

Friday Times

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RAMADAN 4, 1442 AH | FRIDAY, APRIL 16, 2021



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|---------|-------|
| Fajr | 03:59 |
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| Isha | 19:35 |



4,400 Kuwait Flour Mills employees vaccinated

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Local

Happy Ramadan habits



IN MY VIEW

By Nawara Fattahova

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The holy month of Ramadan has many special habits and rituals, even for non-Muslims living in Kuwait. Apart from worship, which includes taraweeh and qiyam prayers and reading the Holy Quran among others, people do good deeds such as giving alms, distributing food to people in need and so on.

Ramadan has a special atmosphere that is only felt during this month. We call it the month of forgiveness, as people try to forgive the mistakes of the past and renew their relations, especially with relatives and friends. It's also called the month of gathering, as the entire family will gather for iftar, usually at the grandfather's house.

Staying at home most of the time is also common during Ramadan. TV viewership rises during Ramadan, so producers focus on this month, which is considered the high season for soap operas. Since we were kids, we used to watch soap operas during this month, but we only had a few channels. Today there are hundreds of channels and tens of new soap operas specially produced for the Ramadan season.

Besides soap operas, live TV competitions are an essential part of Ramadan's activities. The production of these competitions has also developed with time. In addition to those produced in studios, some competitions are shot in shopping malls and outdoor locations.

Walking and jogging before iftar is a very common practice in Kuwait. So walking paths in residential areas and near the seaside are crowded before sunset. Football tournaments are part of the Ramadan atmosphere as well. This practice started over 30 years ago, and inspired some companies and businessmen to support these small individual tournaments, so they became popular.

This holy month has its special dishes, sweets and drinks. In Kuwait, the most popular drink is Vimto. This syrup is an essential part of the Ramadani table. If we drink it at some other time of the year, we always say it's a Ramadani drink, as it reminds us of Ramadan. The same applies to luqaimat - extra-sweet crunchy balls - which symbolize Ramadan. Lentil soup is also a must on most days of this month.

The Ramadan cannon is a part of Kuwaiti culture, which spread to neighboring countries. Firing the cannon just before the Maghrib azan at the time of iftar is also broadcast live, so people can hear it even when at home.

The ghabqa - which is the meal between iftar and suhoor - is also part of our traditions in Kuwait. People gather for this meal, which is sometimes held in ballrooms or restaurants. Some companies used to hold ghabqas for their employees, and even media people used to gather at this event annually. Unfortunately, the pandemic has canceled these kinds of activities due to the curfew and ban on gatherings.

PHOTO OF THE DAY



Aerial photo shows streets during the partial curfew in Kuwait City. — Xinhua

Corona conspiracies...or a conspiracy of viruses?



IN MY VIEW

By Tareq Al-Duaij
local@kuwaittimes.com

Since the emergence of COVID-19, many conspiracy theories about its causes and reasons came and went. These theories had their audience around the world, and here are some of them:

1. A Chinese plot to destroy the American economy.
2. A Chinese plot to destroy the global economy.
3. An American plot to destroy the Chinese economy.
4. An American plot to force China to sign a trade agreement.
5. The 5G conspiracy to control and exterminate people.
6. Anthony Fauci making billions from a new vaccine.
7. Bill Gates making billions from a new vaccine.
8. Bill Gates' chip implant conspiracy.
9. Bill Gates' plot to exterminate people.
10. A plot to destroy Islam and Muslims.
11. Developed countries eliminating the elderly and poor.
12. Racist American conspiracy to eradicate poor blacks and Latinos.
13. Biological weapons companies testing a new virus (weapon).
14. WHO conspiracy to spread terror and control people.
15. Pharma plot to alter the DNA in humans.
16. Elites' conspiracy (them/they) to take away people's freedoms.
17. The corona hoax conspiracy (forging death certificates) to intimidate and control people.

I'm sure there are other conspiracies depending on the country, but maybe there is another type of conspiracy — that of the viruses themselves.

Viruses hold a meeting at the end of each decade to review developments and achievements over the previous 10 years, and here are the main points from the most recent meeting in 2019:

As usual, smallpox was first to speak and said it had

nothing new as it was eliminated by vaccination 40 years ago.

Measles also had nothing new to say; the number of cases and deaths decreased worldwide due to vaccination. But it appears from time to time among where there is no vaccination.

Polio also declined due to vaccination, and is only present in Pakistan and Afghanistan where vaccinations are resisted.

Then Ebola said it still spreads fear among people during its epidemics, but failed to cause pandemics across the Earth, as the means to control it are developing.

AIDS said it also continues to kill hundreds of thousands of people annually, and has spread terror among people and managed to change their behavior. But it warned that medicines are improving.

The influenza virus stated that it still kills hundreds of thousands worldwide, and is a burden on health systems, but it has not been able to change human behavior or even spread fear among them.

Then came the SARS virus, who had good beginnings, killing 10 percent of those infected, but transmission was not easy, so it was controlled and eliminated.

Finally, their new friend, named "COVID", came forward and requested the attendees: "Give me two years. I will combine influenza deaths with the fear of Ebola, and create a pandemic that covers the globe, infect millions of people and kill a small percentage, but in large numbers. I will cause confusion amongst humans, paralyze their governments and health systems, and force them to change their behavior for a while and distrust science and governments, and create conspiracies.

Other viruses stood back and wished it good luck. I have no interest in analyzing these conspiracies, as their supporters and opponents will remain. Older conspiracies are forgotten as new ones appear. What we see now is that infections are increasing daily, deaths are rising, hospitals around the world are suffocating, economies are collapsing, scientists are developing vaccines while the virus is mutating, and people are fed up. And it looks like we have another year to go.

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Local



In the spirit of
Ramadan

PHOTO FEATURE



Getting into the spirit of Ramadan this year has been difficult for many with the coronavirus pandemic, the partial curfew and the limit on nightly gatherings and activities. Still many folks want to mark the blessed month with decorations and decor in a bid to lighten the mood and celebrate the beauty of Ramadan.

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





Local

Ramadan Kareem



Eating healthy this Ramadan

By Angela Smith

I hope upon reading this article that you are blessed with seeing yet another Ramadan or perhaps this is your first Ramadan as a Muslim or you know someone who is a Muslim, but you are wondering why we Muslims fast or how to properly fast.

This year is our second Ramadan in

from food and drink including water, but from smoking as well as other acts of pleasure; and because a big part of Ramadan involves food (fasting), you can imagine then that there is a big focus on food. A few years ago, I wrote about the importance of eating a healthy diet and not overindulging as if you were eating an American Thanksgiving Day feast.

good. "O mankind eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good and do not follow the footsteps of Shaytan. Indeed, he is to you a clear enemy." (Quran 2:168)

How may one follow the footsteps of shaytan when it comes to food you may ask and is not shaytan locked up during the month of Ramadan you may add. You may not have even thought about this one, but if

ber and thank Almighty Allah as you taste each bite of food and only eat enough to feel satisfied, not full. By the time you are feeling full, you have overindulged and have eaten too much.

A healthy diet is a balanced mixture of all the foods that Allah (SWT) had provided for us. This balanced mixture provides us with all the carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins, minerals, and amino acids that our bodies need. Many of us tend to avoid certain food groups due to following the latest fad diet or believe that one way of eating is better than another. Our bodies do need a healthy balance of all the above nutrients.

In Chapter 16 Surat Al-Nahl of the Noble Quran, it mentions certain foods that Allah (the Almighty and Majestic) has provided for us. These foods include cattle, fish, corn, olives, dates, grapes, pomegranates, and other fruits, milk, honey, and grains! I am not saying that these are the only foods that we should eat, but what surprised me is that many of these foods that are mentioned in the Noble Quran are the very foods that many of us tend to avoid these days!

Think about that one, when you are planning your next meal. All these foods have a variety of benefits to our health and Allah mentions them specifically in the Quran, so why not try adding a few more of these to your diet this Ramadan along with your green salad or green veggies.

NOTE: 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 inter-faith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, please call 25231015/6 or 94079426 or e-mail: info@tiescenter.net.



which COVID-19 is here with us which in my opinion makes Ramadan even more special if we are blessed to seeing in through until its end. Ramadan is a time in which Muslims focus on extra acts of worship, prayer, giving in charity, reading Quran, and fasting throughout this holy month from dawn to Sunset.

During this time Muslims fast not just

In the wake of COVID-19, eating a healthy diet and exercise has become even more important now than what it was ever before. It is said let food be thy medicine and even our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), used to recommend certain foods over others.

The Noble Quran in Surat Al-Baqarah even tells us to eat from what is lawful and

one becomes obsessed with food and indulges in too much unwholesome or junk food, he or she may become physically ill, weak, or distracted from the primary purpose of worshipping Allah.

Even overindulging in healthy wholesome foods can cause one to feel weak or lazy. Therefore, when you eat, try to pay attention to your body, eat without distraction, remem-

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Local

Speaker: Assembly office takes action against chaos

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said yesterday that the Assembly office has decided to take "all legal actions" regarding the events during the sessions this week in an attempt to prevent such events from happening again. The speaker did not reveal the nature of actions but launched a scathing attack against some opposition MPs for allegedly hurling "immoral" insults against him and others.

The Assembly sessions on Tuesday and Wednesday were marred with chaos and heated arguments that led the speaker to adjourn both sessions before time as things went out of control. Opposition MPs claimed the speaker breached the constitution and the internal charter in a bid to protect the prime minister

against grillings, and insisted that he must be questioned.

Ghanem also denied allegations by opposition MP Mohammad Al-Mutair that he had ordered employees in the Assembly to assault opposition MPs following Wednesday's session. Some altercations happened between some opposition MPs and a number of employees, who filed a case at the police station.

Opposition MP Muhalhal Al-Mudhaf meanwhile yesterday advised HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah to avoid being the cause of stirring serious problems in the country and called on him to resign. Mudhaf described what happened during the Assembly session on March 30 as a "political crime", and charged that all who took part in the session as participants in the crime.

During that session boycotted by the opposition, the Assembly

approved a decision delaying grillings against the prime minister for 18 months. Opposition MPs claim the decision did not secure the required votes and is thus null and void. Mudhaf questioned how the Assembly can protect the prime minister against current and future grillings, adding that this does not happen even in autocratic states.

Mudhaf also charged that some Assembly employees verbally and physically assaulted a number of opposition MPs, adding that what happened during the session on Wednesday was preplanned by some to "distort" the image of democracy in Kuwait.

Opposition MP Abdulaziz Al-Saqabi said MPs will not allow the Assembly to be used as a vehicle to protect the prime minister. He also complained that the speaker deleted his comments made during the session.

Indian Embassy marks Ambedkar birth anniversary

KUWAIT: The Indian Embassy in Kuwait celebrated the birth anniversary of Babasaheb Dr B R Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution, on Wednesday. Delivering the inaugural remarks, Indian Ambassador Sibi George spoke about the pivotal role played by Ambedkar as the chairman of the drafting committee of the constitution in producing the constitution, which laid the framework for peaceful governance, development and progress, a press release issued by the embassy said.

Pledging to rededicate to the cause of the nation, the ambassador read out the preamble of the constitution. He also unveiled a life-size portrait of Ambedkar at the embassy premises. Floral tributes were paid to the statue of the Father of Nation Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar by the ambassador, officers and family



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George pays a floral tribute to a life-size portrait of Dr B R Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution.

members of the embassy and members of the Indian community in Kuwait. The event was well attended virtually by people from different walks of life in Kuwait, the release added.

MoH vaccinates 4,400 employees of Kuwait Flour Mills Company

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health's official spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad announced the vaccination of 4,400 workers of Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company of all nationalities yesterday. In a statement to

KUNA, Sanad affirmed that the ministry's team will continue to vaccinate workers of cooperative societies and other services departments in residential areas. Sanad had previously announced the provision of two portable units for vaccinations in every governorate, aiming to vaccinate workers in key areas.

As the number of people in Kuwait who have received their COVID-19 vaccination approaches 800,000, health authorities are looking to accelerate vaccinations in Ramadan with the hope of reaching one million vaccinated people soon, which health officials say should help curb a rise in daily infections. — Agencies



KAC concludes COVID vaccination awareness drive

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways Corporation (KAC) concluded its national awareness campaign 'KAC Supports Vaccination' yesterday that was held in cooperation with the Kuwait Vaccination Center

from April 4 to 15, 2021. KAC PR and Media Director Fayeze Al-Anezi said that the campaign aimed to encourage people to get vaccinated against COVID-19. "This campaign was successful and achieved its goals in spreading awareness about the importance of vaccination and reaching the largest number of people," he said.

"The campaign also included posting awareness videos and informative messages on KAC's accounts on social media, in addition to various audio and visual media and the press. Awareness posters were placed in shopping malls and at Kuwait International Airport's T1 and T4," added Anezi. This campaign is part of KAC's social responsibility. "Through this campaign, KAC aims to help the government in encouraging people to get vaccinated to reach community immunity and return to normal life," he said.

News in brief

Toxic leak contained

KUWAIT: Firemen contained a leak of hazardous material after a truck carrying two containers was involved in an accident on Jamal Abdul Nasser Road Wednesday evening.

Police arrest car thief

KUWAIT: South Surra detectives arrested a man who stole four vehicles and one motorcycle in the area recently. The bedoon man, 27, was arrested in his house in Ardiya.

Bus driver arrested

KUWAIT: Traffic police arrested a bus driver who was going the wrong way, endangering his own life and that of others. The incident was seen on a social media video clip. The driver faces deportation due to this grave violation.

Motorist beats policeman

KUWAIT: A pickup driver rammed into a traffic police patrol and beat a policeman in Jaber Al-Ahmad while under the influence. After police received a call about an erratic driver, they arrived and asked him to pull over, but he hit the patrol vehicle, got out and attacked the policeman. The man was arrested.

Deliveryman beaten, robbed

KUWAIT: Detectives arrested two Kuwaitis who violated the curfew, beat a deliveryman and stole his wallet. The two said the victim was driving slowly and delayed them. The two will face further legal action.

Man shot after dispute

KUWAIT: A Kuwaiti man shot a compatriot in the leg after a dispute between the two. Police said that a man - a relative of the victim - said a fight took place between his relative and the suspect, who pulled out a pistol and shot the victim in the leg. The victim was taken to Jahra Hospital and detectives are working on arresting the suspect.

Local

EPA monitoring red tide, fish deaths

KUWAIT: The Public Environment Authority (EPA) has been monitoring the appearance of red tide stretching from Al-Salam beach in Kuwait Bay all the way to Al-Sulaibikhat Bay, amid some floating dead fish. EPA said in a statement on Wednesday that a team of the authority scooped up some samples and examined them at the laboratory. The examination revealed that the samples contained some *Myrionecta rubra* algae at a rate of 150,300 per liter. A survey of the mentioned region showed alteration of the water color, close to rain drainage sewers, adding that “human coastal activities” have negatively impacted on the quality of the seawater, causing the red tide and fish deaths. EPA will survey other locations off the coast in coming days. — KUNA

KUNA takes ‘decisive’ measures following Twitter mistake

KUWAIT: Kuwait News Agency apologized for a mistake it made in a Twitter post on Wednesday and said it has taken what it called “decisive” measures to address this issue. Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi instructed the execution of “decisive” measures at the electronic editing department with the aim of preventing mistakes, KUNA spokesman Essam Al-Ruwayyeh said in a statement.

Among the measures, he added, was appointing “experienced” Kuwaiti editors at the electronic editing department, as well as firing those who committed the mistake. KUNA is keen on accuracy of news published on its social media platforms, as well as reporting local and international events in a credible and transparent manner, Ruwayyeh said. — KUNA

PAY organizes activities for youth during Ramadan

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Youth (PAY) announced yesterday various programs, activities and competitions for youth of different ages during the holy month of Ramadan. The events follow guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. PAY will organize educational seminars and lectures in various fields of youths’ interest - two seminars weekly - with the participation of experts and academics, head of PAY’s public relations and media department Abdullah Al-Adwani said in remarks to KUNA.

PAY will spread daily awareness messages via its social media accounts related to health protection measures the country is witnessing, shedding light on the importance of abiding by health regulations, and encouraging people to practice sports, he said. PAY will also broadcast religious messages in accordance with the holy month, he added.

PAY will launch the 10,000 walking steps challenge, which will take place every week, Adwani said. PAY will present a program on history, culture, volunteering, arts, literature and sports, and will run interviews with actors and intellectuals weekly every Sunday and Thursday, he added. The Authority will also continue broadcasting its program “Youth from distance”, which includes online training courses, as more than 11,000 youngsters benefited from this program that kicked off after the outbreak of COVID-19 last March. Adwani called to engage with and register for these activities through various PAY social media accounts, praising the efforts exerted by volunteer Kuwaiti youth who greatly contributed in the success of these ventures, which positively assist the youth to invest their time. — KUNA

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RAMADAN QUIZ 2021

Kuwait Times annual Ramadan competition will 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 announced in Kuwait Times.

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Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

4- Fasting during Ramadan starts from what time?

- A. Evening
- B. Afternoon
- C. Dawn
- D. None of the above

Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

Date :
Name :
Civil ID :
Tel :
Email :

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UK Muslims urged to get COVID jab during Ramadan

Anniversary highlights Aboriginal deaths in Australian custody crisis



ARBIL, Iraq: The model of an aeroplane decorates a square near Arbil's International airport in the capital of Iraq's autonomous northern Kurdish region yesterday. — AFP

Drone blast hits Iraq airport

First use of such a weapon against US troops in Iraq

ARBIL, Iraq: An explosives-packed drone slammed into Iraq's Arbil airport in the first reported use of such a weapon against a base used by US-led coalition troops in the country, officials said yesterday. There were no casualties in the strike on the capital of northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region late Wednesday, although it did cause damage to a building in the military part of the airport.

It comes after around 20 bomb and rocket attacks blamed on pro-Iran Shiite armed groups against facilities used by coalition troops or diplomats in Iraq since US President Joe Biden took office in January. The attacks have mostly been claimed by shadowy Shiite armed groups aligned with Iran who are demanding the Biden administration set a pullout date for Iraq as it has for Afghanistan. "A drone packed with TNT targeted a coalition base at Arbil airport," the Kurdish region's interior ministry said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, which caused an explosion heard across Arbil. But a shadowy pro-Iranian group calling itself Awliyaa al-Dam (Guardians of Blood), which claimed a previous attack on the same airport in February, hailed the strike on the messaging app Telegram. In the February attack, more than a dozen rockets targeted the military complex inside the airport, killing an Iraqi civilian and a foreign contractor working with US-led troops.

Washington — which has promised to withdraw the troops it deployed in support of Baghdad's successful fightback against the Islamic State group but has resisted setting a date — said it was "outraged" by the latest violence. "The Iraqi people have suffered for far too long from this kind of violence and violation of their sovereignty," State Department spokesman Ned Price tweeted.

'Dangerous escalation'

Leading Kurdish politician, ex-foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari, explicitly blamed pro-Iranian "militia" for the attack. "It seems the same militia who targeted the airport two months ago are at it again," Zebari tweeted. "This is a clear & dangerous escalation." A senior US defense official told AFP that while Wednesday's strike marked the first use of a drone to target US troops inside Iraq, Iran's allies in the country had already shown they had the technology. Washington has said a January drone attack on the Saudi capital Riyadh was carried out from southern Iraq on behalf of Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

"The Iranian-backed militias have drones now with a 15-foot (four and a half meter) wingspan," the defense official said. "It's an Iranian-made CAS-04 which we've already seen weaponized by the Houthis against Saudi."

The official said the technology was constantly being im-

proved. "They now have the capacity for a rocket-assisted launch. The range is 1,200-1,500 kilometers (750 to 930 miles) if they add fuel tanks to it. They can even be loaded onto a ship from (the Iraqi port of) Basra and brought even closer to target. These can be pre-programmed with a GPS destination."

Analysts said the use of drones offered a new way to penetrate US defenses. "Suicide drones are particularly useful in these types of hits as they can avoid counter rocket, artillery and mortar systems," said Hamdi Malik, associate fellow at the Washington Institute. Pro-Iran groups have been ratcheting up their rhetoric, vowing to ramp up attacks to force out the "occupying" US forces, and there have been almost daily attacks on coalition supply convoys across the south.

