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# Assembly session halted as MPs exchange insults

Speaker cautions against move to dissolve Assembly



KUWAIT: MPs engage in heated arguments during the National Assembly session yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** The National Assembly session was again halted prematurely yesterday as MPs traded insults and accusations over allegations of unconstitutional decisions passed by the house. Opposition MPs accused Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem of following unconstitutional procedures to secure the passage of a decision that delays grillings against the prime minister for over 18 months.

MP Abdulkarim Al-Kandari asked the speaker why he took the vote on the decision in Tuesday's session although MPs who submitted the motion demanded to withdraw it. MP Thamer Al-Suwait protested against the speaker for calling Assembly guards into the chamber, saying this has never happened anywhere in the world.

Ghanem insisted that all procedures regarding the voting on Tuesday were in line with the constitution and this means that grillings against HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah will be postponed until the end of 2022. He said Assembly guards were called in after the secretary general of the Assembly was assaulted by some MPs.

Speaking after the session, Ghanem accused what he called a "minority" of lawmakers of deliberately stirring crises in every session in an "attempt to cause the dissolution of the National Assembly" adding that the political leadership is aware of this fact. The speaker said that what has been happening at the National Assembly are "things rejected by the Kuwaiti people" because they are unconstitutional.

He appealed to the lawmakers "not to burn this country" and charged that "funds are being channeled to the social media in an attempt to create a false public opinion".

Like previous sessions, yesterday's Assembly meeting was marred by heated arguments and strong exchanges between opposition MPs on one hand and the speaker and pro-government MPs on the other. The speaker ignored protests by opposition MPs for delaying the premier's grillings and the situation became extremely tense when the speaker moved to the next point on the agenda - the grilling of the health minister

Continued on Page 2

Ramadan Kareem

## Benefits of Ramadan

By Irum Hanif

Fasting during Ramadan being a religious obligation also has many benefits whether spiritual or physical. Self-discipline, self-control, sacrifice, empathy and generosity, are some of the spiritual benefits of fasting in Ramadan. Moreover, weight management, improved mental health, anti-aging and better heart function are among the many physical benefits of fasting. Some of these Physical benefits are listed below as a reminder to help us stay motivated throughout Ramadan. However, although there are many benefits that accrue to us from fasting in Ramadan, our prime and main aim to fast should be seeking Allah's pleasure. Out of His infinite Bounty, if you do something solely for Him, He rewards you in many ways. The following are among the various benefits of fasting in Ramadan as well as during other occasions in which fasting is either compulsory or recommended. (Refer to [www.muslimaid.org](http://www.muslimaid.org))

- 1. Weight Loss:** As fasting is to refrain from eating and drinking from dawn to Sunset, it's the real time in which body goes through starvation. During this starvation, the body uses the stored fat cells in it as a source of energy. If a proper diet along with fasting is maintained, it is a great way of losing some extra kilo grams off our bodies.
- 2. Detoxify:** Abstaining from food for long periods of time not only uses the fat cells stored in the body but it also burns away many harmful toxins that are present in our bodies along with fat deposits. Fasting thus detoxifies the entire digestive system due to which better organ function and improved blood circulation is achieved.
- 3. Improved Cardiovascular Function:** Fasting effects the lipid profile in an incredibly positive manner, which means there is a significant reduction of cholesterol in the blood. A decrease in the body's salt intake lowers the body's blood pressure. Low cholesterol and normal blood pressure improve cardiovascular health that reduces the risk of heart attack or a stroke. It also helps in promoting an improved muscle performance along with enhanced blood vessel growth.

Continued on Page 2

## 'Immunized' pilgrims in Makkah

**MAKKAH:** Pilgrims immunized against COVID-19 circled Islam's holiest site in Saudi Arabia's Makkah Tuesday as they performed the year-round umrah pilgrimage on the first day of the fasting month of Ramadan. Mask-clad worshippers entered holy Makkah's Grand Mosque in batches to perform the ritual of circling the sacred Kaaba, a cubic structure towards which Muslims around the world pray, along socially distanced paths.

Only immunized pilgrims are eligible for permits to perform the pilgrimage and to attend prayers in the Grand Mosque during Ramadan, the

hajj and umrah ministry announced earlier this month. According to the ministry, three categories of people are considered "immunized"—those who have received two doses of coronavirus vaccine, those administered a single dose at least 14 days prior, and people who have recovered from the infection.

The policy has effectively raised the Grand Mosque's capacity during Ramadan to accommodate 50,000 umrah pilgrims and 100,000 worshippers per day, according to state media. It is unclear whether the policy, which comes amid an uptick in coronavirus infections in the kingdom, would be extended to the annual hajj pilgrimage later this year. In late July last year, the kingdom hosted a downsized hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam and a must for able-bodied Muslims at least once in their lifetime.

Continued on Page 2



MAKKAH: Muslim worshippers perform the evening Tarawih prayer during the fasting month of Ramadan around the Kaaba in the Grand Mosque complex in the holy city Tuesday.—AFP

## Israeli-owned ship attacked off Fujairah

**JERUSALEM:** An Israeli-operated ship was attacked Tuesday off the UAE opposite the Iranian coast, Israeli media said, in the latest apparent escalation between the Jewish state and the Islamic republic. Security sources, quoted by Israel's

Channel 12 television, said the vessel Hyperion Ray was "lightly damaged" near the Emirati port of Fujairah, with Iran suspected of carrying out the attack.

Lebanon's Al-Mayadeen television channel, believed to be close to Iran and Syria, also reported that the Bahamas-flagged Hyperion Ray, operated by Israeli firm Ray Shipping, had come under fire. The firm had another of its ships, Helios Ray, come under attack in February, hit by a blast off Oman while headed from the Saudi city of Dammam to Singapore. Iran at the time denied Israeli charges that it carried out the attack. — AFP

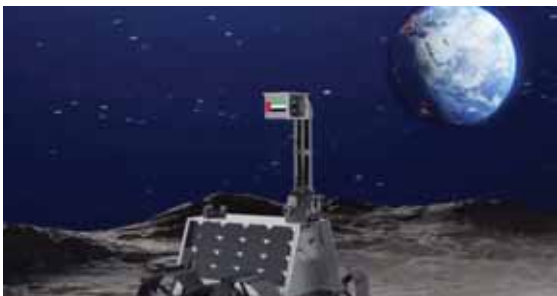


A ship is pictured off the coast of Fujairah yesterday. An Israeli-operated ship was attacked off the UAE opposite the Iranian coast, Israeli media said. — AFP

## UAE to send rover to the Moon in 2022

**DUBAI:** Lunar exploration firm iSpace said yesterday it will transport a United Arab Emirates unmanned rover to the Moon next year, as the Gulf state seeks to expand its space sector. The UAE-made up of seven emirates including the capital Abu Dhabi and freewheeling Dubai-announced in September 2020 that it planned to launch the "Rashid" rover by 2024.

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ABU DHABI: 'Rashid', an Emirati-made lunar rover named after the late Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al-Maktoum, will be launched next year, two years ahead of schedule, with prototype testing to commence this summer.



## Local

# Amir receives Crown Prince, Speaker, Prime Minister

## Sheikh Nawaf receives Ramadan greetings from Ammar Al-Hakim



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — Amiri Diwan photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Parliament Speaker Marzuq Ali Al-Ghanem.



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

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday at Bayan Palace His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. At Bayan Palace, His Highness the Amir also received Parliament Speaker

Marzuq Ali Al-Ghanem. His Highness the Amir received as well His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received Ghanem and His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled at Bayan Palace.

In the meantime, His Highness the Amir on Tuesday received a phone call from Seyyed Ammar Abdulaziz Al-Hakim, chairman of “Tayyar Al-Hekmah,” in Iraq, expressing congratulations on the advent of the holy month of Ramadan. Hakim expressed good wishes for

the two brotherly countries, Iraq and Kuwait, for the Arab and Muslim nations as well as for His Highness the Amir who thanked him for the gracious gesture and “this brotherly contact,” also expressing good wishes to him. — KUNA

## Mohammed bin Rashid launches ‘100 Million Meals’ to provide food support in 20 countries

DUBAI: Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of UAE and Ruler of Dubai, launched ‘100 Million Meals’ campaign to provide food parcels for families and people in need across 20 countries during the holy month of Ramadan.

Launched as an expansion from last year’s locally-held ‘10 Million Meals’ campaign that empowered COVID-19-hit communities across the UAE, the ‘100 Million Meals’ campaign will provide food support for the vulnerable in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Businessmen, companies and the public inside and outside the UAE are invited to make financial donations to the campaign that will distribute food parcels, sufficient to provide 100 million meals, in countries including Sudan, Lebanon, Jordan, Pakistan, Angola, Uganda and Egypt. A donation as little as AED1 is enough to secure one meal for underserved communities in the targeted countries.

The Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Global Initiatives (MBRGI) will coordinate with the Food Banking Regional Network and local humanitarian organizations in beneficiary countries to deliver food parcels to the doorsteps of vulnerable individuals and families.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum said, “providing food during the holy month of Ramadan is the best we can give from the UAE to humanity.” He added, “the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed many populations into an economic despair and pushed us, at the same time, to be more compassionate and giving.”

Urging the public to do their part, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum said, “we will work with humanitarian organizations, companies, entities and humanitarians to join us in securing 100 million meals to bring a sense of safety to underserved homes across the world.”

Philanthropy is an integral part of the UAE’s philosophy since its inception. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum stressed the need to unify efforts and leverage necessary resources to combat world hunger. “Four hours away from us are 52 million people battling hunger. We need to take urgent action to empower underserved communities.” Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum added, “Today, we have the opportunity to send 100 million messages of peace from the UAE to 20 countries across the world.”

The campaign is part of UAE’s response to global efforts to combat world hunger, a major challenge that has been exacerbated by outbreak of COVID-19 that has pushed millions of disadvantaged populations to greater insecurity,

poverty and unemployment. The campaign also aims to support the international community in achieving the second of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to end hunger by 2030.

The MBRGI will carry out the campaign in collaboration with the UN World Food Programme, the Food Banking Regional Network, humanitarian and charity organizations in beneficiary countries, Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Humanitarian and Charity Establishment (MBRCH), and UAE federal and local entities.

### How to donate?

Companies, businessmen and individuals from all over the world can donate any amount starting from AED1 through the website [www.100millionmeals.ae](http://www.100millionmeals.ae) or through a bank transfer to Dubai Islamic Bank account with IBAN no.: AE080240001520977815201. Donations inside the UAE can also be made through SMS (Etisalat and Du) by texting “Meal” to numbers listed on the website depending on the number of meals selected for donation. The campaign’s call center will receive big donations via toll free number 8004999.

### Figures

More than 820 million people are undernourished globally, including 52 million people across the MENA region. Malnutrition contributes to about 45 percent of deaths in children under-5 years of age and hunger claims a child’s life every 10 seconds. Hunger causes more deaths than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.

Besides joining global efforts to combat world hunger, the ‘100 Million Meals’ campaign also aims to raise awareness on reducing food waste and to promote responsible food consumption. Although global food production is sufficient to feed 10 billion people (the current population is 7.8 million people), an estimated 1.3 billion tons of food is wasted globally each year, one third of all food produced for human consumption, amounting to \$2.6 trillion. One-fourth of the food wasted globally could be enough to feed 870 million people.

The campaign aims to foster solidarity and promote individual and corporate responsibility, encouraging all segments of the society to take up philanthropy as an integral part of their lifestyle. It also reflects the UAE’s humanitarian principles and dedication to aiding the vulnerable through swift action. The UAE has dedicated major resources to combating hunger and malnutrition, being named the world’s fifth largest donor to the World Food Programme, with 2019’s contributions amounting to \$270 million.

## Enrichment response to Israel: Iran

TEHRAN: Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday the decision to boost uranium enrichment to 60 percent was a response to arch-foe Israel’s “nuclear terrorism” against its Natanz facility. Tehran starting up advanced centrifuges and producing more highly refined uranium “is a response to your malice,” Rouhani said in a message aimed at the Jewish state.

“What you did was nuclear terrorism,” he said in televised remarks, referring to a blast early Sunday that knocked out electricity at its main nuclear facility in central Iran. “What we do is legal.” Tehran’s announcement of stepped-up enrichment has cast a shadow over talks in Vienna aimed at salvaging the 2015 nuclear deal

between Iran and world powers that then US president Donald Trump abandoned almost three years ago.

The European parties to the accord-Britain, France and Germany-yesterday expressed “grave concern” over Iran’s enrichment move while rejecting “all escalatory measures by any actor”. Iran’s regional rival Saudi Arabia also expressed concern and called on Tehran to “avoid escalation”.

The Natanz attack unleashed a “dangerous spiral,” Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif wrote on Twitter. He warned US President Joe Biden that the situation can only be contained by lifting sanctions Trump imposed on Iran since 2018. “No alternative. Not much time,” he added. Israel has neither confirmed nor denied involvement but public radio reports in the country said it was a sabotage operation by the Mossad spy agency, citing unnamed intelligence sources.

Iran’s envoy to the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency, Kazem

## ‘Immunized’ pilgrims in...

Continued from Page 1

Only up to 10,000 Muslim residents of Saudi Arabia itself were allowed to take part, a far cry from the 2.5 million Muslims from around the world who participated in 2019.

Saudi Arabia has reported more than 400,000 coronavirus infections and 6,700 deaths from COVID-19.

The daytime fasting month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam. Observant Muslims refrain from eating and drinking from dawn to dusk, and traditionally gather with family and friends to break their fast in the evening. — AFP

## Benefits of...

Continued from Page 1

**4. Healthier Brain:** Fasting increases the level of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which causes the body to produce more stem cells which are essential units of human metabolism working pretty much as the body’s repair department with their potential to regenerate and repair damaged tissue. Increased levels of (BDNF) strengthens the mind, sharpens focus, and provides mental clarity. Similarly, reduction in the amount of the hormone cortisol, produced by the adrenal gland, causes stress levels to drop. During the fasting process, blood in the human body is filled with more endorphins, which in turn, gives you a feeling of well-being and great mental health. The overall effects of fasting have a similar impact on the brain as physical exercise would.

## Assembly session halted...

Continued from Page 1

over his alleged mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic. Health Minister Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah requested the debate of his grilling to be postponed for two weeks, and as Ghanem ordered voting on the request, opposition MPs left their seats and assembled on the floor, screaming

at the speaker. Voting was nevertheless completed and the request was granted as many opposition MPs refused to vote. Some opposition MPs went up to the podium to prevent the speaker from continuing the session.

Ghanem accused leading opposition MP Mohammad Al-Mutair of trying to disrupt the session, claiming he received his orders from “outside”. Some MPs were about to be engaged in a physical altercation, but were prevented by other lawmakers. Then, around 27 opposition MPs left the session.

## UAE to send rover to the ...

Continued from Page 1

The rover “will be transported to the Moon on iSpace’s lunar lander” during a mission in 2022, the Japanese company said in a statement. iSpace “will deliver the Emirates lunar mission’s ‘Rashid’ rover to the Moon, provide wired communication and power during the cruise phase, and engage in wireless communication on the lunar surface”.

The UAE is a newcomer to the world of space exploration but is quickly making its mark. In September 2019, the oil-rich country sent the first Emirati into

space as part of a three-member crew that blasted off on a Soyuz rocket from Kazakhstan for an eight-day mission. Then in February, its “Hope” probe successfully entered Mars’ orbit on a journey to reveal the secrets of Martian weather, making history as the Arab world’s first interplanetary mission.

iSpace, which was founded in 2010, will use Elon Musk’s SpaceX (Falcon 9) rocket for its first mission to launch a lander next year-set to blast off from Florida in the United States. Dubai’s ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum has said that the Emirati-made rover will cover “areas not yet reached in previous exploration missions”. It is part of the country’s strategy to build new knowledge-based and scientific capabilities, he added. — AFP

intervals without food cause the stomach to gradually shrink, meaning you will need to eat less food to be satisfied. (Log onto [www.trt-world.com](http://www.trt-world.com) and [www.nutrition.org.uk](http://www.nutrition.org.uk))

**8. Quit Bad Habits:** In the month of Ramadan, one fasts during the day and performs obligatory and voluntary prayers during the night, it is considered the best time to overcome and ditch any of the bad addictions. These addictions can vary from smoking, sugar craving, overeating, and backbiting - among others. During fasting with Allah’s help, one abstains deliberately from these habits, Allah makes it easy to overcome these addictions.

*Courtesy of TIES: TIES is among the projects funded and managed by Kuwaiti Society for Cultural Dialogue. TIES aims at empowering Kuwait’s expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society, and to facilitate opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, please call 25231015/6 or 94079426 or e-mail: [info@tiescenter.net](mailto:info@tiescenter.net).*

Former three-time Assembly speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun said on Twitter that the grillings against the prime minister are still standing and valid because the decision to suspend them was illegal. Most of the ongoing political crises are the result of a verdict last month by the constitutional court to declare the election of prominent opposition lawmaker Bader Al-Dahoum as null and void. The interior ministry said it will start today registering candidates who wish to contest for Dahoum’s vacant seat, after setting May 20 as the date for the by-election.



## Local

# Kuwait completes inoculating staff of Hawally co-ops, mosques nationwide

## COVID-19 vaccination drive continues through Ramadan



**KUWAIT:** The Ministry of Health said it vaccinated workers at cooperative societies and adjacent shops in the Governorate of Hawally. Ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad, in a statement on Tuesday, said health care workers also inoculated against COVID-19 workers of cooperative societies in the areas of Yarmouk, Khaldiya, Adailiya, Fahaheel, Reqqa, Jaber Al-Ali and Mangaf. He added the ministry also vaccinated

workers at mosques nationwide. The ministry, he said, would continue vaccinations of all workers in cooperative societies as well as service centers in residential areas. Teams have been visiting residential areas to vaccinate workers of shops, cooperative societies and mosques. Meanwhile, Al-Qabas Arabic daily had reported yesterday that 18 percent of Kuwait's population have successfully been vaccinated as of Tuesday, accord-



ing to health ministry sources, as Kuwait's vaccination drive continues steadily throughout the holy month of Ramadan.

Kuwait had said Tuesday that seven persons died of coronavirus in the past 24 hours while 1,544 people tested positive for COVID-19. Dr Sanad said total deaths rose to 1,419 and registered infections surged to 250,273 as of Tuesday. He added that 1,201 people recovered from the virus since during

the same period to reach a total of 233,757. He said recovery-to-infection ratio was 93.4 percent. Dr Sanad said 235 COVID-19 patients were in the intensive care units, while total patients receiving health care was 15,097 as of Tuesday. Dr Sanad added that infections-to-swab ratio was 16.7 percent. He called on the public anew to abide by health regulations including physical distancing and avoiding crowded areas. — KUNA

## Three million Captagon pills busted

**KUWAIT:** Customs officers foiled an attempt to smuggle more than three million Captagon pills in a container that arrived in the country. The 40-foot container arrived in Shuwaikh Port from an Arab country, and officers found the drugs hidden in potatoes and onions. Interior Minister Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem, Director General of Customs Jamal Al-Jelawi and Deputy Director General for Customs Affairs Sulaiman Al-Fahad were on hand, along with other officials.



