

Friday Times

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Celebrating Ramadan in the time of coronavirus

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Local

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A photo showing the Scientific Center taken from the Salmiya beach by photographer Fakhruddin Kalim (Instagram: @fakhruddin.kalim). To have your photo considered for Kuwait Times' Photo of the Day, send to local@KuwaitTimes.com or via direct message to Kuwait Times' Instagram account @kuwaittimes. Photos should be high resolution, with no processing or editing.



The Bottom Line

By Ahmad Jabr

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The real danger to society

By Ahmad Jabr

M P Bader Al-Humaidi announced last week that he would propose legislation that calls on authorities to deport all expats receiving treatment at the psychiatric hospital in Kuwait. He said that he was informed by the health ministry that as many as 37,000 expats are receiving treatment at the psychiatric hospital at an alleged "huge financial cost."

The lawmaker's comments caused an uproar on social media, sparking wide criticism, especially from doctors and specialists in the field. Such a proposal coming from a legislator sheds light on a severe lack of awareness about mental health problems in the Kuwaiti and Arab societies.

The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." WHO identifies multiple social, psychological and biological factors that determine the level of mental health of a person at any point of time, including "violence and persistent socio-

conomic pressures."

Mental health awareness has become a topic of great importance in various places around the world in recent years. Countries have taken significant steps to remove the stigma that once surrounded mental health, which prevented people who could potentially be suffering from mental illnesses from seeking help.

Just like modern medicine provides ways to diagnose and treat biological diseases effectively, mental illnesses can also be properly diagnosed and treated so that the patient can live normally and carry out their duties like any healthy individual. And while biological diseases can become worse if left untreated, mental illnesses can also get worse if not diagnosed early and treated properly.

A similar level of awareness is yet to be reached in Kuwait, however. Meanwhile, the current pandemic has only made matters worse as it has left many people severely stressed and struggling under mental distress for long periods of times. In fact, there have been several cases of suicide reported in Kuwait during the past year, which investigators have attributed to severe distress as a result of lockdown and other COVID-19 repercussions.

This situation prompted the Kuwait Psychological

Association (KPA) to launch hotlines, where different doctors provided consultations through the phone for people suffering from the psychological impacts of the coronavirus.

But the lawmaker's recent comments run counter to these efforts that were meant to mitigate the psychological impact of the pandemic and any other crisis that could arise in the future. Instead of opening more doors for people who could be in desperate need for help, such proposals serve as yet another deterrent to those who suffer in a society that still struggles to shake off the stigma surrounding mental health.

Calls to deport patients are similar to demanding punishment for patients suffering from a disease they have no power over. Any person with the basic understanding of mental health would never place patients in the same category as dangerous criminals. MP Humaidi explained that among the motives behind his proposal was to "protect society" from what he described as "a threat to public safety and security, including that of citizens and residents alike." But the fact is that making people who suffer from mental health issues too afraid to seek help is the real danger.

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By Shakir Reshamwala

Ramadan is a time of piety and prayers, fasting and feasting, and spending time with family and friends. Last year, the holy month was a surreal experience, with all mosques closed, most shops shuttered, a 16-hour curfew and people confined at home. This year the situation is much better, as mosques are open for prayers, but a 10-hour curfew is in place.

The coronavirus outbreak and the resulting lockdowns and curfews disrupted many of Kuwait's unique Ramadan traditions that have been observed by generations of citizens and residents of this country as a source of comfort and belonging. These traditions all involve gathering in some form, especially during the night, but a ban on gatherings has put paid to these customs. Even the mainstay of Kuwait's social life - gathering in diwanis - is banned.



The first victim of social distancing has been graish - the traditional pre-Ramadan feast when family members and even neighbors gather before the onset of the fasting month. In the olden days, the women of the house would empty the larders of their homes of foods that are not usually eaten in Ramadan, and extended families would gather to partake in the potluck. In recent years, the food was usually ordered from restaurants and the gatherings were smaller.

Another Ramadan tradition - Girgian - will likely not take place this year too. Girgian is marked on the 13th, 14th and 15th nights of Ramadan, when children go 'trick or treating' to collect candies and nuts around the neighborhood. Lately, the simple confectionery of yore was replaced by gourmet chocolates and exotic nuts housed in brand-name bags and pouches that were often more expensive than their contents. But with children not even going to school and parents fearful of exposing them to any infection, kids going door to door seems to be a remote possibility.





Like Girgian, the ghabqa - a gathering of family and friends in the evenings of Ramadan - had become a lavish corporate affair, where companies invited clients and employees along with their families for a night of fun and feasting, with the media in attendance too. With a nighttime curfew in place and the ban on gatherings, one can be sure ghabqas are out of fashion this year too.

The firing of the iftar cannon - signaling to the faithful it is time to break the fast - takes place every day of Ramadan at the beautifully restored Naif Palace in Kuwait City and is broadcast live

“ **The first victim of social distancing has been graish - the traditional pre-Ramadan feast when family members and even neighbors gather before the onset of the fasting month** ”

the state. The popularity of qiyam al-layl prayers has skyrocketed in the past two decades, especially at the Grand Mosque. Thousands every year attend the nightly prayers, with well over 100,000 worshippers converging on Kuwait's largest mosque on the night of the 27th of Ramadan.

Last year, mosques in Kuwait were shut, but this year, congregating for supererogatory prayers like taraweeh and tahajjud and Eid prayers has been permitted, although health measures have to be followed. These include maintaining a distance between worshippers, wearing a mask and bringing one's own prayer rug. Women, however, will not be allowed to visit the mosques for prayers.

Of course, all of the abovementioned traditions and rituals are not essential to observe the Ramadan fast. One can remain at home, eat simply and spend time with the family. Iftar may not be served in tents outside mosques this year too, so seeking out and helping those in need with prepared meals in the neighborhood is a must.

Perhaps the coronavirus pandemic has been a blessing in disguise, stripping away the rampant commercialization of Ramadan witnessed in recent years and returning the holy month to what it actually is - an act of worship, empathizing with the less-fortunate and exercising self-discipline.



on Kuwait TV and radio. The firing of the cannon by uniformed guards in red livery used to attract dozens of families daily in the open yard of the palace, which is set up to resemble pre-oil Kuwait, complete with vintage cars, artisans and

children in traditional garb. The firing still takes place, but without the crowds.

Though not a social tradition, congregation tahajjud prayers during the last 10 nights of Ramadan are observed in most mosques across

Local

Kuwait wealth fund reaches initial agreement on KPC dividends: Source

KUWAIT: Kuwait's sovereign wealth fund has reached an initial agreement with Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) on new payment terms for over \$20 billion in accrued dividends, a government source said, as the Gulf state seeks ways to counter a liquidity squeeze. KPC has owed for years about 7 billion Kuwaiti dinars (\$23 billion) in dividends to the General Reserve Fund (GRF), one of Kuwait's sovereign funds.

GRF, which is used to cover state deficits, has been squeezed by the coronavirus-driven

drop in oil prices and a continued stand-off between government and parliament on implementing measures such as a law to allow state borrowing.

The agreement between GRF and state-owned KPC on a new payment schedule has not been signed yet but the government source said it would be submitted to the finance and oil ministries for approval. He was confirming a report by Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Rai, which said KPC and the Kuwait Investment Authority - which manages Kuwait's sovereign wealth

funds - reached an initial agreement to transfer the dividends to the public treasury within a 15-year timetable.

The report said the accrued funds amounted to about 7.75 billion dinars. The source did not specify a time frame for the payment but said the final terms would not impact the financial position of the company or its ability to honour obligations linked to its investments.

Kuwait has taken several steps to mitigate the depletion of the treasury's liquid assets, in-

cluding raising funds for the GRF through asset swaps with Kuwait's Future Generations Fund - a nest egg for when the country's oil runs out.

Such steps may push back the risk of a liquidity crunch to the third quarter this year, Bank of America said last month. "This agreement (with KPC) will not solve the problem of financing Kuwait's budget. The government still needs to reach an agreement with the National Assembly on how to finance the budget deficit," the government source said. — Reuters



KUWAIT: People pass by piles of tables and chairs outside a restaurant in Kuwait City on Wednesday. Kuwait has changed its coronavirus curfew hours to start from 7:00pm beginning from yesterday to April 22, although restaurants and cafes are still not allowed to offer dine-in services. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

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Local

Turkey, Kuwait on identical approach toward int'l affairs

Foreign Ministers discuss Syria, Libya, Middle East peace process

ANKARA: The visiting Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu yesterday affirmed harmony of their views toward regional and international affairs. Speaking at a news conference with the Turkish minister, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nasser said his talks with Cavusoglu tackled various issues namely Syria, Libya and resumption of the Middle East peace process. He affirmed that both Kuwait and Turkey had expressed support for the Saudi initiative to resolve the Yemeni crisis and manifested gratitude to states, namely Turkey, for backing conciliation efforts by the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the current Amir His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to settle the Gulf crisis — alluding to rifts that had appeared among some GCC member states.

On the 57-year-old Kuwait-Turkey relationship, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad affirmed that these close relations were marked with mutual cooperation at various levels over the past two decades. Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser affirmed that six documents and memoranda of understanding were signed between the Kuwaiti

and Turkish sides during his current visit to the nation, revealing that the two states became bonded with a total of 61 accords and MoUs, dealing with cooperation in diverse sectors. One of the freshly inked deals tackles cooperation for the next two years, another envisages cooperation in the coming five years, he said, indicating that his discussions with his Turkish host touched on health cooperation, research and development. The discussions have also addressed cooperation in education, culture, technology namely teaching and cyber security.

Meanwhile, Cavusoglu affirmed support for Kuwait's shuttle diplomacy for addressing some issues among the GCC countries, describing Kuwait as an "international brand" with respect of its skills in diplomatic mediation. Moreover, he praised the "great legacy" of the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad regarding diplomacy affirming that the current Amir, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf, adopted the same approach. The Turkish minister said he agreed with the visiting Kuwaiti foreign minister to hold a meeting once a year within framework of the joint committee, in addition to a meeting at the level of deputy ministers every six months, to assess the relations at various levels.



ANKARA: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu attend a press conference in Ankara, Turkey yesterday. — KUNA

Cavusoglu disclosed that volume of commercial exchanges between Kuwait and Turkey stood at \$704 million in 2019 but dropped "a little last year," adding that "the aim is to reach \$1 billion according to a plan set by the two countries." Moreover, enterprises executed by Turk-

ish companies in Kuwait are valued at \$8.5 billion, he said, noting that the Turkish companies are operating within framework of Kuwait Vision 2035. The Kuwaiti foreign minister, earlier yesterday, chaired the second session of the joint commission. — KUNA

Interior Minister hails Customs members' efforts

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah praised yesterday the General Administration of Customs members' efforts in thwarting different smuggling operations. During his visit to the General Administration of Customs headquarters, the Minister said in a press statement that customs



Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah

staff are an essential element in the security system. Furthermore, he praised the administration's keenness to develop the security and customs system using latest technological means. Meanwhile, Director-General of the General Administration of Customs, Counselor Jamal Al-Jalawi, said that the administration cooperates with the Ministry of Interior in several common areas such as security and intelligence investigations to combat smuggling and illegal trafficking. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets Yemeni Foreign Minister Dr Ahmad Awad bin Mubarak. — KUNA

PM assures Yemeni Foreign Minister of Kuwait's support

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received yesterday the visiting Yemeni Foreign Minister Dr Ahmad Awad bin Mubarak and his accompanying delegation at Seif Palace. Minister of Health and Acting Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Basel Humoud Hamad Al-Sabah attended the meeting. His Highness the Prime Minister assured his guest of the State of Kuwait's support for all efforts aimed at reaching a comprehensive political solution to the Yemeni crisis. He also affirmed Kuwait's applause of the Saudi initiative for reaching the aspired political solution and ending humanitarian plight of the brotherly Yemeni people. Ambassador Fahad Ahmad Al-Awadhi, the Assistant Foreign Minister for the Arab World Affairs, was also present in the meeting. — KUNA

Kuwait, Turkey sign key agreements in different fields

KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah headed the Kuwaiti delegation at the second session of the joint Kuwaiti-Turkish committee for cooperation, held in Ankara yesterday. The conferees discussed boosting cooperation in political, economic and media fields, as well as other key areas, and means of strengthening relations between the two countries. The session also saw the signing of six agreements on joint governmental work plan for 2021-2022, a memorandum of understanding on environment, cooperation protocols between Kuwait's Ministry of Information and Turkey's radio and television institute, cooperation in media and journalism, memorandum of understanding between the National Library of Kuwait and the department of publications in Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism and a memorandum of understanding on social policies. The meeting was attended by Kuwaiti Ambassador to Turkey Ghassan Al-Zawawi and senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Turkish representation was headed by Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavusoglu. — KUNA

Local

Twenty-three MPs demand removal of assembly speaker

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: As many as 23 opposition lawmakers yesterday submitted an unprecedented motion demanding the dismissal of assembly speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem for breaching the constitution and the internal charter.

MP Bader Al-Mulla led the motion and 22 other MPs signed it and a number of other MPs are expected to put their names on it later. The motion said that the assembly speaker "committed flagrant violations while presiding over the session on March 30, 2021," adding that the violations committed were unprecedented and very grave.

It said the speaker effectively suspended article 101 of the constitution, which regulates grilling of the prime minister and ministers, by postponing the grilling against the prime minister for one and a half years without any constitutional or legal basis.

The motion demanded that the national assembly debates the issue of dismissing the speaker from his post. This is the first such motion in the history of Kuwait's parliamentary democracy which began in 1962.

There are no provisions in the constitution and the country's laws that clearly explain procedures to remove the assembly speaker but the motion based its demand on article 97 of the constitution.

The motion is certain to deteriorate already troubled political situation in the country that saw last week 32 lawmakers out of the 50-member house boycott a regular session to prevent the new cabinet from taking the oath. But the oath was taken with the attendance of just 18 lawmakers and the 16 cabinet ministers.



KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem (right) is seen during a parliamentary session at the National Assembly on March 30, 2021. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

News in brief

Deliveries until 3 am in Ramadan

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality Director Ahmad Al-Manfouhi gave orders to adjust food delivery timing during curfew to be from 7:00 pm to 3:00 am starting from Ramadan, while they remain until 10 before the holy month. Meanwhile, walking is allowed from 7:00 pm to 8:00 pm until Ramadan, when it will be extended to 10:00 pm.

Over 706K vaccinated

KUWAIT: More than 706,000 people have received their COVID-19 vaccines in Kuwait, or 16.5 percent of the population, health sources said, adding that vaccination has helped drop ICU occupancy from 252 on April 1 to 207 on April 7.

Two held with drugs

KUWAIT: Drugs Control General Department officers arrested two men in possession of 13 kg of heroin and 3 kg shabu valued at KD 250,000 in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, the Interior Ministry's Relations and Security Information said yesterday.

Oxygen's scarcity causes water discoloration: EPA

KUWAIT: The discoloration of water and seabed in West Doha waters is caused by the scarcity of dissolved oxygen and weak current movement, said the Environment Public Authority (EPA) yesterday. A statement by the authority indicated that EPA teams were dispatched to the West Doha area in response to a water pollution distress call from residences. Samples were taken from the area and it was deduced that the scarcity of dissolved oxygen and weak water currents led to the discoloration, indicated the EPA, which also attributed



—KUWAIT: A picture provided by the Environment Public Authority showing discoloration of water and seabed in West Doha. — KUNA

it to the enclosed geographic nature of the area as well as anaerobic organisms' presence. — KUNA

Kuwait seeks environmentally friendly Terminal 2

KUWAIT: Kuwait is seeking to classify the new passenger terminal building (T2) at Kuwait International Airport as "gold ranking" as an environment friendly building, in design and use of power. The remarks were made by Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Communication and Information Technology Affairs Dr Rana Al-Fares in a press statement yesterday. The ranking involves sustainability, energy, using solar panels, recycling different materials and quality of the building's inner environment, she noted. T2 stretches over 183,000 square meters of flat land with a



KUWAIT: Minister of Public Works Dr Rana Al-Fares at the Terminal 2 construction site. — KUNA

capacity to receive 25 million passengers per year and 30 gates that serve 51 airplanes. It also has VIP areas and car parking of 120,000 square meters, with a capacity of 5,000 parking spaces, Fares added. — KUNA



Britain slams 'bullying' Myanmar over London embassy standoff

Biden tackles 'ghost guns' and US firearms violence



ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) receiving EU Council President Charles Michel (center) and President of EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen (left) at the Presidential Complex in Ankara. — AFP

EU demands answers over Turkey 'sofagate'

Ankara blames EU for scandal as Ursula von der Leyen defends women's rights

BRUSSELS: EU lawmakers yesterday called for the bloc's top two officials to explain a snowballing diplomatic scandal that saw Commission head Ursula von der Leyen left without a chair at talks with Turkey's president. The furor—dubbed "sofagate" online—has sparked a slew of accusations over Ankara's attitude to women and the EU, sexism in Brussels, and internal political wrangling between the bloc's institutions.

It all centered on an awkward moment at the start of talks between von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel and Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara on Tuesday.

The well-appointed room which the three leaders entered had only two chairs arranged next to the corresponding EU and Turkish flags. Erdogan and Michel quickly seated themselves while von der Leyen—whose diplomatic rank is the same as that of the two men—was left standing. "Ehm," she said pointedly, while appearing to spread her arms in wonder. Official images later showed her seated on a sofa opposite one taken by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

Cavusoglu said yesterday that criticism leveled against Turkey for the diplomatic blunder was "unfair". "The seating arrangements were made in line with the EU suggestion. Period. We would not be revealing this fact had accusations not been made against Turkey," Cavusoglu told reporters.

Von der Leyen, as president of the European Commission, is head of the EU executive. Michel, president of the European Council, represents member state governments.

Brussels expects both to be treated with the protocol reserved for a head of government. "The president of the com-

mission was clearly surprised," European Commission spokesman Eric Mamer said, insisting von der Leyen should have been treated "exactly in the same manner" as Michel. "She does consider that these issues are important and need to be treated appropriately, which they clearly were not," Mamer said.

While the two male leaders took the only two chairs, a blindsided von der Leyen was left standing before being ushered to a nearby sofa. "EU-Turkey relations are crucial. But EU unity and respect for human rights, including women's rights, are also key," Spanish MEP Iratxe Garcia Perez, the head of the Socialist & Democrats grouping in parliament, wrote on Twitter.

She said she had asked for a conversation with Von der Leyen and Michel "to clarify what happened and how to respect the EU institutions". That call was echoed by the leader of the conservative European People's Party parliamentary bloc, Manfred Weber, who told Politico the trip to Ankara had become "a symbol of disunity" between the EU's top officials.

The meeting with Erdogan came at a delicate moment as the EU and Turkey look to rebuild ties rocked by renewed tensions last year. Von der Leyen, the first female head of the European Commission, stressed Brussels' concerns over women's rights after Erdogan withdrew from the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women and children. Her spokesman hit out at the diplomatic faux pas but said she had pressed on with addressing the thorny issue of ties with Ankara rather than walking out of the meeting.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu deflected

blame from Ankara and said the seating arrangements were made "in line with the EU suggestion. Period". Michel drew flak in Brussels for seeming not to support his colleague and readily accepting the only available seat.

In a Facebook post he insisted "nothing is further from the reality or my deepest feelings" and said the "regrettable" scene was down to a Turkish protocol blunder. The scandal drew complaints from across Europe over what was seen as only the latest example of bungled EU foreign policy efforts.