Earlier Wednesday, two roadside bombs exploded as convoys passed through the southern provinces of Dhi Qar and Diwaniyah, security sources said. The United States last week committed to withdraw all remaining combat forces from Iraq, although the two countries did not set a timeline for what would be a second US withdrawal since the 2003 invasion which toppled Saddam Hussein. The announcement came as the Biden administration resumed a "strategic dialogue" with the government of Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi, who is seen as too close to Washington by pro-Iranian groups. — AFP

International

Enrichment and sabotage cast shadow over Iran nuke talks

Talks to save Iran nuclear deal resume in Vienna

VIENNA: Talks to save the Iran nuclear deal resumed in Vienna yesterday amid new tensions, with Tehran preparing to ramp up uranium enrichment in response to an attack on a facility it blamed on arch-foe Israel. After a positive first round of negotiations aimed at resurrecting the 2015 agreement scuttled by Donald Trump, Iran's push towards enrichment levels needed for military use "puts pressure on everyone," a European diplomat said.

Tehran says the move is a response to Israel's "nuclear terrorism" after an explosion on Sunday knocked out power at its Natanz enrichment plant. 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. "It definitely complicates things," the diplomat said, ahead of the talks between the remaining members of the deal—Germany, France, the United Kingdom, China, Russia and Iran—resuming at 1230 pm local time (1030 GMT).

But events of the past few days have also "reminded both parties that the status quo is a lose-lose situation", and have "added urgency" to the talks, said Ali Vaez, Iran Project Director at the International Crisis Group think tank. "It is clear that the more the diplomatic process drags on, the higher the risk that it gets derailed by saboteurs and those acting in bad faith," Vaez added.

Biden faces tangle of sanctions in talks with Iran

WASHINGTON: Reviving the Iran nuclear deal would seem like a simple task for US President Joe Biden. Iran wants him to lift sanctions in exchange for Tehran's return to compliance.

But as Iran and the United States resume indirect talks in Vienna led by the European Union, the Biden administration faces the question of which sanctions exactly are on the table. Further casting a shadow over the talks is an explosion at a key Iranian nuclear facility purportedly carried out by Israel, a sworn foe of the 2015 accord, which led Tehran to announce it was ramping up uranium enrichment closer to weapons-grade levels.

Sweeping sanctions in place

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, negotiated under former US president Barack Obama, promised Iran relief from sanctions if it drastically scaled back its nuclear program—a commitment that UN inspectors said Tehran had been meeting. Obama's successor Donald Trump called the JCPOA "the worst deal ever" and withdrew in 2018, saying the accord did not take into account other objectionable activities by Iran.

Trump imposed a unilateral embargo on Iran's key export of oil, punishing any other country that bought it. Trump went on to impose a number of additional sanctions including declaring Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards to be a terrorist group, the first time such a designation has been given to a state entity.

'Only viable solution'

Known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the deal has been disintegrating since former US president Donald Trump dramatically withdrew from it in 2018 and re-imposed sanctions, prompting Iran to retaliate by exceeding its agreed limits on nuclear activity. Britain, France and Germany have expressed "grave concern" over the most recent enrichment move, while also rejecting "all escalatory measures by any actor".

China and Russia also strongly back the United States returning to the deal, believing it addresses the most pressing concerns with Iran. Russia's representative in Vienna said the deal remained the "only viable solution which can bring the Iranian nuclear program back to the agreed parameters."

But the Joe Biden administration, while agreeing on the JCPOA's value, has stressed that it is waiting for Iran to first roll back steps away from compliance that it took to protest Trump's sanctions. An American delegation is attending the talks "indirectly", staying at a separate hotel. Washington is "very open-eyed about how this will be a long process," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters Wednesday.

"It's happening through indirect discussions, but we still feel that it is a step forward."

Openly seeking to tie Biden's hands, the Trump administration in its final months announced a number of duplicative restrictions such as designating Iran's central bank for alleged terrorist financing in addition to previous nuclear sanctions.

Which sanctions to lift?

A senior US official reiterated after the initial talks in Vienna last week that Biden was ready to lift "all sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA." "It's not as easy a process as it may sound precisely because the Trump administration went out of its way to make it difficult for a successor administration to rejoin the JCPOA," the official said. But the official also said there remained "legitimate sanctions"—which the United States could impose over "terrorism, on human rights violations, on ballistic missiles" or other issues. Iran has pressed hard for a lifting of all sanctions, warning that it may stop negotiations if not. It has also refused direct talks with the United States, forcing European intermediaries to shuttle between separate hotels in Vienna. Pressures in Washington -

Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia remain in the JCPOA and strongly back a return of the United States, believing the deal addressed the most pressing concern with Iran.

But the Biden administration, while agreeing on the JCPOA's value, has stressed that it is waiting for Iran first to roll back steps away from compliance that it took to protest Trump's sanctions. Some observers believe Biden was unwilling to invest political capital so early on the Iran deal which is fiercely opposed by the rival Republican Party. Republican lawmakers have already accused Biden of capitulation after he took modest initial steps including easing draconian restrictions on the movements of UN-accredited Iranian diplomats in New York. —AFP



VIENNA: Members of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an Iranian opposition group, stage a protest outside the 'Grand Hotel Wien' for the closed-door nuclear talks with Iran in Vienna yesterday where diplomats of the EU, China, Russia and Iran hold their talks. —AFP

'Not much time'

In the meantime, Tehran is reducing its "breakout time"—time to acquire the fissile material necessary for the manufacture of a bomb, said the European diplomat. Under the JCPOA, it had committed to keep enrichment to 3.67 percent, though it stepped this up to 20 percent

in January. The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency said its inspectors visited the site at Natanz for "verification and monitoring activities" on Wednesday, and that Iran had "almost completed preparations" to enrich uranium to 60 percent purity. Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful. —AFP

Biden to proceed with UAE F-35 sales, with rules

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's administration indicated Wednesday it was moving forward with a \$23 billion sale of F-35 fighter-jets to the United Arab Emirates but was considering restrictions and would not deliver them soon. The State Department shortly after Biden's inauguration in January ordered a review of the massive arms package, which was approved by former president Donald Trump when the Gulf ally recognized Israel. Responding to a lawsuit seeking to block the sale, the State Department said it planned a "robust and sustained dialogue" with the United Arab Emirates on arms transfers.

"We can confirm that the administration intends to move forward with these proposed defense sales to the UAE, even as we continue reviewing details and consulting with Emirati officials to ensure we have developed mutual understandings with respect to Emirati obligations before, during and after delivery," a State Department spokesperson said. "Projected delivery dates on these sales, if eventually implemented, will be several years in the future." The lawsuit was filed by a group on behalf of purported victims of Emirati "aggression" who pointed to the Gulf state's participation in the bloody Saudi-led offensive in Yemen and its support for Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. Announcing a refiled lawsuit, the New York Center for Foreign Policy Affairs said it had "hoped for better things out of the Biden administration." —AFP

International

3 dead as Eritrean forces fire on Tigray civilians: Amnesty

UN Security Council to meet on Tigray crisis

ADDIS ABABA: Eritrean soldiers killed three people when they opened fire on civilians this week in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, Amnesty International said. The incident took place in the town of Adwa early Monday, more than two weeks after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed vowed Eritrean troops would leave Tigray amid a growing international outcry over human rights abuses.

AFP reported on the incident Tuesday, citing doctors and medical workers who said 19 people were injured, but had not confirmed the deaths. "Three people lost their lives and at least 19 others are in hospital from yet another unlawful attack by Eritrean troops on civilians in Tigray. Deliberate attacks on civilians are prohibited by international humanitarian law and must stop," Amnesty East Africa deputy director Sarah Jackson said in a statement.

Jackson reiterated Amnesty's call for an international investigation of human rights abuses in Tigray, including possible war crimes and crimes against humanity. Eritrea has not responded to requests for comment about the Adwa shootings. It has previously denied reports Eritreans have committed mass killings and rapes in the five-month-old conflict.

Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, sent federal troops into Tigray in November to detain and disarm leaders of the once dominant regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

He said the move came in response to TPLF-orchestrated attacks on army camps. Abiy declared victory within weeks, but combat has continued

and analysts warn of a prolonged stalemate. Addis Ababa and Asmara long denied Eritreans were involved in the war, contradicting testimony from residents, rights groups, aid workers, diplomats and even some Ethiopian civilian and military officials. Abiy finally acknowledged their presence in March while speaking to lawmakers. It is unclear how many Eritrean soldiers are in the region or whether any have left in recent weeks.

Amnesty's statement Wednesday cited six witnesses who described how Eritrean soldiers drove through the center of Adwa shooting at random. "We scattered in different directions. I hid in the drainage... They were shooting from the backs of the moving trucks," said one witness, identified by the pseudonym Teklu for security reasons.

Like witnesses interviewed by AFP, Teklu said the Eritreans were easily identifiable because they spoke Tigrinya — the main language in Tigray and Eritrea — rode in vehicles with Eritrean number plates and wore "Eritrean defence force camouflages".

Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council was set to meet yesterday to discuss the crisis in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region following a US request, diplomatic sources said Wednesday. The 15 Security Council members will hear from UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock, who will talk about the continued difficulties in getting aid to refugees, according to the UN. In early March Lowcock called for Eritrea to withdraw its troops from Tigray, in the first recognition by a UN official of Eritrea's involvement in the fighting there.



MEKELE: Displaced children from Western Tigray wait at meal time to receive food outside a classroom in the school where they are sheltering in Tigray's capital Mekele. —AFP

UN officials in Geneva have accused the Eritrean army of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Tigray. Asmara rejects the accusations. Yesterday's meeting will be a closed-door session similar to the March 4 meeting on Tigray. At that time China and Russia opposed adopting a unanimous statement calling for an end to violence in the region as both countries

consider the matter an internal Ethiopian affair.

Ethiopia is a longstanding US ally, but Washington has been increasingly alarmed since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed launched a military offensive in Tigray in November. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has spoken of "ethnic cleansing" in Tigray, where Eritrean troops also intervened to fight the local ruling party. —AFP

Missile debris sparks fire at Saudi university

RIYADH: Debris from missiles fired by Yemen's Houthi rebels into Saudi Arabia caused a small fire on a university campus in the kingdom's south, the Riyadh-led military coalition operating in Yemen said. Saudi air defense intercepted five ballistic missiles and four drones deployed by Yemeni rebels on Wednesday night and yesterday morning, according to the coalition. The missiles were fired and drones sent from Yemen's Sa'ada province, a rebel stronghold in the north of the country, toward the Saudi city of Jizan, said coalition spokesman Turki Al-Maliki. "Debris fell on the campus of Jizan University, causing a small fire which was brought under control and there were no casualties," the spokesman said, according to the official Saudi news agency SPA. Maliki condemned the escalating Houthi air campaign against "civilian targets", warning that these "hostile acts constitute war crimes". A Houthi spokesman in the northern capital of Sanaa said that 11 missiles and drones had targeted facilities belonging to the Saudi oil giant Aramco. Patriot anti-missile batteries and other "sensitive facilities" were also targeted by the Huthis in Jizan, a rebel military spokesman said according to the Huthis' Al-Masirah television. —AFP

Somalia condemns 'threats' from foreign allies

MOGADISHU: Somalia has accused some of its foreign backers of undermining its sovereignty after the embattled government was threatened with sanctions over a decision to extend its mandate by two years. President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed on Wednesday signed into law a "special resolution" extending his time in office, despite his term expiring in February, and repeat warnings that such a move would not be supported by western powers.

It followed a total collapse in UN-backed talks between the central government in Mogadishu and two of Somalia's semi-autonomous states over how to proceed with delayed elections in the fragile nation.

Key foreign allies and financial supporters have rebuked the decision in strong terms. They say the mandate extension threatens peace and stability in Somalia and distracts from its fight against the Al-Shabaab Islamist group. The United States, a key partner in the war on terror, and the European Union has warned of sanctions and other penalties should talks toward elections between the feuding parties not urgently resume. "While we ap-

preciate the concerns of our friends and international partners for Somalia's stability and security, it is regrettable to witness champions of democratic principles falling short of supporting the aspirations of the Somali people to exercise their democratic rights," Somalia's foreign ministry said in a statement issued late Wednesday.

"Inflammatory statements laden with threats, which undermine the political independence and sovereign rights of national institutions, will only serve to embolden terrorist organizations and anti-peace elements in Somalia." It said the government stood by the lower house of parliament in its decision to approve the mandate extension, declaring it lawful and necessary to pave the way for free and fair elections. The government has promised a one-person, one-vote election within two years. Past administrations have made similar pledges but no such vote has been held in half a century in the Horn of Africa nation.

The upper house was not permitted to consider the mandate extension, and the speaker of the Senate declared the legislation null and void. The US said Tuesday it was "deeply disappointed" in the move and warned "such actions would be deeply divisive" and erode the progress toward peace made in tandem with the international community.

Somalia received \$2 billion (1.67 billion euros) in overseas development assistance in both 2017 and 2018, according to Somali government data. The EU and US were among the top contributors of this aid, which represents roughly a quarter of the Gross Domestic Product of the impoverished country. —AFP

International

'Lost paradise': Mediterranean is edging ever closer to home

Coastline extremely vulnerable to erosion, flooding and rising sea levels

VIAS, France: After fleeing to France to escape the Spanish Civil War, Amalia Romero's family eventually managed to build a home on the south coast directly looking out over the Mediterranean. But today, the sea is gradually gnawing away at their refuge on a coastline that has grown vulnerable to the ravages of climate change. "It's a harsh fate after we've devoted all our efforts, all our life, to having a roof over our family's head," Romero said.

In 1939, she was among the exodus, or *Retirada*, of nearly half a million Spaniards who fled dictator General Francisco Franco's forces and crossed the border into France, where many ended up initially in internment camps. Now aged 94, the cheerful, determined woman, who worked in the fish and agriculture industry, spoke to AFP at her house, built in 1956 at Vias beach, about 300 kilometers (186 miles) north of the Spanish city of Barcelona. As well as a panoramic vista across the ocean, the veranda off the house's first-floor living room affords views of the Pyrenees. Her parents, on their release from the French camps, managed to buy this parcel of land, at the time overgrown with vines, and built a new life for themselves.

Back then, Romero said, "the dunes (in front

of the house) used to gently slope down towards the sea". Fishermen had plenty of space on the beach to build shacks, pull their boats onto the sand and spread out their nets, she added, nostalgically recalling her "lost paradise". Since then, a wide chunk of land has been "eaten by the sea" and the garden now abruptly drops down to the lashing waves. The sea regularly sweeps away the rock fill, sea walls, bridges and other measures undertaken at a cost of millions of euros (dollars) to artificially recreate the beach. The widow and mother of four, who now lives alone, says it "took some time" to realize that the Mediterranean was creeping ever closer.

'Very serious'

"In the 1990s, suddenly it all dawned on us after several heavy sea swells, but it was already very serious," she said. Vias beach lies on an approximately 180-km stretch known for its low and sandy coastline, which is "therefore extremely vulnerable to erosion, coastal flooding and rising sea levels", said geographer Alexandre Brun, of the Paul-Valery University in the southern city of Montpellier. Globally, sea levels rose by about 15 centimeters (six inches) in the 20th century and the increase is accelerating,



VIAS, France: A picture shows a view of a beach that shrunk because of the coastal erosion, in Vias, near Montpellier, southern France. — AFP

according to the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). By 2050, more than a billion people like Romero will be living in coastal regions that are particularly vulnerable to floods or extreme weather events.

While the very existence of some islands, notably in the Pacific Ocean, is threatened, Europe, too, has not been spared. France is among the

most affected, along with the Netherlands and Belgium among others, said Goneri Le Cozannet, a coastal risk and climate change specialist at the French Geological Survey who contributes to the IPCC expert reports. Ten percent of mainland France's population, or 6.2 million people, live in coastal communities, according to figures from the ministry for the ecological transition. —AFP

COVID jabs available, but reluctance contagious in Senegal

MBAO, Senegal: While people around the world wait impatiently to be vaccinated against COVID-19, an inoculation site in Senegal was empty on a recent day—a sign of the ambivalence nationwide. Though jabs are free and available without appointment at the Mbaio health post, outside the capital Dakar, there were no takers, leaving nurses to chat to pass the time. Shots also did not appear to be in high demand at other Senegalese health centers visited by AFP. "People are in no rush to get vaccinated," one health worker in Mbaio said on condition of anonymity because she was not authorized to speak to journalists. "A woman told me she doesn't trust it because it's free. She's waiting for it to be sold in pharmacies to buy it."

The reticence in the West African nation is multi-layered. Many Senegalese have had doubts about the seriousness of COVID-19 from the start, and widespread skepticism about vaccines only grew with concerns over the AstraZeneca jab's possible link to rare blood clots. The shot by the British-Swedish firm is one of two available in Senegal. Vaccination officials in the religious city of Touba were quoted in local media saying that after a good start, supplies of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine and AstraZeneca jab were now languishing. They warned against the risk of losing a portion of the 7,000 remaining doses of AstraZeneca out of 8,000 delivered since they could expire.

'Did not show up'

National vaccination coordinator Dr. Ousseynou Badiane said there had been some difficulty in convincing people. The gov-

ernment had planned to vaccinate as a priority health personnel, the elderly and those with co-morbidities, which amounts to around three percent of the population. "We have already administered more than 70 percent of the doses we were supposed to administer," he said. But the government quickly increased availability to 20 percent of the population since "priority people did not show up."

Authorities had initially set up online appointment booking, and when vaccination services called the registrants, some "asked if it was AstraZeneca" and preferred to wait, he said. Without official communication, word began to spread on social media that it was possible to be vaccinated without an appointment—a godsend for some. "I came to be vaccinated to protect myself," said Rokhaya Samb, who was leaving a center in Dakar. "My husband doesn't want to be immunized, and when I came he tried to talk me out of it." About 15 people had shown up that day, including expatriates who live or work in the neighborhood. At the beginning, the wait had been a few hours. Now it's reduced to around 30 minutes at most.

Conspiracy theories

Senegal has acquired 200,000 doses of Sinopharm on its own, 10 percent of which has been donated to neighboring Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. It has received more than 300,000 doses of the AstraZeneca jab as part of the international Covax program intended to ensure access for poor countries. More than 362,000 people have been vaccinated out of a population of around 17 million. "There is reluctance but it is difficult to measure," said Badiane, the national coordinator. On the positive side, the number of infections and deaths has been decreasing in Senegal for weeks. Life is also gradually returning to some form of normality since the government lifted a curfew and other anti-COVID restrictions following serious unrest in early March. —AFP

Row deepens in Poland over new human rights ombudsman

WARSAW: Polish MPs prepared to vote for a fourth time on appointing a new human rights ombudsman yesterday after the Constitutional Court ruled the current incumbent could no longer stay in the position. The role is highly politically sensitive in Poland and the row over a new nominee has pitted the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) against opponents who say it is eroding democratic rights.

The current incumbent, Adam Bodnar, is a frequent critic of the government and has stayed on even after his term expired in September last year since MPs have not been able to agree on a replacement. The PiS and its smaller coalition partners hold a razor-thin majority in parliament and the Senate upper house is controlled by the opposition. The role of human rights ombudsman dates back to the final years of communism and the independence of the office is often fiercely contested. Ombudsmen are appointed to five-year terms by lawmakers from both the lower and upper houses. The Constitutional Court yesterday said Bodnar's extension was not compatible with the constitution. "The term of office is strictly defined and cannot be exceeded," said the ruling from a panel of five judges chaired by PiS-appointed Julia Przylebska. The court's ruling will be applicable only after it is published in the official Journal of Laws, meaning that Bodnar can stay on for now. It is unclear what would happen if Bodnar is barred from the role and no replacement has been found. —AFP

International

Panel votes to bring slavery reparations bill to US House

A historic step on a crucial issue as nation reckons on racial justice

WASHINGTON: A US congressional committee voted Wednesday to advance to the whole House of Representatives a bill on federal slavery reparation payments to African Americans, in a historic step on an issue gaining momentum during the nation's reckoning on racial justice.

The move represents the first-ever congressional vote on the issue of reparations for the descendants of enslaved people in the United States. The bill passed the House Judiciary Committee with a vote of 25 to 17 along strict party lines, with no Republicans voting to bring the bill in front of the whole House. The committee had engaged in a late-night discussion about the bill, which would create a commission to study and develop proposals for reparations to Black people.

But it faces major challenges in a closely divided Congress, where more than 150 Democrats co-sponsored the measure. The first version of the bill was introduced more than 30 years ago but never advanced. It addresses the period of slavery and discrimination in the United States from 1619 to the present day, and would establish a commission that will study and propose remedies including financial reparations. House Democrat Sheila Jackson Lee, the bill's chief sponsor, said such a commission would be a long-overdue effort to confront the stark societal disparities occurring in Black communities today, and recommend solutions.

