

3 All registered KU, Education
Ministry staff vaccinated



5 Chemical weapons watchdog
considers Syria sanctions



14 FIFA vows 'consequences'
for Super League clubs



Fajr 03:53
Shurooq 05:16
Dhuhr 11:47
Asr 15:22
Maghrib 18:18
Isha 19:39

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Veteran Chad leader Deby dies after battling rebels

Son named transitional leader; Rebels vow to march on N'Djamena

N'DJAMENA, Chad: Chad's President Idriss Deby Itno died yesterday from wounds sustained in battle after three decades in power, the army said, opening a period of uncertainty in a country that is a key strategic ally of the West. His son was immediately named transitional leader as head of a military council and both the government and parliament were dissolved, but the army vowed "free and democratic" elections after an 18-month transitional period.

The shock news of Deby's death came only the day after the 68-year-old career military man was proclaimed the winner of a presidential election that had given him a sixth term in office.

The army also announced a curfew and border closures. Deby had ruled Chad with an iron fist since taking power on the back of a coup in 1990

but was a key ally in the West's anti-jihadist campaign in the troubled Sahel region.

The army said Deby had been commanding his forces at the weekend as they fought rebels who had launched a major incursion into the north of the country on election day, April 11. Deby "has just breathed his last breath defending the sovereign nation on the battlefield," army spokesman General Azem Bermendoa Agouna said in a statement read out on state television.

The army said a military council led by the late president's 37-year-old son Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, a four-star general, would replace him. The council has already met to draw up a transitional charter, Agouna said, without elaborating. Deby's son oversaw his father's security as head of the elite

presidential guard and often appeared alongside him, wearing the force's red beret, dark glasses and military fatigues. On Monday, the army had claimed a "great victory" in its battle against the rebels from neighbouring Libya, the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT). FACT, which waged its attacks in the provinces of Tibesti and Kanem, had claimed in a statement that Deby had been wounded—a report that could not be confirmed.

A rebel group which launched an offensive against the regime in Chad from Libya last week vowed yesterday to march on the capital N'Djamena after the death of president Idriss Deby Itno.

"We categorically reject the transition (being led by one of Deby's sons)," said Kingabe

Continued on Page 2



In this file photo taken on June 30, 2004 Chadian President Idriss Deby answers to reporters in his palace of Njamena. — AFP

Ramadan Kareem

Ramadan: When God spoke

By Teresa Leshner

We often offer silent or audible prayers, asking for help from our Creator, for succor from our problems, for blessings on our loved ones, and for forgiveness for our mistakes. We also - likely less often - thank Him for our sustenance and surroundings, our families and abilities. We communicate with God, and we may perceive the conversation as one-sided since we receive no spoken or written response. But what if the Almighty Creator of the heavens and earth did answer you - did send you a spoken or written response? What would He say? Would it be one word? A 20-minute speech? A letter? Or an entire book?

In the month of Ramadan, 1455 years ago, God sent us a message. It is the Quran, the Speech of God, revealed through the angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad, who dictated it so it could be transcribed for all of humanity. It is a direct message for you and me, and all humankind. In fact, many verses of the Quran are addressed to "O People!" or "O Mankind!" These are general verses for every living soul. While some verses are addressed particularly to believers, in fact, the whole Quran is a message for each of us. The Quran is the only divinely revealed scripture that has remained intact in its original language throughout the centuries, being widely available until today. It has also been translated in virtually every language across the globe.

So what did God say in this book to us from Him? Following are a few key verses:

"O mankind, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, that you may become righteous. [He] who made for you the earth a bed [spread out] and the sky a ceiling and sent down from the sky rain, and brought forth thereby fruits as provision for you. So do not attribute to Allah equals while you know [that there is nothing similar to Him]." (2:21-22)

"O People! Remember the favor of Allah upon you. Is there any creator other than Allah who provides for you from the heaven?

Heaven and the Earth? There is no deity except Him, so how are they turned away? If they deny you (O Muhammad) so were messengers denied before you. To God all affairs are returned (for decision)." (35:3-4)

"O People! God's promise is true, so do not let the worldly life turn you away and do not let the devil deceive you. Indeed, Satan is an enemy to you; so take him as an enemy. He only invites his party to be among the companions of the Blaze." (35:5-6)

Continued on Page 2

Lebanese PM eyes support from Qatar

DOHA: Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab called for wealthy Qatar's help during a visit to the Gulf country on Monday as his nation sinks deeper into economic ruin. Diab has met with several prominent Qatari ministers and officials during the trip which Lebanese media has suggested has been mired in "secrecy".

"Lebanon has reached the brink of total collapse,

as a result of decades of corruption and policies that have encouraged a rentier economy at the expense of a productive economy," Diab told local media. "We knock on (Qatar's) door just as we will knock on the doors of other sister Arab countries and wait for it to open its doors for us, as did sister Qatar." Despite public outrage and international pressure to form a government so as to enact reforms needed to unlock aid pledges, wrangling over cabinet posts persists eight months after Diab's government resigned.

It followed a devastating explosion at the Beirut port in August, widely blamed on official negligence. The massive portside explosion killed more than

200 people, levelling the waterfront and damaging countless buildings. A steep depreciation of the Lebanese pound along with an explosion of poverty and unemployment have eroded purchasing power and fuelled anger among the population.

Diab did not give any details of what aid had been requested or what would be forthcoming from Doha. "These details are owned by (Qatar's) Amir and prime minister, but I think that there are positives that will be announced," he said. It is not clear if Qatar would provide assistance before Lebanon announces a permanent government. Qatar indicated in February that it was ready to help kick-start

Continued on Page 2

US braces for verdict in Floyd case

MINNEAPOLIS, US: Jurors began a first full day of deliberations yesterday in the trial of the former Minneapolis police officer charged with murdering George Floyd as US cities braced for a verdict in a case that sparked nationwide protests against racism last summer.

After deliberating for four hours on Monday, the jury in "Minnesota vs Derek Chauvin" reconvened at 8 am Central Time (1300 GMT) yesterday.

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter for Floyd's May 25, 2020 death, which sparked protests against racial injustice around the world and is being seen as a landmark test of police accountability.

Chauvin, who is white, was captured on video kneeling on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes as the handcuffed 46-year-old Black man said repeatedly "I can't breathe." White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said President Joe Biden had spoken with Floyd's family on Monday to "check in with them and also share that the family was in his prayers." Prosecutors and the defense presented their closing arguments on Monday and Judge Peter Cahill sent

Continued on Page 2



BROOKLYN CENTER, Minnesota: One of the caretakers of Daunte Wright's memorial arranges the flowers in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota yesterday. — AFP

EU: Hard work needed to save Iran nuke deal

VIENNA: The EU chief negotiator for the Iran nuclear deal talks said yesterday "much more hard work" was needed to save the 2015 landmark agreement, following the latest discussion round in Vienna.

EU diplomat Enrique Mora hailed "progress made over the last two weeks" but said "ongoing challenges" remained to get the accord-that curbs Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief-back on track. The deal was thrown into question when the US withdrew from it in 2018 and sanctioned Iran, which in turn started ramping up its nuclear activities.

US President Joe Biden is seeking to revive the agreement. Diplomats from Britain, China, France, Germany, Iran and

Russia have been meeting regularly since early this month in a luxury Vienna hotel, while US diplomats are participating indirectly in the talks from a nearby hotel. "Much more hard work needed," Mora wrote on Twitter after a fresh round of talks. He added a third expert group was created to address "sequencing issues" after two groups had already been set up earlier to look into nuclear issues and sanctions lifting.

Iran insists it can reverse its nuclear activities, including producing uranium enriched to 60 percent purity, far above the deal's threshold, but only once sanctions imposed by former US president Donald Trump are removed. Talks are to continue next week, according to an EU statement.

Russian ambassador to Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov wrote on Twitter that the parties "decided to take a break to allow the delegations to do homework and consult with the capitals".

Ulyanov on Monday had said that the negotiations had entered "the drafting stage" though "practical solutions" were "still far away". — AFP



VIENNA: Delegation members from the parties to the Iran nuclear deal - Germany, France, Britain, China, Russia and Iran - attending a meeting at the Grand Hotel of Vienna yesterday as they try to restore the deal. — AFP

Local

Amir receives senior officials at Bayan Palace

Prime Minister meets visiting Maldives Foreign Minister



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. — Amiri Diwan and KUNA photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives reports of the Municipal Council's second session for the 12th legislative term 2019/2020.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives reports of the Municipal Council's second session for the 12th legislative term 2019/2020.



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah receives reports of the Municipal Council's second session for the 12th legislative term 2019/2020.



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets the visiting Maldives Foreign Minister Abdullah Shahid.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace yesterday. His Highness the Amir also received Chairman of Kuwait Municipal Council Osama Al-Otaibi, where he presented the reports of the council's second session for the 12th legislative

term 2019/2020.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad at Bayan Palace. His Highness the Crown Prince also received Minister Otaibi, who presented the Municipal Council's reports of the

second session for the 12th legislative term 2019/2020. Furthermore, Minister Otaibi presented the reports to His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah in a separate meeting at Bayan Palace.

In other news, His Highness the Prime Minister received yesterday, in the presence of Foreign

Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace, the visiting Maldives Foreign Minister Abdullah Shahid. During the meeting, Shahid delivered to the prime minister a written message from the Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA

Ramadan: When God spoke...

Continued from Page 1

"This (Message) is a declaration to (all) people as well as a guidance and instruction for God-fearing people" (3:138).

Say, [O Muhammad], "If ye do love Allah, Follow me: Allah will love you and forgive you your sins: For Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (3:31)

"There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of Allah an excellent pattern for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Last Day [and] who

remembers Allah often." (33:21)

It is really miraculous that our Creator has answered our prayers with an entire book dedicated to us, and sent us a messenger to guide our way in applying its teachings. After such a grand gesture, it is only polite to take the time to read it! If we truly want God to answer hear our prayers and answer our call, we must also heed His words and answer His call.

If you would like a translation of the Quran, contact any branch of IPC or the TIES Center.

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.

the Minnesota city on April 11 by a white police-woman. Some 400 protesters marched through the city on Monday calling for Chauvin's conviction, chanting: "The world is watching, we are watching, do the right thing."

In Washington, the National Guard said some 250 troops were being deployed "to support local law enforcement" in response to potential demonstrations. Prosecutors, in closing arguments on Monday, showed excerpts from the harrowing bystander video of Floyd's death that was seen by millions around the world.

"This case is exactly what you thought when you saw it first, when you saw that video," prosecutor Steve Schleicher told the jury. "You can believe your eyes," Schleicher said. "It's exactly what you knew, it's what you felt in your gut, it's what you now know in your heart."

"This wasn't policing, this was murder," Schleicher said. "Nine minutes and 29 seconds of shocking abuse of authority." Defense attorney Eric Nelson told the jury they need to look at Chauvin's actions "from the perspective of a reasonable police officer."

"He did not purposefully use unlawful force," Nelson said. He said Floyd's heart disease and drug use were factors in his death and "the state has failed to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt." Much of the three-week trial involved testimony from medical experts about Floyd's cause of death. Medical experts for the prosecution said Floyd died from a lack of oxygen from Chauvin's knee on his neck and that drugs were not a factor. The defense called a retired police officer who said Chauvin's use of force against Floyd was "justified." — AFP

This week's three-day trip is Diab's first official visit since taking office, having cancelled trips to Cairo and Baghdad.

"Lebanon is in grave danger and it can no longer wait without a safety rope," Diab added in the Qatari capital. "We expect you to be on the side of this country-Lebanon hopes that you will be a safety net to protect your Lebanese brothers." Lebanese daily An-Nahar said in an editorial ahead of the trip that "the caretaker PM surrounds the visit with secrecy". — AFP

Doctors denied access to 'very weak' Navalny

VLADIMIR, Russia: Alexei Navalny's doctors were again denied access yesterday to the jailed Kremlin critic, as lawyers for the hunger-striking opposition figure said he was "very weak" and demanded he be transferred to a civilian hospital. A team of medics has been trying to see the 44-year-old since early this month, after President Vladimir Putin's most outspoken opponent began refusing food on March 31 to demand proper medical treatment for a litany of ailments.

Nearly three weeks into the hunger strike, doctors over the weekend warned that Navalny's health was failing so rapidly he could die at "any minute", as the United States threatened Russia with "consequences" in the event of his death. Russia's prison service, which has repeatedly prevented Navalny's doctors from visiting him, said Monday that he had been moved from his penal colony in the Vladimir region some 100 kilometers (60 miles) east of Moscow to a medical facility at another colony in the same region. Navalny's lawyer Olga Mikhailova told reporters outside the prison hospital yesterday afternoon that he had become "very weak" and that "it's hard for him to speak and sit up".

That assessment came after a team of physicians including Navalny's personal doctor Anastasia Vasilyeva travelled yesterday morning to the new colony and were barred from seeing him.

Mikhailova and another lawyer who were, however, given access, said Navalny had agreed to a glucose drip and was given one on Sunday, but noted that nurses had failed multiple times to find his vein, citing that as evidence that the prison infirmary was not up to the task. "Medical care in this particular case is not being given,"

Veteran Chad leader Deby...

Continued from Page 1

Ogouzeimi de Tapol, spokesman for the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT). "We intend to pursue the offensive," the spokesman said, contacted by AFP from the Gabonese capital Libreville.

"Our troops are en route towards N'Djamena, but we will allow 15-28 hours for Deby's sons to bury their father, according to tradition," he added. Chad's military had previously claimed to have "destroyed" the rebels after more than a week of fighting, saying on Monday that it had killed more than 300 and captured 150.

Ministers and high-ranking military brass had said Monday that Deby was in the region on Saturday and Sunday after the rebel offensive. Deby was among the world's longest-serving leaders. Provisional results on Monday showed him winning re-election with almost 80 percent of the vote against nine challengers. His victory had never been

Mikhailova said. "He must be transferred to a civilian hospital in Moscow so that he can receive all the necessary assistance to prevent him from dying here."