"These are images that hurt. I don't want a naive Europe," France's Europe minister Clement Beaune said. "We are dealing with interlocutors who know the value of symbols. We have to be much more firm."

'Turkish hospitality'

The diplomatic faux pas was instantly branded "sofagate" on Twitter and became the dominant talking point of the first Turkey-EU summit in a year. The meeting was aimed at a setting a more positive tone to relations after months of trouble on multiple fronts. But it ended with European officials accusing Turkey—which last month withdrew from the landmark Istanbul Convention combatting gender-based violence—of male chauvinism.

"First they withdraw from the Istanbul Convention and now they leave the President of European Commission without a seat in an official visit. Shameful. #WomensRights," wrote Spanish European Parliament member Iratxe Garcia Perez. Some also questioned why Michel was so quick to take a seat.—AFP

International

Biden resumes Palestinian aid, urges two-state solution

\$235 million assistance draws a rebuke by ally Israel

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden on Wednesday restored aid to the Palestinians to a tune of \$235 million, drawing a rebuke by ally Israel, as he promised to press for a two-state solution.

In his sharpest break on the conflict yet from the staunchly pro-Israel Donald Trump, Biden said the United States would resume funding for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees that his predecessor had severed. The State Department said the United States would contribute \$150 million to the UN agency and offer \$75 million in economic and development assistance for the West Bank and Gaza as well as \$10 million for peace-building efforts. In a call with Jordan's King Abdullah II, a longstanding US ally who recently faced down dissent within the royal family, Biden "affirmed that the United States supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," a White House statement said.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the US assistance to the Palestinians "serves important US interests and values" as "a means to advance towards a negotiated two-state solution." "It provides critical relief to those in great need, fosters economic development and supports Israeli-Palestinian understanding, security coordination and stability," Blinken said in a statement.

Israel, which had held off on criticism of Biden in his first months, denounced the assistance to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA, which

provides housing, schools and other care to more than six million Palestinian refugees and their descendants. "We believe that this UN agency for so-called 'refugees' should not exist in its current format," said Gilad Erdan, the Israeli ambassador to the United States.

Israel argues that the education provided by the UN-backed schools includes incitement against the Jewish state. "I have expressed my disappointment and objection to the decision to renew UNRWA's funding without first ensuring that certain reforms, including stopping the incitement and removing anti-Semitic content from its educational curriculum, are carried out," Erdan said.

Asked about the Israeli criticism, State Department spokesman Ned Price said that the United States took oversight of UNRWA "extraordinarily seriously" and that it would now have "a seat at the table." The Israeli anger comes as the United States takes part in indirect, European-led talks in Vienna with Iran on returning to a denuclearization deal which was bitterly opposed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

No political push yet

The Palestinian leadership hoped that the aid would mark the start of a concerted effort by Biden to pressure Israel, including on stopping settlements in the occupied West Bank. "We are eagerly awaiting the resumption not only of financial assistance but of political relations with the United States to allow the Palestinian people



GAZA STRIP: A picture shows Palestinian houses and buildings at Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday. The United States said it was restoring assistance to the Palestinians severed under former President Donald Trump with an announcement of \$235 million. —AFP

to achieve their legitimate rights for an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital," said Mohammed Shtayyeh, the Palestinian prime minister. Shortly after Biden's inauguration in January, the United States said it would restore the Palestine Liberation Organization's liaison office that was shut down by Trump.

But Biden has held off on any major peace initiative, with even supporters of a two-state solution expecting near-term chances for a

breakthrough to be slim, especially amid turbulence in Israel following its latest election. Blinken has indicated no change to one of Trump's signature decisions—recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moving the US embassy to the hotly disputed holy city.

Trump had ended UNRWA assistance by arguing that the refugees, some of whom have lived in camps for generations, needed to be permanently resettled.—AFP

US pledges Iraq troop withdrawal but without timeline

WASHINGTON: The United States committed Wednesday to move all remaining combat forces from Iraq, although the two sides did not set a timeline in what would be the second withdrawal since the 2003 invasion.

The first "strategic dialogue" with Iraq under US President Joe Biden's administration comes as Iranian-linked Shiite paramilitary groups fire rockets nearly daily at bases with foreign troops in hopes of forcing a US exit. The two nations agreed in a videoconference led by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein that Iraqi forces were ready to take on more responsibility. "The parties confirmed that the mission of US and coalition forces has now transitioned to one focused on training and advisory tasks, thereby allowing for the redeployment of any remaining combat forces from Iraq, with the timing to be established in upcoming technical talks," a joint statement said.

Iraq has walked a fine line in balancing its relations between the United States and Iran, which shares religious ties with its Shiite-majority neighbor. Iraqi calls soared for a with-



A US soldier walks at the Qayyarah air base, where US-led troops in 2017 had helped Iraqis plan out the fight against the Islamic State in nearby Mosul in northern Iraq, before a planned US pullout. —AFP

drawal of US troops in January 2020 after former president Donald Trump ordered the assassination in Baghdad of top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani — and tensions have remained high. Biden in February ordered airstrikes against targets in Syria of Iranian-linked paramilitaries after a rocket attack killed a contractor for the US-led coalition and injured US personnel. But Biden, in a rare point of agreement with Trump, has been looking for ways to wind down what have come to be dubbed "endless wars." Trump had ordered a drawdown in his final months from Iraq as well as Afghanistan with the number of US troops in each country dipping to 2,500 by January 15. —AFP

UN agency praises new US aid for Palestinians

AMMAN: The cash-strapped UN agency for Palestinian refugees UNRWA yesterday praised President Joe Biden for resuming US financial support, saying it came at a "critical moment" amid the COVID pandemic. "UNRWA could not be more pleased that once again we will partner with the United States to provide critical assistance to some of the most vulnerable refugees across the Middle East," the agency's commissioner general, Philippe Lazzarini, said in a statement.

"The US contribution comes at a critical moment, as we continue to adjust to the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic presents." The Biden administration's decision to restore US aid to the Palestinians to the tune of \$235 million marked a sharp break with the policy of his staunchly pro-Israel predecessor Donald Trump who severed all financial assistance. Its decision to earmark \$150 million of that for UNRWA drew particular anger from Israel, which argues that the agency serves to perpetuate the idea of a Palestinian refugee problem in a way that undermines the Jewish state. "We believe that this UN agency for so-called 'refugees' should not exist in its current format," said the Israeli ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan.—AFP

International

UAE pledges support to new unity government in Libya

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince receives Libya's interim prime minister

ABU DHABI: The United Arab Emirates, which had previously backed Libya's eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, has pledged support for the new unity government in Tripoli formed after UN-sponsored peace talks. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan received Libya's interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah in the UAE capital late Wednesday.

He "renewed his support for the new executive authority in Libya and their endeavors to establish peace and stability," the official WAM news agency reported yesterday. Sheikh Mohammed, the UAE's de facto leader, tweeted early Thursday that it had been "an honor" to meet with Dbeibah.

"Libya will overcome its challenges and we stand at the side of the Libyan people at this critical moment," he said. "The new road map will hopefully lead to stability and unity."

The UAE said in January it was ready to work closely with US President Joe Biden's administration for a peaceful solution to the Libyan conflict. The statement followed a virtual Security Council meeting on Libya, during which the

United States called on "all external parties, to include Russia, Turkey and the UAE, to respect Libyan sovereignty and immediately cease all military intervention in Libya".

Previously, the UAE was, with Egypt and Russia, one of the main backers of Khalifa Haftar, the eastern-based strongman in his abortive bid to defeat the UN-supported Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. In March, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a declaration demanding the withdrawal of all foreign troops and mercenaries from Libya.

The world body estimates that there were 20,000 in the country as of December. Libya has been ravaged by bloodshed since the overthrow and killing of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed revolt in 2011. An array of armed groups arose to fill the vacuum, and many coalesced around Haftar or the GNA. The two camps, each supported by foreign powers, fought for more than a year before Haftar was forced to retreat. In October they signed a truce, setting in motion a UN-led process that saw Dbeibah's transitional unity government installed in February. —AFP



Polisario says police chief killed in Western Sahara

ALGIERS: The Polisario Front's police chief has been killed in the disputed Western Sahara region, a statement from the separatists said Wednesday. "The commander of the national gendarmerie Addah al-Bendir fell on Tuesday as a martyr on the field of honour," the pro-independence movement's defence ministry said in a statement.

He "was on a military mission in the liberated zone of Rouss Irni, in Tifariti," located in the north in Polisario-controlled territory, it added, without elaborating on the circumstances surrounding his death.

The statement had been released through official news agency SPS, which later removed it from its site without explanation. A local official had also confirmed the death to AFP.

Western Sahara is a former Spanish colony, mostly under Rabat's control, where tensions between Morocco and the Polisario Front have simmered since the 1970s.

Morocco has offered autonomy but maintains the territory is a sovereign part of the kingdom.

The Polisario fought a war of independence with Morocco from 1975 to 1991 and its leaders proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in February 1976.

Wednesday's statement said Bendir was born in the Tiress region in 1956, and joined the Polisario Front in 1978. There was no immediate confirmation of the death from Moroccan authorities. —AFP

Iran's Rouhani says Vienna talks open 'new chapter'

TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said Wednesday that talks in Vienna on rescuing a troubled 2015 nuclear deal had opened a "new chapter". An Iranian delegation met Tuesday with representatives of the remaining parties to the agreement to discuss how to bring Washington back into it and end crippling US sanctions and Iranian countermeasures.

US President Joe Biden has said he is ready to reverse the decision of his predecessor Donald Trump to withdraw from the agreement and reimpose unilateral sanctions. But differences remain over the mechanics of the move as Tehran has since responded by suspending compliance with some of its own obligations under the deal. The United States was not present at Tues-

Israeli strikes kill 3 Iran-backed fighters in Syria

DAMASCUS: Israeli strikes overnight targeting Syrian regime military positions and a weapons depot near Damascus killed three Iran-backed militia fighters, a Britain-based war monitor said yesterday.

The strikes near the capital "destroyed a weapons depot likely used by the Lebanese Hezbollah militia," among other Iran-backed groups, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "It also killed three ... Iran-backed militia fighters," said the monitor.

The Observatory said it could not determine their nationalities but that

day's discussions because Iran has refused to meet the US delegation so long as its sanctions remain in place.

Instead, the European Union acted as an intermediary, but all sides gave a positive assessment of the opening talks. "A new chapter has just been opened yesterday," Rouhani told a cabinet meeting Wednesday. "If (Washington) shows it is honest and sincere, that's all we ask... I think we'll be able to negotiate in a short time, if necessary, with the (other parties to the deal)."

In Washington, State Department spokesman Ned Price said that the United States still believed "this is a constructive forum". "The talks so far have been business-like and they are doing what we envisioned they would," Price told reporters. "They are affording us a better understanding of Iran's thinking and we hope that in turn Tehran will leave this round of talks with a better understanding of what we might be prepared to do." The US delegation has set up at a different hotel in Vienna, with EU negotiators acting as go-betweens.

At the same time, two groups of experts-on lifting sanctions and nuclear issues-are working "to identify concrete measures to be taken by Washington and Tehran" to restore the deal, Russian envoy Mikhail Ulyanov said. —AFP

they were all non-Syrians.

The official SANA news agency reported the raids but not the casualties, saying four soldiers were wounded in the attack. "At around 12:56 the Israeli enemy carried out an aggression from the direction of Lebanon on some positions in the vicinity of Damascus," SANA said, citing a military source. "Our air defences intercepted the aggression and shot down" most of the missiles, the news outlet said, adding that "four soldiers were injured".

The strikes also caused "some material damage". The source did not provide details on the targets.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Israel has routinely carried out raids in Syria, mostly targeting Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah forces as well as government troops. Israel rarely confirms the strikes, but its army has said it hit about 50 targets in the war-torn country last year, without providing details. Hezbollah is the only group in Lebanon not to have disarmed after the 1975-1990 civil war, but is also a major player in Lebanese politics. It is a strong ally of Iran and Damascus and has been officially fighting in Syria since 2013. —AFP

International

China says UK sheltering 'wanted criminals' after HK asylum ruling

Nathan Law says he had been granted asylum in Britain

BEIJING: China yesterday accused the United Kingdom of sheltering "wanted criminals" after prominent Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Nathan Law said he had been granted political asylum there. London and Beijing are at bitter odds over the fate of Hong Kong, with Britain accusing China of tearing up its promise to maintain key liberties in the former colonial territory for 50 years after the handover.

Law said Wednesday he had been granted asylum in Britain, after fleeing the semi-autonomous territory following the introduction of a sweeping new security law. That provoked an angry response in Beijing.

"The UK is clearly a platform for Hong Kong independence agitators, and provides so-called shelter for wanted criminals," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters. Describing Law as a "criminal suspect," Zhao called the move "gross interference" in Hong Kong's judiciary.

"The UK should immediately correct its mistake, and stop interfering in Hong Kong affairs and China's internal affairs," he added. Law, a 27-year-old former Hong Kong lawmaker and student activist, fled to the UK in July 2020 in the weeks after the National Security Law, opposed by pro-democracy protesters, was imposed.

Law wrote on Twitter that he had been granted asylum in the UK after several interviews over a period of four months. "The fact that I am wanted under the National Security

Law shows that I am exposed to severe political persecution and am unlikely to return to Hong Kong without risk," he wrote.

The activist highlighted the plight of other asylum seekers in the UK from Hong Kong who might not have the same weight of evidence behind their claims. "I hope that my case can help the Home Office understand more about the complicated situation in Hong Kong," he added.

"To free more protesters from Beijing's authoritarian oppression, the Home Office could consider more comprehensive evidence."

Champion of democracy

Law's fate and the fate of potentially millions of Hong Kongers who Britain has offered a route to escape China's crackdown, has become a point of bitter diplomatic contention between Beijing and London, which ceded the former colonial territory in 1997.

China said earlier this year it will not recognize the British National (Overseas) passport for Hong Kongers because of a new visa scheme introduced in January offering a pathway to full UK citizenship for those who want to leave the territory. Beijing and London have in recent weeks also clashed over Chinese sanctions against four UK entities and nine individuals including lawmakers that have spoken out in defence of China's Uyghur Muslim minority. Britain has condemned sweeping electoral reforms approved by Beijing last month, which are expected to further reduce



Pro-democracy activist Nathan Law (center left) walking past the media outside the Court of Final Appeal after his bail application was successful in Hong Kong in this file photo. —AFP

the small number of democratically elected lawmakers in Hong Kong. Candidates for public office in Hong Kong will have their entire history vetted as Beijing seeks to ensure "patriots" run the city.

Nine veteran activists were also convicted by a local court earlier this week for organizing one of Hong Kong's biggest peaceful pro-democracy protests in 2019. Last year, Britain protested jail terms handed to three leading activists from the pro-democracy party Demo-

sisto, which Law cofounded.

The party disbanded on the same day China's new security legislation was imposed in Hong Kong.

In exile, Law has continued to champion the cause of pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong on social media. Last month, he hit out at mass trials of activists in Hong Kong, saying that they showed that "the Chinese Communist party nakedly abuses its powers and uses the courts to demonstrate that power". —AFP

Hundreds protest in Kyrgyzstan after bride kidnap and murder

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan: Hundreds of people rallied in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek yesterday calling for police chiefs to be sacked after a young woman abducted for marriage was found dead in a country where bride kidnapping is systemic. Police said Wednesday the body of 27-year-old Aizada Kanatbekova had been found outside Bishkek two days after security camera footage widely shared on social networks showed her being bundled into a car by three men.

Kanatbekova's kidnapper and assumed murderer was also found dead, police said, adding that he had likely committed suicide. One of the other kidnappers was detained by police, state television reported yesterday. Bride kidnapping, known locally as Ala Kachuu, has roots in the Central Asian country's nomadic past and persisted into the Soviet era, albeit on a smaller scale.

But the practice became chronic after the

country gained independence in 1991, with convictions extremely rare and survivors reluctant to file complaints due to threats of violence and cultural stigma. Journalist Mahinur Niyazova, who tweeted a call to rally outside the interior ministry headquarters, told AFP that the murder showed police had other priorities rather than defending women from violence. "It is impossible to be quiet and observe the violence that our women, who lack any rights, must endure," said Niyazova, who is deputy editor of popular news website 24.kg.

'End the femicide'

The protesters called for the sacking of the interior minister and the city police chief and held banners bearing slogans such as "Who will answer for Aizada's murder?", "End the femicide" and "Who still thinks that murder is a tradition?" The rally drew some 500 people and prompted Prime Minister Ulugbek Maripov to address the protesters. He asked them to "have patience" and promised that everyone associated with the kidnapping would be punished, as several demonstrators shouted him down and called for his dismissal too. President Sadyr Japarov on Facebook described Kanatbekova's death as "a tragedy and pain not only for her family, but also for our entire state". —AFP

Freed Nigerian students reunite with families

KANO: Five of the dozens of students kidnapped from a college in northwest Nigeria were reunited with their families Wednesday, two days after having been found by the military. The five—three men and two women—were among 39 students kidnapped from Federal College of Forestry Mechanization in Afaka, outside Kaduna city, by criminals last month after a fierce gunfight with soldiers. It was the latest mass kidnapping in the country's northwest, where gangs have been increasingly abducting students for ransom, raiding villages, pillaging and stealing cattle.

The freed students were conveyed to the school from a military facility where they had

undergone medical checks, where they were received by their parents and college authorities. "We give thanks to God for saving five of the kidnapped students," said Sam Kambai, the head of the kidnapped students' parents support group. "We have seen them, they are safe."

Kambai said the students had informed him that those in captivity were being held in one place and were "not in any way molested by their captors". On Monday, the government said five of the students had been "recovered" by the military, without providing details. However Mohammed Usman Bello, the school provost said the students had been released on "health grounds".

"All the students are alive, all the students are together, all the students are not harmed. This is good news to us," Bello said, while welcoming those freed. Heavily armed gangs have recently turned their focus to schools, where they kidnap students or schoolchildren for ransom—the Afaka mass abduction was at least the fourth such attack since December. —AFP

International

Jihadist insurgency in Mozambique rocks stability in southern Africa

Six regional leaders meet in Maputo to discuss security situation

JOHANNESBURG: The violent escalation of an insurgency in northern Mozambique last month has whipped up fresh concerns about security in southern Africa, a region that has enjoyed relative stability in recent decades. Islamic State-linked militants raided the coastal town of Palma on March 24, forcing thousands of residents to flee to the surrounding forest and pushing France's Total to desert a nearby multi-billion-dollar gas project.

The deftly-planned assault marked a major intensification in an insurgency that has wreaked havoc across Cabo Delgado province for over three years as the jihadists seek to establish a caliphate. The 16-member Southern African Development Community (SADC) has denounced the attacks as an "affront" to the peace and security of Mozambique, the region and the international community.

Six of the regional leaders were meeting yesterday for emergency talks in Mozambique's capital Maputo on the deteriorating security situation. Analysts say the stability of the wider region is at stake, as well as the spin-offs of a liquified natural gas (LNG) project on the Afungi peninsula—the biggest single investment in Africa, led by Total.