## Kuwait curfew: What you need to know

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

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

they reach the shopping center.

### Where to obtain a curfew pass?

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

### Co-op delivery during curfew hours

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

Omariya Co-op  
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op  
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op  
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op  
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op  
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op  
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op  
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op  
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op  
WhatsApp 2438-8316

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

Salimiya Co-op  
Tel: 22253225

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

Rawdha & Hawally  
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op  
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op  
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op  
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op  
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op  
WhatsApp 5055-9900

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

Rumaithiya Co-op  
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op  
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op  
WhatsApp 5178-9951

Adan & Qusour Co-op  
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Salam Co-op  
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## Local

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ADVERTISING : 24835616/7  
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### News in brief

#### Licenses to fish in Kuwait Bay

**KUWAIT:** The Environment Public Authority launched an online booking service to fish in Kuwait Bay. This service is open for amateur fishermen for a KD 5 fee per trip, EPA Director Sheikh Abdullah Al-Sabah said. A maximum of 200 boats per day are allowed to enter the bay using this service, EPA said, adding that the service can only be used for a maximum of five times a month.

#### Oil price up

**KUWAIT:** The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by 49 cents to \$62.55 per barrel Tuesday as oppose to \$62.06 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. The prices of the Brent crude and West Texas Intermediate, globally, went up with the first going up by 39 cents to \$63.67 per barrel, while the latter went up by 48 cents to \$60.18 pb.

#### US Dollar at KD 0.301

**KUWAIT:** The exchange rate of the US Dollar was stable at KD 0.301 while Euro rose at KD 0.360, said the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) yesterday. CBK added in its daily bulletin that the British Pound Sterling went up at KD 0.415, same as Swiss Franc up at 0.327. The Japanese Yen remained unchanged at KD 0.003, Currencies' exchange rates as declared by the CBK reflect average rates and do not actual trades.

### Kuwait Heritage



**KUWAIT:** The dates market as it looked like in early 1960. Dates are famous foods in Kuwait and the Arabian Peninsula throughout the history of the region. The picture shows a child eating dates while the seller and a customer look on. (Source: 'Pictures of the old markets of Kuwait' by Ali Al-Rais, Center of Research and Studies on Kuwait 2017. Prepared by: Mahmoud Aakaria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

## Zain delivers 'Ramadan Machla' to KRCS

**KUWAIT:** Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced the continuation of its charitable initiative to provide 'Ramadan Machla' (supplies), which the company recently delivered to its Strategic Partner the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS). The supplies were distributed via vouchers to underprivileged families in Kuwait to serve their needs during the holy month.

Zain's 'Ramadan Machla' initiative has kicked-off before the arrival of the Holy Month, where the company's officials visited the headquarters of the Kuwait Red Crescent Society in Shuwaikh to deliver the vouchers. The visit witnessed the presence of KRCS Chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer, KRCS General Secretary Maha Al-Barjas, Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate



**KUWAIT:** Zain's Waleed Al-Khashti delivers the 'Machla' to KRCS Chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer.

Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti, and the partners' teams.

The initiative is one of the main pillars of Zain's annual Ramadan campaign, which comes in line with the company's Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability strategy to serve the needs of underprivileged families in the country. Zain offered the 'Machla' to KRCS via vouchers in collaboration with Oncost, one of Kuwait's biggest grocery markets, to give each family the opportunity to choose specific supplies as per their different personal needs.

This year, Zain delivered the 'Machla' vouchers to a number of non-profit organizations that are certified by the authorities in Kuwait, including KRCS, the Kuwait Food Bank, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor's Social Care Centers, and the Patients Support Fund Society. These charitable organizations have distributed the vouchers to underprivileged families in

Kuwait, who are able to redeem them at Oncost, which features a large collection of food and other consumer supplies.

Zain's distribution plan included the delivery of the vouchers to the biggest certified organizations across Kuwait to ensure their delivery to those in need before the arrival of the holy month and during the continuing pandemic situation in order to guarantee that families have enough quantities of the most basic supplies. The company hopes this initiative has a deep positive impact on the community's various segments, especially the most vulnerable ones, during such circumstances. Zain's Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility campaign during the holy month of Ramadan aims at helping less fortunate people to enjoy Ramadan happily, as well as celebrating the true spirit the Holy month brings by supporting humanitarian and charitable campaigns.

## KFH launches virtual Holy Quran recitation competition

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Finance House (KFH) launched the "KFH Reciters" competition for reciting the Holy Quran during the holy month of Ramadan, for "Baiti" and "Hesabi" customer segments. The competition is held virtually in line with the current health protocols.

Manager Social Media and PR Services Center at KFH, Abdullah Abdullatif Al-Saif, said that the first competition of its kind encourages the current generation to recite the Holy Quran with clarification of some provisions of intonation, especially since there are several episodes that will be broadcasted live on the KFHGroup Instagram channel to test some of the participants in the competition.

Saif added: "KFH is keen to coordinate with specialized committees to implement evaluation standards with transparency and with high professionalism, in addition to allocating KD 8,000 for winners from the children and youth segment under 25 years, according to the terms and conditions."

Saif explained that customers can register directly through the KFH website, and they will be contacted directly to set their test dates, noting that seats are limited, and priority of registration will be approved according first-come, first-served basis. Additionally, KFH's social media channels are ready to answer any inquiries related to registration and participation in the competition.

He stated that KFH's interest in the competition and allocating the largest value of prizes at the local level to the winners expresses his belief in the importance of Holy Quran and instilling its value in the hearts of generations, with an emphasis on the need for this encouragement to also be done by parents with the participation of their children in this distinguished competition.

Saif concluded: "KFH Ramadan activities during this year target all segments of customers. There will also be a focus on the youth segment through some events that mix between the sports and the social side. Some events will also be organized to encourage small business owners, most of whom are youth."



Abdullah Al-Saif

## ACK students win in universities competition

**KUWAIT:** A team of students from the Australian College of Kuwait (ACK) won third place in the "Universities Entrepreneur Battle" organized by the Minister of Youth Affairs for their project idea, which sought to help ease the daily lives of the blind.

The Universities Entrepreneur Battle was organized by the Ministry of Youth Affairs for university students in Kuwait in order to support and develop youth skills in various fields and highlight their creative abilities in creating ideas for projects that can benefit society. The competition consisted of 18 teams from seven different universities who put forth their ideas for projects that can have a positive societal impact.

The ACK team united two students, Nujoud Al-Azmi and Nour Al-Mutairi and presented their project entitled "Speaking Map for the Blind". The objective of the project sought to ease burdens of the blind by giving them greater accessibility to public areas with a map that speaks directions to them. The project also included a small wireless earphone that accepts voice commands so it can be activate and useful by voice alone. A further benefit is that the program can be used in government sector buildings in order to give users greater accessibility when conducting their necessary transactions.


Worth mentioning that the project could be executed internationally and according to the estimation of



the students it would take 17 months to create and implement, and would cost roughly 50,000 Kuwaiti Dinars to produce.

The Ministry of Youth Affairs announced the winners on Instagram during a live session. Where Hussain Al-Haddad, Manager of Student Affairs at ACK, attended representing the College. Haddad congratulated the participants for their efforts and thanked the Ministry of Youth Affairs for giving students across Kuwait such a great opportunity to improve their skills and benefit their community.

Further elaborating on the benefits of competition to students, Haddad said "The spirit of competition is effective in fostering students' characters, and the constructive use of their abilities works excellently to benefit them personally while also benefiting society as a whole."



# RAMADAN QUIZ 2021

Kuwait Times annual Ramadan competition will be publish every day throughout the holy month of Ramadan. All thirty coupons containing the correct answer must be sent to the newspaper to become eligible for the raffle draw. All coupons must be received on or before Monday 17 of May 2021. Winners will be announce in Kuwait Times.

ISSUE NO: 18410 RAMADAN 3, 1442 AH

**Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz**

**3- Which calendar is used to calculate Ramadan?**

- ☐ A. Lunar calendar
- ☐ B. Gregorian calendar
- ☐ C. Hijrah calendar
- ☐ D. None of the above

**Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz**

Date :  
Name :  
Civil ID :  
Tel :  
Email :

Strategic Partner



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By rail, road or on foot, migrants flow across Mexico towards US

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BROOKLYN CENTER, MN: Protesters march from the Brooklyn Center police headquarters to a nearby FBI office Tuesday in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota. — AFP

# US protesters, police clash over shooting

## Biden warns ‘no justification’ for violent protest

**MINNEAPOLIS, US:** Protesters faced off with police for a third night Tuesday in the American city of Minneapolis over the killing of a young black man shot by an officer, with more than 60 people arrested, law enforcement officials said. Tensions have soared over the Sunday police shooting of Daunte Wright near the midwestern city, in a community already on edge over the ongoing trial of an officer accused of killing another Black man, George Floyd, last year.

Riot police moved in to disperse a group of demonstrators estimated to number between 800 and 1,000 in Brooklyn Center, the suburb where Sunday's shooting took place. Officers deployed stun grenades while protesters responded by throwing objects including water bottles and bricks, law enforcement officials said.

Earlier in the day the families of Wright and Floyd came together to demand an end to police brutality and the killing of unarmed African Americans by white officers. "The world is traumatized watching another African-American man being slain," Floyd's brother Philonise Floyd said of

20-year-old Wright, as he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Wright's relatives at an outdoor press event in driving snow.

A day earlier Philonise Floyd testified in the case against Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer on trial for murder and manslaughter in the case of George Floyd, whose death last year shocked the nation. "To the Wright family from the Floyd family, you all have our condolences," Floyd said Tuesday as he consoled the latest African-American family devastated by the death of a loved one at the hands of police. "We're here, and we will fight for justice for this family."

Wright was shot dead during a traffic stop by a police officer who apparently confused her handgun with her Taser, in what the force later described as a horrible accident. The officer who shot Wright resigned on Tuesday, as did Brooklyn Center Police Chief Tim Gannon, who had told reporters earlier that the officer "had the intention to deploy their Taser but instead shot Mr Wright with a single bullet." The families rejected the accident explanation, as several relatives and activists at the press event

called for the officer to be arrested and jailed for her actions.

"A so-called mistake? A handgun for a Taser? It's unacceptable," Floyd's nephew Brandon Williams said.

"Just because you are the law doesn't mean you're above the law," he added. "When is enough enough?" For activists like Toshira Garraway, Wright's killing is another example of the police brutality and systemic discrimination that has prompted an American reckoning on racial injustice.

US President Joe Biden called the shooting of a Black motorist by police "tragic" but warned that violent protests were unjustifiable. The incident in a Minneapolis suburb was a "really tragic thing that happened but I think we have to wait and see what the investigation shows," Biden told reporters.

"In the meantime, I want to make it clear again: there is absolutely no justification, none, for looting. Peaceful protests-understandable," he added. Biden said he had been briefed and had seen the police body cam video showing an officer shoot Daunte Wright after he tried to escape during a traffic stop.

The Brooklyn Center police chief says the officer mixed up her firearm with the taser she'd been meaning to use.

Biden called the footage "fairly graphic. The question is, was it an accident, was it intentional? That remains to be determined by a full blown investigation."

"In the meantime, I want to make it clear again: there is absolutely no justification, none, for looting. Peaceful protests-understandable." "The fact is that we do know that the anger, pain and trauma that exists in the Black community, in that environment, is real. It's serious and it's consequential, but it does not justify violence or looting," Biden said.

"We should listen to Dante's mom, who is calling for peace and calm." Asked about the nearby trial of a Minneapolis police officer accused of murdering another Black man, George Floyd, last year, Biden said he hoped the outcome would get broad backing. "I'm hopeful that there'll be a verdict and an outcome that will be supported by the vast majority of people in the region. That's my expectation." — AFP

## Fears grow over Mozambique jihadists' move

**JOHANNESBURG:** Jihadist fighters who raided the northern Mozambique town of Palma last month may be planning their next move, analysts say, raising fears of more attacks in the gas-rich Cabo Delgado province. On March 24, Islamic-State linked militants launched a strategic, coordinated assault on Palma that overwhelmed security forces and caused French energy giant Total to abandon a nearby gas project. Dozens of people were killed and thousands displaced by a raid considered one of the worst acts of Islamist militancy in southern Africa. Speculation is now rife about what to expect next from insurgents boosted by the latest assault, during which they garnered fresh provisions and ammunition.

"What is sure is that there is going

to be another major attack," warned Institute for Security Studies researcher Martin Ewi in South Africa. Analysts and security sources have raised red flags around the provincial capital Pemba, a port town of some 150,000 inhabitants around 400 kilometers (250 miles) south of Palma. But neighboring towns and villages are also exposed, including those bordering southern Tanzania—already grappling with its own jihadists and a spillover from Mozambique's insurgency.

"Pemba is the one everybody is scared of but it's really impossible to tell where they are going to hit next," said Crisis Group Africa expert Dino Mahtani. Mozambique government officials claim Palma is back under government control.

### 'Security vacuum'

But the departure last week of South African private military company Dyck Advisory Group (DAG) — hired by Mozambique to help fight the insurgency—has fuelled concern over the army's ability to fend for itself while the government considers new contracts.



PEMBA: A woman rests with her baby on the ground at the Pemba Sports center that is now a shelter in Pemba. — AFP

"There will be a security vacuum in Cabo Delgado this month, if not longer," said a report by specialist intelligence firm Pangea-Risk last week.

"Further attacks on Palma should also be expected," it warned, as well as a potential raid on the village of Quitunda near Total's gas site, around which thousands of displaced Palma

residents have sought refuge. Delgado's jihadists have wreaked havoc across the Muslim-majority province for over three years in a bid to establish an Islamic caliphate. Known as Ahlu Sunna Wal Jannah, the shadowy group escalated attacks last year, notably capturing the key port town of Mocimboa da Praia in August. — AFP

## Somali president extends his rule for 2 more years

**MOGADISHU:** Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed has signed a controversial law extending his mandate for another two years, despite threats of sanctions from the international community. State broadcaster Radio Mogadishu said the president, better known by his nickname Farmajo, had "signed into law the special resolution guiding the elections of the country after it was unanimously passed by parliament".

Somalia's lower house of parliament on Monday voted to extend the president's mandate—which expired in February—after months of deadlock over the holding of elections in the fragile nation. However the speaker of the Senate slammed the move as unconstitutional, and the resolution was not put before the upper house, which would normally be required, before being signed into law. Speaker Abdi

Hashi Abdullahi said it would "lead the country into political instability, risks of insecurity and other unpredictable situations".

Farmajo and the leaders of Somalia's five semi-autonomous federal states had reached an agreement in September that paved the way for indirect parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2020 and early 2021. But it fell apart as squabbles erupted over how to conduct the vote, and multiple rounds of talks have failed to break the impasse. The new law paves the way for a one-person, one-vote election in 2023 — the first such direct poll since 1969 — which Somalis have been promised for years and no government has managed to deliver. A presidential election was due to have been held in February. It was to follow a complex indirect system used in the past in which special delegates chosen by Somalia's myriad clan elders pick lawmakers, who in turn choose the president.

### Sanctions and visa restrictions

The international community has repeatedly called for elections to go ahead. The United States, which has been Somalia's main ally in recovering from decades of civil war and fighting Al-Qaeda-linked



MOGADISHU: Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed has signed a controversial law extending his mandate for another two years. — AFP

Islamists, said Tuesday it was "deeply disappointed" in the move to extend Farmajo's mandate.

"Such actions would be deeply divisive, undermine the federalism process and political reforms that have been at the heart of the country's progress and partnership with the international community, and divert attention away from countering Al-Shabaab," US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in a statement. — AFP

## Seven years on, over 100 Chibok girls still missing

**LAGOS:** Seven years after hundreds of schoolgirls were abducted by Boko Haram jihadists in Chibok, northeast Nigeria, more than 100 are still missing, Amnesty International said yesterday. Several more mass kidnappings of schoolchildren have occurred in northern Nigeria since Chibok, resulting in hundreds of schools being shut in a region where the literacy rate and school enrolment are already very low. On April 14, 2014, Boko Haram gunmen seized 276 girls aged between 12 and 17 from the Government Girls Secondary School in the remote town of Chibok in Borno state.

"Although most escaped or were later released, more than 100 girls remain in captivity," Amnesty International said in a statement. There have been at least five mass abductions of schoolchildren in northern Nigeria since December, and the threat of further attacks has led to the closure of about 600 schools in the region, the rights groups added.

"Whatever authorities are doing to tame this tide, it is not working," said Osai Ojigho, director of Amnesty International Nigeria. Following school shutdowns, many girls have been married off. One 16-year-old schoolgirl told Amnesty: "Since many of my friends were kidnapped in school, my parents decided to give me out in marriage for my own safety." The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that about 10.5 million children between the ages of five and 14 are out of school in Nigeria.

"The Nigerian authorities' failure to protect schoolchildren from recent attacks clearly shows that no lessons have been learned from the Chibok tragedy," Ojigho said.

"The Nigerian authorities risk a lost generation." —AFP



## International

# By rail, road or on foot, migrants flow across Mexico towards US

## Biden's reversal of hardline immigration policies gives migrants new hope

**APIZACO, Mexico:** Greysyi Venegas devours her first meal in three days at a Mexican shelter near the railroad where migrants risk their lives clinging to freight trains on their grueling journey north to the United States. An unexpected pregnancy has complicated her already tortuous trip from Honduras by rail, road and on foot with her seven-year-old son Eduardo. "Yesterday I felt ill. I didn't want to eat. So I asked for a pregnancy test," said the 23-year-old, who has a cough and dark circles around her eyes from fatigue. Venegas scraped together around \$100 for her second attempt to reach the United States in three years, but the money had already run out by the time she reached Mexico. She set off from the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula on March 21 and walked almost 300 kilometers to eastern Guatemala with her son, before traveling more than 12 hours by road.

Then she crossed part of southern Mexico on foot before riding a freight train northwards with other undocumented Central American migrants fleeing violence and poverty. "I worked on a coffee farm, but the hurricanes left me with no job or home," Venegas told AFP at the Sagrada Familia shelter in the central Mexican state of Tlaxcala.

She was likely referring to hurricanes Eta and Iota, two powerful and deadly storms that slammed Central America in late 2020 triggering massive floods and causing widespread damage. At the shelter Venegas joined other migrants spending one or two nights to regain their strength before resuming their arduous journey north. The US-based owner of the Honduran coffee plantation has promised to help her if she gets asylum in the United States. But he cannot do it before because he could be accused of human trafficking, she said. "How I cross over is my problem," Venegas said.