'Allow a doctor to see my dad' -

Concern is growing in the West over Navalny's condition. German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday said Berlin is "working to ensure that he receives proper medical care". "We are very worried and are trying to use our influence," she said. His family members have also spoken up in recent days.

"Allow a doctor to see my dad," Navalny's daughter Dasha Navalnaya tweeted Sunday. In an Instagram post yesterday, the critic's mother Lyudmila Navalnaya called on authorities to "admit independent, civilian doctors to Alexei". The Kremlin however has dismissed the foreign outcry, saying that Russian convicts do not concern Western countries. It has also said that Navalny does not deserve any special treatment.

Navalny is serving a two-and-a-half-year sentence for violating parole terms on old fraud charges he says are politically motivated. He was arrested in January on his return to Russia from Germany, where he had spent months recovering from a poisoning attack with the Novichok nerve agent. He blames the attack on Putin, a claim the Kremlin has repeatedly denied.

The European Union and the United States have imposed sanctions on Russia over the poisoning, and on Monday threatened Moscow with further penalties in the event of Navalny's death.

Navalny launched his hunger strike demanding proper medical treatment over severe back pain and numbness in his limbs. His team said over the weekend a blood test had shown high potassium levels and elevated creatinine, indicating Navalny could be suffering from impaired kidney function and risked cardiac arrest. Russia's prison service insisted his condition was "satisfactory", despite moving him to the medical facility, and said he was taking vitamin supplements as part of his treatment. — AFP

in doubt, with a divided opposition, boycott calls, and a campaign in which demonstrations were banned or dispersed.

Deby was a herder's son from the Zaghawa ethnic group who took the classic path to power through the army, and relished the military culture. He had campaigned for the latest election on a promise of bringing peace and security to the troubled region, but his pledges were undermined by the rebel incursion. The government had sought Monday to assure concerned residents that the offensive was over. Panic had been triggered in some areas of the capital N'Djamena on Monday after tanks were seen out on the city's main roads, an AFP journalist reported.

The tanks were later withdrawn apart from a perimeter around the president's office, which is under heavy security during normal times. "The establishment of a security deployment in certain areas of the capital seems to have been misunderstood," government spokesman Cherif Mahamat Zene had said on Twitter.

"There is no particular threat to fear." However, the US embassy in N'Djamena had on Saturday ordered non-essential personnel to leave the country, warning of possible violence in N'Djamena. — AFP

Lebanese PM eyes support...

Continued from Page 1

Lebanon's flailing economy, but only if its deeply divided political class agreed on a new government.

Local

Kuwait curfew:
What you
need to know

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

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

Where to obtain a curfew pass?

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

Co-op delivery during curfew hours

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

Omariya Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316

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

Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

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

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

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

Rumaithiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951

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

Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832

All Kuwait University, Education
Ministry registered staff vaccinated

Ministry urges non-registered staff to sign up for COVID-19 vaccines

KUWAIT: Kuwait University announced the vaccination of all its staff members who registered on the Ministry of Health's website to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, including Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti members of the academic staff, as well as the administrative body. The University called in a statement yesterday upon all its personnel who have not taken the jabs against the virus, to register their names on the MoH vaccination site, as part of the university's preparations for the safe return of students to traditional learning in the next academic year. The university added that the University Council, in its meeting held on April 7, approved a plan and mechanism for Kuwait University students to return to traditional learning for the academic year 2021/2022, subject to the approval of the health authorities, with the recommendation to vaccinate all Kuwait University employees as soon as possible. Kuwait University praised the efforts made by the Ministry of Health during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education declared on Monday that all its teaching and administrative staff, who have registered on the Ministry of Health site, have been vaccinated against the novel coronavirus. The ministry called in a statement upon all its personnel, namely those who have not taken the jabs against the virus, to register their names on the MoH vaccination site, noting this step is necessary so it could choose teams to organize and supervise scheduled examinations for the 12th grade classes. Neither teachers nor administrative staff will be allowed to partake in organizing and managing the tests unless they are inoculated, in line with guidelines by the MoH, it affirmed. Health authorities have given priority in the vaccination process to the Ministry of Education personnel, teachers and administrators.

Health authorities have sped up the vaccination campaign during Ramadan with hope of reaching one million vaccinated people soon. A local report on Sunday said that around 42,000 students and nearly 60 percent of teachers were vaccinated against COVID-19 ahead of the final exam. Meanwhile, health authorities also began vaccinating around 3,000 bank sector employees and 1,000 cinema workers against the virus. This follows a similar drive to vaccinate co-op, supermarket and commercial shop workers around the country.



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's meeting. —KUNA

Curfew extension

The Cabinet had decided to extend the partial curfew until the end of the holy month of Ramadan in the country as of Thursday, April 22, with unchanged curfew hours from 7:00 pm until 5:00 am. However, the decision may be reassessed as the COVID-19 pandemic situation is regularly reviewed, Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said, adding that the Cabinet tasked concerned bodies with implementing the provisions of this decision. The Cabinet, during its meeting on Monday at Seif Palace under the chairmanship of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, studied recommendations by the ministerial committee of coronavirus emergency and took some relevant measures.

The Cabinet listened to a presentation made by Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah on the developments of epidemiological situation due to coronavirus on regional and international levels. He showed that there is an increase in deaths and infections as well as occupation of

intensive care units at hospitals. He also explained the preventive measures taken by the Ministry to implement vaccination in the country according to an accredited mechanism and priorities. The Cabinet urged the public to assume societal responsibility and accelerate receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, as it is the only method to reduce deaths and infections as well as pressure on ICUs.

The Ministry of Health had announced Monday that Kuwait registered 1,510 new coronavirus infections and eight related deaths in the previous 24 hours. The new figures take the total cases in the country up to 258,497 and deaths to 1,456 respectively, noted the ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad. Kuwait had announced eight deaths and 1,127 new on Sunday, as well as four deaths and 1,388 new infections on Saturday. Dr Sanad pointed out that some 1,231 more people had been cured of the virus over the same period, raising the total of those who have overcome the disease to 241,696. He added that the number of people hospitalized with the virus currently stood at 15,345, with 254 of them in intensive care units; up from 250 the previous day.

Ministers mull Health Insurance Company recommendations



KUWAIT: Ministers attend the Cabinet's weekly meeting. —KUNA

KUWAIT: The Cabinet studied during its weekly meeting the committee's recommendation on the Health Insurance Hospitals Company (HIHC), and was informed about coordination procedures between the Ministry of Health and the HIHC regarding a joint cooperation to operate the HIHC's system to achieve the desired goal of establishing it as quickly as possible to help reflect positively on health services in the country. In addition, the ministers were briefed on the economic affairs committee on the second report of Kuwait's higher energy commission, and they lauded efforts made by the concerned bodies to provide clean and renewable energy to achieve sustainable development, in line with Kuwait Vision 2035.

Moreover, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah informed the ministers about the telephone call he received from Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on distinguished ties between the two countries and some issues of common concern. The ministers discussed political affairs in light of the reports relating to the current developments on the political arena at both Arab and international levels. The Cabinet condemned strongly the attack on Irbil airport in Iraq's Kurdistan region and the bombings that targeted a popular market in eastern Baghdad that left several people killed and wounded. It affirmed that Kuwait stands with Iraq and supports all measures it takes to maintain its security and stability, and stressed the Kuwaiti firm stance rejecting and condemning terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. The Cabinet expressed deep sorrow over the incident of Egypt's train overturning that led to the deaths and injuries of dozens of people. It voiced sincere condolences to Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Egyptian people and the families of victims. —KUNA

Company ordered
to pay delayed
5-month salaries

KUWAIT: The Public Authority of Manpower gave a security company 24 hours to pay school guards their salaries as per its contract with the education ministry, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported yesterday. The authority said in a press statement that it checked the complaint of a school guard in a video clip, saying he has not received his salary for five months. Concerned officials coordinated with residency affairs detectives and went to the guard's workplace and took his testimony, as well as that of the employer. It said company officials asked for one day to pay the guard and the rest of the guards who did not receive their salaries. The authority said it will monitor the company and its undertaking during the said period.

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News in brief

KJA names lawyer

KUWAIT: Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA) Board of Directors agreed to name lawyer Majed Fahhad Al-Duwaish legal advisor for KJA. Duwaish said he was ready to defend any association member in Kuwaiti courts, as well as give legal consultations free of charge. This approval was made during the board's meeting on April 4, 2021.

Cinema to reopen in Eid?

KUWAIT: Cinemas around Kuwait are being prepared in coordination with the health ministry to reopen during the Eid Al-Fitr holiday. Cinescape Spokesman Sheikh Duaij Al-Sabah said in statements published in Al-Rai Arabic daily yesterday.

Opinions in private safe

KUWAIT: The appeals court upheld a court of first instance ruling that found four people not guilty of damaging national unity, because their opinions were expressed in a private social media chat room, Al-Jarida Arabic daily reported yesterday.

Oil price down

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went down by 31 cents to \$65.78 per barrel Monday as oppose to \$66.09 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. The prices of the Brent crude and West Texas Intermediate, globally, went up with the first going up by 28 cents to \$67.05 per barrel, while the latter went up by 25 cents to \$63.38 pb.

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: Open markets of the early 1960s. The picture shows an open market in Kuwait City with its traditional mud brick buildings and mosque. Some merchants are seen next to the shops. (Source: 'Pictures of the old markets of Kuwait' by Ali Al-Rais, Center of Research and Studies on Kuwait 2017. Prepared by: Mahmoud Aakaria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

Burgan Bank concludes Ahmadi Governorate's art competition

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank recently concluded its sponsorship of the Al-Ahmadi Governorate's school art competition "Nabeek Salem". Conducted in compliance with the current health regulations in the Governorate's Office, the award ceremony was organized by the Al-Ahmadi Governorate under the patronage of the Governor of Ahmadi Sheikh Fawaz Al-Khalid Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. The successful live broadcast of the virtual exhibition displayed the creative artworks of nearly 500 students from across 150 schools.

In addition to uplifting the local education sector, sponsorship of the art contest comes as part of Burgan Bank's corporate social responsibility to ensure the overall welfare of the community. The one-of-a-kind contest acknowledged the volunteers' efforts and celebrated the successful campaign that helped contribute to raising awareness on the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic and importance in practicing preventive measures such as getting vaccinated to achieve community immunity.

The Organizing Committee awarded three winners from each academic level whose nine art pieces best represented the cause. All of the drawings and paintings were reviewed

carefully by the Screening and Judging Committee formed by the Technical Art Education Supervision in the Educational Area. The competition that was organized online via the 'Teams' educational platform, also reflected the commitment of the students and their families who were eager to spread the message and improve the current situation.

The Governor of Ahmadi, Sheikh Fawaz Al-Khalid Al-Hamad Al-Sabah added that he was proud of the Al-Ahmadi Governorates perseverance in carrying out its societal and national obligations to tackle the rise of the pandemic with the aid of many governmental, community and volunteering agencies, noting that the "Nabeek Salem" art competition was an impressive initiative.

Sheikh Fawaz Al-Khalid Al-Hamad Al-Sabah thanked Burgan Bank for its pursuit of supporting sustainable development through joint collaborations and many community-driven activities with the Al-Ahmadi Governorate.

Hessa Hussain Al-Najadah, Manager - Public Relations at Burgan Bank, said: "We are delighted to have supported and been part of another positive and strong campaign in partnership with the Al-Ahmadi Governorate for the second consecutive year. The theme of the "Nabeek Salem" art competition was designed based on the need of the hour as the key to protecting the people of Kuwait and enabling prevention is through the vaccination. Burgan Bank's empowering ethos 'Driven by you...Motivated by Sustainability', guides our CSR efforts in helping various segments of the community and delivering real change."

Najadah concluded: "Burgan Bank would like to thank the



KUWAIT: Governor of Ahmadi Sheikh Fawaz Al-Khalid Al-Hamad Al-Sabah (right) with Hessa Hussain Al-Najadah, Manager - Public Relations at Burgan Bank.

Al-Ahmadi Governorate and Al-Ahmadi's Supervision of Art Education for their efforts and congratulate all of the winners for their inspiring artworks."

The bank's support of this initiative falls under its dynamic full-fledged community program entitled 'ENGAGE' - 'Together to be the change. This program sheds light on important aspects affecting every segment of the society by promoting social welfare through educational, cultural and health driven initiatives. Burgan Bank's approach to 'ENGAGE' begins with a vital principle that as a leading Kuwaiti financial institution, its conduct and policies should be aligned with the needs and interests of the community.

KRCS distributes food in Lebanon on Ramadan

BEIRUT: Kuwait Red Crescent is handing out food packages to 75,000 people in Lebanon, including nationals along with Syrian and Palestinian refugees, during the holy month of Ramadan, an official said yesterday. The distribution of the parcels, which contain "essential food rations," is being carried out cooperatively by KRCS and Lebanese Red Cross volunteers throughout the country, head of the organization's Lebanon mis-



sion Musaed Al-Enezi said. "KRCS intends to aid people in need in facing tough economic and living conditions, particularly during the month of good deeds and mercy," he added. —KUNA

ICSK Junior conducts morning assembly

KUWAIT: The morning assembly cultivates a sense of belonging towards the school. It exposes us to an array of experiences and helps the students to imbibe different values. Moving ahead positively in the existing scenario of despair and uncertainty during the pandemic, the students of ICSK Junior with full enthusiasm, conducted a very well-planned assembly of the new academic year 2021-2022, "Satrarambh" recently. The students got the opportunity to display their creativity and talents on a virtual platform, which was highly commendable.

The chief guest Dr Navniit Gandhi, an extremely talented personality, a prolific writer, poetess and an author graced the event by humbly accepting the invitation. Lighting a lamp before an event symbolizes abundance, prosperity and knowledge. The distinguished guest Dr Navniit Gandhi, Principal Sherly Dennis and Vice Principal Sheeja Ravi lighted the traditional lamp to invoke brightness and divine energy.