It would provide a "road map for the truth of the brutality and the onerous and terrible burden placed on African Americans, and this nation, by slavery," she told the committee.

Lee, who is Black, also delivered a message to her Republican colleagues: "Do not cancel us tonight," she implored. "Do not ignore the pain, the history-and the reasonableness of this commission."

President Joe Biden met Tuesday with members of the Congressional Black Caucus at the White House where they discussed the reparations issue. Lee, who attended the meeting, said Biden remained "committed" to the bill. Judiciary Committee chairman Jerrold Nadler said the legislation is intended to "begin a national conversation about how to confront the brutal mistreatment of African Americans during chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the enduring structural racism that remains endemic to our society today."

But Nadler stressed that the measure makes no conclusion about how to properly atone for and make recompense for slavery, segregation and their shameful legacy. Republicans acknowledged the evils of slavery, but they nonetheless spoke out against the legislation, with some criticizing the commission's expected \$20 million cost.

"I would very much caution against going down this road," House Republican Chip Roy told the session. "It takes us away from the important dream of judging people by the content of their character and not the color of their skin." Wednesday's vote comes during the high-profile trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who is charged with the murder of George Floyd. The Black man's death last May triggered protests highlighting the country's racial injustices.

'Systemic' discrimination

Approximately four million Africans and their descendants were enslaved in the original colonies and the United States between 1619 and 1865, a history that some lawmakers described Wednesday as "the original sin" of the United States. The bill says that in the decades following slavery, the government helped create "persistent systemic



WASHINGTON: In this file photo a demonstrator waves an American flag with the words "Not Free" painted on it in front of the Washington Monument during a Juneteenth march and rally in Washington, DC. —AFP

structures of discrimination on living African Americans." Black Americans continue to suffer "debilitating economic, educational, and health hardships" compared to white Americans, the bill notes, including an unemployment rate more than twice that of whites, and an average of less than 1/16 of the wealth of white families. —AFP

No uniforms for royals at Prince Philip's funeral

LONDON: The British royals are all to wear civilian clothing at Prince Philip's funeral to avoid awkwardness over which princes are entitled to military uniform, British media reported yesterday. The Duke of Edinburgh, who died last Friday, will be buried tomorrow at Windsor Castle, west of London, with just 30 mourners, most of them close family. Queen Elizabeth II is understood to have decided that all the royals will wear civilian clothing, The Sun tabloid and other media reported. The funeral would otherwise have emphasized former British Army captain Prince Harry's loss of honorary military titles after his shock departure from royal life last year.

Harry, the Duke of Sussex, was stripped of his military titles after stepping away from senior royal duties and moving to California with his wife, Meghan. While Harry—the Queen's grandson—did two tours of duty in Afghanistan, he is only allowed to wear a suit with service medals. Another potential row comes in the shape of the monarch's second son Prince Andrew, a former Royal Navy helicopter pilot who saw action in the 1982 Falklands War. He has been sidelined from public duties because of outrage at his defense of his friendship with the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. He was set to take the honorary rank of admiral for his 60th birthday but the appointment was put on hold. The Sun said there would have been "serious displeasure" in the Navy had he gone ahead with the uniform plan. The Daily Telegraph reported that royals had held "intense discussions" to allay concerns about embarrassing the family if Andrew and Harry—the only royals to have seen frontline service—were not wearing uniform. —AFP

Myanmar military shoots at protesting medical workers

YANGON: Myanmar's military opened fire on protesting healthcare workers yesterday, killing at least one bystander as the demonstrators fled for safety to a nearby mosque.

The country has been in turmoil since the military seized power from civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1, triggering a massive uprising that the junta has sought to quell using lethal force. But protesters have continued taking to the streets, this week using the Myanmar New Year holiday of Thingyan as their latest rallying point as the normal festivities have been cancelled.

In Myanmar's second-largest city Mandalay, a demonstration by medical workers yesterday turned violent when soldiers opened fire, sending them running to the mosque. "They were shooting everywhere... they were targeting the Sule mosque compound because people in there were hiding protesters," said an eyewitness.

A 30-year-old man who lived in the compound was shot dead, and at least two others were injured, said a doctor who treated the wounded. "The man who died was shot from the back and it penetrated through his chest," he said.

A medic who participated in the protest said he saw the arrest of six nurses and doctors during the crackdown. "We lost contact with some medical team members as well," he told AFP. Myanmar's healthcare workers have been at the forefront of a nationwide civil disobedience movement, refusing to return to work under a military regime. Their absence has left many of the country's hospitals unstaffed during the pandemic.



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

Civil servants from other sectors have followed suit, bringing the operation of the country's banks, schools, railway operations, and businesses to a halt. The junta has tried to force people back to work, and yesterday, state-run media reported that at least 20 doctors participating in the movement will be charged for attempting to "deteriorate peace and stability".

So far, more than 700 civilians have been killed in anti-coup unrest, according to a local monitoring group, and more than 3,000 have been detained. A well-known protest leader was arrested yesterday in central Monywa city—he was leading a demonstration by motorbike when a car rammed into him.

"Wai Moe Naing was arrested... I saw his motorcycle hit by the car from afar," fellow activist Hein Zaw Win told AFP, vowing to "continue our protests until we win." —AFP

International

UK Muslims urged to get COVID jab during Ramadan

Britain has inoculated more than 32 million people so far

LONDON: As the afternoon call to prayer reverberated through the East London Mosque, local residents of all beliefs flocked in to put their faith in science and receive their COVID-19 vaccine. Medical staff and volunteers escorted patients to their appointment at a temporary vaccination center in the mosque compound to ensure the lengthy queue moved with the mechanical efficiency of a factory conveyor belt. The London borough of Tower Hamlets, where the mosque is located, has the highest number of Muslim residents in Britain but doctors are encouraged at the take-up of the vaccine, despite concerns from some that it invalidates the Ramadan fast.

Hasnayn Abbasi, a doctor in charge of the vaccination center, said getting vaccinated was compatible with fasting during the Islamic holy month, which began this week. "This isn't anything new, but it's become more prominent because so many people need the jab this year. So we would say, please come and have the jab done," he said AFP.

"Once you do it in a mosque, you immediately cut through that. So we thought, what better place to do it than here, which gives the message out without having to say anything?"

Erroneous claims

Vaccine hesitancy is disproportionately present among some minority groups, even as Britain drives ahead with a mass inoculation campaign that has so far seen more than 32 million people have a COVID jab. One study indicated that only 59 percent of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities had taken the vaccine by early February—well down on the figure for white Britons.

Erroneous claims have circulated, claiming the vaccines contain alcohol and pork, cause infertility and contradict Islamic practices. But religious figures and medical professionals are working to ensure Muslims get their jabs. "The (East London Mosque) imams have been giving reminders after prayers, their social media is very strong, it goes on the mosque radio station," said Abbasi.

"We've put it out in our local media outlet, we're working with a council team to send the message out. There are lots of pop-up clinics, we're sending text messages."

'Message getting through'

The pandemic has disproportionately hit ethnic minorities in the UK, where more than 127,000 people in total have died from COVID-19 — one of the worst tolls in the world and the highest in Europe.

A Public Health England report last year found the risk of dying from COVID-19 among those of Bangladeshi ethnicity was twice that of white British people after accounting for sex, age, deprivation and region. Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) groups are over-represented in frontline occupations in transport and healthcare, putting them more at risk of contracting COVID and death.

A cross-party parliamentary report in November found that more than 60 percent of black Britons do not believe the state-run National Health Service (NHS) equally protects their health.

And there are fears that pockets of hard-to-reach groups will remain vulnerable to COVID-19 and increase the risk of new variants emerging. But Abbasi painted a cautiously optimistic picture

"He does not aim for a quick knockout, but wears down his opponents slowly, continuously, with great endurance," the magazine noted. A defender of multiculturalism and self-declared "passionate European", Laschet famously stood by Merkel during the fallout from her decision to leave the border open to hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers in 2015-16. Born in Aachen, the spa city in western Germany near the border with Belgium and the Netherlands, he has a reputation for pragmatism and an ability to unify. The father of three is a great fan of Charlemagne, the king of the Franks credited with uniting Europe whose empire was based in Aachen, and his family has even said they are direct descendants.

But Laschet also plays up his common man image, telling party members in January how his father fed his family digging for coal. "When you're down in the mine, it doesn't matter where your colleague comes from, what his religion is or what he looks like. What is important is, can you rely on him," he said. Laschet studied law and political science in Munich and Bonn before working as a journalist for Bavarian radio stations and television, and as the editor of a Catholic newspaper. He was elected to the Bundestag, or lower house of the German parliament, in 1994 and to the European Parliament in 1999, and has been the state premier of North Rhine-Westphalia since 2017.

With his brash posturing and a playful penchant for dressing up as Marilyn Monroe or Shrek, Bavarian leader Soeder would not seem the obvious choice to inherit Merkel's mantle. But behind his rakish charm and passionate Star Trek fandom, there is molten ambition. If he were to win the election, the 54-year-old would be Germany's first-ever chancellor from the CSU, after two failed attempts by previous party leaders, bringing a dash of southern eccentricity to the often staid world of Berlin power politics. —AFP



LONDON: Health workers prepare doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford COVID-19 vaccine at a temporary vaccination center set up at the East London Mosque in London.—AFP

as Britain's vaccination campaign continues apace. The UK government met its target of offering a first vaccine dose to all over-50s and the most vulnerable ahead of schedule earlier this week.

As of Wednesday, 32.3 million people have had a first dose of a vaccine and 8.1 million have received a second. "The message is getting through, we just have to make sure we keep the momentum throughout the month of Ramadan," said Abbasi.

"We were hearing of people saying, 'I'll do it at the end of Ramadan'. "But for some people, it might be four months, so it's very important, for the vaccine to work correctly, for people to have it done at the right time." —AFP

Meet the two men in tug-of-war for Merkel mantle

BERLIN: Germany's ruling conservatives are locked in a bitter dispute over who they want to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor when Germany goes to the polls in September. Merkel, who is still immensely popular with voters, is stepping down this year after 16 years in power.

As head of the Christian Democratic Union, affable Merkel loyalist Armin Laschet would normally be the obvious choice to lead the party and the CSU, its smaller Bavarian sister party, into the election as their chancellor candidate. But with support for the parties plumbing new depths amid anger over Germany's pandemic management, Laschet has faced calls to step aside in favor of the better-liked Bavarian premier Markus Soeder. Here's a look at the two men grasping for a chance at Merkel's throne, with a decision on the candidate expected as early as this week.

Slow and steady

Elected as head of the CDU in January, 60-year-old Laschet has since faced a series of setbacks including a damaging spat with Merkel over virus containment measures. In a recent survey commissioned by business daily Handelsblatt, just 12 percent of Germans said they thought he would be a good chancellor candidate. But coming back from behind has always been a speciality for Laschet, who has an uncanny ability to "sit out his opponents", as Der Spiegel news magazine observed.

US to announce sanctions on Russia

WASHINGTON: The United States will announce sanctions against Russia in retaliation for alleged election interference and hacking, American media reported. Tensions have escalated between the two countries in recent months over a raft of issues, most recently over Russia amassing troops on its border with Ukraine. The sanctions will affect more than 30 Russian entities and will include expelling more than 10 Russians from the United States, including diplomats, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing sources. The diplomats will be targeted as punishment over allegations, denied by Russia, that it offered to pay militants in Afghanistan to kill American military personnel, the newspaper said. The executive order will also expand an existing ban on US banks trading in Russian government debt. Washington is also set to formally accuse Russian intelligence of carrying out the SolarWinds hack that targeted more than 100 US companies and 18,000 government and private computer networks.

The president of Microsoft, one of the companies targeted, has said the sophistication and scale of the SolarWinds attack was on a level not previously seen.

Russia has denied carrying out the attack. Together with Britain, Australia, Canada and the European Union, the United States will also sanction eight individuals and entities over the occupation of Crimea, the Journal reported. The sanctions come at a difficult time for US-Russia relations. —AFP

International

Anniversary highlights Aboriginal deaths in Australian custody crisis

A spate of recent fatalities highlights the failures of reforms

BRISBANE: Thirty years after sweeping reforms were recommended to end the injustice of Indigenous deaths in Australian custody, a spate of recent fatalities and soaring rates of Aboriginal incarceration have highlighted failures to act. Jailing children as young as 10, persistent racist attitudes and tough law-and-order policies all contribute to what has been called as a “national shame” by Aboriginal leaders. More than 450 Indigenous fatalities have been recorded since the landmark Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was published in 1991, including five since early March.

There is now searing anger over the mounting toll—and the fact that no police or prison officials have ever been convicted over the deaths. Nioka Chatfield is still reeling from the loss of her 22-year-old son Tane, who was dragged unresponsive from his prison cell while on remand and later died in hospital.

“It is a painful, painful, tragic experience that us Aboriginal people here in Australia have to endure,” she told AFP. The 1991 inquiry found Indigenous people were more likely to die in custody because of their “grossly disproportionate” over-representation in detention. At the time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders made up just over 14 percent of adult prisoners. That has now doubled to roughly 29 percent—despite Indigenous Australians comprising just three percent of the total population, official statistics show.

The situation is even worse for Indigenous children, who make up about 65 percent of the very youngest in detention. The Royal Commission found the situation “would not be tolerated if it occurred in the non-Aboriginal community”. Last year, nationwide rallies drew tens of thousands who defied coronavirus rules to protest in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and to highlight systematic racism at home.

Hundreds of people attended fresh demonstrations in Brisbane,

Sydney and other cities Saturday, with crowds holding placards bearing the images of the dead.

Many Indigenous deaths in custody are attributed to underlying health issues, self-harm or inadequate medical care. Tane Chatfield’s death was officially ruled a suicide last year at a coronial inquest, which found he had struggled with drugs and depression.

But his family believes the young father was killed by the system—and is fighting for change. As he lay dying, Nioka said she made him a promise: “I will turn every stone, every pebble, every rock, every mountain so your death will not be in vain.” They are now among 15 families who lost loved ones that are pushing for major reforms to Australia’s penal system.

These include creating an independent body to investigate Indigenous deaths in custody, an end to the physical restraint and abuse of prisoners, and raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14. Their campaign is backed by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, and their demands echoed by justice reform groups across the country.

Countries including France, Canada and Germany have urged Australia to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14, as recommended by the United Nations, but work on the issue by top legal officers stalled last year.

‘National shame’

Opposition Senator Patrick Dodson, a Yawuru man who was one of the commissioners, describes the toll as a “national shame”. “Only strong national leadership and fundamental policy changes can avert this crisis,” he wrote on Twitter. A 2018 report produced by Deloitte for the prime minister’s department found 35 percent of the Royal Commission’s recommendations—which included overhauling prisons



BRISBANE: This file photo taken in Brisbane shows demonstrators attending a Black Lives Matter protest to express solidarity with US protesters and demand an end to frequent Aboriginal deaths in custody in Australia. —AFP

safety, addressing Indigenous disadvantage and diverting young people from the justice system—were yet to be fully implemented.

Thalia Anthony, a law professor at the University of Technology Sydney, said it was clear that taking up the reforms “would have saved lives”. “Governments need to retract from their law-and-order policies and agendas that manifest in increasingly tougher policing powers, bail laws and sentencing laws,” she said, urging the redirection of funding to First Nations justice groups. —AFP

Japan PM heads to Washington with China topping agenda

TOKYO: Japan’s prime minister headed to Washington yesterday to become the first foreign leader to hold face-to-face talks with US President Joe Biden, with concerns about China topping the agenda. Yoshihide Suga will be hoping to renew the all-important alliance with Washington after the Trump era, as well as compare notes on an increasingly assertive Beijing. The trip comes after two top US officials visited Japan in March, and following a summit of leaders from the Quad alliance—a grouping of the United States, Japan, Australia and India. The theme of all the diplomatic activity has been clear: signalling a united front to Beijing at a time of growing concern about its military stance and human rights issues. In Tokyo, Suga’s trip is seen as “a sign that the United States puts top priority on East Asia in its diplomacy,” said Kunihiko Miyake, president of Japan’s Foreign Policy Institute think-tank. “It means Washington now shares Japan’s concerns about a dramatic change in the strategic environment in East Asia over the past decade,” said Miyake, a former foreign ministry official. Japan has been increasingly vocal about China’s maritime expansion and military build-up, publicly protesting the presence of Chinese vessels around disputed islets known as the Senkaku by Tokyo and the Diaoyu by Beijing. —AFP

French embassy advises citizens to leave Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: The French embassy in Pakistan yesterday advised all French nationals and companies to temporarily leave the country, after violent anti-France protests paralyzed large parts of the country this week. “Due to the serious threats to French interests in Pakistan, French nationals and French companies are advised to temporarily leave the country,” the embassy said in an email to French citizens. “The departures will be carried out by existing commercial airlines.” Anti-French sentiment has been simmering for months in Pakistan since the government of President Emmanuel Macron expressed support for a magazine’s right to republish cartoons deemed blasphemous by many Muslims. On Wednesday, the Pakistani government moved to ban an extremist political party whose leader had called for the expulsion of the French ambassador. Saad Rizvi, leader of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), was detained hours after making his demands, bringing thousands of his supporters to the streets in cities across Pakistan.

Two police officers died in the clashes, which saw water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets used to hold back crowds. The TLP are notorious for holding days-long, violent road protests over blasphemy issues, causing major disruption to the country. But successive governments have a long history of avoiding confrontation with hardline Islamist groups, fearing any crackdown on religious parties could spark wider violence in the deeply conservative Islamic republic. Macron’s comments in September triggered anger across the Muslim world, with tens of thousands in Pakistan, neighboring Iran and other Muslim countries flooding the streets and organizing anti-French



ISLAMABAD: Paramilitary soldiers stand guard in front of the French Embassy in the Red Zone which was secured with shipping containers by the authorities to beef up security following violent anti-France protests yesterday. —AFP

boycotts. TLP supporters brought the capital Islamabad to a standstill at the time. On Twitter, the hashtag “#FrenchLeavePakistan” was trending with 42,000 tweets as of yesterday afternoon. Weeks after satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo republished the cartoons, its former offices in Paris were attacked by a Pakistani man who stabbed two people. At the time, Prime Minister Imran Khan accused the French president of attacking the Muslim faith and urged Islamic countries to work together to counter what he called growing repression in Europe. In an address to the United Nations, Khan, a populist leader who has been known to play to Pakistan’s hardline religious base, blasted Charlie Hebdo for re-publishing the cartoons, saying “wilful provocations” should be “universally outlawed”. —AFP

International

Biden: 'Time to end' US war in Afghanistan with total pullout

20 years of war left 2,400 US troops and thousands of Afghans dead

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden announced it's "time to end" America's longest war with the unconditional withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, where they have spent two decades in a bloody, increasingly futile battle against the Taliban. Dubbed the "forever war," the US military onslaught in Afghanistan began in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States.

Now, 20 years later—after almost 2,400 US military and tens of thousands of Afghan deaths—Biden named September 11 as the deadline by which the last US soldiers will have finally departed. The pullout will begin on May 1. In a nationally televised address, Biden said the United States had accomplished its limited original mission of crushing the international jihadist groups behind the 9/11 attacks and that with every passing year the rationale for staying was more "unclear." Biden insisted there would be no "hasty exit," but was adamant about his decision. "A horrific attack 20 years ago... cannot explain why we should remain there in 2021," he said. "It's time to end the forever war." The conflict is at best at a stalemate. The internationally backed government in Kabul has only tenuous control in swaths of the country, while the Taliban are growing in strength, with many predicting the insurgency will seek to regain total power once the government's US military umbrella is removed.

Biden told Americans that it was time to accept reality. "We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal conditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result," he said. "I am now the fourth American president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan. Two Republicans. Two Democrats," he said. "I will not pass this responsibility to a fifth."

India daily virus cases double to 200,000 in 10 days

NEW DELHI: India's daily coronavirus caseload has doubled in 10 days, with a record 200,000 new infections logged yesterday as authorities grapple with shortages of vaccines, treatments and hospital beds. Having let its guard down with mass religious festivals, political rallies and crowds at cricket matches, India is experiencing a vicious second wave, recording almost two million fresh infections this month alone. This week, it overtook Brazil to become the country with the second-highest number of cases worldwide, after the United States.