"The hope is that Mozambique will open its doors to some practical assistance... as part of an integrated strategy," said Crisis Group an-

alyst Piers Pigou, noting that the country had so far only sought ad-hoc help from other SADC members on a bilateral basis. Convinced President Filipe Nyusi to stop playing "sovereignty politics" and cooperate with the bloc would be key to thwarting the insurgency, Pigou said. "The question is whether it can be nipped in the bud at this juncture without spreading further," he added.

'On our doorstep'

While Mozambique's jihadists have so far remained relatively contained, their 2018 allegiance to the Islamic State group has raised fears of a more expansive agenda and more sophisticated tactics. Mozambican civil society activist Adriano Nuvunga said the fallout of a worsening of the situation could be momentous. "If Mozambique was to collapse, it could be used by all sorts of groups as a transit point to affect the region," he warned.

The southeast African country, which stretches along the Indian Ocean, shares borders with Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Eswatini and Zimbabwe. "The borders with Mozambique are huge and not easy to manage," said Tanzanian independent analyst Kennedy Mmari, warning that the insurgency could "accelerate" extremism in his country.

Mozambique's jihadists have already tar-



Internally displaced people (IDP) from Palma gather in the Pemba Sports center to receive humanitarian aid in Pemba. The people were evacuated from the coasts of Palma after armed insurgents attacked the city on March 24, 2021. —AFP

geted parts of southern Tanzania, including a deadly raid on the city of Mtwara last October. "It's on our doorstep," said South Africa-based Institute for Security Studies researcher Liesl Louw-Vaudran.

"It would be a huge issue if there was a growing insurgency in southern Africa, where we haven't really seen any violent extrem-

ism," she said. The most vulnerable countries are those adjacent to Cabo Delgado, Louw-Vaudran said, including Malawi and Zimbabwe. But she noted the risk of territorial expansion remained "quite limited" for the time being, as the jihadists seemed more prone to spreading further into Mozambique than crossing borders. —AFP

Navalny supporters jailed for penal colony protest

MOSCOW: A Russian court has handed week-long sentences to several supporters of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny after they travelled to his penal colony to demand he receive proper medical treatment. Police on Tuesday detained nine Navalny supporters outside his prison in the town of Pokrov around 100 kilometers (60 miles) east of Moscow for violating public order.

The supporters had gathered outside the colony to demand access to Navalny, who is on hunger strike and demanding medical treatment for several health issues. Late on Wednesday, lawyers from the Agora rights group representing them said four of the supporters had received stints in detention centres ranging from eight to nine days. Three are members of the Alliance of Doctors medical trade union, which is critical of the government and headed by Navalny's personal doctor Anastasia Vasilyeva.

Navalny went on hunger strike last Wednesday to demand proper medical treatment for severe back pain and numbness in both legs, saying he had only been given painkillers.

He has since said he has also come down with a heavy cough and fever. On Wednesday evening, his lawyer Olga Mikhailova said she had visited the opposition figure, who was moved to the prison infirmary. —AFP

Benin troops fire tear gas to clear protesters in Save

SAVE, Benin: Benin troops fired tear gas to clear opposition protesters blockading a major road in the central city of Save yesterday three days before President Patrice Talon faces an election, an AFP correspondent at the scene said. Talon is widely expected to win a second term in Sunday's election as critics say he has sidelined his opponents, but protests began to erupt in opposition strongholds in the West African country on Monday. A column of military vehicles arrived early in the morning in Save, destroying several makeshift barricades protesters had built across roads.

They fired tear gas, sending local residents running from near the barricades, and then moved in to try to clear a major roadblock, witnesses said. "The soldiers arrived at the roadblock, they fired in the air to scare the demonstrators who were still there. The two large trucks which blocked the road were moved by their driver, but there are still large tree trunks on the way," Michaela, a Beninese transporter stuck since the day before, told AFP.

A cotton tycoon first elected in 2016, Talon is widely expected to win facing two little-known rivals with most opposition figures either living in exile or disqualified from running in the election.

Tensions had been rising since Monday in several towns in central and northern regions where opposition figures have stronger political backing. Once praised as a vibrant multi-party democracy in an often troubled region, critics say Benin has slipped into authoritarianism under Talon as his political foes were targeted in a crackdown.

Meanwhile, Benin's President Patrice Talon looks set to win re-election



A man looks on as protesters erect makeshift barricades with tires and branches during a demonstration against Benin President Patrice Talon in Toui, an opposition stronghold, Wednesday. —AFP

to a second term on Sunday in a presidential ballot critics say is already tilted in his favor after a crackdown on opponents. A cotton tycoon first elected in 2016, Talon faces two little-known rivals with most opposition figures from the West African country either living in exile or disqualified from running in the election. Protests broke out this week in several towns, mainly in opposition strongholds, as tensions built before Sunday's vote with young demonstrators blocking roads and ransacking pro-government property. Once praised as a vibrant multi-party democracy in an often troubled region, critics say Benin has slipped into authoritarianism under Talon as his political foes were steadily sidelined. Slotted between Africa's powerhouse Nigeria and tiny neighbor Togo, Benin has seen some economic successes in five years under Talon, with improved roads, water and energy supplies. But analysts say its pluralist politics are now dimmed. Talon has played up his economic programs while campaigning. —AFP

International

Biden tackles 'ghost guns' and US firearms violence

Nearly 40,000 Americans die each year from shootings

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden is unveiling measures aimed at curbing rampant US gun violence, especially seeking to prevent the spread of untraceable "ghost guns," White House officials said.

Biden has come under pressure from his Democratic party to tackle the bloodshed, most recently highlighted by mass killings as far apart as Colorado, Georgia and California. In addition to relatively modest measures on the politically hyper-sensitive issue, Biden will announce his nomination of David Chipman, a gun-control proponent, to head the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives—a central agency in the fight against gun violence.

made weapons are especially of concern because when found at crime scenes "they cannot be traced." Other measures include boosting support for agencies involved in tackling community violence and ordering the first comprehensive report on firearms trafficking in the United States since 2000. Nearly 40,000 Americans die each year from shootings, more than half due to suicide.

"Gun violence takes lives and leaves a lasting legacy of trauma in communities every single day in this country, even when it is not on the nightly news," the White House said in a statement.

"In fact, cities across the country are in the midst of a historic spike in homicides, violence that disproportionately impacts Black and brown Americans. The president is committed to taking action to reduce all forms of gun violence."

Bigger proposals absent

Absent, however, will be any big measures on seeking to tighten overall gun laws, such as more background checks or ending the sale of powerful rifles often used in mass killings. The official stressed that the measures—where Biden will be accompanied at the Rose Garden announcement by Attorney General Merrick Garland—are only "initial" steps.

Biden has long promised to get tough on a US gun culture that he says fuels an epidemic of mass shootings, as well as the even more deadly, yet less reported, daily stream of gun crimes and suicides. The Democrat says he supports tighter background checks for firearms buyers and a ban on military-style rifles, like the AR-15. Both ideas face strong resistance in Congress.

A semi-automatic resembling the iconic US military M16 rifle, the AR-15 has become reviled by many as the weapon of choice in a string of mass murders. At the same time, though, the rifle is enormously popular with sports shooters and legal gun enthusiasts, symbolizing the country's ideological divide. Biden successfully backed an assault weapons ban in 1994 when he was a senator. The law expired a decade later, however, and has never been renewed, with Republicans increasingly rigid in opposing what they depict as an attack on the more than two centuries-old constitutional right to bear arms. — AFP

old Rodriguez said. Having lost her job at a travel agency due to the pandemic, and making ends meet on \$80 per month from a temporary job as a social media administrator, she quickly found herself responsible for her mother, 59, her grandparents aged 67 and 80 and a cousin, 52, all brought low by COVID-19.

Caring for them at home due to a shortage of hospital beds, she soon found herself in need of \$300 per day just to pay for her family members' medicines. She pawned her car, but this was not enough. Rodriguez put a call out on GoFundMe for \$5,000, and received \$1,075 from donors—money without which "I would be burying my mother now," Rodriguez said with a quivering voice.

Like the rest of South America, Venezuela is



Ecuadorean presidential candidate for "Union por la Esperanza" party Andres Arauz attends the closing rally of his campaign next to Ecuadorean former president (2007-2017) Rafael Correa's sister, Pierina Correa (center right), in Guayaquil, Ecuador, on Wednesday.—AFP

Arauz has plans to change Ecuador's course if elected

QUITO: Leftist presidential candidate Andres Arauz has big plans to change Ecuador's course if elected on Sunday, when he faces right-wing contender Guillermo Lasso in a runoff. Arauz, 36, wants to renegotiate a \$6.5 billion debt with the International Monetary Fund, alter anti-narcotics agreements with the United States, and even hold President Lenin Moreno legally responsible for his handling of the hard-hit country's coronavirus response. Despite wanting to renegotiate the IMF agreement, "we're not going to declare a moratorium against the IMF," Arauz told AFP.

He said that under a renegotiated deal, he would seek a slower reduction in public spending and insist that US dollars "must be kept in Ecuador so there's greater economic activity." Separately he would aim to negotiate with Washington to redraw accords on fighting drug trafficking. The United States can currently conduct operations against drug trafficking and illegal fishing in Ecuadoran territory and is even permitted to use an airport on the Galapagos Islands.

battling a harsh new pandemic wave fueled, authorities say, by more infectious virus variants from Brazil. Officially, the country has had 165,000 cases and nearly 1,700 deaths, but observer groups such as Human Rights Watch question the numbers, which they say are likely vastly underestimated.

'Help my grandmother'

Finding a bed in a public hospital grows more difficult by the day, and the prices in private clinics—from \$1,000 to \$3,000 per day—are out of reach for most in this recession-hit country with a minimum wage of less than one dollar a month. On the GoFundMe site there are more than 2,300 appeals for all types of support, mainly for money to buy medicine and oxygen tanks from Venezuelans

The world's top two cocaine producers are neighboring Colombia and Peru, with much of the output passing through Ecuador on its way to either Europe or the United States. "We cannot forget that the US is the (main) consumer country of drugs in the region and on the planet," Arauz said.

"Given that, we aim to adjust the cooperation conditions. There must be cooperation with the US, Mexico, the Central American countries and our neighbors." Ecuador seized a record 128 tons of drugs in 2020, even though the country produces very little itself. "Unfortunately, Ecuador is a transit country and that's starting to have ramifications in terms of social violence," said Arauz. "We're going to act to eradicate the violence, we're going to cooperate with consumer countries."

Ecuador has been hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic and Arauz made no attempt to hide the fact that he blames Moreno, who is the ally-turned-enemy of Arauz's political mentor, former president Rafael Correa. Correa, who left office in 2017, has been convicted of corruption and sentenced to eight years in prison, although he lives in exile in Belgium. "The country needs to determine the truth, so that there's justice, so that someone is held responsible for the negligence in the management of the pandemic," Arauz said. "That will happen and we will leave the courts to do their work," he added. "It's not political revenge, Ecuadoran society demands justice. —AFP

largely fighting the epidemic on their own.

A well-known singer and even a politician are on the site asking for help with hospital fees, while a television presenter, also registered on the site, has since died. "Help me to save my Mom's life," reads one of the entries. "Help my grandmother get through COVID-19," states another.

"I know that nobody has enough money... I would be very grateful if you could help with a donation, no matter how small," Rodriguez wrote in hers. Maria Angelina Castillo went on GoFundMe last year, when Venezuela was in pandemic lockdown, looking for help to pay for cancer treatment at a time hospitals were overrun with coronavirus patients. "There is no other way. It is GoFundMe or die," she said.—AFP



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden speaks about infrastructure investment from the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House campus Wednesday.— AFP

Reflecting the lack of political unity around anything to do with firearms restrictions, the ATF has not had a Senate-confirmed director since 2015. Chipman is a veteran of the agency who went on to work for a gun control advocacy group and there is no one "better to enforce gun laws," a senior Biden administration official told reporters. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Biden would be issuing six measures "to address the gun-violence health epidemic."

Standing out is a proposed new rule to "stop proliferation of ghost guns," as firearms built from home kits are known. The official said these home-

GoFundMe or death: Venezuelans seek online help in COVID

CARACAS: Four family members with COVID-19, zero savings and no relief from Venezuela's collapsed public health system: Gabriela Rodriguez saw no option but to seek help from crowdfunding. She is one of a growing number of people in the inflation and sanctions-hammered country looking online for assistance on sites such as GoFundMe.

"This has been a nightmare, a horror," 31-year-

International

Aid flows into cyclone-struck Indonesia as death toll rises

Cyclone Seroja forecast to hit Australia Sunday

LEMBATA, Indonesia: Two Indonesian navy ships packed with aid arrived yesterday in a cyclone-ravaged section of the archipelago, as the disaster's death toll rose to nearly 180 people, including dozens killed in neighboring East Timor. The vessels docked in hard-hit Lembata and Adonara island with hospital ships also en route to the ravaged cluster of islands in eastern Indonesia where thousands have been left homeless and

(93 miles per hour) and intense rainfall that could cause flash flooding" on parts of the coast, the Bureau of Meteorology said.

Emergency services warned holidaymakers—many camping or travelling in caravans—to leave ahead of forecast weekend storms that would be quickly followed by the cyclone. "If you remain in the area in a tent or caravan, you are at risk," said assistant commissioner Paul Ryan, adding that

lier this week after the cyclone proved one of the most destructive storms to hit the region in years. Dozens more are still missing and thousands have been left homeless.

Torrential rains from Tropical Cyclone Seroja, one of the most destructive storms to hit the region in years, turned small communities into wastelands of mud and uprooted trees, sending thousands fleeing to shelters amid widespread power blackouts. The storm on Sunday swept buildings in some villages down a mountainside and to the shore of the ocean on Lembata, where one of the aid ships arrived yesterday.

The navy vessels are packed with food, including rice and noodles, as well as blankets and other materials for some of the region's more than 20,000 evacuees. "The two navy ships arrived today," said KOMPIANG Aribawa, a regional naval base chief. "Another ship will arrive later today carrying military personnel who will be deployed to help people in the aftermath of the disaster," he added. A cargo plane left Jakarta for the disaster-struck region with about 100,000 face masks, virus test kits, as well as prepared food and blankets for survivors, Indonesia's disaster agency chief said earlier.

At least 140 people have been listed as dead in Indonesia. Another 37 were killed in East Timor—a tiny half-island nation of 1.3 million sandwiched between Indonesia and Australia that is officially known as Timor-Leste. More than 70 people are still listed as missing, with disaster agency officials deploying sniffer dogs to search mountains of debris for bodies—and any survivors. Rescuers have spent the past few days using diggers and shovels to extract mud-covered corpses from the debris. Hospitals, bridges and thousands of homes were damaged or destroyed by the storm.

Authorities in both countries were also battling to avoid COVID-19 outbreaks in cramped evacuation shelters. Fatal landslides and flash floods are common across the Indonesian archipelago during the rainy season, with deforestation often the cause, environmentalists say. The disaster agency has estimated that 125 million Indonesians—nearly half of the country's population—live in areas at risk of landslides. — AFP

could catch tourists on the wrong side of "the ditch", as locals call the Tasman Sea separating the neighboring nations, potentially forcing them to undergo costly hotel quarantine on their return home. There are currently 95 active COVID-19 cases in New Zealand—the security guard and 94 who were detected at the border—and all are housed in a special quarantine facility. Most of the positive tests are from travellers from India who flew to New Zealand via Dubai. Ardern said the suspension of entry to New Zealand for arrivals from India would run from April 11-28. "During this temporary suspension the government will investigate options to manage risk," she said. "We have never previously suspended travel to New Zealand citizens and residents and that's why I want to assure you this is not a permanent arrangement." — AFP



Buddhist monk Manas Kemgoh (center in white), who had been trapped in the flooded Phra Sai Ngam cave while meditating, walks after he was freed by rescue workers in Thailand's Phitsanulok province.— AFP

Meditating monk rescued from flooded cave in Thailand

BANGKOK: Rescue divers have freed a meditating Buddhist monk from a flooded Thai cave in scenes that echoed the high-profile 2018 rescue of a trapped boys' football team. Manas Kemgoh, 46, was on a pilgrimage when he entered the Phra Sai Ngam cave in Phitsanulok province, in the country's north, on Saturday to meditate.

The monk, wearing only simple brown robes, was trapped inside the cave by severe flooding, until rescuers were able to reach him. "The rescue foundation was informed on (Tuesday)... by an abbot that a monk was missing and he suspected he had gone into a cave to meditate," rescue worker Weerapong Jaighum said yesterday.

A team of divers were dispatched on Tuesday, but quickly ran into trouble. "A lot of stalactites inside the cave made it difficult for divers' rescue operation," he said, adding that heavy rainfall eventually forced them to abandon the search. On Wednesday, they mounted a second rescue operation, involving 100 people. A small team reached the monk and wrapped him in a foil survival blanket to keep him warm while they checked his state of health.

"The water level receded on the second day so we didn't have to use water pumps to pump out trapped water inside the cave," Weerapong said. He said the monk had swimming skills, had previously been diving and was able to cope well with the rescue. The monk is now in hospital with a slight fever and health workers will continue to monitor his condition. The case drew comparisons with the extraordinary saga of the "Wild Boars" football team that captivated the world in 2018.—AFP



Residents watching as rescuers extract mud-covered bodies from the debris in Lamanele village, East Flores, Indonesia after torrential rains from Tropical Cyclone Seroja, one of the most destructive storms to hit the region in years, turned small communities into wastelands of mud.— AFP

dozens are still missing.

Meanwhile, Australian authorities yesterday urged holidaymakers to evacuate a stretch of the country's western coastline in the path of a cyclone that has devastated parts of Indonesia and East Timor. Tropical Cyclone Seroja is expected to hit Western Australia late Sunday or early Monday after tracking south. It is forecast to bring "destructive winds with gusts of 150 kilometres per hour

these structures were "highly dangerous" in wild weather.

Local residents were also urged to prepare emergency kits and ensure their homes were ready for the expected impact. The cyclone is forecast to make landfall in a relatively isolated part of Western Australia—a sprawling, sparsely populated state—as a category 2 or 3 system. Almost 180 people were killed in Indonesia and neighboring East Timor ear-

from India, the departure point for most infected arrivals in recent weeks, shutting out New Zealand nationals for the first time since the pandemic emerged. The new patient is a security guard at a coronavirus quarantine hotel for returning Kiwis. He had not been vaccinated, but his only known contact outside the hotel was a co-worker who has received two doses of the vaccine, officials said.

The case highlighted the potential fragility of the travel opening, due to start on April 19 and which Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has cautioned could be disrupted in the event of new Covid-19 outbreaks. Both New Zealand and Australia have largely contained the coronavirus, with few community outbreaks in recent months which were all successfully eliminated after brief local lockdowns.

But authorities warned that future outbreaks

Fresh COVID case in New Zealand as it plans travel bubble

WELLINGTON: New Zealand health officials confirmed a fresh community case of COVID-19 in Auckland yesterday, just two days after the country celebrated its largely virus-free status by approving a travel bubble with Australia. There was no suggestion New Zealand's largest city would again be thrust into lockdown or the travel bubble plan revised. But Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern immediately announced a temporary halt to travel into the country

International

Britain slams 'bullying' Myanmar over London embassy standoff

Heartthrob actor among several celebrities being rounded up

LONDON: Britain yesterday condemned "bullying" by the Myanmar junta after the country's ambassador to London was ousted in an extraordinary diplomatic coup after calling for the release of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Diplomats loyal to the Myanmar military authorities seized control of the embassy on Wednesday, leaving ambassador Kyaw Zwar Minn locked out in the street. The ambassador said the defense attache had taken over the mission in "a kind of coup", two months after the military seized power in Myanmar. Daily protests demanding a return of democracy have rocked the country and brought a brutal response from the armed forces, with almost 600 civilians killed according to a local monitoring group.