The prayer song, a semi classical dance and a foot



tapping group dance truly mesmerized the audience. The energy of all the performances was contagious which left the audience in awe of them. The orators delivered their speech with confidence that is worth mentioning. A wonderful video presentation about the plans for the new school year fixed the gaze of the viewers.

The chief guest Dr Navniit Gandhi enlightened the children as well as the parents with some very good knowledgeable tips which would definitely help them in the near future. Principal Sherly Dennis and Vice Principal Sheeja Ravi appreciated the efforts of the children, parents and teachers who made the event a grand success. The assembly culminated with the rendition of the pledge and the national anthem played on piano, resonating positivity and exuberance.


Kuwait Times
THE LEADING INDEPENDENT DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

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.

ISSUE NO: 18415 RAMADAN 9, 1442 AH

Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

9- Which surah in the Holy Quran is nicknamed the heart of Quran?

☐ Al-Qasas

☐ Al-Kahf

☐ Yasin

Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

Date :

Name :

Civil ID :

Tel :

Email :

Strategic Partner

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Georgia ruling party, opposition sign EU-led pact to end crisis

50 years after Papa Doc, Haiti democracy still work in progress

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In this file photo taken on April 04, 2017 an unconscious Syrian child receives treatment at a hospital in Khan Sheikhun, a rebel-held town in the northwestern Syrian Idlib province, following a suspected toxic gas attack. —AFP

Syria faces sanctions over ‘gas attacks’

World powers urge chemical weapons watchdog to hit Damascus with sanctions

THE HAGUE: World powers urged the global chemical weapons watchdog yesterday to hit Syria with unprecedented sanctions for alleged toxic gas attacks and for failing to declare its arsenal. Syria faces the loss of its “rights and privileges” at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) after a probe found it had carried out three attacks in 2017.

The regulator’s 193 member states are expected to vote today on a proposal by France, backed by 46 countries, that would include freezing Syria’s voting rights at the Netherlands-based body. Syria and its ally Russia dismissed the sanctions threat, accusing Western powers of using the Hague-based OPCW as a “propaganda tool” to undermine Damascus in its ten-year civil war.

“We cannot let this tragedy go on for another decade,” French OPCW ambassador Luis Vassy told the watchdog. “We find ourselves in an exceptional situation, which demands that we take action accordingly.”

It would be the first time a country had faced such punishment in the history of the OPCW, which was founded nearly a quarter of a century ago to rid the world of chemical weapons.

Sarin and chlorine

The regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad agreed in 2013 to join the OPCW and give up all chemical weapons, following a suspected sarin nerve gas attack that killed 1,400 people in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. But an OPCW investigation found in April last year

that the Syrian air force was responsible for three attacks on the village of Lataminah in 2017 using sarin and chlorine gas.

Damascus then failed to adhere to a 90-day deadline to declare the weapons used in the attacks, reveal its remaining stocks and comply with OPCW inspections. France in response submitted the motion calling for Syria to be punished. Pressure mounted on Damascus last week after a second OPCW investigation found a Syrian helicopter dropped a chlorine bomb on the rebel-held town of Saraqib in 2018. OPCW Director General Fernando Arias said on Tuesday that Syria’s responses to questions about its chemical weapons still “cannot be considered accurate and complete” despite years of inspections.

In the most recent example, the OPCW had opened a new inquiry after Damascus gave “insufficient” explanations for the discovery of chemicals in September 2020 at a site where it had denied making toxic arms. The UN recently said Damascus has for years not replied to a series of 19 questions about its weapons installations.

‘Hostile agenda’

Syria slammed the “pompous” French statement, likening the situation to the false allegations about weapons of mass destruction before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. “We deny that we have ever used toxic gases,” Syria’s OPCW ambassador Rania Alrifaiy said. “I call on you to vote no, to reject the hostile agenda against Syria,” she said.

Russia also rejected the move to punish its ally. “This is very serious. We’ve never had this kind of a case before where a state party was deprived of their privileges and rights,” Russian ambassador Alexander Shulgin said. France however said countries should not be “duped” by claims that Syria would be frozen out of the OPCW, and that Syria would still be able to speak there even though it could not vote.

Moscow and Damascus allege the OPCW has become “politicized”, especially since it gained new powers in 2018 to identify the perpetrators of attacks. Previously it could only say whether or not chemical arms had been used. Russia meanwhile also faces pressure at the OPCW over last year’s Novichok nerve agent poisoning of opposition figure Alexei Navalny. —AFP

Laschet named as candidate for Merkel’s crown

BERLIN: Angela Merkel’s conservatives yesterday confirmed Armin Laschet’s disputed nomination as their chancellor candidate in September’s election, as his rival conceded following a bitter battle that has left the bloc deeply divided. Hours after Laschet, 60, won the backing of the CDU party’s leadership, Bavaria’s state premier Markus Soeder finally backed down after a week of digging his heels in.

“The dice have fallen. Armin Laschet is the chancellor candidate” of the conservative CDU-CSU alliance, said Soeder. “There are days for

discussion. There are days for decision. That has all happened and now it is important to look together into the future,” he said, adding that he wished Laschet success and offered him the backing of Bavarian sister party CSU.

The climbdown came after nine days of back-biting among MPs and leading figures within the conservative bloc that pushed the once-stable alliance to the brink of implosion just as Merkel is about to bow out from politics after 16 years in power. While long-time Merkel ally Laschet received the CDU’s leadership’s backing, 54-year-old Soeder commands far stronger support among the public.

A recent opinion poll commissioned by the Bild daily on Germany’s most popular politicians even had Soeder topping the charts, just above Merkel, while Laschet languished in 12th place.

But the premier of Germany’s most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, has a history of coming back from behind.

‘Passionate European’

A sworn Merkel loyalist, Laschet famously backed the chancellor during the fallout from the 2015 refugee crisis. Despite a souring mood at that time over the arrival of more than a million asylum seekers, Laschet seized North Rhine-Westphalia state—a sprawling industrial region and a Social Democrats stronghold—in a regional election in 2017, handing a major boost to the CDU.

Laschet, a fluent French speaker and self-described “passionate European”, also prevailed in a battle for the CDU chief post in January, seeing off a fierce challenge from Friedrich Merz. Yet he appeared to chart a course away from Merkel in March when he defied the chancellor’s pleas for harder shutdown measures from the leaders of Germany’s 16 states. Laschet defended North Rhine-Westphalia’s broad interpretation of national virus measures, calling for “more freedom and flexibility”. —AFP

Freedom index: Journalism blocked in 130+ countries

PARIS: The annual report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said yesterday that journalism was at least partly blocked in nearly three-quarters of the 180 countries surveyed. Its World Press Freedom Index found 73 countries “totally blocked or seriously impeded” journalism, while it was “constrained” in 59 others, adding that many governments had used the pandemic to worsen repression.

“Journalism is the best vaccine against disinformation,” RSF secretary-general Christophe

Deloire said in a statement. “Unfortunately, its production and distribution are too often blocked by political, economic, technological and, sometimes, even cultural factors.” Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan, China and Djibouti fared worst overall in this year’s RSF ranking. Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Costa Rica were ranked highest. The Middle East and North Africa region continues to be the most repressive for journalists, the report found, highlighting the worsening situation in Iran, Egypt and Syria over the past year. “In this region, still the toughest and most dangerous for journalists, the pandemic has exacerbated the problems that have long plagued the press, which was already in its death throes,” it said. Malaysia recorded the worst deterioration, down 18 places in the ranking to 119, due in part to a recent “anti-fake news” law

“allowing the government to impose its own version of the truth”. RSF said the global level of media freedom remained largely stable overall for the past year, but noted that the figures had deteriorated by 12 percent since the ranking was first launched in 2013.

Part of the problem is falling trust in journalists, fuelled by political polarization and online misinformation. RSF noted a recent survey by the Edelman Trust that found 59 percent of respondents across 28 countries believed journalists deliberately misled the public.

The World Press Freedom Index is based on questionnaires sent to experts around the world, combined with data on abuse and acts of violence against journalists to form a picture that includes pluralism, media independence, self-censorship and other factors. —AFP

PCC congress was held 60 years after Fidel Castro declared Cuba a socialist state, setting up decades of conflict with the United States, which has had sanctions against the country since 1962.

Diaz-Canel takes the reins as Cuba battles its worst economic crisis in 30 years, sky-high inflation, biting food shortages, long lines for basic necessities and growing disgruntlement over limited freedoms. Cuba, one of just five communist countries in the world, faces constant shortages and needs to import 80 percent of what it consumes.

“Since I was born, I have only known one party,” said Miguel Gainza, a 58-year-old in Havana. “And no one dies of hunger, it’s true,” he added. But today, “we are a little stuck, and it’s a shame that Fidel is dead because he solved all our problems”. Diaz-Canel, a suit-and-tie wearing, tech-savvy Beatles fan, while in some ways more modern than the Castros with their love for military uniforms, is a staunch party disciple. —AFP

Cuba gets new leader as last Castro retires

HAVANA: Cuba marked the end of an era Monday with the official transfer of power from the Castro clan, in charge for six decades, to the communist country’s first civilian leader, Miguel Diaz-Canel. The transition, while hugely symbolic, is unlikely to result in dramatic policy shifts in the one-party system that Diaz-Canel, 60, has vowed to safeguard. “The most revolutionary thing within the Revolution is to always defend the party, in the same way that the party should be the greatest defender of the Revolution,” he said on Monday.

International Monetary Fund

Middle East Center for Economics and Finance

Kuwait

Vacancy Announcement

“Senior Interpreter/Translator”

Applications are being solicited for the position of Senior Interpreter/Translator at the IMF-Middle East Center for Economics and Finance (CEF) located in Kuwait. The CEF is an office of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with a mission to strengthen the skills of officials from Arab League countries in economics, finance, and policy formulation, done mainly through the delivery of training courses and seminars. This is a full-time position with an initial appointment term of two-years (renewable) and carries a competitive salary and benefits package commensurate with the successful candidate’s experience and qualifications. For non-residents of Kuwait, relocation and living allowances are provided.

Qualifications and Skills:

- University degree in English language and/or translation or simultaneous interpretation;
- Knowledge of economics, and work experience in translation of economic and financial texts from/to English and Arabic;
- Ability to produce final translations in electronic format and to assist other interpreters in performing consecutive interpretation as needed;
- Ability to act as team leader for less experienced interpreters, and to play a major role in their development and evaluation;
- Must have Arabic as mother tongue;
- High level of competence in office automation;
- Initiative, versatility, good interpersonal skills as well as ability to work as part of a team that may include both outside freelancers and CEF staff.

Closing date of the application is May 3, 2021.

Interested applicants should visit www.imf.org/jobs for the full vacancy information and to apply to job # 21-R811

International

Georgia ruling party, opposition sign EU-led pact to end crisis

Agreement could pave the way for sweeping electoral, judicial reforms

TBILISI, Georgia: Georgia's ruling party and the opposition signed an EU-mediated agreement to end a months-long political crisis that raised concerns in the West over the Caucasus country's backsliding on democracy. Ending the opposition's parliamentary boycott and paving the way for sweeping electoral and judicial reforms, the anti-

ing the crisis." "This agreement is the starting point for your work towards consolidating Georgia's democracy and taking Georgia forward on its Euro-Atlantic future," he added.

He oversaw the televised signing ceremony held in Georgia's presidential palace by video link from Brussels and was set to visit the capital Tbilisi later.



A handout photograph taken and released by Georgian Presidential Press Service Monday shows the European Council President Charles Michel on a screen as participants attend a meeting with Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili over the signature of a deal to end the current political crisis in Georgia. — AFP

crisis agreement-tabled the day before by European Council President Charles Michel—was signed by representatives of all political parties.

Georgia's main opposition force, the United National Movement (UNM), will join the deal "after its (jailed leader Nika) Melia is released from prison as stipulated in the agreement," Salome Samadashvili, one of the party leaders who signed the pact in her personal capacity, said. Michel praised the deal as "a truly European way of resolv-

Michel said he would discuss with Georgian political leaders joint steps aimed at strengthening the ties between Brussels and the EU-aspirant nation in Europe's extreme southeast. The ex-Soviet country has been gripped by a political crisis since October's parliamentary elections, which opposition parties denounced as rigged.

After the vote, opposition lawmakers refused to assume their seats in the new parliament and staged mass protests to demand snap polls.

Biden tests ties with China and Russia

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden's administration accuses China of genocide but reached a joint pledge to cooperate on climate. The White House is also working to arrange a summit with Russia, despite imposing harsh new sanctions. Biden's strategy is not about easing tensions, so often the stated goal of diplomacy, but identifying narrow areas to work together—especially on climate change—while acknowledging that much of the relationship will remain hostile. Biden alluded to America's Cold War relationship with the Soviet Union last week after he ordered sanctions and the expulsion of Russian diplomats as a way to impose costs over Moscow's alleged interference in US elections and a major hacking operation. "We want a stable, predictable relationship," said Biden, who proposed a summit in a neutral country during a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin even while pressing him over the health of jailed dissident Alexei Navalny.

"Throughout our long history of competition, our two countries have been able to find ways to manage tensions and to keep them from escalating out of control," he said. Biden's relationship with China is guided by a similar philosophy—described, in a colloquial phrase popular in his White House, as being able to walk and chew gum at the same time. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a speech Monday, defended the approach from expected criticism by saying that no nation's climate efforts would "excuse bad behavior."

"Climate is not a trading card; it is our future," Blinken said. Climate envoy John Kerry, after a visit to Shanghai last week, issued a joint statement with China saying the two nations are "committed to cooperating with each other." However general in tone, it marked a stark contrast to a testy first meeting between top officials in March in Alaska, where Blinken raised concerns on a host of Chinese actions including what Washington has described as "genocide" against Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim Turkic-speaking people.