### 'The Beast'

The shelter is overflowing with migrants, so some have to spend the night next to the tracks of the near-



**LONDON:** Pedestrians walk past a Big Issue seller holding copies of the magazine as he works near Charing Cross in central London. Britain's partial easing of coronavirus restrictions this has not just been welcomed by the hard-pressed retail and hospitality sector. — AFP

## Homeless magazine sellers back on the streets in UK

**LONDON:** For homeless magazine vendor Matthew Meredith, the lifting of England's coronavirus lockdown is a major relief. For the past three months, he's struggled to pay for food and temporary shelter as the country shut down-depriving him of the scant income he earns selling magazines on the street. "It was a blow not to have the magazine for those months. I had to borrow money. I don't like asking for money," he said. "My mum has just lost her job-her bingo hall shut down. My brother has a good job, so I ask him here and there. Meredith is among about 1,500 vendors for the Big Issue, a magazine sold in the UK to help so-called rough sleepers and the homeless. The 31-year-old sells the magazine on Oxford Street-one of central London's retail hotspots, where shops and restaurants reopened this week. He normally gets £25 (\$35, 29 euros) a week for buying The Big Issue from distributors-and pockets the difference between the cost price of £1.50 and sale price of £3.00.

It's not much, but it's enough to get by. "I have to pay £100 a month for the hostel and buy my own food as the hostel food is disgusting, which eats into my finances."

With few people on the streets to sell to over the past three months, times were tougher than normal. Lockdown restrictions severely affected vendors, who tend to be more vulnerable financially and mentally after experiencing rough sleeping. The pressures of confinement-often in sub-standard accommodation-have been eased, however, as society gradually unlocks. "I am registered for anxiety, depression and personality disorder. I can be a short fuse sometimes," said Meredith. "It was a struggle-the last three months have been depressing." —AFP

## Biden summit offer hailed in Moscow

**MOSCOW:** US President Joe Biden's invitation to Vladimir Putin to hold a summit was being hailed in Moscow yesterday as a sign that Washington had blinked first in the showdown with Russia over Ukraine. With indications that work was already under way for a potential meeting in Finland, Russian officials were crowing that Moscow was finally being treated with the respect it deserves.

"It was a very important step forward... news on a global scale," said Konstantin Kosachev, the chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Russian parliament's upper house. Biden offered to hold the summit on neutral ground during a call with Putin on Tuesday,



**LA JOYA, Texas:** A Guatemalan family waits with fellow immigrants to board a US Customs and Border Protection bus to a processing center after crossing the border from Mexico on Tuesday. — AFP

by railroad known as "The Beast" ridden clandestinely by migrants through Mexico. In three months, the Sagrada Familia hostel has helped around 3,000 people—a "dramatic" figure compared with 6,500 in the whole of 2020, said its director, Sergio Luna. "We don't see it decreasing," he said.

In March, around 172,000 undocumented migrants—many from Central America—were detained crossing the US border with Mexico, a 71 percent increase in just one month and the highest level in 15 years, the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported. It said that 60 percent of them were deported to Mexico under pandemic-control measures.

## How to fill the 'void': What next for Queen Elizabeth II?

**LONDON:** Queen Elizabeth II faces the twilight of her record-breaking reign without her most trusted adviser and personal confidant-husband Prince Philip. But his death last week aged 99 is not expected to change the monarch's lifetime commitment to duty, as a new chapter beckons for Britain's most famous family.

The Queen, who turns 95 next week, once described the Duke of Edinburgh as her "strength and stay", in a rare moment of public candor. He has been credited with the successful running of "The Firm", cementing its position in national life, and helping it to weather crises and scandal. "The Queen, as you would expect, is an incredibly stoic person," said the couple's second son, Prince Andrew, who has been under a shadow because of his links to the late Jeffrey Epstein, a convicted sex offender. "She described (the duke's death) as having left a huge void in her life," he told reporters, adding the family was "rallying round to make sure we're there to support her".

### Life of service

A steady stream of close family members have visited the Queen since last week, including her eldest son and heir, Prince Charles, Andrew, and youngest son, Edward. Edward said his mother was "bearing up", despite the understandable shock at the loss. The Times



**In this file photo taken on June 09, 2018, members of the Royal Family (left to right) Vice Admiral Timothy Laurence, Britain's Princess Anne, Princess Royal, Britain's Princess Beatrice of York, Britain's Prince Andrew, Duke of York, Britain's Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, Britain's Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, Britain's Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge (with Princess Charlotte and Prince George) and Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, stand on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to watch a fly-past of aircraft by the Royal Air Force. — AFP**

as tensions between Russia and the West spiked over Ukraine. A Russian troop build-up on the border with Ukraine—where Russia's forces have been battling pro-Russian separatists since 2014 — had sparked widespread alarm and warnings from NATO. In the call, Biden reiterated US support for Kiev's pro-Western government and urged Russia to "de-escalate tensions", but also offered to hold his first face-to-face talks with Putin on "the full range of issues facing the United States and Russia".

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said yesterday that the offer would be "studied", but Putin spoke quickly on Tuesday night with Finland's President Sauli Niinisto, who said in a statement that the two had discussed the call with Biden and "the planned meeting of the two presidents". Finland hosted the last summit between Russian and US leaders in 2018, when Putin met with then-president Donald Trump. Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev set the tone in his reaction to news of the talks, comparing the summit to his meetings with Ronald Reagan in Geneva and Reykjavik in the 1980s. —AFP

Under pressure from Washington, Mexico has stepped up security along its southern border with Guatemala to stem the flow of Central Americans, but migrants are finding new routes across.

Hernan Cardona, a 58-year-old former Honduran police officer, fought back tears as he recounted how the "ordeal" began on March 15 for his five children and a granddaughter. Guatemalan police took around \$375 from him on the way north, forcing him to look for work making deliveries in southern Mexico to earn some money. "Then we went on foot for eight days and eight nights... sleeping in the mountains and without eating," he said. —AFP

reported on Tuesday that she is currently not being given her daily red boxes of government papers during the two weeks of official royal mourning. But early signs are the Queen will remain faithful to the commitment she made in a radio address to the Commonwealth as a 21-year-old princess from Cape Town, South Africa, in 1947.

"I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service," she said. Just a day after her husband's death was announced, she had an audience with Prime Minister Boris Johnson, according to the Court Circular, which lists royal events and engagements. On Tuesday, she hosted an event at Windsor Castle, west of London, to mark the retirement of the Lord Chamberlain, the most senior officer in the royal household.

She has links to more than 600 charities, military associations, professional bodies and public service organizations.

### Family support

Prince Philip was almost ever-present at the Queen's side since she acceded to the throne in 1952 but had been seen less after retiring from public duties in 2017. It is expected she will now rely more heavily on Charles, his second wife, Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, as well as second-in-line Prince William and his wife at engagements, according to British media reports.

Charles, now 72, has already taken on more of her duties in recent years, including overseas, in preparation for his long-awaited succession. He is expected accompany his mother for the state opening of Parliament on May 11. Younger royals have also accompanied her at events, including online over videoconference during the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

### News in brief

#### 12 missing off US Gulf Coast

**WASHINGTON:** A dozen people were missing at sea off the US state of Louisiana yesterday after a commercial ship capsized in the Gulf of Mexico, sparking a rescue operation that saved six others. The United States Coastguard and a fleet of volunteers were deployed to search for the 18 crew on board after the vessel capsized in a storm near Port Fourchon, about 160 kilometers (100 miles) south of New Orleans. The ship was a 129-foot (39.3 meters) lift vessel, the coastguard said, adding that the search for the remaining crew was ongoing. "We're still looking for others right now," Petty Officer Jonathan Lally, a spokesman for the coastguard, told The Washington Post early yesterday. — AFP

#### Putin gets second dose of vaccine

**MOSCOW:** President Vladimir Putin said yesterday he had received the second dose of a vaccine against the coronavirus and encouraged Russians to follow his example. "I want to inform you that right now, before entering this room, I also received the second vaccination," he said during a televised meeting. "I assume that you, taking care of yourself and your loved ones, will do the same and follow my example," he added. The 68-year-old received his first dose on March 23 in private, declining to say which of Russia's three vaccines—Sputnik V, EpiVacCorona or CoviVac—he had been administered. — AFP

#### Egypt frees journalist couple

**CAIRO:** Egyptian photojournalist Hossam el-Sayed and his wife Solafa Magdy, an independent journalist, have been released after spending the past year and a half behind bars, their professional association said yesterday. Solafa Magdy and her husband Hossam el-Sayed were freed on Tuesday night, the association's president, Diaa Rashwan, announced on Facebook, thanking judicial authorities. They were arrested in a Cairo cafe in November 2019 and accused of belonging to an unnamed "terrorist" group while Magdy also faced a fake news charge. They were released without facing any formal charges in a courtroom. — AFP

#### DR Congo starts vaccination drive

**KINSHASA:** The DR Congo will kick off a COVID vaccination drive next week, the government said yesterday, despite persistent public wariness over potential side effects from the drugs. People will start receiving shots across the vast central African country from Monday, Interior Minister Gilbert Kankonde said on state television. Anti-COVID vaccination is a sensitive issue in the DR Congo, where conspiracy theories air widely on social media. "Vaccination will be voluntary, and preference will be given to healthcare staff, vulnerable people with chronic illnesses and all those who are highly exposed (to the virus) while carrying out their work," Kankonde said. — AFP

#### Russian police raid student site

**MOSCOW:** Russian police yesterday raided the offices of student news site DOXA and charged staff with inciting minors to protest, in an ongoing clampdown on independent media. DOXA said the charges stem from a video about demonstrations in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, who is serving two-and-a-half years in a penal colony over an old embezzlement conviction. "Today at six o'clock in the morning searches were carried out in the office of our journal and in the apartments of our editors," DOXA said in a statement. It said four of its journalists were facing charges of "inciting minors to participate in illegal activities", an offence punishable by up to three years in jail. — AFP

## Millions of women face restrictions on their body: UN

**UNITED NATIONS:** Nearly half the women in 57 countries around the world face restrictions on what they can do with their bodies, such as have sex, use contraception or seek health care, the UN said in a report yesterday. The authors of the report by the United Nations Population Fund addressed for the first time women's bodily autonomy. The study entitled "My Body is My Own" lists attacks on women in 57 countries, ranging from rape to forced sterilization to virginity tests and genital mutilation. The study looks at restrictions on women deciding what to do with their bodies without fear of violence or a decision from someone else on their physical integrity.

"This lack of bodily autonomy has massive implications beyond the profound harms to individual women and girls: potentially depressing economic productivity, undercutting skills, and resulting in extra costs to health care and judicial systems," the UN population fund said in a statement.

The study said only 56 percent of the countries examined in the report have laws or policies providing for thorough sex education. "The fact that nearly half of women still cannot make their own decisions about whether or not to have sex, use contraception or seek health care should outrage us all," said UNFPA director Natalia Kanem.

"In essence, hundreds of millions of women and girls do not own their own bodies. Their lives are governed by others," Kanem said. The report lists 20 countries or territories in which it says there are laws that allow a rapist to marry the victim so as to escape criminal charges. It also listed 43 countries that do not have laws governing rape in married couples and says more than 30 countries impose restrictions on women's movements outside their home. — AFP



## International

# For Azerbaijanis displaced by war, a chance to finally go home

## 750,000 Azerbaijanis fled Nagorno-Karabakh region in the early 1990s

**BAKU, Azerbaijan:** As a young woman in 1993, Azerbaijani Ramziya Sharifova waded across a river into Iran with her family to escape Armenian forces capturing her village, then watched as they burned it to the ground. Nearly 30 years later, she's finally planning to go home.

The 47-year-old librarian is one of the 750,000 Azerbaijanis who fled the Nagorno-Karabakh region in southwestern Azerbaijan and several surrounding districts in the early 1990s. As the Soviet Union collapsed, ethnic Armenian separatists declared independence for Karabakh and seized control of the region in a brutal war that left tens of thousands dead and forced hundreds of thousands from their homes.

Largely dormant for decades, the conflict re-erupted last September. Over six weeks of heavy fighting, Azerbaijan's forces reclaimed much of the territory the country had lost in the 1990s, including seven districts around Karabakh. Separatist authorities retained control of most of Karabakh itself, but a Russian-brokered peace deal agreed to allow people long displaced from their homes-like Sharifova-to return.

"I can't describe the feelings that overwhelmed me when it was announced" that her home region of Zangilan had been retaken, Sharifova said. "I burst into tears... tears of joy for the liberation of our lands, but also of sadness for our soldiers who died."

After fleeing to Iran in October 1993, Sharifova's family of eight was repatriated a few days later to Azerbaijan. They first lived in a freight train wagon, then for a decade in two small rooms of an abandoned administrative building that the government allocated for displaced people in the capital Baku. She now lives in a large and comfortable apartment but is anxious to go home, waiting only for word from the government that the area has been cleared of landmines to move back. "I want to participate in the rebuilding of my village," Sharifova said.

### Billions on rebuilding

Authorities in Baku have not yet said when those who fled in the 1990s will be able to return. Work is under way to clear the retaken territories of landmines and repair infrastructure destroyed in the fighting. Flush with revenues from oil and gas in the Caspian Sea, President Ilham Aliyev's government has said it will spend billions of dollars on rebuilding the areas reclaimed in the war.

Aliyev, who has been accused of stifling the opposition, had long vowed to retake the territory and can use last year's victory to shore up his popular support. Ramil Huseynov, a 41-year-old who fled the Kalbajar region next to Karabakh as a teenager, said he "lived 27 years with the sole dream" of going home. "We were expelled from our ancestral lands and condemned to a refugee's

life," said Huseynov, who lives in Baku where he works as a civil servant in Azerbaijan's state committee for the displaced.

Kalbajar was almost exclusively populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis before they were expelled by Armenians in 1993. After Azerbaijani forces retook the district last year, he seethed with anger at video footage of Armenians who had settled in Kalbajar burning their homes rather than hand them over.

"Armenians lived in our homes, and when they left they burned down the houses, cut the trees in our gardens and forests, destroyed roads," he said.

### Cradle of culture

During last year's conflict, Azerbaijani forces scored an important strategic and symbolic victory when they retook the town of Shusha inside Karabakh. Azerbaijan has long claimed the town as a cradle of its culture and under the peace agreement it will remain in Azerbaijani hands. Ramig Meherremov, who was the head doctor at a Shusha hospital before fleeing the town 30 years ago, said not a day has since passed that he did not think of returning to his home.

Before the 1990s war, Shusha was famed for its culture and architectural beauty, home to centuries-old mosques and churches used by Muslim Azerbaijanis and Christian Armenians. Meherremov managed to make a brief trip to Shusha after the



**BAKU:** Azerbaijani Ramziya Sharifova, 47, poses during an interview with AFP at her apartment in Baku. —AFP

peace deal in November, only to discover that his home and those of several neighbors had been razed to the ground. Sitting in the courtyard of his simple one-storey home in a settlement for displaced people outside Baku, Meherremov said he hoped that Shusha would one day "be restored to its previous beauty". — AFP

## Myanmar protesters throw red paint in the streets

**YANGON:** Anti-coup protesters in Myanmar sloshed red paint in the streets yesterday to symbolize the blood spilled and more than 700 lives lost in a brutal military crackdown. The country is barely functioning and the economy has stalled since the military seized power from civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1. The military junta has sought to quell mass protests with lethal force and a local monitoring group has verified at least 714 civilian deaths but warns the toll is likely to be even higher.

This week is Myanmar's New Year festival of Thingyan holiday but normal festivities such as public water fights have been cancelled. Instead, protesters have been using Thingyan as a rallying point-as bus shelters and pavements were sprayed red on Wednesday in cities and towns nationwide.

"The purpose of the 'bleeding strike' is to remember the martyrs who died in the struggle for democracy," a protest participant from Yangon said. "We should not be happy during this festival time. We have to feel sadness for the martyrs who are bleeding and we must continue to fight this battle in any way we can." In Mandalay, red paint was also spilled on the streets amid signs saying: "hope our military dictatorship fails," "overthrow the era of fear" and "blood has not dried on the streets".

Protesters spray-painted a pavement red in a



**This handout photo taken and released by Dawei Watch yesterday shows protesters carrying pots filled with Thingyan festival flowers and leaves during a demonstration against the military coup in Dawei. — AFP**

Yangon suburb and left a note that read: "Dear UN, How are you? I hope you are well. As for Myanmar, we are dying."

### 'Echoes of Syria'

The United Nations human rights chief warned Tuesday that Myanmar could be spiralling towards a "full-blown" Syrian-style conflict. Flagging of possible crimes against humanity, the High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet urged countries to take immediate action to push Myanmar's military to stop its "campaign of repression and slaughter of its people."

"I fear the situation in Myanmar is heading

towards a full-blown conflict," Bachelet said in a statement. "There are clear echoes of Syria in 2011," she warned, referring to the start of a civil war that over the past decade has killed around 400,000 people and forced more than six million to flee the country. The bloody crackdown has brought widespread international condemnation and calls for restraint-as well as sanctions from some countries on the Myanmar armed forces and their extensive business interests. But diplomatic bickering has stalled concrete action, with the EU's top diplomat blaming Moscow and Beijing for blocking tough measures, such as a UN arms embargo. — AFP

four years of governance. Kidnappings for ransom have surged in recent months in Port-au-Prince and other provinces, reflecting the growing influence of armed gangs in the Caribbean nation.

Anger has been piqued by the abductions on Sunday of 10 people in Croix-des-Bouquets, a town northeast of the capital Port-au-Prince. They include seven Catholic clergy — five of them Haitian, as well as two French citizens, a priest and a nun. A million dollar ransom has been demanded, and none of the victims have yet been released.

On Monday Haiti's Catholic Church slammed the government's failure to act over the unrest, decrying Haiti's "descent into hell." Moise had responded by saying he was aware the state "must make more of an effort." Another recent example of instability was the escape in February of more than 400 inmates from a prison on the outskirts of the capital, during which 25 people were killed. The rise in violence and insecurity have recently drawn protesters onto the streets of Port-au-Prince, including hundreds of women who rallied earlier this month in the city against the growing power of gangs.

Joseph replaces Prime Minister Joseph Jouthe,



**In this file photo taken in Port-au-Prince, Prime Minister Jouthe Joseph participates in a ceremony for the new director general of the National Police of Haiti (PNH), Leon Charles. — AFP**

who also leads the Superior Council of the National Police and presided over the rise in insecurity. The unrest comes as Moise remains mired in a political stand-off. He maintains that his term of office runs until February 7, 2022, but others claim it ended on February 7, 2021. —AFP

## Haiti's govt resigns, new PM appointed

**PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti:** Haiti's government has resigned and a new prime minister has been appointed, President Jovenel Moise announced yesterday, saying the change was aimed at tackling insecurity in the country, which is grappling with a rise in violence and ongoing political crisis.

"The resignation of the government, which I accepted, will make it possible to address the glaring problem of insecurity and continue discussions with a view to reaching the consensus necessary for the political and institutional stability of our country," Moise tweeted. The new prime minister is Claude Joseph, currently the minister for foreign affairs, the president stated.

