebanon have been out of school since the country's coronavirus outbreak began last year, Save the Children said.

Those lucky enough to get any schooling received "an estimated maximum of 11 weeks of education," with even lower numbers for Syrian children, it added. Meanwhile, the country's worst economic downturn since the 1975-1990 civil war has made "remote learning out of reach for more and more children", with families unable to afford electronic devices and a reliable-enough internet connection, the charity said. —AFP



KHAN YUNIS, Palestinian Territories: Wife of Palestinian prisoner in Israeli jails Mohammad Al-Qudra, Iman, 30, holds their newborn boy — AFP

International

Iraq PM Kadhemi seeks to soothe security concerns on Saudi visit

Trade and investment in focus during the long-awaited visit

RIYADH: Iraq will never become a launchpad for attacks on Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi pledged Wednesday during a long-awaited visit to the kingdom aimed at forging closer economic and security ties. In January, explosive-laden drones crashed into the main royal palace in Riyadh, with American media citing US officials as saying they were launched from neighboring Iraq.

Saudi officials did not publicly disclose any details on the reported attack on the sprawling Al-Yamama complex, the official residence and office of King Salman as well as the main base of the royal court. But the news raised alarm in a country that has frequently come under missile and drone attacks from Iran-aligned Houthi rebels in Yemen, where Riyadh-backed forces are engaged in a six-year conflict.

A relatively unknown militant group in Iraq calling itself the Righteous Promise Brigade claimed responsibility for the strike, but it was considered by security experts to be a front for more entrenched Iran-backed militias. Kadhemi said the group's claim was "not true" and insisted that the attack was not launched from Iraq.

"We will not allow any attack on the kingdom," he told reporters after what his aides described as an hours-long meeting with Saudi

Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. "There haven't been any attacks" from Iraq. "There have been attempts by some to... disrupt relations" between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, he added, without elaborating.

Known to maintain close personal ties with Prince Mohammed, Kadhemi walks a diplomatic tightrope as Baghdad often finds itself caught in the tug of war between Tehran and its rivals Riyadh and Washington. Kadhemi's trip comes after the countries reopened their Arar land border crossing in November for the first time since Riyadh cut off diplomatic ties with Baghdad in 1990, following Iraqi ex-dictator Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Boosting trade, investment

Aside from a discussion on border security, the Iraqi premier said he and his delegation of senior ministers sought to further boost trade and economic cooperation with the kingdom during a day-long visit to Riyadh. In a statement published by Saudi state media, the two countries agreed to establish a joint fund with an estimated capital of \$3 billion, a "contribution from the kingdom" to boost investment in the Iraqi economy. Saudi Arabia's investments in Iraq are expected to rise to 10 billion riyals (\$2.67 billion)



RIYADH: Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (second right) and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi (right) reviewing guard of honor at the start of a visit in the kingdom. — AFP

from just over 2 billion riyals currently, the state-run SPA news agency said.

The countries also agreed to maintain energy cooperation to maintain stability in global oil markets, the joint statement added. Iraq is the second-largest producer in the OPEC oil cartel, outranked only by Saudi Arabia. Kadhemi, whose government has sought to fast-track foreign investment including Saudi support for en-

ergy and agriculture, is pushing for deeper cooperation with Riyadh. Kadhemi was scheduled to travel to Saudi Arabia on his first foreign trip as prime minister last July, but the visit was cancelled at the last minute when King Salman was hospitalized for surgery to remove his gall bladder. His trip to Tehran, Riyadh's arch-rival, went ahead, with the premier meeting Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. — AFP

UN Council calls on Somalia to hold elections

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council on Wednesday called on authorities in strife-torn Somalia to resolve the electoral "impasse" and hold "inclusive" elections as soon as possible, following a closed-door emergency session on the situation. In a statement drafted by Britain and adopted unanimously, the 15 Council members "expressed concern" over the ongoing crisis and called on the country's leaders to "convene at the earliest opportunity to resolve outstanding issues."

"They emphasized that it remained in the best interests of all Somalis to ensure that inclusive elections took place as soon as possible," the statement said. Somalia missed a deadline to hold an election by February 8, when President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known by his nickname Farmajo, was due to step down, sparking a constitutional crisis in the already fragile state.

Farmajo and Somalia's five regional leaders reached an agreement on September 17 that abandoned a promised one-person, one-vote ballot but offered a common path forward for elections. But they have been unable to resolve squabbles over how the vote is to be conducted, and a coalition of opposition candidates have now said they no longer recognize Farmajo as president. "Somalia's electoral process is at a critical stage," Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, Barbara Woodward, told reporters. During the closed-door meeting, the UN envoy for Somalia, James Swan, said "the situation regarding Somalia's electoral process requires urgent attention," Woodward added. She said Britain reiterated its call on Somalia to "swiftly" reach an agreement on moving ahead with the electoral process. —AFP

Ethiopian rebels blamed for 'terror attack' in restive west

ADDIS ABABA: A rebel group in Ethiopia's restive Oromia region carried out a "terror attack" this week that killed an unknown number of civilians, officials said Wednesday, while a witness put the death toll in the dozens. The attack took place in the western part of the Wollega area, where Ethiopian soldiers have been fighting an armed group known as the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the Oromia regional government said in a statement.

"Although the (OLA) has been weakened by measures taken by the government together with the community to ensure rule of law, out of a feeling of desperation it continues to carry out attacks on civilians," the statement said. Oromia communications officials did not respond to requests for comment, and the statement did not provide details on fatalities or how the attack was carried out.

One resident of the Babo-Gembel district where the attack took place told AFP that gunmen arrived after 9 pm Tuesday, forced residents to gather outside in a group and shot them dead. "The place had no security cover from government security forces at the time," said the man, a guard at an Orthodox church, who spoke on condition of anonymity for safety reasons. "I found 29 bodies lying in one area, while there were other bodies scattered in nearby areas."

Government 'silence'

Survivors of similar recent attacks in Oromia—a region

dominated by Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromos—have accused OLA fighters of targeting members of the Amhara ethnic group, the second largest. "There have been at least three occasions before the attack where flyers were distributed in the area calling for Amharas to leave," the security guard said. Tewodrose Tirfe, chairman of the Amhara Association of America based in Washington, said Wednesday that "in the month of March well over 300 Amharas including women and children have been massacred by the Oromo Liberation Army".

He also accused the government of being "silent" on massacres. OLA spokesman Odaa Tarbii denied responsibility for the attack, saying on Twitter that an investigation would "100 percent absolve" the group. In a statement earlier this week he denied it was targeting Amhara civilians.

"The Oromo Liberation Army has never at any time engaged in mass killings or ethnic cleansing," Odaa said. "There are several thousand Amharas and members of other groups that live peacefully in areas administered by us and they will testify that we do not treat them any differently."

'Spreading' insecurity

The OLA, believed to number in the low thousands, broke off from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an opposition party that spent years in exile but was allowed to return to Ethiopia after Abiy took office in 2018. No link has been demonstrated between the fighting in Oromia and the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government has described the campaign in Tigray as an operation to detain and disarm leaders of the local ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). But officials have long accused the TPLF of partnering with the OLA to foment ethnic violence and undermine Abiy's government—a claim the Oromia regional government reiterated in its statement Wednesday. —AFP

International

Libya authorities release 120 captured pro-Haftar fighters

Latest move towards reconciliation in a UN-backed peace process

ZAWIYAH, Libya: Authorities in western Libya released 120 fighters from a rival eastern force on Wednesday, the latest move towards reconciliation in a UN-backed peace process aimed at ending years of violence. The men were fighting for the 107th Brigade under the command of eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, who in April 2019 launched an offensive to seize Tripoli from a unity government. The fighters had been captured near the western city of Zawiya that same month.

On Wednesday, dressed in loose white outfits and matching skullcaps, they were released following a ceremony in Zawiya, 45 kilometers (30 miles) east of Tripoli. The ceremony took place at a sports ground in Zawiya under heavy security. In a speech, Abdallah Al-Lafi, vice-president of the country's new presidential council, welcomed the move and called for further reconciliation and rebuilding.

"We must not pass on hatred and bitterness to our children," he said. After a recitation from the Koran and the singing of the national anthem, the prisoners were released and reunited with their families amid loud ululations. The United Nations' Libya mission UNSMIL welcomed the release of the fighters, hailing the "efforts by the

national unity government".

The mission tweeted that it "hopes that this initiative constitutes the start of a national reconciliation" and called for "the release of all detainees before the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan" in two weeks. Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah tweeted that "Libya's future and development are linked to its ability to heal its wounds through national reconciliation."

Foreign forces

Libya has been ravaged by bloodshed since the fall and killing of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed 2011 revolt. An array of armed groups arose to fill the vacuum, and many coalesced around the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) or around Haftar, who backed an eastern administration. The two camps, each supported by foreign powers, fought for more than a year before Haftar was forced to retreat. In October they signed a truce, setting in motion a UN-led process that saw a new transitional government installed in February.

The deal also led to the release of several dozen prisoners by January. The new executive is charged with organizing national elections set for December 2021. But while the advances in the



TRIPOLI: Prisoners of war, loyal to the forces of Libya's eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, are pictured upon their release by the new Libyan unity government on Wednesday in the port city of Zawiya. — AFP

peace process have been widely praised, the transitional administration faces a complex task—not least due to the presence of foreign forces who backed the rival camps and have remained on Libyan soil.

Haftar received military support from the UAE and the shadowy Wagner Group, close to the

Kremlin, while his rivals were backed by Turkey, whose drones were seen as critical in repelling Haftar's forces last year. According to the UN, some 20,000 mercenaries and foreign fighters were still in Libya in early December. A January 23 deadline for their withdrawal passed without any sign of them leaving. — AFP

Exit from women's treaty splits Turkey's activists

ISTANBUL: Turkey's contentious withdrawal from a treaty combating gender-based violence has had a sympathetic response from at least one quarter: a top women's group that includes President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's daughter. With a stroke of the pen that sparked international outrage, Erdogan last month pulled Turkey out of the 2011 Istanbul Convention, a landmark pact it once took pride in having helped craft.

Erdogan's decision came as the number of femicides and other crimes against Turkish women is growing. For some observers, the mostly Muslim but officially secular country now stands at a cultural crossroads. Although Erdogan gave no formal reason for his decision, a top aide said the treaty's references to gender-based abuses had been "hijacked by people attempting to normalize homosexuality"—legal in Turkey since Ottoman times. The LGBT movement was "incompatible" with Turkey's "social and family values", press aide Fahrettin Altun said in a statement.

This argument has found some support from the more religiously conservative women who often back Erdogan and his ruling party, which is rooted in political Islam.

It has also resonated at Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), a prominent group whose deputy chair is Erdogan's younger daughter Sumeyye.

'Neither for nor against'

The convention's association with LGBT activism "has be-



ISTANBUL: In this file photo, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's daughter Sumeyye Erdogan (left) and Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of Baykar Makina Selcuk Bayraktar pose during their wedding ceremony. Turkey's contentious withdrawal from a treaty combating gender-based violence has had a sympathetic response from at least one quarter: a top women's group that includes Erdogan's daughter Sumeyye. —AFP

come an unbearable burden for Turkish officials," KADEM board member Derya Yanik said. "From our perspective, the Istanbul Convention was an instrument for combatting violence against women," Yanik said during an interview at the group's headquarters in Istanbul. "But some groups tied the Istanbul Convention to (LGBT rights). It was one of the elements that eroded the charter." Officially, Yanik said KADEM was "neither for nor against" the convention, which requires countries to adopt a raft of legislation aimed at prosecuting gender-based violence and femicide. —AFP

UN backpedals on Yemen corruption claims

RIYADH: A UN panel of experts has backtracked on corruption and money-laundering claims against Yemen's Saudi-backed government, saying no evidence was found in a preliminary review, according to letters seen yesterday. The experts assessing UN sanctions on Yemen claimed in a January report that the war-ridden country's central bank "illegally" diverted to traders \$423 million from a \$2 billion Saudi deposit, that was meant to stabilize the Yemeni currency and enable basic food imports.

But in an update to the UN Security Council's sanctions committee, the experts said its "preliminary review has not demonstrated evidence of corruption, money laundering or elite capture". In their letter dated last Friday, the panel said it aims to conduct a "complete review" of the initial report and will present its findings in "due course".

It added that the Saudi deposit, made in 2018 under a development and reconstruction program, appeared to have its desired effect as "food prices were stabilized" the following year in Yemen, which has seen famine-like conditions. The January report also alleged that Hayel Saeed Anam (HSA), a UAE-headquartered business conglomerate with a large market presence in Yemen, pocketed a substantial part of the diverted funds. In a separate letter to HSA chairman Abdul Gabbar Hayel Saeed, the panel said its findings "should be disregarded, pending a final assessment". —AFP

International

Pakistan to allow imports from India in sign of diplomatic thaw

Limited imports of sugar, cotton and wheat to help rein in inflation

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan will allow limited imports of sugar, cotton, and wheat from India in a bid to rein in rampant inflation, signaling a further thaw in relations between the two arch-foes.

The government said late Wednesday that permits would be granted for the import of half a million tons of sugar—a move expected to slash the price of the commodity by up to 20 percent ahead of the forthcoming fasting month of Ramadan, when consumption soars. Three million tons of wheat would also be allowed to be brought in, as well as unspecified quantities of cotton and yarn.

Pakistan's economy is in the doldrums, a position made worse by a spreading third wave of the coronavirus pandemic that has seen the reintroduction of partial lockdowns across the country. Islamabad suspended trade and diplomatic ties with India in 2019 after New Delhi revoked the special status of the part of divided Kashmir that it rules.

Both countries withdrew their top diplomats, and consular staff were expelled or withdrawn. There has been a frosty stand-off since, but signs of rapprochement recently have included Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Imran Khan exchanging letters, as well as a resumption of talks last week on the use

of resources from their shared Indus River. Bloomberg reported last week that the United Arab Emirates had brokered secret back-channel talks between the two South Asian nations. Asked at a press conference Wednesday why the trade was resuming despite there being no change in New Delhi's position on Kashmir, Pakistan Finance Minister Hammad Azhar said the government had to make decisions "in the interest of the people".

"Cutting trade ties with India was an emotional decision and now the resumption of these ties is an economic compulsion," Farrukh Saleem, an economist and financial and political analyst, told AFP.

Azhar only took up his position on Tuesday after Khan sacked his predecessor for failing to check runaway inflation. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund resumed its \$6 billion bailout program with Pakistan, which was paused after the coronavirus outbreak, sending an instalment of nearly \$500 million this week. Pakistan went on to make its first foray in nearly five years into the global treasury market, with an oversubscribed issue of \$2.5 billion in Eurobonds. The country is in debt to the tune of nearly \$114 billion—more than 85 percent of its gross domestic product. —AFP



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan announced that it will allow the import of sugar and cotton from India, resuming trade between the two countries after it was stopped in August 2019. —AFP

AU calls for urgent action after Mozambique attack

ADDIS ABABA: The African Union yesterday called for urgent and coordinated international action after a jihadist attack that killed dozens and uprooted thousands on the northern Mozambican coastal town of Palma. The jihadists captured Palma on March 24, ransacking buildings and beheading residents and forcing thousands to seek safety in surrounding forest.

Dozens have been killed, more than 8,000 displaced and many more are still missing following the coordinated attack seen as the biggest escalation of an Islamist insurgency that has battered Cabo Delgado province since 2017. In a statement, AU chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat said he "condemns in the strongest terms the terrorist attacks".

Expressing "utmost concern" at the presence of international extremist groups in southern Africa, he called for an "urgent and coordinated regional and international action". Regional bloc the Southern African Development Community held emergency talks in Harare to discuss the violence.

Botswana's President Mokgweetsi Masisi vowed regional help, but gave no details. He said SADC would "respond in a helpful manner that we assure the integrity and sovereignty of one of our own, never to be assaulted by dissident, rebellious and non-state actor forces that undermine the democratic credentials and peace in the region." —AFP

Italian 'spy for Russia' had money problems, says wife

ROME: The Italian navy captain arrested this week in Rome for selling confidential documents to a Russian official was "desperate" for money, his wife said in a newspaper interview published yesterday.

The arrest of Walter Biot, 56, late Tuesday in a parking lot, unleashed a diplomatic scuffle between Italy and Russia. Italy swiftly expelled two Russian officials on Wednesday while Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio summoned Russian ambassador Sergey Razov to lodge a formal protest.

