



3 Zain takes Kuwait TV into digital platforms era



6 Descendants of Sudan Jews hope to connect with Israel



8 Riyadh vs Dubai: Saudi district gears up for foreign firms



14 Greek gymnasts allege years of abuse by coaches



 **Kuwait Times** **REGISTER TODAY** for the **COVID-19 vaccine** [See Page 16](#)

MP Fadhalah resigns from Assembly over disputes

Two MPs question interior ministry over bribes paid by bedoons

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Independent MP Yusef Al-Fadhalah yesterday submitted his resignation from the National Assembly citing an unfavorable political environment and non-stop political feuds in the Assembly. The lawmaker claimed that the constitution and other laws have been violated right since the opening session of the new Assembly elected on Dec 5, charging that the government has also failed to fulfil its promises.

He said this has resulted in "deepening the struggle between the government and the Assembly and plunged the country into continued conflicts and disputes", which harmed national interests. Fadhalah also criticized what happened in last week's Assembly session which was boycotted by 32 MPs, "when the constitution was violated by postponing current and future grillings against the prime minister, which is unprecedented in the history of the Assembly".

The lawmaker was one of just 18 MPs along

with the 16 Cabinet ministers who attended the session, securing a slight majority that allowed the new Cabinet to take oath. According to the law, the resignation will be discussed by the Assembly only after 10 days. The Assembly will provide Fadhalah with an opportunity to reconsider his decision, but if he insists, the Assembly will accept the resignation.

Last week, Fadhalah called on all opposition MPs to submit their resignations together, which could force the dissolution of the Assembly. The constitutional court yesterday rejected all petitions challenging the results of the Assembly elections held in December. This means that the membership of all MPs has been sanctioned by the court.

Meanwhile, two opposition lawmakers yesterday sent questions to the interior minister about actions it has taken regarding allegations that top ministry officials had received millions of dollars in bribes from stateless people or bedoons to issue travel documents for them. MP Khaled Al-Otaibi said the US Department of State report on human rights

released on March 30 stated that "the ministry of interior revealed that approximately 17,000 bedoons had paid KD 3,000 each in bribes between 2014 and 2018 to obtain article 17 passports (travel documents)".

Otaibi said since the ministry has not denied the report, he asked if the ministry is aware about the network selling those passports and when the ministry confirmed the report. He also asked for the names of officials involved in the scandal and their ranks, and what legal measures have been taken against them. He inquired if those involved have been suspended and if the ministry had initiated cases against them with the anti-corruption authority and the public prosecution.



Yusef Al-Fadhalah

MP Muhannad Al-Sayer said the US report mentioned that an assistant undersecretary has been held in connection with the case. Sayer asked if the ministry has launched an investigation into the case and what was the outcome, and if the ministry has filed a complaint at the public prosecution, demanding documents proving the answer. He asked if the sheikh was held in connection with this case or other cases and if the ministry has revealed the network assisting him.

Separately, Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad announced yesterday that 1,517 new coronavirus infections, 1,325 recoveries and six deaths were recorded over the past 24 hours. Total infections rose to 241,469 and the death toll to 1,379, he said, adding total recoveries climbed to 226,026. He said 207 patients are being treated in intensive care units, while 14,064 cases are in hospitals. The number of tests conducted over the past 24 hours hit 10,432, taking total tests to 2,121,475, Sanad said. The ratio of infections to swabs over the past 24 hours reached 14.5 percent.

News in brief

Iran ship in Red Sea blast

TEHRAN: An Iranian freighter was hit by an "explosion" in the Red Sea, Tehran said yesterday, after the New York Times cited a US official as saying Israel had informed Washington it had struck the ship in "retaliation for earlier Iranian strikes on Israeli vessels". Iran was at pains to stress that the freighter was a civilian ship, although other sources said it had been used by Iranian commandos as a base for shipping protection and other duties in the area. Iran's Tasnim news agency reported that the MV Saviz had been damaged by "magnetic mines". — AFP

Dubai to deport nude group

DUBAI: The emirate of Dubai announced Tuesday it will deport a number of people arrested for public debauchery after a naked photo shoot. Photos and video footage posted online last week showed at least 18 foreign women posing naked in an apartment in the Dubai Marina area. While the UAE is considered one of the more open-minded Gulf nations, pornography and "any other material that may prejudice public morals" is illegal. — AFP

Survivors mental issues

PARIS: One in three people who overcome COVID-19 suffer from a neurological or psychiatric diagnosis six months on, according to the largest study so far published on the mental toll that long-COVID takes on survivors. Authors said the research, printed yesterday in The Lancet Psychiatry journal, proved that COVID-19 patients were significantly more likely to develop brain conditions than those suffering from other respiratory tract infections. — AFP

Show sparks anger in Algeria

ALGIERS: An Algerian reality TV show filmed in Dubai is causing a backlash even before hitting the airwaves, with social media users demanding a boycott and accusing participants of bringing "shame" on the country. "Le DZ a Dubai" brings together a group of Algerian social media influencers, former models and rappers in a format based on a French show similar to Big Brother. But the show, presented by a Tunisian Instagram star and starring several Algerians from the diaspora in France, has sparked rage in Algeria. — AFP

Jordan king says palace crisis 'over'

AMMAN: Jordan's King Abdullah broke his silence yesterday to tell his nation that the worst political crisis in decades sparked by an alleged plot involving his half-brother Prince Hamzah was over. The government had accused Hamzah - a former crown prince who was sidelined as heir to the throne in 2004 - of involvement in a conspiracy to "destabilize the kingdom's security" and arrested at least 16 people.

But Abdullah said yesterday that Hamzah, who has

signed a letter pledging his loyalty to the king following mediation by an uncle, was safe in his palace under his "protection". "I assure you, that the sedition has been nipped in the bud," Abdullah said in an address read out in his name on state television, a day after an official news blackout on the affair.

"The challenge of these last days was not the most dangerous for the stability of the country - but it was the most painful for me because the parties involved in this sedition were from home and from outside," he said. It was not clear whether the king was referring to actors external to the royal family or to the kingdom. Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi on Sunday had charged that the plotters had linked up with foreign parties, but had declined to identify them.

Continued on Page 2



Jordanian King Abdullah II

India imposes new curbs as cases hit record

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state Gujarat became the latest to tighten coronavirus curbs yesterday as India's infections surged to a record of almost 116,000 new cases in 24 hours. Experts blame the country's fresh wave on people ignoring guidelines and attending huge religious and political events, as well as weddings and cricket matches in recent months.

India has now recorded 12.8 million cases, the third-highest behind the

United States and Brazil, although those nations have much smaller populations. More than 166,000 Indians have died. Maharashtra, the worst-hit state and home to megacity Mumbai, has imposed a night curfew and weekend lockdowns are due to begin on Friday evening.

New Delhi imposed night curfews from Tuesday, and yesterday, Gujarat in western India extended after-dark restrictions to 20 cities and banned large social and political gatherings. "We have also extended the timing of night curfew from 8 pm to 6 am... This will be in force until April 30," Gujarat chief minister Vijay Rupani said in a video message. The northern state of Punjab yesterday ordered a ban on political gatherings and extended a

Continued on Page 2



KOLKATA: Protesters display placards near the Election Commission office yesterday demanding the halt of the state legislative election and campaign rallies amidst the rising number of COVID-19 cases. — AFP

Lebanon crisis dims future of pupils abroad

BEIRUT: Lebanese medical student Mohammad Sleiman travelled to Belarus to become the first doctor in his family, but he now fears his country's economic crisis is going to get him expelled. "I've got a future and I'm working towards it," the 23-year-old said from his bedroom in the capital Minsk, a dreamcatcher hanging on the wall behind him. "But if they throw me out of university, my future

will be lost. And it'll be the Lebanese state's fault."

As Lebanese banks forbid depositors from transferring their own money abroad, thousands of students who went abroad to pursue studies they could not afford at home are among the hardest hit. Students told AFP they had moved into cheaper accommodation, taken on jobs or even cut back on meals. Some had been forced to fly home to Lebanon, with no idea how to return to their studies.

Sleiman said he was so stressed about money that he could hardly concentrate in class. Back home, his family's dollar savings have been trapped in the bank since 2019, and

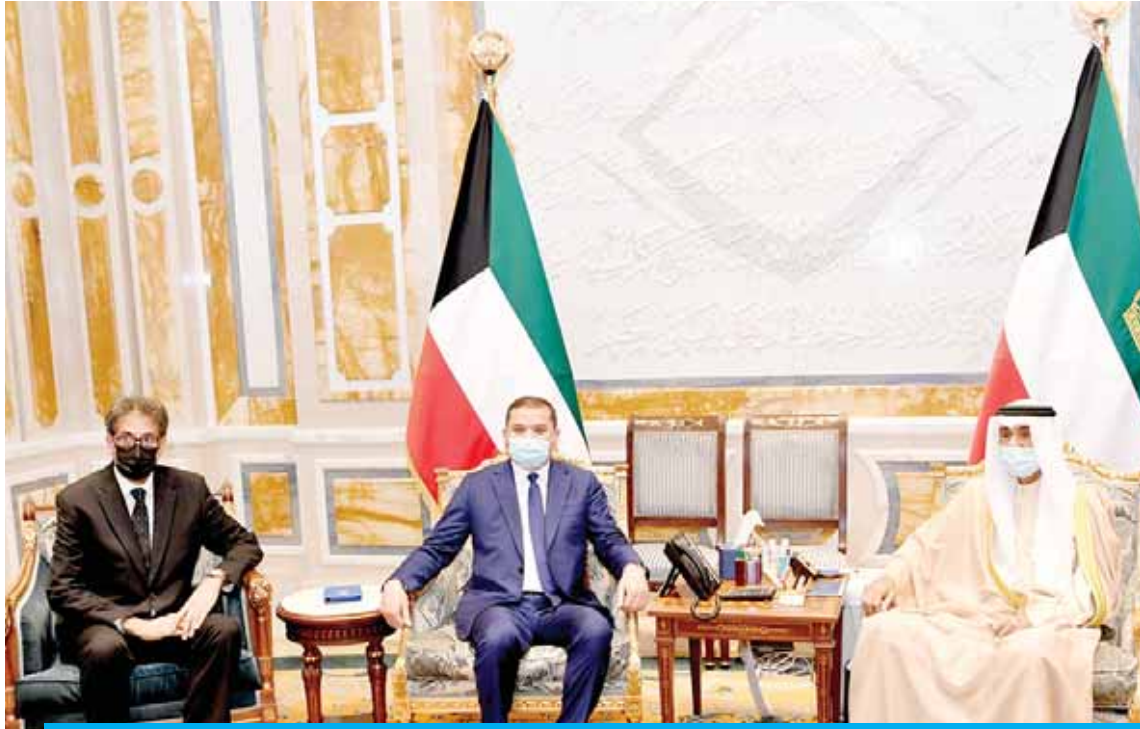
Continued on Page 2



BEIRUT: Relatives of Lebanese students studying abroad demonstrate outside the headquarters of the Banque du Liban (Lebanese Central Bank) yesterday. — AFP

Local

Kuwait's Amir receives Libyan Prime Minister



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibeh. — Amiri Diwan photos

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah who was accompanied by visiting Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibeh. The meeting was attended by the Minister of Amiri Diwan affairs Sheikh Ali Jarrah

Al-Sabah, President of the Amiri Diwan Sheikh Mubarak Faisal Saud Al-Sabah, Deputy President of the Amiri Diwan Mohammad Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah, Head of the Honorary Mission Sheikh Talal Khaled Ahmad Al-Sabah, Amiri Diwan Undersecretary and Director of the Amir Office Ahmad Fahad Al-Fahad.



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

Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir received at Bayan Palace yesterday His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received Parliament Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem and His Highness Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. In addition, His Highness the Amir received State Audit

Bureau President Faisal Fahad Al-Shaya, where he presented a copy of the Citizens Report of 2020. In the meantime, His Highness the Crown Prince received Ghanem, His Highness Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled and Shaya who presented to him a copy of the Citizens Report of 2020. — KUNA

Kuwait Prime Minister receives Libyan counterpart



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah receives his Libyan counterpart Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibeh. — KUNA

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday Prime Minister of the Government of National Unity of Libya, Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibeh. An official reception ceremony was attended by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and Minister of State for enhancing transparency

Abdullah Al-Roumi, Governor of Al-Asimah and head of honor mission Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, chiefs of the Army, Police and National Guard, senior state officials, Abdel-Ahad Mbaki Ambassador of the Republic of Senegal and Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in Kuwait as well as ambassadors of the two countries. Prime Minister of the Government of National Unity of Libya arrived in the country Tuesday on an official visit. — KUNA

Lebanon crisis dims future of...

Continued from Page 1

The 23-year-old has no idea how he will pay tuition fees when his father can barely borrow enough to send him rent. Last month, he says his name appeared on a list with other Lebanese threatened with expulsion if they did not pay up. Lebanon's parliament passed a law last year to help students like him, but parents say banks systematically turn them away demanding more paperwork.

In the south of Lebanon, Sleiman's father said he had been to several protests by parents demanding help from the Lebanese authorities, but to no avail. Without access to his savings, 48-year-old Mousa Sleiman has to buy \$300 for his son each month on the black market at an exorbitant exchange rate. But his earnings from his toy and cosmetics store, in Lebanese pounds now worth 85 percent less at street value, cannot even begin to cover it. "I've been so worried," the father of eight said, with his eldest son's April rent due. "I'm going to have to go and rack up more debt."

One student activist said parents had also sold cars and gold jewelry to help their children. Many pin blame for Lebanon's worst financial crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war on political mismanagement and corruption. As the country's foreign reserves plummet, and amid reports of mass capital flight despite currency controls since 2019, they accuse the ruling class of having plundered their savings.

A law passed last year is supposed to allow parents to access \$10,000 per student enrolled abroad in 2019 at the much cheaper official exchange rate. But parents say the banks don't care. "They take our

requests and dump them in drawers because there's no more money left to send. They stole it," said Sleiman's father.

A handful of parents or grandparents have filed lawsuits against their banks and won, the latest month. One of them was able last year to transfer funds to his sons in France and Spain so they could graduate. Sleiman and fellow parents are looking into doing the same. And the International Union of Lebanese Youth, covering students in 20 countries, has started working with volunteer lawyers towards filing dozens more cases.

But lawyer and activist Nizar Sayegh said these cases were still rare and complicated by coronavirus lockdowns and banks filing appeals. Many families also shy away from legal action for fear the banks would then close their account, he said.

In Italy, 20-year-old Reine Kassis said she and fellow cash-strapped Lebanese flatmates were having to delay breakfast till lunchtime. "We eat toast and cheese, then study, study until supper," said the mechanical engineering student in Ferrara. She says she has received a little help in Italy. But her brother, 23, had to return from Ukraine to Lebanon to continue studying online because he could not afford the rent.

Their father Maurice Kassis, a retired officer, said he was heartbroken. "I only had two children so I could spoil them, and educate them properly," the 54-year-old said in the eastern town of Zahle. When he retired, he had enough savings stashed away in Lebanese pounds to cover both of them studying abroad.

But today, with the collapse of the Lebanese currency, those pounds would fetch just an eighth of their old value in dollars. After he has paid off his home loan with his pension each month, he only has the equivalent of \$50 left for the whole family. "How do you educate your children with that?" he asked. "I'm telling them to find themselves a future abroad." — AFP

Kuwaiti Foreign Minister meets Yemeni counterpart

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met yesterday the visiting Yemeni Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Dr Ahmed Bin Mubarak. During the meeting, both sides reviewed the deep-rooted bilateral relations between the two countries, and the latest developments in Yemen and the region. Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr Ahmed Al-Nasser reiterated Kuwait's keenness to stand with the unity and stability of Yemen and restore security to its territory, and support all efforts to reach a peaceful solution in accordance with the Gulf initiative and its executive mechanism, and the outcome of Yemen's national dialogue conference and the relevant Security Council resolutions. He also stressed Kuwait's support for Saudi Arabia's new initiative to end the crisis in Yemen, and the UN-controlled ceasefire to reach the desired political solution, adding that Kuwait also condemned the continued Houthi attacks on Yemen and Saudi Arabia and the



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Yemeni Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Dr Ahmed Bin Mubarak. — KUNA

targeting of the civilian areas. In the meantime, Bin Mubarak explained the latest developments in Yemen, expressing great appreciation to Kuwait's role and efforts to support Yemen and alleviate the human suffering of the Yemeni people. — KUNA

Jordan king says palace...

Continued from Page 1

Hamzah was appointed crown prince in 1999 in line with his father's wishes, but Abdullah stripped him of the title in 2004 and named his eldest son in Hamzah's place. After claiming he was put under house arrest Saturday, Hamzah had made extensive use of traditional and social media to lash out against his situation. He made accusations of corruption and ineptitude in a video message published by the BBC on Saturday.

But after a statement voicing his loyalty to the king on Monday, Abdullah said yesterday that Hamzah had offered his support for the monarchy. "Hamzah is now with his family in his palace under my protection," Abdullah said the address. "He has committed before the (Hashemite) family to follow the path of his parents and grandparents, to be faithful to their message, and to place the interest of Jordan, its constitution and its laws above all other considerations."

The crisis had laid bare divisions in a country usually seen as a bulwark of stability in the Middle East. Jordan borders Israel and the occupied West Bank, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. It hosts US troops and is home to millions of exiled Palestinians and more than

India imposes new curbs as...

Continued from Page 1

night curfew to the whole state while capping numbers at indoor funerals and weddings to 50 guests and 100 for outdoors. Chief minister Amarinder Singh said it was also a "matter of concern that over 85 percent of cases in Punjab are of the UK strain, which is more contagious and virulent".

Press reports say that hospitals are starting to suffer, particularly in Maharashtra. One Pune clinic is reportedly giving oxygen support to patients in a makeshift waiting area. The All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), one of Delhi's biggest government hospitals, will from today end walk-in consultations to minimize infections, reports said.

The government has so far shied away from reimposing a nationwide lockdown after a shutdown in March 2020 - one of the world's toughest - caused

half a million Syrian refugees. The monarchy ruling Jordan - a country long regarded as a pro-Western anchor of stability in a turbulent region - declared it was settling the matter "within the framework of the Hashemite family".

The king's speech followed orders issued Tuesday by Amman prosecutor Hassan al-Abdallat that banned the publication of any information about the alleged plot in order to keep the security services' investigation secret. Jordan's media was told to wait for official statements before publishing anything about those arrests.

Yesterday's morning newspaper front pages were dominated by the visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan with a message from King Salman and developments in the coronavirus outbreak ravaging the country. Mustafa Al-Riyalat, editor-in-chief of pro-government newspaper Addustour, said Jordanians "all feel reassured, because it's as if nothing happened".

In the streets, Jordanians voiced relief. "When the crisis erupted on Saturday, there was no one in the streets. People were afraid," said Shady, 41, who owns a clothing store in the capital Amman. "But thank God, it was resolved within the royal palace."

But Ahmed Awad, of the Phoenix Center for Economics and Informatics Studies, warned that the crisis was not yet over. "There was a solution within the royal family, but not a solution to the political crisis," he said. "The real political crisis... will continue until there are more democratic reforms." — AFP

widespread human and economic misery. Many Indians lowered their guard after infections slowed sharply in late 2020, with huge crowds thronging religious festivals such as the Kumbh Mela which on one day last month saw three million attendees.

Spectators were also allowed at cricket matches between India and England in Gujarat, while political rallies for state elections have drawn huge crowds, including an estimated 800,000 at one event hosted by Modi. The government late yesterday expanded the sites where vaccinations could take place - currently concentrated at hospitals and healthcare centers - to include workplaces that have 100 staff willing to receive a jab, amid growing calls for more flexibility to speed up the pace of the rollout.

India launched its mass vaccination drive in mid-January and opened up jabs to the over-45s at the start of April. The country has so far administered almost 90 million shots. But experts say that the government's target of inoculating 300 million people by August risks being missed with many scared to get the injections or complacent about the virus. — AFP

Local

Kuwait curfew: What you need to know

KUWAIT: Kuwait imposed a curfew from 7:00 pm to 5:00 am until April 22, 2021 to help curb the sharp increase in COVID-19 cases registered in recent weeks. During the curfew hours, pharmacies, medical stores, co-operative societies and supermarkets are allowed to continue operation only through delivery services, while restaurants and cafes are allowed to deliver food from 7:00 pm to 3:00 am every day. Also during the curfew, people are allowed to go to prayers at mosques only by walking, and the government allowed people to practice walking and jogging from 7:00 pm to 10:00 pm. The government meanwhile allowed salons and health clubs to reopen during the day but kept restaurants and cafes closed except for drive-through and delivery services. Meanwhile, taxis are allowed to carry only two passengers.