Haiti, the poorest country in the Americas, is plagued by poverty, insecurity and natural disaster.

Moise, who is facing popular anger and demands he resign amid the government's failure to reign in criminal violence, is on his sixth prime minister in

## Bangladesh virus shutdown triggers exodus from capital

**DHAKA:** Tens of thousands of people scrambled to get the last trains, buses and ferries out of Dhaka on Tuesday before a nationwide transport shutdown to halt the spread of coronavirus took hold. With new cases and deaths hitting record numbers, Bangladesh's government has ordered all offices and shops to close for eight days from 6 am (midnight GMT) yesterday.

The country will become virtually cut off with all international flights halted, and domestic transport curtailed. Many in the capital of 20 million desperately sought any vehicle to get them back to home villages and towns, with taxi and bus fares quickly rising. Crowds besieged the main bus stations of the city, despite most inter-city routes having stopped on April 5 after officials imposed fresh restrictions.

"So there is no way we can take

them back to their homes," said bus firm manager Rakib Rahman, adding: "But the microbus, car and motorbike drivers are making a fortune thanks to this mad rush".

Police also stopped people boarding trucks that were taking some out of the city, fearing the cramped vehicles would easily allow the virus to spread. Hamidur Rahman, a 25-year-old shopping mall worker, was unable to get a minibus from Gabtoli bus station to his home in western Jeyssore district.

"A regular bus ticket to Jessore costs a maximum of 500 taka (six dollars). We have to pay 1,000 for a seat," he told AFP, after banding together with 12 others to rent an entire bus. Most of the exodus was made up of informal workers in Dhaka stores, offices and markets.

Didarul Alam, a 22-year-old stu-



**DHAKA:** A policeman stops a motorist at a checkpoint as Bangladesh's authorities enforced a strict lockdown to combat the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Dhaka yesterday. —AFP

dent and part-time primary school tutor, said he could not afford to stay in Dhaka. "The students tell me they don't need my services. The maid who cooks in our dormitory has left so I am going too," he said. The South Asian nation of 168 million people has

recorded 684,756 cases and 9,739 deaths, but the number of daily cases has increased sevenfold in a month. Hospitals across Bangladesh say they are being overwhelmed by new cases, and daily deaths have more than doubled. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Jordan court to try 'plot' suspects

**AMMAN:** The suspects in an alleged plot to destabilize Jordan will go on trial in the kingdom's State Security Court, state television reported yesterday. "The court's prosecutor began his investigation Wednesday into individuals implicated in the sedition," it said. Since 2013, the jurisdiction of the State Security Court, which has both military and civilian judges, has been limited to five areas-high treason, espionage, drug trafficking, counterfeiting money and terrorism. Around 20 suspects have been arrested since April 3 in connection with what Deputy Prime Minister Ayman Safadi earlier this month called a "wicked plan" to destabilize the throne. — AFP

#### Sudan invites Ethiopia, Egypt for talks

**KHARTOUM:** Sudan's prime minister has invited his Egyptian and Ethiopian counterparts to a closed meeting to discuss the long-running dispute over Addis Ababa's mega-dam on the Blue Nile, his office said. Last week, talks involving the three countries hosted by the African Union chair, Congo, failed to reach a binding agreement over the operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the filling of its vast reservoir. Ever since construction began in 2011, Egypt has regarded the dam as an existential threat to its water supplies, while Khartoum fears its own dams would be harmed if Ethiopia fills the reservoir without a deal. — AFP

#### Jill Biden to undergo medical procedure

**WASHINGTON:** US President Joe Biden will accompany First Lady Jill Biden as she undergoes a medical procedure at an outpatient facility, the White House said. It did not say what kind of procedure the first lady will undergo, but the statement said it is a "common" one. The White House said that after this procedure the Bidens will return to the White House "to resume their normal schedule." — AFP

#### China urges Canada against 'decoupling'

**MONTREAL:** Beijing's ambassador to Canada on Tuesday pushed back at growing calls in the West to disengage from China, saying this would risk unraveling globalization. Ambassador Cong Peiwu, speaking at the Montreal Council on Foreign Relations, also pitched closer cooperation with Canada-ostensibly an olive branch after two years of frayed diplomatic relations over tit-for-tat arrests of a Huawei executive and two Canadian nationals, or an attempt to hammer a wedge in a US-led alliance taking on Beijing. "We are worried that because some people here in Western countries are preaching the idea of decoupling (with China)," the ambassador said. —AFP

#### Beijing pays its UN dues

**UNITED NATIONS:** China said it has paid its 2021 dues to the United Nations and hinted that the United States, which also owes money, should pay up to uphold "multilateralism with concrete actions." On April 13 China "paid in full all assessed contributions to the UN regular budget" for 2021, a statement from China's UN mission read. And in late February China had paid "the remaining assessments for seven peacekeeping operations." The exact amount of Beijing's contribution to the United Nations was unknown. As the "second largest contributor to UN regular budget and peacekeeping assessments, China has always actively supported the work of the United Nations, firmly safeguarded the international system, and upheld multilateralism with concrete actions," the statement read. — AFP



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Kuwait Times  
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- Canadian Board of General Surgery
- Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of Canada
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- American Board of Surgical Critical Care



**Dr. Abdullah Al Haddad**  
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ENT Consultant, Laryngologist

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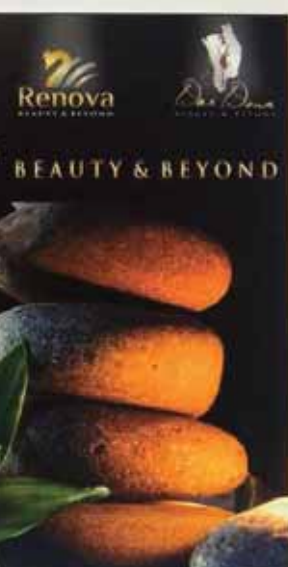
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THURSDAY, APRIL 15, 2021

# Business

## Foreign firms vie to rebuild Beirut port

### Beyond commercial interests, geopolitical influence also at play

**BEIRUT:** Eight months after a massive blast ripped through Beirut port and nearby districts of the Lebanese capital, a host of foreign companies with different national interests are competing to rebuild it. "Everyone has their eyes on the port: The Russians, the Chinese, the Turks, the French and now the Germans," interim port director Bassem Al-Kaissi said. "But for the moment these are only declarations of intent."

The Aug 4 explosion of hundreds of tons of ill-stored fertilizers devastated the dockside and large swathes of the capital, killing more than 200 people. A German delegation last Friday unveiled a spectacular \$30-billion project to rebuild the port and adjacent areas, in the presence of their ambassador. The ambitious plan, drawn up by companies including Hamburg Port Consulting, seeks to move the port east, and remodel the nearby area to include social housing, a "central park" and even beaches.

Former colonial power France has also been positioning itself to take on the port's reconstruction. When French President Emmanuel Macron made a second visit to Beirut in September after the monster explosion, the Lebanese-born head of French shipping giant CMA-CGM, Rodolphe Saade, was in his delegation. During the trip, his company presented Lebanon with a three-phase project to rebuild, expand and modernize the seaside location to become a "smart port", its regional director Joe Dakkak told AFP.

#### Geopolitical influence

The first two phases would cost

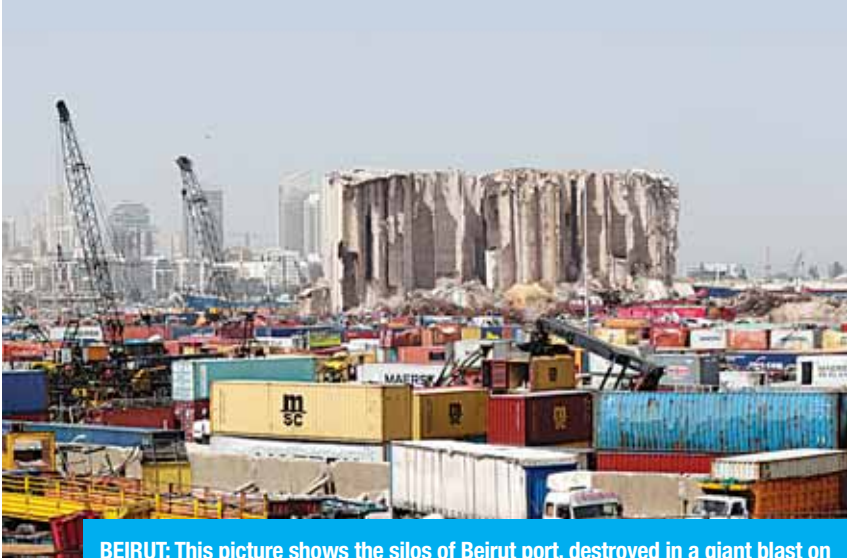
between \$400 million to \$600 million and the firm would fund half, while around 50 companies and international organizations had also shown interest in participating, he said. CMA-CGM has already obtained a concession to run the container terminal in Lebanon's second city Tripoli until 2041, and hopes to soon win a bid for container operations in Beirut.

Beyond the commercial interests, political analyst Imad Salamey says geopolitical influence is also at play. The appeal includes ongoing "offshore gas exploration in the Mediterranean", "Russian expansionism" in the region, and "future economic collaboration between Israel and Arab countries" in the wake of several normalization accords, he said.

In 2018, Lebanon signed its first contract for offshore oil and gas drilling in two blocks with a consortium comprising French, Italian and Russian energy giants, Total, ENI and Novatek, respectively. And further north, Damascus ally Russia has started drilling off the coast of war-torn Syria, Salamey said. The port is likely small fry for China, Salamey said. But it could attract the Chinese "to strengthen their alliance with the Iranians", who hold sway in Syria and Lebanon, where it sponsors the powerful Hezbollah movement.

#### Gentrification?

The former US envoy for Near Eastern affairs, David Schenker, has warned against China winning the bid. "Beijing's aversion to transparency and its ambivalence toward Hezbollah



**BEIRUT:** This picture shows the silos of Beirut port, destroyed in a giant blast on Aug 4 last year, in the Lebanese capital on April 6, 2021. —AFP

would make a Chinese role in reconstruction a worst-case outcome," he wrote. He said Washington should work closely with whichever country wins the port bid to ensure the project is "bound to the principle of reform".

The international community is insisting on sweeping reforms, including at the port, before pumping in foreign aid to rescue the country from its worst economic crisis in decades. But for eight months, deeply divided politicians have failed to agree on a new cabinet to launch them. Despite this, Kaissi said port authorities were working on an action plan to reconstruct and revamp the facility, to be submitted to any new government.

There is an obstacle to the German

proposal. Lebanese activists fear its plan for a park and beaches could spell a repeat of the Beirut center's post-war transformation. The neighborhood was once a historic and vibrant commercial center where people of all social and religious backgrounds mixed. But Lebanese company Solidere privatized downtown Beirut, converting it into grandiose real estate unaffordable to the average Lebanese.

"We will not accept a new Solidere with a foreign touch," civil society group Nahnoo has said. Economist Jad Chaaban said that any project as huge as the port would require "national consultation". "Foreign companies alone should not decide. Neither should the Lebanese state." —AFP

## IEA: Goodbye oil glut thanks to OPEC+, recovery

**PARIS:** A glut in global oil markets is being worked off as the world economy begins to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and as OPEC and its allies restrain production, the IEA said yesterday. The International Energy Agency raised its expectations for the recovery in oil demand after the International Monetary Fund increased its forecasts for global growth this year.

"This improved outlook, along with stronger prompt indicators, has led us to revise up our 2021 global oil demand growth forecast," said the Paris-based body with advised oil consuming nations. It now expects world oil demand to rise by 5.7 million barrels per day (mbd) to 96.7 mbd, following last year's drop of 8.7 mbd. The OPEC oil cartel on Tuesday also raised its 2021 demand forecast to 96.5 mbd.

Oil demand was hammered last year as many countries shut down swathes of their economies in a bid to slow the spread of COVID-19. That caused a glut in supplies, but the so-called OPEC+ group that includes heavyweight producer Russia, sharply cut output last year to reduce that and counter the plunge in prices that briefly saw some turn negative as storage ran short.

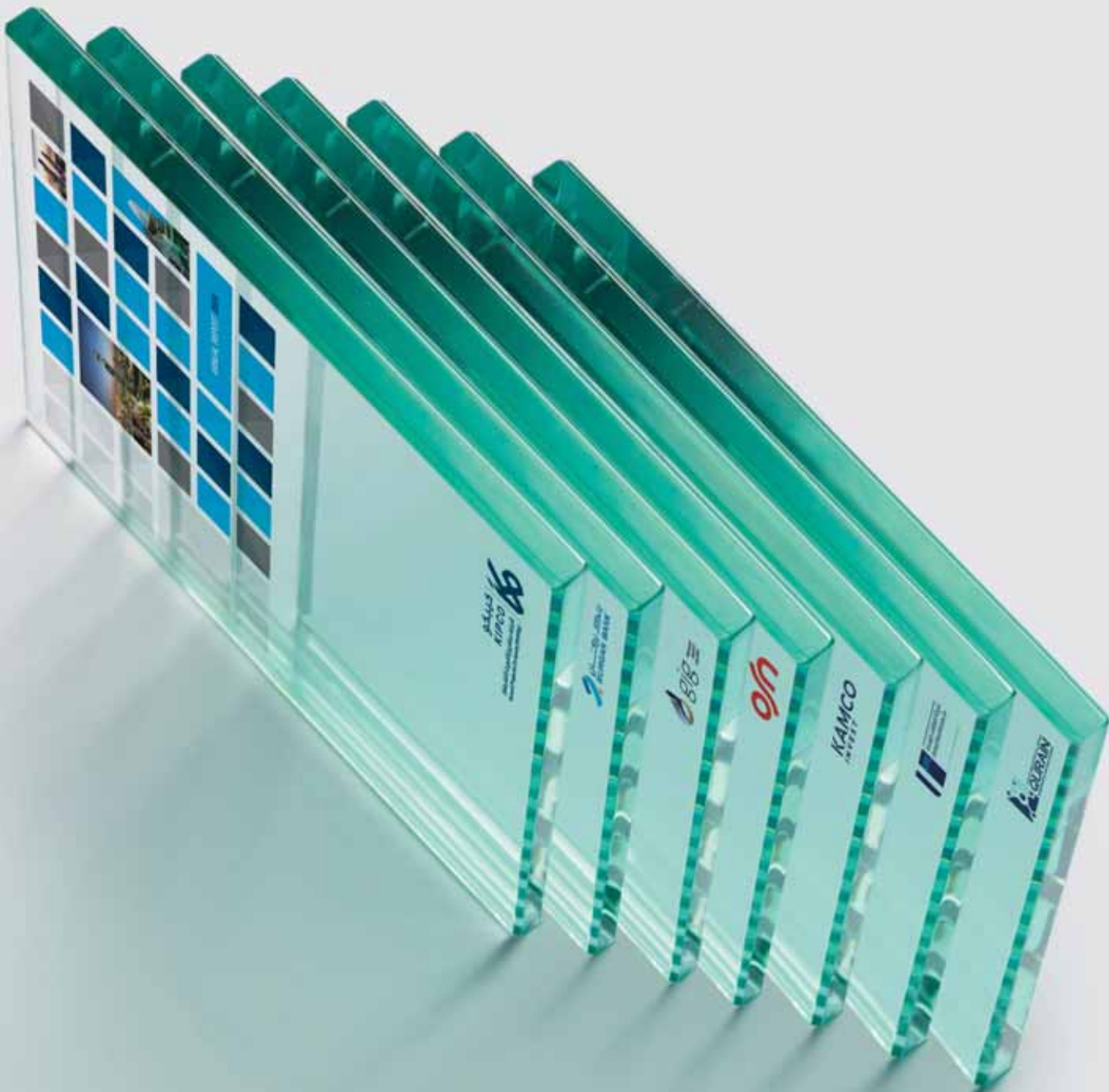
That glut appears to have been largely worked off. The IEA said preliminary data suggest that OECD oil stocks held largely steady in March, following seven consecutive months of draws, and were heading close to their five-year average. OPEC+ has been slowly increasing output since the beginning of the year and at the beginning of April signaled it would lift output by more than 2 mbd in the coming three months in the face of an expected rise in demand. —AFP

## LEADERS IN TRANSPARENCY

KIPCO's 2021 Shafafiyah (Transparency) Forum will take place after the company's General Assembly meeting. KIPCO will present a review of 2020 and guidance for 2021 to shareholders and institutional investors.

The event will be broadcast live on the company's website [kipco.com](http://kipco.com) at 12:30 p.m. on **Thursday, 15 April, 2021**.

For further information, please call **2294 3477**



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## Business

# Toshiba CEO resigns as buyout offer stirs turmoil

## Board members raise questions about offer from CVC Capital Partners

**TOKYO:** Toshiba's CEO resigned yesterday as a buyout offer from a private equity fund stirs turmoil inside the storied Japanese company, with reports suggesting two other funds are considering bids. Nobuaki Kurumatani's resignation is the latest development in years of upheaval at the firm, which only won back its spot on the first section of the Tokyo stock exchange earlier this year after restructuring.

The board accepted Kurumatani's resignation "as he has completed his mission of revitalizing Toshiba", Osamu Nagayama, head of the firm's appointment committee told reporters after the company confirmed the departure. Kurumatani declined to appear before journalists, but a statement from him was read out at the event.

His departure comes as board members raise questions about the buyout offer from CVC Capital Partners, where Kurumatani formerly headed Japanese operations - though Nagayama insisted claims of a conflict of interest had "nothing to do" with the resignation. The private equity firm is reportedly offering a deal in excess of \$20 billion, but there are reports that some in Toshiba see that sum

as too small. The Japanese conglomerate has worked to right the ship after a major accounting scandal in 2015 and the 2017 bankruptcy of its US nuclear subsidiary. After sweeping restructuring, its earnings rebounded and it returned to the prestigious first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in January. A statement from Kurumatani said he was stepping down given the return, as he had "completed my mission".

But the departure is likely to be seen as a reflection of internal disagreements over the CVC offer. The Financial Times said yesterday that another private equity fund, KKR, is planning to offer its own larger buyout proposal. And Bloomberg News reported that a third, Canadian Brookfield Asset Management, was also exploring a possible offer. Toshiba officials did not address the reports at yesterday's press conference.

### 'Sticky situation'

Toshiba last week confirmed it had received the CVC offer, which would take Toshiba private. Delisting the firm could produce faster decision-making by Toshiba's management, which has clashed

with shareholders recently. It could also allow Toshiba to concentrate resources on renewable energies and other core businesses. But any buyout offer is likely to face significant challenges, including securing financing and regulatory approval.