The coup prompted several high-profile diplomatic defections, including the country's ambassador to the United Nations. The junta recalled Kyaw Zwar Minn last month after he issued a statement urging them to release Suu Kyi and deposed civilian President Win Myint. British foreign minister Dominic Raab tweeted his support for the ambassador. "We condemn the bullying actions of the Myanmar military regime in London yesterday, and I pay tribute to Kyaw Zwar Minn for his courage," Raab wrote. "The UK continues to call for an end to the coup and the appalling violence, and a swift restoration of democracy." Protesters gathered outside the mission on Wednesday evening with the ousted ambassador, who told the Daily Telegraph that "when I left the embassy, they stormed inside the embassy and took it." "They said they received instruction from the capital, so they are not going to let me in," he added, calling on the British government to intervene.

Asked who had taken over, he replied: "Defense



LONDON: Myanmar's Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Kyaw Zwar Minn, stands with police officers locked outside the Myanmar Embassy in London on Wednesday. — AFP

attache, they occupy my embassy". According to The Times newspaper, the ambassador said the defense attache had sought to install his former deputy, as charge d'affaires.

AFP has tried to contact Myanmar's military authorities for comment on the incident, but has not yet received a response.

Heartthrob actor held

Myanmar's security forces have struggled to quell protests and a civil disobedience movement aimed at stopping the military from running the country. They have used rubber bullets and live rounds to break up rallies and used night raids to arrest suspected dissidents.

The Assistance Association for Political Prison-

ers (AAPP) says at least 598 civilians have been killed and nearly 2,900 detained. AAPP said that 12 people were killed on Wednesday alone.

As part of its efforts to suppress the movement, the junta has issued a wanted notice for some 120 celebrities accused of fanning the protests by lending their support. Yesterday, the military arrested leading actor, model and heartthrob Paing Takhon in a dawn raid at his mother's home in Yangon. The 24-year-old-a star in both Myanmar and neighboring Thailand-has been active in the protest movement both in person at rallies and through his massive social media following. In February, he posted pictures of himself in a white tracksuit with a megaphone, hard hat and a white fluffy dog strapped to his chest at a protest.

International powers have voiced anger and dismay at the junta's brutal approach, but the UN Security Council has stopped short of considering sanctions, with both China and Russia against the move. A group representing the ousted civilian government on Wednesday began talks with UN investigators, saying it had gathered more than 270,000 pieces of evidence showing rights abuses by the junta.

A lawyer for the Committee for Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) — a group of MPs from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party-met the investigators to discuss alleged atrocities. The CRPH says it has evidence of more than 540 extrajudicial executions and 10 deaths of prisoners in custody as well as torture and illegal detentions. The military has defended seizing power, pointing to allegations of voting fraud in the November election which Suu Kyi's party won comfortably, and says it is responding proportionately to the demonstrations.—AFP

US warns China over moves on Philippines, Taiwan

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday warned China against what the Philippines and Taiwan see as increasingly aggressive moves, reminding Beijing of Washington's obligations to its partners. "An armed attack against the Philippines' armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific, including in the South China Sea, will trigger our obligations under the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty," State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"We share the concerns of our Philippine allies regarding the continued reported massing of PRC maritime militia near the Whitsun Reef," Price said, referring to the People's Republic of China.

More than 200 Chinese boats were first spotted on March 7 at Whitsun Reef, around 320 kilometers (200 miles) west of Palawan Island in the contested South China Sea, although many have since scattered across the Spratly Islands. China, which claims almost the entirety of the resource-rich sea, has refused weeks of appeals by the Philippines to withdraw the vessels, which Manila says unlawfully entered its exclusive economic zone.—AFP

Twitter spotlights Asia protest movements with #MilkTeaAlliance emoji

HONG KONG: Twitter has launched an emoji to spotlight the "#MilkTeaAlliance" online protest movement that has forged links between pro-democracy activists across Asia, the social media giant said yesterday. The alliance-named for the shared love of sugary tea drinks across Hong Kong, Thailand and Taiwan-emerged last year in an expression of cross-border solidarity and shared fear of authoritarian China. The campaign gained steam at a time when Hong Kong was emerging from months of pro-democracy protests and urban youth in Bangkok and other Thai cities were beginning their own street confrontations with authorities, demanding reform to the country's military-drafted constitution and other rights. It has since spread to Myanmar-where tea with condensed milk is a staple breakfast accompaniment-after a coup ousted the country's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in February, sparking a mass uprising. "To celebrate the first anniversary of the #MilkTeaAlliance, we designed an emoji featuring 3 different types of milk tea colours from regions where the Alliance first formed

online," Twitter said on Wednesday. The image appears in any tweet featuring the hashtag in English, Thai, Korean, and several other Asian languages. "Always in solidarity, no matter how hard the times," veteran Hong Kong pro-democracy Joshua Wong tweeted in response to the news, using the English and Chinese versions of the hashtag.

The term has been used on Twitter more than 11 million times since last April, the platform said, with usage again spiking after the Myanmar coup. The military regime there has imposed overnight internet shutdowns and blanket mobile data restrictions to try and bring weeks of unrest to heel.

It has also directed local telecom service providers to block access to social media sites, which protesters have skirted by using virtual private networks and foreign SIM cards. "We strongly believe that having access to the free and #OpenInternet is an essential right and remain a staunch defender and advocate of free expression and condemn #Internet-Shutdowns," Twitter said in its announcement of the new emoji. — AFP



YANGON: Protesters hold signs relating to the "Milk Tea Alliance" during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon. Twitter has launched an emoji to spotlight the "#MilkTeaAlliance" online protest movement that has forged links between pro-democracy activists across Asia, the social media giant said yesterday.— AFP

International

China weighs carrots and sticks in push to vaccinate millions

Beijing aims to fully inoculate 40% of 1.4 billion people by June

BEIJING: Tickets to tourist attractions, shopping coupons, and report cards naming and shaming stores where staff haven't been vaccinated: China is veering from compulsion to persuasion in its bid to inoculate its population from COVID. The country has administered around 140 million doses—most people will require two shots—since vaccinations began last year and aims to fully inoculate 40 percent of its 1.4 billion people by June.

But many in China have been slow to sign up for jabs, feeling they are no longer at risk of catching the virus as the country has largely brought domestic outbreaks under control. China reported just 11 domestically transmitted cases yesterday, while life has returned largely to normal in most parts of the country, where most malls, nightclubs and amusement parks have been open for a year.

Keen to meet vaccination goals, local officials have had to get creative. Walls across the narrow alleys of Beijing's Xicheng district are now plastered with green, yellow and red signs, indicating the vaccination rate of people working and living in roadside stores and courtyard homes.

"I feel it's a little strange," said Wang Ying, a



BEIJING: People line up to be vaccinated against the COVID-19 coronavirus, at a vaccination center next to a residential compound in Beijing yesterday.— AFP

barista at a cafe that had received a red sign right by its door—the lowest grade of less than 40 percent vaccination. "I originally thought vaccination should be based on individual wishes but now it seems like everyone must get the vaccine."

Wang told AFP she had reservations about the safety of the vaccines, but that she and her col-

leagues would eventually all get jabs. "In the food and beverage business, doing so will put everyone more at ease," she said. Meanwhile, Daxing, a suburban district of Beijing, is handing out shopping coupons to people who have received the full two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine. Neighborhood committees in another district have promised

boxes of eggs to older residents who have been inoculated, while others who receive their jab have been promised free visits to the popular Lama Temple tourist site.

But elsewhere, Chinese authorities and employers have opted for compulsion rather than persuasion to vaccinate millions of people. Officials in southwestern China's Yunnan province, which recently discovered a small outbreak, last week launched a push to vaccinate all residents of Ruili city within five days, state media reported. It's unclear how easy it will be to opt out of having the jab in the city, which borders Myanmar, where escalating unrest since a February 1 military coup has raised fears that people may try to cross into China if the violence intensifies.

National vaccination numbers have shot up in recent weeks, with a long line of residents waiting outside one inoculation center in Beijing's Chaoyang district yesterday. "I'd been thinking about it for a while, because this is a new thing, but now more and more people have been getting the vaccine," Zhang, a young man waiting in line to register for a shot, said.— AFP

Crushing election defeats for South Korea's ruling party

SEOUL: South Korea's conservative opposition won landslide victories in elections for the mayors of the country's two biggest cities, results showed yesterday, in a bad sign for Moon Jae-in's Democratic Party a year before the next presidential poll. Both Democratic-held posts became vacant last year as a result of sexual harassment allegations, with Seoul mayor Park Won-soon killing himself while the leader of the southern port of Busan resigned. Between them, the two municipalities account for around a quarter of the national population and the vote was seen as a significant barometer of public opinion ahead of the March 2022 presidential election.

In Seoul, Oh Se-hoon of the conservative People Power Party defeated his Democratic opponent by 57.5 percent to 39.2 percent, according to the National Election Commission, winning all the city's 25 districts. Oh pledged to "embrace the many citizens of Seoul who are in pain".

The conservatives' margin of victory in Busan was even higher, at 62.7 percent to 34.4 percent. Moon and his Democratic Party have been struggling with plummeting ratings in recent months amid public outrage over soaring housing prices, deepening inequality, and corruption and sex abuse scandals involving senior officials. "I solemnly accept the people's reprimand," Moon said, according to the presidential spokesperson, promising: "I will lower myself and carry out state affairs with a much heavier sense of responsibility."

The two new mayors will serve out the re-

maining 14 months of their predecessors' four-year terms.

It was the first time turnout at local elections had exceeded 50 percent, the commission added. Moon—who is limited to a single term by South Korea's constitution—saw his approval ratings plunge to a record-low 32 percent last week, with 58 percent disapproving of the job he is doing, according to a survey by Gallup Korea.

The latest vote result is in stark contrast to the parliamentary elections one year ago, when the Democratic Party enjoyed a sweeping victory that gave it a super-majority in the National Assembly.— AFP



SEOUL: Oh Se-hoon (center), mayoral candidate of the main opposition People Power Party, holds flowers as he celebrates with party members as they watch televisions broadcasting the results of exit polls for the Seoul mayoral by-election at the party's headquarters.— AFP

Australia says politicians no longer exempt from sexual harassment rules

SYDNEY: Australian politicians will no longer be exempt from rules against sexual harassment at work, the conservative government announced yesterday as it tries to quell public anger over parliamentary sex abuse scandals. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said his government would overhaul the country's sexual discrimination laws to make members of parliament, judges and public servants accountable for harassing colleagues in the workplace.

"It's about getting everyone on as much of a playing field as possible," he told reporters in Canberra. MPs, judges and public servants are currently exempt from anti-harassment rules that apply to other Australian workplaces, though they can still face criminal prosecution for sexual assault. The move was in response to a "Respect@Work" report—handed down more than a year ago following a national inquiry into sexual harassment—and comes just weeks after sexual abuse allegations rocked Australia's halls of power.

A young ex-staffer in Morrison's Liberal Party recently went public with allegations she was raped by a colleague in parliament in 2019, while a senior minister was forced to deny raping a 16-year-old when they were both students in the 1980s. Critics said the cases, and the government's apparent initial reluctance to act, have highlighted a "toxic" and sexist culture in Australia's parliament.

Attorney-General Michaelia Cash—who last week replaced the rape-accused minister in the government's top legal role—said other proposed legislative changes would include classifying sexual harassment at work as "serious misconduct" and making it valid grounds for dismissal.

The government also plans to extend the period in which a victim can report an incident from six months to two years, she added.

Nationwide protests

The Respect@Work report was drawn up by the government's own sex discrimination commissioner, Kate Jenkins, and Morrison has been under growing criticism for failing to act on its 55 recommendations since it was first submitted in January 2020.

The prime minister rejected the criticism yesterday, saying his government had already committed to funding several recommendations it felt were high priority. "Last year, we were very focused on those very urgent needs to protect women at a time when they were very vulnerable during COVID," he said.

"We put the additional resources in and now we're in a position to address these more systemic and longer-term issues which are very important and I'm pleased we're able to do that today." The rape allegations sparked nationwide protests, with tens of thousands of women taking to the streets to call for gender equality and an end to sexual violence. In recent weeks, Morrison's coalition government has been rocked by a litany of new sexual abuse and harassment complaints.

A media blitz aimed at showing Morrison's empathy with women has only added to the furor through a series of missteps, and he eventually demoted two top ministers in an attempt to draw a line under the scandals. The government says it hopes to introduce the amended legislation to parliament by June.— AFP

Friday Times Lifestyle

FRIDAY, APRIL 9, 2021

www.kuwaittimes.net

A man reads from a large printed version of the Quran, Islam's holy book, at the Grand Mosque of Yemen's capital Sanaa, as believers prepare themselves in the week ahead of the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan.— AFP

In Russia, the legend of cosmonaut Gagarin lives on

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Lifestyle | Feature



This picture shows K-pop group Brave Girls perform during a rehearsal for a Youtube-livestreamed commercial event at a studio in Gwacheon, south of Seoul. — AFP photos



This picture shows K-pop group Brave Girls members (from left to right) Hong Eun-ji, Kim Min-young, Nam Yu-jeong and Lee Yu-na talking with a staff member during a rehearsal.



This picture shows K-pop group Brave Girls members (from left to right) Hong Eun-ji, Kim Min-young, Nam Yu-jeong and Lee Yu-na pose during an interview with AFP.

VIDEO SAVED THE K-POP STARS: BRAVE GIRLS REBORN VIA YOUTUBE

The Brave Girls were losing courage just weeks ago, on the verge of breaking up and abandoning their dreams of K-pop stardom after years of going nowhere. Then a pseudonymous YouTuber called Viditor uploaded a compilation of them performing on South Korean army bases—and saved their careers. “Rollin’ rollin’ rollin’ rollin’/I am waiting for you/Babe just only you,” they chant, as wildly enthusiastic uniformed conscripts dance and wave glowsticks. It went viral and struck millions of chords across the country.

Less than a month later the song reached number one in South Korea and topped the Billboard K-pop 100 in the US, four years after it was originally released—with their popularity reinforced by their story of struggle against the odds. The fan-led ascent is a reversal of the usual K-pop model, where bands are usually assembled, trained intensively and launched by record companies, whose marketing and promotion is crucial to their success.

“At the start of this year I thought it was time for us to call an end to it,” lead singer Kim Min-young told AFP. “Reaction to our songs had always been cold... It seemed like no one wanted to see us on stage,” she said tearfully. The Brave Girls started out as a five-piece a decade ago, but fell largely on deaf ears. They were relaunched as a septet in 2016, but the reshuffle did nothing to boost their popularity.

Their five singles and two mini-albums were misses rather than hits, and departures over the next few years whittled them down to four members. They were reduced to performing on army bases, the South Korean equivalent of a daytime appearance on a side stage at a music festival. “Our members all felt an emotional burden,” said Kim, 30. “I wasn’t brave enough to give up on my career or start something new. And I

thought if I left the team it would be the end of Brave Girls. So I wanted to keep the team together till the end.” But their tour of duty proved to be the making of them.

‘We will definitely win wars’

South Korea requires all able-bodied men to serve in uniform to defend it against the nuclear-armed North, a period when they are often dispatched to remote places and deprived of the joys of modern life. As a common experience it is a unifier and a leveler, and Viditor’s compilation—complete with witty captions such as “Play this song during battles and we will definitely win wars”—resonated with those who had seen them in the military.

The clip garnered around 15 million views in little more than a month. “Viditor, you

have rediscovered the Brave Girls,” wrote one poster. “You are nothing short of the commander of South Korea’s 600,000 soldiers.” The uploader—who said she wanted to remain anonymous to maintain her privacy—said she had been astonished by the reaction. She has put together hundreds of compilations of other bands’ tracks but never before had similar impact. “I thought I could make an entertaining video with soldiers’ hilarious reactions and funny comments,” she said by email. “But I never saw this coming. I am still in disbelief over what has happened.”

‘Something miraculous happened to us’

The K-pop phenomenon—epitomized by the global success of BTS—earns billions of dollars a year for the world’s 12th-largest

economy. Scores of groups largely made up of teenagers are launched every year hoping to follow in their footsteps, but most acts quickly disappear, leaving barely a trace on the score of musical history. Exposure on major television stations has long been a must-have for aspiring K-pop idols. But cultural commentator Jung Ho-jai said the raunchy moves in the original “Rollin’” video were too risqué for the networks.

They were left with little choice but to take any booking going, however remote and badly paid, with Jung describing them as “relegated to what was essentially the third tier of the English football league”. But once Viditor posted her video, he said, “somehow YouTube algorithms saw potential in the clip and began displaying it to a wider audience. “It has proved how important YouTube has become as a media platform.” K-pop firms are increasingly turning to social media sites like YouTube, TikTok and Facebook to develop their bands’ fanbases. “Well over 50 new groups tap into the market every year but less than half appear on major TV stations,” Kim Jin-hyung, chief executive of Wuzo Entertainment, told AFP. “In order for idols to survive, we have to target online platforms that meet the demands of fans.” But for the Brave Girls, it was an amateur poster who made the difference. Member Lee Yu-na said: “Something very miraculous and inexplicable has happened to us.” — AFP



This picture shows K-pop group Brave Girls perform during a rehearsal for a Youtube-livestreamed commercial event.

Polish teen's fake beauty site helps lockdown abuse victims

Worried about reports of rising domestic violence during lockdown, Polish teen Kryisia Paszko set up a website purporting to be a cosmetics shop that actually offers victims covert help. "I was inspired by this French idea, where by going to the pharmacy and asking for the number 19 mask, you could signal that you were a victim of abuse," the Warsaw high school student told AFP. The 18-year-old decided that Poland could also use some kind of code during the pandemic, when families have been cooped up together under stress, with less privacy and more abuse. During the first lockdown that began in March last year, the Centre for Women's Rights, a Polish NGO, observed a 50-percent increase in calls to its domestic violence hotline. The World Health Organization also reported a surge in Europe. Paszko created the Facebook page Rumianki i Bratki (Chamomiles and Pansies) in April 2020. Featuring photos of lavender soap and cleansing sage face masks, the shop looks real. But instead of salespeople, on the other side of the screen is a volunteer team of psychologists from the Centre for Women's Rights. "If someone places an order and provides their address, that's a signal for us that a police response is required right then and there," said Paszko. Those who just want to talk will request more product information, leading the psychologists to ask coded questions like, "how does the person's skin respond to alcohol or are children's cosmetics also required."

'Under constant surveillance'

So far the team has helped around 350 people, notably offering free legal advice and action plans. Paszko said "the more restrictions there are, the harder it is to leave the house and even see a friend, the more people write to us." "And often aggressors will become more active when times are tough, when there are more infections, more restrictions, more pandemic fear." The majority of those who reach out are female and under 30 years old. The abuse can be physical or psychological and at the hands of a partner or relative. Between 10 and 20 percent of the cases resulted in calls to the police. "I remember this one young woman



Polish teen Kryisia Paszko, creator of a website supporting domestic violence victims, poses at her family house in a suburb of Warsaw. —AFP photos

who was under such constant surveillance by her partner that she could only write to us when she was bathing her child," Paszko said. The woman had previously tried to break off the relationship but her alcoholic, abusive partner refused to move out. Paszko said that thanks to her team's intervention, the police came and "made him give up his keys, informing him of the consequences if he returned." "Fortunately that was the end of the harassment."