Subtle shift

Biden has invited Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping to a climate summit this week, with Kerry saying it would be tantamount to "killing yourself" not to work together on climate despite other disagreements. Biden's cool approach follows the highly personalized diplomacy of his predecessor Donald Trump, who voiced admiration for Putin and in his last year in office incessantly berated Beijing, which he blamed for the devastating COVID-19 pandemic. Ryan Hass, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who advised former president Barack Obama on China, detected a "gradual but significant shift" in the stance toward Beijing under Biden. "His administration has dialed down the rhetorical heat and focused purposefully on concrete areas of the relationship where American interests are impacted by Chinese actions," Hass said. "Both sides also have slowly begun restoring direct functioning channels of diplomatic communication to address areas of concern and explore opportunities for coordination." China and the United States are the world's top two economies and together account for half of global emissions responsible for climate change. Russia is the fourth biggest emitter and Putin has accepted an invitation to speak at the climate summit. —AFP

EU will have vaccine doses for 70% of adults by mid-July

PARIS: The EU will have enough COVID-19 vaccine doses to cover 70 percent of its adult population by mid-July due to higher production within the bloc, a senior official said yesterday. "Fifty-three factories are producing vaccines in the EU. Our continent is now the largest producer in the world after the United States," internal markets commissioner Thierry Breton told French daily Le Figaro in an interview. "I am now certain of how many doses are currently in production and I know how many millions will be delivered each week," he said.

"This allows me to assure you that we will have by mid-July the number of doses necessary for vaccinating 70 percent of the European Union's adult population," he said, citing the threshold many health experts say is necessary to achieve "herd immunity".

EU governments have faced fierce criticism over the bloc's joint vaccine procurement efforts, which saw a slow start to its inoculation drive even as programs raced ahead in Britain and the US. Already half of American adults have had at least one dose, and as of Monday anyone aged 16 and over can sign up for a shot. In the EU, by contrast, just over 20 percent of adults have received at least one jab, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

Breton insisted that Europe would catch up in the coming months, with production capacity "that will reach 200 million doses a month by this summer". But he poured cold water on the idea of using Russia's Sputnik V vaccine anytime soon, after Germany opened discussions with Moscow this month without waiting for coordinated EU action. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) is evaluating Sputnik's safety and efficiency, but "it still lacks some essential data," Breton said. And even if approved, "we'll have to find production capacity, because the Russians do not have large production sites and are looking for industrial partners in Europe which are already fully mobilised".

US advises against India travel as virus cases surge

NEW DELHI: The United States has warned against travel to India, where authorities yesterday imposed tighter restrictions to combat an explosion of COVID-19 cases. India has recorded more than three million new infections and 18,000 deaths this month, bringing its caseload to the world's second-highest, after the United States. The updated US travel advisory comes after the State Department announced Monday it would apply "do not travel" guidance to about 80 percent of countries worldwide, citing the unprecedented risk posed by the pandemic.

"Even fully vaccinated travelers... should avoid all travel to India," the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. Singapore also boosted restrictions on arrivals from India Tuesday, adding a week to the previously required 14-day quarantine period. These moves follow Britain's decision on Monday to

'Politicized justice'

The stalemate worsened in February after police arrested UNM leader Melia in a violent raid on his party headquarters, leading to the prime minister's resignation and prompting swift condemnation from the West. On a visit to Tbilisi last month, Michel initiated inter-party talks aimed at diffusing the spiralling crisis. The parties hammered out the agreement after two failed attempts.

The deal commits opposition parties to enter parliament, while the ruling Georgian Dream party has pledged to resolve cases of "perceived politicized justice" through amnesties or similar measures within a week. That clause concerns the criminal case of Melia, who faces charges of organizing mass violence during anti-government protests in 2019 — a case he says is politically motivated.

The agreement dictates that early parliamentary elections be called in 2022 if the Georgian Dream party scores less than 43 percent in upcoming local elections. It also sets the rules for power-sharing in parliament—guaranteeing that opposition lawmakers would chair five committees—and stipulates sweeping judiciary and electoral reforms.

'Unstable system'

The United States welcomed the agreement "to bring an end to Georgia's political crisis." However, despite Michel declaring the "crisis is over", UNM reiterated plans to stage a mass anti-government rally on May 15, saying the stalemate could only be considered resolved after Melia leaves prison.

Praising "some positive clauses" of the agreement, one UNM leader, Aiko Minashvili, said that "ending the crisis would require addressing fundamental problems" of Georgia's fledgling democracy.

In power since 2012, Georgian Dream and its billionaire founder Bidzina Ivanishvili have faced mounting criticism from the West over the country's worsening democratic record. Critics accuse Ivanishvili—who is widely seen to be calling the shots in Georgia despite having no official role—of persecuting political opponents and creating a corrupt system where private interests permeate politics. "Such an unstable political system will continue producing political crises in future," said Minashvili. — AFP

"For all these reasons, I don't think significant quantities of Sputnik will be available for Europe before the end of 2021," he said.

'Very serious level'

Several EU governments are battling a third wave of coronavirus cases since the outbreak emerged last year, and are desperately hoping for increased vaccine supplies before easing lockdowns and other restrictions. French Health Minister Olivier Veran warned Tuesday that despite a slight dip in the number of new cases since schools were shut and travel banned early this month, "the epidemic is still at a very serious level". President Emmanuel Macron aims to begin easing Covid restrictions in mid-May, including by allowing restaurants shut since late October to reopen outdoor seating. But Veran refused to confirm if the mid-May goal would be reached, telling the regional *Telegramme* newspaper that "the decrease in cases is not yet fast enough or decisive. We have to continue our efforts." — AFP



This handout file photograph taken and released by French pharmaceutical subcontracting firm Delpharm shows vials being filled with the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on a production line at the Delpharm plant in Saint-Remy-sur-Avre, northern France. — AFP

add India to its "red list", and Hong Kong's ban on all flights from the country.

'Tipping point'

India has been struggling to rein in its raging outbreak, with hospitals running out of beds and the government forced to reimpose economically painful restrictions. Its capital and worst-hit city New Delhi entered a week-long lockdown on Monday, with parks, cinemas and malls closed. "Delhi's health system is at a tipping point," said chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, who yesterday went into self-isolation after his wife tested positive. The lockdown announcement prompted tens of thousands of migrant workers to flee Delhi, in scenes reminiscent of the national shutdown a year ago that inflicted economic and human misery. Mumbai's home state of Maharashtra, the epicenter of the recent surge, yesterday further tightened restrictions on grocery shops and home deliveries. All non-essential shops and malls in the western state are currently shut until May 1. Uttar Pradesh, home to some 240 million people, yesterday announced a weekend lockdown from Friday evening, whilst Telangana state in the south became the latest to impose a night curfew. Former Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh, 88, was admitted to hospital with the virus on Monday. Officials said yesterday that his condition was stable. — AFP



In this file photo, former US Vice President Walter Mondale walks outside the US Senate chamber in the US Capitol January 3, 2018 in Washington, DC. — AFP

Former US VP Walter Mondale dies at 93

WASHINGTON: Former US Vice President Walter Mondale, a liberal icon who famously told voters to expect a tax increase should he win the presidency, died Monday, US media reported. He was 93 years old. No cause was given for Mondale's death, according to reports citing a statement from his family.

Mondale served as vice president under Jimmy Carter from 1977 to 1981.

"Today I mourn the passing of my dear friend Walter Mondale, who I consider the best vice president in our country's history," Carter said in a statement, extending his condolences to his former number two's family. "He was an invaluable partner and an able servant of the people of Minnesota, the United States, and the world." Prior to his stint at the White House, Mondale had served as attorney general to his home state of Minnesota from 1960 to 1964, and then as US senator from that state from 1964 to 1976. After Carter left office, Mondale went on to serve as ambassador to Japan between 1993 and 1996. Senator Amy Klobuchar, a fellow Minnesotan, mourned Mondale's passing, calling him "kind and dignified to the end," while former President Barack Obama said Mondale "championed progressive causes and changed the role of VP".

Current Vice President Kamala Harris said in a statement her predecessor "led an extraordinary life of service," and called him "so generous with his wit and wisdom over the years." President Joe Biden reflected on some of his fondest memories of Mondale, including that he had been one of the first to greet Biden when he first arrived at the US Senate. Walter Frederick "Fritz" Mondale was born on January 5, 1928 in the tiny town of Ceylon, Minnesota. The son of a Methodist minister and a music teacher, he moved through several small towns in the southern part of the state throughout his childhood. At age 20, Mondale became a congressional district manager for Hubert Humphrey's successful Senate campaign. Humphrey would later become Mondale's political mentor. — AFP

Police officer in Capitol riot died from stroke

WASHINGTON: The police officer who died following the attack on the US Capitol by supporters of president Donald Trump in January was killed by two strokes, the Washington city coroner ruled Monday. Brian Sicknick was one of five people, and the only police officer, who died in direct connection to the January 6 insurrection, when hundreds of pro-Trump rioters attacked and overran police to force their way into the seat of US government, shutting the building down.

Initial reports, later ruled incorrect, said Sicknick had been hit by a fire extinguisher. Later reports tied his death to being sprayed with chemical irritants like bear spray or pepper spray. But the city's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner ruled Monday that Sicknick, 42, had died from "natural" causes.

The official report attributed the Capitol Police officer's death to "acute brainstem and cerebellar infarcts due to acute basilar artery thrombosis"—a particularly devastating form of stroke with a high death rate, caused by blockages in the brain. It noted that he had been sprayed with a chemical substance at about 2:20 pm during the assault on Congress. At 10:00 pm, he collapsed at the Capitol and was taken to the hospital. Almost 24 hours later he died while still in the hospital.

The report made no link between the spray and Sicknick's collapse. Francisco Diaz, the chief medical examiner, told *The Washington Post* there was no evidence that the officer had an allergic reaction to the chemicals, nor did he show any other internal or external injuries.

However, Diaz told the *Post* that "all that transpired played a role in his condition." Sicknick's collapse and death supported widespread accusations that Trump and his followers had contributed to the death of a policeman, and the FBI had investigated those involved for possible murder charges. Many of the hundreds arrested after the attack have been charged with assaulting and injuring dozens of law enforcement officials who were defending the Capitol. — AFP

International

50 years after Papa Doc, Haiti democracy still work in progress

Country embroiled in twin crises of political illegitimacy, rampant violence

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti: When Haitian strongman Francois Duvalier died, his subjects had no choice on their next president—his 19-year-old son took over. The vote to approve him as successor was officially 2,391,916 to zero. Half a century has passed since the April 1971 death of the elder Duvalier but Haiti is still struggling to achieve democracy, with the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation again embroiled in twin crises of political illegitimacy and rampant violence.

Dubbed Papa Doc due to his background as a physician, the elder Duvalier was democratically elected in 1957 but soon built a ruthless authoritarian state that is believed to have killed tens of thousands of people in its quest to maintain power. Papa Doc also built a fearsome personality cult, reviving voodoo traditions to cast himself as a spirit of the dead and claiming through propaganda posters to have been selected by Jesus Christ. Papa Doc also knew how to play the United States, which was panicked over Fidel Castro's revolution in nearby Cuba. When "Baby Doc" Jean-Claude Duvalier took over as the world's youngest leader, the United States was fully onboard thanks to the Duvaliers' fervent anti-communism.

The US ambassador, Clinton Knox, even had a T-shirt with the likeness of Baby Doc "so he could show the opposition, both overseas and inside the country, that he was their choice," said historian Pierre Buteau. Baby Doc, however, faced opposition as protests erupted across Haiti in the mid-1980s. In 1986, the United States finally parted ways with Baby Doc, who went into exile in France where he spent most of the rest of his life.

Democracy came to Haiti with the 1991 election of reformist priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide, but he was twice ousted in military coups. Haiti again faces question marks as President Jovenel Moise insists he is president through February 2022, rejecting claims by the opposition that his term ended in February 2021.

'You don't just move on'

Moise is championing a June referendum that would consolidate powers around the presidency amid soaring violence and kidnappings—including the abductions of seven Catholic clergy members—that last week prompted the cabinet to resign. "You don't just move on from one day to the next following a dictatorship that lasted 30 years and infected all of the country's institutions with a goal of staying in power as long as possible," said sociologist Laennec Hurbon. The 1987 constitution set a 10-year ban on political participation by the Tontons Macoutes, the paramilitary unit—named for a bogeyman



People walk down a street of Port-au-Prince. Half a century has passed since the April 1971 death of the elder Duvalier but Haiti is still struggling to achieve democracy.— AFP

in Haitian folklore—that brutally enforced the Duvaliers' rule. Mobs carried out lynchings in which suspected militia members were burned alive with the rubber wheels around their necks. The attacks came to be known as "Pere LeBrun", after a local tire dealer.

But the Tontons Macoutes did not face trial and still enjoyed quiet relations with US intelligence as they joined the front lines of opposition to Aristide. "There was no conventional justice for the atrocities of the Macoutes, but there was justice by the people through Pere LeBrun," Buteau said.

With no formal accounting for crimes under the Duvaliers, the cruelty of the regime is being quickly forgotten in a country where more than half the population was born after Baby Doc fell. School textbooks do not even cover Haitian history after 1957. "The problem in Haiti is that the memories of the dictatorship are very weak," Hurbon said. "Many people continue to say that things were better in '86."

Politics for enrichment

The fall of the Duvaliers ended the idea of one-party rule. But it in turn triggered an avalanche of smaller parties motivated more by self-interest than broad ideas or constituencies.

The last presidential election had no fewer than 54

candidates. "You can set up a party with 20 people. Today there are certainly more than 250 political parties," Hurbon said. "Many people believe they can obtain a better economic situation through the state and effectively we see people entering the political system for corruption." The end effect is little democratic participation by the general public, with just 21 percent voting in the last elections in 2016.

One shift came in 2018 when young people took to the streets en masse demanding answers on what successive administrations did with \$1.6 billion contributed by Venezuela under its Petrocaribe initiative. Haiti's High Court of Auditors responded by producing three voluminous reports on rampant mismanagement of the money but Moise, named in one of them, clipped the wings of the court in November through a presidential decree.

Amid the political and economic vacuum, armed gangs have become a force to themselves in the poorest parts of the capital Port-au-Prince, contributing to the sharp rise in kidnappings for ransom.