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry launched a booking service, allowing people to shop from 7:00 pm to 12:00 am during the curfew hours. The service is valid for all co-ops and supermarkets around Kuwait. To book an appointment, a shopper should visit www.moci.shop, enter the required information (civil ID number and serial number, contact number and email address), the reason for appointment (food supply center) and the time and date of the appointment. The shopper would then receive a barcode to show once they reach the shopping center.

Where to obtain a curfew pass?

Citizens and residents that need a pass during the curfew hours to leave their homes can apply for a pass at <https://www.paci.gov.kw/>. The pass is available for those in need of emergency medical treatment, doctor's visits, blood donation, COVID-19 swabs and COVID-19 vaccinations.

Co-op delivery during curfew hours

During curfew hours, co-ops, grocery stores and other markets will be allowed to offer delivery services. Most co-ops will accept orders via delivery. Here is an incomplete list of co-op WhatsApp numbers. Each co-op will be responsible for deciding if and when they provide delivery services and not all may be providing.

Omariya Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316

Wafra Farm Co-op
Tel: 9883-5245 / 5170-0085

Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

Jabriya Co-op
Tel: 1805-353
WhatsApp 6566-6084

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

Faiha Co-op
Tel: 1861-000
WhatsApp 9098-6000

Rumaihiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951

Adan & Qusour Co-op
Tel: 5034-3111 / 6593-3975

Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832

Zain takes Kuwait TV into the digital platforms era

Company develops KUWAIT TV app in collaboration with MOI



Eaman Al-Roudhan and Muneera Al-Huwaidi with Zain and the Information Ministry teams.

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced a partnership with the Ministry of Information to develop KUWAIT TV, an all-new app that features the latest streaming technologies. Through this partnership, Zain takes Kuwait TV into the digital platforms era by offering live streaming and Video on Demand (VOD) services for 9 TV channels and 11 radio channels.

The partnership was announced during a visit from Zain Kuwait's Chief Executive Officer Eaman Al-Roudhan to the office of the Undersecretary of Kuwait's Ministry of Information Muneera Al-Huwaidi, along with the presence of Zain's executive management and MOI's officials. The visit commemorated the official launch of the KUWAIT TV app on the occasion of the upcoming Holy Month of Ramadhan.

Commenting on the partnership, Zain Kuwait's Chief Executive Officer Eaman Al-Roudhan said: "Today, we write a new success story between Zain and yet another government entity; the Ministry of Information. This step reflects our leadership in empowering digital transformation within the public sector under the umbrella of the New Kuwait 2035 vision. Zain was always one of the first national companies in the Kuwaiti private sector with a prominent role in implementing governmental digital transformation across different sectors during the past period".

Roudhan explained: "During the past few years, digital entertainment platforms and live streaming services grew rapidly, and quickly became the first choice for viewers given their ease and convenience. With the pandemic, lockdowns, and health measures that restricted visiting entertainment venues outside, dependence on digital platforms became almost essential for users around the world. For this reason, we saw the importance of taking on this project and fully transforming



Kuwait TV and making it digitally accessible through the KUWAIT TV app and the ministry's official website".

Roudhan continued: "During the app's development phase, we were extremely keen on using the most advanced world-class streaming technologies, enabling users to live-stream 9 TV channels and listen live



Featuring latest streaming tech

to 11 radio channels with a single tap and in ultra-high quality. In addition, the app features a Video on demand (VOD) service that allows them to choose and enjoy their favorite selected shows instantly from anywhere and at any time".

Roudhan further added: "With the official launch of the app for iOS devices and the ministry's website, along with the app for Android



KUWAIT: Zain Kuwait's Chief Executive Officer Eaman Al-Roudhan and the Undersecretary of Kuwait's Ministry of Information Muneera Al-Huwaidi during the announcement.

devices soon, viewers can now enjoy selected shows, programs, and the most-viewed titles during the Holy Month of Ramadhan. We were keen on launching the app just in time for the Holy Month".

Roudhan concluded: "This partnership reflects our active role in offering the latest tech services and solutions for the biggest national institutions in both the public and private sectors. We aim at further progressing Kuwait's prosperity across all fields, especially that Zain is a part of the Kuwaiti private sector, which is a strategic partner and an essential pillar of the country's developmental plans".

Undersecretary of Kuwait's Ministry of Information Muneera Al-Huwaidi said: "The vital role of partnerships between national companies and government entities in implementing digital transformation contributes to business development and offering digital government services, including this project. This is a leap forward for Kuwait TV during its digital streaming journey by offering titles to viewers wherever they are and at any time. This will open new and broad horizons and more collaborations that are complementary to the fresh and strategic brand of Kuwait TV".

Users can now download the KUWAIT TV app from the App Store



for iOS devices (and soon on the Play Store for Android devices). The app features 9 TV channels: Kuwait, KTV2, Al-Arabi, Ethraa, Al-Qurain, Stay Home, Sports, Sports 2, and Al-Majlis. The app also features 11 radio channels: Holy Quran, Kuwait FM, Public Program, OFM, Super Station, Al-Shsabiya, Program 2, EASY 92.5, and Retro Arabic Music.

Zain continuously offers the latest and most advanced services and solutions to showcase its capabilities as an active partner in empowering a smart life, a safe community, and an efficient business sector. The company considers itself a main partner in the achievement of the goals of the Kuwait National Development Plan (New Kuwait 2035).

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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News in brief

Licenses for bedoon vendors?

KUWAIT: A government source said a proposal is being considered to grant bedoons commercial licenses in a bid to organize vendors selling on streets, pavements and roundabouts, so they can be under the supervision of the Municipality, commerce ministry and the food and nutrition authority. The source said it is not true that the Municipality treats roaming bedoon vendors harshly; rather it takes legal measures against violators. He said there are reasons for not allowing hawking, and this is not particular to a certain group - the law is applied to all those who violate decisions, especially those who sell food items such as fruits and vegetables. He said the proposal has several conditions including that the license should be issued in the name of a retired Kuwaiti, a form of guarantee, minimal monthly fees, the Municipality decides where the vendor stands and vehicles must be air-conditioned. This is in addition to having the vendor obtain a health permit and not allowing those under 18 to work. A commerce ministry official said the proposal is welcome if it reaches his ministry. — Al-Qabas

Laundries closed

KUWAIT: Chairman of the Kuwait Laundry Owners Association Jamal Al-Ansari said there are around 3,000 laundries around Kuwait, 50 of which have closed down permanently, while 400 are closed temporarily due to inability to pay wages and rent. He said a letter was sent to Deputy Premier, Defense Minister and Chairman of the Coronavirus Emergency Committee Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah with regards to allowing laundries with delivery service to operate during the partial curfew hours and grant employees curfew passes, while observing all health precautions and protocols. — Al-Anbaa

Stores on fire

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Fire Force said firemen doused a blaze that erupted in several stores at the Kuwait Army Cooperative. Industrial Shuwaikh, Sulaibikhat, Jleeb and backup fire stations, in addition to the army fire brigade, participated in fighting the fire. No injuries were reported.

IWG hosts Canadian Cultural Day

KUWAIT: The International Women's Group- Kuwait was honored to host a Canadian Cultural Day with the participation of the Ambassador of Canada Louis-Pierre Emond and his spouse Mme Satako Araki. Rima Khalidi, spouse of the Ambassador of the State of Palestine and Vice President of IWG acting as master of ceremonies, eloquently and seamlessly managed the virtual program. Ambreen Mustafa, spouse of the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and president of IWG, delivered the welcome address and introduced the Ambassador of Canada.

In his presentation, Ambassador Emond covered various aspects and spoke of Canada as a nation of immigrants with a tremendously welcoming and caring population. An inspiring video 'Peace by Chocolate' of a Syrian family's settlement in Canada was enjoyed by all and was then followed by a video performance from a world-

Indian ambassador calls on Interior, Finance ministers

KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George visited top Kuwaiti officials this week including Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah and Minister of Finance and Minister of State for Economic Affairs and Investment Khalifa Musaed Hamada.

The ambassador called on the Interior Minister yesterday and held wide ranging discussions on bilateral ties and explored ways of further enhancing cooperation between the countries in various fields such as health, security matters and matters related to the Indian diaspora, according to a press release issued by the Indian embassy.

Khalifa Musaed Hamada received George in his office on Tuesday. During the meeting, both sides discussed the entire gamut of the bilateral relations and deliberated on ways and means of further diversifying the close cooperation across various sectors, including economy, finance and investments. They also discussed latest regional and international developments including the COVID-19 pandemic situation and matters of mutual interest, the release said.

Separately, George called on Eng Faisal D

Alatel, Chairman, Kuwait Society of Engineers (KSE) on Monday and discussed issues related to Indian engineers in Kuwait and means of enhancing institutional cooperation between India and Kuwait in the field of engineering.

Shuttle service

Meanwhile, the Indian Embassy launched a shuttle vehicle service from the entrance of the diplomatic enclave to the embassy premises with effect from April 6, 2021. The endeavor is part of the embassy's commitment to address and resolve all genuine concerns and problems faced by the Indian community in Kuwait, an embassy press release said. All visitors to the embassy, especially the elderly, families with young children, and people with mobility issues who will be given priority, are encouraged to use the shuttle service. The operating timings of the Shuttle service are 0700 to 1600 hours on week days. The shuttle service will be operated observing all the health and safety guidelines related to COVID-19. The shuttle service is free of charge, the release added.



KUWAIT: Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah receives Indian Ambassador Sibi George in his office yesterday.

China a long-term, reliable strategic partner of Middle East countries

By Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Li Minggang

At a time when Chinese New Year has just passed and spring has sprung, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid official visits to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and a working visit to Oman. Just a month ago, Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the CPC Central Committee Yang Jiechi paid official visits to Kuwait and Qatar. All these not only demonstrate China's great importance attached to Middle East countries and its firm resolve to develop the relationship between the two sides, but also further indicate that China is a reliable strategic partner of the Middle East, sending a clear message that the two sides work in concert to build an even closer community with a shared future.

The first is to firmly support each other's core interests. China and countries of this region concur that sovereign independence and national dignity of all countries should be respected, and that independent and diverse development models can help offer more options to developing countries in their drive to achieve modernization and promote the harmonious co-existence of different civilizations. We should reject imposing one's ideology upon others, and oppose wanton interference in internal affairs of other countries and slander against other countries under the guise of human rights. The two sides also agree to safeguard the international system with the United Nations as the core and the international order based on international law, uphold multilateralism, and defend international equity and justice.

The second is to jointly preserve regional securi-

ty and stability. The world cannot enjoy real peace and tranquility if the Middle East keeps suffering from instability. During his visits, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi unveiled a five-point initiative for achieving security and stability in the Middle East, which calls for advocating mutual respect, upholding equity and justice, achieving non-proliferation, jointly fostering collective security, and accelerating development cooperation. This will infuse positive energies into achieving security and stability in the Middle East. China fully supports active international mediation over the two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. When taking the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council this May, China will push for holding full deliberation of this issue, and will host a seminar for Palestinian and Israeli peace activists in due course. Continuing its active participation in the process of resolving the Iranian nuclear issue, China has sent officials to Moscow to discuss with Russia and Iran the roadmap and timetable of reviving the nuclear deal. China will also keep close communication with the Gulf countries over holding multilateral forums in China on the Gulf security, starting from topics such as safeguarding oil infrastructure and shipping-lane security, taking into account that easier issues should be tackled first before moving on to more difficult ones in order to accumulate mutual trust. China will hold the China-Arab Reform and Development Forum and the Middle East Security Forum during the year to enhance exchanges of experience in governance and promote dialogues between civilizations.

The third is to deepen anti-pandemic cooperation. We will never forget that facing the sudden COVID-19 pandemic, Middle East countries have extended robust support to China, which has sublimated the friendship between both peoples in responding to this global public health crisis. China is keen to work with Middle East countries to push forward the anti-epidemic cooperation.

The fourth is to enhance synergies of development strategies and advance high-quality Belt and Road cooperation. China has signed documents on Belt and Road cooperation with 19 Middle East countries. During the visits, Director Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Wang Yi held in-depth discussions with their counterparts on better alignment of

development strategies between China and regional countries. State Councilor Wang Yi reached consensus with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretary-General Nayef Falah Mubarak Al-Hajraf at their meeting on the early conclusion of free trade talks between China and the GCC, and signed an agreement with his Iranian counterpart on the plan for China-Iran comprehensive cooperation during his visit to Iran. China is ready to work with Middle East countries to consolidate energy cooperation along the entire industrial chain, and expand in-depth cooperation on new and renewable sources of energy.

The fifth is to build the China-Arab community with a shared future. China and Arab states have enjoyed friendly exchanges for centuries. Despite profound changes unseen in a hundred years and a once-in-a-century pandemic, China-Arab relations have forged ahead and demonstrated strong vitality. It has become a fine example of state-to-state relations. In 2020, China cemented its position as the largest trading partner of Arab states, while Arab states became the biggest source of China's oil import. The two sides agreed to hold the first-ever China-Arab states summit.

Kuwait is an important Gulf state as well as a key partner of China in the region. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of China-Kuwait diplomatic relations. Over the past five decades, China-Kuwait relations have enjoyed sound and steady development, and the two countries have shown mutual understanding and support issues concerning each other's core interests and major concerns. Kuwait was the first country in the region to sign a document with China on Belt and Road cooperation, and bilateral cooperation has yielded fruitful outcomes in such areas as energy, trade, infrastructure and people-to-people exchanges. China has all along approached China-Kuwait ties from a strategic and long-term perspective, and stands ready to work with Kuwait to implement the important consensus reach by the two heads of state, deepen anti-pandemic cooperation, promote high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, push for in-depth development of the China-Kuwait strategic partnership, and promote peace, security, development and prosperity in the Middle East.



IWG members attend the virtual event.

KFH employees visit Silicon Valley as Part of 'Forsa Program'

KUWAIT: As part of its "Forsa Program", Kuwait Finance House (KFH) delegated a group of its outstanding Kuwaiti employees to Silicon Valley in the USA to enhance their innovative digital mindset and creativity in digitalization, IT, FinTech, AI, blockchain and cybersecurity.

Forsa Program with its rich content comes in line with KFH directions and its strategic plans to reinforce its leadership in digitalization, which has become essential in its various activities and business, and to embrace national talents, upgrade their professional level and refine their skills according to international standards.

Forsa Program includes advanced training programs, workshops and field visits to the largest and most prominent global technology firms such as Microsoft, Google, Apple, Ripple, among others. The employees also visited laboratories of digital transformation in prominent American universities such as the University of Berkeley in California, as well as the Innovation Center in Silicon Valley, BNP Paribas and other international institutions and prestigious FinTech companies.

In addition to extensive field visits to Microsoft- Turkey, the employees also visited the digital pioneer KFH-Turkey, which contains research and innovation centers as well as teams of hundreds of engineers, where Forsa trainees learn about artificial intelligence products, process automation, the smart branch, financing E-commerce, customer loyalty analysis, data science, and digital applications which are among many programs designed to promote digital innovation in financial technology in trainees.

The trainees praised the importance of the program and its added value, which will



KFH's "Forsa Program" trainees in Silicon Valley.

be reflected in their performance at KFH by implementing ideas that will contribute to developing and facilitating operations and designing digital services and products to keep pace with the millennial generation requirements and confirm KFH's excellence and leadership in digitalization, online services and financial technology.

They pointed out that the most important characteristic of the program is the practical technical projects that have been implemented away from the traditional academic lecture as well as the methods of digital transformation of global institutions and the motivating creative work environment culture. They also learned how to avoid the traditional mentality of thinking, the flexible and agile performance within a culture of change and continuous innovation, while accelerating

and simplifying all operations and making them available online.

Moreover, Forsa program includes outstanding young Kuwaiti graduates from the technology departments of local and international universities. It also features training programs on the latest and best information technology and its applications in the banking field.

The program develops the trainees' capabilities in the interests of KFH and its customers, enabling them to keep pace with the international levels in expertise, skills, and knowledge of the development of banking operations and the business in its broad sense. This enriches the employees' experience and professional development and enhances the leadership spirit of the young Kuwaiti.

Police begin to seize bikes

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Authorities have started enforcing the ban on riding bicycles and scooters during the walking period after the night-time curfew begins. For the past two days, police patrols in Salwa and other areas have started seizing bicycles and scooters during the walking

period (which was from 6 pm to 8 pm till yesterday, and 7 pm to 10:00 pm from today). When the Cabinet decided to impose a curfew from March 7, 2021, it announced that people are allowed to walk for two hours after the curfew begins in their residential areas. This permission for walking does not include using bicycles or scooters. Yet people, mostly kids and teens, have not been respecting this ban for the past month. And with the increasing number of bicycle and scooter riders on the streets, the police decided to stop this activity.



'It's the tone': Palau president explains his China mistrust

Biden: All adults in US eligible for COVID vaccine by April 19



DAKAR: Volunteers of the Association For Solidarity and Perfection carry one of the twenty eight unidentified corpses to a Mosque ahead of a Prayer in Dakar. —AFP

Senegalese Muslims bury unidentified dead

Somber ceremonies at Dakar cemetery simply a sense of duty and charity

DAKAR: Neither Mohamed Diop nor his fellow mourners knew any of the people they were burying. What had prompted these people to attend the funeral, a somber Islamic ceremony at a cemetery in Dakar, was not love, friendship or even knowledge of the deceased, but simply a sense of duty and charity. For almost 10 years, volunteers with the Jamiyatou Rahmati Wal Ihsani (JRWI, or Association for Solidarity and Perfection in Arabic) have taken it upon themselves to provide the unidentified dead with a Muslim funeral.

For the dead to be buried in a mass grave without Islamic rites would be considered an abomination in a country which is 90-percent Muslim. On a day in late March, 28 bodies without names — 23 men, two women and three children—received a dignified burial, with several hundred people in attendance.

The JRWI activates its network for the funerals, but not all the mourners are members. Faith, a sense of duty and the hope of divine recognition are some of the reasons why people gather to honor those to whom they have no ties. "I came thinking of my final fate. I do it hoping for a divine

reward, and it is not the first time," acknowledged Diop, who is in his twenties.

Mohamed Gueye, an imam in a poor Dakar neighborhood, recalled what inspired him to help found the charitable organization. "One day I saw a vehicle enter the cemetery and leave shortly afterwards. "When I asked, they told me it had to do with unidentified people who were being buried and that it was often in a mass grave, without respect for Islamic rules."

They include a ritual washing of the body, a white shroud and a prayer, the imam explained. Giving unknown people a proper burial is something "that we do for God," he added.

Nameless dead

JRWI volunteers recover the people to be buried at public hospitals, as they had done that day at one called Le Dantec. Hospitals must keep deceased patients for 45 days before they are placed in the association's care, it said. Senegalese hospitals did not respond to questions from AFP on the subject. It was not known how many unidentified people

die each year, nor what happens to bodies if the association cannot take care of them. It is not uncommon for bodies remain unidentified or for families not to claim them—the reasons can be various, from breakdowns in family ties to administrative failings. The head of the capital's fire services, Colonel Papa Ange Michel Diatta, said unidentified bodies may be victims of road accidents, homeless people, or others who suffer from mental illness.

Once they have dealt with the emergency, the fire service leaves it up to hospitals to identify the deceased. In November, JRWI also buried 13 clandestine migrants.

The group had suspended burials owing to the coronavirus pandemic to avoid exposing volunteers and because large gatherings were banned.

A simple prayer and grave

"In nine years, we have buried 1,029 people in Dakar and other regions," said Lamine Mandiang, the JRWI secretary general who works in the oil sector. A group burial can cost the equivalent of almost 700 euros (\$800), about half the average

per capita annual income, according to World Bank data, and the association does not always have the money, imam Gueye says. It depends on contributions from members and others, aid from municipal governments or other public institutions, and a foundation sponsored by Mariye Faye Sall, Senegal's first lady. Her "Fondation Servir le Senegal" (Serving Senegal Foundation) has provided vehicles to transport the deceased and mourners.