Nagayama said Toshiba would consider CVC's offer cautiously but warned that it "lacks detail as an initial proposal". "It's not something Toshiba has asked for, and it has come suddenly," he said. "We will make the best choice for shareholders, our employees, and society" if a formal proposal is made, said Toshiba's new CEO Satoshi Tsunakawa.

Kurumatani worked for the CVC between 2017 and 2018 and his departure will "remove uncertainty over potential conflicts of interest", said Justin Tang, head of Asian research at United First Partners. It will also "force the board to seek other offers that are in the best interests of shareholders", he told AFP. "It is a very sticky situation at present."

CVC reportedly hopes to secure financing assistance for its buyout bid and Toshiba last week warned that was likely to involve "a substantial amount of time and considerable complexity".



**TOKYO:** In this file photo taken on Nov 8, 2018, Toshiba Chairman and CEO Nobuaki Kurumatani attends a press conference. —AFP

The CVC offer is reportedly around 5,000 yen a share, but Tang said he believes "a price north of 6,000 yen is necessary to get shareholders over the line". Toshiba shares closed up 5.76 percent at 4,860 yen. —AFP

## Facebook oversight panel will now review takedown requests

**NEW YORK:** Facebook's independent Oversight Board announced Tuesday it would start accepting requests to remove "harmful content" that users believe has been wrongly allowed to remain on the leading social network. The move has the potential to vastly expand the work of the so-called "supreme court" of Facebook, which up to now had been tasked with reviewing instances of whether content was improperly taken down from Facebook or Instagram.

The Oversight Board, set up by Facebook to deal with contentious questions of content moderation, began operating last year and issued its first rulings in January. The decisions, which can overrule Facebook management, are binding.

"Enabling users to appeal content they want to see removed from Facebook is a significant expansion of the Oversight Board's capabilities," said Thomas Hughes, director of the body's administration.

"The board was created to ensure that fewer decisions about highly significant content issues be taken by Facebook alone, and that better decisions can be delivered through an independent and transparent process that works to safeguard human rights and freedom of expression. Today's announcement is another step towards realizing this."

The announcement comes with Facebook and other social platforms facing intense pressure to act on misinformation and abusive content, ranging from election-related hoaxes to unproven COVID-19 treatments. Users who feel that harmful posts, photos, videos, comments and shares remain online will be able to appeal to the panel to have them removed.

As part of the new process, the panel will establish procedures including privacy protections for users seeking takedown requests. "We expect everyone on Facebook and Instagram to be able to appeal content left up over the coming weeks," said Guy Rosen, head of integrity at Facebook. "We're glad the Oversight Board is expanding their scope and impact, and look forward to their future decisions and recommendations." —AFP

## African Union wants five vaccine-making centers on continent

**NAIROBI:** The African Union on Tuesday announced the launch of a partnership to manufacture vaccines at five research centers to be built on the continent within the next 15 years. Africa sits on the "sidelines" of the vaccination drive against COVID-19, with only two percent of the world total to have received jabs, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), citing supply, funding and personnel shortfalls.

However the AU and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) plan to change all that. CEPI, which helps run the global Covax vaccine-sharing program with the public-private alliance Gavi and the WHO, signed up to boost African vaccine research and development as well as manufacturing. The five centers will be located in the north, south, east, west and center of Africa over the next 10-15 years, said John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an AU agency.

The target is to produce locally within 20 years 60 percent of all vaccines used on the continent - compared with one percent today. "We are aware that it is a challenge," said Nkengasong after a two-day virtual meeting. However, he said, "If Africa does not plan to address its vaccine security needs today, then we are absolutely setting ourselves for failure." —AFP

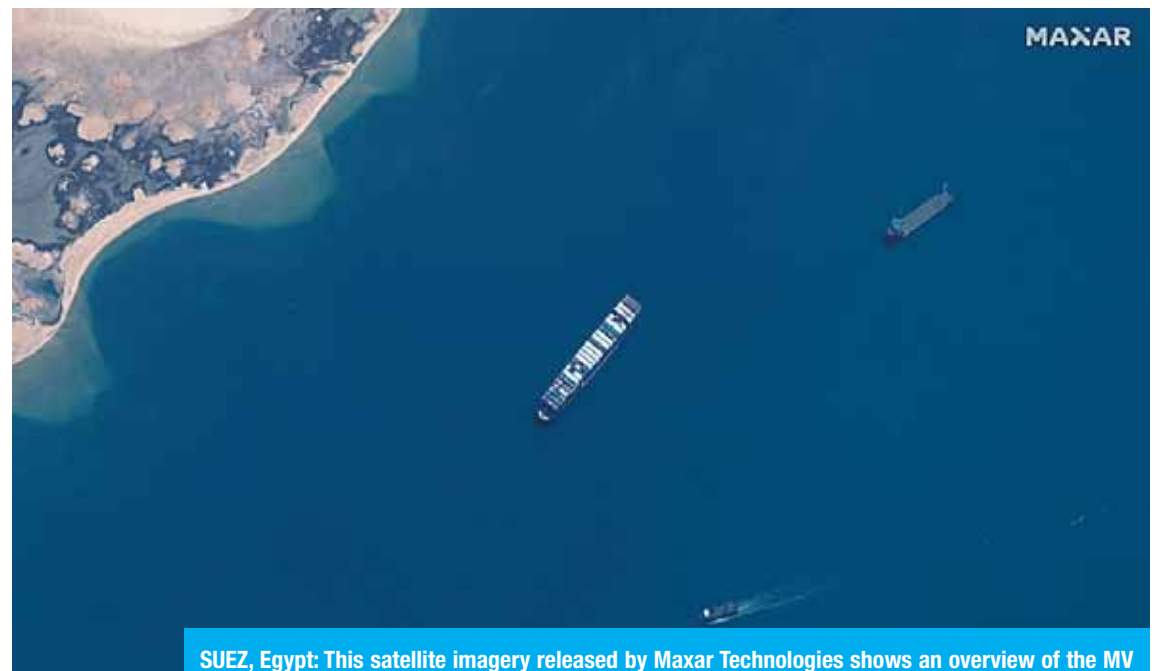
## Egypt seizes Suez megaship, demands \$900m compensation

**TOKYO:** The Japanese owner of a megaship seized after blocking the Suez Canal has said it is negotiating with Egyptian authorities after they demanded \$900 million in compensation for its release. The 200,000-tonne MV Ever Given got diagonally stuck in the narrow but crucial global trade artery in a sandstorm on March 23, triggering a mammoth six-day-long effort to dislodge it.

Maritime data company Lloyd's List said the blockage by the vessel, longer than four football fields, held up an estimated \$9.6 billion-worth of cargo between Asia and Europe each day it was stuck. Egypt also lost between \$12 and \$15 million in revenues for each day the waterway was closed, according to the canal authority.

The MV Ever Given was later seized "due to its failure to pay \$900 million" compensation, Suez Canal Authority chief Osama Rabie was quoted as saying by the state-run Al-Ahram newspaper. Its fate is "now... in the legal arena," a spokeswoman for the ship's owner Shoen Kisen Kaisha told AFP yesterday.

An unnamed spokesperson was also quoted by Japan's Jiji Press agency as saying the firm was "at odds with the canal authority in talks over the appropriate amount (of compensation)" but that discussions were ongoing. The Japanese-owned,



**SUEZ, Egypt:** This satellite imagery released by Maxar Technologies shows an overview of the MV Ever Given container ship in the Great Bitter Lake area of the Suez Canal on April 12, 2021. —AFP

Taiwanese-operated and Panama-flagged ship was moved to unobstructive anchorage in the canal after it was freed on March 29, and tailbacks totaling 420 vessels at the northern and southern entrances to the canal were cleared in early April.

The compensation figure was calculated based on "the losses incurred by the grounded vessel as well as the flotation and maintenance costs" Rabie

## 'Rectification' continues after Alibaba fine

**BEIJING:** A record fine, public penitence from a tech giant and a 'who's who' of digital firms warned to "rectify" their ambitions within a month - state regulators are showing no one is bigger than Beijing in Xi Jinping's China. E-commerce titan Alibaba absorbed the massive \$2.78 billion penalty from China's market watchdog last Saturday, after a months-long investigation found it had been abusing its dominant market position.

Analysts say the chastening was part of Beijing's plan to force a diet on tech giants - from Alibaba to Tencent to Baidu-who have grown fat on the data and personal finances of the Chinese public. After being hit with China's biggest ever corporate fine - the equivalent of four percent of annual sales - Alibaba said it would "fully comply" and drop an exclusivity clause to allow merchants to also sell their goods on rival e-commerce platforms.

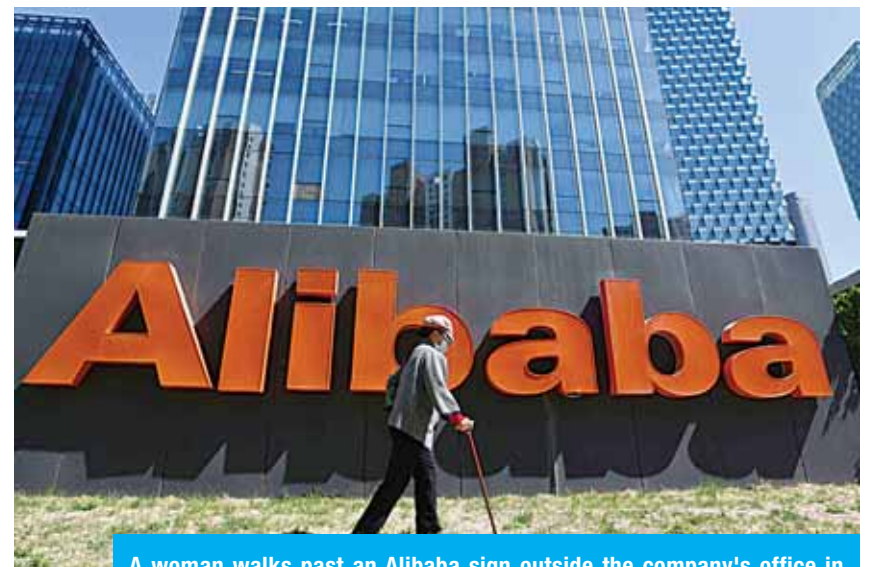
Vice chair Joe Tsai thanked the State Administration for Market Regulation for "good guidance on some of the specific issues under the anti-monopoly

law". Alibaba, which started as an e-commerce platform, spun out fintech colossus Ant Group, China's biggest online payments firm - leaving China's regulators struggling to keep up with a marketplace making and meeting new digital lifestyles.

It hit choppy waters after co-founder Jack Ma publicly criticized Chinese regulators in October over their warnings about the expansion of Ant. In response, regulators pulled Ant's planned record-busting 35-billion-dollar IPO and ordered a restructure of the company, decoupling the "inappropriate links" to other financial products. It is now being forced to transform into a financial holding company under the oversight of the central bank, welding it to banking rules.

### Tucking in tech

Ant must pivot to values "serving the real economy and the masses", state mouthpiece the Global Times said, citing the regulators. The restructure "is designed to level the playing field between Ant and other fintech," said Angela Zhang, a law academic at the University of Hong Kong. "Ant's major competitive advantage lies in the troves of data it obtained through Alipay," she said, citing the ubiquitous online payments platform. The restructure will challenge Ant's ability to creep deeper into lending, insurance and investment, she added. The message to companies reaching too high, too fast is clear, says



**A woman walks past an Alibaba sign outside the company's office in Beijing on April 13, 2021. —AFP**

Nicolas Bahmanyar, a Beijing-based data and tech consultant. "If in a group some activities are not totally legal, expect the whole group to be impacted," he said. "For international companies this is really something to take in consideration: all your eggs are in the same basket when it comes to dealing with the regulator."

Alibaba may have dodged a bullet with a swift fine it can afford to pay, instead of a prolonged, sapping probe "that puts off investors and profitability in the long term", says Larry Ong, analyst at SinoInsider consultancy firm.

### 'Complete rectification'

But the monopolies regulator was only just getting started. On Tuesday it said 34 tech companies - including giants Baidu, Tencent and ByteDance, the owner of TikTok - had been summoned and urged to "heed the warning" provided by Alibaba's legal woes. The firms have been given one month to undergo "complete rectification" - a rigorous self-assessment to ensure they are not in breach of monopoly laws, a statement by the State Administration for Market Regulation said. —AFP

## Microsoft defends against new threat to Exchange

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Microsoft on Tuesday moved to defend against a dangerous new threat to Exchange email servers while the fight continued against hackers taking advantage of a flaw patched last month. The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, part of the Department of Homeland Security, called on government departments to immediately install the latest software update released by Microsoft.

"These vulnerabilities pose an unacceptable risk to the Federal enterprise and require an immediate and emergency action," CISA said in a

notice. "This determination is based on the likelihood of the vulnerabilities being weaponized, combined with the widespread use of the affected software across the Executive Branch and high potential for a compromise of integrity and confidentiality of agency information."

Both CISA and Microsoft said it did not appear that hackers had taken advantage of the newly discovered weakness to break into Exchange email systems. "Although we are not aware of any active exploits in the wild, our recommendation is to install these updates immediately to protect your environment," Microsoft said in a post about the patch.

CISA and Microsoft said that the vulnerabilities were different from those fixed last month, when the US tech company disclosed that a state-sponsored hacking group operating out of China was exploiting security flaws in its Exchange email services to steal data from business users. The company said

the hacking group, which it has named "Hafnium," is a "highly skilled and sophisticated actor".

Hafnium has in the past targeted US-based companies including infectious disease researchers, law firms, universities, defense contractors, think tanks and NGOs. The potentially devastating hack is believed to have affected at least 30,000 Microsoft email servers in government and private networks and has prompted calls for a firm response to state-sponsored attacks which could involve "hacking back" or other measures.

Microsoft in March released updates to fix the security flaws, which apply to on-premises versions of the software rather than cloud-based versions, and urged customers to apply them. US Justice Department officials on Tuesday announced that, with backing from a court, they purged "malicious web shells" hackers had planted in hundreds of computers running Exchange Server software. —AFP



## Business

## KAMCO Invest Report

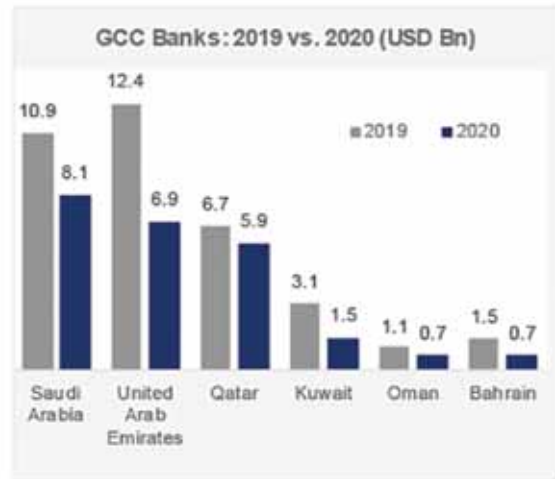
# GCC corporate profits reach 5-year low in FY-2020 on energy, banks and real estate

**KUWAIT:** The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented impact on the GCC economy that dented both corporate and government's coffers. Earnings reported by GCC-listed companies declined to a 5-year low to \$91.3 billion in 2020 as compared to \$150.5 billion during 2019. The 39.3 percent or \$59.2 billion decline came mainly on the back of decline in profits for Aramco (by \$38.9 billion or 44.1 percent y-o-y) followed by Banking, Real Estate and Materials sectors. The three sectors accounted for 85 percent of the decline in net profits for the year, when excluding net profits for Aramco. Excluding the oil giant's numbers, the decline in GCC net profits was relatively lower at 32.6 percent.

The only sectors that showed noticeable increase in net profits during the year were Utilities and Food, Beverage & Tobacco sectors that remained resilient during the pandemic due to their defensive nature. Out of the 21 sectors on the exchange, 12 sectors witnessed y-o-y decline in profits whereas gainers only reported marginal growth. At the exchange level, Abu Dhabi reported the smallest decline in profits during the year at 7.4 percent followed by Oman and Qatar with declines of 18.6 percent and 20.5 percent, respectively.

In terms of quarterly performance, net profits during Q4-2020 declined by 21.6 percent y-o-y to \$25.0 billion as compared to \$31.9 billion during Q4-19. In terms of sequential performance, profits were down marginally by 1.3 percent as compared to Q3-2020. The y-o-y decline in profits during Q4-2020 came as companies on five out of seven exchanges in the region reported decline in profits whereas Abu Dhabi and Bahrain-listed companies reported 28.5 percent and 9.5 percent increase in profits, respectively. In terms of sectors, Energy sector once again reported the biggest decline of \$6.2 billion in net profits or 30.8 percent y-o-y followed by Banks and Real Estate with profits declines of 23.8 percent and 94.9 percent, respectively. On the other hand, the Utilities sector reported the biggest y-o-y growth in profits.

The Banking sector was amongst the biggest sectors that reported a decline in profits during 2020. The sectors \$11.8 billion fall in net profits was led by higher provisions booked by banks as bad loans increased during

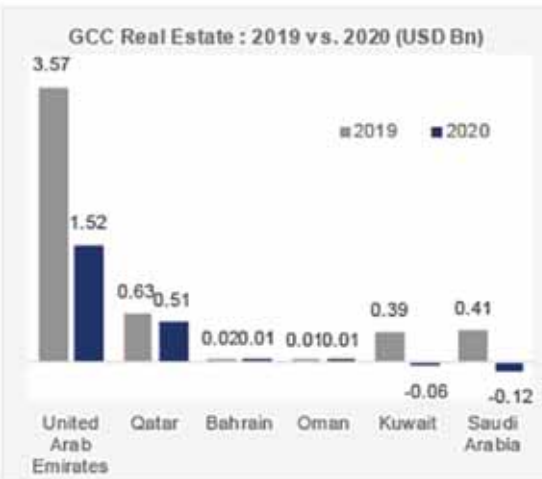


the year due to the pandemic. Loan loss provisions (LLP) booked during the year reached a record high of \$20.3 billion with increase seen across the board in all the six countries.

Banks in the UAE booked the biggest spike in LLP during the year with an increase of \$3.4 billion or 71.6 percent to reach \$8.2 billion. On the other hand, Saudi Arabian banks booked the lowest percentage increase in LLP at 37.6 percent or \$1.3 billion to reach \$4.6 billion during the year. Banks in the region set aside \$6.4 billion for doubtful credit during Q4-2020, the highest for a quarter ever recorded in the region.

In the energy sector, the 44 percent drop in profits for Aramco was led by the historic decline in crude oil prices during 1H-2020 in addition to decline in volumes sold as well as weak refining and chemical margins.

The trend was similar for the bulk of the companies in the sector with 14 out of 21 companies in the GCC energy sector reporting a decline in net profits during 2020. Similarly, the two-third decline in profits for the Materials sector was led by companies related to the energy industry. SABIC reported the biggest decline in profits in the sector after the company's profits shrunk by \$1.4 billion to \$17.8 million in 2020 due to a decline in topline that was affected by a decline in demand for chemical products.