In the past day it also recorded over 1,000 deaths, health ministry data showed, taking its total to 175,000, although on a per-capita basis India is far behind many other countries. After a nationwide lockdown a year ago caused widespread misery and one of the sharpest downturns of any major economy, the government is desperate to avoid repeating the hugely unpopular shutdown. But many states are tightening the screws, in particular Maharashtra and its capital Mumbai, which this week introduced tougher restrictions for its 125 million people.

This has prompted many migrant workers to flee Mumbai and other cities in the state, in scenes reminiscent of the exodus last year when the government halted all activity almost overnight. The government in New Delhi announced fresh restrictions yesterday, imposing a weekend curfew and ordering shopping malls, gyms and spas to stay shut from Friday evening. The megacity of around 25 million inhabitants recorded over 17,000 fresh cases on Wednesday, its highest single-day tally since the pandemic began. Uttar Pradesh, a sprawling state in northern India

Biden's decision was not a shock. The war is hugely unpopular among voters and Biden's predecessor Donald Trump had committed to pulling out at the start of May. "I applaud President Biden's decision," top Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer said Wednesday. However, there was immediate criticism from some quarters that the United States is abandoning the Afghan government and encouraging jihadist insurgencies. "We're to help our adversaries ring in the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks by gift wrapping the country, and handing it right back to them," senior Republican Senator Mitch McConnell said. Immediately after the speech, an emotional Biden walked under light rain through Arlington National Cemetery, and told reporters that his decision had ultimately not been difficult. "It was absolutely clear," he said.

Afghan forces on own

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani insisted Wednesday after a phone call with Biden that his forces are "fully capable" of controlling the country. And Biden said that Washington will continue to support the Afghan government, only not "militarily," according to the excerpts. He also said the United States will "hold the Taliban accountable" on promises to keep international jihadists from setting up base in Afghanistan. Pakistan, which has close links to the Taliban, should "do more" to support Afghanistan. But the US exit will mark a profound shift in clout for the beleaguered Kabul government and its US and coalition-trained security forces.

A decade ago, the United States had 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. Today there is a US-led NATO force of about 9,600, with some 2,500 of those soldiers American. NATO announced that



ARLINGTON: US President Joe Biden walks through Arlington National cemetery to honor fallen veterans of the Afghan conflict in Arlington, Virginia on Wednesday. —AFP

the withdrawal would be "orderly, coordinated and deliberate," beginning on May 1. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the exit "entails risk" but the alternative is "a long-term, open-ended military commitment with potentially more NATO troops." Biden had earlier considered stationing a residual US force to strike at Al-Qaeda or other international jihadist groups in Afghanistan or making withdrawal contingent on progress on the ground or in slow-moving peace talks. —AFP



MUMBAI: Passengers queue up for the COVID-19 coronavirus medical screening after arriving at a railway platform on a long distance train. —AFP

with a population of more than 240 million, also imposed curfews in major cities as it scrambled to control a recent surge in cases.

Hospitals around India are now struggling to cope, running short of beds, oxygen and coronavirus medicines like Remdesivir. In a new disturbing trend, doctors across India's most-affected cities told AFP they had seen an increase in the number of Covid-19 patients aged below 45 and suffering from more severe symptoms compared to last year. "We are also seeing children under the ages of 12 and 15 being admitted with symptoms in the second wave. Last year there were practically no children presenting symptoms," said Khusrav Bajan, a consultant at Mumbai's P.D. Hinduja National Hospital. India's drive to vaccinate its 1.3 billion people has also hit obstacles, with just 114 million shots administered so far and stocks running low, according to local authorities. —AFP

Hun Sen says country on 'brink of death' from COVID surge

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia: Spiraling COVID-19 cases have put Cambodia "on the brink of death", its strongman premier Hun Sen has warned, as the country imposed lockdowns in the capital Phnom Penh and a nearby city. The Southeast Asian kingdom has seen COVID-19 cases surge since February, when an outbreak was first detected among its Chinese expatriate community.

Authorities said last week that hospitals in Phnom Penh were running out of beds and that they had transformed schools and wedding party halls into treatment centers, while Hun Sen threatened quarantine-breakers with jail time. Phnom Penh and adjacent city Ta Khmau were Wednesday night placed under lockdown for two weeks to curb the spread, effectively halting the movement of more than two million people. "Please my people—join your efforts to end this dangerous event," pled premier Hun Sen in a recorded address aired on state-run television late Wednesday night. "We are on the brink of death already," he said. "If we don't join hands together, we will head to real death." Cambodia's latest announced figures exceeded 4,800, but the premier said Wednesday that an additional 300 cases had been detected. Phnom Penh and Ta Khmau residents are now barred from leaving their homes for two weeks except to go to the hospital or to buy medicine, while only two household members will be allowed out to buy food. —AFP

International

China's Xi to join European climate summit as Kerry arrives for talks

US envoy's trip a chance for Beijing and Washington to put aside tensions

SHANGHAI: Chinese President Xi Jinping will join a virtual climate summit with France and Germany, Beijing announced yesterday, as US envoy John Kerry visited Shanghai to drum up support from the world's biggest polluter for America's drive to address environmental challenges. Kerry, President Joe Biden's climate czar, is in China for meetings with his counterparts until tomorrow—the first visit by an official from the new US administration.

Kerry is not expected to meet with Xi, on a trip which has so far taken place behind closed doors. Beijing unexpectedly announced Xi would join an online French-German climate summit on Friday "at the invitation of French President Emmanuel Macron".

Kerry's trip is seen as a chance for Beijing and Washington to put aside high political tensions—following a heated initial meeting last month between diplomats in the US—and focus on areas of potential climate collaboration. The two sides clashed in Alaska over accusations about China's policies in Hong Kong and its treatment of Uyghurs in its northwestern Xinjiang region, criticisms China rejects as interference in its domestic affairs.

Biden has made reversing the climate-skeptic policy of his predecessor Donald Trump a priority.

He has rejoined the 2015 Paris accord, and is hosting a virtual summit of world leaders next week which the US hopes will result in stronger climate pledges. Chinese leader Xi is yet to confirm if he will attend the summit.

The US consulate said Kerry arrived in China and would meet Chinese counterparts at a Shanghai hotel in a day of closed-door talks. Officials are expected to discuss environmental challenges, areas

which both China and the US say are top priorities, as well as the upcoming UN-led climate talks to be held in Glasgow at the end of the year. "At this point understanding each other's expectations and ambition levels, and agreeing how to use those commitments to move the international climate negotiations forward would already be an important first step," Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, said.

China, the world's biggest polluter, announced an ambitious target to be carbon-neutral by 2060, but analysts have warned high reliance on coal and modest short-term targets could scupper the ambition.

'Long way to go'

As Trump turned away from the national climate agenda, Xi made bold promises to cut emissions. China "now shouldered the responsibility of global climate governance" and won't be part of a US-centered climate campaign, the nationalistic Global Times cited experts saying yesterday. Biden has yet to announce any new targets under the Paris agreement. "Both countries have a long way to go to firm up their targets and commitments for this decade," said Myllyvirta.

No global solution on climate change is likely without both the US and China on board, since the world's top two economies together account for nearly half of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions. Li Shuo from Greenpeace China said he hoped the talks might yield agreements on China's huge use of polluting coal.

"China is the largest coal consumer, it is still building coal-fired power plants, both domestically and along the Belt and Road region," he told AFP, referring to China's sprawling international infrastructure



SHANGHAI: A security guard checks a car trying to enter the Dongjiao State Guest Hotel in Shanghai yesterday where US climate envoy John Kerry is staying following his arrival for talks with his Chinese counterparts. —AFP

plan. "There needs to be a reverse on that. In terms of potential outcomes, that would be top on my list."

While Beijing and Washington have clashed over Hong Kong and Xinjiang, the climate issue is seen as a shared interest which cuts through the rancor. —AFP

Hong Kong police mark 'national security day'

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police displayed a cuddly bear mascot and unveiled a new goose-step march yesterday as the financial hub held a "National Security Education Day", part of its push to instill patriotism in a city chafing under China's rule. Beijing blanketed Hong Kong in a sweeping national security law last year in response to months of huge and often violent democracy protests that convulsed the international business hub. Yesterday's education day, the first since the security law's imposition last June, saw activities held across the city that burnished the security forces and outlined the threats China perceives it faces in Hong Kong.

At a morning ceremony attended by senior officials, Luo Huining, Beijing's top envoy in Hong Kong, gave a fiery speech vowing to "strike down hard resistance and regulate soft resistance", warning that China was ready to "teach a lesson" to any foreign power trying to use the city "as a chess piece".

"For all deeds that endanger national security and Hong Kong's prosperity and stability, the central authorities will take action as necessary," he said. In 2019, huge crowds hit the streets for seven straight months demanding democracy and greater police accountability in the worst unrest since the city's 1997 hand-over to China. —AFP

US envoy assures Taiwan ties are 'stronger than ever'

TAIPEI: Relations between Taiwan and the United States are "stronger than ever", an envoy for President Joe Biden said yesterday during a visit to the democratic island as it faces increasingly hostile moves by China. Former senator Christopher Dodd and former deputy secretaries of state Richard Armitage and James Steinberg were asked by Biden to travel to Taipei this week, in the first such delegation since the new US administration came to power.

"I can say with confidence the US partnership with Taiwan is stronger than ever," Dodd said as he met with President Tsai Ing-wen yesterday morning. "You will find the Biden administration, madam president, to be a reliable, trusted friend," he added. "I'm confident this administration will help you expand your international space, support your investment in self-defense."

Taiwan's 23 million people live under the constant threat of invasion by authoritarian China, which uses diplomatic, economic and military pressure to keep the island isolated on the world stage.

Beijing claims Taiwan as its own territory and has vowed to one day seize it. China's sabre-rattling has increased considerably over the past year, with fighter jets and nuclear-capable bombers breaching Taiwan's air defense zone on a near-daily basis. "Recently China has frequently dispatched military vessels and aircraft to carry out maneuvers in waters and airspace surrounding Taiwan," Tsai told Dodd. "These actions alter the status quo in the Indo Pacific and threaten regional peace and stability."

A record 25 Chinese military jets and bombers breached Taiwan's defense zone on Monday just ahead of the visit, which Beijing con-



TAIPEI: Former US Senator Chris Dodd (left) speaks at a meeting with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen at the presidential office in Taipei yesterday. —AFP

demned. The exercises have rattled senior US military figures who have publicly warned policy makers in recent weeks that Beijing may be considering an invasion.

Analysts are divided on how likely such a drastic move is and warn any invasion could prove enormously costly to China, despite its military might. Washington has diplomatically recognized Beijing over Taiwan since 1979. But it maintains relations with Taipei and is bound by an act of Congress to sell the island defensive weapons. It also opposes any attempt by China to change Taiwan's future by force.

This week's delegation comes on the 42nd anniversary of that legislation—the Taiwan Relations Act—which Biden signed when he was a young senator. It also comes after the State Department said on Friday it was issuing new guidelines to allow US officials to meet more easily with Taiwanese counterparts. —AFP

Youths play next to the Roman Marcus Aurelius arch in the Libyan capital Tripoli's old city, which is undergoing infrastructure rehabilitation work. — AFP

Libyan capital's neglected Old City gets facelift

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LIBYAN CAPITAL'S NEGLECTED OLD CITY GETS FACELIFT



Youths play near the Roman Marcus Aurelius arch in the Libyan capital Tripoli's Old City, which is undergoing infrastructure rehabilitation work. —AFP photos



Youths sit outdoors in a square of the Libyan capital Tripoli's Old City, amid ongoing infrastructure rehabilitation work.

In alleys criss-crossing the Libyan capital's Old City, construction crews are hard at work restoring former glory to architectural treasures neglected under ex-dictator Muammar Gaddafi and in the decade since. Pushing wheelbarrows, a clutch of workers ferry sand, dismembered concrete or gravel, and others dig or hammer away, bent double or down on one knee. The din of pick axes stops suddenly, however, as calls to prayer echo around the ancient buildings. Workers down tools in silence, while cafes empty, as everyone heads to their place of worship. The substantial restoration underway seeks to "preserve the heritage of the Old City" in Tripoli, said Mahmoud al-Naas, head of the management committee overseeing the project.

Covering around 50 hectares (123 acres), the Old City is an "architectural joy"—but this makes the "enormous" work required a "heavy responsibility", he said. The project, funded largely by the state, comes as Libya is undergoing a tentative political renewal. A new prime minister, Abdulhamid Dbeibah, was selected earlier this year through a UN-backed inter-Libyan dialogue to steer the North African country to December elections, bringing hope that unrelenting chaos since Gaddafi was ousted and killed in 2011 might finally end.

'Revive the soul'

Unlike past restoration work—including largely unsupervised and sometimes botched attempts in the mid-1990s and about a decade later—latest efforts ban cement and concrete, wherever possible. Lime-based mixtures are used to generate an authentic look during plastering, while basalt cobblestones replace asphalt streets. Built by the Phoenicians in the 7th century BC, Tripoli's Old City has passed from civilization to civilization, notably the ancient Greeks, Romans and the Ottoman empire.

When Gaddafi decided to ban private sector-led development in the late 1970s, workshops and specialty stores alike lowered their curtains for good. In an instant, know-how that had been passed down from gen-

eration to generation was painfully rendered obsolete. Long-resident families gradually drifted away, despite fleeting attempts to stop the rot in the 1990s. "So many trades just vanished," lamented Hajj Mokhtar, a white-bearded trader who sells mens' wear and reserves particular distaste for cheap imports. But others look to a brighter future. Mohamad Al-Ghariani, 76, an artist and painter who owns a gallery in the sector, said the ongoing "improvements... revive the soul of the city that we knew as children".

"The restoration is progressing from district to district," he said, pointing with enthusiasm to the restoration of a cultural center for children, known as Dar Krista. Built in 1977, it is named after renowned Tripolitan artist Abdallah Krista, who produced songs and cartoons for children, and sits within a group of buildings originally erected in 1664 by Osman Pasha Karamalli, descendant of the Ottoman dynasty that ruled Tripoli for centuries.

Exemplifying the cultural diversity of the Mediterranean city, another part of the complex still houses the Greek Orthodox St. George, the oldest Orthodox church in North Africa, alongside a so-called Turkish prison, built in 1664 by Osman Pasha to hold Christians captured by the Ottomans. A few parts of the Old City's east side have withstood the ravages of time. The gold and silk markets still attract custom to their covered alleyways and arcades, while its citadel serves as a museum. Then there is the famed Arch of Marcus Aurelius, its date palms and the minaret of the Gurgi Mosque—the perfect backdrop for a souvenir snap.

'Everyone counts'

Forsaken corners that up until lately served as open dumps have morphed into huge construction sites overseen by architects, historians, specialist tradesmen and artists. "The opinion and expertise of everyone counts," said one resident, Al-Mahdi Abdallah. Squatters who for many years occupied numerous abandoned buildings have been moved on,

often leaving their own haphazard building work or ruins in their wake. In some places, the walls of old buildings awaiting facelifts are bolstered by wooden beams that extend across alleyways like bridges.

Defying the dangers of a dugout street, children dart around at full pelt, as an adult scolds them. But "all the elders are keeping an eye on them", so they are safe, noted Abdallah. "That's the benefit of living in this community, which, little by little, is putting itself together again." The already refurbished waterfront at the northern edge now boasts pavements and a completed road. Gone are the potholes that turned the street into a muddy alley on rainy days. The facelift mirrors signs of political progress in the conflict-wracked country.

Dbeibah's new government replaced two rival administrations based in Tripoli and the country's east, the latter loyal to military strongman Khalifa Haftar whose forces tried but failed to seize the capital in a 2019-20 offensive. "The Old City is coming back to us," rejoiced Mohamad Nasser, whose seafront shop selling fishing and diving gear is a prime beneficiary of the restoration work. "It was about time!" —AFP



Laborers work on an infrastructure rehabilitation project in an alley of the Libyan capital Tripoli's Old City.



A man crosses a street in the Libyan capital Tripoli's Old City, amid ongoing infrastructure rehabilitation work.



Youths use an alley of the Libyan capital Tripoli's old city, amid ongoing infrastructure rehabilitation work.

SOLO SWIM: THE FIGHTING FISH RAISED ALONE IN VIETNAM



Tran Ngoc Thang feeds Betta fish or Siamese fighting fish raised inside plastic and glass bottles at his ornamental fish farm.



Tran Ngoc Thang feeds Betta fish or Siamese fighting fish.



Tran Ngoc Thang feeds Betta fish or Siamese fighting fish inside glass jars.

Thousands of glass and plastic bottles lie across the floor of Tran Ngoc Thang's farm in Hanoi, each one home to an aggressive, brightly coloured fish that must be raised alone. Thang has been breeding Siamese fighting fish, also known as betta fish, for more than 20 years in Vietnam—and his business is going swimmingly. They were once prized for their combative nature and were pitted against each other in fights, with bets placed on which fish would triumph. Now they are mostly kept for ornamental purposes but are still kept apart on Thang's fish farm to avoid any clashes.

"I have studied the character of these fighting fish, and I know used plastic bottles are a good place to raise them," he told AFP, explaining that he collects bottles from the local train station. "I cut the bottle neck, and drill a hole, which makes it easier when I want to change the water," the 54-year-old said, adding that the fish are fed everyday from a nearby pond. This way, "caring for them is much easier and we can avoid them fighting each other".

On top of other fish species, Thang raises around 3,000-4,000 betta fish a year, and sells them for between 50 cents and \$5 each. One of his clients, 35-year-old Bui Doan Tung, has been devotedly buying all kinds of Siamese fighting fish—half-moon, dumbo, fancy and koi—for the last four years. "They are not for fighting now, just for admiring," he says. "Each type is beautiful in a different way." —AFP



Tran Ngoc Thang poses with Betta fish or Siamese fighting fish raised inside glass jars at his ornamental fish farm in Hanoi. —AFP photos



A woman looks at a Betta fish or Siamese fighting fish inside a glass jar at an ornamental fish farm in Hanoi.



Betta fish or Siamese fighting fish are raised inside plastic and glass bottles.



A man looks at Betta fish or Siamese fighting fish.

Lifestyle | Features

Top French chef Yannick Alleno plots post-COVID revolution

He has scaled the heights of French gastronomy, now Yannick Alleno says it is time to reinvent fine dining for a post-COVID age, both on the table and in the kitchen. When the pandemic hit, Alleno realized he had not stopped moving since he first entered a professional kitchen at the age of 15. "I was on life's highway and running like a madman," the 52-year-old told AFP.

The philosophy had always been: "You arrive at 8am, you finish at 1am, and you don't have any choice in the matter." That approach was highly successful. His modern twists on French classics and scientific dissection of sauces has earned him a glut of accolades. He runs several distinguished restaurants, including two-Alleno Paris at Pavillon Ledoyen and Le 1947 in the Alps-with three Michelin stars. But suddenly, with all of them shut by the first coronavirus lockdown last spring, he found himself effectively "unemployed" for the first time, with space to reflect.

The result is a new book, "Tout doit changer!" (Everything must change), that serves as a manifesto for post-COVID haute cuisine. "It's important to me that I don't reopen the restaurant like before," he told AFP. "I have the need today to change our house and make it an extreme example."

Inclusivity

In part, that means changing the way his kitchens are run. "I'm tired of hearing that restaurant work is difficult and excluding." He is introducing more flexible hours and "participatory planning" for the 150 staff at Pavillon Ledoyen, and wants to move towards an equal gender split, starting immediately with his sommeliers. Alleno is still trying to live down criticism from a talk he gave in Paris two years ago in which he said female roles in

restaurants were limited because "it's a woman's DNA to bear children."

It was clear from the rest of his speech that he meant kitchens should be more flexible in allowing young mothers to juggle their work and private lives, but he knows the choice of words was a gaffe. "I did something stupid, it was really inappropriate and unacceptable. I've apologized as much as I can... and I've decided to move on," he said. He has taken other steps towards greater inclusivity, hiring three disabled staff at Pavillon Ledoyen during the brief reprieve from France's lockdowns in the autumn. Whether or not he will rein in his famously harsh manner in the kitchen, which led to accusations of bullying a few years ago, remains to be seen.

'Monumental waste'

He is also planning big changes on how customers will experience trips to his restaurants. His big idea is to speak with diners a few days earlier to discuss their tastes, allergies and budget. This is a way to prevent the "monumental waste" that is generated in normal kitchens: "In the past, we had to have 15 birds in the fridge in case someone wanted one."