A column of hearses, ambulances and buses made its way from Le Dantec hospital along a 15-kilometre (nine-mile) route to Dakar's Muslim cemetery. JRWI volunteers wearing green and orange uniforms unloaded the bodies, brought them into a small mosque, where a prayer was said, and bore them to a grave that had been dug beforehand. Another imam, Mohamed Samb, said a final prayer, noting also that there were many tombs nearby that were fancier than stipulated under Islamic rules.

The 28 unidentified bodies will lie beneath a mound marked by a simple stone with no inscription, Samb said. —AFP

Backlash after Pakistan PM links rape to how women dress

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan rights campaigners have accused Prime Minister Imran Khan of "baffling ignorance" after the former playboy cricketer blamed how women dress for a rise in rape cases. In a weekend interview on live television, Oxford-educated Khan said an increase in rapes indicated the "consequences in any society where vulgarity is on the rise".

"The incidents of rape of women... (have) actually very rapidly increased in society," he said. He advised women to cover up to prevent temptation. "This entire concept of purdah is to avoid temptation, not everyone has the willpower to avoid it," he said, using a term that can refer to modest dress or the segregation of the sexes. Hundreds have signed a statement circulating online Wednesday calling Khan's comments "factually incorrect, insensitive and dangerous".

"Fault rests solely with the rapist and the system

that enables the rapist, including a culture fostered by statements such as those made by (Khan)," the statement said. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent rights watchdog, said Tuesday it was "appalled" by the comments.

"Not only does this betray a baffling ignorance of where, why and how rape occurs, but it also lays the blame on rape survivors, who, as the government must know, can range from young children to victims of honor crimes," it said. Pakistan is a deeply conservative country where victims of sexual abuse are often viewed with suspicion and criminal complaints are rarely seriously investigated.

Much of the country lives under an "honor" code where women who bring "shame" on the family can be subjected to violence or murder. It regularly ranks among the worst places in the world for gender equality. Nationwide protests erupted last year when a police chief admonished a gang-rape victim for driving at night without a male companion.

The Franco-Pakistani mother was assaulted in front of her children on the side of a motorway after her car ran out of fuel. Last year, Khan was also criticized after another television appearance where he failed to challenge a Muslim cleric's insistence that coronavirus had been unleashed because of the wrongdoings of women. The latest controversy comes as the organizers behind International Women's Day marches battle what they have called a coordinated disinformation campaign against



ISLAMABAD: In this file photo taken on March 8, 2021 activists of the 'Aurat March' shout slogans and carry placards during a rally to mark International Women's Day in Islamabad. —AFP

them, including doctored images and videos circulated online. It has led to blasphemy accusations—a hugely sensitive issue in Pakistan where allegations have previously led mobs to attack people.

The organisers of the annual rally have called for the prime minister to intervene.

In his weekend TV appearance, Khan also blamed divorce rates in Britain on the "sex, drugs and rock and roll" culture that began in the 1970s, when the twice-divorced Khan was gaining a reputation in London as a playboy. —AFP

Malaysia's Najib faces bankruptcy over \$400m tax bill

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's scandal-plagued former prime minister Najib Razak is facing bankruptcy for allegedly failing to pay more than \$400 million in taxes, which could bring his political career to an end. Najib lost power in 2018 when his party, which had governed the Southeast Asian nation for six decades, was defeated at the polls after he became embroiled in a financial scandal.

The leader and his cronies were accused of stealing billions of dollars from state investment fund IMDB, and he has since been convicted and sentenced to 12 years in jail in the first of several trials he is facing over the fraud. Last year, a court ordered Najib—who remains free on bail and

is still an MP—to pay 1.69 billion ringgit (\$409 million) in taxes owed between 2011 and 2017.

Late Tuesday, Najib said that tax officials issued a notice demanding he settle the bill, plus additional costs, otherwise they will launch bankruptcy proceedings. If he is declared bankrupt, the ex-premier will lose his seat in parliament and be barred from standing in elections.

The 67-year-old insisted he had always paid his taxes, and that the case against him is politically motivated. "I will continue to stand up and fight against every attempt to bully and intimidate me by those in power," he wrote on Facebook, adding he had asked his lawyers to try to get the proceedings halted. The tax office declined to comment.

The prospect of bankruptcy comes as different factions battle for control of Najib's party, the United Malays National Organization, of which he remains an influential member. Despite his involvement in the IMDB scandal, Najib is still a popular figure, with more than four million Facebook followers. He began an appeal against



KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's former prime minister Najib Razak (center) arrives at the court of appeal in Putrajaya. —AFP

his conviction over the IMDB scandal last year. He denies any wrongdoing. —AFP

China sentences Uyghur ex-govt officials to death

BEIJING: Two Uyghur former government officials in China's Xinjiang have been handed death sentences for carrying out "separatist activities", a court said, as Beijing comes under increasing fire for its actions towards minority groups in the region. Shirzat Bawudun, a former head of the Xinjiang department of justice has been sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve on the charge of "splitting the country", according to a statement released Tuesday on the Xinjiang government website.

Bawudun had conspired with a terrorist organization, taken bribes, and carried out separatist activities, Wang Langtao, vice president of the Xinjiang Higher People's Court, said at a press conference. Bawudun was found guilty of colluding with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) — listed as a "terrorist" group by the United Nations—after meeting a key member of the group in 2003, according to state news agency Xinhua. The US removed the group from its list of terror groups last November, saying there was "no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist."

Bawudun also illegally proved "information to foreign forces" as well as carrying out "illegal religious activities at his daughter's wedding", Xinhua said. The court statement said Sattar Sawut—former director of the Xinjiang education department—was also sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve after being found guilty of crimes of separatism and taking bribes.

Sawut was found guilty of incorporating ethnic separatism, violence, terrorism, and religious extremism content into textbooks in the Uyghur language, officials said. The court said the textbooks had influenced several people to participate in attacks in the capital Urumqi including riots that resulted in at least 200 deaths in 2009. Others became "key members of a separatist group" headed by former college teacher Ilham Tohti—a Uyghur economist jailed for life on separatism charges in 2014. Rights groups believe at least one million Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim minorities have been incarcerated in camps across Xinjiang. The United States says "genocide" has been inflicted on the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the region, while Beijing has denied all allegations of abuses and has insisted its policies in Xinjiang are necessary to counter violent extremism. —AFP

International

Biden: All adults in US eligible for COVID vaccine by April 19

California set June 15 target to fully reopen businesses

WASHINGTON: All adults across America will be eligible for COVID-19 vaccines within two weeks, President Joe Biden announced Tuesday, as economic powerhouse California set a June 15 target to fully reopen businesses. The positive news from the United States—which has reported the most coronavirus deaths of any country but is now a leader in vaccine distribution—contrasted with a record daily toll in Brazil and Europe's troubled rollout of the AstraZeneca shot.

Biden announced in a White House speech that he is moving up the deadline for all over 18s to be eligible for vaccines to April 19. The previous target had been May 1. "Our vaccine program is in overdrive. We're making it easier to get a vaccination shot," Biden told the nation. "We're the first country to administer 150 million shots and the first country to fully vaccinate over 62 million people." Biden's April 19 deadline means ending restrictions by age, health issues or other categories for people wanting to get vaccinated. It would not necessarily mean that anyone could get a shot immediately, as distribution remains a work in progress.

Visiting a vaccination site in Virginia earlier, Biden said that while the worst of the pandemic is "not over yet," vaccines mean it soon could be.

California to reopen

The news comes as California Governor Gavin Newsom said the state will fully reopen by June 15 if the current rate of vaccinations continues, lifting all COVID-related restrictions on businesses and gatherings. "We'll be getting rid of the blueprint, as you know it today. That's on June 15 if we continue the good work," said Newsom, adding that mask-wearing requirements would remain.

Some 556,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, by far the highest toll reported in any country. On Tuesday the Johns Hopkins University tracker reported 68,643 new confirmed cases and 1,105 deaths, as con-



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden delivers remarks on a vaccination update from the State Dining Room at the White House on Tuesday. — AFP

cern grows that people may be letting down their guard. The International Monetary Fund meanwhile said accelerated vaccines and a flood of government stimulus spending, especially in the United States, meant it now predicts global economic growth this year of 6 percent, up from a forecast of 5.5 percent in January. This would be a swift reversal of the 3.3 percent contraction in 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—the worst peacetime downturn since the Great Depression nearly a century ago.

Focus on vaccines

The pandemic has now killed more than 2.8 million people worldwide, upended economies and lifestyles everywhere and put huge pressure on health care systems. And on a global scale it has not yet abated, despite more than 660 million shots having been administered worldwide. In an annual report yesterday Amnesty International said that richer countries are failing a "rudimentary" test of global solidarity by hoarding

COVID vaccines, "leaving countries with the fewest resources to face the worst health and human rights outcomes." Hard-hit Brazil registered 4,195 deaths from the virus Tuesday, in the deadliest day of the pandemic yet for a country whose total reported toll is now nearly 337,000, second only to the United States. Elsewhere in Latin America, Argentina notched a record high new daily cases with 20,870 infections, and across the border in Chile a coronavirus surge forced President Sebastian Pinera to postpone an election to choose a commission to rewrite the country's constitution.

Meanwhile India, a vaccine-producing powerhouse, is struggling to contain a record surge in daily infections. New Delhi on Tuesday imposed an immediate nighttime curfew, and financial hub Mumbai imposed similar measures. A rare breakthrough in reopening international travel occurred however when Australia and New Zealand—both largely free of the coronavirus—announced a two-way, quarantine-free travel corridor starting April 18. — AFP

Descendants of Sudan Jews hope to connect with Israel

KHARTOUM: In a corner of a shabby central Khartoum neighborhood, Hebrew-lettered gravestones jut up from a rubble-strewn plot, remnants of the small but vibrant Jewish community that once lived in Sudan. The cemetery stood for years as a reminder of an oft-overlooked chapter in Sudan's history, but for decades it has been neglected, abandoned among cracked streets littered with trash and lined by tire shops.

"All we have from Sudan's Jewish community is this run-down cemetery, some old photos and memories," pharmacist Mansour Israil told AFP. The grandson of an Iraqi Jew who settled in Sudan, Israil, whose family later converted to Islam, still lives in a neighborhood once known as "the Jewish quarter" in Omdurman, the capital's twin city across the Nile river.

The Jewish community in Sudan was already one of the smallest in the Middle East, and it dwindled in the latter half of the 20th century, as tensions surrounding the 1948 creation of Israel permeated the region. In Sudan, like elsewhere in the Arab world, local Jews bore the brunt of growing anti-Israel sentiment.

"The hearts of many in Sudan changed," said 75-year-old Israil, who watched his lively, diverse neighborhood transform, and his Jewish friends leave Sudan.

Now, decades later, Israil and other descendants of Sudanese Jews see a recent rapprochement between their country and Israel as an opportunity to connect with their origins. Last year, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco agreed to normalize ties with the Jewish state under the US-brokered "Abraham Accords". It was a U-turn on longstanding policy after the 1967 Six-Day War between Arab countries and Israel that saw the Jewish state occupy swaths of territory. Arab leaders gathered in Khartoum after the defeat, announcing a resolution that became known as the "three nos": no peace, no recognition and no negotiations with Israel. At the time, Israil said, he got "threatening phone calls because of my family name". "Imagine how it was for the Jews."

Descendants' hopes

Pressure on the community had already mounted since the 1956 Suez crisis, when Britain, France and Israel invaded Egypt to regain control over the strategic canal, said Daisy Abboudi, a British historian and descendant of a Jewish Sudanese family. While Sudan had by then gained independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule, its politics remained closely tied to its northern neighbor.

Djibouti president Guelleh set to clinch fifth term

NAIROBI, Kenya: Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh is expected to extend his two-decade rule of the tiny Horn of Africa nation as the country heads to the polls Friday.

Guelleh, 73, is facing political newcomer Zakaria Ismail Farah, his only rival after traditional opposition parties decided to boycott the election. A businessman specialized in the importation of cleaning products, Farah, 56, is seen by observers as unlikely to pose a significant challenge to the strongman who has been in power for 22 years. Djibouti is a largely desert country strategically situated on one of the world's busiest trade routes and at the crossroads between Africa and the Arabian peninsula, a short distance from war-torn Yemen.

Under Guelleh, the country has exploited this geo-



KHARTOUM: Amin Israil (bottom), the grandson of an Iraqi Jew who settled in Sudan and whose family later converted to Islam, his daughter Salma (left), and Yosar Basha (right), another Sudanese woman descended of Jewish origins, pose for a photo together at Israil's home during an interview. — AFP

Sudan's Jewish community, made up of no more than 250 families at its zenith in the 1940s and 50s, had virtually disappeared by the late 1970s, according to Abboudi, who is also deputy director of UK-based Jewish oral history project Sephardi Voices. Jewish communities in other Arab states, including Egypt, Morocco and Iraq, had suffered similar fates from the late 1940s.

"It was much more subtle in Sudan compared to anywhere else in the Middle East... but community members started to feel very uncomfortable and realized maybe there is no future" in the country, Abboudi told AFP. Some of Sudan's Jewish families resettled in Israel, as did some of the remains in Khartoum's Jewish cemetery, which were airlifted to Jerusalem and reburied in the 1970s, she said. Sudan maintained a rigid anti-Israel stance during the three-decade Islamist rule of former president Omar al-Bashir, who was ousted amid mass protests in April 2019. But six months after the Sudan-Israel deal was announced, the cabinet in Khartoum on Tuesday approved a bill abolishing a 1958 boycott of the Jewish state.

A post-Bashir transitional government has been pushing for re-integration with the international community and to rebuild the country's economy after decades of US sanctions and internal conflict. Sudan agreed to normalise ties with Israel in October in a quiet-pro-quo for Washington removing the country from its "state sponsors of terrorism" blacklist months later. For Salma, Israil's niece who lives in Wad Madani, south of Khartoum, the move was "long overdue". "Normalisation will make it easier to reconnect with my origins," said the 35-year-old, who has sought to learn more about her Jewish roots and the bygone community. — AFP

graphical advantage, investing heavily in ports and logistics infrastructure. At the same time the country has seen an erosion of press freedom and a crackdown on dissent. "Little by little, there has been a hardening of the regime since 1999," said Sonia Le Gouellec, a political scientist who authored a book on Djibouti.

"The more it has opened to the world, the more it has closed internally." Guelleh's predicted fifth term will be his last, under a 2010 constitutional reform



Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh reacts. — AFP

News in brief

Mexican election campaign from coffin

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico: A Mexican congressional candidate launched his election campaign in a coffin Tuesday to highlight the country's many thousands of deaths from the coronavirus pandemic and cartel-related violence. Carlos Mayorga, a lower house candidate for the Encuentro Solidario party in the northern state of Chihuahua, said he was sending a message to politicians that people were dying "because of their indifference." Mayorga arrived inside a gold-colored casket at a campaign rally on a bridge between the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez and El Paso, Texas. — AFP

Brazil prostitutes strike for jobs

BELO HORIZONTE, Brazil: Prostitutes in the city of Belo Horizonte in southeast Brazil have gone on strike for a week, demanding to be included in the group of front-line workers receiving priority coronavirus vaccines. Thousands of sex workers in the city have been forced by pandemic-related closure of hotels—where they rented rooms to sell their services—to solicit for clients on the street, they say. "We are in the front line, moving the economy and we are at risk," Cida Vieira, president of the Association of Prostitutes of Minas Gerais state, told AFP. "We need to get vaccinated." — AFP

Chile president postpones election

SANTIAGO, Chile: Chile's President Sebastian Pinera enacted a law Tuesday to postpone by five weeks an election to choose a commission to rewrite the country's dictatorship-era constitution, amid a surge in coronavirus infections. The vote was to have taken place on Sunday, but Pinera proposed that it be delayed, and received the backing of parliament. "We did not think it prudent or convenient to hold elections this coming weekend," Pinera said as he signed the bill in Santiago. The election to decide the members of a Constituent Assembly who will rewrite the constitution—which has been in effect since the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-90)—will now take place on May 15 or 16. — AFP

Brazil's daily COVID toll crosses 4,000

BRASÍLIA, Brazil: Brazil registered more than 4,000 COVID-19 deaths in 24 hours for the first time Tuesday, the health ministry said, as the country reeled from a surge of infections that has made it the current epicenter of the pandemic. The coronavirus claimed 4,195 lives in the deadliest day of the pandemic yet for the hard-hit country, whose total reported death toll is now nearly 337,000, second only to the United States. Brazil's health system is buckling under the strain of the latest virus wave, which has forced doctors into agonizing decisions over which patients to give life-saving care and led cemeteries to hold nighttime burials to deal with the crush of coffins. — AFP

16 dead as buses collide in Mexico

MEXICO CITY: A collision on Tuesday between two buses carrying workers at a mine in northern Mexico left 16 people dead and 14 injured, authorities said. The pre-dawn crash happened on a road leading to the entrance of the mine in the state of Sonora, the region's attorney general's office said in a statement. The workers who died were traveling in a mini-bus while those injured were being transported in a larger bus and were taken to hospital for treatment. All of victims were Mexican, the statement said. — AFP

which scrapped term limits while also introducing an age limit of 75 which would lock him out of future elections. Djibouti's election campaign came as the country saw COVID-19 infection rates soar by 38 percent in the past week, with some 200 cases a day in the country of almost one million people.

The rate of positive tests is 23 percent. Nevertheless thousands turned out for rallies for the ruling Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP), many without wearing masks.

Farah—who had to renounce his dual French citizenship to join the race—held a few small rallies before cancelling the rest in the 10 days leading up to the polls. He complained that he was not offered security services for his rallies. The challenger, who has styled himself as the "flag bearer of poor Djiboutians", appeared with his wrists bound and mouth taped last month at one of his rallies to protest "unequal treatment". In 2020 Guelleh faced an unusual wave of opposition protests, which were brutally suppressed, after the arrest of an air force pilot who had denounced clan-based discrimination and corruption. And police broke up several spontaneous small protests against Guelleh's fifth term in the run-up to the election. — AFP



A Yemeni worker helps as an excavator (background) digs graves for COVID-19 victims at a cemetery in Yemen's third city of Ta'izz amid a surge in cases of coronavirus that the war-torn country is badly equipped to combat. — AFP

Yemen gravediggers, bulldozer join forces against COVID

TA'IZZ, Yemen: Between the mountain ranges of Ta'izz, dozens of fresh graves are being hastily dug in Yemen's third city to deal with a spike in deaths from COVID-linked complications. Groups of men, most of them wearing neither masks nor gloves, carry caskets to Al-Saeed cemetery and its row upon row of new graves.

At the same time a truck arrives, carrying mourners—along with more bodies. People are struggling to bury their dead in the southwestern city amid a surge in cases of coronavirus that the war-torn country is badly equipped to combat. Besieged for years by Houthi rebels and their snipers, the gravediggers of Ta'izz are under constant threat and cannot work fast enough.

Health measures, such as wearing surgical rubber gloves to bury COVID-19 victims, are not a priority here. "We are receiving nine or 10 bodies a day," Shaban Qaed, a cemetery official, said.

"We brought in people from the marketplace to dig with us but still haven't been able to keep up with demand for new graves, and we've had to hire a bulldozer." Men in traditional costume gathered around the last freshly-dug graves on Saturday for a funeral procession, with the rumble of a bulldozer at work in the background. In other parts of the cemetery, women in black sat near the graves, reading from the Koran holy book. The United Nations says the number of new COVID-19 infections in the impoverished country has more than doubled in past weeks.

'Lot of neglect'

The Saudi-supported government—embroiled in a six-year war with the Iran-backed Houthi rebels—has so far recorded more than 4,900 cases, among them close to 1,000 deaths. But with inadequate testing facilities, delays in seeking treatment and difficult access to health centers, the UN says the official numbers fall far short of reality. Yemen's health care system has been crippled, in what the UN says is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. "Why is there no government move to stop the spread of the pandemic?" read one sign held by Ta'izz residents staging a protest at the cemetery. "There's a lot of neglect and shortcomings on the part of the government, which is not performing its role," protester Ahmed al-Bukari told AFP.