"He's not stupid, he's not irresponsible. It's just that he was desperate," Biot's wife, Claudia Carbonara, told La Corriere della Sera daily. "Desperate for our future and that of the children."

Biot's salary of 3,000 euros a month (\$3,500) was insufficient to support his family of four children—one of them with a serious handicap—and four dogs, Carbonara told the paper. A 1,200-euro mortgage, school costs and activity fees for the children all pushed the navy veteran of 30 years



ROME: A view of the headquarters (left) of Italian Ministry of Defense in Rome. —AFP

to hand over secret documents to the Russian in exchange for 5,000 euros, she said.

"Because of Covid we've become impoverished," said Carbonara, a sex therapist, adding that her husband had not discussed with her beforehand what he planned to do. Since 2015, Biot has worked in the office of the Chief of the Defense Staff. He is accused of taking pictures of secret documents on his computer screen and passing the files onto a pen drive, which police confiscated.

Police said the arrest followed lengthy

investigations by Italy's domestic intelligence agency AISI, with support from the Chief of the Defense Staff. On Wednesday, Di Maio told parliament that Russia's move was a "hostile act that will have consequences". A Kremlin spokesman said Wednesday he hoped the incident would not affect "the very positive and constructive nature" of relations between the two countries. The Russian embassy in Rome also on Wednesday expressed "regret" for the expulsion of two members of its military attache office. —AFP

International

Roma, Texas: Border town at center of immigration wave

Hundreds of undocumented immigrants take first steps into US

ROMA, US: Around midnight, Silvia hears the doorbell ring at her home in the small community of Roma, Texas, where she is a teacher. When she answers the door, she finds a young girl, soaked and begging for help. Silvia lives opposite a sandy path that sees hundreds of undocumented immigrants take their first steps into the United States after crossing the Rio Grande from Mexico.

The 11,000 inhabitants of this Rio Grande Valley border town and these undocumented immigrants have lived alongside each other for decades. There are mixed feelings among residents about the new arrivals: compassion and empathy for those looking for a better future—just like many of their own families did years ago—but also worry and even fear about the growing number of people coming to their community in recent months. Lately, there have sometimes been up to 500 people who cross the river in Roma per night, including families and children who have traveled alone.

“What are we going to do with all these children?” Silvia wondered. “Where are we going to put them? We also have people here who need help,” she said, standing in the door of her modest house, where she has installed security cameras. The 58-year-old ultimately gave dry clothes to the girl that night—she had fallen out of a smuggler’s boat and nearly drowned—but Silvia didn’t want to lend the

child her phone to make a call. “There are too many,” she said. “I’m afraid. Something has to be done.”

Roma is a national historical site, founded 250 years ago and known for its bird watching opportunities. The large majority of those who live there speak Spanish as well as English, are of Mexican descent, and work in the public sector or for oil pipelines. And Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential vote in Roma—just.

Empathy

“We empathize with immigrants because we know their experiences. Their stories are our stories also,” Roma Mayor Jaime Escobar said. “The only concern that I have as mayor is if it becomes an increased problem that we can’t control.” Over the course of three nights, AFP journalists saw hundreds of immigrants cross the river in rowboats, most of them coming from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador—escaping hunger, violence and poverty.

Families and children turn themselves over to US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and are detained. About 80 percent of the lone children and teenagers already have at least some family in the United States, and the Biden administration’s policy is to reunite the children with their relatives in the US—unlike under former president Donald Trump whose officials deported them. Some families are able to

claim asylum and are released from detention to await their hearings. Others are turned back.

But there are also adults who come alone and intend to escape detention entirely. It’s no easy feat—there is a strong law enforcement presence in Roma and the surrounding area as Biden seeks to assure critics that the border is not wide open and that single undocumented adults will be deported.

There were nearly 100,000 undocumented immigrants arrested at the border in February, a return to numbers not seen since mid-2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. For Dina Garcia Pena, founder of local newspaper El Tejano, “there isn’t anybody here who doesn’t understand the fight for a better life.” “A lot of people came from Mexico. My dad was undocumented. We leave water outside in case of emergency, we never deny a phone to anyone,” she said. But “we are seeing really large groups of 400 people.”

The wall

“The government has to (do) something about these people, they are looking for a place to live here, but there’s too many coming from out there,” local school custodian Tony Sandoval said, dressed in jeans, a cowboy shirt and straw hat. The 67-year-old said he sometimes gives food to the migrants who pass his house, but he is furious that his fence on Roma’s outskirts frequently gets broken down.

Sandoval pointed to an incomplete portion of the reddish-brown border wall that runs between nearby sorghum and cotton farms—a cornerstone Trump project—and said he would like to see it finished. Biden, who promised to reverse many of Trump’s anti-immigration policies, halted work on the wall when he took office two months ago. Luis Silva, a pastor at Bethel Mission Outreach Center who is also in favor of the wall, greets immigrants at the riverbank, brings them water and escorts them to CBP. But in his pocket, he carries a 9 mm Smith and Wesson gun. “It’s never my plan to use it, but...” he trailed off. “There has to be a way to stop this thing,” Silva said. “I almost was attacked in my house” by a migrant, he added. “We are the Wild West pretty much around here. We just have to watch out for our people.”—AFP

technology, these two tender-aged siblings would have been exposed to the harsh elements of desert environment for hours,” Chavez said. The United States is facing an increase of migrant arrivals at the country’s southern border, mostly Central Americans who say they are fleeing poverty and violence in their own countries.

Recently, there has been an average of 500 unaccompanied children crossing each day. President Joe Biden’s administration is facing growing pressure to confront the situation and criticisms about how the unaccompanied minors have been cared for while under US government custody.

According to official statistics, the Department of Health and Human Services had 12,918 migrant children in their care as of Tuesday, while CBP was responsible for the care of another 5,285. —AFP



Rosibel Emerita Arriaza, the mother of Salvadoran woman Victoria Esperanza Salazar Arriaza, who died on March 27, 2021. — AFP

Mother of Salvadoran killed by Mexican police seeks Biden help

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador: The mother of a Salvadoran woman who died at the hands of Mexican police asked US President Joe Biden Wednesday to grant refuge to the victim’s young daughters. Rosibel Arriaza, mother of Victoria Salazar, spoke to AFP as she was preparing to leave for Mexico from El Salvador to recover her daughter’s body and be reunited with her granddaughters, aged 15 and 16 — one of whom had gone missing but has since been located.

“I’m afraid that something will happen to my girls in Mexico and I don’t want to bring them to El Salvador either. I want to ask the president (Joe) Biden to help me... and give refuge to my grandchildren in the United States,” Arriaza told AFP by telephone. According to Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, Salazar was “subdued by four individuals” on Saturday in the Caribbean beach resort of Tulum. “She was brutally treated and murdered. It fills us with sorrow, pain and shame,” he said on Monday.

“All those responsible are going to be punished. They are already in the process of being prosecuted and there will be no impunity,” the president vowed. The 36-year-old mother of two had lived in Mexico for five years and worked in a hotel, according to her family in El Salvador.

Oscar Montes de Oca, prosecutor for the state of Quintana Roo, home to Tulum, said Salazar was involved in an altercation with the manager of a grocery store, who called the police. He said the police used “disproportionate force” against Salazar, which caused a fatal spine fracture.

Salazar’s mother has likened her killing to the treatment in the United States of George Floyd, who died as a policeman knelt on his neck. Montes de Oca said the four officers suspected in Salazar’s death were in custody and would be brought before a judge to face charges of femicide, punishable by up to 50 years in prison. —AFP



ROMA: The entrance to a border crossing in the southern Texas border city of Roma. The 11,000 inhabitants of the Texas border town Roma have been living with illegal immigrants for decades. — AFP

Two children dropped over US-Mexico border wall

WASHINGTON: Two small Ecuadoran girls, three and five years old, were hoisted over and dropped from the top of a 14-foot wall marking the US-Mexican border in the middle of the night before being picked up by US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers, the agency said

Wednesday. “On Tuesday evening, a Santa Teresa agent utilizing camera technology observed a smuggler dropping two young children from the top of the approximately 14-foot-high (four-meter-high) border barrier,” CBP said in a statement. The children were taken to a CBP station in Santa Teresa, New Mexico to be evaluated by medical personnel, and then were transported to a local hospital as a precaution. CBP said the girls remain in the agency’s custody.

“I’m appalled by the way these smugglers viciously dropped innocent children from a 14-foot border barrier last night,” chief patrol agent Gloria Chavez said in a statement.

Chavez said US agents are working with Mexican authorities to identify those responsible. “If not for the vigilance of our agents using mobile

International

As US newspapers slide toward abyss, a bidding war breaks out

Bidding war pits hedge fund operators against civic-minded billionaires

WASHINGTON: Even as US newspapers sink toward an abyss, an unusual bidding war has broken out for a major chain, pitting hedge fund operators against civic-minded billionaires seeking to promote a nonprofit model for the struggling industry.

Tribune Publishing, which owns the Chicago Tribune, Baltimore Sun and other big regional dailies, was set to sell the company to Alden Global Capital at a value of \$630 million, a move that would expand the news operations of the hedge fund with a reputation for aggressive cutting of newsroom staff. Maryland businessman Stewart Bainum had another idea: he initially struck a deal to buy the Baltimore Sun as part of the transaction, but when that plan hit a snag, made a \$650 million offer for the entire chain. Bainum, chairman of

Joining Bainum's effort was Swiss billionaire Hansjoerg Wyss, who told the New York Times he would invest \$100 million; and Mason Slaine, a minority Tribune stakeholder and former CEO of Thomson Financial. Slaine told the Wall Street Journal he would commit the same amount to acquire the Orlando Sentinel and Sun-Sentinel in his state of Florida. Amid efforts to find buyers for other Tribune dailies, a "mystery" investor has emerged for the Morning Call offering \$30 million to \$40 million for the newspaper, according to the Allentown, Pennsylvania daily. If Bainum succeeds, he would likely sell off some of the newspapers—which include the Hartford Courant and Virginian-Pilot—with some potentially becoming nonprofits.

"Alden's strategy has been to cut deep and extract as much value as they can from newspapers," Kennedy said. "Those of us who care about the future of regional newspapers hope that the Bainum group can pull it together." Jon Schleuss, president of the NewsGuild which represents journalists at several Tribune newspapers, has also been pressing for civic support and local ownership in the hope of averting further job cuts.

"Our hope and work is that Alden doesn't win," Schleuss said. "Bainum represent a better alternative." Complicating matters is that Alden already owns a 31.6 percent stake in Tribune, giving it leverage over any transaction. Another 24 percent is owned by Patrick Soon-Shiong, a biotech billionaire who bought the Los Angeles Times from Tribune Publishing in 2018.

Billionaire heroes?

Gabriel Kahn, a former newspaper reporter now on the faculty at the University of Southern California, said the bidding comes at a time when the value of newspapers in the US has plunged. "When you have only two bidders, it is difficult to gauge what the true value of these papers might be. But these assets have never been cheaper," Kahn said.

But Kahn said even so-called benevolent owners may be frustrated by a dismal news media landscape where it is difficult to get digital subscriptions or advertising revenues. Since Soon-Shiong has taken over the Los Angeles daily, "no clear strategy has emerged, nor any clear leadership. It seems obvious that managing this was much thornier than he had anticipated," Kahn said.

"That makes me think that he is done playing civic-minded hero and will take the highest bidder for his Tribune stake." The nonprofit model has been growing in recent years in the United States, and now includes some 300 news outlets.

The movement gained momentum in Philadelphia, where the Inquirer newspaper has been under nonprofit ownership since 2016. Bainum's plan for a nonprofit in Baltimore could build on that momentum. But now, Bainum and his allies are likely to either come away with the full Tribune group or nothing. "These buyers are united by a common interest in the long-term future of local journalism and an antipathy for newspaper investors with a track record of gutting newsrooms for near-term profit," said Jim Friedlich, chief executive of the Philadelphia institute.—AFP

come on the back of three years of recession, worsened by economically devastating lockdown measures taken to quell the global health crisis. Not helping matters was an inflation rate of 36.1 percent in 2020, as incomes failed to increase in tandem with the price of food and other goods. The unemployment rate is over 10 percent. Argentina registered its highest poverty rate of 58 percent at the end of 2002, during its worst economic crisis. Thousands of people marched in Buenos Aires earlier this month to demand food aid. The COVID-19 pandemic has killed some 55,000 people in Argentina out of more than 2.3 million recorded infections. —AFP



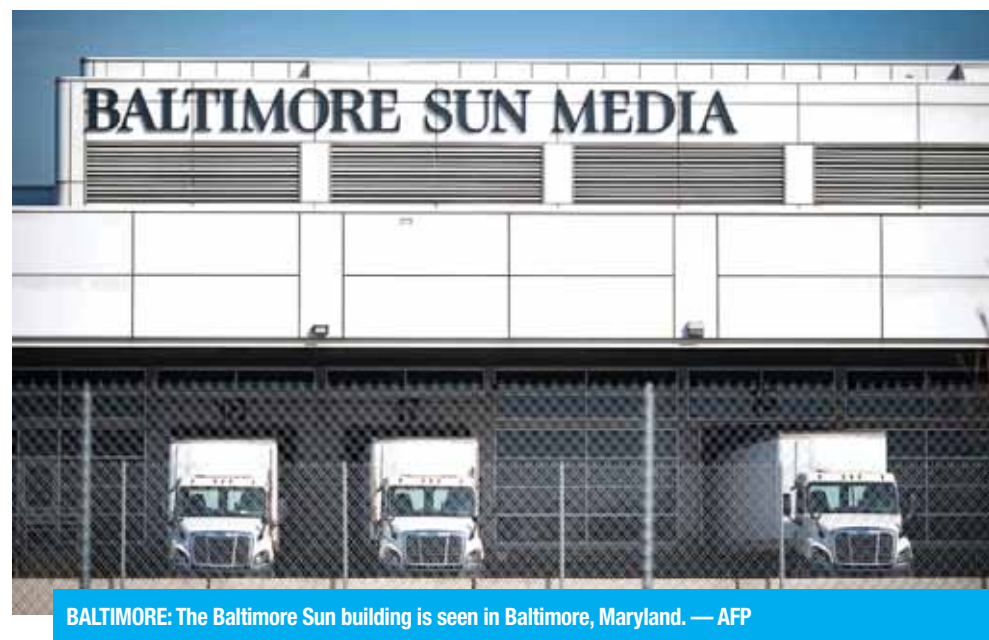
PORT MORESBY: Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape (right) preparing to receive a dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine in Port Moresby. — AFP

Facebook virus lies 'biggest challenge' to PNG vaccine drive

PORT MORESBY, PNG: Papua New Guinea's health minister yesterday called disinformation spread on Facebook the "biggest challenge" to efforts to curb the rampant spread of COVID-19 in the poor Pacific nation. Jelta Wong said "dangerous" posts and anti-vax conspiracy theories were hampering the drive to get people to seek treatment and testing for the disease as infection numbers soar.

"When Facebook hit Papua New Guinea everybody became an expert," Wong told an online event organized by Sydney's Lowy Institute think tank. "Everybody had a PhD, even sitting under a coconut tree they became a PhD," he said in describing the spread of faulty information about coronavirus by users of the platform. PNG, a poor nation of more than eight million off Australia's northeast coast, reported around 1,000 Covid-19 cases in the first year of the pandemic, but saw more than 5,000 new infections last month alone.

Wong said that low rates of testing meant the real scale of the outbreak was likely much larger. The country's health care system is creaking under the strain, with many workers themselves infected and authorities in the capital, Port Moresby, forced to set up a makeshift COVID-19 clinic in a sports stadium earlier this week. Australia flew an emergency batch of 8,000 doses of vaccine into Port Moresby last week along with a small team of public health specialists to help inoculate frontline health workers ahead of a larger rollout. About 40 percent of the 1,600 staff at the Port Moresby General Hospital have agreed to be vaccinated, according to health officials, while doses will also be sent to hotspots including Lae, Goroka and Vanimo.—AFP



BALTIMORE: The Baltimore Sun building is seen in Baltimore, Maryland. — AFP

Choice Hotels, has pledged to put up \$100 million, a sum match by two other wealthy investors. But it remained unclear if he can raise enough in time to head off the Tribune deal with Alden. "Alden is offering a clean bid: they have cash and are waving it in front of the shareholders," said Dan Kennedy, a Northeastern University journalism professor. "It becomes complicated to ask shareholders to wait until (Bainum) can get his financing together."