It could also allow for nice but gimmicky touches: "If you had white lilies for your wedding day, we'll try to put a bouquet of white lilies on your table for an anniversary dinner and their initials on the napkins." And from a cooking point of view, it gives Alleno's teams even greater scope to prepare their famous sauces, while also tailoring the experience to an ever-more demanding clientele. "We can no longer impose a menu on guests," he said. — AFP

DANIEL BARENBOIM: THE TIRELESS AND COMBATIVE MAESTRO

It takes more than a pandemic to slow down Daniel Barenboim, the legendary pianist and Middle East peace activist, who has been on stage for 71 years and says he is always ready to "start again from scratch". Ever the plain speaker, the Argentina-born maestro is not hugely optimistic about the twin passions in his life: classical music and the Israel-Palestine conflict. "The importance of culture and music has been decreasing over the last 40 years... Sometimes we have forgotten that the spirit of the human being needs to be fed," the 78-year-old told AFP during a visit to Aix-en-Provence, where he was recording alongside another legendary pianist and fellow Argentinian Martha Argerich for its Easter Festival, forced online this year.



Argentinian pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, 78, poses during an interview at the grand Palais in Aix-en-Provence. — AFP

"The main problem for the future of musical life is not the post-corona situation, the problem is that there is no musical education in schools." Barenboim, who was partly raised in Israel, is even more dismissive of the prospects in that part of the world, where he says: "There is actually not one person on either side that takes to heart the future, and how can we learn to live together." In 2007, Barenboim became the first person in the world to hold both Israeli and Palestinian passports, having founded an orchestra and musical academy with Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said aimed at fostering Middle Eastern talent.

'The greatest gift'

But faced with the gloom, he remains tireless. His day job as musical director of Germany's state opera and orchestra, the Staatsoper and Staatskapelle, which he has held for 29 years, may have slowed

over the past year, but he has used the time to record his fifth complete Beethoven sonatas, launch an online music festival and direct several streaming concerts. He embodies restlessness. "I hate the word career, I don't like it," he told AFP. "A musician never arrives, routine is his greatest enemy. Every time I play, I learn something new, little connections..."

"If I played a Mozart concerto yesterday and I have to play it again today, I have to start from zero and this is the greatest gift a human being can have." His efforts to share that gift include establishing a music-focused kindergarten in Berlin and presenting a series of YouTube videos about famous composers, "5 minutes on...", that have racked up hundreds of thousands of views. Indefatigable he may be, but Barenboim's combative style is chafing a little against the delicate sensibilities of the current era.

He welcomes the push for greater diversity in classical music, for instance, but warns against it leading to tokenism. "There should be more black musicians no question. There should be women conductors, of course no question. The mistake is to say 'We have a free date... we must get a woman.' No, we must get the best possible candidate and if it is a woman, we must take her. (Anything else shows) a lack of respect to the woman herself."

'Very uncomfortable'

He also found himself brought up on charges of bullying colleagues at the Staatskapelle in 2019. He put them down to his "impatient" outbursts and they were ultimately dismissed. Today, he recognizes that "the definition of how to deal with others has changed all over the world", and says "I obviously regret it" if he has hurt anyone. But he finds political correctness hard to stomach.

"The main difficulty for me with it is that it forces people, before they say or do anything, to see how it will look... not to think 'I have an inner need to say this.'" He recalls his own harsh musical education under storied French teacher Nadia Boulanger-with fondness. He remembers world-famous tango composer Astor Piazzolla, then a fellow student of Boulanger, in tears after she told him he would never be more than a "second-rate Stravinsky".

But he says it was also Boulanger who told Piazzolla to work with the music from his own country and develop it, which is precisely what made him a star. "She taught in a very uncomfortable way, which is necessary," said Barenboim. "I don't believe in comfortable teaching." He takes a similarly uncompromising look at his own future. Though he has been given the baton for life in Berlin, he says: "I don't want to stay like a relic of the past... If the orchestra changes its mind... I will free them of this decision. "But so far, it seems to work." — AFP



In this file photo three stars chef Yannick Alleno poses in front of his restaurant "Le Pavillon Ledoyen" in Paris. — AFP



Members of Shri Mahila Griha Udyog, the organization that produces the famous Lijjat Papad, weighs papadums at one of the organization's facilities in Mumbai. — AFP photos

A member of Shri Mahila Griha Udyog, the organization that produces the famous Lijjat Papad, rolls papadums.

CRUNCH TIME: INDIAN SNACK SPINS FEMINIST SUCCESS STORY

The fairytale success of Lijjat Papad—a multi-million-dollar venture founded by seven women in a crowded Mumbai tenement in 1959 with seed capital of 80 rupees (\$1.10) — belies its revolutionary feminist aspirations. The cooperative employs 45,000 women across India, offering them a job for life as “co-owners” of the enterprise, whose wafer-thin snacks—known locally as papads and as papadums in the West—have become a byword for good business and female empowerment in a patriarchal country. Life at Lijjat’s 82 branches begins early, with women lining up before dawn to drop off finished products, pick up freshly prepared lentil dough, and head home.

That’s when the work shifts into high gear, as they deftly stretch and roll out the dough—flecked with cumin seeds and black pepper—into small flat rounds that are then left to dry. The job relies on skill but doesn’t require formal education, opening up opportunities for multitudes of Indian women to become financially independent. That is a huge accomplishment in a country where female workforce participation—never high to begin with—has been declining for years, plunging from 34 to 20 percent in the two decades to 2019, according to the International Labour Organization.

As a young bride aged 24, Darshana Pundalik Parab fretted about managing household expenses with her husband’s meagre salary, realizing that her employment prospects as a school dropout were dire. Then she heard about Lijjat. Not only did the cooperative have a job for her, it allowed thousands of housewives like her

to work from home, no questions asked. In the 35 years that followed, Parab was able to keep earning while raising three boys.

“It was difficult when the kids were small, to watch over them and do the job,” said Parab, recounting the early years when she kept one eye on her sons, and the other on the papads. The extra cash was welcome, she told AFP, relaying her pride in being able to pay her children’s school fees and teach them crucial life lessons. “My sons know that there is no such thing as women’s work,” she said, adding that her youngest, 27, still chips in to help prepare the crunchy snacks.

Humble beginnings

Lijjat’s commitment to women’s empowerment reflects its inconspicuous begin-



nings, when seven housewives gathered on a Mumbai rooftop one sunny morning to prepare four packets of papads. They ran the business on a shoestring budget, with annual sales in 1959 amounting to just over 6,000 rupees, a fraction of their current revenue. Every woman is paid according to her production capacity and role in the organization, with Parab earning around 12,000 rupees a month on average. Men are only hired as shop assistants, drivers or errand boys.

“Some of our women earn more than their husbands—and their families respect them for it,” said Lijjat president Swati Ravindra Paradkar. Paradkar was just 10 years old when her father died at 37, leaving the family’s finances in precarious shape. Every morning before school, she

would help her mother—who was part of the cooperative—make papads. “I found it very hard... especially during vacations, when my friends would all be out playing and I would have to work,” Paradkar, now 61, told AFP. She persevered, eventually joining the cooperative full-time and becoming its president, thanks to a policy that sets Lijjat apart from other businesses. “We believe that only someone who can roll out papads can become president,” she said.

Bollywood calling

Although the coronavirus pandemic slashed sales by nearly a fifth according to early estimates, Paradkar said there had been no layoffs, with staff even receiving modest salary hikes. The cooperative has expanded into other categories, including chapatis and laundry detergent, but the papad remains its flagship product, sold across India and in foreign markets from Singapore to the United States.

The inexpensive snack—a 100-gram (3.5-ounce) packet costs 31 rupees—is even making the leap to the silver screen, with Lijjat’s story now the subject of a Bollywood film under production. “People will be able to learn something from it,” said Usha Juvekar, who has been part of the cooperative for 15 years. “If everyone in this country cared as much about women as Lijjat does, we would make so much more progress,” she told AFP. — AFP

Staff of Shri Mahila Griha Udyog, the organization that produces the famous Lijjat Papad, packs rolled papadums.

Lifestyle | Feature



Views show the Largo Argentina archaeological site in central Rome. — AFP photos



Ruins, ghosts and cats: Rome's 'Area Sacra' to welcome visitors

History buffs will be able to roam the ruins of Rome's "Area Sacra", perhaps catching a glimpse of Julius Caesar's ghost, after the site becomes an open-air museum next year. Work to adapt the Largo Argentina archaeological site for tourists begins next month, with upgrades to allow entry into the vast sunken square containing the ruins of four Roman temples, Rome Mayor Virginia Raggi announced on Wednesday. Today, the expanse of excavations in the historic site can only be gazed upon from street level. "With this work we'll begin entering into the area and... walk among the vestiges of our history," she said at a press conference.

Julius Caesar is believed to have been stabbed in the Curia Pompei, a Senate building, part of whose limestone founda-

tion is still visible. But visitors are more likely to spot an apparition of the four-legged kind—namely, a cat. The ruins are the domain of a colony of hundreds of rescued cats, fed, sterilized and cared for by a private non-profit shelter, who scamper through the site, lounging atop truncated marble pillars or posing for tourist photos—altogether unimpressed by the historical significance of their vast litterbox. The temples, which date to between the third and second centuries B.C., include a circular monument to the goddess of Fortune, whose colossal marble head now sits in Rome's Centrale Montemartini museum. They were uncovered as recently as 1926 in an urban planning project when demolished medieval houses revealed ancient Roman ruins underneath.

Tourists welcome

Julius Caesar was assassinated on March 15, 44 BC, by senators who feared he wanted to become king of Rome. While at the Curia Pompei, where the Senate was gathered, a group fell upon him, stabbing him 23 times. Among them was his friend Brutus, leading the dying man to utter,

according to Shakespeare's immortal line, "Et tu, Brute!" The work at the "Area Sacra", which is expected to take a year, will include elevated walkways, illuminated at night, footpaths, an elevator and a covered exhibition area along one side of the site.

The project is being financed by jeweler Bulgari, owned by France's luxury conglomerate LVMH, which donated about one million euros (\$1.2 million). Bulgari was a previous sponsor on the restoration of Rome's Spanish Steps and an intricate mosaic floor within the Baths of Caracalla. Excavations and preparatory work for the project continued despite the coronavirus restrictions of the past year, but the expected opening of the site in 2022 will hopefully coincide with a new wave of post-pandemic tourism, said Raggi. "We are preparing for the arrival of new tourists when COVID is over," she said. But what about the cats? The city said the new site would not affect the area "where the historic feline colony of Largo Argentina is housed." — AFP



Is it a bird? Is it an iguana? No, it's a croissant!

Polish animal welfare inspectors on Wednesday reported their bafflement at being called out about a dangerous-looking animal lurking in a tree—only to find out it was a croissant. The Krakow Animal Welfare Society said in a post on Facebook that the organization had received a desperate call from a local resident in the southern Polish city about the sighting. "It's been sitting in a tree across the house for two days! People aren't open-

ing their windows because they're afraid it will go into their house," the caller was reported as saying. "It's brown, it's sitting in a tree," the caller said.

The animal welfare workers suggested that it could be a bird of prey but the caller said it looked more like an iguana, although she could not find the word and initially called it a "lagoon". Still, the inspectors visited the area and eventually saw the object in a lilac tree, noting it had "no legs or

head". "We already knew that we could not help this creature... The mysterious 'lagoon'... turned out to be a croissant." The society said it hoped the incident would not discourage others from reporting their animal welfare concerns, pointing out that it had gotten calls about abandoned cats and dogs and even fish. — AFP





French **volcano** enthusiasts camp out to skirt curfew

France's Reunion island is regularly treated to spectacular eruptions of the Piton de la Fournaise volcano—but with a COVID-19 curfew in place, some residents resorted to drastic measures this week to enjoy the stunning night-time views. The Indian Ocean island has been under a 6.00 pm-5.00 am curfew since March 5 in a bid to tame coronavirus infections.

That presented a problem for amateur photographer Marc Gence when the first eruption of the year began on Friday night-

Several other spectators have also been camping out to view the volcano, whose name means "Furnace Peak" in English. But island authorities have now moved to stop people from taking up temporary residence in the area to beat the curfew. Prefect Jacques Billant announced that all camping would be banned across the whole island from Tuesday night, "to avoid groups spreading the virus".

Long walk for police

"This little ruse wasn't ill-intended, and frankly, there is little risk of spreading the virus by bivouacking at a volcano," grumbled Jean-Francois Lauret, another camper. He and Gence decided to pack up their tents on Tuesday morning. "As if there weren't enough things banned already," complained Gence, "they're even taking away the pleasure of admiring our volcano." A police source said security forces were preparing to tighten checks on illicit camping. Nonetheless, Lauret said some of his friends had decided to stay on.

"I can understand why. The view of the eruption at night is captivating," he said. "Plus," he added mischievously, "the police would have to walk quite a long way if they wanted to find them." The Piton de la Fournaise, situated in an uninhabited area in the southeast of the island, has erupted around 20 times over the last decade, and its violent bursts of activity often prompt stunning lava flows. While only the most zealous have been camping out, thousands



Photo shows lava erupting from Piton de la Fournaise volcano.

"A huge number of people have gone up there, there've been monster traffic jams," said Pascal Lauret, who drove to the volcano with his wife and their two children. Dozens of drivers have been fined for parking badly along the route. "I got a fine, and I didn't even see anything," said Marie-Jose Legros. Up until Sunday night, spectators had to walk for an hour and a half to reach a decent viewing point, but since Monday the eruption has been visible from the road. "We saw a little red dot, which is better than nothing," said Michel Morel. He is planning to return next weekend, hoping the volcano will still be belching out its lava.— AFP

of residents have headed to the area by car and leaving before the curfew each night, hoping to catch a glimpse of the eruption.



Photo shows lava erupting from Piton de la Fournaise volcano.



Photo shows lava erupting from Piton de la Fournaise volcano.

since, he pointed out, night-time is when "the spectacle is at its most beautiful". With night-time travel banned, Gence saw only one solution: pitching a tent not far from the volcano and making it his home for a couple of nights. "I didn't travel, and the views were magical," he said, happily showing off snaps of the eruption he took on Saturday night.

With giant swabs and grumpy camels, Kenya hunts for next deadly virus



An overhead view shows pens used to hold camels on the crest of a small hill at the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) ranch, where the camels are regularly tested for the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) virus as scientists monitor for indications of possible transition of the microbes from animal to humans, at the Kapiti plains ranch, located in Machakos County. — AFP photos

Kicking and grunting under the restraint of three men, the camel makes its displeasure known as Kenyan veterinarian Nelson Kipchirchir swirls a giant swab in the nostril of the grumpy dromedary. It turns out camels don't much like being tested for coronavirus either. But the research is critical to advance understanding of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) — a far deadlier cousin of COVID-19 that scientists fear could cause the next global pandemic. The fear is this virus—which has circulated among camels, and to a lesser extent, their owners in Kenya for some time—could mutate, and a new strain could spread beyond herding communities into the general population.

So Kipchirchir has little choice but to risk the wrath of the cantankerous 300-kilogramme (660-pound), two-meter (6.5-foot) high camel to collect crucial nasal and blood samples. "Sampling every animal is difficult in the sense that you never know what's going to happen... if you are going to do the wrong thing then that is when it can get more difficult in the sense that it can kick you, it can bite you," said Kipchirchir at Kapiti plains in southern Kenya. On this foggy morning, one camel handler gets a violent kick from one of a dozen of the testy creatures who underwent the ordeal at the 13,000-acre Kapiti ranch. Kapiti belongs to the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), headquartered in Nairobi, and its research station on the ranch where wildlife, cattle and sheep are studied by scientists.

New, deadlier viruses

ILRI began researching camels in Kenya in 2013, a year after the appearance in Saudi Arabia of MERS, a coronavirus which kills an estimated 35 percent of those it infects, with some 850 deaths recorded, according to the World Health Organization. MERS is a zoonotic virus, believed to have transmitted from bats to camels, which causes similar symptoms to COVID-19 in humans: fever, coughing and respiratory difficulties. The emergence of COVID-19, which has killed almost three million people worldwide in 16 months, has sharpened focus on the next virus which could jump from animals to humans, or in the case of MERS, mutate to become even more transmissible.

WHO experts believe COVID-19 jumped from bats to humans via an intermediary animal which has not yet been identified. According to WHO, some 60 percent of infectious diseases in humans have a zoonot-

ic origin. The UN's science advisory panel for biodiversity, called IPBES, warned in 2020 that pandemics will grow more frequent and deadly due to environmental destruction and climate change which are leading to increased contact between humans, livestock and wild animals. IPBES warned of up to 850,000 viruses which may be able to infect people, with five new diseases breaking out among humans every year—any one of which has the potential to become a pandemic. "There is a renewed interest in anything to do with viruses, anything to do with zoonotic diseases because of the whole COVID issue," said Eric Fevre, a specialist in infectious diseases with ILRI and the University of Liverpool in Britain.

46 percent positive

In Kenya, there are around three million camels, one of the biggest populations in the world, and their popularity is growing in arid

areas as herders adapt to more frequent droughts, which wreak havoc on cattle and other livestock. Meanwhile, demand is growing for camel milk and meat. "A camel is very important," said Isaac Mohamed, one of the herders at Kapiti, who originates from Kenya's vast, arid north which borders Ethiopia and Somalia, both also home to massive camel populations. "First, it cannot die if (there is) drought. Second, a camel can stay up to 30 days without water. Third, when shifting places, you can use the camel to transport your belongings."

At the ILRI laboratory in Nairobi, biologist Alice Kiyong'a gets a steady stream of samples taken from camels across Kenya, which she analyses for the presence of MERS. A study that she led in 2014 showed MERS antibodies in 46 percent of the camels studied, and in five percent of camel handlers and abattoir workers who were tested. "The MERS that we currently have in Kenya now is

not easily transmittable to humans," compared to that in Saudi Arabia, she said. But researchers are obsessed with the likelihood of a variant emerging that could make Kenyan MERS more contagious to mankind.

"It's exactly like with COVID... there are new variants that appeared... it is the same with MERS, the virus is changing all the time," said Fevre. "I wish I had a crystal ball and I could tell you it might be that it never becomes hugely dangerous to humans," he added. However, "it could be that with a few genetic mutations that it could become that way. So I think the important thing is to maintain an effort for doing surveillance... because then we will be ready when it happens." — AFP



Sospeter Wambugu (right), a veterinary technologist, administers a nasal swab on a female camel as she is held down by resident livestock handlers.



Camels stand in their pens as they wait to be released to pasture.



Nelson Kipchirchir (right), a research associate and resident vet, draws blood from an artery in the neck of a female camel as she is held down by resident livestock handlers.

Tunisia 'sandy' Farms resist drought, development

Farmers near a seaside lagoon in northern Tunisia are fighting to preserve a unique, traditional irrigation system that has sparked renewed interest as North Africa's water shortages intensify. Retired schoolteacher Ali Garci wanders among tiny sandy plots, inspecting his potatoes, lettuces and onions. "It's not land that we cultivate for the profit it brings, but for the art and the

But they had to battle a lack of cultivated land and water. They learned to take advantage of the light, sandy soil, and the fact that underground freshwater, which is lighter than seawater, "floats" above the saltier groundwater below. When rainwater from the hills reaches the sandy area around Ghar El Melh's lagoons, instead of mixing immediately with the brine below, it forms a thin layer of fresh groundwater. Twice a day, the tides of the nearby Mediterranean raise the level of both, bringing precious freshwater in contact with the vegetables in the ramli plots. "It's as if the sea is suckling its young," said Abdelkarim Gabarou, who has worked the traditional plots for more than 40 years.

'Every drop of water'

The ramli farms—ramli is Arabic for "sandy"—cover around 200 hectares (500 acres) and support around 300 people. They were listed last year in the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) list of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems. The FAO said the ramli system was "unique not only in Tunisia but in the whole world". Ramli produce is said to have a particular taste, and is in high demand both locally and in Tunis. But farmers voice regret that their products lack formal certification, despite the FAO designation.

They must also contend with growing threats to their unique farming system, both from climate change and development. As rainfall becomes less regular and sea levels rise, the ramli farmers' delicate dance with nature is becoming harder. "We're totally dependent on rainwater," Garci said. "We try to preserve it in the most natural way possible." For the system to work, the roots of the



A picture shows a view of planted agricultural land near the sea in the small fishing town of Ghar El Melh in Tunisia's north. — AFP photos

vegetables must reach freshwater but also, crucially, not the saltwater below. That requires precisely the right amount of sand above: a layer exactly 40 centimeters (15-and-a-half inches) thick.