"There were some measures during the first wave of the virus but still not up to standard," he said. "For the second wave, which is more severe, authorities in Ta'izz are not living up to their responsibility to protect people." Yemen received a first shipment of COVID-19 vaccines last week, after its coronavirus committee warned of a public health "emergency" and called for a partial curfew. — AFP

International

'It's the tone': Palau president explains his China mistrust

Whipps says Palau will not be bullied by anyone into deciding its future

HONG KONG: He leads one of the world's smallest nations, but Surangel Whipps says Palau will not be bullied by anyone into deciding its future—least of all by China. Whipps, 52, became Palau's president after last year defeating an opponent who favored closer ties with Beijing. The Pacific nation of around 21,000 people is one of just 15 countries that still recognize Taiwan over China, something Whipps is adamant will not change under his watch despite Beijing's pressure campaign. "If we were the last man standing we should be because Taiwan has been with us from the beginning," he told AFP via video call this week after returning from a trip to Taipei, where the two allies set up a coronavirus travel bubble for tourists.

Authoritarian China claims democratic, self-ruled Taiwan as its own territory and has vowed to one day seize it, by force if needed. Beijing has whittled down Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies using a mixture of

carrots and sticks. In 2019, it had two successes in the Pacific, persuading the Solomons and Kiribati to switch sides. Only Palau, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu remain.

Whipps has emerged as the most vocally China-skeptical leader in the Pacific, something he says is forged from both Beijing's more aggressive stance under President Xi Jinping, and his own interactions with Chinese officials. "I've had meetings with them and the first thing they said to me before, on a phone call, was 'What you're doing is illegal, recognizing Taiwan is illegal. You need to stop it,'" he recalled. "You know, that's the tone they use," he added. "We shouldn't be told we can't be friends with so and so."

Whipps said he would often receive calls on his mobile from Chinese officials in the run-up to last year's elections. "It would ring for like 16 times," he said. "After the elections, I have not taken their calls."

China tourist ban

Beijing has largely opted for the diplomatic stick when it comes to Palau recently. Located around 900 kilometers (600 miles) east of the Philippines, Palau saw explosive growth in the number of Chinese tourists in the early half of the last decade. But in 2017, China suddenly banned package tours, a common move to apply economic stress. That decision, Whipps believes, backfired because it heightened Palauan awareness of Chinese pressure. "That's just an example of how it's kind of bait," he said, summarizing the Chinese position as: "You do this for me, then we expect this and this."

That skepticism is music to Washington's ears as it tries to shore up alliances in the Pacific to counter Beijing's growing regional clout. Palau was one of a group of Pacific islands administered by the United States in the aftermath of World War Two.

It became independent in 1994 but maintains close links with Washington. Like other nearby Pacific nations, it has a 50-year defense agreement with the United States known as the Compact of Free Association (COFA). US forces are under Japanese pressure to draw down their massive bases in Okinawa and are looking to diversify across the Pacific. Last year, then-defense secretary Mark Esper became the first Pentagon chief to visit Palau. Whipps says he is keen to see more US military bases, something he hopes will make his nation less reliant on tourism.

"I think there's an opportunity for everybody to gain from this," he said. A key battlefield during World War Two, Palau forms part of the "second island chain" that US military strategists see as key obstacles to China dominating the Pacific. "The Japanese back then saw the strategic importance, and I think it still remains today," Whipps said. While Whipps has spent most of his life in Palau, he was born in Baltimore, studied in the United States and speaks with an American-tinged accent. —AFP



KOROR, Palau: This file photo taken on April 1, 2021 shows Palau's President Surangel Whipps (right) greeting tourists (left) from Taiwan during their arrival in Koror after Taiwan and Palau launched a rare holiday travel bubble. — AFP

Seoul voters go to polls after abuse scandal

SEOUL: Voters in Seoul went to the polls yesterday to pick a successor to the mayor of South Korea's capital, who took his own life following allegations of sexual abuse. South Korea's ruling Democratic party picked a woman candidate to defend his seat, but several of its top figures have lined up to defend late mayor Park Won-soon. Female MPs have also privately denigrated Park's accuser, in what campaigners say shows how low a priority the progressive party of President Moon Jae-in — who has called himself a feminist — puts on women's rights.

A similar by-election was also being held in the country's second city Busan, after its Democratic mayor was also accused of harassment and resigned. Following Park's death in July, when he left a handwritten apology on his desk, Seoul's Democrat-controlled city administration held an official five-day mourning ceremony.

But in January, the National Human Rights Commission confirmed he had committed sexual misconduct, and his victim told reporters last month: "If the (next) mayor is elected from the party that hurt me, I fear that I will not be able to return" to normal life. Party figures who have defended Park include Lim Jong-seok, Moon's former chief of staff. Kwon Soohyun, president of Korea Women's Political Solidarity, told AFP: "These people have absolutely no interest when it comes to gender issues and women's rights."

"This problem will not get fixed simply by having a woman candidate for the by-election." With around a fifth of South Korea's population living in Seoul, the vote is seen as a significant barometer of public opinion ahead of a presidential election next year. Democrat candidate Park Young-sun, 61, a former journalist and four-term parliamentarian who has pushed for a 50 percent female legislature, had a mountain to climb as the polls opened.

The latest surveys from last week showed her around 20 points behind Oh Se-hoon of the conservative opposition People Power Party. The capital's soaring property prices have been a key issue in the election, with many young citizens despairing of ever being able to afford a home of their own, exacerbated by a corruption scandal at the state housing developer. Analysts say voters have been disillusioned by the current administration, which came to power following peaceful candlelight protests that led to the impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye for graft.

Many of the party's senior figures also played key roles in South Korea's democracy movement under military rule. The current administration carries a "special moral responsibility" because it was born out of "a critical juncture moment for South Korean democracy", Aram Hur, a political science professor at the University of Missouri told a forum organized by Stanford. — AFP



SEOUL: A woman casts a ballot for the Seoul mayoral by-election at a polling station in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

'Suddenly we heard people scream: Flood!' Horror in Indonesia

ADONARA, Indonesia: Homeless, injured, and with his daughter dead, Sugeng stares blankly as he comes to grips with the devastation left by floods and landslides on Indonesia's Adonara island. The 60-year-old was asleep with his family on Sunday night as torrential rain battered the community at the eastern end of the vast archipelago nation. In seconds, their lives changed forever. "Suddenly we heard people scream 'flood!'" said Sugeng, who like many Indonesians goes by one name. He and his wife fled their home, but their 20-year-old daughter Indri did not make it out alive and her body was later found on a beach.

"She was trying to hold on to a cupboard but the current was so strong that she lost her grip," Sugeng said. "We buried my daughter yesterday... I'm devastated." Adonara island, home to about 125,000 people, was among the areas hardest hit by the floods and landslides that killed more than 150 in Indonesia and neighboring East Timor. The disaster was triggered by heavy rain and wind from one of the region's most destructive cyclones



Damaged homes after a flash flood in Waiwerang village, East Flores. At least 157 people have been killed in Indonesia and neighboring East Timor with dozens more still missing after a tropical cyclone battered the Southeast Asian nations. — AFP

Two Chinese mine workers kidnapped in southwest Nigeria

LAGOS: Gunmen have kidnapped two Chinese workers from a gold-mining site in southwest Nigeria and shot their security guards, police said yesterday, in the latest such incident in the area.

Kidnapping for ransom used to be common in Nigeria's oil-producing south but has lately spread to other parts of the country. The victims are usually released after a ransom is paid although police rarely confirm if money changes hands. The latest abduction occurred on Monday at Okepa/Itikan village in Osun state, police spokeswoman Yemisi Opalola said in a statement.

She said "a gang of criminals, at about 4 pm., attacked and abducted two Chinese nationals." "The two men, namely: Zhao Jian, 33, and Wen, 50, were working at a mining site," she said. The gunmen shot and wounded two private guards attached to the foreigners, and they had been hospitalized, the spokeswoman said. "The police are on the trail of the perpetrators of the crime." Chinese firms are working in Nigeria on multi-billion-dollar infrastructure projects that include mining, railways, airports and roads. Their workers have been repeatedly targeted by kidnap gangs. —ADFP

in years, which ripped across a cluster of islands in the neighboring Southeast Asian nations. Far-flung Adonara, dotted with beaches and a volcano, is accessible only by boat. It has no local hospital. More than 50 residents were killed and a dozen were still missing yesterday.

'Thundering noise'

Indonesia's disaster agency said it is trying to airlift the injured in helicopters to a city and provide shelter for those left homeless. Among the evacuees was Elisabet Lena Huki, 61, who took refuge at a local government office with her husband, elderly parents, children and grandchildren. She was coming back from an Easter mass on the predominantly Catholic island when tragedy struck. "We had rushed home from church because my elderly parents were there," she said. "Suddenly I heard a thundering noise... and I screamed to my sleeping husband that there was a flood."

Her neighbors sobbed in fear as chaos struck, while Huki's family searched frantically around their waterlogged home for her nephew Yeremias. "He's still missing," she sobbed, remembering the 33-year-old she thinks of as a son. "I want him to be found, even if it's just his body... so we can lay him to rest and visit his grave. That's my only hope now."

With just the clothes on their backs, Huki and her extended family also have to think about their own survival in the weeks ahead. "I need diapers for my elderly parents but the stores are closed," she said. —AFP

Australia blames EU supply issues for slow vaccine rollout

SYDNEY: Australia's prime minister yesterday blamed restricted vaccine supply from Europe for his country's halting coronavirus inoculation efforts, as he faced growing public frustration over the sluggish rollout. Scott Morrison said vaccine shortages and "strict export controls" introduced by the European Commission meant Australia received just 700,000 of a contracted 3.8 million doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.

His government, which received global praise for successfully containing Australia's coronavirus outbreak, has fallen far behind its vaccine rollout schedule. It had initially pledged to administer four million doses by the end of March, but had instead managed about 920,000 shots by yesterday—drawing increasing criticism that Morrison tried to address at a hastily organized press conference. "3.1 million vaccines didn't arrive in Australia—that's just a simple fact," he said. "It's not a dispute. It's not a conflict. It's not an argument. It's not a clash. It's just a simple fact."

Australia has received around 870,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, which it is administering



This handout photo taken and released by Dawei Watch yesterday shows protesters taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Dawei. — AFP

Myanmar group compiles junta rights abuse dossier

YANGON: A group representing Myanmar's ousted civilian government said yesterday it has gathered 180,000 pieces of evidence showing rights abuses by the junta including torture and extrajudicial killings. The country has been in turmoil since the army deposed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1, with nearly 600 people killed in a crackdown on anti-coup protests. The Committee for Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) — a group of MPs from Suu Kyi's party—said its lawyers would meet UN investigators to discuss alleged atrocities committed by the junta.

"CRPH has received 180,000 items of evidence. This evidence shows widespread abuses of human rights by the military," the group said in a statement. They include more than 540 extrajudicial executions, 10 deaths of prisoners in custody, torture, illegal detentions and disproportionate use of force against peaceful protesters, the statement said. Demonstrations calling for the return of democracy and the release of Suu Kyi from detention have rocked Myanmar almost daily since the coup. Civil servants, doctors and other key workers have downed tools as part of a civil disobedience movement aimed at preventing the military from running the country.

In response, the security forces have used rubber bullets and live rounds to break up rallies and detained thousands of activists, some in night raids. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a local monitoring group, says 581 civilians have been killed in the crackdown and more than 2,700 arrested.

Nearly 50 of the dead were children. With many protest supporters and NLD activists now in hiding to escape arrest, the junta is increasingly taking their family members hostage, according to AAPP.

UN meeting

International powers have voiced anger and dismay at the junta's brutal approach, and imposed sanctions on key officials. But while the UN Security Council has condemned civilian deaths, it has stopped short of considering sanctions. Both China and Russia have come out against sanctions, arguing they risked making the situation worse. And so far, the diplomatic pressure appears to be having little effect, as deaths and detentions continue every day. The CRPH, which claims the right to speak for the country instead of the junta, said its lawyers are to meet the UN's Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar yesterday.

"This meeting is intended to discuss the modalities of dialogue and cooperation between Myanmar (acting through CRPH) and the IIMM in relation to the atrocities committed by the military," the statement said, without giving details of when and where the meeting would take place. Rights group Amnesty International last month reported that the junta was using battlefield weapons on unarmed protesters and carrying out premeditated killings orchestrated by their commanding officers. —AFP

to frontline workers. Authorities had been counting on imported and locally made AstraZeneca shots to cover most of the population. But trouble surfaced last month when Italy blocked the export of 250,000 AstraZeneca doses as it struggled to cope with a severe coronavirus crisis at home—a delay Morrison's government insisted would not affect its overall vaccine rollout plan.

'Our ticket back to normal'

A wider debate across Europe on whether to export vaccines when EU countries are struggling to contain the virus has also held up supplies. Morrison said yesterday he had been reassured by statements from EU officials overnight that AstraZeneca export requests were being processed. He said he was also still awaiting an EU response to an urgent request for one million of Australia's AstraZeneca doses to be diverted to neighboring Papua New Guinea, which is facing a worrying COVID-19 surge. Early in the pandemic, Morrison boasted that Australia would be "at the front of the queue" for vaccines after a slew of deals with AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Novavax.

But public frustration over the actual rollout has prompted angry exchanges last week between the Morrison government and state officials tasked with administering the program. "Scott Morrison needs to stop pretending like there's no rush. Vaccinations are our ticket back to normal—the government needs to get a move on," opposition leader Anthony Albanese said. —AFP

Business

THURSDAY, APRIL 8, 2021

Riyadh gears up for foreign firms

Companies seeking state contracts must have Mideast HQs in kingdom by 2024

RIYADH: Dangling off sun-dappled skyscrapers, construction workers put finishing touches to a long-delayed financial district in Riyadh that is taking center-stage as competition heats up with Dubai to attract foreign firms. The King Abdullah Financial District (KAFD), a multibillion-dollar project announced in 2006, is gearing up to "launch" in the coming months, formally declaring it open for business, multiple sources told AFP.

The mammoth development in the heart of Riyadh is preparing to capitalize on a government ultimatum to foreign firms - those seeking state contracts in the biggest Arab economy must have their Middle East headquarters in the kingdom by 2024. The ultimatum issued in February is seen as a direct challenge to Dubai - a Gulf city that has long ruled as the region's business hub - and comes as Saudi Arabia scrambles for investment to diversify the oil-reliant economy.

Central to that effort is KAFD, a 1.6-million-square-metre (over 17-million-square-foot) development filled with glass skyscrapers, a tree-lined walkway designed to resemble a riverbed and a mosque shaped like a desert rose. "It's a sleeping giant getting ready to wake up," a consultant close to the project told AFP. Billed as a special economic zone, the project is going all out to lure tenants.

KAFD will offer companies incentives, such as zero percent corporate tax for 50 years, a 10-year waiver from the state's "Saudization" policy to reserve jobs for Saudis and "preferential" treatment in government contracts, according to a document seen by AFP. The incentives shared confidentially with several companies are subject to change closer to the launch, consultants privy to internal discussions say.

White elephant

Long dismissed as a white elephant, the project has been beset by construction delays and cost overruns. But after lying dormant for many years, construction cranes hovering over the site - which

stands out in Riyadh's relatively low-slung skyline - have been feverishly active in recent months. On top of the undisclosed billions already spent on KAFD over the past decade, the kingdom's Public Investment Fund signed construction contracts worth eight billion riyals (\$2.13 billion) earlier this year, two sources close to the project said.

They said the PIF, which owns the project, expects to see "high demand" when it is ready. KAFD's management declined a request for comment. Saudi Arabia is looking to bring up to 500 international companies to Riyadh after the February ultimatum, local media reported, with many expected to be based in KAFD.

By contrast, Dubai managed to attract around 140 headquarters in three decades, the highest in the Middle East. Indian hotel startup Oyo and venture capital firm 500 Startups told AFP they were setting up their regional headquarters in KAFD. Meanwhile, some Saudi firms, such as banking giant Samba, have already begun operating from KAFD.

But finding long-term tenants to fill the massive project remains a struggle. A public document outlining Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform plan acknowledged that KAFD was planned "without consideration of its economic feasibility", and "even achieving decent occupancy rates will be very challenging".

'Arm twisting'

The push to get the project off the ground comes amid a slow pace of foreign investment, a struggle that last week prompted Prince Mohammed to press the largest local firms to cut their dividends and invest in the economy. Some Western executives privately criticize the Saudi ultimatum as "arm twisting". "But if the choice is job or no job, people will go," a Dubai-based finance executive said.

With a population of 34 million, Saudi Arabia offers the region's biggest market and lucrative contracts in various megaprojects worth hundreds of billions of dollars. "The Saudi ultimatum is a two-



RIYADH: This photo taken on March 16, 2021 shows workers in the King Abdullah Financial District (KAFD) of the Saudi capital. —AFP

level game: Vendors to the government and consumer-focused companies," said Sam Blatteis, co-founder of the Dubai-based Middle East High Tech Business Council, which advises dozens of global firms exploring expanding in Saudi Arabia. "The new rule raises the stakes for the first. The jury is out for the second," Blatteis told AFP.

The kingdom is aggressively playing catch-up with Dubai in terms of lifestyle, allowing once-forbidden cinemas, concerts and sporting extravaganzas. "When European executives are asked, 'When are you moving your headquarters to Saudi?' a

common retort is, 'When will you allow alcohol?'" a Gulf-based diplomat told AFP. "The Saudi response is, 'It will gradually happen'."

Saudi officials have publicly ruled out lifting its absolute ban on alcohol. They also publicly play down talk of rivalry with Dubai. But in closed-door meetings with consultants, they are dismissive of the city. "Dubai was built on our (Saudi) shortcomings," one consultant told AFP, citing a Saudi royal. "Those days when executives could work in Saudi for five days and fly home to Dubai for the weekend are over." —AFP

Top researcher resigns from Google AI team

NEW YORK: Google on Tuesday confirmed a leader of its artificial intelligence team has resigned in a departure that comes after the controversial firing of two colleagues. The internet giant declined to comment further on the resignation of Samy Bengio, who has worked at Google about four years and specialized in machine learning.

"While I am looking forward to my next challenge, there's no doubt that leaving this wonderful team is really difficult," Bengio wrote in a work email first cited by Bloomberg. Bengio did not refer to Timnit Gebru or Margaret Mitchell, two former members of the team focused on ethical artificial intelligence.

Google in February fired Mitchell, a lead researcher, following controversy last year over the tech giant's dismissal of Gebru, an outspoken diversity advocate. Bengio expressed solidarity with Gebru in a message shared on Facebook that remained up on Tuesday.

"I have always been and will remain a strong supporter of her scientific work to make sure that AI becomes a positive force for the minoritized, as well as her generosity and tireless actions to lift the voices of the silenced ones," Bengio said of Gebru in the post. Mitchell had downloaded and shared company documents, according to a Google statement earlier this year to Axios, which reported that it was an effort to show discrimination in the treatment of Gebru, who was fired last year.

In December, more than 1,400 Google employees demanded that the company explain why it dismissed Gebru. "It is sad to see this happening to the one director in the research org who was doing the right thing," Gebru said of Bengio on Twitter.

Mitchell used Twitter to thank Bengio for supporting her and Gebru, and providing them an inclusive environment. "But once you 'see' sexism and racism, staying at an organization that stands by it becomes untenable," Mitchell said in a tweet, predicting more members of her former team at Google would quit. "There is keen interest in responsible/ethical AI outside of Google, so people we worked with have a lot of options." —AFP

Geneva watch expo goes digital before switch

GENEVA: Geneva's international expo of fine watches opened yesterday with an online 2021 edition before shifting next week to Shanghai, where the coronavirus is under control. The fair, one of the major annual gatherings for luxury watchmakers,

Samsung, LG forecast 40% leaps in Q1 operating profits

SEOUL: South Korea's two biggest electronics firms both forecast jumps of around 40 percent in their first-quarter operating profits yesterday, with coronavirus-driven working from home fuelling global demand for semiconductors and home appliances. Tech behemoth Samsung Electronics said in an earnings estimate that it expected operating profit of 9.3 trillion won (\$8.3 billion) for January to March, up 44.2 percent from a year earlier, largely driven by robust sales of smartphones and the launch of its flagship Galaxy S21 series.

Meanwhile, LG Electronics, South Korea's second-largest appliance firm after Samsung, forecast a 39.2 percent jump in operating profit for the same period, to 1.5 trillion won. "Both quarterly revenue and operating profit are the highest in the company's history," it said in a statement.

The Samsung figures were ahead of expectations, said Gloria Tsuen, Vice President at Moody's Investors Service, telling AFP that "tight supplies in the semiconductor segment, especially DRAM", among others, had helped the firm's performance.