Turning point?

The outcome for the Tribune could be a turning point for the troubled sector, either toward a model with civic support for expanded local news coverage, or a pure economic-driven model that could lead to deeper newsroom cuts. Newsroom employment at US newspapers fell by half between 2008 and 2019, according to Pew Research Center, with more cuts reported during the pandemic.

In the 31 large cities that were studied, the country's poverty rate rose from 40.9 percent in the first half of the year to 42 percent in the second, according to the National Institute of Statistics. This represented a steep climb of 6.5 percentage points from the last six months of 2019.

Poverty is defined as the inability to afford a basket of basic food and services valued at some \$600 for a family of four. People who cannot afford a basic basket of only food—about \$250 for a family—are classified as indigent. They numbered 10.5 percent of the population in 2020.

More than 57 percent of children up to age 14 lived in poverty, the data showed. The figures

More than four in 10 Argentines living in poverty

BUENOS AIRES: The economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic has worsened poverty in Argentina, with some 12 million people in urban areas unable to afford a basket of basic food or essential services in the second half of 2020, official data showed Wednesday.

International

Friday, April 2, 2021

Amid virus surge, WHO says Europe vaccine rollout 'unacceptably slow'

Brazil deaths hit new monthly record as France tightens curbs

COPENHAGEN: The World Health Organization yesterday slammed Europe's vaccine rollout as "unacceptably slow" which it said was prolonging the pandemic as the region sees a "worrying" surge in coronavirus infections. "Vaccines present our best way out of this pandemic... However, the rollout of these vaccines is unacceptably slow," WHO director for Europe Hans Kluge said in a statement. "We must speed up the process by ramping up manufacturing, reducing barriers to administering vaccines, and using every single vial we have in stock, now," he said.

To date, only 10 percent of the region's total population have received one vaccine dose, and four percent have completed a full vaccine series, the organization said. The WHO's European region comprises 53 countries and territories and includes Russia and several Central Asian nations.

The organization said the slow rollout was "prolonging the pandemic" and described Europe's virus situation as "more worrying than we have seen in several months." Five weeks ago, the weekly number of new cases in Europe had dipped to under one million, but "last week saw increasing transmission of Covid-19 in the majority of countries in the WHO European region, with 1.6 million new cases," it said. The total number of deaths in Europe "is fast approaching one million and the total number of cases about to surpass 45 million," it said, noting that Europe was the second-most affected region after the Americas.

Worrying new variants

The UN body warned that the rapid spread of the virus could increase the risk of the emergence of worrying new variants. "The likelihood of new variants of concern occurring increases with the rate at which the virus is replicating and spreading, so curbing transmission through basic disease control actions is crucial," Dorit Nitzan, WHO Europe's regional emergency director, said in the statement.

New infections were increasing in every age group except in people aged 80 years and older, as vaccinations of that age group begin to show effect. The WHO said the British variant of the virus was now the predominant one in Europe, and was present in 50 countries. "As this variant is more transmissible and can increase the risk of hospitalization, it has a greater public health impact and additional actions are required to control it," it said. Those actions included expanded testing, isolation, contact tracing, quarantine and genetic sequencing. Meanwhile, the WHO said lockdowns "should be avoided by timely and targeted public health interventions", but should be used when the disease "overstretches the ability of health services to care for patients adequately."

It said 27 countries in its European region were in partial or full nationwide lockdown, with 21 imposing nighttime curfews.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 death toll spiraled out of control in Brazil in March, more than doubling the country's previous monthly record, officials said Wednesday, as French President Emmanuel



ANKARA: A woman waits to receive the COVID-19 vaccine yesterday. —AFP

Macron announced a limited nationwide lockdown. In a sign of the devastation the virus is still causing while the world races to roll out vaccines, Brazil reported 66,573 people had died of COVID-19 in March—more than twice as many fatalities as the country's second-deadliest month of the pandemic, July 2020. —AFP

Two dead as fresh wave of violence hits India state poll

NANDIGRAM, India: Two people died as the second phase of voting in a violence-marred Indian state election kicked off yesterday, officials said, with crowds of opponents clashing on the streets despite a ban on large gatherings. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist party and the firebrand leader of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, are caught up in a fierce battle for the eastern state renowned for its high levels of political violence and murders.

Campaigning in the town of Nandigram has been particularly intense, with 66-year-old Banerjee—one of Modi's fiercest critics—contesting the seat against a former confidante who defected to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) last year. Hundreds of supporters of Banerjee's Trinamool Congress party and the BJP clashed outside polling stations in Nandigram yesterday, despite an Election Commission banned on gatherings of more than four people. Police told AFP a worker for Banerjee's Trinamool Congress party (TMC) was "hacked to death" early yesterday with three BJP supporters detained for questioning. A BJP worker also allegedly killed himself after he was threatened by TMC supporters, police said, citing a complaint filed by his family. Despite the outbreaks of violence, thousands of people queued at hotly contested Nandigram's polling stations to cast their vote. The West Bengal polls are being held over eight phases amid tight security and conclude on

April 29. The second phase of voting involves 30 constituencies including Nandigram.

In another district, West Midnapore, police said a TMC camp was raided by BJP supporters, with party flags ripped up and vehicles damaged. "BJP supporters came in with force and threw crude bombs and rocks," a police spokesman told AFP. The BJP has been seeking to expand its power at the state level beyond its Hindi-speaking northern heartlands. West Bengal, home to more than 90

million people with some 73 million eligible to vote, has so far eluded the BJP. The results of the West Bengal poll will be announced by the Electoral Commission on May 2, alongside several other state and territory elections in Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. The second out of three phases of polling in the northeastern state of Assam—where the BJP is looking to hold on to power after winning for the first time in 2016 — also commenced yesterday. —AFP



NANDIGRAM, India: Voters stand in a line to cast their vote outside a polling station during Phase 2 of West Bengal's legislative election in Nandigram yesterday. —AFP

US climate envoy Kerry will travel to UAE, India, Bangladesh

WASHINGTON: The United States' climate envoy John Kerry will travel to the United Arab Emirates, India and Bangladesh ahead of a climate summit that Washington will host next month, according to a statement from the department Wednesday.

The leaders of the three countries are among 40 invited to a two-day virtual meeting starting April 22 and meant to mark the US's return to the front lines of the climate crisis fight, after former president Donald Trump disengaged from the process. The US is expected to make ambitious new commitments to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions under the terms of the Paris climate accord soon, and will encourage others to boost their own goals. Kerry will visit Abu Dhabi, New Delhi and Dhaka between April 1 and 9, the State Department statement said.

The Paris Agreement left countries in charge of making their own promises and taking their own measurements of emission reductions, but requires them to regularly revise their Nationally Determined Contributions. The agreement's goal is to limit the increase in global temperatures by the end of the century to around 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels — or risk leaving much of the planet inhospitable to life. The United States, the world's top economy, is the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, which trap heat in the atmosphere.

The trip announcement comes as the administration of President Joe Biden was preparing to seek a multi-trillion dollar package from Congress to modernize ageing infrastructure, while shifting to renewable energy and electric cars. —AFP

International

Suu Kyi faces court as UN envoy warns of Myanmar civil war

Death toll reaches 535 as junta represses protests

YANGON: Myanmar's ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi faced a court hearing yesterday, after a UN envoy warned of the risk of civil war and an imminent "bloodbath" as the junta represses pro-democracy protests. More than 535 people have died in daily demonstrations since the military overthrew Suu Kyi on February 1, halting Myanmar's decade-old experiment in democracy.

The UN Security Council held an urgent closed-door session on the escalating crisis on Wednesday, and special envoy Christine Schraner Burgener urged it to act. "I appeal to this council to consider all available tools to take collective action and do what is right, what the people of Myanmar deserve," she said, in remarks obtained by AFP.

She said she remained open to dialogue with the junta but added: "If we wait only for when they are ready to talk, the ground situation will only worsen. A bloodbath is imminent." The emergency UN session came on the eve of Suu Kyi's latest court hearing—she faces a raft of criminal charges that could see her barred from office for life. Her legal team on Wednesday held their first meeting with her-by video link in a police station—since she was ousted and detained in the early hours of February 1. The 75-year-old has not been seen in public, but her lawyers said she appeared to be in good health despite two months in detention.

The hearing was expected to be brief, and to deal only with administrative aspects of the case. The junta is also probing the Nobel laureate over



MANDALAY: This photo taken and received courtesy of an anonymous source via Facebook yesterday shows protesters taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Mandalay. — AFP

allegations she took payments of gold and more than \$1 million in cash, but Khin Maung Zaw, one of her lawyers, said these were not likely to translate into formal charges at this stage. A group of ousted MPs from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), who have been working underground against the junta, have announced plans for "a new civilian government" in the first week of April.

They announced that Myanmar's military-drafted 2008 constitution was "cancelled", and yesterday a group of protesters burned a pile of copies

in the street in Yangon. Two military-owned supermarkets in Yangon were set on fire overnight, local media reported.

China caution

Britain's UN envoy Barbara Woodward said the Security Council was "united in its condemnation" and was discussing "a range of measures at our disposal". But China, considered an important ally of Myanmar, ruled out sanctions or other "coercive measures". China's UN ambassador Zhang Jun also

Massive rally

The group was prosecuted for organizing an unauthorized assembly on August 18, 2019 — one of the biggest in Hong Kong that year as people took to the streets calling for democracy and greater police accountability. Organizers claimed 1.7 million people turned out—almost one in four Hong Kong residents—though that number was difficult to independently verify.

It was easily one of the biggest rallies that year, with dense crowds marching peacefully for hours under a sea of umbrellas and thundery skies. Protests in Hong Kong can only go ahead with the permission of authorities and rights groups have long criticized the use of unauthorized assembly prosecutions. British lawyer David Perry, hired by the Hong Kong government to be the lead prosecutor, stepped down following withering criticism from both the UK government and British legal bodies over his decision to take the job.

Prosecutors accused the group of defying police instructions that day and encouraging crowds to march across Hong Kong's main island, bringing traffic disruption. In her verdict, district Judge AJ Woodcock indicated that she was inclined to go for a maximum jail sentence and said the fact the march was peaceful was no defense.

"It cannot be right for an offender to argue that although his act was unauthorized... but because it was ultimately peaceful and there was no violence he should not be arrested, prosecuted or convicted," she wrote. —AFP

Some struck a defiant tone outside court yesterday morning ahead of the verdict, holding banners that read "protest political suppression". "We are very proud even if we have to go to jail for it," Lee Cheuk-yan, a former legislator and labor leader told reporters. "We will still march on no matter what lies in the future." Seven were found guilty of organizing and knowingly participating in an unauthorised assembly. Two others had previously pleaded guilty. They face up to five years in jail.



HONG KONG: Former lawmaker Cyd Ho (center) and pro-democracy activist Lee Cheuk-yan (right) speak to the media outside West Kowloon court in Hong Kong yesterday after being found guilty of organizing an unauthorized assembly on August 18, 2019. — AFP

Veteran Hong Kong activists convicted over democratic rally

HONG KONG: Nine veteran Hong Kong activists face jail after they were convicted yesterday for their roles in organizing one of the biggest democracy protests to engulf the city in 2019. The defendants included some of Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy campaigners, many of whom are non-violence advocates who have spent decades campaigning in vain for universal suffrage.

They are the latest group of democracy figures to be prosecuted as China oversees a sweeping crackdown on dissent following seven straight months of democracy protests in the financial hub.

Among them are Martin Lee, an 82-year-old barrister who was once chosen by Beijing to help write Hong Kong's mini-constitution, and Margaret Ng, a 73-year-old barrister and former opposition lawmaker. Media tycoon Jimmy Lai, currently in custody after his arrest under Beijing's new national security law, was among those convicted.

Leung Kwok-hung, an opposition politician known by his sobriquet "Long Hair" who has also been detained on national security charges, was also sent down. Others are leading members of the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), the coalition that organized a series of huge rallies throughout 2019.

called for the protection of foreign businesses—a key concern for China, which has seen dozens of its factories torched amid anger against Beijing.

The US State Department has ordered the departure of non-essential diplomatic staff and their families from Myanmar, and Japan—a top donor to the country—has halted new aid payments. Linda Thomas Greenfield, the US ambassador to the United Nations, raised the possibility of action if the military does not step down.

If "they continue the attacks that they were making on civilian populations, then we have to look at how we might do more", she told reporters. German company Giesecke+Devrient, which supplies raw materials to Myanmar's central bank for the production of bank notes, announced Wednesday it was suspending deliveries. French renewable energy giant Voltalia said it was also withdrawing from the country because of the political and humanitarian crisis.

Fears are growing that a broader conflict could erupt in a country plagued for decades by on-off fighting between the military and rebel ethnic armies. Several of Myanmar's 20 or so armed ethnic groups, who control large areas of territory mostly in border regions, have voiced their opposition to the coup and crackdown. Three of them—the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army—on Wednesday threatened to join the protesters' fight against the military. —AFP

China seeks 'democratic transition' in Myanmar

UNITED NATIONS: China on Wednesday said it wanted a "democratic transition" in military-ruled Myanmar, but ruled out sanctions at a UN Security Council meeting. "China hopes that Myanmar will restore peace, stability and constitutional order as early as possible and continue to steadily advance democratic transition," Ambassador Zhang Jun told the closed-door meeting, according to a statement.

"Maintaining peace and stability in Myanmar is in the common interest of the international community. Should Myanmar slide into protracted turbulence, it will be a disaster for Myanmar and the region as a whole," he said. Myanmar's military, which overthrew the country's elected leadership on February 1 and has violently suppressed protests, counts on China as its main ally.

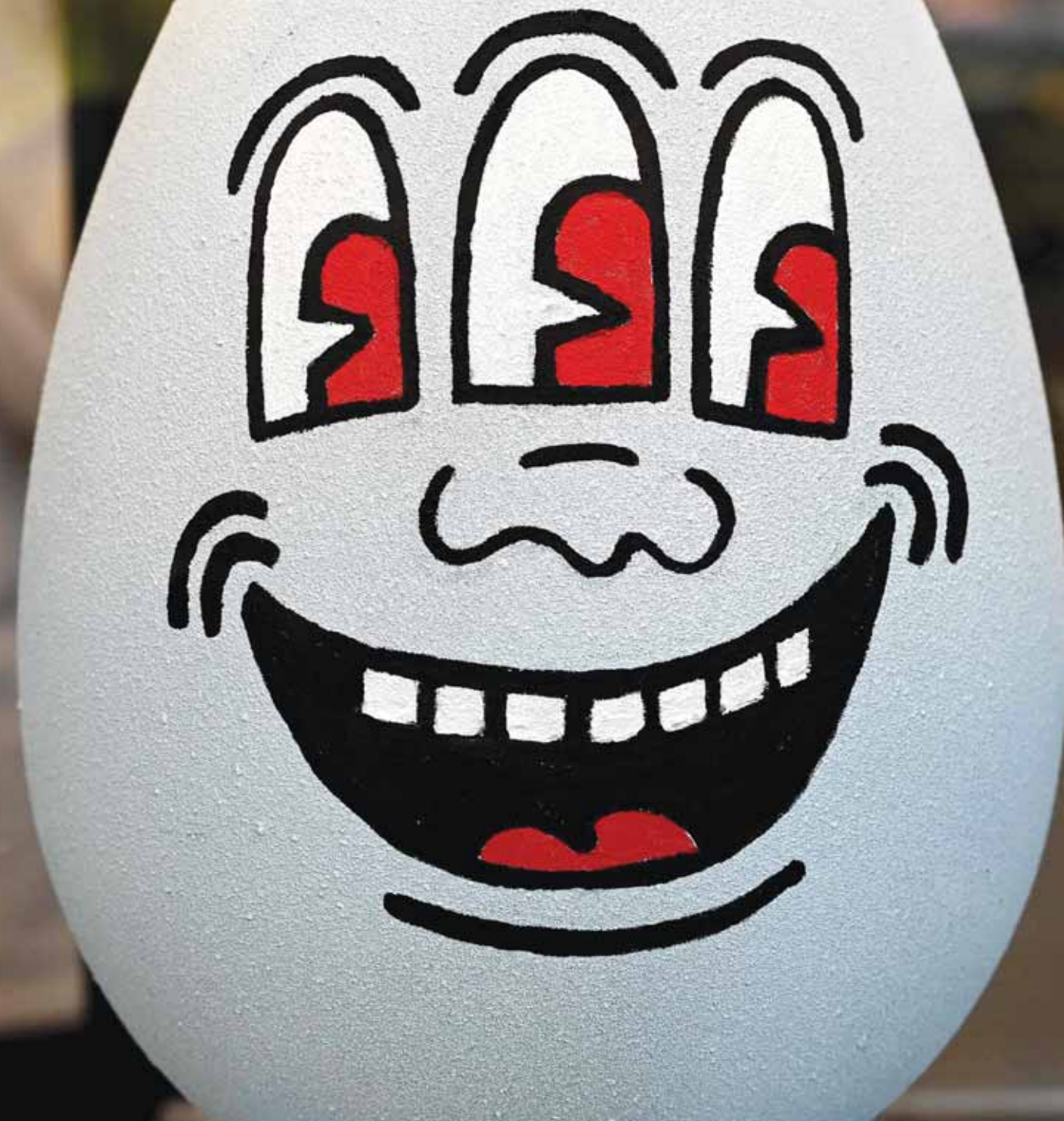
China nonetheless remained consistent in its opposition to economic pressure on Myanmar after the closed-door meeting in which Western powers spoke of further measures. "One-sided pressure and calling for sanctions or other coercive measures will only aggravate tension and confrontation and further complicate the situation, which is by no means constructive," Zhang said. —AFP

Lifestyle

Friday Times

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A photograph shows an Easter chocolate egg painted to pay a tribute to American artist Keith Haring, and made by pastry chef Walter Musco, in his pastry shop 'Pasticceria Bompiani', in Rome.— AFP

How do you like your eggs? Rome chef's elegant answer for Easter

See Pages 20-21



A photograph shows Easter chocolate eggs painted to pay a tribute to American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (left), Spanish painter Antoni Tapies (center) and Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, made by pastry chef Walter Musco.