In the Real Estate sector, which reported the third biggest decline in profits during 2020, results were mainly affected by the loss in rental income as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the governments across the region during the year. Profits for the sector declined by \$3.1 billion to reach \$1.9 billion in 2020 as compared to \$5.0 billion during 2019 mainly led by \$2.1 billion decline in profits for UAE-based real estate companies. The three Emaar companies, Emaar Properties, Emaar Malls and Emaar Development reported a combined net profit decline of \$1.7 billion while Damac Properties reported bigger losses of \$283 million in 2020 as compared to a loss of \$10.0 million in 2019.

## Kuwait

Bursa Kuwait-listed companies reported a y-o-y net profit decline of 46.6 percent during Q4-20 that reached \$0.54 billion compared to \$1.0 billion during Q4-19. The major sectors i.e., Banks, Telecommunication, Real Estate, and Capital Goods contributed to the y-o-y decline in aggregate profitability that was partially offset by higher profits reported by sectors like Energy, Insurance and Materials.

In terms of FY-2020 profits, Kuwaiti-listed companies posted a decline of 61.6 percent during the year with profits reaching \$2.3 billion for the full year as com-

pared to \$5.9 billion in 2019. Net profits for the Kuwaiti Banking sector plunged 51 percent to \$1.5 billion in FY-2020 against \$3.1 billion in FY-19 as all the banks posted a decline in the net profit led by higher COVID-19 led provision charges. NBK reported a FY-20 net profit of \$811.1 million, a decline of 39 percent primarily due to higher provision charges of credit losses and impairment losses and higher operating expenses.

Similarly, KFH reported a net profit of \$489 million for FY-20 compared to a profit of \$829 million in FY-19, a drop of 41 percent, led by decrease in investment income and increase in provisions for impairment to offset the negative effects of coronavirus pandemic. Ahli Bank of Kuwait posted a net loss of \$229 million in FY-20 against a net profit of \$95 million, due to benchmark interest rate cut and lower business volumes.

Profits for the Telecom sector declined by 24.3 percent to reach \$726.5 million for FY-20 compared to \$960 million for FY-19. Zain recorded a net profit of \$610 million in FY-20 compared to \$716 million in FY-19 down by 14.9 percent, mainly due to the pandemic impact across all the major operations of the Group. STC Kuwait and Ooredoo Kuwait also reported a decline in profits during 2020 that were relatively steeper at 26.6 percent and 88.8 percent, respectively.

The real estate sector posted a net loss of \$56.4 million for FY-20 compared to a profit of \$385 million in FY-19. This came as the sector witnessed one of the biggest impact of the COVID-19 restrictions, inline with the impact across the globe. In Kuwait, 10 real estate companies posted losses during FY-20 as compared to profits during FY-19 while an additional two continued to report losses during the year. Almost all the companies in the sector posted deteriorating financials during FY-20 vs. the previous year.

The Insurance sector recorded a profit growth of 14.8 percent that reached \$148 million in FY-20 compared to \$129 million in FY-19. Gulf Insurance Group reported the biggest increase in profits in the sector for FY-20 of \$54 million compared to \$44 million mainly due to the increase in net investment income and Gross Premium Written. AlAhleah Insurance Co posted a net profit of \$40 million for FY-20 against \$34 million up by 18.6 percent supported by the increase in operating revenues.

## NBK offers customers guaranteed cashback up to 25% with Mastercard

**KUWAIT:** As part of its keenness to provide exceptional rewards to its customers and meet all their various needs, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) provides eligible NBK Mastercard Credit Cardholders with the opportunity to get cashback up to 25 percent on their purchases all over the world when using eligible NBK Mastercard Credit Cards for online shopping, at a select of leading international brands, for the first time in Kuwait.



NBK Customers can benefit from Travel Rewards offers when using eligible NBK Mastercard Credit Cards for online shopping on the websites of a select of brands around the world including:

- Abercrombie & Fitch
- Boggi Milano
- GILT
- Neiman Marcus Online

- Saks Fifth Avenue
- Farfetch
- Forzieri
- Giglio
- Hollister
- Anatomie
- Slowear
- Learn Primary
- Malababa
- YOOX
- Macy's Online
- Fever
- Rue La La
- TWGTEA.com
- Strawberry.net
- Faire Leather co.
- MYUS.com
- Tocco Toscano

Additionally, the holders of the following NBK Mastercard Credit Cards are eligible for Travel Rewards:

- NBK World Mastercard Credit Card
- NBK World Elite Mastercard Credit Card
- NBK Titanium Mastercard Credit Card
- NBK Platinum Mastercard Credit Card

To sign up and learn more about the exclusive offers and cashback when shopping during travel, please visit the website: <https://mtr.mastercardservices.com/en>

On this occasion, Anwar Al-Ballam Cards Products Manager, at Consumer Banking Group, at National Bank of Kuwait said: "We seek to reward all our customers by providing exclusive offers that suit their various lifestyles and meet their expectations. For travel lovers from NBK Mastercard Credit Cardholders, we give them the opportunity to get exceptional offers as part of our endeavors to reward them all year

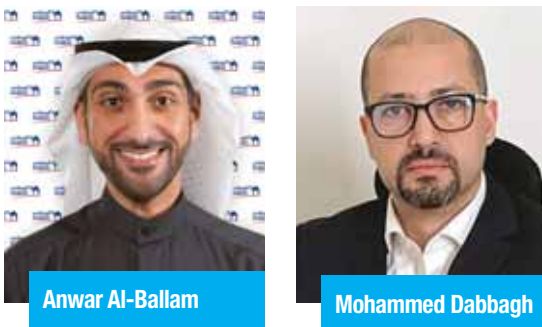
Vision 2035.

"Ooredoo has an established reputation of trust in the regional digital services market," said Zainab Al-Shammari, Manager, Strategic Marketing & Business Planning, B2B/B2B Marketing, Ooredoo Kuwait. "Under the goals of Vision 2035, we are committed to realizing the ambition of a smart society in Kuwait and we see digital transformation as a key component of that promise. Our partnership with Microsoft will accelerate cloud migration and bring innovation, job creation and prosperity to all the people of Kuwait."

Ooredoo Cloud Connect is expected to provide Kuwaiti organizations with secure, reliable, and affordable cloud connectivity services to drive digital transformation and align with the goals of Kuwait Vision 2035. The company's partnership with Microsoft establishes Ooredoo as an Azure ExpressRoute connectivity provider in the country.

"Microsoft's mission is to empower every individual and organization on the planet to achieve more," said Alaeddine Karim, Country Manager, Microsoft Kuwait. "Our work with Ooredoo is furtherance of our commitment to the government, people and business community of Kuwait. Through the trusted, versatile, and intelligent Microsoft Cloud, enterprises will be able to engage customers, empower employees, optimize operations and reinvent business models through digital transformation."

Ooredoo Cloud Connect makes available Microsoft Azure's private domain services in Europe, as well as



Anwar Al-Ballam



Mohammed Dabbagh

round." Al-Ballam indicated that NBK seeks to promote using digital channels for making payments and online shopping, as part of the efforts made to protect customers under the prevailing exceptional circumstances. "Since our cashback campaigns are well-received and very popular among customers, we promise them to continue providing such exclusive offers and rewards," he added.

Al-Ballam noted that in addition to the chances to participate in the campaigns launched by NBK all year round, NBK Credit Cards guarantee customers a unique lifestyle, thanks to the numerous benefits provided to cardholders, which contribute to enrich their banking experience.

On his part, Mohammed Dabbagh, Director, Business Development, Kuwait at Mastercard, said: "Launching the Mastercard Travel Rewards demonstrates our commitment to provide customized products that cater to the different unique lifestyles of customers. We are proud to strengthen our long-standing partnership with NBK, and are fully confident that the new cashback offers will help Kuwaiti travelers get closer to their passion, and make everyday payments simpler and safer, while receiving valuable rewards."

NBK Mastercard Credit Cards provide a wide range of exclusive benefits and offers to customers including NBK Rewards Program at more than 900 partner outlets across Kuwait, free access to luxurious airport lounges worldwide, free travel insurance, NBK Secure Shopping, free valet parking, local concierge service, as well as exclusive special offers.



Alaeddine Karim



Zainab Al-Shammari

public cloud services, such as Microsoft 365 and Dynamics 365. Data-rich management tools also give organizations real-time visibility of their entire network infrastructure, which allows them to optimize performance.

As Kuwait continues on its path of digital transformation, businesses of all scales will benefit from access to the intelligent cloud. Microsoft Azure delivers a range of platforms and services to businesses while optimizing costs and reducing the complexities of network administration. Technologies resident in the Microsoft Cloud include business intelligence, machine learning, predictive analytics, smart bots, natural-language processing, and Internet of Things field-connection services.

## UK supermarket Tesco profits surge in pandemic year

**LONDON:** Britain's biggest retailer Tesco yesterday announced a six-fold surge in annual net profits after the supermarket giant exited Asian markets and was allowed to stay open during coronavirus lockdowns. Profit after tax soared to £6.14 billion (\$8.44 billion) in the 12 months to the end of February from £971 million in 2019/20.

Pre-tax profit however fell by around a fifth to £825 million, hit by the cost of employing thousands of extra staff to meet booming online demand for groceries. Earnings were impacted also by the supermarket's decision to repay UK government tax relief received during the pandemic.

"While the pandemic is not yet over, we're well-placed to build on the momentum in our business," chief executive Ken Murphy said in yesterday's earnings statement. "We have doubled the size of our online business and... we're building a digital customer platform," he added. Tesco said that in response to the "unprecedented increase in customer demand", annual online sales in main market UK jumped by 77 percent to £6.3 billion. "In terms of the outlook Tesco said it expects sales volumes to decline as lockdown restrictions ease, however costs are also expected to decline as well," noted Michael Hewson, chief market analyst at CMC Markets UK.—AFP

## In world first, New Zealand to make banks report climate impact

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealand will force banks to reveal the impact their investments have on climate change under world-first legislation intended to make the financial sector's environmental record transparent, officials said. Commerce Minister David Clark said the law would make climate reporting mandatory for banks, insurance companies and investment firms.

"Becoming the first country in the world to introduce a law like this means we have an opportunity to show real leadership and pave the way for other countries to make climate-related disclosures mandatory," he said. Clark said it would force financial institutions to consider the real-world impact their investments have on the climate and allow the public to gauge their performance. "It is important that every part of New Zealand's economy is helping us cut emissions and transition to a low-carbon future," he said. "This legislation ensures that financial organizations disclose and ultimately take action against climate-related risks and opportunities." The legislation was introduced on Monday and if passed will make climate reporting mandatory by 2023.

Climate Change Minister James Shaw said the annual reports were likely to underline the fact that high-carbon investments would become less attractive as measures to curb emissions took hold. "We simply cannot get to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 unless the financial sector knows what impact their investments are having on the climate," he said.—AFP





## Lifestyle | Features



This photo shows painter Sergei Alexandrov speaking during an interview with AFP at his workshop. — AFP photos



This photo shows painter Sergei Alexandrov gesturing while speaking during an interview with AFP in front of a residential building known as "Khrushchyovka".

## IN MOSCOW, URBAN RENEWAL LEAVES ARTISTS OUT IN THE COLD

**S**ergei Alexandrov has just a few weeks to take down the colorful landscapes and seaside sunsets that have brightened the walls of his Moscow studio ahead of a deadline to demolish it. The Soviet-era residence block near the center of the Russian capital which houses his workplace is set to be leveled as part of a massive urban renewal drive that will see thousands of apartment buildings replaced with towering skyscrapers.

The packing boxes on the floor of the studio that he rents for a pittance are filling up quickly, but Alexandrov has no idea where to take them. "They haven't made me an offer yet, so I'm going to stay until the end," Alexandrov told AFP with a smile, looking out at removal vans hauling off the belongings of the bloc's last remaining residents. The 65-year-old is one of hundreds of artists in Moscow at risk of losing their studios under the ambitious urban project, which is costing authorities some 100 billion rubles per year (\$1.2 billion).

Over 4,000 buildings are ultimately expected to be leveled and some 350,000 households relocated, but the

future looks dim for the artists. Until now they benefited from a Soviet-era program that provided free studios to members of the Moscow Artists Union who only had to foot the bills. The workspaces are mostly located in Khrushchyovkas, low-cost housing units thrown up in the 1960s and nicknamed after the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev who commissioned them.

Now, after years of neglect, many of the hastily constructed five-storey buildings across Moscow are up for demolition-and with them the artist studios. President of the Moscow Artists Union Viktor Glukhov told AFP that officials have not offered any solution and that the demolitions mean many artists have "nowhere to go". Since the Union lacks financial capacity to fill the gap, at least 200 artists risk "losing everything," Glukhov said. However, other artists told AFP that the real number could closer to 1,000 with members of another union also facing evictions.

### 'Moscow is losing its soul'

Alexandrov, who has made a relatively successful career, acknowledged that his predicament could be worse. One of his

paintings hangs in the Russia's embassy in Washington and he claimed to have the ear of an adviser to President Vladimir Putin, who "wanted to help me". "But there are hundreds of others apart from me," he said.

For many artists the subsidized studios are an important lifeline when other means of support are practically non-existent. In another residence block in Izmaylovo, where Alexandrov keeps his studio, Polina Surovova is one of the last occupants of a Khrushchyovka where residents received eviction notices in August last year. The studios are mostly located on the top floor of the Soviet-designed buildings where 14 studios line a single corridor with a shared a kitchen and shower.

The workspaces are each around 50 square meters, with high ceilings and light flooding in through large windows making the rooms ideal for visual artists. "If I had to rent a room, it would costs tens or hundreds of times more," said 28-year-old Surovova. "Of course I wouldn't be able to afford it." Moscow's mayor Sergei Sobyenin has sought to assure worried Muscovites that nobody "will be left on the

street". His office however did not respond to AFP's request for comment on the studio space. The sweeping renovations of Moscow that began 10 years ago has brought with it new parks, pedestrian-friendly streets and modern public transport that have overhauled the Russian capital.

But some fear that Moscow will lose an important part of its character with this blunt modernization drive. Despite some protests, the demolition of the Khrushchyovkas was mostly welcomed by residents of the capital. But some Muscovites told AFP they were concerned by the towering residence buildings expected to be erected in their place of the Soviet residence blocks. "Moscow is losing its soul, its essence," said Yelena Yanchuk, an opposition municipal deputy from Izmaylovo who has spoken out for the artists in the neighborhood. She blamed the changes on the "cold, commercial business-approach" of the city authorities. "If this continues, Moscow's future looks very poor." — AFP

## 'Violent' ducks? Hong Kong clothing brand cartoons rile China

**C**ute cartoon animals have been at the heart of Hong Kong clothing brand Chickeeduck since 1990, displayed on everything from t-shirts and tote bags to baby rompers and pillows. But owner Herbert Chow is now struggling to get his designs made in China, where his avian characters have been seized by authorities for "advocating violence". Chow, 57, was preparing for the Lunar New Year shopping season earlier this year when he was informed that a shipment of some 10,000 Chickeeduck items had been seized in mainland China. "My manufacturer said the customs department found the products were advocating violence in social movements," Chow told AFP after recently deciding to go public.



Photo shows a sculpture of a protester on display at a shop run by local clothing brand Chickeeduck in Hong Kong.

At first glance, the contraband cartoons might seem innocuous. They included cushions with yellow birds holding umbrellas alongside "I love HK" speech bubbles, and canvas bags featuring five ducklings swimming on one side and a flag-bearing chicken on the other. But for those who know Hong Kong's recent tumultuous politics, the designs are a clear nod to the city's democracy movement, which is now being swept away by China's crackdown on dissent. Chow makes no secret of his messaging. The tote bag, for example, was a reference to the popular protest slogan "Five

demands, not one less". But he says he is baffled that such designs would be deemed illegal. "I don't see what's wrong with the message," he said. "I don't know what business the Chinese authorities have in trying to stop something like this from going to Hong Kong."

### Grocery chain raid

Chow's predicament illustrates how much the landscape has changed in semi-autonomous Hong Kong since 2019's huge and often violent pro-democracy protests. Certain speech and views can instantly land people and businesses-in hot water. As Chow was speaking with AFP, Hong Kong's Customs Department held a press conference to announce the seizure of nearly 9,000 items from Abouthai, a grocery chain. Authorities said the items-mostly imported from Thailand-failed to carry proper warning labels in Chinese. Abouthai was founded by Mike Lam, a pro-democracy businessman who is one of dozens charged under a new national security law that Beijing imposed on Hong Kong last year.

The raid prompted long queues at Abouthai stores by Hong Kongers wanting to show support. The Customs Department said the raid on Abouthai was not political and it rejected "any false accusation maliciously alleging that its law enforcement action against the trader is 'repression'."

Chow was born into a family that migrated to Hong Kong from the mainland's Fujian province. He identifies as "Hong Kong Chinese" and sees himself as a moderate democracy supporter. He drives a car with the license plate "LV1997" (Love 1997), commemorating the moment Hong Kong was handed to China by Britain. What Hong Kongers want, he argues, is a greater say in how their lives are run. —AFP



These photos show the owner of clothing brand Chickeeduck, Herbert Chow, showing a cushion his company makes, decorated with chickens and ducklings, in Hong Kong. — AFP photos



DJ Black Coffee (Nkosinathi Innocent Maphumulo) poses for a portrait after his show at Altitude Beach club in Fourways, Johannesburg. — AFP photos



DJ Black Coffee (Nkosinathi Innocent Maphumulo) performs his show at Altitude Beach club in Fourways, Johannesburg.

## Black Coffee: S Africa's DJ rocks on despite COVID

**T**he coronavirus pandemic has silenced many artists, but South Africa's house music pioneer, Nkosinathi Maphumulo, popularly known as DJ Black Coffee, has been rocking it-dropping an album and creating a streaming platform. The legendary DJ released his sixth album, the first in five years, a few weeks before his 45th birthday. As the pandemic hit the pause button on live music performances and pushed many in the gig industry to the brink, the township-born musician-turned-house star was navigating between composing a new album, creating his own streaming music service and philanthropy work.

On February 5, he delivered a 12-track album titled "Subconsciously" featuring an eclectic mix of local and international artists including American singer Pharrell Williams, French DJ David Guetta, Australian musician RY X and South Africa's Msaki. "Every artist that's there brings a certain side musically of me," the lanky, soft-spoken artist, reputedly one of Africa's wealthiest, told AFP. Maphumulo is one of a generation of black South Africans who rode the wave of democracy from 1994 and made it out of poverty.

"He is our biggest international success really because he is worth \$60 million," said University of the Witwatersrand's anthropologist, David Coplan, echoing the Forbes Magazine richest artists rankings. The DJ has carved a niche for himself in the highly diverse house music market, and is at times likened to legendary South African cultural exports-Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Johnny Clegg. He is more than just a star, said Coplan, but "the genuine article". Maphumulo's latest album had over 100 million streams even before its release, following the success streak of previous albums that logged local multi-platinum sales status.