Istanbul Convention

For her efforts, Paszko won the EU's Civil Solidarity Prize, a 10,000-euro (\$12,000) award for COVID initiatives. Paszko said that the problem of domestic abuse in Poland "is somewhat disregarded and neglect-



Polish teen Kryisia Paszko, creator of a website supporting domestic violence victims, works on a computer in her family house.

ed... More government support is needed." She cited the Istanbul Convention, a landmark international treaty combating violence against women. Poland's justice minister announced last year that he had set in motion the process to withdraw from the treaty, arguing it contained provisions that undermine conservative family values and are "ideological in nature". The plan triggered an outcry at home and abroad.

Last week, lawmakers from the governing conservative Law and Justice party and far-right MPs voted in favor of a draft law to quit the treaty. They sent it to committee after outnumbering those who had wanted to kill the project. Initiated by the ultra-conservative organization Ordo Iuris, the "Yes to Family, No to Gender" bill proposes an alternative convention banning abortion and gay marriage. —AFP

Tokyo, as you've never seen it before

It's Tokyo, but unlike you've ever seen it before — a miniaturized 1:1,000 scale version of one of the world's biggest capitals, displaying everything from sea levels to population densities. Pairing a 3-D model with projection mapping, the Urban Lab project at Tokyo's Mori Building aims to display information about the Japanese capital in different and visually arresting ways.

"We usually can't grasp the whole picture of the city in a bird's-eye view, but looking at it this way, we can see how attractive Tokyo is as well as its challenges," Shinji Takeda, senior manager at Mori Building, told AFP at the facility.

Launched in 2019, the project covering 13 of Tokyo's 23 districts is intended to help researchers and private developers think about the city. Visitors can spot landmarks including the red-and-white Tokyo Tower and endless apartment blocks in precise 3-D detail, replicating a sprawling 230 square kilometers (90 square miles).

Projection-mapping on top of the model offers a range of information — including how railways intersect with the physical landscape and where businesses and populations are concentrated. Road and railway network projections throw into relief the comparatively underdeveloped parts of the megacity, while other visual information depicts Tokyo's various vulnerabilities.

For example, mapping over the model with altitudes and sea levels illustrates which areas are prone to flooding from rivers, canals and the sea. Given Japan's exposure to natural disasters, ranging from earthquakes to typhoons, understanding those vulnerabilities is key, said Takeda.

He cited the example of a massive 2019 typhoon that caused significant flooding along Tokyo's Tama river. "We saw the importance of learning how the city has developed in terms of its terrain and which areas are more vulnerable in heavy rain," he said. "In this facility, you can see not only how earthquakes but also a variety of



TOKYO: This picture taken on December 14, 2020 shows a 3-D model of the Japanese capital Tokyo in a miniaturized 1:1,000 scale version, presented by the Urban Lab project at Tokyo's Mori Building. —AFP

other issues affect a disaster-prone Tokyo."

Tokyo is often considered to be expanding and developing wildly, without a particular plan, in part because earthquake requirements are regularly updated and buildings are overhauled to meet new rules.

And the exhibit will keep changing with the city, updated each year to reflect the loss of old buildings and the appearance of new ones. "Tokyo keeps growing," said Takeda. "It's not a city where visitors simply see history as if they're reading an old textbook. It keeps changing and growing every day, and that is another element of the city that people can enjoy." —AFP

No more weird tan lines: Spain drops sunbathing mask rule

Holidaymakers can breathe a sigh of relief: shortly after making masks obligatory on the beach, Spain now says they won't be necessary while sunbathing or swimming if social distancing is respected. The law, which came into force last week, sparked a huge backlash in Spain which is heavily dependent on tourism, particularly in coastal areas which are gearing up for summer and lobbying hard for the introduction of vaccination passports.

But following talks late Wednesday, government health officials and those from Spain's 17 regions agreed to modify the law, meaning people can now remove masks on the beach if they remain in one place, "respecting the minimum 1.5-metre (5-foot) security distance from people they don't live with," a health ministry statement said. But if they walk along the beach, they must put them back on, it said. It also clarified other activities when masks can be removed, including while swimming in the sea, in lakes, reservoirs or rivers as well as both indoor and outdoor swimming pools. Masks can also be removed for "strictly necessary" moments of eating or drinking in public. Masks first became obligatory on public transport in early May 2020 in a bid to reduce COVID-19 infections, and within weeks were made compulsory in the street for anyone aged six and above. Anyone violating the rules faces a fine. Spain has so far lost over 76,000 lives to the virus and counted more than 3.3 million cases. —AFP

INDIGENOUS SOFTBALL TEAM BATS AWAY MEXICO MACHISMO



Players of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, pose for a picture after a softball match against “Guerreras de Piste”, in Hondzonot, municipality of Tulum, Quintana Roo State, Mexico. —AFP photos



Players of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, warm up before a softball match against “Guerreras de Piste”.



A player of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, catches the ball during a match against “Guerreras de Piste”.

Barefoot and resplendent in traditional embroidered garments, women from an indigenous Mayan community in rural Mexico are challenging gender stereotypes and the country’s machismo culture on a dusty softball field. There are no locker rooms or manicured lawns where the Little Devils of Hondzonot play visiting teams, in their village in the southeastern state of Quintana Roo. Spectators, mostly men with a beer in their hand, sit on rocks in the shade of trees to protect against the harsh sun. But the fans were not always there to cheer for the Little Devils. One of the first barriers that the team encountered was sexism, said captain Fabiola May.

“They didn’t think we could play as we’re women, but we’ve shown them that we can do just as much as men and even more,” the 29-year-old said proudly. “Now our husbands support us a lot. There are still people who criticize us, but we don’t care.” Most of the players are mothers and housewives. Some make a living selling handicrafts—a trade that like many has become much less lucrative during the coronavirus pandemic, which has taken a heavy toll on Mexico.

‘Part of us’

After more than an hour’s delay, the visiting team finally took to the field. May gave final instructions to her players in the Mayan language. Their opponents on this occasion were the Piste Warriors from neighboring Yucatan state, also made up of Mayan women but competing in trousers, T-shirts and sneakers. The 20 Little Devils of Hondzonot village choose to play barefoot because they find it more comfortable. It is one of their hallmarks, along with their colorful huipil garments, embroidered by hand using techniques passed down through the generations.

“We decided to use our huipil as our uniform because it’s a part of us, of our identity as Maya,” said Juana Ay Ay, 37, wearing a huipil adorned with violet flowers. The traditional garment, the fruit of several months’ work, helps to make the high temperatures in Quintana Roo more bearable. The Little Devils also wear earrings and makeup on the field to help mark each game as a celebration for them.

‘I know we can’

The amateur team was born three years ago when the local authorities offered to teach the women of Hondzonot a sport. The official support faded away, but the players’ love of the game lives on. At first they used tennis balls and borrowed equipment, but today they have their own thanks to a donation from their heroes, the Mexico City Red Devils professional baseball team. All of the Little Devils’ games are friendlies. Mexico has no professional women’s softball league, although there is talk of creating one.

The country qualified for the first time for the softball event at the Tokyo Olympics with a

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Players of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, celebrate during a softball match against “Guerreras de Piste”.



Players of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, wait for their turn to play during a softball match against “Guerreras de Piste”.



Players of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, celebrate during a softball match against “Guerreras de Piste”.



A player of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, shows a self-autographed ball after a match against “Guerreras de Piste”.



A player of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, hits the ball during a softball match against “Guerreras de Piste”.

team made up mostly of players of Mexican descent who were born and compete in the United States. Mexico is number five in the women’s ranking of the World Baseball Softball Confederation behind the United States, Japan, Canada and Puerto Rico. The Little Devils hope to be a part of the future success of the sport, which has been present in Mexico for more than a century.

In addition to the long-standing challenges facing their community, the coronavirus pandemic has destroyed many jobs in the tourism and construction sectors. Without money for gasoline, they can only play at home. But their experience as a team has given them inspiration for life off the field too. “Here, as you can see, there are a lot of needs and poverty,” said May. “When you want to, you can. At first I didn’t believe that this would happen. I said that we couldn’t, but now I know we can and we’ll be able to do more as a team,” she said. —AFP



A player of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot” in action against “Guerreras de Piste”.



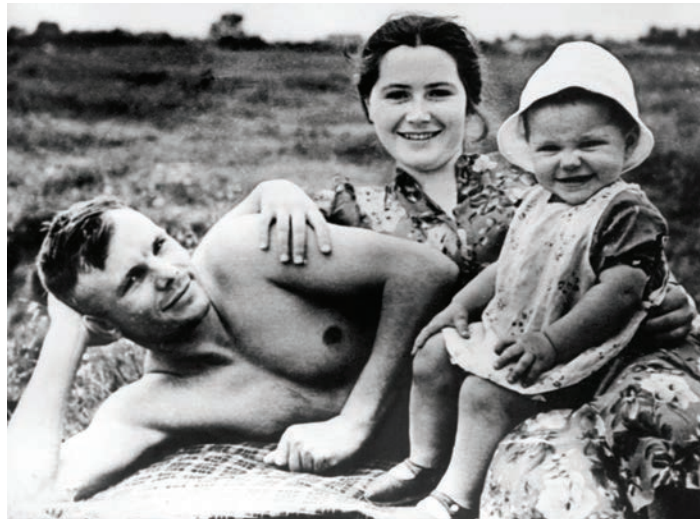
A player of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot” in action against “Guerreras de Piste”.



A player of “Las Diablillas de Hondzonot”, prepares to play a softball match against “Guerreras de Piste”.



In this file photo taken on July 11, 1961 first cosmonaut in history Yuri Gagarin salutes the crowd upon his arrival in London during an official visit in England. — AFP photos



In this file photo Soviet cosmonaut Major Yuri Gagarin, first cosmonaut in history, poses on the beach of Glasma with his wife Valentina and daughter Jelena in June 1960.



In this file photo taken on April 12, 1961 Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Alexeyevich Gagarin in the Vostok 1 command capsule.

Sixty years after he became the first person in space, there are few figures more universally admired in Russia today than Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. His smiling face adorns murals across the country. He stands, arms at his sides as if zooming into space, on a pedestal 42.5 meters (140 feet) above the traffic flowing on Moscow's Leninsky Avenue. He is even a favorite subject of tattoos. The Soviet Union may be gone and Russia's glory days in space long behind it, but Gagarin's legend lives on, a symbol of Russian success and-for a Kremlin keen to inspire patriotic fervor-an important source of national pride.

"He is a figure who inspires an absolute consensus that unifies the country," says Gagarin's biographer Lev Danilkin. "This is a very rare case in which the vast majority of the population is unanimous." The anniversary of Gagarin's historic flight on April 12, 1961 — celebrated every year in Russia as Cosmonautics Day-sees Russians of all ages lay flowers at monuments to his accomplishment across the country. The enduring fascination comes not only from his story of rising from humble origins to space pioneer, or even the mystery surrounding his death. Gagarin, says historian Alexander Zheleznyakov, was a figure who helped fuel the imagination. "He transformed us from a simple biological species to one that could imagine an entire universe beyond Earth."

Humble beginnings

The son of a carpenter and a dairy farmer who lived through the Nazi occupation, Gagarin trained as a steel worker before becoming a military pilot and then, at age 27, spending 108 minutes in space as his Vostok spacecraft completed one loop around the Earth. He was lauded for his bravery and professionalism, an example of the perfect Soviet man, but his legend was also imbued with tales of camaraderie, courage and love for his two daughters and wife Valentina Gagarina. Long a secret, Gagarin wrote his wife a poignant farewell letter in the event that he died during his mission.

"If something goes wrong, I ask you-espe-

cially you-Valyusha, not to die of grief. For this is how life goes," he wrote, using a diminutive for Valentina. In an interview with AFP in 2011, cosmonaut Boris Volynov recalled a man who, despite sharing privileges of the Soviet elite, spent hours on the phone to procure medicine or a spot in a hospital for his less well-off friends. On his return to Earth, Gagarin found himself at the center of a propaganda campaign on the superiority of the Soviet model. Biographer Danilkin says Gagarin was used by authorities as an example to the rest of the world, but also to convince Soviet citizens, who had endured World War II and Stalin-era repressions, "that the sacrifices of the previous decades were not in vain".

President Vladimir Putin, he said, has co-

opted that legacy to cement his own hold on power, promoting Soviet victories to encourage support for his 20-year rule. "The current authorities methodically appropriate popular cults: first that of victory during World War II, then the conquest of space," Danilkin says.

Tragic hero

Like all great Russian heroes, Gagarin is a tragic figure. His death during a training flight in 1968 at the age of 34 remains a mystery because authorities never released the full report of the investigation into the causes of the accident. Partial records suggest his MiG-15 fighter jet collided with a weather balloon, but in the absence of transparency, alternative theories abound.

In this file photo taken on April 12, 1961, the Vostok-1 spaceship blasts off on top of Rocket R-7 from the Baikonur space center with Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin on board for the first manned trip into space.

IN RUSSIA, THE LEGEND OF COSMONAUT GAGARIN LIVES ON



Milestones in space exploration

From Yuri Gagarin to the first man on the Moon and the robot that landed on a comet, we look at 10 key dates in space exploration.

1957: Sputnik

Moscow launches the first satellite, Sputnik 1, on October 4, 1957, ushering in the Cold War tussle for the cosmos. The beach ball-sized aluminum sphere takes 98 minutes to orbit the Earth and sends back the first message from space, simple “beep-beep-beep” radio signals. A month later Sputnik 2 carries the first living being to fully orbit the Earth, a small street dog called Laika. She dies after a few hours.

1961: Gagarin, first man

On April 12, 1961 Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin becomes the first man in space, completing a single, 108-minute orbit aboard Vostok-1. Twenty-three days later Alan Shepard becomes the first American in space when he makes a 15-minute trip. On June 16, 1963 cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova becomes the first woman in space. It takes a full 40 years for the old Cold War rivals to be joined in space by a third country, when China sends up Yang Liwei onboard Earth orbiter Shenzhou 5.

1969: Walking on the Moon

US astronaut Neil Armstrong is the first man to step onto the Moon on July 21, 1969, Buzz Aldrin joining him around 20 minutes later. Between 1969 and 1972, 10 astronauts—all American—walked on the Moon as part of NASA’s Apollo program.



In this file photo Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin is seen in 1961.

1971: Space station

The Soviet Union launches the first orbital space station, Salyut 1, on April 19, 1971. Another Russian space station, Mir, follows. It is brought back to Earth in 2001 after 15 years in orbit. Construction of the still-operating International Space Station (ISS) starts in 1998. The biggest man-made structure in space, it orbits Earth 16 times a day.

1976: Mars

US spacecraft Viking 1 becomes the first

to successfully land on Mars on July 20, 1976 and sends back images of the Red Planet. The robot Opportunity explored Mars between 2004 and 2018, with NASA’s Curiosity Rover still active there. About 40 missions are sent to Mars, more than half of which fail.

1981: Space shuttle

The US space shuttle Columbia, the first reusable manned spacecraft, makes its first voyage on April 12, 1981. It is followed by Challenger, Discovery, Atlantis and Endeavour, which serve the ISS until the shuttle program winds up in 2011. The US has since depended on Russia to transport its astronauts to the ISS. Two US shuttles were destroyed in flight, with the loss of 14 astronauts: Challenger in 1986 and Columbia in 2003.

1990: Hubble

Hubble is the first space telescope to be placed into orbit on April 25, 1990, 547 kilometers (340 miles) above the Earth. It revolutionizes astronomy, allowing scientists to observe the planets and distant stars and galaxies unimpeded.

2001: Tourism

On April 28, 2001 Italian American multi-millionaire Dennis Tito, 60, becomes the world’s first space tourist. He pays Russia \$20 million to stay on the ISS for eight days. In all, seven space tourists have taken Russian flights to the ISS. The US company SpaceX is planning to launch its first space tourism mission at the end of 2021.



In this file photo taken on April 12, 1961 Yuri Gagarin, 27, (1934-68) wearing cosmonaut helmet, prepares to board Soviet Vostok 1 spaceship at Baikonur rockets launch pad shortly before its take-off to become the first man to travel in space, completing a round-the-Earth circuit.

2008: SpaceX

SpaceX becomes the first private firm to successfully launch a rocket into the Earth’s orbit in September 2008. Its Dragon cargo ship becomes the first commercial spacecraft to visit the ISS in May 2012, on a mission for NASA. Since then, SpaceX has conquered the satellite launch market with its Falcon 9. After flights in 2020, SpaceX has planned two other manned launches for NASA to the ISS in 2021, including one which will lift off from Florida on April 22 with French, American and Japanese astronauts.

2014: Comet landing

The European Space Agency places a small robot, Philae, on a comet more than 500 million kilometres from Earth on November 12, 2014. The first comet lander is part of a mission aiming to explore the origins of the Solar System. The manmade object that is furthest away from the Earth is the unmanned US spaceship Voyager 1, launched in 1977 and still travelling. In August 2012 it made it into interstellar space, about 13 billion miles from Earth.

2021: Moon to Mars

NASA sees the Moon as a pit stop for missions to Mars. It aims to send the first woman to the Moon by 2024. Perseverance became the fifth rover to set wheels down on Mars on February 18, laying the groundwork for NASA’s first attempt at powered, controlled flight on another planet. — AFP



A woman tours the museum of Russia’s leading rocket-space enterprise RSC Energia in Korolyov outside Moscow.



This combination of pictures shows Sergey Denisov, the owner of the art tattoo studio, and his tattoo of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space.



This combination of pictures created in Saint Petersburg on April 3, 2021, shows Nastya Rotova, 35, and her tattoo of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space.



This combination of pictures created in Sochi on March 27, 2021, shows Nikita Gomonov, 31, and his tattoo of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space.

Five things to know about Gagarin's journey to space

Sixty years ago on Monday cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first person in space, securing victory for Moscow in its race with Washington and marking a new chapter in the history of space exploration. Decades later, his journey has become shrouded in myth after many details about the historic mission were for years kept secret by the Soviets. Here are five things to know about Gagarin's legendary flight:

'Let's go!'

A trained steel worker turned military pilot, Gagarin was selected from thousands of candidates to undergo the rigorous training required for a space flight. Apart from showing excellent results in his tests, Gagarin, then aged 27, also reportedly stood out by removing his shoes before entering the Vostok spacecraft designated for the mission, a custom in Russia when entering a home. On April 12, 1961, as Gagarin's flight took off from the Baikonur spaceport in Kazakhstan, he exclaimed his iconic catchphrase "Poekhali!", or "Let's go!" in Russian.

Risky business

The flight lasted just 108 minutes as the Vostok completed one loop around the Earth. Once Gagarin safely returned home, the success of his mission outshone the fact that not everything went according to plan. Among a dozen technical glitches, his spacecraft entered into orbit at a higher altitude than expected. If its brakes system had malfunc-

tioned, Gagarin would have had to wait for the spacecraft to begin descending on its own. And while the Vostok was stocked with enough food, water and oxygen to last 10 days, the higher altitude meant the wait would have been much longer and Gagarin would have run out of supplies. Luckily for the Russian cosmonaut, the brakes worked.