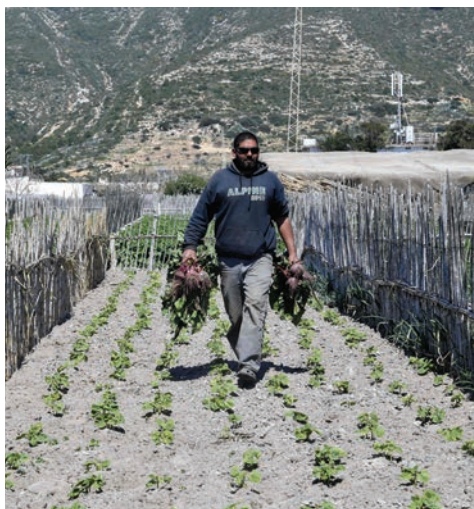
Raoudha Gafrej, an expert on water resources and climate change, says it would be near-impossible to reproduce the ramli system elsewhere. "This ingenious system doesn't cover a huge area... but we have to preserve it, because the country needs every drop of water it can get," she said.

Valuable real estate

Unlike in other parts of Tunisia, these farms thrive all year round without artificial irrigation, allowing the farmers to produce up to 20 tons (22 tons) of crops per year. Reeds protect the plots, just four meters wide, from wind and erosion, but shielding them from human activity is another matter. This beauti-

ful coastline, where a long strip of white sand separates the lagoon from the sea, is popular with holidaymakers. "Lots of farmers are thinking of selling their land for good prices, to people who want to build houses overlooking the sea and the hills," said Garci.

Meanwhile, he says, very few young Tunisians want to become farmers. But in a country where 80 percent of water goes to irrigation, any effort to make more efficient use of water is valuable. On the Tunisian island of Djerba, where summer water outages are common, an NGO recently renovated 15 ancient reservoirs to collect rainwater for irrigation in the drier months. Gafrej said such efforts were vital. "We need to help this culture of water preservation to take root," she said. — AFP



A farmer works on his plot of land near the sea.

pleasure," says the 61-year-old, who works around a hectare (2.5 acres) inherited from his family. Local farmers have used the "ramli" technique since the 17th century, when Muslims and Jews settled in North Africa after fleeing the Catholic reconquest of Andalusia. Some found safety in Ghar El Melh, a small fishing town in Tunisia's north.



A picture shows a view of planted agricultural land near the sea.



A farmer works on his plot of land near the sea.

Kids Page

Word Search

I ♥ Coffee
Word Search

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

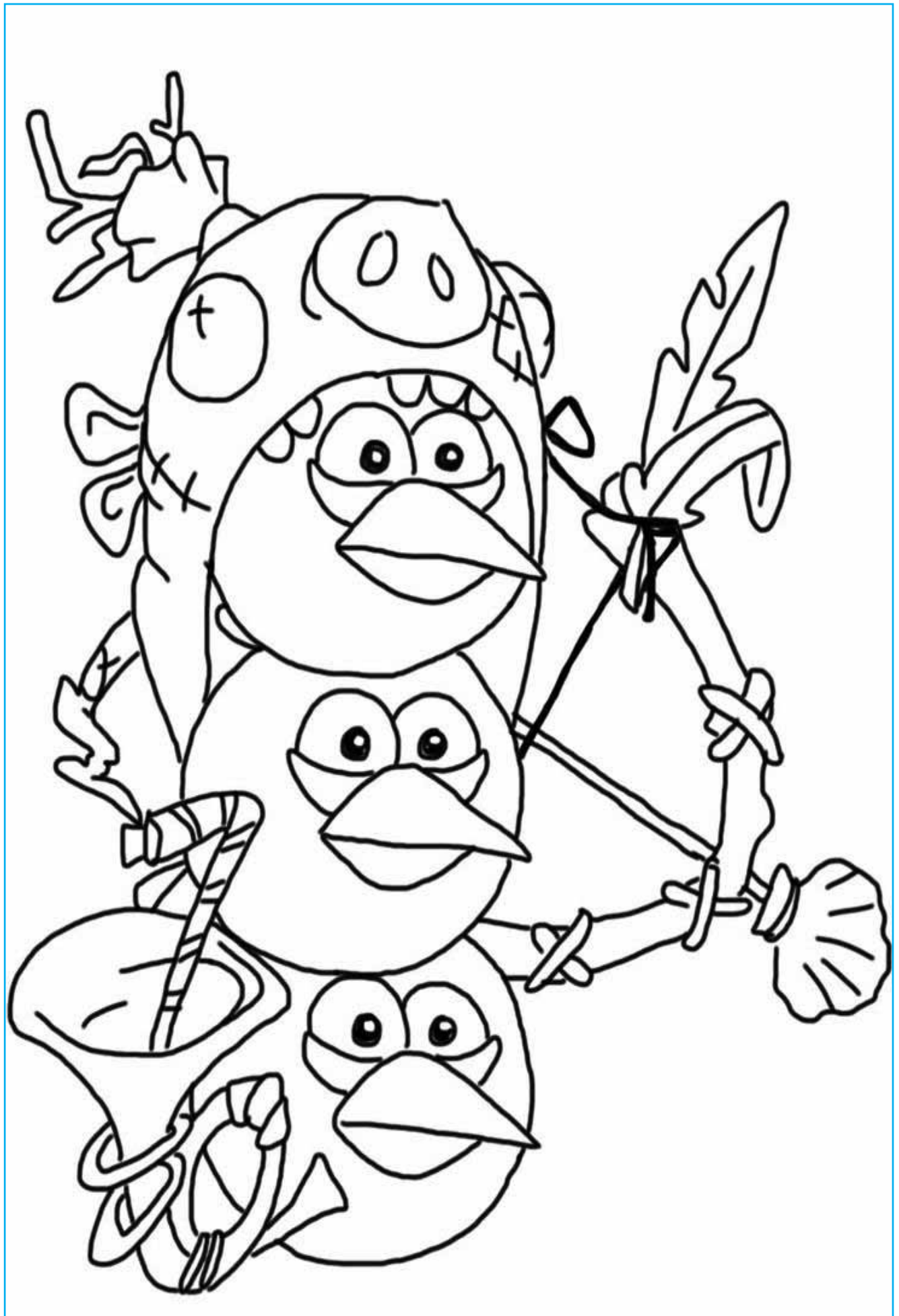
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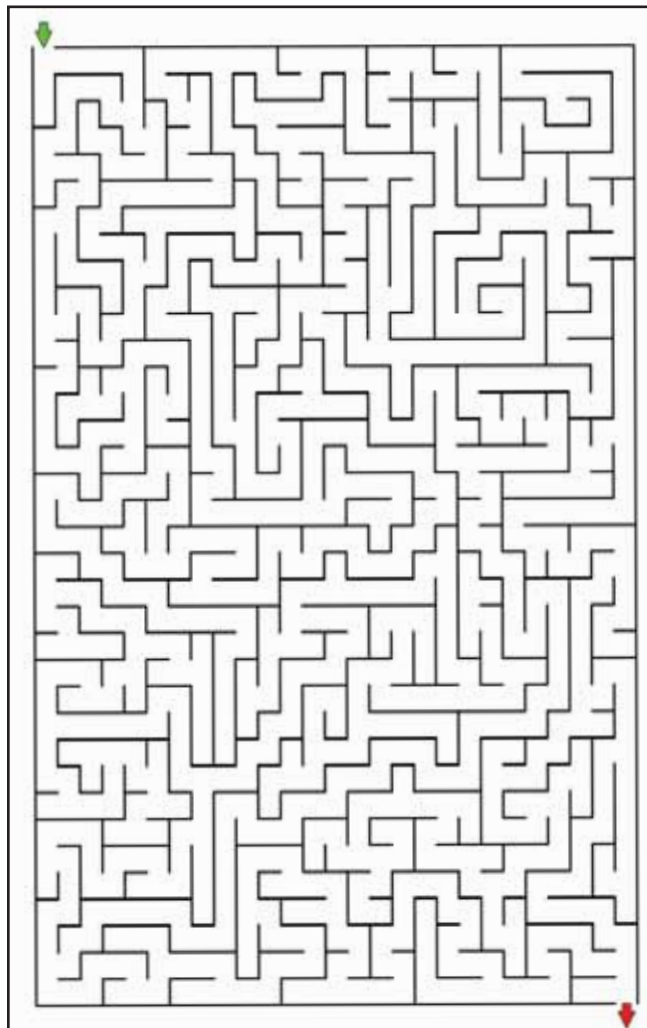
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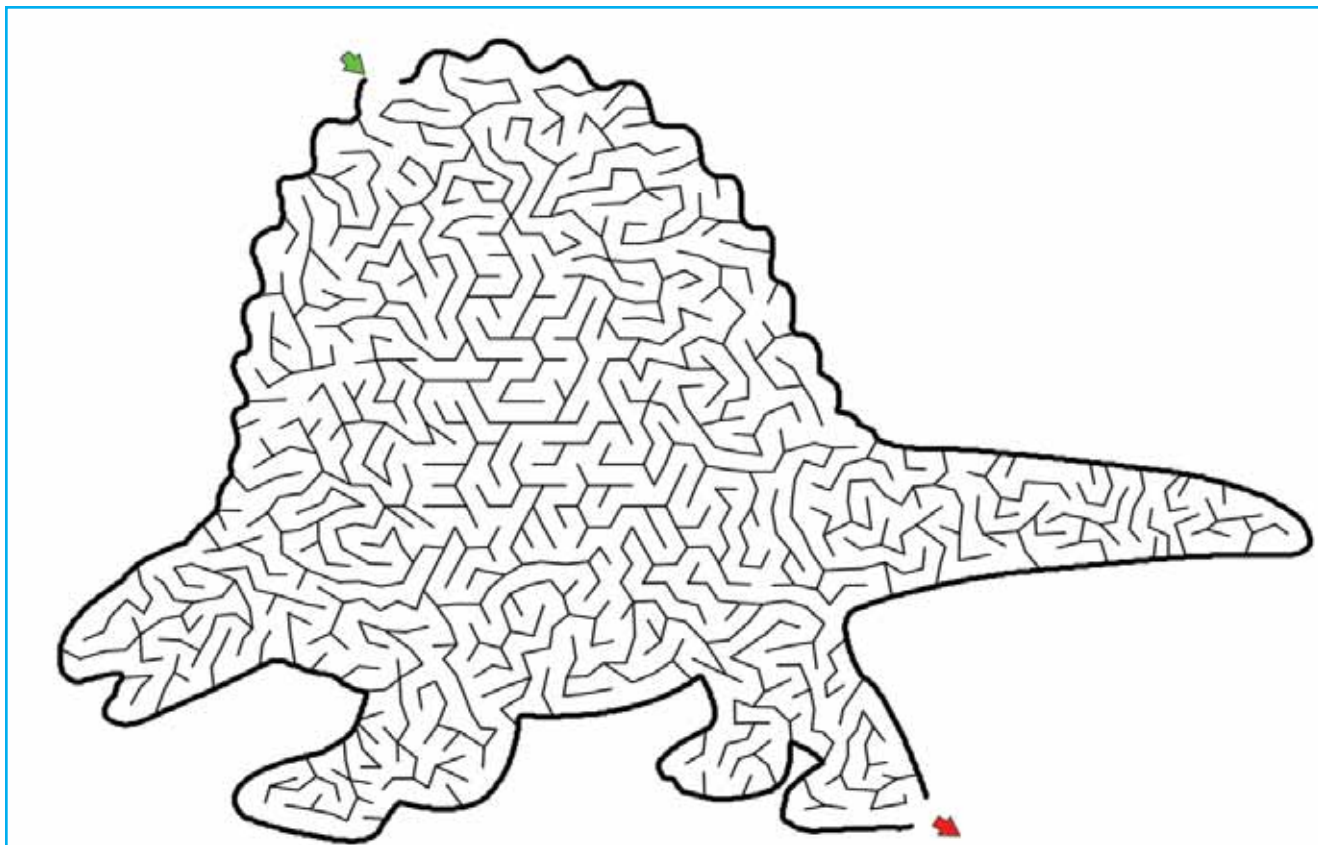
Color It



Kids Mazes



Find the way



Word Scramble

Signs of Spring



This spring Peony is going on a field trip with her class to the state park. Her teacher gave the class a list of things to look for in the woods and meadows, but the words got all mixed up. Can you help Peony unscramble her list?

1. OFGR -----
2. FEUYRBTLT -----
3. SRSGA -----
4. ORMHTARWE -----
5. SNTGLHUI -----
6. UDB -----
7. DDNLIAENO -----
8. ORELWF -----
9. EBE -----
10. GLBDYAU -----
11. OMLOB -----
12. ERGEN -----

Join the dots



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WHO push to tackle rampant rise of diabetes

GENEVA: The World Health Organization on Wednesday turned the spotlight on the insulin market - and its domination by three Big Pharma giants - in a fresh bid to tackle the rapid rise of diabetes. The WHO marked the 100-year anniversary of the discovery of insulin by launching a new Global Diabetes Compact aimed at boosting efforts to prevent diabetes and giving access to treatment to everyone who needs it.

"The need to take urgent action on diabetes is clearer than ever," said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "The number of people with diabetes has quadrupled in the last 40

years," he said, noting that "it is the only major non-communicable disease for which the risk of dying early is going up, rather than down".

Tedros said addressing the crisis was particularly important in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, stressing that "a high proportion of people who are severely ill in hospital with COVID-19 have diabetes". The WHO says that about 422 million people worldwide have diabetes, most living in low-and middle-income countries, and 1.6 million deaths are directly attributed to diabetes each year. The WHO said diabetes deaths had risen by 70 percent since 2000 and it was now the world's

ninth leading cause of death.

The UN health agency said urgent action is needed on increasing access to affordable insulin, particularly in less wealthy countries. "The Global Diabetes Compact will help to catalyze political commitment for action to increase the accessibility and affordability of life-saving medicines for diabetes and also for its prevention and diagnosis," Tedros said.

For people living with diabetes, access to treatment, including insulin, is critical to their survival. Diabetes is a chronic, metabolic disease characterized by elevated blood sugar levels, which leads over time to serious damage

to the heart, blood vessels, eyes, kidneys and nerves. The most common is type 2 diabetes, usually in adults, which occurs when the body becomes resistant to insulin or does not make enough of it. Type 1 diabetes is a chronic condition in which the pancreas produces little or no insulin by itself.

Tedros said: "It is a failure of society and the global community that people who need insulin should encounter financial hardship to buy it or go without it and risk their life." A major problem is that the global insulin market is dominated by just three companies: Eli Lilly, Novo Nordisk and Sanofi. — AFP

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| Chest Hospital | 24849400 | Abdullah Salem | 22549134 |
| Farwaniya Hospital | 24892010 | Nuzha | 22526804 |
| Adan Hospital | 23940620 | Industrial Shuwaikh | 24814764 |
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| Al-Razi Hospital | 24846000 | Dasmah | 22532265 |
| Physiotherapy Hospital | 24874330/9 | Bneid Al-Gar | 22531908 |
| | | Shaab | 22518752 |
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| | | Ayoun Al-Qibla | 22451082 |
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| | | Salmiya | 25746401 |

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| Rawda | 22517733 |
| Adaliya | 22517144 |



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| Jazeera Airways | 177 | Emirates | 22921555 |
| Turkish Airlines | 1884918 | Air India | 22456700 |
| FlyDubai | 22414400 | Air India EXPRESS | 22438185/4 |
| Qatar Airways | 22423888 | Sri Lanka Airlines | 22424444 |
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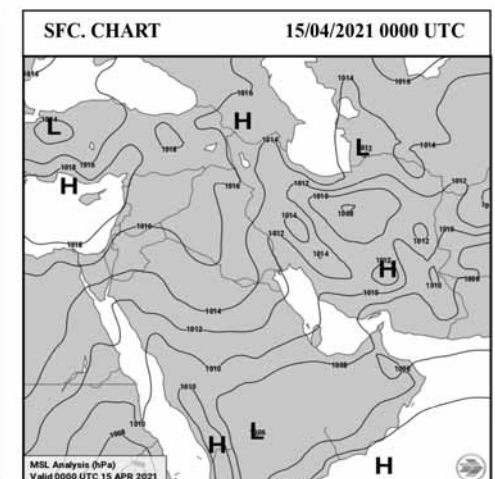
Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Rather hot with light to moderate freshening at times north westerly wind with speed of 12 - 40 km/h and some high clouds will appear.

BY NIGHT: Fair with light to moderate north westerly wind with speed of 12 - 32 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| WEATHER WARNING | No Current Warnings |
|-----------------|---------------------|

| STATION | MAX. EXP. | MIN. REC. |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| KUWAIT CITY | 32 °C | 21 °C |
| KUWAIT AIRPORT | 32 °C | 21 °C |
| ABDALY | 31 °C | 15 °C |
| BUBYAN | - °C | - °C |
| JAHRA | 33 °C | 20 °C |
| FAILAKA ISLAND | - °C | - °C |
| SALMIYAH | 29 °C | 21 °C |
| AHMADI | 29 °C | 22 °C |
| NUWAISIB | 35 °C | 20 °C |
| WAFRA | 34 °C | 18 °C |
| SALMY | 31 °C | 16 °C |



4 DAYS FORECAST

| DAY | DATE | WEATHER | Temperatures | | Wind Direction | Wind Speed |
|----------|-------|---|--------------|-------|----------------|--------------|
| | | | MAX. | MIN. | | |
| Friday | 04/16 | Rather hot and rising dust and some scattered clouds will appear | 36 °C | 20 °C | NW | 15 - 45 km/h |
| Saturday | 04/17 | Rather hot and Cloudy and rising dust | 35 °C | 22 °C | NW | 22 - 55 km/h |
| Sunday | 04/18 | Hot and Partly cloudy and rising dust | 37 °C | 23 °C | NW | 20 - 50 km/h |
| Monday | 04/19 | Hot and some scattered clouds will appear with a chance for rising dust specially over open areas | 38 °C | 22 °C | NW | 15 - 45 km/h |

PRAYER TIMES

| | |
|---------|-------|
| Fajr | 04:00 |
| Sunrise | 05:22 |
| Zuhr | 11:48 |
| Asr | 15:22 |
| Sunset | 18:14 |
| Isha | 19:34 |

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

| | |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| MAX. Temp. | 32 °C |
| MIN. Temp. | 22 °C |
| MAX. RH | 59 % |
| MIN. RH | 11 % |
| MAX. Wind | N 50 km/h |
| TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR. | 0 mm |

Business

FRIDAY, APRIL 16, 2021

34 Syria devalues pound after sacking CB chief**35** India's desert salt farmers feel the heat from climate change**36** Rising hopes, lingering questions as cruise sector eyes comeback

Chinese tech giants to end unfair competition

20 companies heed the warning of Alibaba's case



BEIJING: People walk inside a shopping mall during lunchtime in Beijing. — AFP

BEIJING: More than 20 Chinese tech giants have made a public pact to abide by anti-monopoly guidelines, after regulators told them to note “the warning” of a record fine against e-commerce giant Alibaba. Beijing is taking China’s tech firms to task to curtail the reach of private companies into the daily finances of the Chinese public—and, analysts say, to rein in their runaway expansion.

In a series of individual statements published by China’s market regulator on Wednesday and Thursday, some of the country’s biggest brands—including ByteDance, Baidu and Ctrip—promised to “ensure fair competition”, “not abuse market dominance”, and “not implement unfair price behavior”.

The oaths come after regulators summoned 34 tech companies on Tuesday and warned them to “rectify” any anti-competitive measures and “heed the warning of Alibaba’s case”. The firms were given one month to undergo complete rectification after conducting internal checks, and to correct practices that harmed competition. Ride-hailing service Didi, video platforms Kuaishou and Bilibili, as well as e-commerce firm JD.com

are also among those who have since published commitments.

JD.com said it would not force the practice of “choosing one of two” on its retailers—where merchants are compelled to work only with one platform and not its rivals—a move which Alibaba had come under fire for. Meanwhile, in its statement, Didi pledged: “Except where necessary for regular business activities, we will not illegally collect or misuse personal information.”

The next front in Beijing’s assault on big tech could be the huge volumes of data they scoop up from China’s consumers. On Saturday, regulators hit Alibaba with a \$2.78 billion penalty, after a months-long investigation found it had been abusing its dominant market position.