Pastry chef Walter Musco poses for pictures with Easter chocolate eggs sculpted to pay tribute to different artists, in his pastry shop "Pasticceria Bompiani", in Rome.

How do you like your eggs? Rome chef's elegant answer for Easter

In a working-class neighborhood of Rome, crowds gather in front of a pastry shop window to see sumptuous Easter eggs turned into works of art. Laid out like brightly coloured pieces of jewelry, each of Walter Musco's chocolate eggs is created as a tribute to a particular artist. One is adorned with two people holding up a heart, after US pop artist Keith Haring, while another is crafted all in yellow with slashes reminiscent of Argentine-Italian painter Lucio Fontana.

"It's a simple idea—I'm really passionate about art and I expanded my field to include literature, music and cinema," Musco told AFP. The 47-year-old Roman, wearing an impeccable white chef's uniform, has been making these

kind of eggs for a decade and has now put a selection on show ahead of the Easter weekend. The eggs on display are the "ones that have pleased me the most", and include one decked with a dove like the bird in Robert Mapplethorpe's famous photo of Patti Smith, and a red dressed egg inspired by fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa.

Each of these eggs will set you back between 150 and 400 euros, depending on how long they take to make. But you don't have to eat them, and if looked after, they can last for years. "The main thing is to keep them out of the heat, so not next to a chimney or a radiator, or near a window exposed to the sun. There's no problem up to about 26 or 27 degrees celsius," Musco said.



Photo shows an Easter chocolate egg painted like the "Tagli" painting by Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana in order to pay him a tribute. — AFP photos



A photograph shows Easter chocolate egg painted to pay a tribute to Italian actress Giulietta Masina, the wife of director Federico Fellini.

Photo shows Easter chocolate eggs painted to pay a tribute to the book "1984" by English novelist George Orwell.

Photo shows an Easter chocolate egg painted like a painting of US artist Keith Haring in order to pay him a tribute.

Self-taught

The eggs on display are all for sale, excepting a few which are part of private collections of clients. But customers must buy them in person due to the risk of damage if sent by post. Musco uses a 55 percent dark chocolate from France for his eggs, making shells that he puts together before adding the decorations—all of them edible. In his laboratory in the basement of the pastry shop in the Tor Marancia district in southern Rome, he is keen to show off his skills.

Armed with a warm knife, he carves designs into the chocolate with the concentration of a surgeon. "I am

self-taught. I had an art gallery years ago, I mainly sold African, South-East Asian, Oceanic and Australian Aboriginal art," he said. "Then I developed this passion for another form of more Eurocentric art," he added, smiling. When choosing his inspirations, he looks at "everything that is abstract and not obvious to understand, but has a big emotional impact". In the future, he wants to keep making his eggs but in direct collaboration with artists, "a way to exchange opinions and ideas, and thus evolve!". — AFP



A photograph shows an Easter chocolate egg sculpted to pay a tribute to American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (Front), made by pastry chef Walter Musco, in his pastry shop.

Pastry chef Walter Musco poses for pictures with Easter chocolate eggs painted like the "Tagli" painting by Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana (left) and like a painting of US artist Keith Haring in order to pay them a tribute.

A photograph shows Easter chocolate eggs painted to pay a tribute to the Tunisian fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa (left), Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci (center) and a Cubistic egg, made by pastry chef Walter Musco.



Pastry chef Walter Musco poses for pictures with an Easter chocolate egg sculpted to pay a tribute to American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

A photograph shows an Easter chocolate egg sculpted to pay a tribute to German artist Anselm Kiefer, made by pastry chef Walter Musco.

Lifestyle | Features

‘The Man Who Sold His Skin’: Tunisia’s dark Oscars nomination

It’s a troubling political fable shot with a sophisticated aesthetic, and Tunisia’s first-ever Academy Award nomination: “The Man Who Sold His Skin”. Part dark satire, part romantic drama, the film tells the story of lovelorn Syrian refugee Sam Ali (Yahya Mahayni) who is able to travel to Europe thanks to a Faustian pact. When a contemporary artist tattoos a European Schengen visa across his back, Ali finds himself able to cross international borders as a living work of art. Tunisian writer-director Kaouther Ben Hania ventured outside her native country to dive into two contrasting worlds-of refugees and contemporary art. “I couldn’t stand the victimization discourse on refugees anymore,” said the director, Ben Hania. “My intention from the start was to make him a contemporary hero who comes out on top and turns the adventure to his advantage.”

The story is partly inspired by the real-life tale of a Belgian man, Tim Steiner, who sold the right to tattoo his back, occasionally exhibit it, and recover the skin after his death, to the artist Wim Delvoye, who makes a cameo in the film. The movie, shot in France, Belgium and Tunisia, alternates between a grating and tender tone as it highlights the cruel absurdity of a system where objects can travel more freely than people. “The Man Who Sold His Skin” is shortlisted in the International Feature Film category for the Oscars, which are held on April 25. Monica Bellucci plays a “fake blonde” gallerist while Syrian actor Yahya Mahayni portrays a sweet freedom-loving dreamer who oscillates between joy and anger in a volatile situation.

‘Total dispossession’

While the refugee is “in total dispossession of his body” during part of the story, “he eventually regains possession of it”, said Ben Hania. The characters in the story “resemble me, pushed to the extreme”, she confided. Like the Syrian refugee, she said, she has faced “problems of papers to leave for France”. And like the eccentric artist in the film, she said, “I reflect on my work to the extreme”. Her earlier films have already won awards, including “Beauty and the Dogs” about a young woman’s quest for justice after being raped, and “Zineb Hates the Snow”, a documentary about a Tunisian teenager who migrates to Canada. The Oscar nomination “is huge,” admitted Ben Hania, who added that she regrets the lack of institutional support for cinema in Tunisia. The film was co-produced with 25 international partners, including in Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, Tunisia and Qatar, and shot by Lebanese cinematographer Christopher Aoun (“Capernaum”). Raising the budget of 2.5 million euros (\$2.9 million) was “a challenge”, according to one of the co-producers, Nedim Cheikhrouha, who said the project almost collapsed a year ago due to lack of funds.

At the Academy Awards, “The Man Who Sold His Skin” has fewer promotional resources than other contenders, the producers said. Ben Hania—who says she is now working on a film “on the edge of genres” between documentary and fiction—hopes that the Oscar nomination will, at the very least, “make my next films a little easier”. “The Man Who Sold His Skin” was released this week in Tunisia and will screen in the United States from April 2, and in Sweden on April 23. —AFP



Tunisian director and screenwriter Kaouther Ben Hania (center), producer Mohamed Habib Attia (left), and Syrian actor Yahya Mahayni, attend the first screening of her film “The man who sold his skin” in the country, in the capital Tunis. —AFP photos

Britney Spears says she ‘cried for weeks’ over documentary

Britney Spears said she was “embarrassed” and “cried for two weeks” over her portrayal in a recent documentary about her career and mental health problems. “I didn’t watch the documentary but from what I did see of it I was embarrassed by the light they put me in,” she wrote on Instagram late Tuesday, in her first response to “Framing Britney Spears”, a documentary produced by FX and the New York Times released in February.



The film looked at the 39-year-old pop star’s career and the controversial conservatorship of her father, who was given legal guardianship over her finances in 2008 following a highly publicized breakdown, sparking the #FreeBritney movement by fans. “I cried for two weeks and well ... I still cry sometimes !!!!!” Spears wrote about watching the film. “My life has always been very speculated ... watched ... and judged really my whole life !!!!!” she wrote elsewhere in the message, which was accompanied by a video of her dancing to “Crazy” by Aerosmith. “It takes a lot of strength to TRUST the universe with your real vulnerability cause I’ve always been so judged... insulted... and embarrassed by the media.”

Spears filed last year to remove her father Jamie Spears from the conservatorship and give sole power over her estate to a financial institution. Her court-appointed lawyer said she was “afraid” of her father. A judge ruled in February that both Spears’ father and Bessemer Trust would oversee the pop star’s finances, denying Jamie Spears’ bid to keep sole power to delegate investments, though the case is ongoing. —AFP

Croatia acts to save its iconic Istrian goat

With wavy horns and a sturdy build, the Istrian goat stands proudly on Croatia’s national flag. But in the pastures where the white-furred animal hails from, the breed is almost nowhere to be seen. For centuries, the domestic goat was a staple of rural life in Croatia’s Istria peninsula, an enchanting region home to rolling hills and picturesque coastline. But from a population in the thousands in the mid-20th century, the goat’s numbers have dwindled down to a few dozen, prompting local authorities to launch a conservation program with the help of local breeders.

“It is crucial to preserve the Istrian goat since it is an indigenous breed,” said Ivan Milohanic, a 32-year-old bus driver, whose herd of goats includes some 20 of the heavy-set white Istrians. The goats are milked by hand and graze for a few hours daily at a meadow close to the Milohanic family’s farm house, where he also grows olives, grapes and hosts tourists. “Also, there is a strong interest in genuine natural products,” he added, noting the health benefits of the goat’s milk and meat. Milohanic, one of a handful of local breeders raising the goats, started years ago and aspires to run a small cheese factory in future.

Milk and meat

The animals were for many years a key food resource, providing milk and meat for villagers too poor to afford a cow or sheep. “There was practically no farm without some goats,” said Boro Mioc, a professor at the Zagreb University Faculty of Agronomy, who is helping the revitalization project. Known as agile and intelligent, goats were the first animal to be milked by man, he added. In times of hardship, such as during wars or hunger, the “poor man’s cow” helped villagers survive due to their modest needs regarding food and shelter. They were also easy to bring along if the owner needed to flee. “Goats were always a symbol of poverty but also of the preservation of family,” said Gordan Subara, of the government’s agency for Istria’s rural development, in charge of the rehabilitation project. The death of a goat was once a tragedy for an average Istrian family. But laws in the 19th and 20th centuries practically banned keeping the animals, which were considered forest-destroying pests, causing the population to shrink dramatically. In recent decades, the movement of people to urban areas and development of tourism as a source of income have further reduced reliance on the animals.

‘Return our debt’

The local revitalization project started in 2010 with experts carrying out a genetic analysis to confirm the Istrian breed still existed with a view to adding it to Croatia’s list of indigenous and protected species. That fol-

lowed two years later. Local authorities are now studying around 30 breeding goats to prevent mating of close relatives, with hopes that artificial insemination can also help double the population annually to reach 1,000 within a decade. “The most important goal is to return our debt towards this animal, whom we proclaimed a pest without justification,” Subara told AFP. This year, they also plan to buy up any Istrian baby goats in the region to prevent their slaughter. While Istria has changed hands several times over the centuries, the goat has remained an enduring symbol, featuring on the region’s coat of arms while it was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italy. After Croatia’s independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, a yellow goat with red horns and hooves was incorporated onto both Istria and the national flag, as well as both coat of arms. Preserving that symbolism is also very important,” Subara stressed.

Tourist attraction

Another ray of hope for the goats may lie in tourism. Olga Skopac, whose farm is nestled between the picturesque hilltop town of Labin and the coastal resort of Rabac, used two does and a buck to clear her land a few years ago instead of machinery. Now the animals are an additional draw for the tourists who stay in apartments on her farm. “We are renewing a traditional rural household” on nature’s doorstep, said the energetic 66-year-old, who with her husband grows olives and keeps some 20 Istrian sheep, three donkeys and several goats. —AFP



Croatian breeder Ivan Milohanic poses next to some of his goats at a meadow in Veleniki.

MARCH OF THE MUMMIES: EGYPT READIES FOR PHARAOHS' PARADE



In this file photo Egyptians wave their national flag from a balcony as they bid farewell to the Ramses II colossal statue at Talat Harb Square, as it's moved from the polluted capital city Cairo to a spot near the Pyramids in Giza, closer to its original site.



This file handout photo released by the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities shows a view of the mummy of ancient Egyptian King Seqenenre Tao II, "the Brave", who reigned over southern Egypt some 1,600 years BCE.



In this file photo the mummified remains of Queen Hatshepsut, ancient Egypt's most famous female pharaoh, lie in a glass case after being unveiled at the Cairo Museum. —AFP photos

The mummified remains of 22 ancient Egyptian kings and queens will be paraded through the streets of Cairo tomorrow, in an eye-catching royal procession to a new resting place. Dubbed the Pharaohs' Golden Parade, the 18 kings and four queens will travel in order, oldest first, each aboard a separate float decorated in Ancient Egyptian style. They are being moved from a decades-long residency at the Egyptian Museum in central Cairo to be put on display at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, which first opened in 2017, in the south of the capital.

Upon arrival, they will occupy "slightly upgraded cases," said Salima Ikram, professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo. "The temperature and humidity control will be even better than it was in the old museum," added Ikram, a mummification specialist. Emblazoned with the name of their allocated sovereign, each of the gold-coloured carriages will be fitted with shock absorbers for the 40-minute journey through Cairo, to ensure none of the precious cargos are accidentally disturbed by uneven surfaces.

Seqenenre Tao II, "the Brave", who reigned over southern Egypt some 1,600 years before Christ, will be on the first chariot, while Ramses IX, who reigned in the 12th century BC, will be at the rear. Ramses II and Queen Hatshepsut, the most powerful female pharaoh, will also make the journey. Beginning at 6.00 pm on Saturday, the procession will take place under the watchful eyes of hefty deployments of security forces. The parade will be spurred on by music and performances from Egyptian artists, all broadcast live on state television.

Princess Margaret horrified

Discovered near Luxor from 1881 onwards, most of the 22 mummies have lain

since the early 1900s in the Egyptian Museum, on the capital's iconic Tahrir Square. From the 1950s, they were put on display in a small room, one next to the other, unaccompanied by explanatory blurbs. Ahead of their departure onto Cairo's streets, the mummies will be placed in special containers filled with nitrogen, under conditions similar to their regular exhibition boxes.

In their new home, they will be showcased individually, each next to a sarcophagus—and in some cases, a statue—in an environment redolent of underground royal tombs. Exhibits will be signposted by a brief biogra-

phy and, in some cases, copies of computerized tomography (CT) scans.