### College dropout

Born in South Africa's fourth largest township of Umlazi, he moved to live with his grandmother in Mthatha, a rural town some 30 kilometers (18 miles) away from Nelson Mandela's birthplace, after his parents divorced. It was there where his grandmother's antique radio initiated him into the sounds of local maskandi, jazz and soul. He then joined his high school choir before going to study jazz at a Durban college. "The decision to study music at a tertiary level was the line between just being a fan of music and loving it and then really taking it seriously," he said.

"As soon as I got into that space I knew that I need(ed) to make a career out of it, so that was the defining moment and everything I have done after that is just following that beginning." Unable to afford the fees, Maphumulo dropped out of music college. In 1997 he teamed up with two ex-music students and formed afro-pop group Simply Hot and Naturally (SHANA). He then broke away to fly solo. Maphumulo's 2005 breakout hit was a remix of jazz maestro Hugh Masekela's "Stimela", a popular political jazz and Afro-funk ballad that was a metaphor for the migrant labor industry. His self-titled album debuted a few months later. Under his Soulistic Music label, he has released nine bodies of work including a platinum-selling DVD titled "Africa Rising" recorded live in 2011 with a 24-piece orchestra.

In 2016, he became the first South African to win a BET award in the best international act category. Jacob Zuma, then president, hailed him as a "prime international export." Next, Maphumulo is launching a streaming app called Gongbox, aimed at helping up-and-coming African artists battling for platforms to showcase their music, while retaining ownership catalogues. But his spirited two-decade career has not been without controversy. His divorce from actress Enhle Mbali Mlotshwa has seen court battles splashed over the tabloids amid allegations of abuse. A 2016 viral video clip showing him slapping a manager of a local rapper backstage shocked fans. Behind the scenes, he runs a charity organization supporting people with disabilities. —AFP

## Oscars set to flop in China as Hollywood, politics collide

**T**he Oscars are the glitziest night of the year in Hollywood and millions across the globe tune in, but they threaten to be a dud in China after the nomination of a Hong Kong protest documentary. Beijing-born filmmaker Chloe Zhao, who is touted to win big for her acclaimed American road movie "Nomadland", has also faced criticism back home after some questioned her loyalty to China. The country has spent years "pining for Hollywood accolades", according to entertainment magazine Variety, and state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) has shown the awards live or on a delay since 2003.



A handout photo received from BAFTA shows Chinese director Chloe Zhao reacting after winning the award for Best Director for her work on the film "Nomadland". — AFP

Online platforms in China, the world's fastest-growing movie market, have also streamed the Oscars in the past. But Bloomberg News reported last month that the ruling Communist Party's propaganda department has ordered state-controlled media to play down the 93rd Academy Awards and also not show them live on April 25. In Hong Kong, where Beijing is greatly tightening its grasp, the Oscars will not be televised for the first time in more than half a century, with broadcaster TVB saying it was "purely a commercial decision".

Chinese state media has taken aim at the Oscars in recent weeks and in particular "Do Not Split", about Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests. Just days after its nomination in the short documentary category, the state-run Global Times made clear China's disdain, saying the film "lacks artistry and is full of biased political stances". "Such movies, if they win awards, will hurt the feelings of Chinese audiences," said the newspaper, warning: "This will also dent the Oscars' reputation among Chinese movie-goers."

Another Global Times piece saw a Beijing-based film critic say that "the Oscars have lost their purity in the pursuit of the art of film and are more close to a political stand". Anders Hammer, who made "Do Not Split", told AFP that he was delighted by the reaction. "Beijing has helped us a lot," said the Norwegian. "The main aim of making a documentary is not to win the Oscar but to bring attention to the critical situation in Hong Kong. "We have received so much more attention."

### Boycott threat

The director Zhao, who looks set to be a central figure at the Oscars, has also found herself in hot water in China. The 39-year-old's "Nomadland"-which peers into the soul of America-has six nominations including best picture, best director and best actress for Frances McDormand. The movie has already hoovered up an array of awards, including at the Golden Globes for best drama film and best director.

Zhao was the first female director to win best drama and state media hailed her as "the pride of China". But that soon gave way to a national backlash after social media users dug up old interviews in which she appeared to criticize the land of her birth.

Chinese film authorities had approved her film for domestic release on April 23 but that now appears to be in doubt. "Chloe Zhao's Oscar nominations for 'Nomadland' may not earn her forgiveness in China," the Global Times said in a headline, citing "experts". One said Chinese movie-goers might even boycott the film. On Douban, a popular online platform where films are rated and reviewed, the Oscar nominations and winners for every year since 1929 are listed. —AFP



## Lifestyle | Features



Greece's Theodoros Smpiliris (right) and Turkey's Ayca Kolukisa (left) at their home in Athens.



Greece's Olga Antonea (right) and Turkey's Sukru Ilıcak (left) pose for a portrait at a Park in Athens. — AFP photos

## Love conquers all for Greek-Turkish couples in Athens



Greece's Theodoros Smpiliris (left) and Turkey's Ayca Kolukisa (right) at their home in Athens.

**M**erve Kocadal, who is 28 and works in a call center, met her Greek boyfriend 32-year-old Yorgos Taliadorous on a dating app in 2017 when the two were in Cyprus, an island that is still a point of tension between the two countries. Located at the outer limits of Europe in the Mediterranean, one third of Cyprus has been occupied by Turkey since 1974 after a coup aimed at uniting the island with Greece. Kocadal says the island is "the main point of friction" between her and her beloved's family.

"Some conversations are tense and voices can rise," she says carefully, "but that takes nothing away from the love we have for each other." She is Muslim and he is Orthodox Christian and the couple wishes to marry without a religious ceremony since neither of them plans to convert-despite wishes from both their families for any future children to be "Muslim" or "baptised within the church".

Aeronautics engineers Theodoros Smpiliris and Ayca Kolukisa were married in a civil ceremony in Greece in 2019 before throwing a festive celebration in Turkey.

"For my parents it doesn't matter that Theo is Greek or Orthodox. What is important is that he is a good person," says Kolukisa. Smpiliris, for his part, admits to having come a long way as far as his views on Turkey. "At school, history books created resentment. We grew up with the idea that Turkey was the enemy," he says.

**'Listen to each other'**

Some political or religious subjects remain sore among family and friends, such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 2020 decision to convert the Hagia Sophia museum and former basilica to a mosque. "But all you have to do is talk to each other and listen to each other to bring the tension down," says Smpiliris.

The couple recently launched an Instagram profile called "Ouzo and Loukoum" in order to "show Greeks the beauty of Turkey and Turks the treasures of Greece," says Kolukisa. "Our family is like a bridge between the two countries," Smpiliris says.

Researcher and Turkish native Sukru Ilıcak discovered Greece in the 90s through rebetiko-a musical genre created by Greek refugees in exile. He moved to Greece permanently when he married his partner Olga Antonea, a graphic designer, in 2016. "We share the same values and the same politics," says the 49-year-old. "Diplomatic relations aren't going to influence our relationship. "If we can have a Greco-Turkish love story, why should it be any different on a larger scale between our countries?" — AFP



It will have been less than a year since Rowling, 55, released her last book, a fairy tale titled "The Ickabog" — though that was her first children's book since the seventh and final installment of Harry Potter in 2007. In the interim, she released several novels for adults, which have proved popular, albeit not on the world-changing scale of those about the boy-wizard. — AFP

## ITALIAN PIANO MAKER SEES CRAFT THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION

**A**t the age of 23, Luigi Borgato decided to build his first piano, for himself. In the decades that ensued, the Italian craftsman grew his business into a prestigious brand capable of attracting buyers from all over the world-until the coronavirus pandemic abruptly put a halt to it all. Now, the 58-year-old fears his ancient trade could disappear entirely in Italy, the country that invented the pianoforte at the end of the 17th century. "Everything stopped,



Italian piano craftsman Luigi Borgato works in his workshop.

there are no more concerts, no more contacts with musicians. Without government assistance, our profession may not make it to the end of the pandemic," Borgato told AFP.

Inside his home in Borgo Veneto, near Padua in northern Italy, everything breathes classical music-a bust of Verdi and a portrait of Beethoven hold court along with concert posters from such storied opera houses as La Scala in Milan. At the back of the room sits the Doppio Borgato, an imposing assembly of two grand pianos on top of each other, with 37 pedals. Halfway between an organ and a piano, the concept was bor-

rowed from Mozart who had a pedal piano built in 1785.

When Borgato starts to play a Chopin prelude, he modestly smiles, murmuring that he should "study a little more". Nearby sits the latest addition to Borgato's collection, introduced in 2017 by its inventor as "the longest concert piano in the world", at 3.33 meters (10.9 feet), about 50 centimeters longer than the standard. Borgato and his wife Paola, who is in charge of each instrument's mechanics, build a maximum of two pianos per year, aided by a single employee.

**Handcrafted**

"There is no one else in Italy, or even in the world making concert pianos by hand like we do," said Borgato. "But with the pandemic, people are thinking twice about investing in a piano." The price of a Borgato ranges from 291,000-486,000 euros (\$346,114-\$578,083) excluding tax, depending on the model, each of which represents more than 1,850 hours of work. Buyers are mostly from abroad, from Switzerland, France, Germany, Austria but also China, and are generally piano players-although some invest in the instrument as a work of art. Paola, 55, acknowledged the difficulty of saying goodbye to the handcrafted pianos. "There is always a beautiful part of our life in each instrument that leaves," she said. Her husband lamented that Italy does not adequately recognize the craft of piano making, despite it being the country where Padua's Bartolomeo Cristofori invented the piano's ancestor, the pianoforte, in 1698.

Throughout Europe, small piano factories have gradually disappeared in favor of large companies, which in turn have been swallowed up by Asian giants. Austrian manufacturer Bösendorfer, for example, has been owned by Japan's Yamaha since 2008, while Germany's Schimmel sold a majority stake to China's Pearl River in 2016.



Italian piano craftsman Luigi Borgato works in his workshop.

**'A great actor whispering'**

In his workshop, Borgato meticulously takes measurements, then cuts, molds and glues each part, from the soundboard in red spruce to the hammer heads covered with merino wool felt-at least 15,000 for a grand piano. After starting his career as a tuner in 1983, he and his wife travelled the world to visit museums of musical instruments and study the history of the piano. In 1985, driving an old Renault 4L, Borgato went to Berlin to visit his first piano factory, that of Bechstein.

It was also in Germany that he drew inspiration for his first piano, after visit-

ing the house in Bonn where Ludwig van Beethoven was born in 1770. Following the example of the German composer's last instrument, he created a piano with four strings for the high notes instead of three, an idea he patented. In 1991, the French virtuoso Jean Guillou, who died two years ago, inaugurated this piano in the Church of Saint-Eustache in Paris, referring to its "young genius piano maker".

Since then, famous pianists such as Radu Lupu, Vladimir Ashkenazy or Jerome Rose have given recitals on Borgato pianos. If the concerts have stopped due to coronavirus, the profes-

sional recordings continue. During the lockdown last year, Italian pianist Francesco Libetta played all 35 sonatas of Beethoven on a Borgato, describing the sound of the 3.33-metre piano as "breathtakingly beautiful." "This piano is gigantic, but the sound that emanates from it is very supple, very nuanced, and allows you to go easily from pianissimo to fortissimo," Libetta said. "It's like a great actor whispering and the back row of the house can hear it perfectly." — AFP



Italian piano craftsman Luigi Borgato works in his workshop in Borgo Veneto.



Italian piano craftsman Luigi Borgato plays on a Borgato Grand Prix 333 piano in his workshop in Borgo Veneto, near Padua.—AFP photos





## Sports

# Virus surges fuel fears 100 days before Tokyo Olympics

**TOKYO:** A second section of the Tokyo Olympics torch relay was pulled from public roads over spiking coronavirus cases yesterday, fueling fears about whether the postponed Games should go ahead with just 100 days until the opening ceremony.

Even as Tokyo unveiled installations featuring the Olympic rings and mascots to celebrate the 100-day milestone, organizers face monumental challenges as virus surges. They have barred overseas fans and delayed test events, but insist preparations are on track for the Games to open a year late on July 23.

Cancellation is “certainly not” on the table, International Olympic Committee (IOC) vice president John Coates told reporters yesterday. “The Tokyo Games will be the light at the end of the tunnel.”

For organizers, there are some causes for optimism. The Olympic torch is on its way across Japan, despite already being forced off roads in the Osaka region where it was being carried around a closed circuit yesterday with the general public kept away.

And vaccination programs are ramping up in many countries, with some athletes already inoculated. Japan won't require Olympic participants to be vaccinated, but the IOC is encouraging jabs and has secured Chinese-made doses for athletes in countries without access to them. In Japan, sports events are still on, with crowd numbers capped, and fans have become used to virus rules that will be implemented at this summer's Games, including a ban on cheering.

North Korea's decision to skip Tokyo 2020 over virus concerns has not prompted a rush for the exits, with athletes mostly seeming impatient for a return to the international stage. “These past 14 months have been very motivating for all of us,” five-time Olympic gold medalist swimmer Katie Ledecky said last week.

“Once we get there we really want to show the world all the work that we've put in.”

## ‘We're prepared’

In Japan, a historic golf Masters win by Hideki Matsuyama and swimmer Rikako Ikee's comeback — just two years after being diagnosed with leukemia — are offering a feel-good factor. But there's no disguising the challenges more than a year after the pandemic caused the event's historic postponement.

Surges of COVID-19 across Japan have forced the government to tighten restrictions only weeks after they were lifted and yesterday, the head of Tokyo's Medical Association warned the rising infections could make holding the Games “really difficult”.

The governor of western Ehime region announced the public torch relay would be scrapped later this month in the city of Matsuyama, citing the “extreme pressure” on local medical services from rising cases. Tokyo 2020 organizers said a spectator-free relay event would be held behind closed doors instead.

Coates acknowledged the situation, but insisted organizers and Olympic officials are fully prepared. “Of course we're concerned, of course safety remains our priority, but we believe that we're prepared for the worst situations,” he said. Organizers have released “playbooks” outlining anti-virus measures, to be updated later this month.

Tens of thousands of athletes and other Olympic participants arriving from overseas will be able to skip quarantine, and are not required to show proof of vaccination. But athletes will be asked to limit their movements, stay only at the Olympic village during their events and face regular virus testing.

## ‘Situation is uncertain’

Overseas fans have already been barred from



**TOKYO:** This picture shows the Tokyo Tower, Japan's second-tallest structure at 332.9 meters (1,092 feet), lit up with Olympic colors to mark 100 days till the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

the Games, and a decision on domestic spectator numbers could come in April. Still, the atmosphere will be far from the usual rowdy celebrations, and it remains unclear how strong demand for tickets will be when they finally go back on sale.

Polls show most Japanese back either a further postponement or cancellation, but the numbers in favor of holding the Games this summer have crept up, to around 27 percent in March, from just 11 percent in January.

In Tokyo, residents expressed mixed feelings about the prospect of the Games. “In these dark

times, anything that will brighten up the day, like getting a gold medal, or anything that can energize will be appreciated,” 27-year-old Kenzo Tanaka said.

But Midori Hinamoto, 65, said she felt “the situation is uncertain.” “I think the Olympics should be cancelled, if that's possible.” Olympic organizers acknowledge the mood, but said they expect it to shift once athletes take the stage. “Every time, we are inspired by their strength and resilience, and that will be truer than ever this year,” they said. —AFP

## McConaughey, Austin prepare for ‘war’ in MLS

**LOS ANGELES:** Oscar-winning actor Matthew McConaughey is preparing for the first shots of what he says will be a “100-year war” when Austin FC make their much-anticipated Major League Soccer bow this weekend. The Hollywood star is a minority owner in the MLS expansion side and is determined to help the club successfully embed itself in his hometown as the franchise's “minister of culture”.

Speaking to reporters on a video-conference call on Tuesday, McConaughey said becoming involved with Austin FC marked the realization of a lifelong ambition to help launch a sports franchise. “I'm not interested in being a mascot,” the 51-year-old said. “I've always dreamed of being in at the ground level and helping to build a team. I've always studied and appreciated the great organizations that have succeeded and lasted — whether it's the All Blacks in rugby or the New England Patriots in American football.”

Founded in 2018, Austin FC will make their home debut on June 19 at their newly constructed 20,500-seat Q2 Stadium. The club has already sold out of its 15,500 season tickets, with a further 15,000 more fans on a waiting list. McConaughey says the interest reflects a deep-rooted passion for soccer in what is the fastest growing big city in the United States according to Census figures released in March last year.

## ‘It was time’

“Austin was a soccer town already before Austin FC,” McConaughey said. “It's a very diverse city. We have 150 people moving here a day. It's a city on the come. Soccer is the world's game and we've got people from all over the world in our city, that have never had a team to root for. It was time.”

McConaughey says he sees his role as “minister of culture” as helping to ensure the club reflects the culture of his hometown. “For a team that's going to represent the city of Austin, I need to be there as someone who knows Austin really well, that the two are mirror images of each other,” he said. “On any given night in the stadium, it should feel, smell and taste like the best of Austin, Texas.”

Austin open their MLS campaign with a trip to Los Angeles FC on Saturday, another expansion club who topped the Western Conference standings in only their second season in the league. McConaughey says Austin will attempt to emulate LAFC's success in fostering a vibrant fan culture around the team.

“You can plant the seed, but the culture is built by the supporters,” McConaughey said. “And what LAFC did with the supporters, how they empowered the supporters, is an example that we are learning from.”

McConaughey however is careful to damp down expectations around the new club. “How much success can we have in year one? We'll see,” he said. “But we didn't build Austin FC in a day, and we're not going to be a fad. “This is the beginning. The seed has been planted and we want to be a big, strong oak. It's a 100-year war. We have the long view.”

McConaughey also declined to be drawn on how a championship with Austin might compare to his big-screen accolades which included an Oscar for best actor at the 2014 Academy Awards for his performance in “Dallas Buyers Club”. —AFP

## Inside China's gymnastics machine: Children training for Olympic glory

**BEIJING:** Under the twin emblems of the Chinese flag and the Olympic rings, two tiny boys dangle from the high bar in a cavernous gym — the cradle of China's elite gymnasts. Elsewhere, rows of children as young as four hold the splits and handstands under the watchful eye of coaches at the Li Xiaoshuang Gymnastics School in Xiantao, west of Wuhan.

They are among the latest recruits to China's notoriously demanding state sports system, which has attracted legions of critics but has also made it one of the most successful Olympic nations. AFP has gained rare access to China's gymnastics training centers over the past four years, chronicling the lives of children and young athletes who are being honed for Olympic glory.

Despite the tough nature of the drills, officials at the Li Xiaoshuang school say the focus is now on fun for the children — “happy gymnastics” — rather than the medal-obsessed ways of old. “We are more relaxed now. In the past, we certainly hoped to produce lots of champions,” said deputy headmaster Liu Fen. “But now society and people's minds are changing, so our training mode is also changing.”