Alibaba and JD.com, along with messaging and gaming giant Tencent, have become hugely profitable on the back of growing Chinese digital lifestyles and government restrictions on major US competitors in the domestic market. But as the platforms amassed hundreds of millions of regular users, concern has risen over their influence in China, where they are used for a huge array of daily tasks. — AFP

Turkey’s CB holds interest rate at 19% under new chief

ANKARA: Turkey’s central bank yesterday held its main interest rate at 19 percent in the first decision since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sacked its market-friendly governor and replaced him with a party loyalist.

The bank said it had “decided to maintain the tight monetary policy stance by keeping the policy rate unchanged,” adding that it intended to keep it above the annual rate of inflation, which came in at 16.2 percent last month.

“The policy rate will continue to be determined at a level above inflation to maintain a strong disinflationary effect,” it said in a statement. The lira held steady against the dollar minutes after the decision was announced, but economists said the central bank was opening the door to future rate cuts. Erdogan sacked former governor Naci Agbal after he used his four-month term to aggressively raise rates to fight inflation, and replaced him with former ruling party lawmaker Sahap Kavcioglu last month. Erdogan gave no explanation for his decision, but Kavcioglu has subscribed to the Turkish leader’s unconventional belief that high interest rates cause inflation instead of tamping it down.

“The language also suggests that they are looking for opportunities to lower interest rates,” said Capital Economics analyst William Jackson. Kavcioglu is the fourth central bank chief Erdogan has appointed since July 2019. Earlier this month, Erdogan said he was “determined” to see the interest rate return to single digits, and to “reduce inflation to single digits”. But consumer prices keep rising, and have now reached their highest level since July 2019, when Turkey was suffering from economic effects of a standoff with the United States the previous year. — AFP

Business

US banks ride a strengthening economy to blowout Q1 profits

Bank CEOs offer a heady outlook for banking sector

NEW YORK: Profits soared in the first quarter at three US banking giants thanks to an improving macroeconomic backdrop that has reduced the need to set aside funds for bad loans. Profits from JPMorgan Chase, Goldman Sachs and Wells Fargo were all at least four times the level in the year-ago period, boosted in part by reserve releases of funds set aside earlier in the pandemic in anticipation of a big downturn. Results from JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs were also lifted by a blowout quarter in Wall Street trading and deals connected to companies going public.

Bank CEOs offered a heady outlook on the expected boom-like conditions in the coming months, but cautioned that there were challenges ahead as pent-up demand for goods, services and experiences drives activity. "We think we're going to have very robust economic growth in the second half of 2021 and into 2022," Goldman Sachs Chief Executive David Solomon said on a conference call with analysts.

The downside of that scenario is the chance for a big jump in inflation that prompts aggressive moves by the Federal Reserve to tighten monetary supply, Solomon said. That outcome is "not obvious in the near-term," Solomon said. "But it's a risk issue markets will have to continue to watch."

Anemic loan growth

At JPMorgan Chase, earnings came in at \$14.3 billion, about five times the level from the year-ago period. The result included \$5.2 billion from releases of funds set aside earlier in the pandemic due to fears of bad loans. Revenues of \$33.2 billion were up 14 percent from the year-ago period.

JPMorgan, the largest US bank by assets, turned in an especially strong performance in corporate and investment banking, thanks to gains in advisory fees and a big increase in commissions tied to trading in financial markets. In consumer banking, JPMorgan pointed to a return in consumer spending to pre-pandemic levels. Home lending originations were strong, but the bank expects this area to cool with higher interest rates.

But JPMorgan executives acknowledged anemic activity in many areas of lending, attributing the trend to a flood of government support programs that have lessened the need for households and businesses to turn to banks. JPMorgan's credit card loans fell 14 percent compared to the year-ago period and wholesale loans also dropped. "What happened is the consumer has so much money, they're paying down their credit card loan, which is good," JPMorgan Chief Exec-



In this file photo the headquarters of Goldman Sachs is pictured in New York City. —AFP

utive Jamie Dimon said on a conference call with reporters. "That's not the same as when the economy's weak on the business side."

Dimon said companies have also taken advan-

tage of loose monetary conditions to build excess cash on their balance sheet. "This is not bad news about loan demand," Dimon said. "This is actually good news." — AFP

Oil surges as US stocks waffle on valuation fears

NEW YORK: Oil prices surged Wednesday and most European markets closed higher on increased optimism for a post-pandemic economic rebound, though Wall Street struggled with concerns over excessive equity valuations. And crude prices added more than four percent, responding to news of drawdowns from US reserves and higher demand forecasts from the International Energy Agency as the global growth outlook brightens.

"With other risk assets also rising, there is no doubt that optimism over the re-opening of global economies has also helped to fuel the rally after a lengthy consolidation in recent weeks," said Fawad Razaqzada of Thinkmarkets. While both the IEA and OPEC, the oil producing countries' club, have lifted demand expectations, the cartel and its allies plan to reverse pandemic production cuts only slowly.

"Demand looks set to recover at a quicker pace than supply growth. Against this backdrop, investors are happy to keep buying the dips in crude oil," Razaqzada said. However, the mood was less decisive on Wall Street, where only the Dow among major indices eked out a gain as traders became wary that a recent string of equity rallies may have reached its end. CFRA Research's Sam Stovall said in a note that strategists worry "equities are priced to perfection" following a series of market records in anticipation of the just-begun earnings season. On Wednesday, leading banks reported blowout profits after they unlocked funds set aside for bad loans. — AFP

Syria devalues pound after sacking CB chief

DAMASCUS: Syria's central bank devalued the pound yesterday, bringing the currency's official exchange rate closer to the black market rate, two days after the government sacked its governor.

The pound was now officially valued at 2,512 to the US dollar from around 1,250 previously, central bank data showed. The black market rate is more than 3,000 to the greenback. The move means the Syrian currency has officially shed more than 98 percent of its value since the start of the country's civil war in 2011.

It follows the government's decision to dismiss central bank governor Hazem Karfoul on Tuesday after a three-year tenure that coincided with a severe economic crisis. The pound stood at 47 pounds to the dollar before the conflict. Syria last devalued the pound in June 2020, giving in to weeks of depreciation on the black market as new US sanctions took effect.

The country's war-battered economy is now reeling from the knock-on effects of a financial crisis in neighboring Lebanon that has stemmed the flow of dollars into government-held areas. President Bashar Al-Assad's government also blames Western sanctions against Syria for the economic crisis. The economic crunch has plunged millions into food insecurity nationwide, as food has over the years become 33 times more expensive than before the war, UN figures show. — AFP



DAMASCUS: Syria's currency hit a record low on the black market of around 3,000 pounds to the dollar earlier this month. — AFP

Business

India's desert salt farmers feel the heat from climate change

Farmers toil in scorching heat to pump out briny water in Gujarat

LITTLE RANN OF KUTCH, India: Roshni Thakor left school to harvest salt from a sun-baked Indian desert, a backbreaking trade practiced by her ancestors for centuries but now threatened by climate change. For eight months every year, farmers toil in scorching heat to pump out briny water from handmade wells in a sparse corner of western Gujarat state.

A ton of the resulting salt crystals fetches the meager sum of 300 rupees (\$4.00), but unpredictable rainfall, rising temperatures and frequent dust storms have slashed yields, and made it harder for Thakor and her family. "It's getting hotter and hotter here. My eyes burn and I often feel dizzy and sick," the 20-year-old told AFP, as her mother prepared tea over a wooden stove.

Erratic weather has brought mounting losses for her family, but her father Raju says they must keep trying to eke out a living from their four salt pans. "I have no choice but to keep working here as I don't own any agricultural land. I don't have any other source of income," he said.

India is the world's third-biggest producer of salt and nearly three-quarters of its annual output comes from Gujarat. The Thakor family are among the tens of thousands of "Agariyas", or salt farmers, who spend most of the year living and working within the barren mudflats of the Thar Desert.

They dig 50-foot wells with shovels and their bare hands before using diesel pumps to direct

water into large rectangular basins, where it evaporates and leaves salt crystals behind. The work is both tedious and taxing. Farmers prepare the basins by stamping their bare feet to seal in the brine and stop it from seeping back into the earth, a process that leaves them vulnerable to painful foot infections.

'We have to start all over'

Heat plays an important part in the process, with 24 degrees Celsius (75 degrees Fahrenheit) the optimal temperature for the formation of salt crystals, Raju said. But climate change is making it harder to plan for the salt harvest and is delaying the onset of the farming season, in addition to bringing unbearable heatwaves to those working the desert lands.

Deforestation and unplanned development have already transformed India's monsoon season, with a recent government report warning that climate change was making rains unpredictable and more intense. "Salt production needs dry weather-if it rains suddenly, all our effort goes down the drain," said Raju Thakor. "The salt dissolves and we have to start all over again."

The same government report warned that India faced a 4.4-degree rise in average temperatures by the end of the century. Dhvanit Pandya, who runs a local salt farmer advocacy group, says the mercury has already risen by that much in the Thar Desert



AHMEDABAD: A laborer packing salt at a factory in Kharaghoda village near the Little Rann of Kutch (LRK) region, some 120 km from Ahmedabad. —AFP

over the past decade, with daytime maximums now sometimes topping 54 degrees.

Dust storms are also rising in frequency, muddying the salt pans and cutting sale prices. "The traders slash the price by half if the salt is not of good quality," Pandya said. Pandya estimated that farmers were now losing a quarter of their harvest each year because of sharp changes in weather

patterns, pushing many families towards poverty.

The Agariyas say their ancestors have farmed salt in the region for more than 500 years. Their homes in the Gujarati desert, far from the state's population centres, are not connected to the electricity grid. Fresh water in the desert is scarce, and the community's children spend most of the year out of school. —AFP

Philippines lifts ban on new mining deals

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte officially lifted a nine-year ban on new mining projects yesterday in a controversial move aimed at boosting state revenue and spurring investment in the country's coronavirus-devastated economy.

The mining industry has stagnated since 2012 when Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino, imposed a moratorium on new projects following public backlash over a series of devastating mining accidents. The executive order released yesterday was welcomed by the mining sector-but green groups branded the decision "outrageous" and warned it could lead to more environmental disasters.

Duterte—who had previously threatened to shut down the mining sector completely—is facing growing criticism over his handling of the pandemic that has crippled the economy and thrown millions out of work. The Philippines is one of the world's biggest suppliers of nickel ore and is also rich in copper and gold, but Duterte said less than five percent of the country's mineral reserves had been tapped.

He said the mining industry could bring "significant economic benefits to the country" by supporting the government's "Build, Build, Build" infrastructure program and creating jobs. The Chamber of Mines of the Philippines said the removal of the "policy roadblock" would encourage local and foreign investment. —AFP

German top court throws out Berlin's disputed rent cap

BERLIN: Germany's highest court said that a policy to freeze rents in Berlin for five years to combat soaring housing costs was unlawful in a ruling published yesterday.

In a blow to millions of tenants, the capital's "Mietendeckel" law or rent cap "violates the Basic Law and is thus ruled void", said the Federal Constitutional Court in the southwestern city of Karlsruhe. The tribunal ruled in favor of MPs from the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the pro-business Free Democrats, who are both in opposition in Berlin.

The court agreed with their argument that rent policy falls under federal law not the jurisdiction of Germany's 16 states. The rent freeze, passed by Berlin's legislature in January 2020, was a flagship policy of the local governing coalition of the center-left Social Democrats, the Greens and the far-left Linke parties. It is a major setback for them ahead of September elections both in Berlin—its own city-state—and for a new federal parliament and chancellor after Angela Merkel steps down this year.

Once 'poor but sexy'

Berlin was the first and only of Germany's states to introduce a rent cap. The law froze rents at the level from June 2019 until 2025, after which any increases would have been limited to 1.3 percent per year in line with inflation. According to the city's de-

partment for urban development and housing, it affected more than 1.5 million apartments.

Exceptions included social housing and new housing built since 2014. Some particularly high rents were even temporarily lowered, pending the court ruling, with landlords who broke the rules facing fines of up to 500,000 euros (\$599,000). Those tenants will now generally be required to repay back rent. A poll by Sparkasse public savings bank for the daily Tagesspiegel yesterday said that fewer than half of Berliners had set money aside for the arrears now due. The SPD, which is also the junior coalition partner in Merkel's federal coalition, has pledged to champion rent controls nationwide in its election campaign.

Once described by a former mayor as "poor, but sexy", Berlin has seen its housing costs double over the last decade as employees lured by a strong job market moved into the city.

The rent cap faced fierce opposition from the property sector, which argued that the freeze discouraged developers from building in Berlin and ultimately worsened the capital's housing crisis. The policy also saw the number of rental offers plummet as owners declined to put apartments on the market, according to the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW).

Real social emergency

According to the property website Immowelt, Berliners spend an average of one-quarter of their income on housing costs. Only 18.4 percent of the city's roughly four million residents own their own property, one of the lowest rates in Europe. Housing insecurity has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is also putting jobs under threat. "The coronavirus crisis is going to lead to a real social emergency when it comes to housing," warned rental association Berliner Mieterverein in February. —AFP

Business

Rising hopes, lingering questions as cruise sector eyes comeback

Diehard American fans of cruise trips sense an end to COVID-imposed stranding

NEW YORK: After more than a year of frustration, diehard American fans of cruise vacations at last sense an end to their COVID-imposed stranding, and many are booking trips as soon as they can. Steve Butcher, who has had about 10 trips canceled in the last year, is finally confident an upcoming voyage in July will go ahead—but the ship will depart from St. Maarten in the Caribbean, beyond the reach of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which has barred almost all cruise voyages from the United States.

"I want to get back to living my life," Butcher, 68, said. James Holcombe, who has spent the last year "getting canceled and rebooked," is also hopeful an upcoming excursion from Jamaica will actually happen. The two trips on ships traveling with significant empty cabin capacity and requiring vaccinations—are among a growing number of voyages planned by major cruise lines even as the outlook for US ports of call remains murky.

Recent booking figures and strong pricing trends reported by Carnival Cruise Line and smaller operators offer proof of the pent-up demand for cruising, an especially hard-hit corner of the COVID-battered tourism industry. About half of the readers in a Cruise Critic survey are actively looking for trips, said the website, which has also reported recent accounts of trips selling out in a single day.

Still, as with so many other areas of the economy, much remains to be resolved before cruising returns to its pre-COVID-19 levels. Inoculations are becoming more widespread, but businesses are now navigating politically turbulent terrain over vaccine protocols in a debate that is starting

to resemble the fights over face masks.

Vaccinated cruising

Cruise travel was one of the early victims of the pandemic, and live television broadcasts of the arrival of liners carrying COVID-infected passengers were among the first signs of the national emergency the virus was to become. Cruise aficionados had been hopeful for an easing in the US regulatory stance as the pandemic ebbed, noting the industry's ability to undertake safe excursions outside the country and the increasing availability of vaccines.

But the CDC on April 2 gave little ground, pointing to the need for strict guidelines at a time when emerging COVID-19 variants are becoming widespread.

"Cruising safely and responsibly during a global pandemic is difficult," the agency said, adding that "COVID-19 vaccination efforts will be critical in the safe resumption of passenger operations." Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a strong supporter of former president Donald Trump and himself a potential presidential candidate, has sued President Joe Biden's administration over its stance on the cruise industry, while also signaling to Florida media that his ban on "vaccine passports" would preclude cruise ships from requiring vaccinations. Legal experts are skeptical of DeSantis' efforts, but they point to an unsettled debate in the broader public.

Cruising giant Carnival has avoided backing a blanket vaccination requirement to travel, in part because vaccines are not available to everyone, including children, said Chief Executive Arnold Donald.

"We would encourage everyone to get a vaccine if available," Donald said, adding that he also re-



A view of the Royal-class cruise ship "Sky Princess", operated by Bermuda-based Princess Cruises of Carnival Corporation, off the coast of Cyprus' southern city of Limassol. Half a dozen cruise ships have been stranded since May 2020 off Cyprus, looming large over a fishing village on the holiday island hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

spected "personal liberties" and that it was too soon to set brand policies around vaccines.

Rule following

Donald called the CDC's latest stance "not necessarily a workable or practical solution" as his company pointed to first-quarter bookings up 90 percent from the fourth quarter of 2020. Cruise ships "hopefully won't be asked to stand up to a zero risk standard because, frankly, nowhere else in society is that being considered," said Donald, who pledged to work with the CDC. The company's rival, Norwegian Cruise Lines, has taken a different tact, announcing it will require voyagers to be vaccinated and lobbying the CDC to permit voyages to depart from US ports

beginning July 4.

The CDC did not respond to a request for comment. Surveys of cruise vacationers show almost no opposition to vaccination requirements. In the latest Cruise Critic survey, 86 percent said they will cruise if vaccinations are required, with only six percent declining and eight percent not sure.

Butcher, who lives in Ohio and has already been vaccinated, strongly supports a vaccination mandate, as well as a requirement to wear masks on board. Describing himself as a "rule follower" from decades of military service, Butcher said that some of the CDC's hardline approach likely stems from last spring when cruise ships resisted shutting down despite coronavirus outbreaks. —AFP

Google unveils \$2bn data hub in Poland

WARSAW: US tech giant Google launched a new cloud data hub in Warsaw—its first in Central and Eastern Europe—with an investment of nearly \$2.0 billion (1.7 billion euros). Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki hailed the new hub saying it would ensure "better service from private and public entities" and strengthen security because the data would be stored in Poland. "We hope that the new Google Cloud region will... help in recovery from the pandemic and will contribute to a thriving digital economy in Poland and the neighboring countries," Magdalena Dziejguc, Google Cloud's country manager, said in a statement.

US embassy charge d'affaires Bix Aliu said US companies have invested around \$60 billion in Poland and Google "is adding close to \$2 billion to that number by expanding cloud services". Poland's economy last year went into recession for the first time since the fall of communism three decades ago because of the coronavirus crisis but it is expected to bounce back this year. —AFP

Europe needs more aid to counter COVID risks: IMF

WASHINGTON: Europe faces more risks to its economic recovery due to COVID-19 variants and delays in vaccination campaigns that threaten to prolong the health crisis, the IMF said on Wednesday.

"Reflecting the periodic infection waves and the pace of vaccinations, the economic recovery in Europe is still halting and uneven," Alfred Kammer, director of the International Monetary Fund's European department, told reporters. The European economy is expected to grow of 4.5 percent this year, 0.2 points lower than the October forecast, followed by a 3.9 percent expansion in 2022, according to the IMF's latest Regional Economic Outlook.

Targeted and temporary

That would take the economy "back to its pre-pandemic level but not to the path expected before the pandemic." But the IMF forecasts assume vaccines will be "widely available" by mid-year, and Kammer said "the number one priority is to boost vaccine production."

A slower recovery could create "social unrest and more medium-term scarring of economies if the crisis lingers," the report warned, and policymakers "need to continue to provide emergency support to households and firms." However, Kammer said, "This is not a call for a package that boosts spending indiscriminately and permanently, but for a well-targeted and temporary shot in the arm of both demand and supply." Additional spending of three percent of GDP through next year could lift GDP by about two percent by the end of 2022 and cut the impact of scarring by more than half, he said.

"The costs would pale in comparison to the benefits," he added. While the current level of support provided by European governments "looks sufficient," he cautioned that "we don't know how long (the recovery) is going to take" so fiscal support will need to continue in 2021 and 2022. The Washington-based crisis lender said pandemic spending were "unprecedented lifelines" that helped tens of millions, but said those funds should shift to retraining programs to help workers find jobs in emerging industries.

"The faster the recovery, the less scarring people and businesses will suffer," the IMF said. The IMF official also stressed that it was difficult to know to what extent consumption would support growth after countries, such as France, had to re-impose restrictions due to a new wave of infections. "And government should be ready to provide accurate demand support when and if needed," he said. —AFP

Sports

Top Japanese politician says virus could force Olympics cancellation

TOKYO: A senior Japanese politician said cancelling the Tokyo Olympics over the coronavirus remains a possibility yesterday, as a surge in cases renews concerns about the Games with less than 100 days to go. Toshiro Nikai, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's number two, said the Olympics must be cancelled "without hesitation" if the virus situation is too severe. A year after their historic postponement, the 2020 Olympics remain beset by pandemic problems, with parts of the torch relay forced behind closed doors and public support consistently low. Organizers and Olympic officials insist the Games will go ahead safely, but Nikai said yesterday that all options were on the table. "We need to make a decision depending on the situation at the time," he told the private TBS television network. "We need to cancel it without hesitation if they're no longer possible," added Nikai, who is the LDP's secretary general. Asked if he considered cancellation an option, Nikai said: "Yes of course. If infection spreads because of the Olympics, I don't know what the Olympics is for." He added however that he sees the Games as an "opportunity", and it was "important for Japan to foster excitement with support from the public". "We definitely want to make a success. In order to do so, there are various issues to solve. It's important to solve them one by one."