"The mummies will be shown for the first time in a beautiful way, for education, not for a thrill," another Egyptologist, Zahi Hawass, told AFP. The 22 mummies will be on display to the general public at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization for 15 days after the parade. The macabre appearance of the mummies has over the decades put off many visitors. Among the most prominent was a fellow royal—Princess Margaret, sister to British monarch Queen Elizabeth II. "I will never forget when I took Margaret to the museum,"

said Hawass, a former antiquities minister. "In the gallery was the mummy of Ramses II... (Princess Margaret) closed her eyes and ran away—she couldn't stand" what she saw before her. The National Museum of Egyptian Civilization was completed in 2010, and "I was planning to open this museum in 2012," Hawass said. "But because of what happened in Egypt we could not," he added, referring to the country's 2011 popular revolution and subsequent turmoil.

'Curse of the Pharaoh'

In the coming months, the country is due to inaugurate another new facility, the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), near the Giza pyramids. It will also house pharaonic collections, including the mummified remains of Tutankhamun. Discovered in 1922, the tomb of the young ruler, who took the throne briefly in the 14th century BC, contained treasures including gold and ivory. A so-called "curse of the pharaoh" emerged in the wake of Tutankhamun's unearthing in 1922-23.

A key funder of the British dig, Lord Carnarvon, died of blood poisoning months after the tomb was opened, while an early visitor died abruptly in 1923. With the planned parade coming only days after several disasters struck Egypt, some have inevitably speculated on social media that the mummies' looming disturbance has provoked them into unleashing curses. Recent days have seen a deadly rail collision and a building collapse in Cairo, while global headlines were dominated by the fate of the giant container ship the MV Ever Given that blocked the Suez Canal for almost a week. Both Hawass and Ikram were at pains to dispell any notion of a link between the mummies' parade and recent events. "You know that everyone loves a story like this," said Ikram. "It makes things far more dramatic." —AFP



In this file photo the massive statue of Ramses II, a 100-tonne, 11-meter-high pink granite colossus, is paraded on the street in Giza.



Photo shows shop owner Jacky Hoi posing for a picture with food items made of paper for sale ahead of the Qingming festival, also known as Tomb Sweeping Day, in Rawang in Malaysia's Selangor state.— AFP photos



Shop owner Jacky Hoi posing for pictures with a set of cameras and mobile phones, all made of paper, for sale ahead of the Qingming festival.

Immortal protection: COVID-themed offerings for Malaysia 'Tomb Sweeping Day'

Paper masks and goggles are among offerings that ethnic Chinese in Malaysia will burn to mark "Tomb Sweeping Day", hoping their ancestors can use them to fight the coronavirus in the afterlife. Qingming is one of the most important dates for Chinese communities, and is

observed across East and Southeast Asia. During the festival, which this year falls on Sunday, it is customary for Chinese to offer prayers, sweep their loved ones' graves and burn paper models of items that could be useful in the afterlife.



Photo shows paper money offerings, also known as hell notes, for sale ahead of the Qingming festival.

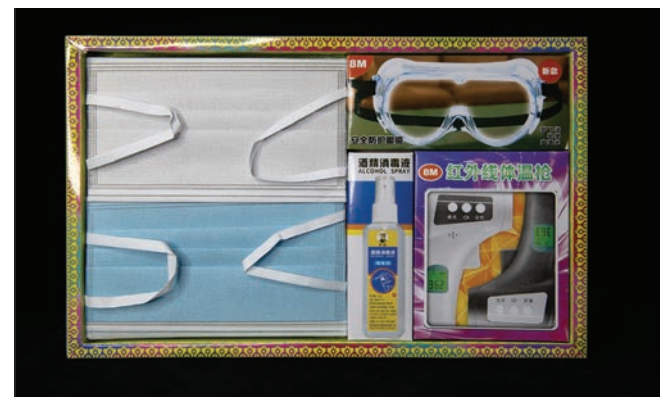


Photo shows a set of items used to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, including face masks and hand sanitiser all made of paper.



Photo shows a gambling set made of paper.

Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, April 2, 2021



Photo shows a handbag and a pair of shoes made of paper.



Photo shows a set of men's clothing made of paper.



Photo shows a set of medicine made from paper.

These can range from money and shoes to yachts and planes-but the pandemic has led to the addition of virus-themed offerings. A shop in the town of Rawang, just outside the capital Kuala Lumpur, is selling a set of paper masks with small boxes carrying pictures of goggles, a bottle of hand sanitizer and a thermometer. "We want our ancestors to realize the importance of wearing a mask during the pandemic, so we introduced this," store owner Jacky Hoi told AFP, holding a packet containing the items. He believes the set will prove popular in Muslim-majority Malaysia, where about a quarter of the country's 32 million inhabitants are ethnic Chinese, as it "will let our ancestors have a chance to fight the pandemic".

Hoi is missing one important thing-a paper vaccine-something he says that he is yet to come across when ordering the items from China. Chinese in Malaysia will be observing "Tomb Sweeping Day" for the first time since 2019, as activities related to the festival were cancelled last year due to a virus lockdown. Rules will be implemented to prevent infections, including a cap on the number of people allowed to take part and a time limit on prayers. Malaysia was hit by a new COVID-19 wave in recent months. The number of cases has started to decline, although health authorities are still reporting around 1,000 infections and several deaths every day. — AFP



Photo shows a set of skincare products made from paper.



Photo shows a set of face masks, goggles, hand sanitizer and thermometer, all made of paper.



Photo shows paper money offerings, also known as hell notes, for sale ahead of the Qingming festival.



Photo shows paper money offerings, also known as hell notes, for sale ahead of the Qingming festival.

MEXICO TOURISTS HAVE WHALE OF A TIME AS PANDEMIC EASES

Aerial view of gray whales swimming near whale watching boats at Ojo de Liebre Lagoon in Guerrero Negro, Baja California Sur state, Mexico.
— AFP photos

A giant barnacle-encrusted gray whale nuzzles her calf next to a small boat of excited tourists in the waters off the Baja California peninsula in northwestern Mexico. The annual arrival of the migratory mammals, coinciding with a drop in coron-

avirus infections, has provided a much needed boost to the region's battered tourism industry. For visitors, close encounters with one of the largest animals on the planet are a welcome respite from a pandemic that has killed more than 200,000 people in Mexico—the world's third highest toll. "It's the best day of my life," said Wilbert, a Mexican tourist who traveled from the southern state of Oaxaca to a coastal wildlife sanctuary in Baja California.

"I had dreamed of whales before so I was really keen to come." Each year, gray whales travel about 9,000 kilometers (5,500 miles) from their summer feeding grounds off Alaska to mate and give birth in the warmer waters off northwestern Mexico. Similar in size to a humpback whale but recognizable from their mottled grey coloring, they span up to around 15 meters (46 feet) and weigh as much as 30-40 tons.



A whale watcher touches a gray whale at Ojo de Liebre Lagoon in Guerrero Negro, Baja California Sur state, Mexico.



Aerial view of gray whales at Ojo de Liebre Lagoon.



A gray whale is seen at Ojo de Liebre Lagoon.

'Pay off some debt'

Mexico is one of the few major tourist destinations not to have closed its borders during the pandemic or demanded a negative COVID-19 test result from visitors on arrival. As a result, it was the third-most visited country in the world in 2020. But it has still been a disastrous time for the tourism industry and whale-watching tour operators were among those hit by a suspension of non-essential activities for part of last year.

Thanks to a decrease in coronavirus infections, the government allowed the boats to go out 30 percent full at the start of this January-April season, which was later

increased to 50 percent. "We kept the jobs and we hope to come out of it, if not with a profit, then at least being able to pay off some debt," Luis Enrique Achoy, of whale watching company Malarrimo Eco-Tours, told AFP. He said that it had been a good season with around 1,500 to 1,700 whales spotted in the El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve.

'Little by little'

Fisherman and tour guide Naman Dominguez was one of those affected by the pandemic restrictions. "Right now, there's a maximum of six or seven people per boat



Whale watchers try to touch a gray whale.

due to social distancing," he said. "But everything's getting better little by little. As the level of infections has been low, tourism has been increasing." The gray whale's survival was once at risk after commercial whalers found them wintering along the Baja California peninsula in the mid-19th century.

But the population in the eastern North Pacific has since rebounded strongly and the gray whale is today ranked "least concern" on the list of threatened species of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The eastern North Pacific is home to the only definitely surviving breeding population, with an estimated size of up

to around 27,000 gray whales, according to the IUCN.

And one of the best places to see them is in the lagoons off Baja California where they congregate in winter away from predators like killer whales, offering an unforgettable experience for visitors. "We could touch them and see the mother with her calf. The two of them were playing for a good while with us," said Mexican tourist Claudia Gaitan. — AFP



Kids Page

Word Search

DIRECTIONS:
Find and circle the ALL CAP NAMES in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.

Film Directors
Word Search

O	Q	I	T	R	F	F	A	U	T	E	B	K	X	H	R	O	H	M	C	
U	N	Z	E	Y	E	V	M	R	L	U	C	A	S	B	U	Y	I	F	F	C
G	I	X	M	R	I	X	W	B	N	Q	M	Y	L	B	I	T	H	L	Z	N
O	L	T	U	E	O	X	J	E	B	E	T	L	R	Q	C	B	G	J	T	D
Z	P	X	L	P	E	A	G	E	B	J	J	O	K	H	A	A	K	A	O	Z
R	A	T	P	I	I	A	R	K	A	D	B	T	C	D	M	M	T	I	P	Y
E	H	I	B	R	D	G	M	R	E	C	G	O	M	F	K	L	N	B	O	X
H	C	U	H	C	M	T	G	H	I	A	C	R	F	C	O	P	P	O	L	A
M	Y	T	X	A	K	R	S	M	O	K	T	N	E	S	O	T	I	E	A	N
O	U	K	N	M	V	A	T	I	N	C	G	O	E	B	U	R	T	O	N	U
H	R	I	B	E	L	L	Z	J	I	I	W	S	N	Q	L	V	H	Y	S	H
B	Q	H	Z	R	H	L	D	A	T	R	E	F	O	O	N	E	O	C	K	R
X	L	N	C	O	O	E	Y	O	N	B	L	A	O	G	O	F	I	Y	I	R
X	S	T	F	N	K	N	O	J	A	U	L	S	E	D	S	E	O	P	T	I
I	M	C	S	T	Y	N	O	M	R	K	E	B	E	D	R	L	E	R	S	H
T	L	X	O	P	T	L	I	F	A	C	S	J	Z	H	E	L	A	S	D	W
D	A	B	C	R	D	O	O	W	T	S	A	E	A	W	D	I	V	H	E	I
A	Z	O	Z	A	S	M	C	E	N	Y	X	W	Z	C	N	L	G	O	L	
W	F	Y	K	P	P	E	Y	S	U	H	K	T	K	A	A	I	H	E	A	D
X	K	D	E	G	O	R	S	T	H	S	B	V	W	O	M	K	W	K	E	E
Y	Z	M	B	O	J	T	A	E	W	U	A	O	T	A	C	V	T	J	V	R

- Woody ALLEN
- Wes ANDERSON
- Ingmar BERGMAN
- Tim BURTON
- James CAMERON
- Frank CAPRA
- Charlie CHAPLIN
- Joel COEN
- Francis Ford COPPOLA

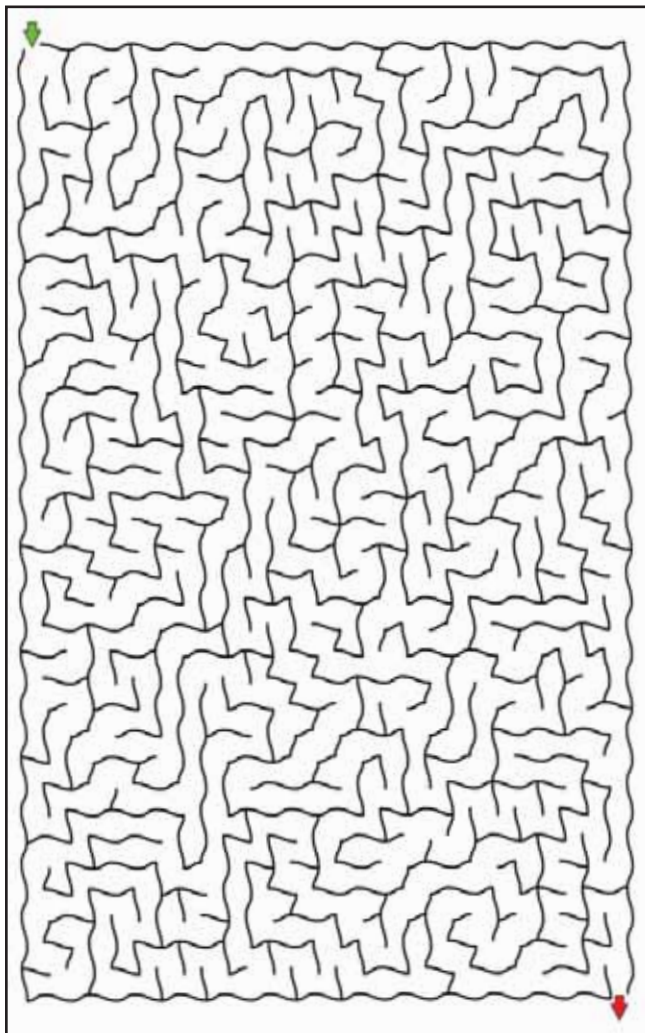


- Clint EASTWOOD
- Federico FELLINI
- Jahn FORD
- Howard HAWKS
- Werner HERZOG
- Alfred HITCHCOCK
- Buster KEATON
- Stanley KUBRICK
- Spike LEE
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- Roman POLANSKI
- Martin SCORSESE
- Ridley SCOTT
- Steven SPIELBERG
- Quentin TARANTINO
- Francois TRUFFAUT
- Orson WELLES
- Billy WILDER

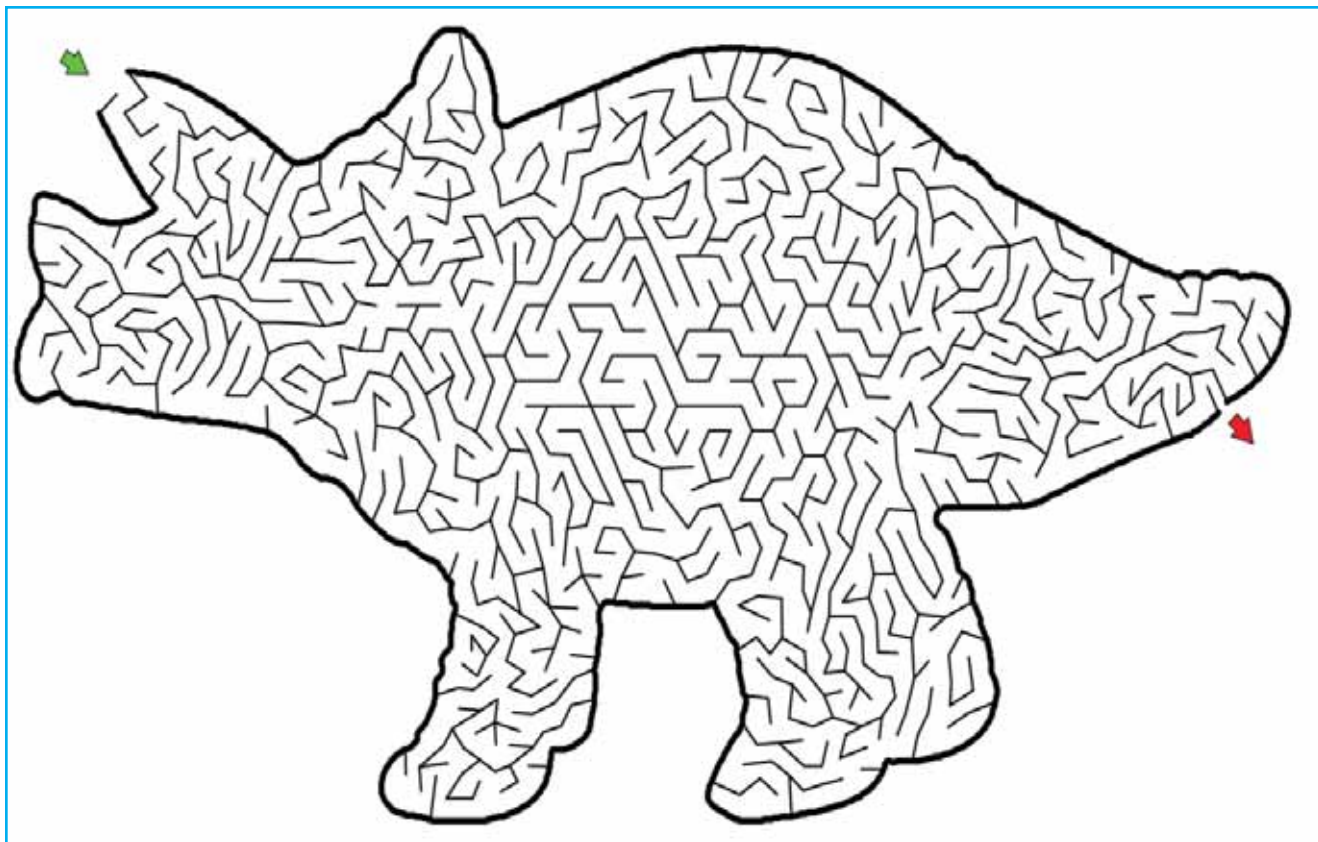
Color It



Kids Mazes



Find the way



Word Scramble

Costume Store Word Scramble

The costume store is a mess and Halloween is only a few days away! Can you help to unscramble the costume names so that all of the kids have something to wear on October 31st?