Deliveroo shares rise on first full trading day

LONDON: Deliveroo shares rose yesterday on the take-away app's first full trading day, in contrast to last week's London stock market launch when they crashed after being snubbed by institutional investors. Deliveroo shares gained 2.7 percent to 287.65 pence, giving the group a market value of £5.3 billion (\$7.3 billion, 6.2 billion euros), as small investors joined in the trading.

It coincided with a number of Deliveroo riders striking over pay and conditions across a handful of English cities. "The start of unconditional trading in Deliveroo-recast as Flopperoo in some quarters after its disastrous market debut-at least hasn't led to more pain for the business,"

Analyst forecasts had averaged 8.88 trillion won according to Bloomberg News. Samsung Electronics is the flagship subsidiary of the giant Samsung group, by far the largest of the family-controlled empires known as chaebols that dominate business in South Korea, the world's 12th-largest economy.

It is crucial to the country's economic health-the conglomerate's overall turnover is equivalent to a fifth of the national gross domestic product. The coronavirus has wreaked havoc on the world economy, with lockdowns and travel bans imposed around the globe for several months.

But the pandemic-which has killed more than 2.8 million people worldwide-has also seen many tech companies boom. The worldwide move to working from home has seen consumer demand rise for devices powered by Samsung's chips, as well as home appliances such as TVs and washing machines.

Its estimated sales for the period were up 17.5 percent year-on-year to 65 trillion won. Analysts say the company has had a particular boost from rolling out its Galaxy S21 series in January, more than a month ahead of the flagship product's usual annual launch schedule. "Key to the success of this latest flagship has been its lower \$799 starting price," tracker Counterpoint Research said in a report.

"Lower cost coupled with trade-in offers that essentially make the S21 device free, is helping increase demand for these 'entry-level' flagships." But Samsung shares closed down 0.47 percent.

The global chip-manufacturing industry had been expecting to see record revenue this year, with the stay-at-home economy persisting, according to Taipei-

noted AJ Bell financial analyst Danni Hewson. "A strike by riders though will keep the takeaways platform in the spotlight for the wrong reasons on Wednesday." Deliveroo's initial public offering on March 31 was London's biggest stock market launch for a decade, valuing the group at £7.6 billion, after the eight-year-old company enjoyed surging sales during the coronavirus pandemic as locked-down people ordered in.

But its IPO of 390 pence failed spectacularly, with the group losing 26 percent of its value on its first conditional trading day. The group faced criticism from some institutional investors over the treatment of self-employed riders. Deliveroo maintains that its riders-around 100,000 across 800 cities worldwide-value the flexibility the job affords.

However, its business model has come under scrutiny, including in Britain, France and Spain, over conditions. Group founder and chief executive Will Shu has also been criticized for adopting a dual class share structure that gives him 20 votes per share compared



SEOUL: A man steps down the stairs in front of an advertisement for the Samsung Galaxy S21 smartphone at the company's showroom in Seoul yesterday. —AFP

based market tracker TrendForce. But power outages across Texas in the United States-caused by a severe winter storm-shut down semiconductor factories clustered around Austin in February, including Samsung's.

The firm said operations at its factory returned to almost normal in late March, but South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported it may suffer around 400 billion won (\$357 million) in losses due to the shutdown. Still, Hi Investment and Securities in Seoul said Samsung's first-quarter performance will greatly benefit from its mobile business, backed by solid shipments and cost control. The tech giant is expected to have produced around 62 million smartphones in January-March, with a market share of 18.1 percent, according to TrendForce. —AFP



A Deliveroo rider cycles through central London. —AFP

with one vote per share for all other stockholders. Deliveroo made a portion of its stock available for customers, with delivery riders and restaurant partners also able to participate. —AFP

said in opening remarks, stressing that holding the expo online was "the right thing to do".

Expert debates streamed live on the platform will include discussions on the lasting consequences of the pandemic, the role of new materials and technology and the impact that blockchain could have on watchmaking. The watch industry is Switzerland's third-largest export sector. It has been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis, with boutiques closing due to restrictions to control the spread of the virus, and the collapse of the tourism industry on which the luxury sector depends.

In 2020, Swiss watch exports fell by 21.8 percent

to 17 billion Swiss francs (\$18.6 billion) compared with the previous year, according to figures from the watchmaking federation. Exports plunged by 81.3 percent in April 2020 before gradually recovering from August onwards. China remained the only growth market among major destinations for Swiss watchmakers, with exports up 20 percent, while Chinese consumer purchases have shifted to local stores due to travel restrictions. While Europe struggles to tame the pandemic, the salon's online edition, running until April 13, will feature 38 different brands. The physical version in Shanghai, from April 14 to 18, will feature 19 brands. —AFP

Business

Boursa Kuwait, MEIRA host webinar on new era of digital transformation

IR webinar entitled 'Responding to the New Digital IR Era'

KUWAIT: Boursa Kuwait collaborated with the Middle East Investor Relations Association (MEIRA) and its Kuwait Chapter to organize an Investor Relations (IR) webinar as part of their constant efforts to develop the ever-expanding investor relations field, aiming to increase transparency - considered the backbone of the IR industry - in communications with current and prospective investors, locally and around the world.

Entitled 'Responding to the new digital IR era', the webinar, which was held on April 5, highlighted the new era of digital transformation and its impact on IR and approach to virtual investor communications. The webinar was attended by more than 70 IR practitioners from companies listed on Boursa Kuwait and aimed to educate participants on internationally recognized standards and practices to help them maintain strong and transparent relationships with the investment community.

Keynote speakers

The keynote speakers of the webinar were Khalidoun Al-Tabtabaie, the CEO of Kuwait Clearing Company - the central registrar, depository and clearing house for Boursa Kuwait which plays a pivotal role in all market development plans - and Michael Chojnacki, co-founder and Managing Director of Closir, a financial technology (fintech) IR platform focused on helping companies from emerging and frontier markets to directly access global institutional investors. Both speakers offered insights into the new possibilities that digitization offers in enhancing IR.

Mohammed Abdal, head of the MEIRA Kuwait Chapter and Chief Communications Officer at Zain Group also participated in the discussion and shared his experience

from an issuer perspective. The webinar was moderated by Dalal Al-Dousari, MEIRA Board Member and Investor Relations Deputy General Manager at Gulf Bank Kuwait.

Both keynote speakers highlighted the latest digital transformation in the services provided to investors including e-Annual General Meetings, e-dividends and virtual

and their shareholders in order to enhance investors' experience," he said.

"Technology sits at the core of this business strategy. We strive to continuously provide value to our clients by investing in the best-in-class technology and infrastructure. We have an ambitious plan to digitally transform our services by 2023 and we are keen to continue on the development path

making, increased transparency and considerable investor engagement, which will enhance organizations' competitiveness in global capital markets.

Chojnacki commented on the effect of the pandemic on digital trends, stating, "COVID-19 has accelerated some of the digital trends that have been emerging in our industry over the last decade. At the forefront of these trends is the opportunity to reach a global investor audience without leaving your office. To make the most of this opportunity, companies have taken a more strategic and tailored approach to target and engage with this audience."

Collaboration with Boursa Kuwait

The collaboration between Boursa Kuwait and MEIRA is part of the Education pillar of Boursa Kuwait's Corporate Sustainability strategy and is an example of its endeavors to raise financial literacy and capital market awareness among current and prospective investors. The bourse has launched several initiatives to empower and equip businesses and investors with the ability to capture market opportunities as well as transform the Kuwaiti capital market into a robust capital market ecosystem and Kuwait into an attractive investment destination.

Fahad Al-Besher, Director of Investor Relations at Boursa Kuwait commented on the rise and growing significance of eAGMs in particular and the digitization of the IR function as a whole, saying, "Virtual AGMs have been gaining traction in the region as a more efficient and cost-effective way to hold annual shareholder meetings. As a more accessible means of communicating with shareholders across the world, we are confident that eAGMs will become a norm in the future."



Khalidoun Al-Tabtabaie



Fahad Al-Besher



Michael Chojnacki

communications. Tips were offered on how to leverage world-class IR practices to drive rapid growth and realize long-term goals, as well as examining the role of IR in value creation through its supportive role in strategic planning in cooperation with the Board of Directors and Executive Management.

Al-Tabtabaie touched on the ambitious Kuwait Clearing Company transformation strategy, in cooperation with Boursa Kuwait and the Capital Markets Authority, that led to the successful upgrade of Kuwait in the world's leading market indices.

"Our strategy has always focused on developing market infrastructure to make it more attractive to investors. This entails providing added value services to issuers

we've started in order to achieve service efficiency and availability," Al-Tabtabaie added.

"Over the past few years, we have managed to successfully launch a number of digital services, including e-dividends, IPO Kuwait, e-AGMs and e-voting. These new services triggered investors' satisfaction and they bode well for our long-term vision. We continue to listen to investors and issuers, doing our best to cater to their needs by utilizing our market experience and the technology we've invested in." The speakers also explored how businesses can leverage the possibilities of new technologies by embracing digital transformation and the adoption of digital tools and processes, which can lead to improved efficiency and decision-



This picture shows a general view of the headquarters building of Japanese industrial group Toshiba in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

Toshiba to weigh buyout offer from UK fund

TOKYO: Toshiba is considering a buyout offer from a British private equity fund, it said yesterday, with reports suggesting the deal could be worth about \$20 billion. Trading of Toshiba shares was halted on Tokyo's stock exchange at the open, after the Japanese firm confirmed the offer in a statement.

Toshiba said it "received an initial proposal yesterday" by CVC Capital Partners for a buyout. "We will request detailed information and carefully discuss" the offer, the firm added. The Nikkei newspaper said CVC was considering a 30 percent premium over the Japanese industrial group's current share price, valuing the deal at nearly 2.3 trillion yen (\$20.8 billion) based on Tuesday's close.

The financial daily said CVC would consider recruiting other investors to participate in the buyout. CVC declined to comment on the matter. The proposal would take Toshiba private, with delisting intended to produce faster decision-making by Toshiba's management, which has clashed with shareholders recently,

reports said. The move, if successful, would allow the firm to concentrate resources on renewable energies and other core businesses, the reports added.

The two firms are not strangers-Toshiba's CEO and President Nobuaki Kurumatani was head of CVC's Japanese operations between 2017 and 2018, before he took the top job at the conglomerate. And a senior executive at CVC Japan is currently an outside director on Toshiba's board.

Kurumatani told reporters that "we received the proposal but we'll discuss it in a board meeting". Reports suggested the discussions would begin on Wednesday, though Toshiba did not immediately specify. Toshiba has been hit by false accounting scandals and huge losses linked to its US nuclear unit. It was forced to sell its profit-making chip business to make up for huge losses. Following painful restructuring, its earnings rebounded and the company in January returned to the prestigious first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange. Justin Tang, head of Asian research at United First Partners, said CVC's representation on Toshiba's board meant the fund was already "familiar with Toshiba's assets as well as its inner workings". "Given the turbulence in Toshiba, the favorable interest-rate environment and supportive investors, the situation is right up CVC's alley with their expertise in restructuring and turnarounds," he said. "They will, however, have their work cut out for them in regards to regulatory approvals," Tang warned.—AFP

Secretary Janet Yellen said she would push for an agreement among the advanced economies in the G20.

"Together, we can use a global minimum tax to make sure the global economy thrives based on a more level playing field in the taxation of multinational corporations," Yellen said on Monday. The idea is to ensure companies pay a minimum amount of tax regardless of where they are located, preventing firms from evading taxes by establishing headquarters in countries with lower rates-a practice prevalent among tech companies which drains resources from government coffers.

'Great step forward'

The United States lowered its corporate tax rate in 2017 under former president Donald Trump. But President Joe Biden last week proposed raising the rate again to finance a massive \$2 trillion infrastructure and jobs plan. However, Yellen has said it would be best to couple a US rate increase with the establishment of a global minimum tax to end the "race to the bottom" among countries to see who implements the

New small business coalition targets Amazon on antitrust

SAN FRANCISCO: A new coalition of small business groups on Tuesday launched a campaign for tougher US antitrust enforcement, specifically calling for the breakup of online commerce titan Amazon. The Small Business Rising group includes the American Booksellers Association, National Grocers Association and a number of local and regional business organizations.

The coalition website said its goal is to "stop tech monopolies, such as Amazon, from cornering the online market by breaking them up and regulating them." The move comes amid a growing backlash against large technology firms which have dominated key economic sectors and seen their influence grow during the pandemic. The new small business group said it supported the conclusions of a recent US congressional report highlighting the power of tech platforms and calling for tougher antitrust enforcement and new legislation to make it easier to dismantle some firms.

"By restoring competitive markets, we can unlock the potential of Americans to grow successful businesses and build an economy that is more prosperous, equitable and innovative," the group said.

It specifically named Amazon, saying the company's "stranglehold over online commerce is one of the top threats facing independent businesses." The group said the congressional investigation "found that Amazon has exploited its gatekeeper power over online shopping traffic to impose exorbitant fees, demand oppressive terms and extract valuable data from independent manufacturers and retailers that depend on its platform." Amazon pushed back at the claim that it stifles competition, arguing in a statement that "self-serving critics are pushing misguided interventions in the free market that would kill off independent retailers and punish consumers." A company statement said that "Amazon empowered small and medium-sized businesses to generate hundreds of billions of dollars in sales last year, and their sales are growing significantly faster than Amazon's first-party sales."

'Not a level playing field'

Danny Caine, owner of the independent Raven Book Store in Lawrence, Kansas, said Amazon was "writing the rules of the game, and they're playing the game at the same time."

lowest rate.

Washington's allies welcomed the US push, with French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire telling AFP "a global agreement on international taxation is now within reach" and called on countries to "seize this historic opportunity." German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz called Yellen's announcement a "great step forward" in the battle to stem the erosion of government revenues.

"The support of the USA gives this initiative a strong tailwind," Scholz said, adding he hoped a deal could be reached this year. The European Commission expressed a similar sentiment, with spokesman Daniel Ferrie saying the bloc called on "all global partners to remain engaged in these discussions and to continue the work without delay."

How high?

The IMF joined in on Tuesday, with the fund's chief economist Gita Gopinath saying "We are very much in favor of a global minimum corporate tax." Speaking at the start of the spring meetings of the IMF and World

Bank, she underscored the "large amount" of tax avoidance and "countries sending money to tax havens." "That's reducing the tax base on which governments can collect revenues and do the necessary social and economic spending that's required."

The international reform would be comprised of two components: the minimum tax rate and the establishment of a system to modulate corporate taxes based on profits in each country, regardless of where they are headquartered-which would likely impact tech giants the most.

Biden singled out the US technology and e-commerce giant Amazon last week for avoiding federal income taxes as he proposed to boost the US corporate tax rate to 28 percent. Chief executive Jeff Bezos said Tuesday that the company supports the proposal as part of a "balanced solution that maintains or enhances US competitiveness" and one that makes "bold investments in American infrastructure." No official global minimum tax rate on corporations has been decided, but estimates range between 12.5 percent and 21 percent. — AFP



In this file photo taken on March 04, 2021 an 'amazon fresh' logo is pictured above the entrance to Amazon's new Amazon Fresh store in Ealing, west London. A new coalition of small business groups Tuesday launched a campaign for tougher US antitrust enforcement, specifically calling for the breakup of online commerce titan Amazon. — AFP

Global minimum tax for corporations inches towards reality

WASHINGTON: Proposed by the United States, supported by the IMF and welcomed by major economies including France and Germany, a global minimum tax rate on corporations is gathering momentum toward becoming a reality. The reform aimed at ending tax competition between countries and the use of tax havens by companies will be on the agenda of G20 finance ministers when they meet virtually on Wednesday, and the group could unveil a proposal by July.

The idea has been promoted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development but received a fresh boost this week when US Treasury

Business

NBK Economic Report

Rapid vaccine rollout in UAE to underpin its economic recovery

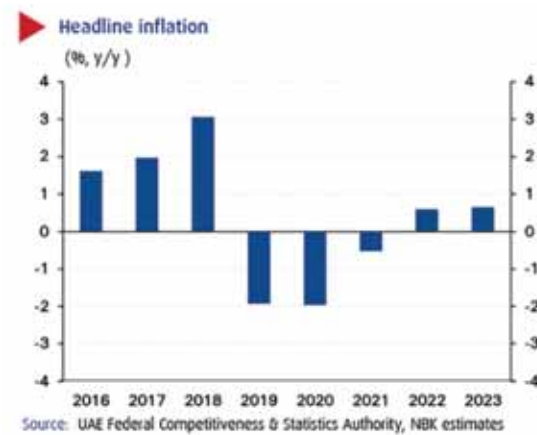
UAE's economic activity is estimated to have declined by 6.6% in 2020

KUWAIT: The United Arab Emirates' economic activity is estimated to have declined by 6.6 percent in 2020, reflecting a drop in both non-oil GDP (roughly 70 percent of total GDP) by -5.1 percent on COVID-19 fallout and the oil sector by -8.5 percent due to OPEC+ production cuts. Total GDP contracted in H20 by 3.9 percent y/y as non-oil GDP fell by 6.0 percent, at a time where movement restrictions and health-related closures were more prevalent, hurting the hospitality, transportation, and wholesale and retail trade sectors (about 30 percent of GDP). The UAE has done extremely well on vaccinations, standing among the best worldwide performers while avoiding strict closures and curfews. Vaccination deployment, with more than half of the population (52 percent) covered by mid-March, boosts reopening and reduces pressures on key sectors. As such, the recovery in 2021 could come from a rebound in the tourism and hospitality sector, although the extent of this recovery hinges on global recovery.

Non-oil GDP is expected to grow 3.3 percent in 2021 and 3.5 percent over the medium term, on average, benefiting from Expo 2020 and the recovery in global demand. Oil GDP could decline 2.9 percent in 2021 as oil production is expected to reach 2.7 mb/d due to the OPEC+ agreement. In the medium term, oil GDP could grow by 5 percent as output cuts are eased and refining capacity are expanded (Ruwais and Jebel Ali refinery upgrades and BPGIC's Phase 3), adding about 1.2 mb/d to refining capacity.

Recovery and loose monetary policy

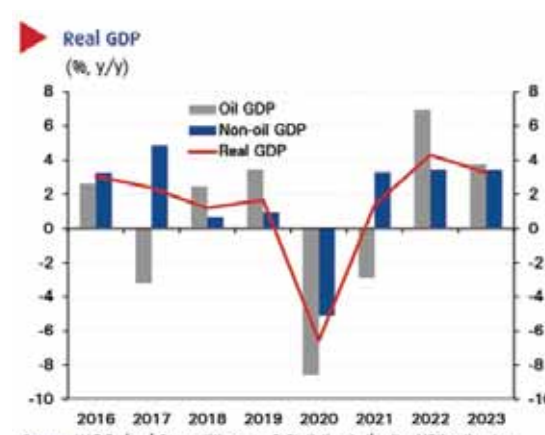
Monetary policy is expected to remain accommodative over 2021-23 in tandem with Fed policy, giv-



Source: UAE Federal Competitiveness & Statistics Authority, NBK estimates

en the Dirham peg to the US dollar. This should also help a return to positive growth for private sector credit of 3.5 percent in 2021, after a decline of 2.2 percent in 2020. Total domestic credit is expected to grow by around 4.0 percent over the medium term, supported by credit demand from government-related firms, the stabilization in the real estate market, and the broader recovery in the non-oil sector.

With modest increase in demand in 2021 and possible further decline in expat population and with it a fall in rents (34 percent weight in CPI basket), consumer price inflation could remain slightly negative (-0.5 percent), compared with -2.1 percent in 2020. The fall in housing rents could start bottoming out this year, then gradually pick-up in 2022-23 as real estate oversupply issues ease. Inflation is projected to hover around 1



Source: UAE Federal Competitiveness & Statistics Authority, NBK estimates

percent over the medium term.