The political standoff lets the governing class avoid any trial over Petrocaribe corruption, the goal of the 2018 protests, Buteau said. "There are no longer large demonstrations because people are hungry and tired and hardened by poverty. In the face of insecurity, they are afraid." — AFP

Scores test positive for COVID on India flight to Hong Kong

HONG KONG: At least 53 passengers on a flight from New Delhi to Hong Kong have tested positive for coronavirus, authorities said yesterday, as the financial hub introduced an emergency ban on arrivals from India over a new wave of cases. The passengers flew into Hong Kong on a flight run by Indian operator Vistara on April 4.

The positive tests are significant as Hong Kong is regularly recording fewer daily cases than the total detected on the flight since it brought a fourth wave under control in January. Authorities have now imposed a two-week ban on all flights from India, Pakistan and the Philippines that began on Monday, categorizing the countries as "extremely high risk" after detecting the N501Y mutant COVID-19 strain for the first time in the local community. India is battling skyrocketing infections, with hospitals running out of beds and the government forced to reimpose economically painful restrictions. Its capital New Delhi went into lockdown from Monday night as officials scramble to get the surging cases under control.

The Vistara aircraft can hold 188 passengers but Hong Kong authorities did not announce how many it had been carrying. The positive coronavirus results surfaced while the arrivals were undergoing Hong Kong's mandatory three-week quarantine period, one of the strictest entry regimes in the world.—AFP



This handout photo taken April 14, 2021, and received from the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), Philippine coast guard ship BRP Cabra (MRRV-4409), in center, along with coast guard-manned Bureau of Fisheries boats, patrol an area in the South China Sea. — AFP

Crematoriums buckle as dead pile up in India

NEW DELHI: A summer storm is buffeting New Delhi as Mohammed Shamim wearily pauses to glance at yet another ambulance arriving with a coronavirus victim to bury, just minutes after the last. The gravedigger's grim workload, like those of others around India, has grown dramatically in the past few weeks in a brutal second wave that has caught authorities badly off guard.

When AFP visited the Jadid Qabristan Ahle cemetery in the Indian capital—which is now in a week-long lockdown—on Friday, 11 bodies arrived within three hours. By sunset, 20 bodies were in the ground. This compares to some days in December and January, when his earthmoving machine stayed idle and when many thought the pandemic was over. "Now, it looks like the virus has legs," Shamim, 38, a gravedigger like his father and grandfather, told AFP. "At this rate, I will run out of space in three or four days."

Around the graveyard, white body bags or coffins made out of cheap wood are carried around by people in blue or yellow protective suits and lowered into graves. Small groups of men, some in Islamic skullcaps, look solemnly at the ground as the imam, struggling to be heard as dust laced with rain swirls around, recites final prayers. Sobbing women watch from their closed car windows next to the flashing lights of an ambulance as a yellow digger fills up the graves with the dry brown and grey soil.

"Two days ago someone came to me and said he needs to start preparing for his mother because doctors had given up on her," Shamim said. "It's unreal. I never thought I'd see the day where I'd have a request for starting the funeral formalities of a living person."

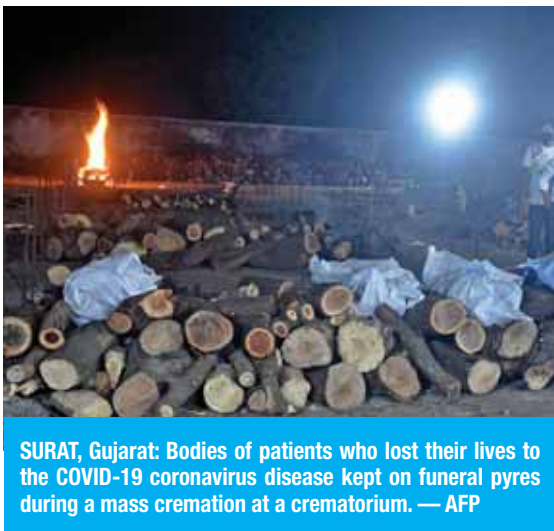
Melting iron

Officially, almost 180,000 Indians have died from coronavirus, 15,000 of them this month, although some believe the real number may be higher. Social media and newspaper reports have been flooded with horrifying images of row upon row of burning pyres and crematoriums unable to cope.

In Ghaziabad outside Delhi, television pictures showed bodies wrapped in shrouds lined up on biers on the pavement with weeping relatives waiting for their slot. In the western state of Gujarat, many crematoriums in Surat, Rajkot, Jamnagar and Ahmedabad are operating around the clock with three to four times more bodies than normal.

Indian rail staff saves boy in dramatic rescue

MUMBAI: An Indian railway worker has been hailed a "superhero" after he sprinted more than 30 meters along a track to grab a boy from the path of an express



SURAT, Gujarat: Bodies of patients who lost their lives to the COVID-19 coronavirus disease kept on funeral pyres during a mass cremation at a crematorium. — AFP

The chimney of one electric furnace in Ahmedabad cracked and collapsed after being in constant use for up to 20 hours every day for the past two weeks. The iron frames inside another in the industrial diamond hub of Surat melted because there was no time to let the furnaces cool.

"Until last month we were cremating 20-odd bodies per day... But since the beginning of April we have been handling over 80 bodies every day," said a local official at the Rammath Ghela Crematorium in the city. With waiting times of up to eight hours, Rajkot has set up a dedicated 24/7 control room to manage the flow in the city's four crematoriums.

Bring your own wood

At two crematoriums in Lucknow in the north, relatives are being given numbered tokens and made to wait for up to 12 hours. One has started burning bodies in an adjacent park, an official told AFP.

Rohit Singh, whose father died from COVID-19, said crematorium officials were charging around 7,000 rupees (\$100) — almost 20 times the normal rate. Some crematoriums in Lucknow ran out of wood and asked people to bring it themselves. Viral photos on social media showed electric rickshaws laden down with logs. The ultimate place for Hindus to be cremated is Varanasi, the ancient city where since time immemorial bodies have been burned on the banks of the river Ganges. Belbhadra, who works at one of the famous ghats there, told AFP that they were cremating at least 200 suspected coronavirus victims per day. The usual time to get to the ghat—a riverside embankment for cremations—from the main road via narrow lanes was usually three or four minutes, a resident said. "Now it takes around 20 minutes. That's how crowded the lanes are with people waiting to cremate the dead," he said. — AFP

train. CCTV images of Mayur Shelke's incredible rescue have gone viral on social media with many lauding the selfless 30-year-old. The six-year-old boy was with his partially sighted mother on Saturday at Vangani station—about 70 kilometers (about 42 miles) east of Mumbai—when he fell off the platform edge onto the track. Shelke was alerted by cries for help from the mother and immediately started running along the track.

He is seen in images released by the Indian Central Railways grabbing the boy, throwing him back onto the platform and then climbing up himself barely two seconds before the Udayan Express thundered through. "I

saw the kid falling and the train speeding towards him. There was no chance he would have lived had I not intervened," Shelke was quoted as saying by the Mid-Day newspaper.

He said he had been scared of the looming train, but added: "There was no time to think at all, I was determined to save him." Fatal accidents are common on India's vast, but often dilapidated railway network. Social media users called Shelke, whose job as a pointsman is to check the train signals, a "superhero". Railway Minister Piyush Goyal said Shelke would be rewarded for "motivating humanity with his work". — AFP

News in brief

Egypt sacks rail authority chief

CAIRO: Egypt's railways chief was sacked yesterday following a string of deadly train disasters, two days after the latest accident that cost 11 lives. "The goal of these decisions is not merely about leadership changes of the authority but are in line with the next stage which demands... a complete upgrade of the railway network," the transport ministry said. The changes "underway aim to provide better services, working around the clock to serve commuters and to upgrade... this essential service which transports millions of passengers yearly", it said in a statement. — AFP

Mahathir urges king to lift emergency

KUALA LUMPUR: Former Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad delivered a petition to the national palace yesterday urging the king to revoke a Covid-19 state of emergency, saying it had transformed the country into a "dictatorship". The monarch declared the nationwide emergency in January, on the advice of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, in a bid to fight the coronavirus as cases spiralled out of control. But parliament was also suspended, prompting critics to accuse Muhyiddin of using the virus crisis to cling to power after allies in his crisis-racked ruling coalition deserted him. — AFP

Cape Town blaze almost contained

CAPE TOWN: A sweeping fire on South Africa's iconic Table Mountain that choked Cape Town with smoke and destroyed several historic sites including a university library was almost fully contained yesterday, officials said. High winds had strengthened the blaze that was first spotted Sunday but calmer weather conditions yesterday allowed for fire crews to ramp up their aerial attack with five helicopters, said Rey Thakhuli, spokesman for South Africa National Parks. "Approximately 90 percent of the fire has been contained," he said in a statement. The fire first broke out in the foothills of Table Mountain, a favorite with tourists, and spread to the University of Cape Town (UCT), destroying buildings and forcing students to flee. — AFP

Russia to launch space station in 2025

MOSCOW: Russia's space agency said yesterday it hoped to launch its own orbital station in 2025 as Moscow considers withdrawing from the International Space Station program to go it alone. Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin said work had begun on the first module of a new station, after officials warned that Russia was considering pulling out of the ISS, one of the few successful examples of cooperation with the West. The announcement came with tensions soaring over espionage claims, a Russian troop build-up along Ukraine's borders and the deteriorating health of President Vladimir Putin's imprisoned critic Alexei Navalny. — AFP

Duterte to deploy navy over South China Sea claim

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said he is willing to deploy military ships to the South China Sea to assert the country's claim over oil deposits in a contested part of the waterway. Duterte, who has embraced China since taking power in 2016, has faced growing domestic criticism for his reluctance to confront Beijing over its activities in Philippine-claimed waters.

Tensions spiked last month after hundreds of Chinese vessels were detected at Whitsun Reef in the Spratly Islands, which are contested by several countries, including the Philippines and China. Beijing has refused repeated demands by the Philippines to call back the ships, which Manila says are maritime militia vessels and China says are fishing boats. "I'm not so much interested now in fishing. I don't think there's enough fish really to quarrel about," Duterte said Monday.

"But when we start to mine, when we start to get whatever it is in the bowels of the China sea, our oil, then by that time... I will send my grey ships there to state a claim," he said, while also emphasizing his desire "to remain friends" and "share whatever it is". Duterte spoke the day after top military leadership rejected a rumor that a social media group involving members of the armed forces had demanded the president denounce China or they would no longer support him as their commander in chief.

Beijing asserts sovereignty over almost all of the waterway, which is believed to hold rich deposits of natural resources. In 2016, a UN-backed tribunal rejected its claims. Beijing has ignored the ruling. Duterte has repeatedly said conflict with China would be futile, and on Monday warned of "bloodshed" if the Philippines tried to take back the waters.—AFP

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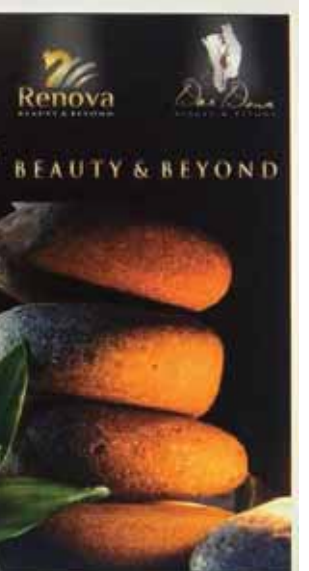
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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 2021

Business

NBK reports net profit of KD 84.3m for 1Q 2021

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) has announced its financial results for the first quarter ended 31 March 2021. NBK reported a net profit of KD 84.3 million (USD 278.8 million), compared to KD 77.7 million (USD 256.9 million) for 1Q 2020, up by 8.5 percent year-on-year.

Total assets as of end of March 2021 grew by 1.5 percent year-on-year to reach KD 31.0 billion (USD 102.5 billion), whereas total loans and advances increased by 0.8 percent year-on-year to KD 17.9 billion (USD 59.0 billion), and total shareholders' equity reached KD 3.3 billion (USD 10.8 billion), boosting by 6.6 percent year-on-year.

Commenting on the results, NBK Group Chairman, Nasser Al-Sayer, said: "During the first quarter of the year we continued to experience some of the challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic including movement restrictions and renewed closures. Despite these headwinds, NBK was able to grow its profits for the period demonstrating its resilient business model, solid financial fundamentals backed by its prudent income diversification and digital transformation strategies."

Al-Sayer noted that the variant pace of vaccine rollout and recovery of major economies worldwide has compelled the Group to continue focusing on the conservative approach adopted since the beginning of the crisis. Al-Sayer emphasized that the Bank is able to meet its customers' needs and expectations by providing top-tier banking services and supporting them to overcome these exceptional circumstances through financing and advisory services; reflecting NBK's remarkable capabilities, highly professional cadres and long-standing expertise, which always succeeded in earning and maintaining customers' trust.

"We are fully committed to our historical and leading roles in supporting the national economy and delivering on our social responsibilities; becoming a key player in supporting community stability and stimulating business environment, and this role is best manifested during the times of crises," added Al-Sayer.

Al-Sayer also explained that these exceptionally challenging times demonstrated NBK's successful strategy in compliance with ESG standards considering them a key pillar for achieving sustainable growth in the future, thereby becoming a role model across the region in this regard.

Al-Sayer:

- Our solid financial position enables us to meet the expectations of all our stakeholders
- Our prudent diversification and digital transformation strategies made us more resilient in the face of the crisis
- The variant pace of vaccine rollout and economic recovery around the world forces us to maintain the conservative approach embraced since the beginning of the crisis
- Meeting all our customers' needs despite the exceptional circumstances reflects our remarkable capabilities and long-standing expertise
- Our human capital is the cornerstone of our success and is key towards achieving the Bank's future goals

Al-Sager:

- We are proud to report consistently healthy quarterly profits while maintaining our solid financial position throughout the crisis
- We remain cautious as we expect the impact of the pandemic to continue into 2021, despite gradual recovery
- The exceptional circumstances demonstrated our outstanding technological capabilities and digital infrastructure built over years
- Our solid financial results confirm we are well-positioned to be the biggest beneficiary from a gradual recovery

Al-Sayer extended special gratitude to the bank's employees for the dedication they showed in working during these exceptional circumstances, appreciating their strong sense of responsibility during these difficult times, which demonstrated that NBK's human capital is the cornerstone of its success and key to achieving its future goals.