TWCIH	_____	OWLCN	_____
OMEZIB	_____	PEHRSERUO	_____
WRZDAI	_____	OCASCWERR	_____
TOROB	_____	TOHSG	_____
KOTESLEN	_____	EISNRPSC	_____
BOCOYW	_____	RMNEAIF	_____
IESRDP	_____	IDELV	_____
UKMNIPP	_____	EMIRPVA	_____
ARYFI	_____	ANIJN	_____
EALGN	_____	ARPEIT	_____
MYMUM	_____	EMAIRDA	_____



Join the dots



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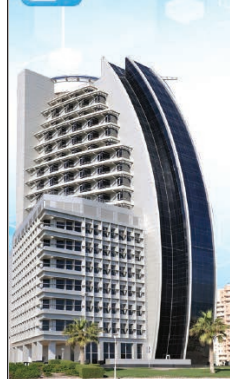
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Stars

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

If you've been thinking about going back to school for a degree of some kind, Aries, this is the time to start the process. Success and good fortune through your own initiative and through increasing your skills are definitely indicated now. A journey you've wanted to take for some time may finally be possible, as could achievements in the fields of writing and speaking.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

If you've been thinking of buying a new home, Taurus, this is an excellent time to do it. Surprising developments might clear the way for you. Success through investments of any kind, particularly real estate, looms on the horizon. A young visitor may come to your home today, as well as an important letter or call. In the evening, visit an older friend or relative.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

You may feel a little out of sorts today, Gemini. Perhaps you indulged a bit too much last night. However, some exciting phone calls at midday might perk you up, perhaps good news from a friend or colleague. A change in your financial state is definitely indicated, as is the resulting boost to your self-esteem. All looks wonderful for you in the months to come!



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Your hard work is finally paying off, Cancer. A phone call bring good news to you. You should be filled with a new sense of optimism, enthusiasm, and hope. Work will be more of a pleasure than a drag, because you have something to look forward to. Changes are definitely in the wind for you, so be prepared for just about anything!



Leo (July 23-August 22)

You're a hard worker, Leo, with a good business head and strong practical sense. However, success in the past few weeks might have you thinking about doing something more innovative to earn your money, possibly something to do with the opportunities surrounding the Internet. Business and personal communication of all kinds should come to you during this auspicious period.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Some strange phone calls might come your way, perhaps from people you don't know. Investments in real estate, particularly the home, should pay off now. You could also decide to make a new investment in this area. Follow your hunches, Virgo. Don't let your usual logic get in the way! Your mind is especially receptive to messages from other realms now. Make the most of it.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

A long-awaited and very welcome call from an older friend might finally come your way today, Libra. News that a goal you've been working toward has finally been reached could come as well. You're optimistic about the future. The ambition that has served you well in the past will continue to do so. You will probably entertain some visitors. It will mean work, but you will have a great time.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

The near future looks great for you, with auspicious omens for success and good fortune regarding career and money. All the hard work that you've done in the past may finally be paying off. Advancement is on the horizon, as well as increased income and much happiness. All signs are that you won't stop there. You're more likely to continue working toward new, more challenging goals.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Today's celestial energy could find you making plans to travel for pleasure or possibly business. A young friend or relative might accompany you. You're likely to accomplish whatever you hope to on the trip, Sagittarius. All signs are for success and good fortune. You might even aim for a new position. This is an excellent period to open up your own business.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Financial benefits may come your way through channels you've never dreamed of. This could have to do with investments, settlements, or insurance benefits. Pleasant recurring dreams may come your way, bringing insights to your past and giving rise to new self-awareness. Someone from the past you haven't seen for a long time may suddenly reappear. This should be a pleasant surprise.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

A friend might approach you with the idea of forming a partnership, and even propose drawing up a tentative agreement. This is definitely something worth looking into, Aquarius, although you should consider all the facts before committing. Success and good fortune are definitely in the works, whether through this partnership or not. Expect an important call from a romantic partner.



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

You can look forward to a new sense of purpose and higher morale, Pisces. Ambition, diligence, and a lot of hard work could pay off now. You could soon be raking in the benefits. You're feeling strong, fit, and physically healthy, as if you could seize the world in your two hands. This is a great time to take the next step in your personal relationship.

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027

Business

FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 2021

34 Microsoft wins \$22bn US army contract for AR gear**35** Egypt commerce reputation survives Suez Canal blockage**36** WTO says 2021 global trade recovery rests on vaccines

Biden sets out \$2tn infrastructure plan

President says corporate tax hike will pay for 'once-in-a-generation' plan

PITTSBURGH: President Joe Biden on Wednesday unveiled a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan aimed at modernizing America's crumbling transport network, creating millions of jobs and delivering a "once-in-a-generation" investment that will enable the country to best China on the global economic stage. Biden compared his "transformational" plan to the ambitious US space program of the 1960s, saying it would boost the livelihoods of poor and middle-class Americans, take aim at global warming, and be funded by increased taxes on large companies and the rich.

"Today I'm proposing a plan for the nation that rewards work, not just rewards wealth. It builds a fair economy that gives everybody a chance to succeed. It's going to create the strongest, most resilient, innovative economy in the world," Biden said. "It's a once-in-a-generation investment in America, unlike anything we've seen or done since we built the interstate highway system and the space race decades ago."

The plan called for sweeping upgrades to transportation, telecommunications and energy infrastructure, which the US leader said was both about revitalizing an economy weakened by the Covid-19 pandemic and restoring its global competitiveness. "We can't delay another minute. It's long past due," he said in Pittsburgh. "The rest of the world is closing in and closing in fast - we can't allow this to continue."

Trillions in spending

Biden's infrastructure plan - the second massive spending initiative of his 10-week old administration, after the \$1.9 trillion short-term COVID rescue bill passed earlier this month - faces tough tests in a Congress worried about soaring deficits. But it also seeks to address crumbling bridges, roads and other public works around the country that successive administrations have failed to take on.

In doing so, it would expand the role of the government in the US economy to levels not seen in decades. "In fact, it's the largest American jobs investment since World War II. It will create millions of jobs, good-paying jobs," Biden said. Biden also stressed that it would reward "hard-working" Americans instead of the wealthy of Wall Street, countering an economy that had become "distorted and unfair," particularly under his predecessor Donald Trump. "When Trump's tax bill passed, 83 percent of the money went to the top one percent," he said. "This is not to seek retribution. This is about opening opportunities for everybody else. Here's the truth: We all do better when we all do well."

Taxing the rich

He proposed to fund it by raising taxes on companies and rich Americans whom he said don't pay their fair share. Taxes will rise



PITTSBURGH: US President Joe Biden unveils a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan on Wednesday. — AFP

on Americans earning more than \$400,000 a year, and the corporate tax ceiling will rise to 28 percent from 21 percent. "I have nothing against millionaires and billionaires. I believe in American capitalism," he said.

However, he said, "the biggest companies in the world, including Amazon... pay not a single solitary penny in federal income tax" because of corporate-friendly loopholes. "That's just wrong." Biden's speech fired the starting gun on what is expected to be a bitter battle in Congress, where the Democrats hold only a narrow majority and will face strong opposition from Republicans, who have denounced the plan as excessive government spending.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell called the plan a "Trojan horse" for the extreme left, with higher taxes and support for unions. "Our nation could use a serious, targeted infrastructure plan," he said in a statement. Biden's plan, he said, is just "the latest liberal wish-list" and a "major missed opportunity".

Business groups blasted Biden's intention to have them fund it. "We need a big and bold program to modernize our nation's crumbling infrastructure and we applaud the Biden administration

for making infrastructure a top priority," the powerful US Chamber of Commerce said in a statement. "However, we believe the proposal is dangerously misguided when it comes to how to pay for infrastructure." Trump, who spoke of revitalizing US infrastructure but made no headway in Congress, said Biden's tax hike would hurt the economy and "decimate US manufacturing".

Need to woo Republicans

The coming months will test the negotiating skills of Biden, a veteran Washington dealmaker, to the limit, and the chances of his infrastructure plan becoming law remain uncertain. Even though Republicans refused to vote for his COVID-19 rescue plan, Biden said he was confident some would support the infrastructure program, and that he was ready to negotiate with them. "I don't think you'll find a Republican today in the House or Senate ... who doesn't think we have to improve our infrastructure. You know, China and other countries are eating our lunch," he said. "We will have a good-faith negotiation," he said. "But we have to get it done." —AFP

Business

Big companies feel heat as US voting rights debate intensifies

Corporations had stayed quiet throughout legislative discussion

NEW YORK: Facing boycott threats over their earlier public neutrality on a new voting rights law in Georgia, Delta Air Lines and Coca-Cola on Wednesday publicly slammed the state measure and vowed to work to ensure better ballot access. Delta chief executive Ed Bastian called the new Georgia state law “unacceptable” in a memo to staff, while Coca-Cola chief James Quincey said in a broadcast interview the controversial measure was “a step backward.”

The statements came as big companies in Georgia and beyond face pressure from civil rights leaders to fight against a wave of voting rights changes in myriad states that critics have likened to Jim Crow-era restrictions used to repress the political power of African Americans. Georgia’s new law comes after unprecedented turnout in the 2020 election due to increased use of early voting and vote-by-mail amid the coronavirus pandemic, in a state with a history of slavery and segregation where Black people have faced decades of attempts to inhibit their votes.

Major lobbies such as the Business Roundtable have broadly endorsed ballot access and initiatives to promote voting, but individual companies have largely tried to steer clear of thorny legislative debates on voting in an era of US political polarization. Quincey said Coca-Cola had always opposed the new Georgia law. “Many things are improved and done and achieved in private without having to take a public stand,” he told CNBC. “But in this case, it has not worked, clearly, so we’re being more forceful in our public position.”

Microsoft wins \$22bn US army contract for augmented reality gear

SAN FRANCISCO: Microsoft has won a Pentagon contract for augmented reality headgear for soldiers worth \$21.88 billion over the next decade, the company and the US military announced Wednesday. The headsets, based on commercially available HoloLens, will make soldiers safer and more effective, according to Microsoft technical fellow Alex Kipman.

The Department of Defense (DoD) said the production agreement is for five years with a renewal option – that could make the contract worth “in excess of \$21.88 billion” over 10 years, a Pentagon official said in a statement. Microsoft will rapidly start producing the so-called Integrated Augmentation System under the contract.

The award aims “to deliver next-generation night vision and situational awareness capabilities to the Close Combat Force at the speed of relevance,” the Pentagon said. A head-mounted display used by soldiers for battle and training employs sensors for night and thermal vision in addition to providing data for help in engaging targets and making tactical decisions, officials said.

“The program delivers enhanced situational awareness, enabling information sharing and decision-making in a variety of scenarios,” Kipman said in a blog post. The contract shows that Microsoft can make money from its augmented reality offerings with the military and likely heralds expanded uses by private businesses as well as consumers, according to Wedbush analyst Dan Ives. “The second and potentially most important point is this deal just further drills in the narrative that Microsoft is tightening its grip on deals within the DoD and Pentagon,” Ives said in a note to investors.

Georgia not alone

A group of 72 prominent black executives – including Merck chief executive Kenneth Frazier and Mellody Hobson and John Rogers Jr, the co-chief executives of Ariel Investments – released a public letter Wednesday calling for corporate America to oppose restrictive voting measures, US media reported.

The Georgia measure, signed into law last week by Republican Governor Brian Kemp, imposes voter identification requirements, limits the number of voting drop boxes and enacts other restrictions, such as forbidding volunteers from giving water bottles to voters who can be forced to wait in line for hours.

Voting rights advocates had sought support from big corporations in the large southern state, whose capital Atlanta is also home to the headquarters to Home Depot and UPS. But the companies had largely stayed publicly quiet throughout the bruising legislative debate. Kemp, in an interview on CNBC Wednesday, said the measure had been misrepresented by opponents, noting that the law ensures more early voting days than many states and automatic voter registration when obtaining a driver’s license.

But critics say measures such as restricting the access to voting drop boxes to business hours are designed to depress turnout, and make it difficult for those in underrepresented communities to vote. Georgia was one of the most hotly contested states in the 2020 election, with President Joe Biden narrowly prevailing over Donald Trump, who claimed falsely that he lost Georgia due to voter fraud.

Legislators in 43 states have introduced more than 250 bills that would make it harder to vote in response to the former president’s

“continued lies about voter fraud,” according to the Brennan Center for Justice, a progressive think tank.

‘Based on a lie’

After Kemp signed the bill into law, Delta released a statement last Friday that said it “engaged extensively” with lawmakers in both parties to improve the bill, while adding that “there continues to be work ahead” on the matter. However, the company faced consumer criticism, with #BoycottDelta trending on Twitter over the weekend.

Bastian said Wednesday’s announcement came after the company had more time to “fully understand” the bill and its effect on the black community. “The entire rationale for this bill was based on a lie: That there was widespread voter fraud in Georgia in the 2020 elections,” Bastian said. Nse Ufot, chief executive of the New Georgia Project Action Fund, applauded Delta’s shift, “even if it’s late.” “Conversations with black and brown leaders must happen at all stages and all areas of decision-making, not after the damage is done,” she wrote in a statement. “Here’s the lesson: Listen to black and brown people. Listen to young voters. Listen to new voters. We are the future, and our voices matter.” — AFP



Ed Bastian



BLACKSTONE, Virginia: This handout photo courtesy of US Army taken on Oct 21, 2020 shows soldiers testing the CS3 militarized form factor prototype of the Army’s IVAS and wield a SiVT during a training environment test event at its third STP 3 at Fort Pickett. — AFP

The Pentagon late last year said it was sticking with its decision to award a \$10 billion cloud computing contract to Microsoft, despite Amazon’s claims that former president Donald Trump improperly influenced the process. “In a cloud arms race, Microsoft right now has the momentum,” Ives said. The Redmond, Washington-based company recently launched a platform called Mesh, in which long-distance coworkers can collaborate as though in the same room, using augmented reality glasses and cloud computing power. “One of the easiest ways to think about it is Microsoft Mesh connects the physical and digital worlds, allowing us to transcend the traditional boundaries of space and time,” co-creator Simon Skaria said in a video presentation. — AFP

Japan business confidence back to pre-COVID levels

TOKYO: Major Japanese manufacturers are feeling optimistic for the first time since the pandemic began, a key survey showed yesterday, marking a further improvement after business confidence plunged last year. The Bank of Japan’s Tankan business survey, a quarterly poll of about 10,000 companies, showed a reading of 5 among big manufacturers.

A positive figure means more manufacturers see business conditions as favorable than those that consider them unfavorable. The upbeat reading beat a market consensus estimate of minus 1 and is the first positive reading since Sept 2019, before the coronavirus began to wreak havoc on the world’s economy.

Three months ago, the same survey showed a reading of minus 10, up from minus 27 in the September survey and minus 34 in June – the lowest level since the global financial crisis more than a decade ago. The short-term business sentiment survey is considered to be the broadest indicator of how Japan Inc. is faring, and comes after the country lifted a pandemic state of emergency in the Tokyo area on March 22.