Fiscal and external balances

Large government stimulus packages with lower oil prices pushed the fiscal deficit to an estimated 7.1 percent of GDP in 2020. The fiscal and monetary support worth a combined 18 percent of GDP have helped in alleviating some of the pressures on the economy. Some of these measures aimed at reducing business costs through lowering/waiving fees, as well as supporting SMEs. The deficit, still reasonable by regional standards, should narrow to 3.3 percent of GDP in 2021 as spending is expected to fall across emirates by at least 5 percent on lower budgeted outlays by both federal and local governments. Based on a recovery in oil prices to \$60/bbl, the deficit could

record a small surplus of 1 percent of GDP by 2022. Benefiting from low interest rates globally and a strong credit standing, UAE issued more debt in 2020 than before to finance the fiscal deficit. Abu Dhabi had the lion's share at \$15.1 billion benefiting from its extremely strong credit profile, while the Emirates of Dubai and Sharjah also issued around \$2.0 billion. Yields for these bonds ranged from 0.75 percent to 4.0 percent with maturities from 3-50 years. Yet, the public debt to GDP (excl. GREs) remains relatively low at estimated 38 percent, and is susceptible to decline in 2022-23 as the government benefits from expected oil prices and higher growth with the fiscal position returning to surplus in 2022-23. These same factors and expected pick up in external demand could lead to a recovery in tourism and should return the external current account to balance in 2021 and surplus in the following two years, after registering a deficit of -2.8 percent of GDP in 2020.

Positive outlook though uncertain

The UAE's status as an international hub for trade, travel and tourism mean that it would stand to benefit from a rapid global economic recovery. A successful Expo 2020 along with continued policy agility that responds to developments in a timely manner could have a lasting positive impact on the economy and increase its resilience. On the downside, a possible reversal of US monetary policy sooner than expected due to inflation concerns in addition to slow global growth along with renewed weakness in oil prices and lingering government-related entity contingent liabilities could hinder growth prospects.

NBK offers 15% cashback on purchases from all coop societies

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen to provide exceptional rewards to its customers all year round. In this context, the bank announces providing an exclusively unique shopping experience for NBK customers during the holy month of Ramadan, in cooperation with the Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies (UCCS), when shopping at the coop societies all over Kuwait.



Hisham Al-Nusif



Fahad Al-Keshty

In the campaign scheduled from 1st of April to 15th of May, customers will get a 15 percent cashback on their purchases from coop societies when using digital payment solutions (Samsung Pay, Garmin Pay & Fitbit Pay), and 5 percent cashback when using eligible NBK credit/prepaid cards.

On this occasion, Hisham Al-Nusif, Deputy General Manager of Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait, said: "We congratulate our customers with the approaching holy month of Ramadan. At NBK, we always care to share moments with our customers all year round by providing exclusive rewards

that suit their needs." Al-Nusif praised the cooperation with UCCS, affirming that NBK strives to harness all its capabilities and its strong relationships with leading institutions to provide exceptional services and offers to the bank's customers.

"We are rewarding our customers for their use of eligible digital payment solutions and credit/prepaid cards, as part of our efforts to keep them safe and promote the use of NBK's cutting-edge digital payment solutions," he added. Al-Nusif emphasized that NBK is committed to organize outstanding campaigns for the bank's customers from eligible NBK Credit/Prepaid Cardholders all over the year, which contribute to offer them a unique lifestyle matching their expectations and meeting their needs.

On his part, Fahad Al-Keshty, the UCCS Chairman said: "We congratulate the people of Kuwait as we are approaching the holy month of Ramadan, and express our pleasure with cooperation with a leading institution of NBK's stature, and contributing to provide the bank's customers with a special shopping experience."

Al-Keshty emphasized that coop societies are always ready to meet all consumers' needs during Ramadan and to provide special offers commensurate with this occasion. Customers wishing to participate in this campaign can register through NBK official website, and spend a minimum of KD 400 on total purchases made during the campaign period, and each customer will receive a cashback up to KD 100, KD 50 for each payment method, respectively. NBK Credit Cards are the best and convenient method to make payments and give customers access to many benefits, especially when using their credit card in shopping, including NBK Rewards Program, NBK Miles Program, NBK Secure Shopping, extended warranty, just to name a few.

plete control of their mobile plans and digital worlds, and makes it easier to buy, manage, share and pay for Ooredoo digital services directly from their mobile phones. ANA gives customers the freedom to pick and choose what they want in their plans. Customers can either choose from the ANA bundles, or they can customize and build their own plan - choose minutes, internet and other features that best suit your needs. Customers can do it all through the My Ooredoo App with a few taps, and Ooredoo will deliver their ANA SIM to their doorstep for free.

Naser Al-Abdullah, Manager, Advertising and Marketing Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "As part of our constant endeavor to strengthen the relationship between us and our customers, we make sure to efficiently and relentlessly communicate with our customers, gauge their expectations and then mirror and respond appropriately. Thus, we are committed to providing our customers with ongoing contests, offers, and rewards that fulfill their desires and goes in line with their lifestyle."

"At Ooredoo Kuwait, we aspire to create a passionate community of customers who are eager for more and cannot wait to see our upcoming products, services, and rewards" Al-Abdullah added.



MC20 wins 'Best of the Best' at Red Dot Awards - Product Design 2021

MODENA: The new Maserati MC20 receives the prize for "Best of the Best" at the Red Dot Awards 2021 in the Product Design category. The Red Dot Awards is an international design competition run by Design Zentrum Nordrhein Westfalen in Germany, which has been assessing and selecting the most aesthetically exciting, functional, intelligent, innovative products from all over the world since 1955.



Every year, this prestigious competition rewards excellence in the field of product and brand design and communication at the global level, with criteria constantly updated to the socio-cultural context. A jury of 50 international experts chooses products in almost fifty different categories, from fashion to accessories and from furnishings to vehicles.

Gulf Bank to announce Al-Danah's first quarterly draw winner of KD 100,000

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank will be conducting its first quarterly Al-Danah account draw of the year on Thursday (April 15, 2021) to announce the lucky winner of the KD 100,000 prize. The quarterly draw will be held in the presence of representatives from both the Ministry of Commerce and from Ernst & Young. Gulf Bank's General Manager of Consumer Banking, Mohammed Al-Qattan, commented: "We are thrilled to reveal the winner of Gulf Bank's Al-Danah quarterly draw, the lucky customer who will receive the KD 100,000 prize. Although this is our first quarterly draw of the year, customers have a chance to win with an Al-Danah account year-round, with draws on a monthly, quarterly and annual basis! I would like to remind and encourage all Gulf Bank customers to save using an Al-Danah account, which they can open and deposit into online through the Gulf Bank app, or by visiting one of our branches."

The Al-Danah account is one of the most rewarding savings accounts in Kuwait, with its periodic draws that award valuable prizes and its many advantages for account holders. Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account offers

Maserati CEO Davide Grasso stated: "Our mission was to develop a car that would be remembered in the future as the model that launched the Maserati New Era. And I think we've achieved our goal with MC20. Maserati is innovative by nature, powered by passion and unique by design: the new super sports car embodies all these values and is a watershed, the founding model of this new phase in the Brand's history." Klaus Busse, Head of Maserati Design, added: "We are honored to receive this coveted accolade, which recognizes the work of an entire team who have worked hard on this unique project, creating a car that opens a new chapter in Maserati's history."

MC20, designed by the Centro Stile Maserati in Turin, is a mix of elegance and sporting prowess, a genuine masterpiece of style, which inaugurates a new Era for the Trident Brand. The focus on performance led to the conception of a car with a distinct personality, with refined aerodynamics and unmistakable lines that render it unique. The new super sports car represents the pure form of speed, with Maserati style: a work of sculptural engineering, showing the way to the Brand's aesthetic future.

MC20 is innovative by nature, and every design detail is functional: the butterfly doors are not only stunningly beautiful, but they also improve the car's ergonomics and enable optimal access to and from the cabin. Developed by the Maserati Innovation Lab and built at the historic Modena plant, Maserati MC20 is genuinely an all-Italian car.

A car whose superb looks conceal an uncompromisingly sporty soul, with the new 630 hp V6 Nettuno engine that delivers 0 to 100 km/h acceleration in under 2.9 seconds and a top speed over 325 km an hour. The patented engine was conceived, developed, designed and built entirely by Maserati, and uses a pre-chamber combustion technology derived from Formula 1 engines.

Numerous benefits

The Al-Danah account is the only account that rewards customers for their loyalty by providing loyalty chances. Loyalty chances are the total chances gained in the previous year, which are then transferred to the current year to reward customers for their loyalty to the Bank. Accordingly, all chances gained by existing Al-Danah customers in 2020 have been transferred to the 2021 draws, and this will be repeated in 2022 onwards. Terms and conditions apply. It is also worth noting that all account draws are attended by a representative from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, with the quarterly and annual draws also reviewed by Ernst & Young.

Annual grand prize

To increase their chances of winning, account holders must either maintain the minimum deposit amount of KD 200, or increase their Al-Danah savings - the higher the balances in an account, the more chances accumulated over time. Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account holders also have the opportunity to enter and win cash prizes all year long through monthly, quarterly and annual draws.

Ooredoo Kuwait reveals winner of 'ANA Plans' draw

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, with the support of Ministry of Commerce and Industry, has announced the winner of the valuable prize of the "ANA Plans" draw, while taking into consideration all the health guidelines requirements for social distancing and prevention set by the official authorities.

The winner, Amjad Bannoura won an all-expenses paid trip to Maldives for two persons including: flight tickets and accommodation for three nights in a luxury hotel. The ANA Plans Contest started 20 December 2020 until 18 February 2021, as a customer-centered initiative that offers Ooredoo customers the opportunity to win valuable prizes. Ooredoo is the first operator in the State of Kuwait to launch a personalized mobile plan, which provides an all-digital, individually customized mobile product that gives customers com-



Mohammed Al-Qattan

CLINIC PAGE



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Lifestyle | Features

'MRS SRI LANKA' REGAINS TITLE AFTER ON-STAGE FRACAS



In this photograph, winner of Mrs. Sri Lanka 2020 Caroline Jurie (second left) removes the crown of 2021 winner Pushpika de Silva (center) as she is disqualified by the jury over the accusation of being divorced, at a beauty pageant for married women in Colombo. —AFP

A Sri Lankan beauty pageant winner who had her crown yanked off by last year's champion in an ugly on-stage fracas has been re-declared the victor and says she will sue. Pushpika de Silva, who needed hospital treatment after the incident at Sunday's gala, was named "Mrs Sri Lanka" again at a smaller ceremony on Tuesday. "I forgive everyone involved in this incident," an emotional de Silva told reporters on Tuesday. "If anyone thinks they can obstruct me by doing this type of thing, they will not succeed. I am an iron woman." She said, however, that she planned to launch legal action against her alleged attacker, reigning champion Caroline Jurie.

Jurie had forcibly removed de Silva's crown on stage in the climax of the ceremony, saying that de Silva was divorced and therefore ineligible for the prize. To qualify for the title, contestants must be married. De Silva is estranged from her husband, but they are still legally married. Organizers said they were claiming compensation from Jurie for damages to the stage and backstage dressing rooms where several

mirrors were smashed. "We are also holding an inquiry," said the local franchise-holder of the event, Chandimal Jayasinghe. Jurie, who is the reigning "Mrs World", has also been accused by organizers of bringing disrepute to the event. It was broadcast live on social media platforms.

Chandimal Jayasinghe told reporters in Sri Lanka they were "deeply disturbed and sincerely regret" the behavior of Jurie. Social media calls have been mounting to strip Jurie of her "Mrs World" title. There was no immediate comment from her. "She should be stripped of the (Mrs World) title," posted Facebook user Anushka Lovell. "It will teach her about humiliation." "My instinct says Caroline Jurie is not fit for current Mrs World title," posted Rohan Pathirana, another Facebook user. Sri Lankan journalist Munza Mushtaq said on Twitter that the drama was "utterly shameful". "If Mrs World stands for demeaning other women by the reigning Mrs World, then we no longer need men to put down women, because women do it better," she wrote.—AFP

'Men in Black' and 'Ghostbusters' to star in Sony's Thai theme park

"Men in Black" rides and "Jumanji" water slides are some of the star attractions of a theme park being jointly built in Thailand by Sony as the tech giant seeks to broaden its entertainment offerings. The venue near Pattaya—a tourist hotspot in non-pandemic times—will open from October, Sony Pictures Entertainment and Thai amusement-park developer Amazon Falls announced yesterday. It will feature zones and rides based on films produced by Columbia Pictures, which is owned by Sony, including Hollywood favorites "Ghostbusters" and "Bad Boys".

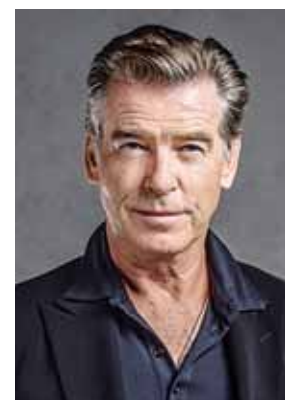
Sony Pictures said the "Columbia Pictures"

"Aquaverse" would be the first amusement park of its kind, but did not announce how much it would cost. Japanese conglomerate Sony has in recent years moved to further diversify from its core technology business, boosting its offerings in the entertainment sector including music and film. "Columbia Pictures' Aquaverse is the next step in Sony Pictures' larger global strategy to grow and expand location-based entertainment by utilizing its strong global film and TV brands," said Sony Pictures executive Jeffrey Godtsick. Sony says it is expecting a record net profit this financial year as virus lockdowns boost demand for games and consoles. —AFP



Pierce Brosnan steals props from film sets

The 67-year-old actor - who played James Bond in four films from 1995 to 2002 - has revealed he's taken numerous copies of well-known paintings that featured in 'The Thomas Crown Affair'. Pierce explained: "One of the best occasions was to see the art going up on the wall. They were all reproductions of Renoirs, Chagall and Picasso. I did take some." The Hollywood star - who was born in Ireland but now lives in the US - revealed that some of the paintings are now hanging in his home in Malibu. He told the 'Talk Art' podcast: "I took a Renoir mother and child painting, a Gauguin red dog, a beautiful Van Gogh which I had in



Malibu of autumn trees." Pierce previously admitted that becoming an actor has been a "liberating" experience for him. He explained: "Once I found the world of acting, I clung to it with all my heart. It was liberating." Pierce enjoyed success as a stage actor, but Pierce always wanted to establish himself in Hollywood. He said: "I always dreamed of the movies. The stage, as exhilarating as it was, I wanted to be up on the silver screen." Pierce enjoyed a big breakthrough in 1993, when he starred alongside Robin Williams and Mara Wilson in 'Mrs. Doubtfire'. Reflecting on making the comedy movie, Pierce shared: "At day's end, you want to look around and hopefully you have a handful of films that you can be proud of participating in. That is definitely one of those movies for me." Pierce also has fond memories of working with the film's late star. He said: "I went into the makeup trailer and there was Robin, sitting in the makeup chair. He had a Hawaiian shirt on and cargo pants, and his hairy arms and hairy legs hanging out. 'He had the head of 'Mrs Doubtfire' and greeted me: 'Oh, Pierce! Oh, you look so handsome, oh, give us a kiss.'"

Allison Janney has no regrets

Allison Janney is "OK" about not getting married or having children. The 61-year-old actress admits she was "never really confident" that she wanted to have kids of her own and would rather regret not having them than regret having children years down the line. She shared: "I think if I would have found the right guy at the right time who wanted to have kids, I probably would have with the right partner because I wasn't ever really confident that I wanted to have kids. I would rather regret not having kids



then have kids and regret that. I'm OK with it." And Allison insists if she doesn't find the one for the rest of her life she will be "fine". Speaking on The Drew Barrymore Show, she added: "I really am this time in my life getting to know who I am and what I want. I'd love to eventually find someone to share my life with but if it doesn't happen, I'll be just fine." Meanwhile, Allison previously revealed she is on the hunt for a mystery man her psychic dubbed 'Hot Pants'. Speaking about her quest for the mystery man, she said: "I don't know about you, but I like to go see psychics... I kind of like it. It's kind of interesting. I went to this psychic and she kept saying she kept seeing this man that was going to come into my life. She said, 'I'm seeing a lot of things, Allison. I see a lot in the bedroom. This man is going to be... I'm seeing a lot of things he's doing to you. I'm gonna call him Hot Pants.' ... This was a couple of months ago, and I still haven't found Hot Pants. But I keep looking for him! And it keeps making me... go do things I wouldn't normally do. Like, I'm going to go get the oil changed in my car because maybe Hot Pants will be there. It's getting me out of my house and, I don't know if that's what she was really trying to do, but I keep doing more things than I usually do."



Keke Palmer 'felt shame about having acne'

The 'Hustlers' star previously revealed that she has suffered with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) - which can cause skin issues, as well as irregular periods, facial hair growth and pregnancy struggles - for many years but was only diagnosed last year. And the 27-year-old star has admitted she felt like she had to wear make-up every day to hide her spots. However, years of covering up her skin only made the problem worse. She told InStyle magazine: "I was constantly hiding myself and felt shame about having acne. "Wearing make-up became a chore because I always had to be 'on' whenever I went in case a fan asked me to take a picture; I didn't have the proper boundaries to say no. So instead of getting to the bottom of my acne and trying to understand it, I was covering it up, trying to be perfect. But you're never going to get to the nitty-gritty of something when you do a lot of covering up." The actress explained how filming the upcoming thriller 'Alice' made her realize it was time to apply the same "energy and confidence" to her skin as she had done with her natural hair. She said: "The movie is so much about standing up for your freedom, and that activated something deep in me. "I started questioning what I could do for myself instead of just popping a birth-control pill to try to control my acne. I wanted to bring the same energy and confidence to my skin that I had already brought to my natural hair when, after it was changed by weaves and wigs, I learned how to protect it." Keke added how important it is for women to be open about their health issues so it's no longer taboo. She said: "I feel most beautiful when I'm being kind and of service to others. "As females, we need to advocate for ourselves, because everything [in society] is kind of a rule-of-thumb by males. But it shouldn't be weird for us to talk about our health issues or demand what we need when we go to the doctor. We make it weird, but it's not really weird - and the more that we talk about it, the less of an issue it will become."

Margot Robbie is 'obsessed' with drinking tea

The 30-year-old movie star has revealed she became a tea fanatic after moving to London from Australia.

Speaking about her morning routine, she shared: "Breakfast is usually porridge, and during the morning I'll have an immunity-boosting smoothie. I'll normally have a chicken salad for lunch, and for dinner I'll tuck into a tuna steak with sweet potato. "Throughout the day, I'll sip on tea - I've been obsessed with it ever since I lived in the UK." Margot now lives in the US and has admitted to being a huge fan of beef burgers and beer. However, when she lived in London, the actress was obsessed with a Mexican restaurant. She told the May issue of Women's Health UK magazine: "Food is a big thing for me. "I love burgers and fries, which I'll order with a pint of beer. In the US, my favourite meal is a double truffle burger from the American chain Umami Burger: it comes with a truffle cheese fondue, truffle aioli and truffle glaze. "But back when I called London home, I loved the Mexican restaurant and bar La Bodega Negra in Soho. Everything I ate there was amazing - and they whip up the best margarita I've ever had anywhere." Margot is currently one of the most sought-after actresses in the movie business, and she's admitted to particularly enjoying her experience of working with Quentin Tarantino. She explained: "When I got the chance to work with Quentin



Tarantino [on 'Once Upon A Time...In Hollywood'] I was so excited." He is one of the all-time great directors - and I wrote him a letter telling him I'd love to be in one of his films. "Once on set, I made sure I soaked up all the knowledge from him that I could. If you want something, ask for it - the worst people can say is no."