Spy suspicions

But Gagarin came down miles away from his expected landing point, ejecting from his capsule over the Saratov region in southern Russia. He landed in a field where the first people he saw were a young girl and her grandmother digging up potatoes. Clad in a white helmet and orange spacesuit, he strug-

gled at first to convince them amid Cold War tensions that he was not a foreign spy.

Urination nation

Legend has it that before takeoff Gagarin asked the bus driver bringing him to the launchpad to pull over so he could relieve himself, before urinating on the back right tyre. For years Russian cosmonauts repeated the ritual before launching into space, but the decades-old superstition may soon be forced into retirement: the new design of the Russian spacesuit presented in 2019 is not equipped with a fly and is too heavy to nimbly remove.

The man behind Gagarin

While Gagarin became a household name in the Soviet Union, for years nobody knew about the mastermind of the country's space program: Sergei Korolyov. The Soviets even rejected a Nobel prize awarded to their "Chief Designer", determined to keep his identity a secret. Only after his death in 1966 was his name revealed. Under Korolyov's leadership, the USSR sent not only the first person to space, but later the first woman, as well as conducting the first spacewalk. — AFP



In this file photo taken on August 19, 2015 employees prepare spacesuits at the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

THE WORLD ART DUBAI ANNUAL EVENT



Visitors attend the World Art Dubai annual event.—AFP photos



Egyptian artist Rabab Tantawy paints at the World Art Dubai annual event.



An artist takes part in a live graffiti jam battle at the World Art Dubai annual event.



Artworks by Zahra Goulamhousen are exhibited at the World Art Dubai annual event.



A woman visits the World Art Dubai annual event.



Children visit the World Art Dubai annual event.

Kids Page

Word Search

Name: _____ Date: _____

I Love Guitar
Word Search

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

Acoustic
Amplifier
Borrie
Bass
BB King
Bridge
Capo
Chet Atkins
Chord
Classical
Diagram
Double Stop

Dreadnought
Electric
Fingerboard
Fret
Headstock
Jimi Hendrix
Lead Guitar
Luthier
Neck

Pegs
Pick
PIMA
Pluck
Popular
Portable
Rhythm Guitar
Strings
Tuning

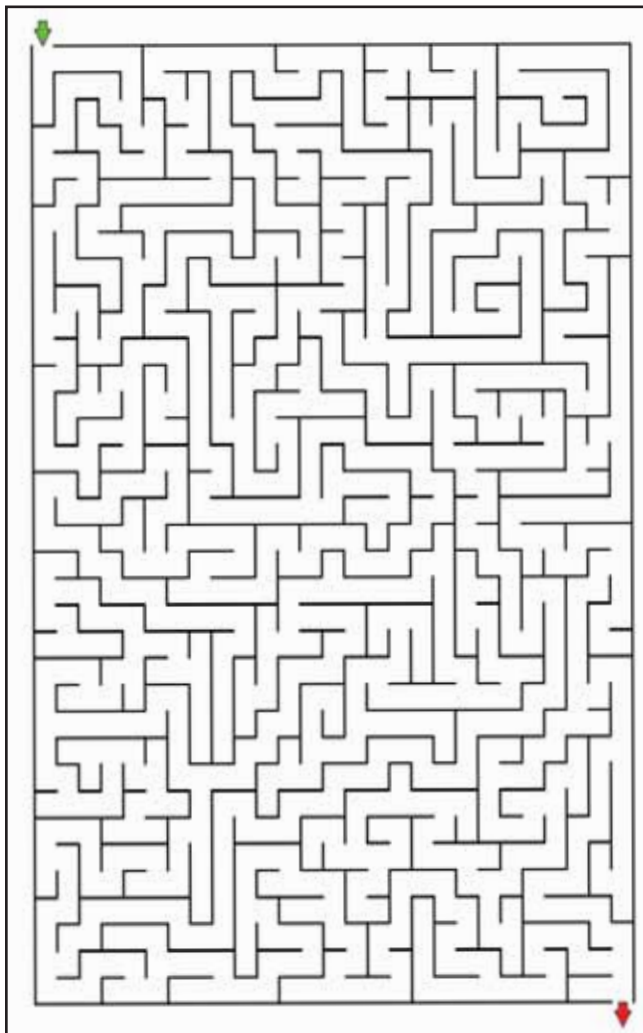
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A	H	B	X	C	G	M	Q	I	I	Z	B	K	T	X	L	H	R	E	B	J
J	I	M	I	H	E	N	D	R	I	X	T	S	C	X	P	A	R	Y	Y	C
T	R	F	P	K	Q	I	I	T	Y	U	K	M	P	I	L	L	O	J	J	L
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U	T	M	R	K	K	P	N	C	S	B	M	O	F	T	I	K	D	E	K	S
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R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



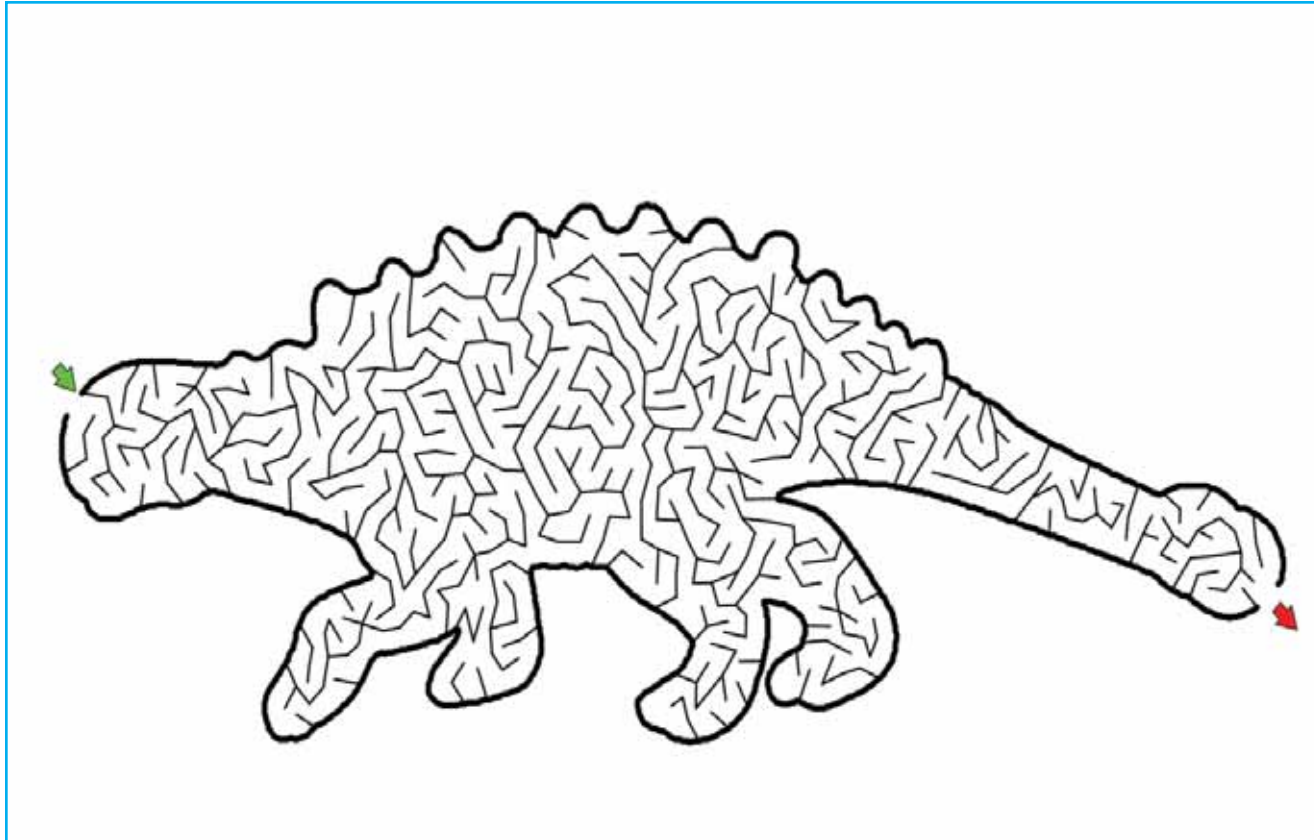
Color It



Kids Mazes



Find the way



Word Scramble

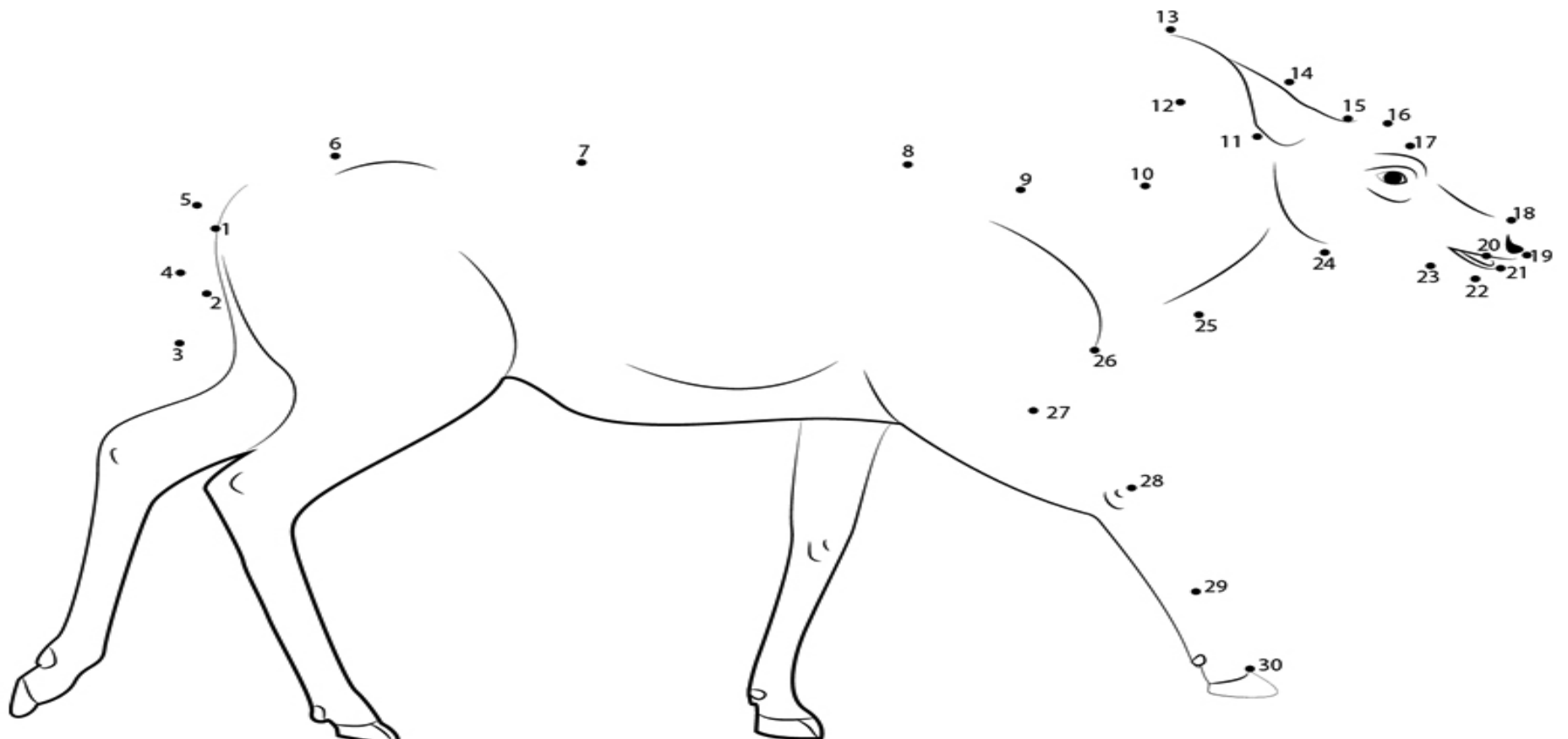
Groundhog Day

WORD SCRAMBLE AND CROSS: Unscramble each of the words on the left and write them in the grid. When the puzzle is complete the shaded letters going down will spell out what goes on in the Groundhog's den all winter long.

LHOE										
DIPERCT										
RYAEBURF										
EDN										
RWORBU										
PGRNSI										
WHDOSA										
THWERAE										
HINUENSS										
UYLODC										
IRNWTE										



Join the dots



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With 2 percent vaccinated against COVID so far, Africa on 'sidelines'

ABIDJAN: Africa is on the "sidelines" of the worldwide vaccination drive against COVID-19, with only two percent of the global total to have received jabs, the World Health Organization (WHO) said yesterday, citing supply, funding and personnel shortfalls. WHO's director for Africa, Matshidiso Moeti, blamed the slow pace of vaccinations in Africa on "inadequate supplies, lack of financing and lack of qualified personnel" as well as logistical problems.

Speaking to an online press briefing, she noted in particular that exports of vaccines from India under the Covax global vaccine-sharing facility had slowed. Africa has been the least affected by the pandemic, with 4.3 million cases including 114,000 deaths in an overall population of 1.2 billion, according to the latest figures from WHO Africa. The global death toll is 2.9 million.

Mohamed Malick Fall, head of the eastern and southern Africa section of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), told the press briefing that delivery has hit transport snags as well as logistical woes over refrigeration requirements. These problems have led to wastage, he added.

But Fall said vaccines through the Covax program are now "arriving in all African countries" and appealed for improved efficiency and distribution capacities. Both Moeti and Fall recognized the "reticence" in Africa over the AstraZeneca vaccine, the most widely used in the Covax scheme, with concerns over side effects making world headlines. Both stressed the importance of shunning rumor and disinformation. They recalled that resistance to the polio vaccine had been overcome in many African countries, notably Nigeria. — AFP



CAPE TOWN: South African Health Minister Zweli Mkhize is inoculated with a COVID-19 vaccine shot at the Khayelitsha Hospital in Cape Town on February 17, 2021. — AFP

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Stars

STAR TRACK

**Aries (March 21-April 19)**

Today you might decide to sequester yourself at home, catch your breath, get your thoughts together, and recall the events of the past several days. You will also plan for the future, Aries, as you feel especially optimistic and energetic enough to pursue whatever goals you have. At some point you're likely to share this with a close friend and seek his or her support and opinion.

**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

Taking care of chores around the house might bring some home matters to your attention that need to be taken care of, Taurus. Perhaps there are a few minor repairs to make, or maybe you need a new piece of equipment or furniture. You should be optimistic about the future and confident enough to get back into your daily routine without feeling any letdown.

**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**

A group you're associated with but have been neglecting may be on your mind today. You might want to fulfill your obligations to it. You could also consider completing a long-term project that was put on hold over the past week or so. Tying up loose ends may take up much of your time today and keep you busy, Gemini. Don't forget to take a little time for yourself. You are your first priority!

**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**

Money may be coming your way through a contract of some kind. This is a positive development. Make sure you read every word in the document before you commit to anything. This is a good time to ask for a loan or fill out paperwork regarding scholarships, grants, or other forms of financial support. The process is going to be less complicated than you imagined, Cancer. Things should manifest quickly.

**Leo (July 23-August 22)**

Are you sometimes afraid of appearing silly in front of people, Leo? The fear of failing in the eyes of others might be holding you back from real progress. The celestial energies are asking you to think about this carefully today. With all of your analytical strengths and abilities, just think of all that you could accomplish if you had the courage to take more risks!

**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**

You usually like to think of yourself as being a scientific, logical person, Virgo, but today you may think more like a mystic. Your intuition is more active than usual, and you might come up with the same words as someone close to you. You might also feeling especially inspired to work in an innovative way. Use your intuition and go for it!

**Libra (September 23-October 22)**

Social invitations or opportunities to participate in group activities should come your way for a few weeks, Libra. Your phone could ring off the hook. Relations with others should be warm, friendly, and congenial, so any sort of get-together you schedule or attend today should go well and be informative. In the evening, plan a romantic encounter with the special person in your life.

**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**

You're thinking about your future career development, Scorpio, and you aren't happy with your current situation. Advancement is on your mind. Perhaps you seek a promotion or you want another job or you prefer to change careers entirely. This is the time to get your head together and firm up your plans. Success is on the horizon, but only if you work toward it.

**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**

Today is a good day to take time out for the small, sensual pleasures, Sagittarius. Perhaps this is a day for dessert, particularly chocolate or cheesecake. Don't forget about the pleasures that nature can bring. You may want to spend time in a park or forest or next to a lake, breathing in the fresh air and soaking up the beauty. You may also enjoy indulging in a massage.

**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**

Some time alone with a special person is definitely called for today, Capricorn. The social whirl of recent weeks has put you in touch with a lot of old friends and enabled you to make new ones. Now it's time to relax at home. You might discuss your plans for your future together, perhaps regarding possible changes in your living situation. You might also give some thought to your career.

**Aquarius (January 20- February 18)**

The possibility of moving out of your neighborhood may have occurred to you before, Aquarius, but events today might have you finally making up your mind to do it. Perhaps too many good neighbors have moved away, or maybe some good fortune has made it possible for you to move to a bigger place. There is much to consider and decide before it happens, but if this is what you really want, go for it.

**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**

Today you might be pleasantly surprised to realize that you're in far better financial shape than you thought. You could discover a hidden talent for money management that you didn't think you had. You might also be anticipating a raise or some other increase in income. Optimism and enthusiasm are what drive you today, Pisces. Your hopes for the future seem more grounded in reality than ever.

Country Codes

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

Business

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NANJING: The high-tech hound uses sensors and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to 'hear' and 'see' its environment-and can even be taken for walks. — AFP

Chinese tech firm develops robo-dogs

AlphaDog, a robotic response to China's love for pets, technology

NANJING, China: It's whip fast, obeys commands and doesn't leave unpleasant surprises on the floor-meet the AlphaDog, a robotic response to two of China's burgeoning loves: pets and technology. The high-tech hound uses sensors and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to 'hear' and 'see' its environment-and can even be taken for walks. "It's really very similar to a real dog," says Ma Jie, chief technology officer at Weilan, the company behind the product.

The Nanjing-based creators say their robot dog-which moves at a speed of almost 15 kilometers (nine miles) per hour and spins on the spot like an excited puppy-is the fastest on the market. With four metal legs it is more stable than a real dog, Ma explains as one of his team swiftly kicks it to prove the point. "It can predict

the friction and height of the ground (to) adjust its height, adjust the stride frequency, and adapt to the environment," he tells AFP, as the robot slowly navigates going up a set of stairs. Its creators are using 5G technology, super-fast internet speeds with immediate reaction times, to make the robot operate autonomously.

Ma studied reinforcement learning-the study of how to reinforce actions through reward or punishment-at the University of Oxford and says he has used that knowledge to inform how the AI dog mimics canine habits. Dog ownership was banned under the leadership of communist China's founder Mao Zedong-but has since boomed dramatically.

And in the first month of sales, more than 1,800 AlphaDogs have trotted off the shelves,

despite the hefty price tag of 16,000 yuan (\$2,400). "Orders are mostly from computer developers, tech geeks, and also kids, who really seem to like it," said Ma.

Robot rollout

As China seeks to upskill its workforce, Beijing has been making huge investments in robotics and AI. Robots are already used to deliver parcels, serve in restaurants, offer information at stations and even take throat swabs for COVID-19 tests.

The Weilan workshop is staffed by young tech enthusiasts, filled with pencil design sketches and a central obstacle route of stairs and slopes for the machines to clunk over in testing. Developers there hope future uses of

their four-legged friend could benefit the visually impaired. "To help the disabled is an important developing direction for us," says Ma. "When the robot dog has the function of vision, hearing and dialogue too, it can easily interact with disabled people, and lead them to the supermarket or the bus." Future software updates will include the dog "barking"-and beyond that, even add human voices to allow conversations between pet and owner.