On his part, NBK Group Chief Executive Officer, Isam J Al-Sager, commented: "We are proud of reporting consistently healthy quarterly profits since the beginning of the pandemic, while maintaining a solid financial position, strong capitalization and stable asset quality metrics. This ensures a sustainable future growth and ability to meet the needs of our customers."

In light of market conditions, we will continue to closely monitor costs, optimize operations and our balance sheet,

and invest in areas where we believe the greatest short- and long-term impact can be achieved. We are focused on our digital transformation, a program that has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and that has proven vital to our response to the crisis. We will maintain our conservative approach to risk, allowing us to withstand external pressures until during the gradual normalization of economic activity, which we are cautiously optimistic will take place in the course of 2021," added Al-Sager.

Al-Sager noted that in light of curfews imposed in Kuwait and challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Bank's digital capabilities have been a clear testimony to the remarkable technological capabilities and infrastructure built over years, which yielded top-notch digital banking services and payment solutions that were remarkably well-



received by customers across all segments. We will continue to invest in our digital services, enabling the Group to maintain solid progress towards its strategic objectives.

Al-Sager pointed out that the income diversification strategy succeeded in preserving the Group's leading position and dominant share in Kuwait, in addition to building strong competitive edges in the key regional markets in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, leveraging the integration and completeness of the Group's offerings. Al-Sager concluded by saying: "Our financial results boost our confidence in being well-positioned to be the biggest beneficiary of the gradual recovery, thanks to our comfortable liquidity, strong asset quality, and our digital excellence."

Performance and operating highlights (Q1 2021):

- Total assets grew by 1.5 percent year-on-year, to KD 31.0 billion (USD 102.5 billion)
- Total loans and advances grew by 0.8 percent year-on-year to KD 17.9 billion (USD 59.0 billion)
- Total shareholders' equity reached KD 3.3 billion (USD 10.8 billion), boosting by 6.6 percent year-on-year
- NPL/gross loans ratio at 1.68 percent and an NPL coverage ratio of 225 percent
- Robust Capital Adequacy Ratio of 18.4 percent, comfortably in excess of regulatory requirements



Business

Facebook unveils audio push, adds podcasts

Social media giant takes on fast-growing Clubhouse app

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook on Monday said it is adding podcasts and “live audio rooms” in a push to get people talking and take on the fast-growing audio-based app Clubhouse. “We think a lot of magic happens at the intersection of audio formats, as well as at the confluence of text, audio and video,” Facebook app chief Fidi Simo said in a blog post.

Facebook’s plan to weave audio offerings into the social network comes as it works to prevent losing users to Clubhouse. Facebook has seen a steady rise in users opting for voice, from audio calls at the social network to leaving spoken messages using WhatsApp of Messenger. The Silicon Valley titan is building new audio creation tools Simo described as “like having a sound studio in your pocket.”

The tools will let people create short-form Soundbites such as jokes, anecdotes, or spontaneous thoughts, according to Simo. “While we’re big believers in the power of short-form audio, we also know that some stories and conversations deserve more airtime,” Simo said.

People talking

More than 170 million people are connected to Facebook pages centered on podcasts, and some 35 million users are members of podcast fan groups, but listening to one required leaving the social network. “Within the next few months, you’ll be able to listen to podcasts directly on the Facebook app - both while using the app or when

the app is backgrounded,” Simo said.

As part of the move into podcasts, Facebook will be expanding its partnership with Spotify so users can share and listen to podcasts, according to the company. Facebook also planned to begin testing Live Audio Rooms, expected the feature to be available to all users by the middle of this year. To make its audio offerings sustainable for the long term, Facebook is building in ways for people creating content to make money, according to Simo.

Creators hosting Live Audio Rooms will be able to get paid directly by fans, and Facebook plans to add the option to charge for access, Simo said. Safety and privacy safeguards are also being added to audio features, according to the social network. The news came a day after Clubhouse said it closed a new funding round as the popular live audio app struggles to scale up in response to demand. The latest round gives the startup a valuation of some \$4 billion, according to sources.

Launched last year, the San Francisco-based platform is looking to establish itself as the standard-bearer for digital audio and has already inspired copycat products. Facebook’s move is “a natural response to a competitive threat,” tech analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group. “It you do nothing, you could become MySpace,” he added, referring to a pioneering social network that faded into oblivion after Facebook arrived.

Facebook’s pattern has been to either buy startups the pose potential threats or to copy features



MENLO PARK, California: In this file photo taken on Oct 23, 2019 a giant digital sign is seen at Facebook's corporate headquarters campus. —AFP

that are attracting users, the analyst noted. While riding the hot trend in audio-centric online socializing is smart of Facebook, squashing Clubhouse could add to scrutiny it already faces from

antitrust regulators, according to Enderle. “When a competitor comes along providing your customers something that you aren’t, you don’t have a lot of choices in how to respond.” —AFP

China stampede into electric cars sparks auto buzz

SHANGHAI: Thought Big Tech was taking over your life through smartphones? It may be coming for your car next as Chinese firms lead a stampede into auto manufacturing in their battle for more consumers. Cars are the next major prize in the battle for digital territory, industry insiders say, and the deep pockets and data muscle of big Chinese tech firms will fuel even faster growth in “smart-electric” vehicles - and possibly hasten the arrival of autonomous cars.

In recent weeks, Chinese smartphone giants Huawei and Xiaomi, e-commerce leader Alibaba, and even DJI, the world’s top drone manufacturer, have thrown their hats into the ring. “This sort of competition is a good thing and will greatly accelerate innovation,” William Li, founder, chairman and CEO of Chinese electric vehicle (EV) producer NIO, told AFP in an interview just ahead of the Shanghai Auto Show.

The first major auto industry gathering of the year opens to the public Wednesday with the global sector looking to China - the world’s biggest

and most rapidly electrifying auto market - to lead the way into a post-pandemic future. Sales in China contracted two percent to 25.1 million vehicles last year - nearly one-third of the global total - but are rapidly recovering thanks to the expanding popularity of electric cars.

Just a tiny fraction of Chinese sales until recently, EVs accounted for around nine percent in March, according to official figures. China’s government expects new-energy vehicles - which integrate the most advanced driving technology - to comprise 25 percent of car sales by 2025, and recent announcements appear to bode well.

‘Lightning-fast’

Xiaomi, which has rapidly become one of the world’s biggest smartphone suppliers, plans to invest \$10 billion over the next decade in a smart EV subsidiary, and Huawei will invest \$1 billion this year. Alibaba-linked autonomous driving unit AutoX has partnered with Japan’s Honda to ramp up testing on Chinese roads.

And tech giant Baidu said Monday its Apollo autonomous navigation system would be installed on one million vehicles over the next three to five years. The moves will focus fresh attention on Apple’s secretive project to develop a self-driving vehicle. Cars

investment plan to become the top maker of electric vehicles by 2025.

All electric

All of the major automakers such as Stellantis (Peugeot, Fiat, Chrysler), Renault-Nissan, GM, Ford, Hyundai-Kia and China’s Geely (Volvo) have announced in recent years plans to move towards electric vehicles. All except for Toyota, whose line-up is dominated by hybrids, from the sub-compact Yaris to the big 4x4 Highlander.

The automaker has only a handful of battery electric vehicles on sale outside of China, including the ProAce small van and the ultra-compact C-pod. That is hang-over from the poor welcome an electric version of its Rav4 SUV received in the United States in 1997 owing to its limited range and a lack of recharging stations.

Meanwhile, Toyota’s new hybrid Prius which launched at the same time and didn’t have range limitations, was a commercial success. “At Toyota we always look at the needs of our customers,” Maeda said. “It is necessary for people to be able to use our products in every environment,” he added. But with progress in battery technology that has expanded the range of vehicles, the construction of more charging stations and public subsi-



SHANGHAI: A Haval HEV car is seen during the 19th Shanghai International Automobile Industry Exhibition yesterday. —AFP

represent a fresh opportunity for companies like Huawei, now rushing to develop its own tech ecosystem after US sanctions banned it from using Google’s Android.

Huawei has realized its current “market limitations”, said Chen Yusheng, chief technology officer for procurement analysis firm Shanghai Autodatas Co. “(Huawei) will enter a new track in the future, and with its own advantages, including combining software and hardware, will help pro-

mote lightning-fast development of smart cars and autonomous driving,” Chen said.

Even potential competitors seem intrigued. “This is very reassuring. (Tech companies) see there is an opportunity in this industry, which means that this industry still has a very bright future,” said Antoine Barthes, managing director of the automaking joint venture Dongfeng Nissan. “And they are probably going to shape the industry.” —AFP



SHANGHAI: A Toyota C-HR EV electric car is seen during the 19th Shanghai International Automobile Industry Exhibition on Monday. —AFP

dies, sales of electric vehicles have increased. They reached 15.1 percent of total car sales in Europe in the final three months of 2020.

10 percent of sales by 2025

Toyota now believes that it can no longer do without a complete range of vehicles that includes hybrids, battery

electric and hydrogen fuel cell vehicles. The carmaker is now aiming for a target of 10 percent of its sales from either BEV’s or hydrogen vehicles by 2025. It expects 70 percent of its sales to be standard hybrids that year, 10 percent plug-in hybrids, and just 10 percent with internal combustion engines, said Matt Harrison, head of Toyota Motor Europe. —AFP

Dubai leasing firm buys Boeing’s troubled MAX jets

PARIS: US plane builder Boeing said yesterday that it had sold 15 of its troubled 737 MAX jets to Dubai Aerospace Enterprise, a leasing company, for an undisclosed amount. Worth around \$1.8 billion at list prices, it was “the first direct 737 MAX purchase from Boeing” by DAE, which had until now been “buying jets from existing customers and leasing them back”, the manufacturer said.

The top-selling 737 MAX only returned to the skies late last year after being grounded for 20 months following two fatal crashes. But carriers this month pulled a number of individual aircraft from service over potential electrical faults, including 30 at Southwest Airlines, 16 at United and 17 at American Airlines. All three US carriers still have MAX planes in their fleet not affected by the issue.

DAE chief executive Firoz Tarapore said in the Boeing statement that his firm is “confident in the success of these aircraft”. “An increasing number of global aviation regulators are returning the MAX to the skies,” Tarapore added. DAE’s fleet numbers around 425 planes, of which 162 are from Boeing including the latest order.

Last year it bought up 23 737 MAX from American Airlines and Brazilian carrier GOL under deals to lease them back to the carriers. Sold as offering more range, reliability and fuel efficiency than earlier aircraft, the 737 MAX has also seen recent orders from Southwest, Ryanair and others. —AFP

Drugmakers on trial over US opioid crisis

SAN FRANCISCO: Four drugmakers, including Johnson & Johnson, went on trial Monday over claims they helped fuel the deadly opioid epidemic in the United States through deceptive marketing that downplayed the risks of addiction. J&J, Teva, Endo and Allergan are accused of trivializing the dangers of long-term use of opioid painkillers to boost sales in a lawsuit filed by several California counties

and the city of Oakland.

The complaint seeks billions of dollars in damages to abate the public nuisance it says the drugmakers created. “Defendants prioritized profits over lives and deceived the public about the real dangers of opioids,” Santa Clara County attorney James Williams said in a statement. Almost 500,000 people in the United States have died from overdoses involving prescription or illicit opioids over the past two decades, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 50,000 people died from opioid overdoses in 2019 alone.

The plaintiffs- Santa Clara, Los Angeles and Orange counties, as well as the city of Oakland - represent 15 million people, or 40 percent of the most populous American state. In addition to the damages, they are asking for measures to prevent deceptive pharmaceutical marketing practices in the future.

“While the use of opioids has taken an enormous toll on the State of California and its residents, Defendants have realized blockbuster profits. In 2014 alone, opioids generated \$11 billion in revenue for drug companies like Defendants,” the complaint said.

The lawsuit comes at a particularly bad time

for J&J. The pharmaceutical giant, also tainted by a scandal related to its talcum-based baby powder, was hoping to restore its reputation with its coronavirus vaccine. But the shot has been suspended in the United States, pending an investigation, after reports that six women had developed serious blood clots.

Neither J&J nor any of the other companies responded to AFP’s request for comment. More than 3,000 lawsuits related to the opioid crisis have been filed in US courts. In 2019, an Oklahoma judge ordered J&J to pay a \$465 million fine for downplaying the risks of opioids. J&J is appealing. —AFP

Business

Ahli United Bank AGM approves bonus of 10 shares per 100 shares



KUWAIT: Ahli United Bank (AUB) held its Annual General Meeting (AGM) on Tuesday the 20th of April 2021, with 91.981 percent quorum and approved 10 percent bonus shares (10 shares per 100 shares). In alignment with the guidelines and measures issued by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health, AUB took all necessary health and safety measures, including implementing social distancing between all attendees.

Dr Anwar AlMudhaf, AUB chairman said: On behalf of myself and the Board of Directors, I am truly honored to present to you the 55th Ahli United Bank (AUB) KSCP Annual Report: highlighting AUB's key achievements and financial statements for the financial year ending by the 31st of December 2020.

The year 2020 was very exceptional, with all its repercussions, and the human and economic losses the world sustained as a result of the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the resulting -strict precautionary measures taken by all countries worldwide to curb the pandemic.

At the GCC level, COVID-19 has a double impact. On the one front, the disruption of life and business has a severe impact on the economic growth in the region. On the other front, the - drop in oil prices severely affected oil revenues which account for more than 50 percent of government revenues in the GCC countries.

We can say that COVID-19 pandemic was a test for the resiliency of the banking sector worldwide, albeit this crisis was not a banking crisis -. However, the challenges posed by this crisis had negative impacts on the banking sector in the world such as credit losses and irregular facilities, although it was expected that most banks would overcome these challenges relying on their capital buffers.