The delayed Tokyo Olympics, starting in July, will be the culmination of years of training for China's latest crop of top gymnasts. The pressure to succeed is high, after China's gymnastics team failed to win a gold medal at Rio 2016 — just eight years after they dominated at their home Games in Beijing.

## ‘Win the Tokyo Olympics’

At the national training center in the capital Beijing, the Chinese flag adorns a wall along with a red banner saying: “Win the Tokyo Olympics.” Leading gymnasts pause training only to review

## Hard landing: China's gymnast-turned-beggar back on the streets

**BAODING:** A decade ago the plight of former champion gymnast Zhang Shangwu shocked China and made world headlines when he was discovered begging in Beijing, prompting one of the country's richest men to give him a job. That should have heralded a turnaround for the troubled Zhang, who had been imprisoned for theft after injury ended his gymnastics career.

But after another stint in jail, Zhang is again making a living on the streets, doing handstands and singing for a live online audience in a carpark in his home city of Baoding. It marks a second fall for the former Olympic hopeful, whose predicament cast a spotlight on the fate of Chinese athletes when he was spotted begging and street-performing in Beijing in 2011.

Athletes in China, a leading Olympic power, are often reared in special schools from a young age and can struggle to adjust to normal life once their careers are over. Zhang appeared destined for the Olympics after he won two gold medals at the 2001 Universiade. But a year later a tendon injury brought his promising career to an end.



**BEIJING:** In this picture taken on November 12, 2018, athletes from the national gymnastics team train at the Chinese National Training Centre in Beijing. —AFP



**In this picture taken on November 12, 2018, athlete Wang Zhen from the national gymnastics team trains at the Chinese National Training Centre in Beijing.**

their performances on tablets or take sips from water bottles.

There is little room for error. They bow to their coaches in apology if they are not up to scratch, and a bad performance is punished with extra weight training at the end of a long day. One gymnast cries, her team-mate offering a gentle pat of encouragement.

For these athletes dreaming of gold at the Tokyo Games, postponed last year over the coronavirus, this is a life they embarked upon at a young age. The Li Xiaoshuang school, perhaps the best known facility, provides academic les-

sons for its boys and girls but the main focus is afternoon training in the large gym. The children are positioned in deep stretches and handstands against gym equipment, or place their legs in a suspended bucket to practice moves for the pommel horse. At night, they sleep in bunk beds — two sharing the top mattresses, two in the lower berths, in dormitories.

After growing resistance among parents to committing their children to this uncompromising world, there are hints of change. “If you always follow the old training model to teach, it won't work,” said Liu, the deputy headmaster. —AFP



**In this picture taken on January 11, 2021, young gymnasts train at the Li Xiaoshuang Gymnastics School in Xiantao, Hubei province.**



**In this picture taken on January 12, 2021, young gymnasts train at the Li Xiaoshuang Gymnastics School in Xiantao, Hubei province.**

sons for its boys and girls but the main focus is afternoon training in the large gym.

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**BAODING:** In this picture taken on March 18, 2021, Chinese retired champion athlete and former member of the national gymnastics team, Zhang Shangwu, sings songs as he live streams his performance using an app and smartphones on a tripod, at a parking lot in Baoding, Hebei province. —AFP



Sports

# PSG show their mettle with biggest Champions League scalp

## Pochettino's side overcome Bayern to reach semis

**PARIS:** Paris Saint-Germain's relationship with the Champions League over the last decade has been fraught with disappointment and littered with spectacular defeats, but an aggregate victory against holders Bayern Munich is the most significant of the Qatar era as they aim to finally get their hands on the trophy.

Against the team that Mauricio Pochettino kept insisting was the best in Europe, PSG exacted revenge for their 1-0 defeat in last season's final in Lisbon. It was not achieved without suffering, as they followed their smash-and-grab 3-2 win in the first leg in the Munich snow last week with a 1-0 defeat in Tuesday's return, Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting scoring Bayern's goal against his old side.

But while in previous years PSG might have collapsed under the pressure, this time they held on to win their quarter-final tie on away goals. Following the Qatar Sports Investments takeover of 2011, PSG spent a long time struggling to make an impact in Champions League knockout ties. They threw away first-leg leads to lose on away goals to Chelsea in the 2014 quarter-finals and to Manchester United in the last 16 in 2019.

There was the humiliation of the "remontada" against Barcelona in 2017 too, when a 4-0 first-leg lead in the last 16 was obliterated in a 6-1 second-leg loss. This time they held on, despite captain Marquinhos and playmaker Marco Verratti missing the second leg, and despite Neymar bissing a host of chances in the first half. "This club has been growing every day, year on year," said Presnel Kimpembe, the skipper against Bayern whose late handball was responsible for their dramatic exit against United two years ago.

## Chelsea into Champions League semis for first time since 2014

**SEVILLE:** Thomas Tuchel urged his young Chelsea team to embrace their Champions League "adventure" after they reached the semi-finals for the first time since 2014 despite a 1-0 defeat against Porto in Tuesday's quarter-final second leg.

Tuchel's side produced a masterclass in game management to win 2-1 on aggregate in Seville. Chelsea smothered Porto with an intelligent defensive approach until Mehdi Taremi's stunning bicycle kick in the last minute of stoppage time. That sublime strike was out of character with the rest of Porto's display as they labored to overturn the 2-0 first-leg deficit.

Chelsea have lost only once in 18 matches since Tuchel replaced the sacked Frank Lampard in January and this was another feather in the German's cap. Making it to the last four is an even more admirable feat given the lack of Champions League experience among the majority of Tuchel's squad.

Tuchel knows the likes of Mason Mount, Reece James, Kai Havertz, Ben Chilwell and Christian Pulisic are all learning on the job, but he hopes their

fearlessness will be invaluable. "Mason scored his first goal in the competition in the first leg. When Mbappe scores or Salah scores or Benzema scores, it is their 100th goal or their 50th goal in the competition," Tuchel said. "We arrive with a very young team. They can fight and run and hang in there. We have to take it like an adventure for them. It is a big step. You see when Chelsea were last in the semi-finals. We are not used to being there. It's a big achievement."

Tuchel had admitted this week was a make or break period for Chelsea. They passed the first test and can now focus on Saturday's FA Cup semi-final against Premier League leaders Manchester City at Wembley before returning to the Champions League trail.

"Once you are there you play to reach the final. We need every minute to learn and to grow. You cannot improve without these experiences," Tuchel said. "We cannot rely on the biggest experience but we can rely on a hard working young group. Hopefully we can stay adventurous to accept the challenge. It will be a big one coming."

### 'Incredible' Kante

Praising France midfielder N'Golo Kante's influential display in his first start since a hamstring injury, Tuchel said: "N'Golo is incredible, he is like one and a half or two players. "Everyone who sees him for the first time loves him. He wins so many balls and gives everybody confidence."

## Flick mulls future after Bayern Munich exit

**BERLIN:** Bayern Munich head coach Hansi Flick admits he is considering his future after the holders were knocked out of the Champions League by Paris Saint-Germain. Bayern's 1-0 return-leg win in Paris on Tuesday was not enough to overturn last week's 3-2 first-leg defeat in Munich as PSG marched into the semi-finals at the Germans' expense.

"Everyone understands that I am thinking about my future," Flick told Sky after Bayern striker Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting scored the only goal on Tuesday. Flick has been under noticeable strain in recent weeks with tensions running high between him and Bayern sports director Hasan Salihamidzic.

The 56-year-old Flick has also been tipped to become Germany's next head coach when Joachim Loew steps down after the Euro 2020 finals this summer. For now, Flick, whose Bayern contract runs until 2023, says he "first wants to process the elimination" and "assess the situation. I also have my own ideas."

Ultimately, a PSG side boasting the talent of Neymar and Kylian Mbappe was too good for a depleted Bayern team missing their injured top-scorer Robert Lewandowski. Under Flick,

### 'No excuse'

The success against the holders comes after they eliminated Barcelona in the last 16, winning 4-1 at the Camp Nou in the first leg. That was also a case of exacting revenge, with the Catalans having beaten the French side in the knockout rounds three times in the previous decade.

In both of those ties PSG have shown a resilience that has been lacking before, and they have beaten two of the great traditional powerhouses of European football en route to the last four, having also beaten Manchester United away in the group phase.

"We have deserved to win these two ties, but I don't think that makes us favorites now," said coach Pochettino, and yet there is a significance to the teams they have knocked out. Last year their run to the final, as impressive as it was, featured wins over Dortmund, Atalanta and RB Leipzig, none of whom were seen as contenders to win the trophy. The latter two victories came in one-off ties in the 'Final Eight' in Lisbon.

PSG's European run this season comes just as their hegemony at home is under threat — after seven Ligue 1 titles in eight years, they are currently three points behind leaders Lille with six games remaining. Nevertheless, the Champions League is really all that matters, and it is success in Europe's elite club competition that can convince superstar duo Kylian Mbappe and Neymar to sign contract extensions.

The two most expensive signings in football history when they arrived in Paris in 2017, Neymar and Mbappe are both out of contract at the end of next season. It remains Barcelona's dream to bring Neymar back, while Mbappe has long been linked



**PARIS:** Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe (right) fights for the ball with Bayern Munich's defender Benjamin Pavard during the UEFA Champions League quarter-final second leg football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and FC Bayern Munich at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris, on Tuesday. —AFP

to Real Madrid. "Kylian and Neymar have no excuse for wanting to leave because we have everything in place here to win the Champions League," beaming

PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi told RMC Sport. "We are a top team now, with all respect for the other teams out there." —AFP



**SEVILLE:** Chelsea's German head coach Thomas Tuchel (center) walks on the pitch after the UEFA Champions League quarter final second leg football match between Chelsea and Porto at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium in Seville on Tuesday. —AFP

Tuchel this week said he wouldn't want to fight Antonio Rudiger or Cesar Azpilicueta, such is the ferocious will to win coursing through Chelsea's most vocal players. Both defenders lived up to Tuchel's billing as they fought tooth and nail to keep Porto at bay in a niggly clash.

Porto manager Sergio Conceicao added: "I'm really frustrated but I'm proud of what we did in both matches. Our performance was very good. We were more of a team than Chelsea. We just lacked that bit of efficiency."

Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy gifted Porto a golden opportu-

nity for a priceless early goal when his miscued pass went straight to Jesus Corona inside the penalty area. But Corona couldn't keep his composure and Jorginho did enough to ensure the shot flashed wide.

Corona's profligacy let Porto down again when he lashed hurriedly over from 12 yards after Ben Chilwell misjudged Otavio's high ball. Taremi's eye-catching strike with seconds left came far too late for a dramatic finale, with tempers flaring in a heated exchange involving Rudiger and several Porto players after the final whistle. —AFP

## Roma hope to hold off Ajax in hunt for Europa semis

**PARIS:** Roma are hoping to reach the semi-finals of a European competition for the second time in four seasons as they host continental heavyweights Ajax, while Arsenal hope to avoid humiliation at the hands of Slavia Prague and Manchester United look set for the last four. AFP Sport looks ahead to the second legs of the Europa League quarter-finals tonight:

### Roma (ITA) v Ajax (NED) (first leg 2-1)

Ajax may be four-time European champions and one of the most exciting sides of recent seasons but it is Roma who have the advantage going into the second leg of their tie at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome. Italy's last remaining representative in Europe came away from the Johan Cruyff Arena with a thrilling come-from-behind 2-1 win after being under the cosh for much of the match and are close to a likely last-four clash with Man United after reaching the semis of the Champions League in 2018.

Roma have had a poor domestic season and sit seventh in Serie A — seven points off the Champion League places — after coming up short in almost all of their fixtures against their rivals for the European spots, so Thursday's second leg could define their season. Ajax are almost guaranteed to retain their Eredivisie title and warmed up for their trip to the Italian capital with a 1-0 win over RKC Waalwijk thanks to a goal from club-record signing Sebastien Haller, who cannot play against Roma after being accidentally left off his club's European squad list.

### Slavia Prague (CZE) v Arsenal (ENG) (first leg 1-1)

Slavia Prague lived up to their dangerous reputation last week when Tomas Holes headed home a stoppage time leveler to turn their tie with Arsenal in their favor. Mikel Arteta's Gunners missed some good chances in the first leg but now have their work cut out for them if they want to win a trophy and qualify for next season's Champions League.

Slavia are on a run of 23 games without defeat and have already knocked out Leicester City and Rangers in their run to the quarter-finals. Arsenal meanwhile have been inconsistent all season and sit ninth in the Premier League, 10 points off the Champions League spots.

### Manchester United (ENG) v Granada (ESP) (first leg 2-0)

United are huge favourites to reach the semi-finals following their simple win over Granada in Spain last week, which should put an end to the surprise package's first ever season of European football. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side are safely tucked in the Champions League places behind Premier League leaders Manchester City and looked in rude health in sweeping past Tottenham Hotspur 3-1 at the weekend.

United will be without key players Harry Maguire, Luke Shaw and Scott McTominay through suspension but two away goals in the first leg will likely be enough to see England's second-best team through at Old Trafford.

### Villarreal (ESP) v Dinamo Zagreb (CRO) (first leg 1-0)

Gerard Moreno is having the season of his life as Villarreal gun for their first ever major trophy, a Europa League triumph that would continue three-time winner Unai Emery's strong record in the competition.

Spain forward Moreno is set to record a career-best tally after scoring 24 times in all competitions this season, including the only goal in Zagreb last week which gave the La Liga outfit an away goal and a great chance of reaching the last four.

With the top four spaces in La Liga looking sewn up, Villarreal are in a three-way battle to return to the competition next year, and the form of Moreno — who has scored nine times in his last nine matches and set up another four — will make them tricky opponents should they get past Dinamo. —AFP



**PARIS:** Bayern Munich's German head coach Hans-Dieter Flick reacts during the UEFA Champions League quarter-final second leg football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and FC Bayern Munich at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris, on Tuesday. — AFP



## Durant drops 31 in Nets win

### Nuggets' Murray out indefinitely with torn ACL

**MINNEAPOLIS:** Kevin Durant scored 31 points as the Brooklyn Nets bounced back from defeat to the Los Angeles Lakers with a blowout victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves on Tuesday. Durant led the scorers in a 127-97 victory for the Nets in a game that had been postponed 24 hours after unrest in Minneapolis triggered by the deadly police shooting of 20-year-old Black man Daunte Wright during a traffic stop on Sunday.

Durant, making only his third appearance since returning from a near two-month injury layoff, wasted no time in asserting himself, scoring eight points in the first five minutes on court. The Timberwolves, who have the worst record in the NBA with only 14 victories this season and 41 losses, were never in contention and trailed by a massive 45 points at one stage in the fourth quarter.

Durant got help from guard Joe Harris, who finished with 23 points and Landry Shamet, who added 19 off the bench. DeAndre Jordan also cracked double figures with a 13-point contribution. Anthony Edwards, the Wolves' No.1 pick in last year's draft, led the home side's scorers with 27 points.

Durant said the Nets had blocked out the backdrop of racial tension in Minneapolis which forced the postponement of the game on Monday. "I think guys are obviously aware of what's going on in our country, we have conversations about this all the time," Durant said. "But once we step on the floor we understand what our job is."

The former NBA Most Valuable Player

meanwhile said the Nets were simply happy to have avoided a wasted trip. "I'm glad the NBA made the game happen and that we didn't come out here for nothing and we finished it off," said Durant.

#### 'Guys have stepped up'

"I felt good out there. I feel like my wind and legs are getting under me with each and every minute I'm playing." The Nets face a crunch clash with the Philadelphia 76ers on Wednesday where first place in the Eastern Conference will be at stake. The Nets and Sixers are neck-and-neck with identical 37-16 records.

Nets coach Steve Nash was pleased by his team's emphatic victory, which came despite a raft of absent players including Kyrie Irving, James Harden and LaMarcus Aldridge. "Guys have stepped up," Nash said. "We've got a lot of wins this season where we've been undermanned. I'm proud of the effort and tonight was another one where we took care of the task in front of us."

Nash, a two-time former NBA MVP, meanwhile ruled out making himself available for the injury-hit Nets. "I'd be great for four or five minutes and then the wheels would fly off," the 47-year-old joked. "Think I'll save the world that horror show."

In other games on Tuesday, the Utah Jazz shrugged off Monday's surprise loss to the Washington Wizards to score a 106-96 win over the Oklahoma City Thunder. Bojan Bogdanovic led Utah's scoring with 23 points while Donovan Mitchell finished with 22 points for the Jazz, who head the

Western Conference with a 41-14 record.

The Los Angeles Clippers meanwhile rolled to a sixth straight victory with their 126-115 win on the road at the Indiana Pacers, Paul George leading the way with a 36-point haul with seven rebounds and eight assists. It was George's fourth straight with 30 or more points. "When he's playing like this, we're a tough team," Clippers coach Tyrone Lue said of George's performance.

In Charlotte, Kyle Kuzma's 24 points helped the Los Angeles Lakers to a 101-93 defeat of the Hornets. While Kuzma led the Lakers scorers, it was Alex Caruso's 13 points off the bench that tipped the contest the Lakers way.

Caruso drained a three-pointer to put the Lakers 95-91 ahead with 45 seconds remaining and then added two free throws to give his team a six-point cushion. "He does so much dirty work for us, it's ridiculous," Vogel said of Caruso. "Everybody's happy for him."

#### Murray out

Denver Nuggets star Jamal Murray has suffered a torn knee ligament and will almost certainly miss the rest of the NBA season, the team and reports said Tuesday. The 24-year-old Canadian guard collapsed to the court in agony just seconds from the end of Monday's defeat to the Golden State Warriors as he attacked the basket.

A statement from the Nuggets said Tuesday a scan had revealed a torn anterior cruciate ligament and that Murray faced would be out "indefinitely" with the injury.



**MINNEAPOLIS:** Anthony Edwards #1 of the Minnesota Timberwolves plays defense on Kevin Durant #7 of the Brooklyn Nets on Tuesday at Target Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. — AFP

Multiple US reports said Murray would now face surgery, ruling him out of the remainder of the season.

The injury also deals a blow to Canada's Olympic hopes — Murray had indicated he was determined to play for the national team and hoped to compete in Tokyo. Monday's injury at the Chase Center left players from both teams subdued after Murray crumpled to the floor.

He declined the offer of a wheelchair to remove him from the arena, instead hobbling away with the help of support staff.

Murray has been one of the stars of Denver's campaign this season, helping the Nuggets build a 34-20 record which has left them fourth in the Western Conference.

With the acquisition of Aaron Gordon from the Orlando Magic, and the MVP-caliber form of Nikola Jokic, Denver had put together a starting roster capable of going deep into the playoffs. The injury to the dynamic Murray deals a shattering blow to the team's championship aspirations. — AFP



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