Cardi B: Anniversary of my album is like a birthday

Cardi B thinks the anniversary of her album launch is like having another birthday. The 28-year-old rapper marked the three-year anniversary of the release of 'Invasion of Privacy' on Tuesday and celebrated like it was a special occasion. She wrote on Twitter: "Thank you everyone that's been showing 'IOP' love today. It feels like a birthday. (sic)" 'Invasion of Privacy' features tracks such as 'Drip' with Migos, 'Ring' with Kehlani, 'Best Life' with Chance the Rapper and her chart-topping single 'I Like It' with Bad Bunny and J Balvin. Cardi won a Grammy for Best Rap Album and recently set another record, with 'Invasion of Privacy' becoming the first album by a female rapper to spend three full years on the Billboard 200. The 'WAP' hitmaker went on to explain how she still gets emotional when she listens to the album as making it was such a challenging experience. She added: "I get real sweet and bittersweet memories when I listen to the album, I faced many challenges thru the process and after but the outcome was beautiful and successful. Love you forever. (sic)" Cardi also shared a fan-made video congratulating the rap star for three years of the album, which was captioned: "In celebration of 'Invasion of Privacy' turning three, Bardi Gang decided to make a video to congratulate Cardi on the album's success. Congratulations @iamcardib, we love you so much and can't wait for CB2! #3YearsOfIOP (sic)" Cardi replied: "Awwww this is sooo cute...Thank you guys (sic)" Several fans reached out to the musician to celebrate the anniversary. One fan wrote on Twitter: "I am proud of you, dear, Cardi! You are very important to me and to Brazil. We know how much you struggled to be where you arrived. You deserve everything you've been conquering. You're a queen. (sic)" —Bang Showbiz



Ricci agrees custody arrangement with estranged husband Heerdegen

Christina Ricci and her estranged husband have agreed on a custody arrangement for their six-year-old son Freddie. The 'Addams Family' star split from James Heerdegen in July last year, and it has now been confirmed the former couple have agreed on a new custody deal for their son that will allow Christina to take Freddie to Canada with her where she is filming a new movie. According to People magazine, a judge signed off on the papers last week after they were filed in March, and Christina will fly to Vancouver with Freddie later this month. As part of the custody agreement, James is allowed to continue visiting their son through his "regular monitored visitation time" and Christina will pay for his "reasonable costs for travel and accommodations". Christina will also select a hotel for James if he travels to Vancouver to see Freddie, and the cinematographer is entitled to 15-minute FaceTime calls with their son three times per week. The custody arrangement comes just a few months after Christina obtained a restraining order against James after accus-

ing him of being violent towards her for seven years. Christina claimed she was subjected to "severe physical and emotional abuse" by James with "many of these acts of abuse" taking place in front of their son, and a judge ruled James must stay at least 200 yards away from her, their son and their family dog. The 40-year-old actress stated the alleged abuse began in 2013 when she found out she was pregnant and she claimed James has also threatened to "kill" her on multiple occasions. She wrote in a declaration: "I began to feel extremely isolated." She also recalled a family vacation to New Zealand where her spouse "said something that made me think" he "could kill me." She wrote: "He said the only way he could feel sorry for me is if I were dismembered into small pieces." "That night I hid all the knives in the cabin where we were staying. I feared for my life and the life of our son. I slept in a separate bedroom with Freddie, and I locked the door." In a statement at the time, James' attorney said he "unequivocally denies all allegations of abuse made by Ms. Ricci as having occurred in 2020".



Lifestyle | Features

Don't spoil it! **Italians**
celebrate classic carbonara

In this file photo, one of the chefs of the traditional team presents the traditional famous Italian pasta dish "spaghetti alla carbonara", during a preview for the press on April 5, 2019, one day before the international event Carbonara Day (#CarbonaraDay) in Rome.



This file photo shows a traditional famous Italian pasta dish "spaghetti alla carbonara". — AFP photos

Italian gourmets celebrating Tuesday one of the country's classic pasta dishes-carbonara-had a simple message for foreigners: keep it simple, and don't betray the tradition. "The secret to a good carbonara... is more about what you don't put in it, rather than what you put in it," food journalist and carbonara expert Eleonora Cozzella told AFP. She was speaking on the sidelines of the launch in Rome of the "CarbonaraDay," a once-a-year online marathon of carbonara-themed events organized by Italy's pasta-makers' association.

Classic carbonara, typical of Rome and its surrounding Lazio region, is made with eggs, pork cheek (guanciale), pecorino cheese and pepper. Italians get touchy when more ingredients are added to the mix. Earlier this year, a "Smoky Tomato Carbonara" recipe in the New York Times' cooking supplement, which included tomatoes and replaced pork cheek and pecorino with bacon and parmesan, caused an uproar in Italy. Coldiretti, a farmers' lobby, called the US

recipe "a disturbing knockoff of the prestigious dish from Italian popular tradition," and complained that carbonara was "one of the most disfigured Italian recipes".

The dish actually owes its origin to the United States, as it was developed in Rome towards the end of World War II, when invading US soldiers brought bacon to poor and starving Italy. A spokesman for the pasta-makers association, Matteo de Angelis, said even some old Italian recipes for carbonara-from the 1950s-included incongruous ingredients such as garlic and gruyere cheese. Cozzella said she is "never scandalized" by unorthodox variations on carbonara. But she added: "Some versions may be seen as a homage, and other ones more as an insult." "The important thing is never to cross the line that betrays the spirit of the dish. The problem is never tradition versus innovation, but tradition versus betrayal," she concluded. — AFP



In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex (right) and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex leave after attending a Commonwealth Day Service at Westminster Abbey in central London. — AFP

PRINCE HARRY AND MEGHAN'S FIRST NETFLIX SERIES FOLLOWS INVICTUS GAMES

Prince Harry will produce a documentary about the Invictus Games for disabled military veterans-the first series under a lucrative deal he and wife Meghan Markle signed with Netflix after moving to California last year. Harry, who served with the British military in Afghanistan, will appear on camera and executive-produce "Heart of Invictus," a multi-episode series which follows competitors as they train for next spring's competition in The Hague. "This series will give communities around the world a window into the moving and uplifting stories of these competitors on their path to the Netherlands next year," said Harry in a statement.

The program will be the first released by the couple's Archewell Productions, which inked a sprawling deal with streaming giant Netflix last September to produce "impactful" films and series. "As Archewell Productions' first series with Netflix, in partnership with the Invictus Games Foundation, I couldn't be more excited for the journey ahead or prouder of the Invictus community for continuously inspiring global healing, human potential and continued service," said Harry. No financial terms were disclosed, but the deal is reported to be multi-year and exclusive to Netflix.

Multiple other projects rumored to be in development include a nature documentary series and an animated series focused on inspiring women, although former "Suits" star Markle has no plans to return to acting. "The Duke and Duchess of Sussex and the Archewell Productions team are building an ambitious slate that reflects the values and causes they hold dear," said Netflix content chief Ted Sarandos. "From the moment I met them, it's been clear that the Invictus Games hold a very special place in their hearts, and I couldn't be happier that their first series for Netflix will showcase that for the world in a way never seen before."

Harry has previously appeared in Paralympics documentary film "Rising Phoenix," and launched the first Invictus Games back in 2014. The couple first went public together at the Games' September 2017 edition. The Olympics-style sports event taking place in The Hague in the Netherlands was initially scheduled for 2020 but was twice delayed to spring 2022 because of the coronavirus pandemic. As well as following their training, the series will also dive into the competitors' "powerful stories of hope and resilience." The couple quit the British royal family and moved to California last year. —AFP

'NOMADLAND' DIRECTOR ZHAO NOT READY TO MAKE CHINA CHILDHOOD FILM

Chloe Zhao's US road movie "Nomadland" has stoked controversy in China, but it will be "another few years" before the Beijing-born director will dare tackle her childhood roots on screen, she told the Santa Barbara International Film Festival Tuesday. Oscar frontrunner "Nomadland" is the latest of Zhao's films set in the US

about her youth, Zhao said it was "scariest to dig into your own past." "I feel like I would have to think about teenage angst and all that stuff, and back home," she said. "It's going to take another few years. I think I need to mature more, to not be afraid to look at myself."

Telling stories about other people is "safer for me," she added, while paying tribute to the courage of Lee Isaac Chung's childhood-inspired, Korean-American immigrant drama "Minari." "I don't have that courage yet. So I think it's very brave what you did," she told Chung. Zhao, 39, was born to a wealthy Chinese steel company executive, and left China as a teen to attend a British boarding school before finishing her education in Los Angeles and New York. While at film school in New York she stumbled upon images of an Indian reservation in South Dakota, which led to her first film "Songs My Brothers Taught Me."

"I was getting into my late 20s and I felt a bit disconnected to myself, to be honest, and not... able to hear my own voice," said Zhao. "And when that happens, people tend to go west... west of wherever they are, and for me it was going to the heartland. "And I ended up in South Dakota, and really fell in love with the Badlands," she said, referring to a national park in the midwestern state best known for Mount Rushmore. Asked what she most looked forward to doing once the pandemic is over, Zhao said she would like to visit relatives back home. "I miss international travel-I miss going back to China, going home to see my family," she said. "And to eat the food that I can digest." The Santa Barbara International Film Festival runs until Saturday. — AFP



Chloe Zhao

"heartland," and follows van-dwelling Americans left on society's margins by the Great Recession as they roam sparsely populated states like South Dakota and Nebraska. It has already dominated top prizes including the Golden Globes but has faced a backlash in China, after social media users and state media questioned Zhao's loyalty to her birth country.

Some even called her a "traitor" after digging up a years-old interview with Australian media in which she allegedly said "the US is now my country." Asked during a virtual panel with three fellow best director Oscar nominees if she would consider making a film in China or

Russian director pulls film from festival over Navalny nomination

Acclaimed Russian director Andrei Konchalovsky has pulled his latest film from the country's prestigious White Elephants Awards in protest at plans to honor opposition leader Alexei Navalny at the event. In a message on Facebook, the 83-year-old said he had asked that "Dear Comrades!"-nominated for best film and also short-listed for the 93rd Academy Awards-be withdrawn from consideration at the festival, as he did not want it to be judged alongside political work by the jailed Kremlin critic.

He was referring to a decision to hand Navalny and his team an award in the Event of the Year category for their video documentaries on state corruption which have been viewed by millions on YouTube. "This award is one of the most important in Russian cinema for me, as it means recognition of the film's art value from the professional community," Konchalovsky wrote. He denounced the award given to Navalny's "journalistic project that one can consider a political act but can in no way be judged through the lens" of filmmaking.

Navalny, 44, went on hunger strike last week to demand adequate medical treatment at the prison where he is being held. He was arrested on his return to Russia in January, after spending months in Germany recovering from a poisoning last summer that he blames



Director Andrei Konchalovsky

on the Kremlin. Unlike his younger brother, the Oscar-winning director of "Burnt by the Sun", Nikita Mikhalkov, who has always been close to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Konchalovsky has maintained a diplomatic distance from the Kremlin.

Earlier this year, however, he came out in support of a constitutional referendum that could allow Putin to stay in power to 2036. Konchalovsky, who lived in the United States for many years and whose Hollywood movies include "Tango and Cash" and "Runaway Train", settled again in Russia in the 1990s and has often been critical of western culture. — AFP



In this file photo Kim Kardashian speaks with Steve Forbes at the 2017 Forbes Women's Summit at Spring Studios in New York City. — AFP photos

Kim Kardashian is a billionaire, says Forbes

Reality television star, influencer and business owner Kim Kardashian West is officially a billionaire, according to an estimate from Forbes, making her debut on the exclusive global list only one year after her younger sister Kylie Jenner fell off of it. Kardashian West's money comes from TV income and endorsement deals, according to the magazine, as well as her two lifestyle brands. The star saw her wealth jump more than \$200 million just since October, Forbes estimated, from a worth of \$780 million last fall to \$1 billion this spring, only five years after the magazine first reported she had made her first \$51 million.

KKW Beauty was launched in 2017, often releasing cosmetic products in partnership with her four famous sisters that were heavily promoted through social media-Kardashian West alone has 69.7 million Twitter followers and 213 million Instagram followers. By 2018, the company was making about \$100 million in revenue, according to Forbes, which has listed 2,775 billionaires in this year's rankings. The 40-year-old's most recent project, Skims, launched in 2019 to offer underwear and loungewear in the founder's signature minimalist style, a move that proved lucrative during the work-from-home era.

Though the company-of which Kardashian owns a majority stake-has not disclosed revenue figures, Forbes has estimated its worth at more than \$500 million. Jenner, the youngest member of the Kardashian family empire, fell out of the Forbes rankings in 2020 after the maga-



In this file photo Kim Kardashian arrives for the 2018 Met Gala at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

zine claimed the 23-year-old had been inflating the size of her own cosmetic business. She had been named the world's youngest self-made billionaire in 2019 at age 21. The family's hit reality show "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" is set to end this year after a 20-season run, as news also emerged earlier this year that Kardashian West had filed for divorce from rapper Kanye West. — AFP

Suspect arrested over Van Gogh and Hals thefts

Dutch police arrested a 58-year-old man Tuesday on suspicion of stealing two paintings by Vincent van Gogh and Frans Hals from small museums, saying it brought them closer to recovering both masterworks. The man was held at his home in the central town of Baarn over last year's thefts of Van Gogh's 1884 work "Parsonage Garden at Nuenen in Spring", and 17th century painter Hals's "Two Laughing Boys". Police said that they have not yet found either of the paintings-the Van Gogh is valued at up to six million euros (\$6.6 million) — but the arrest was an "important step" in the investigation.

"For months, intensive investigations into the robbery of both paintings were conducted under the leadership of the public prosecution service," a Dutch police statement said. "This has led to the arrest of a 58-year-old suspect from Baarn. He was arrested at his home this morning. The man is suspected of stealing the paintings." The Van Gogh painting was stolen from the Singer Laren Museum near

Amsterdam just over one year ago on March 30, 2020, while it was closed due to coronavirus measures. It is around 10 kilometers (six miles) from Baarn where the suspect was arrested. The "Two Laughing Boys" by Hals was meanwhile taken in August from the Hofje van Mevrouw van Aerden museum in Leerdam.

'Huge success'

Dutch art detective Arthur Brand, dubbed the "Indiana Jones of the Art World" for finding a number of lost paintings, hailed the news of the arrest. "Another huge success for Dutch Police," Brand tweeted. "The plot thickens..." It was Brand who two months after the theft of the Van Gogh received two "proof of life" photos of the painting. The Singer Laren Museum said it hoped the arrest would lead to the recovery of the "beauti-

ful work", which it had on loan from the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands.

"Compliments to the police for their investigative work. Nobody is allowed to break in with impunity," general manager Evert van Os said in a statement. "I sincerely hope that this arrest will lead the police to the painting in the short term... It has now been a year since the break-in took place and every day we hope for this good news." The Hofje van Mevrouw van Aerden said on its Facebook that there was now a "little bit of hope" about getting the Hals painting back. The police statement said that "both paintings have not yet resurfaced with this arrest. The search continues unabated." "This arrest is an important step in the investigation. If you have information and have not yet shared it with the police please do this," it added.—AFP



Van Gogh's 1884 work "Parsonage Garden at Nuenen in Spring".

Embiid leads Sixers romp over Celtics, Curry downs Bucks

LOS ANGELES: Joel Embiid scored 35 points as the Philadelphia 76ers returned to top spot in the Eastern Conference on Tuesday with a 106-96 victory over the Boston Celtics. Cameroonian star Embiid, playing in his second game since returning from a 10-game injury layoff, led from the front as the Sixers overpowered the Celtics in the third and final regular season meeting of the two teams.

Danny Green added 17 points while Ben Simmons had 12. Tobias Harris and Furkan Korkmaz finished with 10 points apiece as the Sixers improved to 35-16 to edge ahead of the Brooklyn Nets in the East. Despite his 35-point display, Embiid believes he is still not firing on all cylinders as he works his way back from injury.

"It's only my second game back," Embiid said. "I'm still working through it to get back to the shape I was in before I got hurt, but I'm feeling great. "The body feels healthy. It's all about me putting game together and getting back to where I was." Embiid however was disgusted with his shooting performance from the free throw line. Despite making 16 of 20 attempts for an 80 percent success rate, Embiid believes it should have been more.

'Too many misses'

"Too many misses," Embiid said. "I should be a 90 percent free throw shooter. That's why I get pissed off — they're called free throws. I should be making more." A disappointing night at the TD Garden for the hosts saw Boston booed by their own fans midway through the third quarter as the Sixers surged into a 21-point lead after a Simmons layup.

Although the Celtics closed the margin to 10 points at the buzzer, the contest was effectively over long before the end. Celtics coach Brad Stevens said his team had paid the price for a lack

of precision. "We were loose with our passes, we took too much of a gamble, too much of a risk and it backfired," Stevens said. "You have to be sure with the ball against them because otherwise they get running in transition. They are big, strong physical guys that take you where they want to go. It puts you in a bind if you're not able to hold your ground individually. They play a physical brand of basketball."

Jayson Tatum led the Boston scorers with 20 points while Jaylen Brown finished with 17 as Marcus Smart and Kemba Walker added 14 apiece. The defeat leaves the Celtics with a 25-26 record for eighth place in the Eastern Conference.

Curry too hot for Bucks

Elsewhere Tuesday, Steph Curry delivered another mesmerising MVP-worthy performance with 41 points as the Golden State Warriors took advantage of the absence of Giannis Antetokounmpo to clinch a 122-121 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks.

Curry went 14-of-21 from the field as the Warriors overturned a 10-point deficit with four minutes remaining to claim victory. "We needed this in the worst way considering how the last 16 or so games have gone," Curry said, referring to the Warriors' dismal recent run of form.

The Dubs had won just four of their 16 previous games heading into Tuesday's home game at the Chase Center, and were battered 130-77 by Toronto last week. "We just needed a win to feel good about ourselves," Curry added. "It gives you confidence and it should help us build our identity. It's big for us as we make a playoff push. It helps some of the younger guys understand what winning is like." The Warriors are 10th in the Western Conference standings, just outside the playoff



BOSTON: Joel Embiid #21 of the Philadelphia 76ers shoots the ball against the Boston Celtics on Tuesday at the TD Garden in Boston, Massachusetts. — AFP

places with 24 wins and 27 losses.

In Tampa, the injury-hit Los Angeles Lakers had seven players in double figures in a 110-101 win over the Toronto Raptors to kick off a daunting five-game road trip with an encouraging victory. Talen Horton-Tucker led the Lakers scoring off the bench with 17 points in just over 25 minutes on court as the NBA champions bounced back from

their humiliating 104-86 rout by the Los Angeles Clippers on Sunday.

"We got embarrassed on Sunday against the Clippers," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said. "We were all on a long flight angry about how that game went. "Our mindset was to take it out on the Raptors and we did, thanks to great ball movement, and an angry, nasty defensive disposition." — AFP

Greek gymnasts allege decades of abuse by coaches

ATHENS: Nearly two dozen Greek gymnasts alleged they suffered decades of abuse and neglect "bordering on torture" at the hands of their coaches, in a letter published yesterday. The letter was sent this week to Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis by 22 female and male athletes, revealed by Greek daily Efsyn. It alleged "harsh and abusive" practices dating back to 1985 included forced fasting, psychological and physical punishment and sexual harassment.

"For the first time, a cry of protest by a large number of gymnastics athletes about psychological and physical abuse is expressed en masse," the athletes' lawyer Alexandros Adamidis told the newspaper. There was no immediate response to the allegations from the gymnastics federation, which in March elected a new chairman for the first time in 14 years.

The letter said coaches would slap, kick, shove and throw objects at athletes during training, even dragging some girls by the hair. On occasion, coaches would remove protective mats, causing injuries. Some of the athletes were forced to train while injured, the letter says. Disciplinary measures allegedly included forcing athletes to train in extreme temperatures and denying them toilet breaks. Because of strict weight requirements, some athletes starved themselves to the point of fainting, and resorted to secretly eating toothpaste and food leftovers scavenged from hotel bins, it said.

Prominent Greek gymnasts have previously accused the federation of failing to ensure proper training facilities. After the Greece's main gymnastics indoor hall at Agios Kosmas, Athens flooded last June, Olympic champion Lefteris Petrounias said the country's squad was forced to train at a disadvantage to other nations. "Every time it rains we are forced to stop training. Our equipment is frequently destroyed," Petrounias said on Facebook, before emergency repairs were ordered.

Earlier this week, after an asymmetric bars frame collapsed during training at the Agios Kosmas facility, Petrounias' coach Dimitris Raftis told Kathimerini daily that no federation official had inspected the hall's gymnastics equipment in years. "We have been saying this for years...but they did not take us seriously because they know how much we love (the sport)," Raftis told the daily.

'Medieval' management

He also noted that rodent droppings had been found in the gymnastics foam pit, calling the previous management "medieval". Petrounias won gold on the rings in Rio in 2016 and Greece also won artistic gymnastics medals in the 2000 and 2004 Olympics.