'Might be no spectators'

The comments were quickly dismissed by an unnamed LDP official, who told the Jiji news agency: "The Games will not be cancelled." Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike said she had "been told that the comment meant it is an option". "I take it as a message of strong encouragement that we contain the coronavirus by all means," she said. Japan's vaccine minister meanwhile mooted the possibility of a total bar on spectators at the Games. "We'll hold the Olympics in a form that is feasible," the Asahi newspaper quoted Taro Kono as saying. "There might be no spectators." Nikai's remarks come with fresh worries in Japan about what experts have called a fourth wave of infections. Record numbers of cases have been reported in Osaka in recent days, and the government has been forced to authorise new restrictions just weeks after lifting a virus state of emergency. The surge has already forced the Olympic torch relay off public roads in Osaka, and a city in western Japan also announced Wednesday that it would cancel the public event.

'Neither safe nor secure'

Compounding the problem is the comparatively slow roll-out of the vaccine in Japan, which has so far only approved the Pfizer/BioNTech version. Around 1.1 million people in the country of 126 million have received a first

Mercedes admit Red Bull 'edge' ahead of Imola showdown

IMOLA, Italy: Lewis Hamilton and his Mercedes team expect Max Verstappen and Red Bull to bounce back and give them a torrid test of speed at this weekend's Emilia Romagna Grand Prix, the second round of this year's world championship. Three weeks on from the season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix, where Hamilton dug deep into his reserves to conjure up his record 96th Formula One victory ahead of the Dutchman, the seven-time champion knows it will be a challenge to repeat his 2020 win at the old Autodromo Enzo e Dino Ferrari. Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff was delighted to see Hamilton triumph in the opener, but said he is under no illusion that Mercedes have proved they can match the obvious speed of this season's Red Bull car. "We may have won the first round, but we are under no illusions that this is going to be an easy season," he said. "Our car still lacks speed on a single lap and Red Bull have the edge at the moment."

In Bahrain, Verstappen secured pole by three-tenths, but Hamilton made the most of strategy and race-craft to win, with the aid of a costly error by the Dutchman, by just seven-tenths of



KIEV: Anna Ilina, a member of the Ukrainian Olympic shooting team for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, flanked by the country's Health Minister Maksym Stepanov, receives a dose of China's CoronaVac vaccine yesterday. —AFP

dose of vaccine so far, with the roll-out only expanding to the elderly this week. Despite the problems, Olympic organizers insist the Games can be held safely and have released virus rulebooks to allay public fears. Athletes will not be required to quarantine or be vaccinated, but will have to limit movements and be tested regularly. Overseas fans are barred from attending, with a decision on domestic spectator limits expected later this month. However many fans are allowed to attend, the atmosphere will be markedly different from Games past, with cheering strictly banned.

Organizers note that sporting events are continuing in Japan, including some international fixtures such as the World Team Trophy figure skating, which opened in Osaka yesterday. But opinion polls show most Japanese favor postponing or cancelling of the Games, with those in support hovering below 30 percent. Medical professionals have also warned the Games are a risky prospect, with four experts writing in the British Medical Journal this week urging plans for the event "be reconsidered as a matter of urgency". "International mass gathering events such as Tokyo 2020 are still neither safe nor secure," they wrote. Despite the obstacles, International Olympic Committee vice president John Coates on Wednesday said organizers were "certainly not" considering a cancellation. "Of course we're concerned, of course safety remains our priority, but we believe that we're prepared for the worst situations," he said. —AFP

a second. Hamilton's Bahrain victory showcased not only his speed, but his experience and supreme race-management, qualities that he will need again this season as he seeks to fend off the challenge for his crown from Verstappen.

Hamilton rode his luck to win the 2020 Emilia Romagna race at Imola with some aplomb - and the help of a timely Safety Car intervention - last November as he roared towards the drivers' title. His win was the third triumph in a run of five as he took advantage of Mercedes' superiority and team-mate Valtteri Bottas' ill fortune to take command of the title race on the narrow and bumpy old track, back in use for the first time since 2006.

Hamilton made it plain last year that he loved the "old school" nature of the circuit set in the rolling vineyards of Emilia Romagna and Wolff shared his feelings. "It's where won secured our seventh constructors championship that weekend," he said. "And it's such an historic and iconic venue, which the drivers really enjoy - twisty and fast with a variety of corners."

Apart from Hamilton, only one other driver has previously won at Imola - two-time champion Fernando Alonso, who has returned to race for the Alpine-branded Renault team this year. Alonso will be hunting an improvement on his pointless run in Bahrain, where he retired, as will fellow veteran and four-time champion Sebastian Vettel after a labored first outing for Aston Martin. Their experience may help at Imola, but it is likely to be Red Bull setting the pace in a thrilling duel with Mercedes - with McLaren, Ferrari and AlphaTauri in hot pursuit. —AFP

Cricket roundup

Stokes makes English history

LONDON: Ben Stokes has become the first England cricketer to be named the prestigious Wisden Leading Cricketer in the World twice since it came into being in 2004. The 29-year-old all-rounder won the award for a second successive year due to scoring more Test runs than any other batsman in 2020, with 641 in seven matches, while also taking 19 wickets. —AFP

Pakistan defeat South Africa

CENTURION, South Africa: Babar Azam gave a batting master-class to lead Pakistan to a nine-wicket win in the third Twenty20 international against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Wednesday. Babar hit 122, his first T20 international century, and shared a record Pakistan first wicket partnership of 197 with Mohammad Rizwan (73 not out) as Pakistan chased down a challenging target of 204 with two overs to spare. —AFP

Bangalore beat Hyderabad

CHENNAI: Virat Kohli's Royal Challengers Bangalore edged out Sunrisers Hyderabad by six runs for their second successive victory of this Indian Premier League season on Wednesday. Hyderabad, who lost their opener of the Twenty20 tournament on Sunday, faltered in their chase of 150 to finish on 143-9 despite a valiant 54 by skipper David Warner in Chennai. —AFP

Kohli reprimanded

NEW DELHI: Royal Challengers Bangalore skipper Virat Kohli has been reprimanded after hitting a plastic chair with his bat following his dismissal during an Indian Premier League match. TV cameras picked up Kohli's tantrum as he kicked an advertising cushion and then vented his frustration on the chair after falling to Hyderabad's West Indian import Jason Holder. But the Indian captain escaped a fine. —AFP

Babar ends Kohli reign

KARACHI: Pakistan captain Babar Azam dethroned Indian maestro Virat Kohli after more than three years as the world's number one batsman in one-day international rankings, the International Cricket Council announced Wednesday. The 26-year-old becomes the fourth Pakistani batsman to get the top spot in ODIs and the first since Mohammad Yousuf in 2003. —AFP

Streak banned 8 years

PARIS: Former Zimbabwe cricket captain Heath Streak was on Wednesday banned for eight years on corruption charges, the International Cricket Council announced, after being implicated for his dealings with a shadowy Indian gambler identified only as 'Mr X'. "Mr Streak chose to admit the charges and agreed the sanction with the ICC in lieu of an Anti-Corruption Tribunal hearing," an ICC statement said. —AFP

Sports

Sixers win battle for top spot in East, Doncic hits clutch winner

LOS ANGELES: Joel Embiid finished with 39 points as the Philadelphia 76ers won the battle for first place in the Eastern Conference, holding on to beat the short-handed Brooklyn Nets 123-117 on Wednesday. Philadelphia, who are seeking their first NBA championship since 1983, are looking to earn the top seed and home court advantage in the postseason and Wednesday's win gives them the upper hand, at least for now, over the second-place Nets.

The 76ers improved to 38-17 on the season, just one game ahead of Brooklyn at 37-18. Embiid also shot 13-of-29 from the floor and pulled down 13 rebounds as the 76ers saw their 22-point lead slashed to just three in the fourth. Tobias Harris added 26 points and Ben Simmons finished with 17 points, nine assists and three steals for the Sixers, who won their third straight. Shake Milton had 15 points.

The depleted Nets played without offensive star James Harden, who is recovering from a strained hamstring, and Kevin Durant who sits out when the team has games on back-to-back nights. Durant had eight turnovers in his last game, a one-sided 126-101 loss to the Los Angeles Lakers.

Kyrie Irving led the Nets with 37 points and nine assists while Landry Shamet added 17 points and Jeff Green had 15. Bruce Brown scored 14, and DeAndre Jordan finished with 12 points and 14 rebounds. Irving was a late addition to the lineup after he took time off for "per-

sonal reasons."

The Nets have been playing with all or a portion of their "Big Three" out for most of the season but they are hoping that everyone gets healthy for the postseason. With the Sixers up by double digits in the second half, Embiid was hoping to have an early night and rest for the fourth quarter. But the Nets had other plans, making a late run to cut a 22-point lead to just three. "The last three games I sat out the fourth and I thought it would be the same. We made a bunch of mistakes and turned the ball over. It can happen," said Embiid.

Elsewhere, Luka Doncic delivered another clutch game winner, sinking an off-balance three pointer to beat the buzzer and lift the Dallas Mavericks to a 114-113 win over the Memphis Grizzlies. Doncic scored 25 of his 29 points in the second half and finished with nine assists to help Dallas end a two-game losing streak. Kristaps Porzingis chipped in 21 points for the Mavericks. "I was kind of falling down. It's kind of lucky, but we'll take it," Doncic said.

Doncic scored the Mavericks' final six points of the contest with a layup, free throw and then capping his incredible performance with a falling three pointer. "He's a really hard cover and that why he's an MVP candidate. He turned it on in the second half and I give him a lot of credit," Grizzlies coach Taylor Jenkins said of Doncic.

Seventh place Dallas gave themselves a bit of a buffer with the victory, extending their lead in



PHILADELPHIA: DeAndre Jordan #6 of the Brooklyn Nets fouls Joel Embiid #21 of the Philadelphia 76ers in the third quarter at the Wells Fargo Center on Wednesday. —AFP

the standings to 2 1/2 games over the eighth-place Grizzlies. "The last play was amazing. You look at the last minute or so. In those situations,

you pull off a miracle in a game like that once in a blue moon. It just doesn't happen very often," said Dallas coach Rick Carlisle. — AFP

Major League Soccer bullish for new season after pandemic chaos

LOS ANGELES: Major League Soccer's 2021 season kicks off today with league chiefs believing the competition has emerged stronger than ever after the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Just over a year after MLS chiefs called a halt to the 2020 season as the coronavirus swept across North America, the 2021 campaign gets underway with the league welcoming a 27th team as well as a plethora of new purpose-built stadia.

With MLS academies also churning out a procession of young players, some of whom have recently been snapped up by clubs in Europe, it is little wonder that MLS Commissioner Don Garber is bullish about the health of the league. "The story in MLS is momentum," Garber said this week during a conference call with media. "More teams, more stadiums, more fans and more players that are representing the excitement on the field. We had momentum going into last year, that got put on pause a bit with the pandemic, but now that momentum has kicked back." Nowhere is that sense of momentum more evident than in the arrival of Texas expansion franchise Austin FC, who make their debut tomorrow in a nationally-televised away game against Los Angeles F.C. Austin, who will play their home games in the new 20,500-seat Q2 Stadium, have already sold 15,500 season tickets with 15,000 more fans on a waiting list. —AFP

After humbling Phelps, Schooling seeks another shock at Tokyo Olympics

SINGAPORE: Singapore's Joseph Schooling famously upset the great Michael Phelps to win Olympic gold but he said "my biggest rival is myself" as he bids to return to form at the Tokyo Games. Schooling, the Southeast Asian city-state's first Olympic champion, said the year's pandemic delay had given him extra time to prepare after a disappointing world championships in 2019.

The 25-year-old caused a sensation at Rio 2016, when he beat his idol Phelps - who has a record 23 Olympic gold medals - by a fingertip to win the 100m butterfly. Five years on, Schooling again looks an outsider and although he still wants to win "more than ever", he admitted much of his fate was beyond his control.

"It is always a never-ending pursuit of trying to get better. Win or lose, you're going to give it your best," he told AFP via email. "In the past, I was always focused on winning, and I still am, I still want to win more than ever. But at the same time, it is also important to find a balance - the push and pull, letting go of what you can and can't control."

'Had to make some changes'

Schooling hasn't been at his best since Rio, and he crashed out in the heats of the 100m butterfly at the 2019 world championships in South Korea. Later that year, he won only one individual title at the Southeast Asian Games in the Philippines, and was criticized by fans for being out of shape. "I simply wasn't as prepared as I should have been for those two meets," Schooling said. "Having said that, I recognized that I had to make some changes which I did."



RIO DE JANEIRO: In this file photo taken on Aug 11, 2016, USA's Michael Phelps (left) and Singapore's Joseph Schooling react during a swimming event at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games at the Olympic Aquatics Stadium. —AFP

Schooling has been allowed to defer his compulsory national service - set at two years for all Singaporean men - since 2014, with an extension granted last year when the Tokyo Games were postponed. "Despite the Tokyo Olympics being postponed, I think you can find positives out of every negative," he said. "It gives me an extra year to get physically and mentally stronger, working on the things that can get me to where I want to be... I look at the extra year as a positive boost for myself." Swimming against Phelps was a clear motivator for Schooling, who was photographed with the now-retired American legend as a boy. Now, he said: "My biggest rival is myself. I want to perform at the best of my ability. — AFP

Sports

Foden fires City into Champions League semifinal clash with PSG

DORTMUND: Manchester City set up a blockbuster Champions League semifinal against Paris Saint-Germain as Phil Foden's second-half winner sealed a 2-1 victory at Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday to send the Premier League leaders through 4-2 on aggregate. England midfielder Jude Bellingham gave Dortmund an early lead, but a second-half Riyad Mahrez penalty and Foden's powerful strike moved City into the last four of Europe's top club competition for the second time.

Having also scored the 90th-minute winner to give City a 2-1 victory in last week's first leg in Manchester, England international Foden again broke Dortmund hearts. "We are finally in the semi-finals and we're really happy," Guardiola told Sky with his team bidding to win four titles this season. "The guys deserve it because what they have achieved this season is incredible."

Guardiola was full of praise for Mauricio Pochettino's PSG after they reached the last four by squeezing past holders Bayern Munich on away goals. "We saw yesterday how strong they (PSG) are, Neymar is an excellent player and they have eliminated the world's best team," said Guardiola. "It's time to celebrate and drink a lot of wine, then prepare to face Chelsea (in the FA Cup semifinals on Saturday)."

City had bowed out at the quarterfinal stage in each of the last three seasons, and had to come from behind at Signal Iduna Park as Dortmund shrugged off their indifferent Bundesliga form to take the lead on 15 minutes. Four days after scoring his first Bundesliga goal, Bellingham also hit

the back of the net for the first time in the Champions League.

After Mahmoud Dahoud fired straight at City goalkeeper Ederson with six minutes gone, Dortmund went ahead with their next clear chance. Emre Can's long ball found Erling Braut Haaland in the area, the Norwegian squaring for Dahoud, and although his shot was saved, Bellingham curled the rebound beyond Ederson. At 17 years and 289 days, Bellingham became the second youngest goal-scorer in the knockout stages of the Champions League behind Bojan Krkic, who was 72 days younger when he scored in the quarter-finals for Barcelona in 2008.

Conceding an early goal fired up City, whose captain Kevin De Bruyne hit the crossbar 10 minutes later following a mistake by Mateu Morey. Dortmund goalkeeper Marvin Hitz pulled off saves at point-blank range to deny Foden and a header by Oleksandr Zinchenko, while Bellingham got back to block a Mahrez attempt.

Can looked crestfallen when he gave away the penalty 10 minutes after the break by heading a corner onto his own arm. "That's bitter, it really hurts," said Can. "I touched the ball first with my head and then with my hand". Mahrez converted the spot-kick by slamming the ball beyond Hitz. The Algerian's fist-clenched celebration showed what the away goal meant to City before being mobbed by his team-mates.

The winning goal came with 15 minutes to go when Mahrez took a short corner with Bernardo Silva, who found Foden on the edge of the



DORTMUND: Manchester City's English midfielder Phil Foden (left) and Dortmund's German forward Ansgar Knauff vie for the ball during the UEFA Champions League quarterfinal second leg football match on Wednesday. — AFP

penalty area. The 20-year-old hit his left-footed shot low past Hitz and in off the post before sprinting to celebrate with Guardiola on the sidelines. It was a quiet night for Dortmund top-

scorer Haaland, who has now failed to score in his last seven games for club and country. "We had a big dream, but unfortunately it's over now," said Dortmund coach Edin Terzic. — AFP

Liverpool draw blank as Real roll into semis

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool were left to rue a host of missed chances as Real Madrid held out for a 0-0 draw at Anfield to progress to the semifinals of the Champions League 3-1 on aggregate. Mohamed Salah and Georginio Wijnaldum were guilty of wasting glorious opportunities to get Jurgen Klopp's men back into the tie as they failed to replicate a remarkable recovery from 3-0 down to beat Barcelona 4-3 on aggregate at the semifinal stage two years ago.

Madrid were far from their best, but did not need to be to set up a semifinal clash with Chelsea as Los Blancos extended their unbeaten run in all competitions to 14 games. Klopp admitted before the game that his players had to create their own atmosphere without the cauldron of noise that has accompanied famous European nights at Anfield in the past.

Despite the empty stands due to coronavirus restrictions, Liverpool flew out of the traps and should have halved their deficit within two minutes. Sadio Mane knocked Ozan Kabak's long ball perfectly into the path of Salah, but Liverpool's one consistent performer in the final third this season fired straight at Thibaut Courtois.

Klopp surprisingly repeated his decision from the first leg to leave Thiago Alcantara on the bench with James Milner this time taking the place of the Spanish international in midfield. Milner made his presence felt within a minute with a late lunge on Karim



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Portuguese striker Diogo Jota shoots wide during the UEFA Champions League quarterfinal second leg football match between Liverpool and Real Madrid at Anfield on Wednesday. — AFP

Benzema and nearly inflicted a different type of damage on Madrid 10 minutes in when his long range effort forced Courtois into another fine save.

Real's fine run has propelled them back into contention to defend their La Liga title and claim a 14th crown as European champions. However, Zinedine Zidane warned after Saturday's 2-1 El Clasico win over Barcelona that his players were at their "physical limit" and the visitors looked jaded as they were happy to sit on their first leg lead. The closest Madrid came to scoring was when Kabak inadvertently deflected a Benzema cross off the outside of his own post with Alisson Becker wrong-footed. — AFP

Persepolis, Sharjah make winning starts

DOHA: Iran's Persepolis and the UAE's Sharjah were the only teams to record wins on a day that saw four matches end in draws as the Asian Champions League's west zone competition kicked off at four venues on Wednesday. While last year's runners-up Persepolis edged the UAE's Al Wahda 1-0, Sharjah FC beat Iraq's Air Force Club, also by a similar margin, to set themselves up for a hectic group stage campaign over the next few weeks.

Captain Seyed Hosseini was the star for Persepolis as his 40th minute strike fetched three points for the Iranian giants who had finished runners-up to South Korea's Ulsan Hyundai in Doha last year. The 39-year-old defender found himself in a great position to score from the edge of the box after Mehdi Torabi had placed the ball for him following an exchange of passes with Ehsan Pahlavan.

Persepolis have been a force to be reckoned with in Asia over the past few years, missing out on the title last year and also in 2018 when they were beaten by Japan's Kashima Antlers in the final. Abu Dhabi based Al Wahda are making their 12th appearance in the competition having skipped it last year due to several coronavirus cases among their squad. The four-time UAE Pro League champions reached the semifinals of the event in 2007 but since then have got past the group stage only once, in 2019. Al Wahda had their chances on Wednesday at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Margao, India but it was Persepolis who dominated the Group E match, Shahriyar Moghanloo's eighth-minute header thudding into the crossbar. Torabi could have put Persepolis 2-0 up 20 minutes after the break but his effort off a Moghanloo pass went wide before the defensive minded Iranians went on to seal the three points. — AFP



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