Despite a spike in COVID-19 infections over the winter, Japan has seen a comparatively small outbreak overall with around 9,000 deaths, and has avoided imposing the blanket lockdowns seen in other countries. However, the number of new cases is rising gradually in the capital and more quickly in some other regions, sparking fears over a fourth wave as Japan’s vaccine drive lags behind many other large economies. Yesterday’s survey showed confidence among big non-manufacturers also improved to minus 1 – against a market consensus of minus 4 – after logging minus 5 in December. The Japanese government last year announced several multi-billion-dollar stimulus packages to shore up the world’s third-largest economy as it suffered a coronavirus slump. — AFP

Business

Egypt commerce reputation survives Suez Canal blockage

International salvage specialists play significant role

CAIRO: The near week-long shutdown of the Suez Canal threw an uncomfortable international spotlight on Egypt, but experts see limited overall fallout for its commercial shipping reputation. The accident, in which a 200,000-tonne container vessel became wedged diagonally across the canal during a sandstorm, blocked a crucial shipping artery used for 10 percent or more of world trade.

But fears that it could take weeks to refloat the behemoth proved unfounded. Six days into the crisis, after major operations involving a flotilla of tug boats and excavators dredging up sand, the Japanese-owned MV Ever Given was freed and taken to an unobtrusive anchorage. Egypt's Suez Canal Authority was quick to claim credit.

"Anywhere else in the world, this operation would have taken three months," boasted canal chief Osama Rabie, adding that "99 percent" of personnel working at the scene had been Egyptian. Visibly relieved, he said he had been told by President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi that "the reputation of Egypt rested on my shoulders". Sisi, who deposed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013, spent over \$8 billion to widen and add a 35 km second lane on a northern segment of the canal amid much pomp six years ago.

The country has emerged from the short crisis with credit, said Tony Munoz, editor-in-chief at trade publication Maritime Executive. "The Egyptian government handled the blockage and closure of the critical trade lane exceptionally well, considering the intense international pressure," Munoz told AFP.

'A big one'

However, Munoz also pointed to the significant role played by the international salvage specialists who worked alongside Egyptian personnel. Munoz cited in particular the crisis management expertise provided by Resolve Marine's Captain Nick Sloane, who was also salvage master for the clear-up of the 2012 Costa Concordia cruise ship disaster off Italy.

Another expert likewise said international help was crucial. "There was bound to be some domestic flag-waving about the success of the refloating... but it does not diminish the Dutch involvement," said Angus Blair of the American University in Cairo, referring to Dutch firm Smit Salvage.

Both Blair and Munoz saw little or no impact from the canal blockage on Egypt's share of shipping cargo traffic over the medium-term. "In essence, this was only a traffic accident - (albeit)



ISMAILIA, Egypt: A man waves the Egyptian flag after Panama-flagged MV 'Ever Given' container ship was fully dislodged from the banks of the Suez Canal on March 29, 2021. —AFP

a big one," said Blair. "Airports have accidents, but within hours to a day the airport will reopen and then there is an investigation to determine the cause," he added. "So, I do not think there is damage to Egypt's reputation".

Munoz noted that "the alternative of sailing around Africa is not reasonable", emphasizing that the whole "purpose of these mega-boxships is to reduce port calls and operational costs". — AFP

Inside vaccine production at new BioNTech plant

MARBURG, Germany: Decontamination chambers, tight-fitting protective suits, a controlled atmosphere: vigilance is the order of the day when making COVID-19 vaccines at the new BioNTech plant in Marburg, Germany. From the outside, the facility is an unassuming building on the outskirts of the town north of Frankfurt in central Germany.

But that quickly changes when you step inside the rooms of the second European site to manufacture the vaccine developed by BioNTech with US giant Pfizer. Production has been running night and day since the European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved the site last week, with the facility poised to eventually churn out one billion doses a year.

"It takes a lot of manual work and about 50,000 steps to make a batch" of messenger RNA (mRNA), the substance that trains the immune system to protect itself against Covid-19, production manager Valeska Schilling told AFP. From that batch, "we can make some seven or eight million doses of vaccine," said Schilling, who is "extremely proud" of the huge scientific effort.

'Extremely proud'

Glass pipette in hand and wrapped head to toe in a blue protective suit, a young employee mixes pharmaceutical ingredients in a sterile bag to begin the process of making mRNA. This step, called in-vitro transcription, is "the most technologically complicated", Schilling notes - less a mass production process than an art form.



MARBURG, Germany: Employees in cleanroom suits test the procedures for the manufacturing of mRNA for the COVID-19 vaccine at the new manufacturing site of BioNTech on March 27, 2021. —AFP

During in-vitro transcription, which Schilling compares to "making a photocopy of a book", enzymes are used to generate up to 500 "copy" mRNA molecules from a single DNA molecule. After the reaction to produce the RNA, the resulting liquid must be purified: the enzymes and DNA used for the transcription are removed, and filtration prevents possible contamination.

In the third and final stage of production in Marburg, the mRNA is wrapped in fatty molecules, or lipids, so that it can get inside of human cells. In all, it takes five to six days to make a 35-litre batch of mRNA, which is then transported to other factories for bottling - currently done in Belgium and soon near Frankfurt. Several time-consuming tests are carried out along the way to ensure the quality of the vaccine, which is around 95 percent effective against COVID-19 according to clinical studies. — AFP

VW 'sorry' after name-change prank backfires

FRANKFURT: Car giant Volkswagen said Wednesday it was sorry for a publicity stunt that duped major media outlets and was criticized by AFP news agency as a "breach of trust". The outrage came after Volkswagen just a day earlier said in a press release it would be changing the name of its US subsidiary to "Volvswagen" to highlight its shift towards electric cars.

The announcement raised eyebrows but company spokespeople insisted it was genuine, resulting in widespread media coverage before VW eventually revealed the rebrand was a joke dreamt up by its marketing team. In a statement sent to AFP, Volkswagen of America said its marketing campaign had sought to draw attention to VW's e-offensive "in a fun and interesting way" as "an April Fool's Day effort".

"The many positive responses on social media showed that this campaign resonated with consumers," it said. "At the same time, we realize the announcement rollout upset some people and we are sorry about any confusion this has caused." Reporters reacted angrily to the stunt, with some saying it was tone-deaf coming from a company still recovering from the 2015 "dieselgate" scandal, when the German automaker was forced to admit it had for years used cheating software in cars to skirt emissions tests. — AFP

Business

Snakes, rats and cats: The trillion dollar invasive species problem

Cost to humanity and environment is vast and growing

PARIS: Disease-carrying mosquitoes, crop-ravaging rodents, forest-eating insects and even the domestic cat are all “exotic” intruders whose cost to humanity and the environment is vast and growing, according to a sweeping study published yesterday. Researchers in France estimate that invasive species have cost nearly \$1.3 trillion to the global economy since 1970, an average of \$26.8 billion per year.

And they warn that this is likely an underestimate. In a study published in the journal *Nature*, scientists totted up the dizzying array of harmful effects from species carried between habitats, whether plants, insects, reptiles, birds, fish, molluscs, micro-organisms or mammals. Beyond the “phenomenal magnitude” of these costs, there is also sign of a steady upward trend since 1970, said lead author Christophe Diagne, of the Ecology, Systematics and Evolution laboratory at the University of Paris-Saclay.

Most of the price tag is associated with the damage to ecosystems, crops or fisheries, although pest-control measures were also included in the research, an

analysis of hundreds of studies that are part of a new invasive species database. A preliminary roundup of the top ten invasive pests includes crop-eating rats and the Asian gypsy moth, which is attacking trees throughout the northern hemisphere.

It also included the tiger mosquito, native to Southeast Asia, which has become one of the worst invasive species in the world, carrying diseases like chikungunya, dengue and zika. Average annual costs triple every decade, researchers said, in part because of an increase in scientific studies on this subject. But there is also evidence of an “exponential increase in introduced species, due to growing international trade,” said Franck Courchamp, director of the same Paris-Saclay laboratory. “We import lots of species, voluntarily or involuntarily,” he said.

Musseling in

It is a problem with a long history, linked to human trade, travel and colonialism. In Australia, feral European rabbit populations were first reported in the early 1800s and their population exploded, reaching such proportions that

they ravaged native species and caused billions of dollars of damage to crops. In 1950, the government released the disease myxomatosis, which only affects rabbits, killing over 90 percent of the wild bunnies. But some have since built up immunity.

The brown tree snake has eaten nearly all of the native birds and lizards of Guam since it was accidentally introduced in the mid-twentieth century from its South Pacific habitat, as well as causing power outages by infiltrating electrical installations and menacing people in their homes. In the 1980s and 90s the zebra mussel, which originated in the waterways of the former Soviet Union, invaded North America’s Great Lakes, blocking pipes, threatening native species and causing billions in damages.

On land, American forests - and more recently those in Europe - have been devastated by the Asian long-horned beetle. While in Hawaii, the Puerto Rican coqui frog has found a new home with no natural predators - except local homeowners whose property values have tumbled thanks to its ear-splitting croak, which can reach 100 decibels. — AFP

WTO says global trade recovery rests on vaccines

GENEVA: Global trade is set to grow by eight percent in 2021, the World Trade Organization said Wednesday, stressing that the route out of the COVID-19 crisis rested on the rapid rollout of vaccines. The predicted bounce-back in global merchandise trade by volume is slightly stronger than the WTO’s previous 7.2 percent forecast issued in October.

The organization said global trade shrank by 5.3 percent in 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic shocked the world economy. “The strong rebound in global trade since the middle of last year has helped soften the blow of the pandemic for people, businesses, and economies,” said the WTO’s new boss Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

The global trade body’s assessment of the COVID-19’s impact on 2020 trade is nowhere near as bad as had been first predicted when the pandemic broke out. A year ago, the WTO had cautioned that global trade could plummet by a third in 2020 but gradually revised that estimate to an expected 9.2-percent drop.

It said strong monetary and fiscal policies were the main drivers behind the smaller-than-expected contractions in growth and trade. “Prospects for a quick recovery in world trade have improved as merchandise trade expanded more rapidly than expected in the second half of last year,” the Geneva-based organization said.

While the rebound this year will be stronger than expected, growth is forecast to slow to 4.0 percent in 2022, the WTO said. It warned that the effects of the COVID-19 crisis “will continue to be felt as this pace of expansion would still leave trade below its pre-pandemic trend”.



KARACHI: A senior citizen receives a dose of the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine against COVID-19 at a vaccination center yesterday. — AFP

Equitable vaccine rollout

Okonjo-Iweala warned that any rebound in global trade remained vulnerable to the still-raging coronavirus pandemic. “New waves of infection could easily undermine any hoped-for recovery,” she told reporters. The Nigerian former finance minister said the rapid development of effective vaccines had given the planet a realistic chance of quelling the pandemic and kick-starting the world economy again.

But the opportunity could yet be squandered if large parts of the world are shut out of access to vaccine doses. “Rapid global and equitable vaccine rollout is the best stimulus plan we have for the strong and sustained economic recovery that we all need,” Okonjo-Iweala said. However, “as long as large numbers of people and countries are excluded from sufficient vaccine access, it will stifle growth, and risk reversing the health and economic recovery worldwide,” warned the former World Bank development economist. — AFP

NBK appoints Al-Hamad, Bouhadiba

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) announced the appointment of Faisal Abdul-Latif Al-Hamad as Head of Group Wealth Management, and Omar Bouhadiba as Chief Executive Officer of International Banking Group, effective 1 April 2021, after obtaining the required approvals from the Central Bank of Kuwait.



Faisal Al-Hamad



Omer Bouhadiba

The appointing of Al-Hamad comes in line with the group’s aspirations to seize regional and international growth opportunities, through further integration between NBK Capital, the Group’s investment arm and the Private Banking Division. This aims to strengthen the bank’s wealth management footprint by providing a wider range of high-quality products and services to meet the needs of investors, institutional clients and high-net-worth individuals, leveraging the Group’s global wealth management platform.

Building on the professionalism and technical competencies of its team members along with NBK’s financial capabilities, Group Wealth Management will pursue several wealth management-related investment projects supported by NBK’s broad geographical footprint spanning 4 continents and 15 countries worldwide. The Group also targets higher AUMs growth as part of its efforts to further diversify its income sources, a key pillar of the Group’s strategy.

Al-Hamad has extensive experience exceeding 18 years in investment, wealth management and strategic relationships, as well as financial restructuring, organizational development, strategy and corporate governance. He also held several leading positions in NBK Capital since he joined in 2007. Al-Hamad holds an MBA from Harvard Business School and a Bachelor Degree from the University of Chicago.

On the other hand, Omar Bouhadiba, the CEO of International Banking Group holds a Master degree in Business Administration (MBA) in Finance from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Bouhadiba has over 39 years of experience in corporate and investment banking, with Bank of America, Mashreq Bank, NBK, Arab Bank plc and most recently with International Bank of Qatar in the position of Chief Executive Officer. International Banking Group continues striving to achieve utmost benefit by providing various products in different geographies for NBK customers in Kuwait, wherever they are.

Senegal wrestlers ready for combat after yearlong wait

DAKAR: Ten burly Senegalese wrestlers raise a chant, singing “Mother, pray for us,” while jogging up and down a sandy field by the Atlantic Ocean. Training has resumed after a year of coronavirus-related restrictions that had stopped them from practicing their sport. Wrestling in the West African nation is a centuries-old tradition rooted in harvest festivals, and draws a fanatical following.

Hulking fighters dressed in loincloths face off in packed stadiums, performing mystic rituals in the sand before going toe-to-toe. On Sunday, the first major bout since the start of the pandemic will take place in a 20,000-seater stadium just outside of Dakar. “This fight is of huge importance to me,” says Eumeu Sene, 42, one of the men training in the suburb of the capital Dakar.

A former national champion once crowned ‘King of the Arenas,’ Sene is hoping to make a comeback in his match against a fighter known as Lac 2. There are five separate bouts on Sunday’s fight card, but this one is the main draw. Panels advertising the event line the streets. Gaston Mbengue, the fight promoter, told AFP that there had not been a clash of this level “for years”.

‘Must not lose’

Such fights can grind daily life to a halt, with many people glued to television sets to watch wrestlers spar and attempt to throw each other to the ground. But Senegal’s fans have been deprived of the spectacle since the onset of the

pandemic last year, when the government banned wrestling matches and training sessions in professional stables. After nationwide unrest, Senegal lifted health restrictions this month, allowing the sport to resume.

At the training session in the Dakar suburb of Petit Mbaou, barrel-chested fighters grapple with each other until a call to prayer interrupts them. “My career depends on this, I must not lose,” says Sene, who has weighed in at 120 kilos, for his upcoming fight. Sene, whose real name is Mamadou Ngom, won the prestigious King of the Arenas title in 2018 but lost it the following year.

A victory against Lac 2 would allow him to joust for the title again. Like Sene, many wrestlers go by evocative nicknames, such as ‘John Cena’, after the American professional wrestler; or simply, ‘Building’. Sunday’s fight will take place in front of 10,000 spectators, the stadium at half its capacity to try to avert coronavirus infections.

Mystical rituals

Khalifa Ababacar Niang, the head of the wrestling stable that includes Sene, said that few are allowed to approach wrestlers ahead of bouts, for fear of black magic. “We are very careful about strangers,” he explained, adding that some spells can render fighters lazy or dizzy. Niang underlined that allowing AFP to interview his prize fighter was a rare privilege.

Mysticism plays an important role in tradi-



PETIT MBAOU, Senegal: Senegalese wrestlers grapple during a training session on March 29, 2021. —AFP

tional wrestling in Senegal. Fighters sport magical charms known as “gris-gris” (pronounced “gree-gree”) wrapped around their waist, wrist or biceps. They coat their bodies in a liquid deemed to be imbued with magical properties and then face off in the arena, serenaded by “griot” singers. With the return of the season, many wrestlers in this poor nation of 16 million people are hoping for a boost to their incomes.

Coronavirus restrictions put some 8,000 professional fighters out of a job, according to Senegal’s national wrestling association. Wrestler Ngarafe Ndiaye, 22, said he started selling telephones during the pandemic. Nicknamed “Sadio’s Son,” Ndiaye added that he hopes to make a full-time living from wrestling one day. “Right now, I need another job to get by,” he said. —AFP

Ring-rusty South Africa begin march on 2023 World Cup

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa return to one-day international cricket for the first time in a year against Pakistan from today with a history-making new captain at the helm and their sights set on the 2023 World Cup. The Proteas have not played an ODI since completing a 3-0 home series win against Australia in March 2020. Following that series, South Africa went to India but the tour was aborted because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A planned series against England last December was then postponed after two members of the touring party tested positive for coronavirus - results which later were declared as false positives. As a result, South Africa have yet to secure their first points in the World Cup Super League which decides which seven teams join hosts India as automatic qualifiers for the 2023 World Cup.