AUB Performance in an Exceptional Year

Despite the cautious optimism surrounding the current economic scene, Ahli United Bank persists to take all necessary measures to maintain its solid performance during this hard phase through its vision to become a leading sharia compliant bank, operating in line with international standards, while always putting customers first.

AUB is always working to achieve a clear mission to provide innovative financial solutions in compliance with Islamic sharia, competitive products and high-quality services to customers, while maintaining high standards of Corporate Governance, Risk Management and a solid capital base to achieve maximum return for shareholders on a sustainable basis, while retaining qualified and professional staff and developing their capabilities, so that AUB will become the bank of choice for customers, along with completing the digitization of its business and processes through advanced customer-centric technology solutions.

With the trust and support of our shareholders, we managed to achieve our objectives by working through a sustainable basis to maintain the highest standards of corporate governance and compliance, maintain solid capital and liquidity growth, establish a culture of risk management and balanced costs, deepen a culture of compliance with sharia principles within the Bank through appropriate policies and programs in this concern, as well as developing a multicultural and effective management structure that contributes to the social and economic advancement. All this has enabled AUB to continue to provide high-quality services to its customers, and to achieve better returns for its shareholders.

AUB reported a net profit of KD 29.7 million in 2020 compared to KD 55 million in 2019, a decline by 46 percent. However the Bank continued to expand financing activities and provide full support to business sectors and customers affected by the pandemic by deferring financing installments. AUB's total assets reached KD 4.4 billion at the end of December 2020.

The financing receivables grew reaching KD 3.1 billion at the end of December 2020, compared to KD 3 billion in 2019. The customers' deposits increased by 11.5 percent to hit KD 3 billion compared to KD 2.7 billion in 2019. Shareholders' equity reached KD 443 million at the end of December 2020. The earnings per share (EPS) reached 13.5 fils in 2020 compared to 26.5 fils in 2019.

The Bank's asset base comprises mainly of net financing constituting 71 percent of the total asset base. Cash balances, including inter-bank deposits, account for 18 percent of the total assets, thereby reflecting the rising liquidity levels within the Bank. Investments securities mainly consist of short term and long term investments in sukuk which reached 9 percent of total assets. The Bank's liabilities mainly comprise customer deposits, and deposits from banks and financial institutions at 78 percent and 20 percent respectively of the total liabilities. The Bank recorded a total operating income of KD 90.7 million in comparison to KD 107.2 million for the previous year. The net operating profit recorded at KD 57.5 million. The Bank's return on average equity (ROAE) recorded 6.6 percent and return on average assets (ROAA) recorded 0.7 percent for 2020. The Bank enjoys a solid capital adequacy ratio of 15.7 percent under the Basel-III accord being higher than the regulatory requirement of 11 percent as of 31 December 2020.

The Bank's conservative policy has contributed to maintaining good quality of assets. The Bank has also maintained its focus on effective balance sheet management, prudent customer base growth, as well as scaling up initiatives aimed at improving customer experience and asset quality.

High Credit Ratings

The Bank has continued to receive high credit ratings from international credit rating agencies, such as Fitch, Moody's and Capital Intelligence. As of 31 December 2020, the Bank maintained a credit rating of "A+" on the long term and "F1" on the short term by Fitch Ratings Agency, and "A1" on long term counter party Risk Rating (foreign currency) and "A2" on the long term Bank deposits (foreign currency), and "P-1" on the short term deposits (foreign currency) by Moody's. Capital Intelligence affirmed the Bank's long term credit rating of foreign currency to "A+" and the short term foreign currency rating to "A1". All these ratings underscore the credit standing, capital quality and stability of the Bank.

Corporate Governance and Risk Management Criteria

COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed the success of Ahli United Bank in adopting an effective governance system through a balanced governance framework that is aligned with regulatory requirements of applying governance principles and rules at Kuwaiti banks, and follows the international practices and recommendations to achieve AUB's goals and maximize AUB's value for its shareholders, clients and stakeholders. During 2020, AUB has continued its efforts in developing its corporate governance system to be in line with CBK's vision in developing and consolidating standards of governance in Kuwaiti banks and improving practices in banking business for the benefit of the banking sector and the Kuwaiti economy.

In 2020, AUB continued in adapting its risk strategy as part of the Bank's overall integrated strategy, with a set of regulatory policies and regulations in place to ensure that AUB will continue to pursue its business activities according to the approved risk appetite and sustain independence of the internal and external audit functions. The Bank has successfully fulfilled CBK's instructions with regard to containing cyberspace risks and reducing their impact through developing and strengthening the protection means applied in the field of cybersecurity.

Prominent Social Role in Pandemic Response

Based on our vision that social responsibility is one of the Bank's main objectives to contribute to social and economic progress, AUB managed to provide a role model in dealing with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the announcement of the first COVID-19 cases in Kuwait, AUB has begun to launch several social initiatives to support those most affected by the pandemic, and to provide necessary support to help them cope with the repercussions of the crisis.

He highlighted the importance of qualifying the bank's employees and raising their efficiency to deal with emergency conditions and ensuring the smooth workflow without interruptions and during various circumstances.

The program included multiple scenarios as a practical experience that was taken from the beginning of the corona crisis last year, and ways to deal with business continuity plans, the most important of which is the emphasis on means and mechanisms of communication and cooperation for business continuity, and a statement of readiness to avoid potential impacts.

During the virtual training program, Al-Mulla emphasized the effectiveness of coordination and collaboration between various departments and sectors, in line with the best practices and international standards.

He discussed the importance of leadership and reputation of any institution during emergency circumstances that may occur at unexpected times, which require analysis of the crisis and communication between internal departments to overcome obstacles and make the right decisions.

Al-Mulla explained that the training program aims to preserve the interests of KFH and its customers and the bank's reputation, capabilities, financial and human capital assets, pointing out that the practical experience of business continuity management has provided the participants with a valuable set of new ideas that help in studying and analyzing any incident and ways to deal with it, if it occurs.

He also stressed the importance of taking

Our Human Wealth is a Key Competitive Edge

Perhaps the most important reason for my optimism is the dedication, commitment and high capabilities our human resources demonstrated during the crisis to cope with the difficulties and risks caused by COVID-19 spread, which was reflected in the Bank's continued performance in discharging its functions to the fullest without impacting customers' rights.

I would like to seize this opportunity to extend my grateful thanks to our Executive Management and staff in the front lines at branches for their outstanding efforts in meeting customers' urgent needs during the various stages of the crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis has proved once again that our real wealth is our human resources who are committed, dedicated, and possess high professional and ethical capabilities that enable the Bank to face difficulties and cope with the harshest circumstances.

In view of the above, I would like to emphasize that we would not have been able to address the repercussions of this pandemic without the strict measures taken by the government of Kuwait to protect the health of the citizens and residents by following clear, targeted and thoughtful guidelines to address the pandemic in its various stages. Also, if it had not been for the pre-emptive decisions taken by the Kuwait government, and the Central Bank of Kuwait to face COVID-19 repercussions on the local economy in general and the banking sector in particular, the impacts of this crisis would have been worse.

Responding to COVID-19 - Success Story

2020 demonstrated a new success story for Ahli United Bank in terms of support to its customers and employees. Despite the state of anticipation and uncertainty prevailing the global and local economic scene during 2021 due to COVID-19 repercussions, we are very optimistic about what is coming.

This pandemic has reaffirmed our unlimited capabilities in addressing and overcoming crisis through our solid financial position, high quality, and long history with nearly 80 years of banking experience since our inception in 1942. This crisis also substantiated the soundness of our strategic decision to move forward in the journey of digital transformation and pursuing the state-of-the-art banking technologies.

The readiness and efficiency of our digital platforms have enabled us to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic repercussions and to provide appropriate electronic services that allowed customers to continue carrying out their banking transactions, while maintaining the safety of our customers and employees at the same time.

responsibility for work and developing strategies and prior plans that enable the organization to overcome obstacles, continue in business, while maintaining activities and achieving goals.

He underlined the importance of evaluating the pros and cons of each solution and weighing it to enable the senior management to make the right decision regarding the solution to be implemented, explaining that the proposed solutions aim to restore business in times of crisis within the specified time.

Al-Mulla said: "The Business Continuity Department plays an important role in preparing, arranging, planning and following up constantly to ensure the continuity of readiness and the permanent availability of capabilities, which provides KFH with elements of stability and sources of strength."

He praised the positive interaction of the participants and the interest, follow-up and appreciation they showed for the importance of the program, expressing his happiness with the results of the program that enriched the ideas of the participants and showed their creative talents and achieved the maximum benefit from it, noting that the Business Continuity Training Program will be held periodically in efforts to encompass the largest possible number of employees.



Faisal Al-Mulla

Ooredoo Kuwait re-certified as Cisco Gold Partner

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, has announced it has been re-certified as a Cisco Gold Partner. Achieving the Cisco Gold Partner certification indicates that Ooredoo Business, the trusted technology partner for business solutions, meets the rigorous global standards set out by Cisco. The official evaluation criteria cover networking competency, service, support, and customer satisfaction. In every technical activity area under scrutiny, Ooredoo Kuwait's provision was found to meet the high standards required.

Cisco Systems has been solving business challenges since the company was founded in 1984. With Cisco Gold Certification, Ooredoo gains access to Cisco's comprehensive sales, technical, training, lifecycle services, and support.

Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, Chief Executive Officer, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "We are delighted to share the news of our re-certification as a Cisco Gold Partner. I can confidently state that such certification confirms once again that Ooredoo Business provides business customers with high-quality services and support as we respond to the needs of a continuously growing ICT market. "We share the same impeccably high standards as esteemed partners such as Cisco and are proud to be consistently recognized within the industry for our effort."



Abdulaziz Al-Babtain

KFH organizes training program on business continuity management

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) organized a training program on business continuity management and crisis management, with an analysis and evaluation of the institution's infrastructure, highlighting the importance of continuing to provide service and confirming business, as part of the bank's efficiency in dealing with variables and crises.

The training program presented by Senior Manager Business Continuity Management at KFH, Faisal Al-Mulla focused on how to deal with any obstacles that may be exposed to KFH services, and take precautionary and corrective measures to avoid any interruption of the bank's services. He clarified the appropriate methods and tools for dealing with developments related to business continuity, considering the Corona crisis and its repercussions.

Al-Mulla said that the program includes important steps within an ongoing approach that KFH follows to enhance the culture of risk management among the bank's employees, officials and departments, with the aim of formulating an approved precautionary system based on initia-

monthly and annual draws with cash prizes up to 100 times the winner's salary."

Al-Qattan added, "At Gulf Bank, we make it a point to design products that meet the specific needs of our clients and provide them with the banking services they require. As part of the many ways we aim to reward our customers, Gulf Bank holds periodic draws for its clients - from Salary Account customers, to Red student account holders, to AlDanah account holders as a way to encourage a culture of saving. At Gulf Bank, customer loyalty will always be valued, and clients will always be supported and rewarded."

Throughout 2021, Gulf Bank's Salary Package offers clients a wide range of exclusive offers, including the ability to choose between an interest-free loan or a cash prize of up to 200 Kuwaiti Dinars, and a free credit card, with these offers being valid for workers in both the public and private sectors. Gulf Bank is also providing special offers for frontline workers in appreciation of their continuous efforts in combating the pandemic.

Frontline Workers Salary Package

Gulf Bank recently tailored a special offer for employed Kuwaiti frontline workers who wish to transfer their salaries to Gulf Bank. Upon transferring their salaries, these clients will immediately receive a set of benefits, including a cash gift of KD 200, or an interest-free loan of up to KD 10,000 or a special car loan offer from approved showrooms. They

will also be eligible to receive a Visa or MasterCard credit card with all annual fees waived for the first year, a free MasterCard World card (upon KD 5,000 expenditure).

The frontline offer also consists of other benefits, including a free safety deposit box for a period of one year upon opening the account, free concierge services, and a customer segment upgrade. The new frontline offer is open to Kuwaiti employees working in the Fire Brigade, National Guard, Civil Aviation (including Kuwait Airways) and in the following Ministries: Health, Defense, Information and Interior.

Salary Package - Exclusive Offer

As part of the vast range of services and benefits available to Salary Account customers, Gulf Bank offers its clients the opportunity to choose the most appropriate benefits from a wide selection of attractive options.

With the 2021 Kuwaiti Salary Offer, new customers who transfer their salaries to Gulf Bank are automatically enrolled in the monthly draws, giving them the chance to win cash prizes of up to 12 times their salary. Customers are also enrolled in a yearly draw of Kuwait's largest salary prize, a cash prize of up to 100 times the winner's salary.

Gulf Bank's Salary Account also gives new customers the opportunity to receive either a KD 200 cash gift upon transferring their salaries to Gulf Bank, or an interest-free loan of up to KD 10,000. Customers must have a minimum salary of



KD 500 and are eligible for the offer following their first salary transfer to Gulf Bank.

Customers can also enjoy additional benefits like a Visa or MasterCard credit card free of charge for a year. They can also apply for a loan of up to KD 70,000 with a repayment period of 15 years, or a consumer loan of up to KD 25,000.

The Salary Package offer is available to employees working in the Ministry of Education, the oil sector, and Kuwaiti frontline workers working in various public sector agencies and institutions, in addition to workers in the Ministry of Defense, women working in the government sector, members of the army, and "Preferred" segment clients.

Gulf Bank announces Somayah AlHurairi and Doha AlMotairi as winners

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank conducted its third monthly Salary Package draw of the year, announcing Somayah Awwad AlHurairi as the lucky winner of a cash prize worth 12 times her salary. In addition, Gulf Bank also conducted its annual Red account draw, announcing Doha Ali AlMotairi as the winner of a cash prize worth 12 times the monthly student allowance. The draws were held on Monday at local radio station, Q8 Pulse FM 88.8 in the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Commerce & Industry. On this occasion, Mohammad Al-Qattan, General Manager of Consumer Banking at Gulf Bank, said: "We would like to congratulate the two lucky winners, Somayah Awwad AlHurairi and Doha Ali AlMotairi, on winning 12 times their monthly salary and student allowance, respectively."