There is also a larger "enterprise" dog model, designed for industrial inspections of machinery or pipes. The next generation of the AlphaDog in pet form could also introduce "personalities" to the dog's toolkit to make them even more canine-like, as well as extend its somewhat brief battery life. —AFP

Business

Northern Ireland riots signal dark new chapter for Brexit

Post-EU rules are stoking fury among pro-UK sections

DUBLIN: A week of rioting in Northern Ireland is the first evidence Brexit turbulence may be boiling into unrest in the British province, where post-EU rules are stoking fury among pro-UK sections. The unrest emanates from the unionist community—which believes in Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom—and where some feel a new post-Brexit “protocol” is an existential threat.

Last week violence flared in the city of Londonderry, before spreading to the capital Belfast and outlying areas over Easter weekend and into Monday. Small bands of masked males set cars alight and tossed petrol bombs and masonry at police, injuring 41 officers. Police formed ranks with riot shields and armored vehicles to retake the streets, arresting teens and young adults. “There is no doubt that Brexit and the advent of the protocol has significantly damaged the balance of power,” Ulster University politics professor Duncan Morrow told AFP. “This has been brewing for months.”

Border troubles

Northern Ireland was the site of “The Troubles”—a 30-year sectarian conflict that killed 3,500 people. Unionist paramilitaries, British security forces and armed nationalists-seeking to unite the territory with the Republic of Ireland—waged battle until a landmark peace deal in 1998. The accord let unionists and nationalists coexist by blurring the status of the region, dissolving border checks with fellow European Union member Ireland. Britain's shock 2016 referendum decision to leave the bloc threatened to upset that arrangement, by requiring the return of the border checks.

Eventually a special “protocol” was agreed for Northern Ireland, shifting checks away from the land border to Northern Irish ports, on



An employee works at the Seko Logistics and warehousing company as the demand for warehousing has surged in the Netherlands since the United Kingdom departed the European Union in 2020 known as Brexit, in Schiphol. — AFP

goods arriving from Britain. It came into effect when a Brexit transition period ended at the start of 2021.

‘Rewarding violence’

The new checks—effectively keeping Northern Ireland in the EU's customs union and single market—have already disrupted trade with mainland Britain. But for many unionists the deeper issue is a sense of betrayal. Regional justice minister Naomi Long, of the centrist Alliance Party, said British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government “promised people unfettered access, which is not the case”.

“They denied the existence of borders, even as those borders were being erected,” she told the BBC Wednesday. Johnson's spokesman on Tuesday declined to comment on the factors driving the unrest, but offered sympathies for the injured officers and backed police appeals for calm. Belfast Telegraph crime correspondent Allison Morris wrote that rioters have little interest in the complexities of UK-EU trade, “but they do know they're angry”.

“They do understand that they have been

betrayed by the very British government that their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were slavishly loyal to,” she wrote.

Some also believe that Brexit negotiators bowed to nationalists who tacitly threatened a bloody response to any resumption of checks on the Irish border. “That has created a powder-keg precedent whereby many young loyalists look at the protocol and conclude that violence is rewarded,” unionist activist Jamie Bryson told the News Letter paper. Earlier this year, protocol checks were suspended at Belfast and Larne ports when graffiti appeared threatening staff.

Graffiti has also appeared in unionist areas depicting the gun crosshairs symbol and the phrase “all bets are off”. But Brexit is only one plank in a wider crisis within unionism in Northern Ireland. In 2017 unionists lost their historic majority at the regional assembly at Stormont. Then the 2019 UK election returned more nationalist than unionist MPs for the region for the first time. Meanwhile there is evidence of a demographic shift towards nationalists, feeding a sense of unionists as a besieged minority. —AFP

Norway authorities towing stray cargo ship to safety

OSLO: Norwegian maritime authorities said late Wednesday that they had begun towing a Dutch cargo ship that was drifting dangerously towards the coast after the crew were forced to abandon it. The 12-man crew of the “Eemslift Hendrika” was rescued Monday in a challenging two-stage operation after they issued a distress call while steaming from Bremerhaven in Germany to the Norwegian port of Kolvereid. The cargo ship was carrying several smaller vessels, and began to list after high winds and huge waves displaced some of its cargo.

The “Eemslift Hendrika” also suffered an en-

gine failure and started drifting towards the Norwegian coastline. Eight of its crew members were airlifted by helicopter from the cargo ship's deck by Norwegian rescue services but the last four had to jump into the water to be plucked from the sea.

Video images showed strong waves rocking the ship as it listed to the starboard (right) side. Towing operations were due to have begun Thursday, but the ship deviated from its predicted trajectory and drifted even closer towards the coast, prompting maritime authorities to rush into action. “The tow is now attached,” the Norwegian Coastal Administration (Kystverket) said on its website late Wednesday. “The risk of grounding has been averted.”

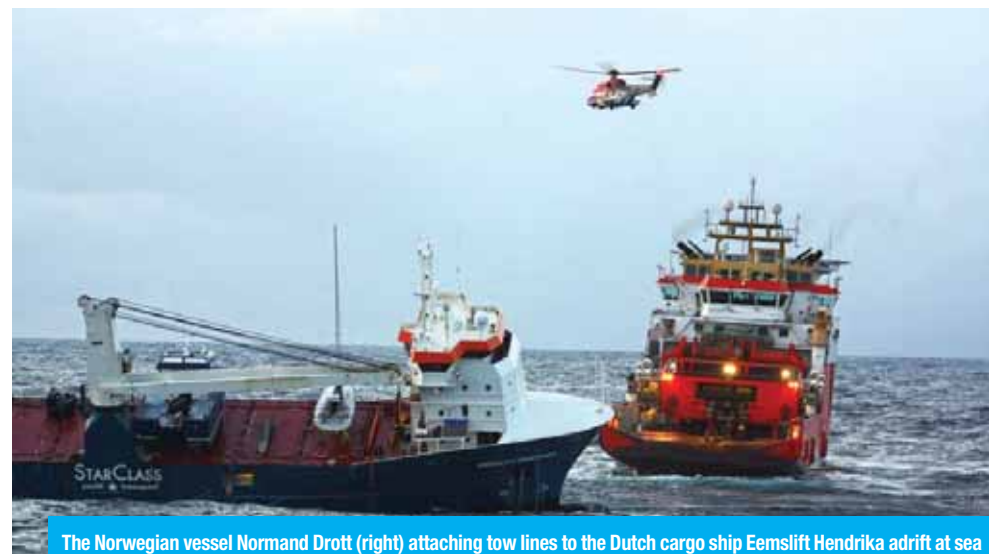
Yesterday, the “Eemslift Hendrika” was being towed slowly towards the Norwegian port of Alesund and Kystverket said “no particular challenges” had been encountered overnight. — AFP

German industrial orders jump on renewed demand

BERLIN: German industrial orders climbed for the second month in a row in February on resurgent domestic demand despite a drop in orders from abroad, official data showed yesterday. Orders rose by 1.2 percent month-on-month, federal statistics office Destatis said in seasonally adjusted figures, slightly exceeding the 1.0 percent forecast by financial services provider Factset.

Compared with February 2020, new orders were up by 5.6 percent, Destatis said. The month-on-month February increase was driven by a surprise 4.0 percent jump in orders from within Germany, Destatis said, with domestic demand resurgent despite ongoing coronavirus restrictions in Europe's biggest economy. Industrial orders are closely watched as a key indicator of future economic activity, especially in manufacturing powerhouse Germany.

The February jump comes after a 0.8 percent rise in January, revised down from the initial Destatis estimate of 1.4 percent. “Orders in the manufacturing sector continue their upwards trend...and exceeded February 2020 levels for the fifth month in a row,” the economy ministry said in a statement, singling out strong demand in car production and machine-tool making. —AFP



The Norwegian vessel Normand Drott (right) attaching tow lines to the Dutch cargo ship Eemslift Hendrika adrift at sea off Norway, west of the city of Aalesund. — AFP

Business

International support grows for raising taxes to fund recovery

IMF, US join campaign to raise taxes on wealthy firms

WASHINGTON: The IMF and United States on Wednesday gave a boost to the international campaign to raise taxes on wealthy firms that have done well during the pandemic in order to finance recovery efforts. The renewed support for tax changes comes as G20 finance ministers said they would continue work on a minimum corporate tax aimed at undermining the use of tax havens internationally, with a deal possible by July. The plan also has the support of France and Germany but US President Joe Biden's administration on Wednesday took the first step by announcing it intended to raise domestic corporate taxes and clamp down on loopholes to ensure US companies making huge profits, at home or overseas, pay a minimum amount to the government. "Destructive tax competition will only end when enough major economies stop undercutting one another and agree to a global minimum tax," US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said.

Yellen this week also said she wants the G20 to reach a global agreement on taxation to prevent firms from evading levies by establishing headquarters in countries with lower rates—a practice prevalent among tech companies.

IMF support

The IMF backs that idea and also argues that higher taxes on wealthy firms and individuals, even if temporary, could finance policies needed to ensure recovery from the pandemic. "The IMF has been calling for a minimum, global corporate income tax rate as a way to interrupt the race to the bottom in corporate income taxation," said Vitor Gaspar, head of the IMF's Fiscal Affairs Department.

US President Joe Biden last week announced plans to raise corporate taxes to pay for a massive \$2 trillion infrastructure and jobs program. The US proposal "is in the context of an effort at the global level to combat tax avoidance and evasion and to make sure that large multinational corporations pay their fair share in taxation," Gaspar told reporters during the

fund's spring meetings. The powerful US Chamber of Commerce however expressed opposition to raising taxes, saying it would "hurt American businesses and cost American jobs."

Irish finance minister Paschal Donohoe on Tuesday also expressed "reservations" over the global proposal. Ireland is considered a major tax haven, but Donohoe rejected the notion the country has sought a "race to the bottom."

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has been leading the charge on reaching a global tax agreement, and its chief Angel Gurría said there is a "unique opportunity" this year to advance the issue and "ensure the fair taxation of multinational companies, including digital companies." In his statement to the IMF meeting, he said such a deal could increase global corporate income tax revenues by up to \$100 billion a year.

The IMF also has promoted the option of

using a "recovery contribution" or surcharge on personal or corporate incomes given that some major companies have done very well during the pandemic.

The IMF said increased tax resources can be used for measures to support national economies, notably aimed at accelerating COVID-19 vaccination campaigns and ending the pandemic, which will generate returns and boost growth. Vaccinations will "more than pay for (themselves), providing excellent value for public money invested in ramping up global vaccine production and distribution," the IMF said in its Fiscal Monitor report. Fund economists calculated that controlling the pandemic sooner than expected—so that most countries have broad and affordable access to vaccines by early 2022 — means "stronger economic growth" and more than \$1 trillion in cumulative tax revenues for advanced economies by 2025.—AFP



SAN FRANCISCO: Workers operate an excavator as they make infrastructure repairs on Wednesday in San Francisco, California. President Biden last week unveiled a \$2 trillion jobs and infrastructure plan paid for in part by an increase in the domestic corporate tax rate, and by sweeping up corporate profits stashed overseas.—AFP

nary wires are available, a joint statement said. They are designed to run up to 600 kilometers (375 miles) on each hydrogen charge, and "should begin service in 2025," Alstom France head Jean-Baptiste Eymeoud was quoted as saying. The contract is worth 190 million euros (\$225 million) for the 12 first trains, which are to seat 218 passengers and be divided evenly among the four regions in eastern and southern France.

Alstom first tested prototypes in Germany three years ago and has now begun a commercial phase with 41 orders for the 72-metre-long (yards) trains. They are designed to combine onboard hydrogen with outside oxygen via a fuel cell mounted in the roof that powers

the motors. "This is another step towards 'zero emissions' in public rail transport," the French-language statement quoted Christophe Fanichet, head of SNCF's Voyageurs unit, as saying.

SNCF currently operates 1,100 regional express trains that use diesel fuel, and which it plans to phase out by 2035. It is also testing alternative technologies based on batteries and a "green" fuel made from colza. Hydrogen is considered a leader in the race to develop sustainable energy sources and slash carbon emissions.

But it is expensive to produce and the electricity needed generates a lot of carbon dioxide emissions or other pollutants.—AFP

Longtime tax target Amazon now leads charge for reform

WASHINGTON: A longtime lightning rod for critics of corporate tax avoidance, Amazon now wants to lead the way on reform. Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos this week endorsed a higher corporate tax to help fund infrastructure as part of a "balanced solution that maintains or enhances US competitiveness." The move by Amazon comes after years of criticism by activists who claim it pays little or no corporate taxes.

According to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, an advocacy group, Amazon had an effective 9.4 percent federal income tax rate last year on profits of \$20 billion after two years of paying no taxes. The low rate is partly explained by the Trump-backed 2017 reform which cut business taxes. But Amazon also benefitted from "depreciation breaks" on its investments and on stock options, according to the institute.

President Joe Biden, who is proposing a \$2 trillion infrastructure program funded in part by increasing the corporate tax rate from 21 percent to 28 percent, last month singled out Amazon as an example of corporate tax avoidance. Biden referred to a 2019 study showing many of "the biggest companies in the world, including Amazon... pay not a single, solitary penny of federal income tax," the president said.

Amazon has defended its policies, engaging in heated debate with political leaders at times, saying that its investments offset taxes as intended by the tax code. "We pay every penny we owe. Congress designed tax laws to encourage companies to reinvest in the American economy," Amazon tweeted in response to a 2019 comment from Biden as a candidate.

Amazon noted that its tax provision from last year—the closest approximation to federal taxes paid—was \$1.7 billion, and that it paid billions more in payroll taxes, customs duties and state and local taxes. Daniel Shaviro, a New York University law professor and taxation specialist, said Amazon and other firms often use "aggressive tax planning" and can sometimes outmaneuver authorities, but mostly are just taking advantage of what the law allows.—AFP

French rail firm orders 12 hydrogen trains

PARIS: French national railway SNCF said yesterday it has ordered 12 hydrogen-powered trains to begin tests in four regions in 2023 as it eyes a zero-emissions future with the nascent technology.

The trains are to be built by the French industrial group Alstom and operate on either hydrogen or electricity when overhead cate-

Business

Spat in Spain over bailout of tiny Venezuela-linked airline

Row rages over \$62m government bailout extended to Ultra Plus

MADRID: A multi-million-euro rescue of a tiny airline with just four planes has sparked controversy in Spain, with its leftwing government under fire for extending special treatment to the Venezuela-linked firm. The row is over a 53-million-euro (\$62 million) government bailout extended in early March to Ultra Plus, an obscure airline that links Spain with Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.

The money came from a 10-billion-euro rescue fund created by the government of Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez to help strategically important firms hit hardest by the pandemic. But the move drew a sharp rebuke from Spain's right-wing opposition, which regularly attacks the government over its stance on Venezuela, notably accusing hard-left coalition partner Podemos of being funded by Caracas.

"It's a scandal that's growing by the day and the government is offering no explanation," said Antonio Gonzalez Terol, a lawmaker with the right-wing Popular Party which wants a parliamentary inquiry into the matter. The liberal Ciudadanos has also urged the European Commission to open an inquiry, while the far-right Vox has filed a complaint with the Supreme Court.

A strategic asset?

In November, the government offered a 475-million-euro lifeline to Air Europa, Spain's second-largest airline, which has been badly hit by



The row is over a 53-million-euro (\$62 million) government bailout extended in early March to Ultra Plus, an obscure airline that links Spain with Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.

the plunge in air traffic. But Ultra Plus is at the opposite end of the scale, counting 156,000 travellers on 800 flights in 2019, compared with Air Europa's 19 million passengers on 165,000 flights, figures from Spanish airport operator Aena show.

"What's strategic about an airline with four destinations and a market share of less than 0.1 percent, which was posting losses long before Covid and doesn't even figure among Spain's top 30 airlines?" asked Ciudadanos leader Ines Arrimadas. For the press and the right-wing opposition, the explanation lies in the relationship between Caracas and Podemos, whose leader Pablo Iglesias once served as an advisor to the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.

Plus Ultra has its headquarters in Madrid, but its main shareholders are Venezuelan business-

economy reopens, which sparked a selloff in bonds and some rocky trading sessions on Wall Street. The FOMC meeting minutes showed most central bankers saw inflation as under control, with the risks "broadly balanced," but there was a split on the fear prices could spike.

"Several remarked that supply disruptions and strong demand could push up price inflation more than anticipated," the minutes said. But, "Several participants commented that the factors that had contributed to low inflation during the previous expansion could again exert more downward pressure on inflation than expected." Meanwhile, despite the strengthening recovery, FOMC members warned that "the path ahead remained highly uncertain, with the pandemic continuing to pose

considerable risks to the outlook." In particular, they raised concerns about the labor force participation rate, a measure of the economy's active workforce, which in February was at 61.4 percent. Though it has recovered from the lowest point of the pandemic, it is near levels not seen since the mid-1970s.

Some committee members worried "labor force participation continued to be held down by workers' health concerns and additional childcare responsibilities associated with virtual schooling," and would not improve until those are addressed. In the March employment data released last week, the labor force participation rate posted a minuscule increase to 61.5 percent compared to 63.4 percent in January 2020. —AFP

men who have been denounced by Spain's opposition as having close links to Caracas.

The issue has also greeted with the tiny airline's competitors. "We demand the same treatment... it is unacceptable to discriminate between airlines," Airline Association head Javier Gandara told El Mundo newspaper. But in Caracas Venezuela's foreign minister Jorge Arreaza played down the affair. "All of this is politics. When I read about the affairs of the Spanish, I laugh a lot... When we kill a cockroach here, it's on Spain's front pages the following day," he said. Madrid issued a statement saying Plus Ultra offered a service that "complemented" that of "the larger companies" and that the airline's passengers were mostly Latin Americans "mainly travelling to visit their family". —AFP



The Federal Reserve building is seen in Washington, DC — AFP

Fed members say inflation remains under control

WASHINGTON: Most US central bankers viewed inflation as stable, but some are becoming more vocal about fears the COVID-19 pandemic will push prices higher, according to minutes of last month's Federal Reserve meeting released on Wednesday. Fed officials also expressed concern the pandemic was constraining the American labor force.

The policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) took no major action at the March 16-17 meeting, keeping its benchmark lending rate at zero to help the economy recover from the business disruptions and mass layoffs caused by COVID-19. While warning the recovery was incomplete, Fed Chair Jerome Powell acknowledged the rebound has been faster than expected thanks to relief measures approved by Congress, including the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan enacted last month.

However, the massive spending has raised fears inflation will increase as the world's largest

Uniqlo operator Fast Retailing raises outlook

TOKYO: Uniqlo's parent company Fast Retailing said yesterday it expects a stronger rebound in full-year operating profit driven by a solid performance in East Asian countries hit less hard by virus lockdowns. The Japanese clothing empire forecast 2020/21 operating profit of 255 billion yen (\$2.3 billion) — up slightly from its previous estimate of 245 billion yen. That marks a rise of 70.7 percent from the year before, when business began to be hit worldwide by the COVID-19 pandemic with many shops forced to close for extended periods.