The Proteas and the Netherlands are the only teams who have yet to play a match in the 13-team league. Seven teams already have three or more wins, so South Africa, under new captain Temba Bavuma, will be seeking to make up ground when they play Pakistan at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Friday in the first of three one-day internationals. —AFP

New Zealand beat Bangladesh in rain-hit T20

AUCKLAND: New Zealand beat Bangladesh by 65 runs in a rain-shortened third Twenty20 International in Auckland on Friday to claim a series clean sweep. With their innings reduced to 10 overs due to bad weather, Bangladesh were all out for 76 with three balls to spare, well short of the 142 target set by New Zealand. The Black Caps made 141 for four after losing the toss and being asked to bat, with Finn Allen hitting 71 from 29 balls.

Spinner Todd Astle was the standout bowler, taking four wickets for 13 runs in his two over spell. Captain Tim Southee said it was satisfying for the New Zealanders to notch their seventh home series win of the season on all formats. “It’s been a great summer and we’ve played some good cricket and seen a lot of guys come into the environment and do well,” he said.

Bangladesh captain Liton Das said mistakes cost his side, including a series of dropped catches that allowed Allen to run away with the match. “We’re not playing good cricket in batting and fielding,” he said. “We’ve been very good bowling but that’s cost us. We’re a young team and we’re learning.”

New Zealand made a blistering start, with Martin Guptill smashing three sixes in the first two overs. Allen was also finding the boundary but rode his luck with two dropped catches as the Black Caps raced to 69 without loss after five overs. Guptill smashed 16 off the first three balls from Mahedi Hasan but the



AUCKLAND: New Zealand players celebrate their series victory after the third Twenty20 cricket match between New Zealand and Bangladesh yesterday. - AFP

spinner had his revenge when the batsman was caught on 44 trying to clear the rope. Allen brought up his maiden half century off 18 balls and was gifted another life when Soumya Sarkar dropped a straightforward chance. He finally fell in the final over, scooping a Taskin Ahmed delivery over his head to the fielder, but by then the damage had been done.

Bangladesh made a disastrous start, losing two wickets to paceman Southee in the opening over. They were starting to rebuild when Astle also claimed a brace, leaving Bangladesh teetering on 37 for four. Astle’s second over proved just as destructive and the tourists had no answer as the run rate climbed to an insurmountable level. —AFP

Sports

Bucks spoil Drummond debut, Mavs hold on to beat Boston

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo made it a family affair yesterday night by scoring 25 points and joining his two brothers on the court as the Milwaukee Bucks beat the Los Angeles Lakers 112-97 at Staples Center arena. Giannis joined forces with Bucks teammate Thanasis Antetokounmpo against the Lakers Kostas Antetokounmpo to become just the second brother trio in NBA history to play in the same game.

Jrue Holiday scored a game-high 28 points for the Bucks who snapped a three game losing skid. Khris Middleton added 17 points and eight assists, and Holiday also added eight rebounds and six assists for the Bucks. Montrezl Harrell led four Lakers players in double-figures scoring with 19 points, followed by Dennis Schroder (17), Kyle Kuzma (16) and Markieff Morris (15).

Milwaukee was down 30-24 heading into the second quarter but turned that around to lead 57-49 at halftime. They cruised to victory from there. The Bucks also spoiled the Lakers debut of Andre Drummond as the American center finished with just four points. He started in place of Marc Gasol but did not start the second half, and he re-entered the game briefly in the second half before pulling himself. The Lakers said that Drummond suffered a right big toe contusion.

In Boston, Luka Doncic scored 36 points, including seven three pointers, as the Dallas Mavericks held

on for a 113-108 win over the Celtics. The Celtics clawed their way back in the contest after being down by 23 points in the third quarter. They trailed 90-73 at the end of the third before cutting the deficit to single digits in the fourth quarter.

"I thought when things got a little hairy down the stretch, the great thing we did was keep our poise," Mavs coach Rick Carlisle said. "We were able to get fouled, make free throws and get a key basket when we needed." Doncic shot 11-of-15 from the field while Jalen Brunson finished with 21 points for the Mavs, who won for the fourth time in their past six games.

Kristaps Porzingis had 19 points, and Dorian Finney-Smith scored 11 with nine rebounds in the win. Jayson Tatum had 25 points, Jaylen Brown 24 and Kemba Walker 22 for Boston, who have lost seven of their last 10 games. Marcus Smart chipped in 17 points in the loss.

'We've got to respond better'

Doncic and Brown traded threes pointers as Dallas led by eight with 36 seconds left in the fourth. Walker sank a three and Tatum finished off a tip in to make it a two-point game with under 10 seconds left. But a badly missed free-throw attempt by Smart thwarted any chance of the Celtics forcing overtime. "We've got to respond better in the middle of a game. And we just haven't," Celtics coach Brad Stevens said.



LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo #34 of the Milwaukee Bucks scores a basket against Andre Drummond #2 of the Los Angeles Lakers during the first half of the game at Staples Center on Wednesday. —AFP

Elsewhere, Kyrie Irving scored 31 points and finished with a season-high 12 assists as the Brooklyn Nets stormed back in the final quarter to beat the Houston Rockets 120-108 despite losing James Harden to an injury in the third quarter. Joe Harris added 14 of his 28 points in the fourth and nailed seven three-pointers as the Nets moved into first

place in the Eastern Conference. Harden was forced to leave the contest with just under five minutes left in the third with tightness in his right hamstring. He scored 17 points before exiting with the Nets well behind at that point. Nets coach Steve Nash said doctors will see how Harden feels Thursday before their game against Charlotte. —AFP

China defies boycott calls with Beijing 2022 Olympic tests

BEIJING: The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics launched a series of test events yesterday as China ploughs on with preparations despite calls for a boycott over its treatment of the Uyghur minority. There are also doubts about how the Games in February next year will deal with the coronavirus - a top Beijing 2022 official recently admitted that the pandemic makes it "a big challenge to host a smooth Winter Olympics". Organizers plan to run 10 days of testing at five locations in Olympic and Paralympic sports including ice hockey, speed skating, figure skating and curling. All athletes are Chinese because of virus-related travel curbs. Among measures at venues to thwart the coronavirus were plastic screens sealing competitors off from the media in the "mixed zone" where interviews are usually done at close quarters.

The testing, seen as an important step in getting ready for 2022, comes after IOC president Thomas Bach said in mid-March that a "boycott of the Olympic Games has never achieved anything". Campaigners have urged countries to skip the Games and on Thursday a coalition of 200 rights organizations called on confectionery giant Mars Wrigley to pull Snickers - the official Olympic chocolate - from Beijing 2022 "or risk being tainted by association".

China has come under increasing fire from rights groups and some governments amid claims that actions towards Uyghur and other minority groups in the northwestern region of Xinjiang amount to genocide. —AFP

Biden says teams should follow science to beat pandemic

LOS ANGELES: US President Joe Biden says sports teams are making a mistake if they ignore the science and allow fans back into stadiums at full capacity and without aggressive COVID-19 restrictions. Biden said the Texas Rangers are not being "responsible" by allowing 100 percent capacity at Globe Life Field on Major League Baseball's opening day yesterday, following a decision by the National Football League earlier this week to play games beginning in early September at full capacity.

"Well, that's a decision they made. I think it's a mistake," Biden said of the Rangers filling their 40,300 seat stadium. "They should listen to Dr [Anthony] Fauci, the scientists and the experts. But I think it's not responsible." Biden made his comments as part of an interview with US sports broadcaster ESPN which aired Wednesday night. He also emphasized the importance of wearing masks and continuing to follow restrictions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, which has killed over 550,000 Americans so far.

The state of Texas has seen almost 50,000 people die - more than Canada and Sweden combined. "In terms of it being responsible [for stadiums to open at full capacity] — you see what's happening in Europe now when they lifted the mandates. I don't know why we don't just follow the science and beat this," Biden said. Europe has seen rising infections, with leaders discussing reimposing virus restrictions. The Washington Nationals said this week that five players would miss Thursday's season opener against the New York Mets because of Covid-19 protocols, including one undisclosed player who tested positive. The Nationals plan to open their stadium to 5,000 fans, at 12 percent capacity. When asked what he would tell athletes who are reluctant to get the vaccine, Biden remarked, "I'm president of the United States and I got vaccinated. I don't have an unimportant job. Would I take the vaccine if I thought it was going to hurt me?"

He said vaccine research had been conducted that demonstrated their



Joe Biden

effectiveness, adding that the United States needed to get enough people inoculated to diminish the possibility for the virus to spread.

'Jim Crow on steroids'

Tennis players Elina Svitolina and Aryna Sabalenka, who are in Florida this week competing in a WTA tournament, have said they are reluctant to get the vaccine because of various concerns, including how fast it was rolled out. Biden also said he is in favor of moving the July 13 MLB all-star game out of Georgia, describing the newly passed voting law in the southern state as "Jim Crow on steroids." He said Georgia's new election law restricts access to voting for Americans. "Imagine passing a law saying you cannot provide water or food for someone standing in line to vote. Can't do that? Come on," he said. Biden went on to note professional athletes immense potential for social change, referring to the civil movement within the NBA that established a coalition to advance equality and social justice. "People look to them. They're leaders," he said. And addressed the anti-mask contingent, he said: "Some people think they are being tough guys by not wearing masks, but guess what, they are just hurting themselves and other people." —AFP

Sports

North Macedonia shock Germany as France, England grind out wins

PARIS: Germany suffered a stunning 2-1 home loss to North Macedonia in World Cup qualifying on Wednesday, while defending champions France edged Bosnia and Herzegovina 1-0 and England beat a Poland side missing the injured Robert Lewandowski. Napoli midfielder Eljif Elmas secured a famous victory for North Macedonia in Duisburg, scoring five minutes from time to give his country a second win from three Group J matches.

Veteran striker Goran Pandev, 37, put the visitors in front just before half-time but Ilkay Gundogan levelled from the spot after Leroy Sane was fouled in the area. Timo Werner missed a glorious chance after coming off the bench, and Elmas condemned the four-time world champions to a first defeat in qualifying for the global showpiece since 2001 when he steered in a cut-back from Arijan Ademi.

"I don't know how to explain it. It's not easy to do. We knew that we couldn't underestimate the opponent and I don't think we did that. We just weren't good enough," said Gundogan. "It's not quite sunk in yet. This is a victory for the whole nation," said North Macedonia coach Igor Angelovski, whose side will make their European Championship debut this summer.

Germany are level alongside North Macedonia in a section led surprisingly by Armenia, who

won for the third time in as many games thanks to two late goals in a 3-2 victory over Romania. Antoine Griezmann scored the only goal of the game in Sarajevo as France recorded a second away win in four days over Bosnia following their 2-0 success in Kazakhstan at the weekend.

After being held 1-1 at home by Ukraine in their opening game on the road to the 2022 finals in Qatar, France are now in a strong position at the top of Group D. Manchester United defender Harry Maguire struck a late winner for England as the 2018 World Cup semi-finalists overcame Poland 2-1 at Wembley. Harry Kane put England ahead with a first-half penalty after a foul on Raheem Sterling, but a mistake by John Stones allowed Poland to level through Jakub Moder.

England regained the lead with five minutes left when Maguire smashed home after central defensive partner Stones headed a corner back across goal. "It is a big win. We are playing to play at a World Cup," Maguire told ITV. "John (Stones) has been brilliant this year. Defenders make mistakes and when we do we get scrutinised. He made up for it with a great header at the back post." The nervy win means England top Group I with nine points after wins earlier in the international window against San Marino and Albania.



DUISBURG, Germany: North Macedonia players celebrate as Germany's forward Timo Werner walks past after the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification match on Wednesday. —AFP

Wins for Spain and Italy

Goals from Dani Olmo, Ferran Torres and second-half substitute Gerard Moreno lifted Spain to a 3-1 victory over Kosovo and top of Group B. However the qualifier in Seville was overshadowed by a pre-match diplomatic dispute, stemming from the description of Kosovo as a "territory" by the Spanish Football Federa-

tion when it published Spain's group fixtures.

Stefano Sensi scored just after his introduction as a half-time substitute to help Italy, who failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup, register a third successive win in Group C. Roberto Mancini's team defeated Lithuania 2-0 in Vilnius with Ciro Immobile adding a stoppage-time penalty for the Azzurri. —AFP

UEFA 'considering' allowing expanded squads for Euro 2020

LAUSANNE: UEFA is weighing up the possibility of allowing teams at this year's European Championship to name larger squads following calls by several coaches who are afraid of losing players to COVID-19, a spokesperson told AFP yesterday. "UEFA is considering the issue. No decision has been made yet," a spokesperson for European football's governing body told AFP.

The option has been prompted by calls from several coaches, notably those of Italy, Belgium and France, to prepare for teams being hit by a raft of positive coronavirus tests which could force players into isolation during the tournament. Euro 2020 was postponed last year because of the pandemic but is due to take place this year at venues all across the continent, from June 11 to July 11.

Belgium coach Roberto Martinez this week called on UEFA to allow teams to name squads of "26 or 27 players". National teams have named squads of 23 players at the World Cup and European Championship ever since the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea. Prior to that only 22 players were allowed in each squad at international tournaments.

"Ideally we would be able to have an extra goalkeeper, defender, midfielder and forward, so either 26 or 27 players in the squad," Martinez said after Belgium beat Belarus 8-0 in a World Cup qualifier. UEFA has already decided that teams will be allowed to make up to five substitutions in games at the Euro instead of the usual three, in line with current rules across many club competitions. —AFP

Top seed Medvedev follows Osaka out of Miami Open

MIAMI: Top-seeded Daniil Medvedev crashed out of the Miami Open Wednesday on a day of upsets that also saw Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka ousted from the quarterfinals. Seventh-seeded Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut beat Medvedev 6-4, 6-2, for his third win in as many meetings with the Russian who was runner-up to Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open and ascended to No. 2 in the world with his victory at Marseille in March.

Women's world No. 2 Osaka - seeded second behind top-ranked Ashleigh Barty in the prestigious ATP Masters and WTA hardcourt tournament - had bowed out hours earlier, the Japanese star's 23-match winning streak coming to a crashing halt with a 6-0, 6-4 loss to Greece's Maria Sakkari. Bautista booked a semi-final showdown with 19-year-old Italian Jannick Sinner, the world No. 31 who beat Kazakhstan's Alexander Bublik 7-6 (7/5), 6-4.

Sakkari will face eighth-seeded Canadian Bianca Andreescu for a place in the women's final. Andreescu, ranked ninth in the world, clawed out a 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 victory over tenacious 58th-ranked Spaniard Sara Sorribes Tormo. Osaka, playing her first tournament since lifting her fourth Grand Slam title at the Australian Open, won just eight points in the first set as she failed to muster a single winner.

Osaka broke in the second game of the second set and seized a 3-0 lead before Sakkari roared back for a victory that ended Osaka's chance of overtaking Australia's Barty - who had already booked her semi-final spot - atop the world rankings this week. Osaka acknowledged that the rankings race may have affected her against Greece's 25th-ranked Sakkari.

"The last time I was in this (press conference) seat, I wasn't really thinking at all about rankings, but someone asked me that question, so then I did start to ponder about it a lot. "So maybe unwillingly that put pressure



MIAMI GARDENS: Roberto Bautista Agut of Spain shakes hands after defeating Daniil Medvedev of Russia in their quarterfinal match of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

on myself. But I feel like even if it did, I should be able to rise above that," Osaka said.

Osaka hadn't dropped a set at love since her last defeat, which came in February 2020 in a Fed Cup match. "She has the most wins so far this year so she's in great form - it meant a lot to me," said Sakkari, who let loose a scream of delight after the final point. "To be deadly honest, I got a little tight in the first two games of the second set," said Sakkari, who had saved six match points in her fourth-round win over American Jessica Pegula. "I stayed within myself and started fighting back, hitting a few more balls and winning a few points against her."

Andreescu, the 2019 US Open champion trying to work her way back this year after a 15-month injury absence, broke Sorribes in the final game of the opening set, launching a run of eight straight service breaks. Andreescu was irked by a time violation early in the second set, in which Sorribes held serve for the only time in the set for a 5-3 lead - enough of an edge to level the match. —AFP



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