Greece in recent months has been rocked by a wave of allegations of sexual abuse in the fields of arts, sport and education. More than three years after the #MeToo movement surfaced in the United States, the code of silence in Greece was broken in December by a two-time Olympic sailing medalist, Sofia Bekatorou. Bekatorou said that when she was 21 she was subjected to "sexual harassment and abuse" by a senior federation member in his hotel room, shortly after trials for the 2000 Sydney Olympics. — AFP

Masters field facing supreme test at firm and fast Augusta

AUGUSTA: Augusta National has served a warning to the world's greatest golfers with firm and fast conditions like some have never seen ahead of today's start of the 85th Masters. Five months after Dustin Johnson shattered the course record with a 20-under par 268 in rain-softened conditions, the Masters is back in its typical April setting and serving up lightning-fast greens with firm fairways to roll balls into danger. "With firm greens, this golf course needs to be respected, three-time Masters winner Phil Mickelson said. "And I think it has been a long time since it has had to be respected."

Reigning US Open champion Bryson DeChambeau, whose power-driving game could benefit from long rolls on many holes, says he will focus on his irons into notoriously undulating Augusta greens. "I've never seen it this fast, this quick, this early, but I certainly love the challenge," DeChambeau said. "We had a hole location on 17... if you just got it past the hole, it would roll off the front of the green. Literally it moves a dimple and it's gone."

Man Utd, Arsenal set for Europa League quarters

PARIS: Manchester United head to Spanish surprise package Granada while Arsenal take on Slavia Prague, but Ajax against Roma may be the tie of the round. AFP Sport looks ahead to the Europa League quarter-finals ahead of the first legs tonight

Emery the Europa League expert

Unai Emery won the Europa League in three consecutive years with Sevilla and took Arsenal to the 2019 final. When he was appointed by Villarreal last summer he said he dreamed of winning a trophy with a club that has been one of the most consistent in Spain in the last 15 years, with nine top-five finishes in La Liga. There have been four European semi-finals too, but they have never won a major trophy or reached a final.

With Emery, they are currently sixth in La Liga and have been excellent in Europe, cruising through their group before eliminating Red Bull Salzburg and Dynamo Kiev. Now they face perennial Croatian champions Dinamo Zagreb who are enjoying their best European run since the 1960s after stunning Jose Mourinho's Tottenham Hotspur in the last 16. Croatian international Mislav Orsic is the man to watch after his brilliant hat-trick did for Spurs.

Ajax eyeing another final

On paper this is the tie of round, as the runaway Dutch league leaders welcome visitors from Serie A to Amsterdam for the first leg. Four-time European champions Ajax are enjoying another deep run in continental competition soon after reaching the Europa League final in 2017 and the Champions

Spain's Sergio Garcia, the 2017 Masters winner, makes his 22nd start at Augusta National and he's seen nothing like this. "The greens are probably the fastest and firmest I've seen them on a Monday or Tuesday forever," he said. "If we get lucky and the weather stays nice, it's going to be a challenging Masters. The way it's playing right now, there are some holes, some pin positions... some of them are almost impossible to get to." Storylines abound, with Johnson trying to join Tiger Woods, Nick Faldo and Jack Nicklaus as the only back-to-back Masters winners. "With it firm and fast, it's just a really hard golf course," Johnson said. "Any hole at any time can jump out and get you."

Second-ranked Justin Thomas, who can overtake Johnson for world number one with a victory, comes off a win in last month's Players Championship. The 2017 PGA Championship winner has improved every year he has played. After finishing fourth in last year's Covid-19 delayed event, there's not much room left without a green jacket. "I know I can play this place well," Thomas said. "I feel like it's a place that I'm going to win at some point, at least I hope, and I feel like I can do it multiple times."

Four-time major winner Rory McIlroy will try to complete a career Grand Slam with a Masters victory. "Going to be a huge premium on accuracy, landing your golf ball on your numbers and being precise with your iron play," McIlroy said. "The



AUGUSTA: Phil Mickelson of the United States works on the range during a practice round prior to the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club yesterday in Augusta, Georgia. — AFP

ball is not stopping so you're inevitably going to miss a few greens and scrambling is going to be key, too." Four-time major winner Brooks Koepka is playing after right knee surgery on March 12. He's in pain and will have trouble bending down to retrieve balls from cups. "I don't have that much motion in my knee," he said. "Getting down, it's going to look funny, I know that. But what are you going to do?"

A reduced number of spectators are allowed this week, the first at any major since 2019, and they will return roars to the weekend drama. "Patrons

play such a massive role, the echos, the roars down in the valley," 2015 champion Jordan Spieth said. "Especially come the weekend, it won't take many people for it to feel close enough to normal to be a fantastic event."

Tenth-ranked Patrick Cantlay expects conditions to bring out the roars. "I expect it to get really firm and fast and that's when this golf course shines," Cantlay said. "Everyone loves seeing the chips and putts that seem to trickle out forever and take forever to get to the hole." — AFP

League semi-finals in 2019. Erik ten Hag was in charge two years ago and is still at the helm now with Ajax beating Lille and Young Boys after dropping out of the Champions League in the group stage.

Roma's hopes of qualifying for the Champions League from Serie A have been hit by a slump in form so the opportunity to get there by winning this competition should not be sniffed at. They have already eliminated Braga and Shakhtar Donetsk in the knockout rounds.

Slavia threat for Arsenal

For the second year running Arsenal's poor league form under Mikel Arteta has left them looking to cup competitions for success. FA Cup winners last year, the Gunners' only hope of silverware this season is in the Europa League, and this competition — in which they reached the 2019 final — almost certainly offers their best chance of returning to the Champions League next season.

After winning all six group games and then edging Benfica and Olympiakos, Arsenal can nevertheless not afford to take Slavia Prague lightly. The Czech champions are on a 21-game unbeaten run which includes knocking Leicester City and Rangers out of Europe. The latter tie was marred by accusations by Rangers midfielder Glen Kamara that he was racially abused by Slavia centre-back Ondrej Kudela, who will miss Thursday's game in London with what his club described as "a bruised nose" and "high fever".

Man Utd too strong for Granada?

United shrugged off the disappointment of being knocked out of the Champions League in the group stage to claim impressive wins against Real Sociedad and AC Milan in the Europa League. The Old Trafford side are chasing a first trophy since winning this competition in 2017 and on paper they should be too strong for Granada, even if Anthony Martial is out injured and Eric Bailly has tested



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Norwegian manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer on the pitch after the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Brighton and Hove Albion at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on April 4, 2021. — AFP

positive for COVID-19.

Granada have slumped to ninth in La Liga but have enjoyed a brilliant debut European campaign, notably beating PSV Eindhoven away in the group stage and eliminating Napoli in the last 32 before defeating United boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's old club Molde of Norway in the round of 16. "On Thursday we are going to play one of the most important matches in our history," said Granada coach Diego Martinez, who won the Europa League during his time as an assistant coach to Emery at Sevilla. — AFP

Sports

Vinicius double puts Real Madrid on top against Liverpool in Champions League

MADRID: Vinicius Junior scored twice as Real Madrid made Liverpool pay for more defensive errors on Tuesday, a 3-1 victory putting them in sight of the Champions League semi-finals. Vinicius and Marco Asensio both profited in the first half after darting behind Liverpool's makeshift back-line before a simple move from a throw-in gave Vinicius a simple finish in the second. Mohamed Salah's strike shortly after the interval briefly made it a contest at Valdebebas, with an away goal certainly a significant consolation for Liverpool to take into the second leg at Anfield next week.

But without fans and with a miserable recent record at home, Jurgen Klopp will know his side have it all to do to avoid his team's season becoming solely about scraping into the Premier League's top four. "We didn't play well enough, that's my first concern," said Klopp. "We didn't deserve to win tonight, but the good news is that there is another match. "We are going to fight, 3-1 is not good, but we have a chance."

Except for two spells after half-time and at the finish, when their opponents were holding on to what they had, Liverpool were overpowered by Real Madrid, whose only disappointment might be missing out on a clearer margin ahead of the return in eight days' time.

Before then, they go up against Barcelona on Saturday and this result, their fifth consecutive victory, should be another huge boost to morale going into what will be a crucial fixture in La Liga's title race. "Nothing is close, nothing is won," Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane said. "We are alive in two competitions and we will keep fighting. We will start the second leg like it's 0-0 because it will be another very difficult game."

Madrid were without Sergio Ramos, who

throughout was bellowing at his team from the stands, while Raphael Varane testing positive for Covid-19 on Tuesday morning meant both sides were fielding patched-up back fours. The last time these two clubs met, Ramos dislocated Salah's shoulder and Madrid went on to win their 13th European Cup but Klopp insisted there was no desire for revenge in the minds of his players.

They could have done with some extra fire because Madrid were superior in the first half, more controlled in possession and more aggressive out of it. Liverpool seemed caught between trying to match Madrid's intensity and slowing the game down to gain a foothold.

Kroos runs the show

In the end they did neither, as the openings came early. Luka Modric wanted a penalty after being clipped just outside the box and Trent Alexander-Arnold was beaten too easily by Ferland Mendy, whose cross was headed just wide by Vinicius. The excellent Toni Kroos was given space at the base of midfield to dictate the tempo and it was a pair of arrowed balls forward from the German that put Madrid in charge.

The first he fired between Alexander-Arnold and Nat Phillips for the scampering Vinicius, who did brilliantly to chest the ball beyond his opponents and shoot low into the Liverpool net. Seven minutes later, Kroos did it again, this time with the aid of a badly misguided Alexander-Arnold header, locating Asensio, who lifted over Alisson Becker to leave himself with an open net.

A full stadium would have sent a surge of momentum through Madrid but there was still a simmering buzz, as their substitutes were cheering louder and the players pressed quicker and passed



MADRID: Real Madrid's Brazilian forward Vinicius Junior celebrates after scoring a goal during the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final football match between Real Madrid and Liverpool at the Alfredo di Stefano stadium in Valdebebas in the outskirts of Madrid on Tuesday. — AFP

harder. Liverpool were holding on for half-time but the raging Klopp could not wait, hauling off Naby Keita with three minutes left and sending on Thiago Alcantara in his place.

The break briefly had an effect, Liverpool pulling a goal back five minutes after as Georginio Wijnaldum tore forward and Diogo Jota's shot deflected kindly into the path of Salah, who poked in off the crossbar. For a while, the game was in the balance. Kroos shot over and Sadio Mane almost

finished off a break down the left. Asensio should have finished for Madrid but opted to pass and it was blocked. Yet another Madrid chance was not far away, as Liverpool failed to react to a throw-in down the right and Modric was allowed to drift inside, teeing up Vinicius to sidefoot in a second. Liverpool pushed for another away goal in the final minutes but Madrid were not troubled. It was Spanish cheers that could be heard when the whistle blew. — AFP

Foden hands Man City late advantage against Dortmund

MANCHESTER: Pep Guardiola said Manchester City "felt the pressure" of expectancy in the Champions League as they needed Phil Foden's 90th minute winner to take a slender 2-1 lead from the first leg of their quarter-final tie against Borussia Dortmund on Tuesday. City have now won 27 of their last 28 games in all competitions to remain on course for a historic quadruple of Champions League, Premier League, FA Cup and League Cup.

But they have failed to get beyond the last eight in the Champions League in each of the Guardiola's four previous seasons in charge. "We felt the pressure today, in this competition, at home, not knowing how we would react," said Guardiola. "It's better to win than draw but even at 1-1 we had 90 minutes to do it."

The sides will meet again in Germany on April 14 with the winners facing Bayern Munich or Paris Saint-Germain in the last four. Dortmund are at serious risk of missing out on the Champions League next season after slipping seven points adrift of the top four in the Bundesliga.

However, the visitors started brightly until Emre Can gifted the ball away to Riyad Mahrez and City launched a ruthless counter-attack. De Bruyne, Foden and Mahrez exchanged passes before the Belgian tapped home from close range.

City thought they had a great chance to double their advantage moments later when Rodrigo went down under Can's challenge inside the area and referee Ovidiu Hategan pointed to the penalty spot. Hategan, though, rightly overturned his call on a VAR review in the first of a number of dubious decisions from the Romanian official.

His next big call ruled out a Dortmund goal when he adjudged Jude Bellingham to have fouled Ederson as he dispossessed the Brazilian and tapped into an empty net just before half-time. This time VAR could not intervene as Hategan



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's English midfielder Phil Foden (right) walks off the pitch with Dortmund's Norwegian forward Erling Braut Haaland after the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final football match between Manchester City and Borussia Dortmund at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on Tuesday. —AFP

had blown before Bellingham rolled the ball home. "I definitely think I won the ball fairly," said the England international. "It's a bit frustrating at a time when they have so many cameras, they don't let me put the ball in the net and check it."

More than a scorer

Erling Haaland was the focus of much of the pre-match hype with City one of a number of clubs interested in the Norwegian wonder kid. The 20-year-old had failed to score in just two of his previous 14 Champions League appearances, but he spurned his one big chance to net early in the second-half.

Haaland showed great strength and pace to outmuscle and outprint Ruben Dias, but could not lift the ball over the advancing Ederson. De

Bruyne was at the heart of all of City's most dangerous moments as Foden should have done better than fire too close to Marwin Hitz with the goal gaping.

The City captain then sent a low shot inches wide before once more picking out Foden, who saw another effort beaten away by Hitz. However, City were then hit with a sucker punch as Haaland showed he is more than just a goalscorer. His brilliant reverse ball released Marco Reus to fire beyond Ederson in what seemed a sting in the tale six minutes from time. But Dortmund could not hold out in the closing stages as City pushed for a winner. De Bruyne was the creator again as his cross found Ilkay Gundogan at the back post and his cut-back was swept home by a relieved Foden. —AFP



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Belgian midfielder Kevin De Bruyne runs with the ball during the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final football match between Manchester City and Borussia Dortmund at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on Tuesday. — AFP

football Txiki Begiristain hailed De Bruyne as one of the best players in world football.

"His performance level has been remarkably consistent since coming to City, and in the last few years he has developed into one of the

game's elite players," he said. "His talent is unquestionable — but he is also a consummate professional whose dedication to Manchester City during his time here has been nothing short of remarkable." —AFP

Ruthless Real Madrid turn to Barca after rout

MADRID: Real Madrid have made a habit of saving their best for the biggest moments of the season and their 3-1 win over Liverpool in the Champions League on Tuesday suggested they could be ready to do it again.

Madrid rolled back the years with a performance reminiscent of their most ruthless days under Zinedine Zidane, when they powered through the knock-out stages to win three European titles in a row, or motored to 10 consecutive victories at the end of last season to win La Liga.

A pivotal eight days that pitched two quarter-final legs against Liverpool either side of Saturday's Clasico against Barcelona got off to the perfect start. Vinicius Junior's double and a Toni Kroos masterclass at the Alfredo di Stefano stadium putting Madrid in sight of another Champions League semi-final.

Mohamed Salah's away goal early in the second half, and Liverpool's comeback from a more desperate situation against Barcelona in 2019, should serve as warnings against complacency. But an imperious and authoritative display enhances the growing sense of a Madrid team now plugged in, its eyes narrowing again just as the trophies come into view.

"It is the character that this team has, that all the players go through difficult times but I know they have this character to turn things around," said Zidane on Tuesday night. "Madrid erased Liverpool in the first half, the Reds were baffled," wrote Madrid newspaper AS on Wednesday. "It was a complete performance," said Jorge Valdano on Spanish television. In Spain, many wondered if Barcelona and Atletico would enjoy an advantage in the final stretch, their own early exits in the Champions League allowing them to focus fully on what has now become a neck-and-neck battle for the title.

Barca might still feel the benefits of an extra day's rest in the Clasico this weekend, their tight victory over Real Valladolid on Monday night possibly less demanding as well than Madrid's demolition at Valdebebas. And yet it may also be that Madrid benefit from the build-up of momentum, the compression of climax fixtures ensuring their already trophy-laden squad has no time now to look away or let up.

Irrepressible

"They are players who have won a lot but still want more and that shows you the character these players have," said Zidane. The 31-year-old Kroos, with 22 club titles and a World Cup in his name, was irrepressible against Liverpool, his surgical passing from deep laying the platform for Madrid's control and conviction. "Toni is incredible, a legend of the club. Whenever he goes out on the pitch he goes out with class. Nobody can play like him," said Vinicius.

"It was probably one of his best games in his best season for a player who is possibly the best midfielder in the world," wrote Marca. Kroos was the architect this time but his brilliance was just the latest example in a recent surge for Zidane's old guard.

Modric has been flawless since the turn of the year, Casemiro unwavering and Karim Benzema, although quiet against Liverpool, could arguably be La Liga's player of the season. It may be no coincidence Madrid's veterans have roused themselves while the club ponders who to discard and who to preserve in its shift towards the next generation. Ramos and Modric are out of contract this summer while next year, Benzema's deal expires too.

But the crescendo is also familiar, a throwback to previous years when Real Madrid stumbled through the mundane months of a campaign, only to find their groove when it matters. "They always want more," said Zidane. "This team has no limits." — AFP

Kevin De Bruyne signs extension at Manchester City

LONDON: Kevin De Bruyne has signed a two-year contract extension that will keep him at Manchester City until 2025, the Premier League club announced yesterday. The Belgium international, whose existing deal was due to expire in 2023, is 30 in June and now looks set to see out most of the remainder of his career at the Etihad Stadium.

De Bruyne has had a glittering spell since joining the club from Wolfsburg in 2015, winning seven major trophies, which could rise to 11 by the end of the season if City are successful in their hunt for the quadruple.

"I could not be happier," said De Bruyne. "Since joining City in 2015, I have felt at home. I love the fans, my family are settled here in Manchester and my own game has developed really well. This football club is geared for success. It offers me everything I need to maximize my performance, so signing this contract was a straightforward decision. I am playing the best football of my career and I honestly feel there is more to come."

He said he and manager Pep Guardiola had the same football philosophy. "Having that relationship with a manager is so important to me because our objectives are totally aligned, and we want the same things," he said. City director of

Olympic torch relay barred from public roads across Japan's Osaka

TOKYO: The Olympic torch relay will be barred from public roads across Japan's Osaka region, the governor said yesterday, after a spike in virus cases there prompted officials to declare a medical emergency. A decision to keep the flame away from public view had already been taken for Osaka city, but yesterday's announcement extends the measure to the entire prefecture.

"Today, we decided to ask residents across the entire Osaka region to refrain from making non-essential and non-urgent outings, so we will cancel the torch relay on public roads in the prefecture," regional governor Hirofumi Yoshimura told reporters.

Tokyo 2020 organizers said yesterday they would instead "arrange for the Osaka segment of the relay to be run in the Expo '70 Commemorative Park." They said they would "implement all necessary measures to ensure a safe environment for all torchbearers who wish to run there, with no spectators being admitted."

The Olympic flame began its nationwide relay on March 25 in Fukushima and is due to pass through the Osaka region on April 13 and 14. The relay launch ceremony was held without spectators because of virus concerns, and rules already require fans lining the route to wear masks and avoid cheering.

Yoshimura said it would be "inappropriate" to hold it in the Osaka region on public roads as large numbers of onlookers could gather. "The torch relay tends to attract crowds because people want to see it, even if

we take measures," he said.

The decision came as the Osaka region declared a medical emergency, with rising infections putting local health facilities under increasing strain. It reported a new record 878 new infections yesterday and local residents are being asked to avoid non-essential outings.

Osaka city is already under special anti-virus measures, including asking businesses to close early. Yoshimura had suggested last week that Osaka city's relay leg might be cancelled, before a compromise was reached to keep the flame off public roads.

"Realistic response"

With a little over 100 days until the virus-postponed Games are due to open on July 23, Olympic officials are battling the logical issues tied to a new surge in cases. On Tuesday, Tokyo 2020 confirmed a water polo test event would be postponed because virus restrictions mean officials from abroad cannot enter the country.

And three qualifiers organized in Japan by the international swimming federation FINA are in doubt because of virus restrictions, with announcements on whether they will be moved due this week. Tokyo 2020 organizers have previously said legs of the torch relay could be cancelled if overcrowding occurs, but its CEO Toshiro Muto insisted the changes to the Osaka leg should not be considered a cancellation.

"I want people to understand that the Olympic flame relay will be carried out



TOCHIGI: This handout photograph taken and released on March 28, 2021 by Tokyo 2020 shows a Japanese torchbearer carrying the Olympic torch on a boat during the torch relay in the eastern city of Tochigi. — AFP

although its form is different," he told reporters. "The Olympic flame relay has a significant meaning," he added. "It is

important to continue the Olympic flame relay by making a realistic response." Muto said some 200 bearers were

scheduled to run in the prefecture and they would all be invited to take part in the park ceremony. — AFP

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