In the first six months of this financial year, Fast Retailing logged a 0.5 percent dip in revenue year-on-year to 1,202.8 billion yen. But operating profit in the same period was up 22.9 percent from 2019/20 at 167.9 billion yen. "Performance in most regions of Uniqlo International, as well as within Global Brands, reported declines in revenue and profits due to the severe impact of COVID-19," the firm said in a statement.

"However, a strong rise in profit at Uniqlo Japan and in the Uniqlo Greater China region, both of which saw a more limited impact from the pandemic, contributed to the increase in group consolidated profit." After years of aggressive expansion, Fast Retailing is vying to be the world's most valuable clothing firm, challenging Spanish fast-fashion giant Inditex—which owns Zara—for the top spot.

Earlier this year the Japanese group's market capitalization overtook that of Inditex for the first time, but it has since fallen back behind. Fast Retailing said on Thursday it would continue to open new stores and expects to have 2,337 Uniqlo stores worldwide by the end of August, of which 813 will be in Japan. The group also owns fashion retailer Theory and French brands Comptoir des Cotonniers and Princesse Tam Tam.

At a press conference, Fast Retailing's billionaire founder Tadashi Yanai was asked about the group's stance on using cotton from the far western Chinese region of Xinjiang. H&M and other fashion brands have been pilloried in China for statements voicing concern about allegations of forced labour in cotton fields in Xinjiang. —AFP

Sports

Suns burn first place Jazz, Durant delivers perfect shooting night

LOS ANGELES: Devin Booker did the heavy lifting offensively, scoring 35 points as the Phoenix Suns edged the Utah Jazz 117-113 in overtime in a Western Conference showdown between the two best teams in the NBA.

The Suns not only won their seventh straight game, but the nail-biting victory gives them an important psychological edge over the Jazz as the pandemic-shortened 72-game NBA season nears the final stretch. "It came down to perseverance," said Booker of the thrilling match that lived up to its pre-game billing. "We had the right approach. It wasn't a pretty win but anytime you can beat a team like that it is a good."

The second place Suns improved to 36-14 and cut the Jazz's lead atop the Western Conference to one and a half games. Both teams came into the contest having won nine of their last 10. Chris Paul had 29 points and nine assists and Deandre Ayton finished with 18 points and 12 rebounds for Phoenix, who picked up their second win in two meetings with the Jazz this season.

Donovan Mitchell scored a game-high 41 points for the Jazz. Mitchell forced the overtime with a key three pointer late in regulation in front of the crowd of 5,100 at PHX Arena. Bojan Bogdanovic scored 20 points and Rudy Gobert chipped in 16 points and 18 rebounds for the Jazz, who have lost two in a row on the road.

Elsewhere, Kevin Durant scored 17 points in his timely return from injury absence as the Brooklyn Nets clobbered the New Orleans Pelicans 139-111 in New York. It was a perfect

shooting night for Durant whose return came after star point guard James Harden went out with a hamstring injury.

Durant liked being thrown into the game after starting the night on the Nets bench. "It worked out. I wasn't trying to ease into the game," said Durant, who came off the bench for just the second time in his career. "I knew exactly how I needed to approach it."

Durant shot five of five from the field, five of five from the free throw line and two of two from beyond the arc as he was one of seven Brooklyn players to reach double figures in front of the pandemic-limited crowd of 1,700 at Barclays Center arena.

He had missed the past 23 games with a left hamstring injury and hadn't played since February 13. The Nets were 19-4 while he was out. "It was nice to have him back. It has been a long absence. He had a big smile on his face," said Nets coach Steve Nash. Harden is expected to be out for at least 10 days with his hamstring issue.

Zion streak ends

The Pelicans dug a huge hole by being outscored 43-26 in the second quarter as the Nets cruised from there. "We got dominated at both ends of the floor. Totally dominated," Pelicans coach Stan Van Gundy said. "Our defense was absurd." Everything went right for the Nets, who led by as many as 38 points. The Pelicans couldn't get going offensively, especially Zion Williamson who had his streak of consecutive



BROOKLYN: Kevin Durant #7 of the Brooklyn Nets and Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets high-five during a game against the New Orleans Pelicans on Wednesday at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York. — AFP

games with 20-plus points on 50 percent shooting or better snapped at 25 games.

Williamson, who finished with just 16 points on four of 12 shooting from the floor, is tied with former Los Angeles Lakers star Shaquille O'Neal for the longest such streak in the NBA. Williamson was playing in his second game after

missing three contests with a sore right thumb.

Also on Wednesday, Marcus Smart hit a clutch three with 36 seconds left and scored 14 of his 17 points in the fourth quarter, as the Boston Celtics rallied to defeat the New York Knicks 101-99 to break a seventh-place tie in the Eastern Conference standings. — AFP

French Open delayed one week in hope more spectators can attend

PARIS: The French Open was yesterday delayed by a week to May 30-June 13 in the hope that heightened COVID-19 restrictions in France will have eased by then to allow the maximum number of fans to attend the event.

The French tennis federation (FFT) said the decision had been made in the wake of French President Emmanuel Macron's announcement last month that the government wanted some cultural venues to be back up and running from mid-May onwards, "subject to the improvement of the health situation". FFT president Gilles Moreton said the week's delay "will give the health situation more time to improve and should optimize our chances of welcoming spectators at Roland-Garros".

"For the fans, the players and the atmosphere, the presence of spectators is vital for our tournament, the spring's most important international sporting event," Moreton added. The qualifying rounds of the clay-court Grand Slam event will now be held on May 24-28, followed by the main draw from May 30 to June 13.

Wimbledon, the next Grand Slam tournament after the French Open, said in a statement that the decision had no impact on its planned start date of June 28. The initial Wimbledon warm-up

events, however, start on June 7, midway through Roland Garros.

There will now only be a two-week break between the French Open final and the start of Wimbledon. However, the decision to move the French Open was carefully discussed with the other major tournaments, unlike last year when the FFT moved the claycourt showpiece into a September-October slot because of the pandemic in what was criticised in some quarters as a unilateral decision.

Ugo Valensi, executive director of the Grand Slam Board, said: "These remain extremely challenging times for communities around the world, and, while there is optimism for the future, it is clear that this pandemic is very much still with us. The Grand Slams represent the most significant spotlights for our sport and so we will do everything possible to ensure they can be staged successfully. Further to consultation, the decision by the FFT to postpone Roland-Garros by a week in order to enhance the likelihood of the tournament taking place successfully is therefore fully supported by the Grand Slam Board."

'Agile approach'

The FFT's decision was also given the green



PARIS: In this file photo taken on October 4, 2020, groundstaff members remove covers across the Suzanne Lenglen court surface after the rain, on Day 8 of The Roland Garros 2020 French Open tennis tournament in Paris. — AFP

light by the ATP and WTA, the governing bodies of men's and women's professional tennis respectively. "Tennis has required an agile approach to the calendar over the past 12 months in order to manage the challenges of the pandemic, and this continues to be the case," read a joint ATP/WTA statement. "Both the WTA and @atptour are supportive of the decision and are working in consultation with all parties impacted by the postponement to optimize the calendar for players, tournaments and fans, in the lead up to and following Roland-Garros."

Crowds were limited to just 1,000 spectators each day at last year's rearranged French Open. Rafael Nadal will defend his title after winning a record-extending 13th French Open last year, while Iga Swiatek of Poland is the reigning women's champion. Roland Garros was one of the many sporting events affected by the fall-out from the global coronavirus pandemic. Last season, the professional tours were suspended from March until August, with Wimbledon cancelled. This year's Australian Open was also pushed back by three weeks. — AFP

Sports

Dublin, Bilbao Euro 2020 games in doubt as UEFA extends fan deadline

PARIS: Euro 2020 matches in Dublin and Bilbao are in doubt after Irish and Spanish football chiefs said Wednesday they were unable to give assurances over the presence of spectators, as UEFA extended to April 28 a deadline for host cities to submit fan number estimates.

Dublin was one of 12 cities that had originally until Wednesday to submit their plans to admit fans to European football's governing body for the delayed tournament, which runs from June 11 to July 11. The Aviva Stadium in the Irish capital is scheduled to host three group matches and a last-16 game but there are growing doubts over the issue of fan attendance.

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has warned that countries that fail to offer guarantees on supporter numbers could be dropped as hosts. "The Football Association of Ireland, on advice and guidance from the government, has today notified UEFA that owing to the COVID-19 pandemic it is not in a position at this point to provide assurances on minimum spectator levels at the UEFA Euro 2020 matches due to be held in Dublin in June," the FAI said in a statement.

Ireland has been in a third coronavirus lockdown since late December but will take its first tentative step towards lifting curbs on Monday. The government has signaled the relaxing of restrictions will be staggered over a period of months after a hasty reopening in late 2020 contributed to a surge in cases.

The Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) said it would be "impossible" to admit fans to games at Bilbao's San Mames stadium based on the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the Basque

region. "The requirement to have 60 percent of the population vaccinated in the Basque Country and the rest of Spain before June 14, or a figure that does not exceed 2 percent of (intensive care) beds occupied by COVID by the date of the matches, they are impossible objectives to fulfil and will result, therefore, in the absence of the public," the RFEF said in a statement.

Spanish media had reported Bilbao was planning to accommodate up to 13,000 fans inside its 53,000-capacity ground, due to host Spain's group games against Sweden, Poland and Slovakia and a round-of-16 match, if health conditions were met.

Dutch on board

Earlier on Wednesday, the Dutch Football Association (KNVB) announced it hoped to have "at least 12,000 fans" at the four matches Amsterdam is hosting for the Euro. The Johan Cruyff Arena will hold the Netherlands' group matches against Ukraine, Austria, North Macedonia and a round-of-16 match.

The KNVB said in a statement the scenario it submitted to UEFA is based on the "realistic" assumption that it will be able to fill at least 25 percent of the 55,000-seat stadium's capacity. It hopes that "depending on the development of the COVID-19 pandemic, there may be a chance to accommodate more fans".

The KNVB added that spectators wishing to attend matches in Amsterdam will have to comply with the security protocols in place in June and present a negative COVID test result, but warned that the number of fans allowed in could



BILBAO: This file photo taken on February 10, 2020 shows an interior view of San Mames stadium in the Spanish Basque city of Bilbao. — AFP

be reduced "if the pandemic worsens in June".

Tournament director in Amsterdam Gijs de Jong said that "there were no guarantees yet", adding that he had received the green light from the Dutch interior ministry and Amsterdam city hall to implement the 12,000-seat scenario.

On Tuesday, the head of Italy's football federation Gabriele Gravina said the Italian government had given the green light for fans to attend Euro matches scheduled for Rome's Stadio Olimpico, including the tournament opener. — AFP

Lukaku pulls Inter 11 clear, Dybala scores in victorious Juve return

MILAN: Romelu Lukaku powered Inter Milan closer to their first league title in over a decade by scoring and setting up Lautaro Martinez in Wednesday's 2-1 win over Sassuolo that moved his team 11 points clear at the top of Serie A.

Champions Juventus are 12 points behind Inter in third after beating Napoli 2-1, as Paulo Dybala scored on his return after nearly three months out with the league's leading scorer Cristiano Ronaldo also on target. Both fixtures had been rescheduled because of coronavirus outbreaks at Inter last month and Napoli in early October.

Lukaku got his head to an Ashley Young cross to score his 21st league goal this campaign after in the 10th minute at the San Siro and then laid on Lautaro for the second midway through the second half. Hamed Junior Traore pulled a goal back for the visitors with five minutes to go before Inter claimed a 10th consecutive league win to strengthen their grip on the title. Antonio Conte's side are on course for a 19th Serie A title and first since 2010. "There are nine games to go and each game is worth six points," said the Inter coach.

"We are trying to do something nice for this city that hasn't won for 10 years. The same team has won for nine, and it would be wonderful to end this reign," added Conte who led Juventus

to the first three of their current run of nine Serie A titles.

Juve restore self-esteem

Juve's push for a 10th consecutive league title had faltered after taking just one point from their last two league games against lowly Benevento and Torino. However their win against Napoli was crucial for their Champions League ambitions next season with both teams equal on points in fourth place before kick-off in Turin. "It was important to restore self-esteem to the team after bad performances. They had to play this kind of match and get this result," said coach Andrea Pirlo. Juve were without Leonardo Bonucci and Federico Bernardeschi who tested positive for COVID-19 after international duty with Italy.

Dybala started on the bench, having being dropped for the derby match with Torino last weekend after breaking lockdown rules with teammates Weston McKennie and Arthur Melo. Ronaldo missed a chance to put the champions ahead after two minutes when he headed wide, before Napoli's Piotr Zielinski also fired over not long afterwards.

But good work from Federico Chiesa allowed the Portuguese to net his 25th Serie A goal this campaign on 13 minutes. Chiesa beat two defenders before rolling the ball across to Ronaldo who finished off low past Alex Meret in the Napoli goal.

"Great lads, three very important points! we need this spirit until the end," Ronaldo wrote on Instagram after bringing his tally to 773 career goals, second only to Czech Josef Bican's 805. Veteran Juventus keeper Gianluigi Buffon did well in goal as he replaced first-choice keeper Wojciech Szczesny who had been under fire after the draw against Torino last weekend.

The holder of the Serie A appearances record did well to deny



MILAN: Inter Milan's Belgian forward Romelu Lukaku celebrates after opening the scoring during the Italian Serie A football match Inter Milan vs Sassuolo on Wednesday at the San Siro stadium in Milan. — AFP

Napoli's Giovanni Di Lorenzo after the break, Lorenzo Insigne on the hour and Fabian Ruiz midway through the second half. Dybala came off the bench along with McKennie with 20 minutes to go and the Argentine had an immediate impact, curling in a Rodrigo Bentancur cross four minutes later. Lorenzo Insigne pulled a goal back from the penalty spot in the final moments after Victor Osimhen was brought down by Giorgio Chiellini in the box. Juventus overtook Atalanta to move third with the two teams meeting in Bergamo next week, when Inter travel to Napoli. — AFP

Sports

Mbappe stars as PSG win at holders Bayern Munich

MUNICH: Kylian Mbappe insisted Paris Saint-Germain still have it all to do after he scored twice in a thrilling 3-2 win at holders Bayern Munich in Wednesday's Champions League quarter-final first leg. Bayern had their 19-match unbeaten run in the Champions League ended in a repeat of last year's final, as the German giants suffered their first European defeat since March 2019.

PSG raced into a 2-0 lead after just 28 minutes behind closed doors at the Allianz Arena as Neymar created goals for Mbappe and Marquinhos. Bayern, whose top scorer Robert Lewandowski is sidelined by a knee injury, drew level courtesy of headers by Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting and Thomas Mueller.

However, Mbappe showed his class with a superb second goal to give the visitors an advantage for the return leg in Paris. "We used all our chances and had a bit of luck, but nothing has been decided," Mbappe told Sky, with the second leg to come in Paris on Tuesday.

PSG goalkeeper Keylor Navas played a key role with a string of saves as Bayern peppered his goal with 31 shots compared to the French club's six. "We have to score a lot more goals," said Mueller. "If it had ended 5-3 or 6-3 for us, no one could have complained based on the chances."

Bayern coach Hansi Flick, who finished on the losing side for the first time in the Champions League, also rued the number of missed chances. "With the chances we had, we could have got a good result despite conceding three goals," Flick said. "We don't like to lose, but the way the team played was top."

Chelsea punish Porto to put one foot in semis

SEVILLE: A classy goal from Mason Mount on Wednesday helped Chelsea to a 2-0 first-leg win over Porto, whose wasteful finishing could have scuppered their hopes of springing another Champions League upset in the quarter-finals.

Mount's slick turn and shot in the first half would have been painful enough for Porto, who were the better side for large spells in Seville but repeatedly lacked the precision to take advantage. Instead, their misery was compounded by Ben Chilwell capitalizing on a mistake at the back to score a late second that gave Chelsea another away goal and leaves them on the brink of the semi-finals. They were away goals only in name given both these teams were playing in the unfamiliar Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan, where they will meet again next week, just with the home and away roles reversed. Porto were in the home dug-out, wore their home kit, had a large club banner in the empty stand and their anthem was the one that played out before kick-off.

Chelsea played the part too, delivering a clas-

This was a record 19th appearance in the Champions League quarter-finals for Bayern, but there was little for them to celebrate at the final whistle. "Kylian Mbappe made the difference. It's a very positive result for us, but everything is still open," said PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino.

Marquinhos scores and limps off

COVID-19 cast its shadow over both teams with Bayern winger Serge Gnabry, plus PSG pair Alessandro Florenzi and Marco Verratti quarantined after testing positive. Heavy snow fell in the first half in Munich as the visitors put the heat on the holders.

The opening goal came after Neymar sprinted through a gaping hole in the defence and laid the ball off for Mbappe, whose shot flew into the net through Manuel Neuer's legs. PSG forward Julian Draxler had a goal disallowed with Mbappe offside in the build-up as the visitors kept up the pressure.

Bayern midfielder Leon Goretzka powered a header into the feet of Navas just before the hosts fell two goals behind. A clearance kick only got as far as Neymar, whose ball over the top found Marquinhos unmarked in the area to stroke his shot past Neuer, shortly before the PSG captain limped off injured. Flick responded by bringing on Alphonso Davies to provide pace on the flanks and moved David Alaba into defensive midfield. The hosts pulled a goal back when Mueller's cross was headed past Navas by Choupo-Moting to make it 2-1 at half-time.

Neymar was denied by Neuer and Angel Di

Marquinhos' away performance of soaking up the pressure and hitting their opponents on the counter-attack, their quality in the final third proving decisive. Real Madrid could lie in wait for the victors, after they beat Liverpool 3-1 on Tuesday.

"There is a good atmosphere in the dressing room, we are happy but not too happy, excited but not too excited," said Chelsea's coach Thomas Tuchel. "We have to have a top mentality and a top performance next Tuesday."

Mount's goal makes him Chelsea's youngest ever scorer in the Champions League at 22 years and 87 days old while Chilwell's second meant the club boasted two English scorers in a Champions League game for the first time since 2012.

Chelsea's win also goes some way to easing the shock of Saturday's 5-2 loss at home to West Brom in the Premier League, which ended Tuchel's 14-match unbeaten start as coach. "After losing such a strange game we said the best situation would be to produce a clean sheet straight away and this makes it very precious, this result," Tuchel said. Tuchel decided Thiago Silva's 29 minutes before being sent off in that game were not enough to hone his sharpness, meaning Andreas Christensen was picked in the back three. And Antonio Rudiger also returned, despite his training ground scuffle with Kepa Arrizabalaga on Sunday, which Tuchel described as a "serious situation". — AFP



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's Austrian defender David Alaba (left) and Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe vie for the ball during the UEFA Champions League quarter-final first leg football match between FC Bayern Munich and Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in Munich, southern Germany, on Wednesday. — AFP

Maria had an effort cleared off the line, while Leroy Sane went close at the other end for Bayern as both teams had their chances after the break. Bayern then equalized when Mueller nodded in a superb Joshua Kimmich free-kick on the hour. However, the wintry night in Munich be-

longed to Mbappe, who showed his class by turning Bayern defender Jerome Boateng inside and out before driving his shot past Neuer with 22 minutes left. Bayern went down fighting as Alaba and Mueller both fired agonizingly wide in the dying stages. — AFP



SEVILLE: Chelsea's English midfielder Mason Mount (left) vies with FC Porto's Nigerian defender Zaidu Sanusi during the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter final football match between FC Porto and Chelsea FC at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium in Seville on Wednesday. — AFP



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