"Gulf Bank's Red account is one of the most important accounts catering to our younger clients at the high school and university levels. The account currently offers its users a free prepaid card, and is the only account in Kuwait that provides 10 percent cashback on prepaid cards for the youth segment, in addition to the opportunity to win a cash prize worth 12 times the student allowance."

"We encourage high school and college level students to learn more about the Red account and its numerous benefits. We would also like to highlight the exclusive features of our Salary Account, as it is the only account in Kuwait that encompasses offers that are specifically tailored to our customers' needs, in addition to the benefits that come with our

Lifestyle | Features

Swiss blow up huge snowman in mountains for first time



The Boeoegg, a symbolic snowman, is seen over the Devil's Bridge.



The Boeoegg, a symbolic snowman, is seen burning over the Devil's Bridge during the Sechseläuten (Ringing of the six o'clock bells) festival near Andermatt, central Switzerland. — AFP photos

A giant snowman brandishing a pitchfork exploded in a blaze of fireworks atop a pyre on a snowy mountain pass named Devil's Bridge on Monday, the first time the spring festival ceremony has been held outside the Swiss city of Zurich. That the snowman effigy named Boeoegg blew up fairly quickly was taken to herald a "great summer" ahead, a positive outcome after last year's festivities were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The burning of Boeoegg—the climax of Zurich's traditional spring holiday Sechseläuten—is normally held in the city center, but coronavirus restrictions meant that was not possible this year.

Instead the snowman was sent 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Zurich and installed on the famed Devil's Bridge in Schoellenen Gorge, the site of dramatic battles between French and Russian troops in 1799 during the Napoleonic

Wars. Boeoegg—who represents the evils of winter—normally holds a broom, but given the bridge's name, this year he was handed a pitchfork. Local tradition says that the time between the lighting of Boeoegg's pyre and the explosion of his fireworks-stuffed head predicts what the coming summer will be like.

This year it took a relatively speedy 12 minutes and 57 seconds, despite the improvised pyre being exposed to freezing cold and wind in the heart of the mountains. While a decent time, it is still significantly more than the record of five minutes, 42 seconds recorded during a heatwave in 2003. Boeoegg's speedy demise prompted debate on local channel TeleZuri, broadcasting the event, with a spectator commenting: "I think it will be a great summer." — AFP



Downton Abbey will return for sequel

Downton Abbey is to return in a sequel due to be released this Christmas, producers told US media. The first Downton Abbey film, based on the hugely popular British TV series, was released in 2019. Reassuring diehard fans, producers said Monday that much of the original cast—including Maggie Smith, Hugh Bonneville, Laura Carmichael, Jim Carter, Michelle Dockery and Elizabeth McGovern—will return. And they will be joined by new faces, with Hugh Dancy, Laura Haddock, Nathalie Baye and Dominic West making

an appearance, the sequel's producers told USA Today.

The movie, which began production last week, is set to be released on December 22. The plot remains under wraps but Julian Fellowes, the man behind the original script, has signed on to write the sequel's screenplay. "After a very challenging year with so many of us separated from family and friends, it is a huge comfort to think that better times are ahead and that next Christmas we will be reunited with the much beloved characters of Downton Abbey," producer Gareth Neame said in a statement. The original television series, which ran from 2010 to 2015, followed the trials and tribulations of the landed Crawley family and their servants in the fictional Downton Abbey estate. A runaway success, the show launched the Hollywood careers of many of its stars as well as providing a financial lifeline to many struggling English country houses. — AFP

'TIPPING POINT': OSCARS FILMMAKERS HAIL DISABILITY PROGRESS

This year, the Oscars will feature a best picture contender about a drummer with hearing loss, a nominated documentary exploring a hippie camp for disabled youths, and a nod for the first film ever to star a deafblind actor. It's a step forward for disability representation in Hollywood, nominated filmmakers told AFP—but one that must be built on to prevent progress slipping away from our screens yet again. Until now, Tinseltown producers "haven't done a very good job—but they know that, we're making them aware of that," said "Sound of Metal" supporting actor nominee Paul Raci, who was raised by deaf parents.

"I'm one of the guys who has got to be in the forefront of not dropping the ball... keeping them aware of all the deaf artists that we have, all the disabled artists, all the genius that's out there, all the untold stories," Raci told AFP. The wariness is understandable. This is a road Hollywood has attempted to travel down before. In 1948, Jane Wyman, a hearing actress, won an Oscar for playing a deaf-mute woman in "Johnny Belinda"—a miscasting Raci likens to "nails on a chalkboard." Real progress came in 1987 when Marlee Matlin, who is deaf, won the Academy Award for best actress for "Children of a Lesser God." But until recently, that has remained a stark exception to the norm, even as Hollywood has made leaps and bounds in inclusive content involving Black and LGBTQ filmmakers and themes.

"Oftentimes, the disability community brings up the rear as far as underrepresented communities getting the spotlight," said Doug Roland, director of the Oscar-nominated short film "Feeling Through." Roland is able-bodied, but his short film was inspired by a late-night encounter he had with a deafblind man who needed help crossing a New York street. He cast first-time actor Robert Tarango—the first deafblind person with a leading role in any movie, according to filmmakers. Matlin herself came on board as an executive producer, and the film is now on an Oscar shortlist of five. "That conversation has really started to shift in a very significant way to the disability community, and there's louder voices being heard," said Roland.

'Subhuman'

But disability representation is such an uphill battle in entertainment because biases are "very deep and hard to identify," with those holding them often not even aware of their prejudice, according to Roland. The community is "often seen as 'less than' in a way that's more severe than other communities," or even "almost as subhuman," he told AFP.

"That's something that has maybe stifled people really listening or leaning in or taking it seriously," Raci, who plays an addiction counselor who lost his hearing late in life in "Sound of Metal," agreed that "people are afraid of the unknown, or they're threatened." "Deafness is a hidden disability—there's no sign in anybody that says 'I'm deaf,'" he told AFP. Another obstacle for actors with disabilities is physical access to film sets and locations, which are not always equipped for a wide range of people such as wheelchair users or the blind. This month, A-listers including Amy Poehler and Naomie Harris signed an open letter to top movie studios urging them to hire permanent disability officers, who would help seek opportunities for disabled talent and ensure more inclusive hiring.

In a bid to change Hollywood's course, actor Nic Novicki in 2013 launched a film

competition requiring at least one crew or cast member with a disability, which has now become the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge. "When I started it... we were very underrepresented—much more so than now," said Novicki, who has a form of dwarfism, and was tired of being offered typecast roles where disability was "the storyline." "If you look at the Academy Awards this year, the proof is in the pudding," he added, pointing also to Oscar-nominated documentary "Crip Camp."



In this file photo Paul Raci attends the "Sound Of Metal" premiere during the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival at Winter Garden Theatre in Toronto, Canada.



In this file photo actress Marlee Matlin arrives at the 2016 American Film Institute Life Achievement Awards Honoring John Williams, in Hollywood, California.



In this file photo Director and Producers Jim LeBrecht and Nicole Newnham attend the "Crip Camp" Premiere during the 2020 Sundance Film Festival at Eccles Center Theatre in Park City, Utah. — AFP photos

'Tipping point'

The film, from Barack and Michelle Obama's production company, begins at a 1970s New York summer camp for disabled youths, before charting their outsized role in the US disability rights movement. "That's one of the most inclusive and beautiful films I can remember," said Novicki, praising its co-director James LeBrecht, a lifelong wheelchair user born with spina bifida. With roughly a quarter of the planet's population suffering some disability, the "largest minority population in the world" remains vastly under-represented, even at this year's Oscars, said Novicki.

But "I think we're at that tipping point, honestly... just getting more and more in the mindset of everybody in the entertainment industry," he said. "It can't be all these able-bodied people, that's not how it works," agreed Raci. "It's about time to start paying attention to that, and this, and that—everything." — AFP

'Raw' personal loss inspired Vinterberg's Oscar-nominated dark booze comedy

"Another Round," a film about a pact by four world-weary Danish schoolteachers to spend every day drunk for a loosely scientific "experiment," was always going to walk a fine line between comedy and darkness. Director Thomas Vinterberg wrote his script, originally a play, upon realizing many of the world's great historic feats were made by people regularly intoxicated on alcohol—the very same substance that can rip lives and families apart.

But four days into shooting, Vinterberg's daughter was killed in a car crash. He somehow still finished the uniquely funny, tender and tragic film—which has earned him a rare Oscar nomination for best director. "The movie was always meant to be life-affirming and full of love, and bare to some extent... raw," Vinterberg told AFP in an interview via Zoom. "But the tragedy that happened in my life left all defenseless and open." Starring as the teachers are four of Vinterberg's close friends and collaborators, including former 007 villain Mads Mikkelsen, who all spent the shoot doing "everything they could to make me laugh in these circumstances."

"There was so much love on the set—and I guess you can see that on the screen," said Vinterberg, whose movie is a favorite to take home the Oscar for best international film on Sunday. While the film is clearly about alcohol, it is also "about living inspired, about forgetting about yourself, about being curious, and being in the moment and all that comes with drinking." Those life-affirming ele-

ments were inspired by his daughter Ida, who was due to play Mikkelsen's daughter, and whose real-life friends play classmates who participate in a joyous teen drinking competition around a lake.

"There's an alarming bunch of people and countries who connected to this thing about drinking," joked Vinterberg. "Yes, they drink differently in California—they put the bottle in a [paper] bag—whereas in Denmark, teenagers run around in the streets with bottles out," he said. "But it seems that the film connects on a different level, and hopefully we succeeded in elevating this film... to a movie about something more."

'My own garden'

Humor is not always associated with Vinterberg, co-founder of the ascetic Dogme 95 filmmaking movement with Lars Von Trier, and director of movies tackling issues such as child abuse including "The Celebration" and "The Hunt." But Vinterberg, 51, has often defied categorization. The famous Dogme 95 "manifesto" imposing strict naturalistic limits on directors was always half serious, half tongue-in-cheek.

And while he has dabbled in Hollywood—for instance 2015's "Far From the Madding Crowd" starring Carey Mulligan, also an Oscar nominee this year—his most widely acclaimed films are often his most Danish and local. "It seems like when I dig in my own garden, that's when people really get interested, also abroad," he said. The universal themes of "Another Round" may partly explain how Vinterberg landed one of just five Oscar



In this file photo Danish director Lars Von Trier poses as he arrives for the screening of the film "The House that Jack Built".



In this file photo Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen arrives for the opening ceremony of the 12th edition of the Lumiere Film Festival in Lyon, central eastern France.

best director nods, for a non-English-language film (fellow nominee Lee Isaac Chung's "Minari" is in Korean and English).

"The pleasures of alcohol, but also the destructive side of drinking, have been around for thousands of years, in all cultures almost," said Vinterberg. The director served his cast booze during rehearsals, and they watched Russian YouTube videos together to observe episodes of extreme inebriation. "We needed to see these characters being in the zone," he recalled. "It wasn't like they were very drunk, actually, but there was alcohol." On set, however, everyone was sober, Vinterberg said—"they had to act, basically, which I think they did well."

Much as the production of "Another Round" is a story of contrasts—tragedy and camaraderie, humor and philosophy—the fates of the teachers diverge when the temptation of booze takes hold to varying degrees with each of them. But the movie itself deliberately "did not want to moralize" or "make an advertisement for alcohol," said Vinterberg. "Very importantly, I did not want to have a message." — AFP



In this file photo Danish director Thomas Vinterberg (left), British actress Carey Mulligan and Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts (right) pose for photographers on the red carpet ahead of the world premiere of the film "Far From The Madding Crowd" in central London. — AFP photos



Iranian luthier Fatemeh Moussavi gives a oud to master player and instructor Hamid Khansari at her workshop in the capital Tehran. — AFP photos



Iranian luthier Fatemeh Moussavi helps master player and instructor Hamid Khansari pick an instrument at her oud-making workshop.



Iranian luthier Fatemeh Moussavi builds a oud at her workshop.

ORIENTAL LUTE MAKES COMEBACK ON IRAN MUSIC SCENE

The Oriental lute is making a comeback in Iran after decades in the shadows as musicians reconnect with an instrument integral to Arab and Turkish musical tradition in a fragmented region. Known as the oud in Arabic, it is commonly called the barbat in Persian, although some would argue the instruments differ slightly. “The number of (oud) students has increased considerably over the past 15 years or so; before a known teacher would have had a dozen students whereas today they’ll be about 50,” said Majid Yahyanejad, a 35-year-old oud teacher in Tehran.

Nouchine Pashar, a 40-year-old musician in the Iranian capital, made the same observation. She started teaching the stringed instrument “about 23 years ago” after graduating from professional arts school, known as honarestan in Persian. “At the time, most of my students were old, really old. Now they’re more on the young side,” Pashar said. “We only knew the oud as played in Egypt and Iraq. We knew nothing of the oud in Turkey. But today we know it’s also played in Syria, Kuwait and Jordan.”

Internet friends

Yahyanejad noticed young Iranian oud players were “taking more interest in Arabic and Turkish culture... and Turkish, Arab and Iranian musicians are becoming friends on the internet”. The barbat has been around for centuries and it



Oud master Nouchine Pashar, 40, poses for a picture during an interview in the Iranian capital Tehran.

takes up a whole chapter of the “Shahnameh” (Book of Kings), written in the 10th century. Iran and Syria are lobbying for the manufacture and playing of the oud to be added to UNESCO’s “intangible heritage” list.

The barbat had fallen out of Iran’s classical and traditional repertoires, with (other) stringed instruments such as the setar, tar, santur and kamancheh given preference. But in the second half of the 20th century, a man named Mansour Nariman introduced oud instruction at the honarestan and published the first

Persian-language manual on the instrument, Yahyanejad points out. Nariman, who died in 2015, had been drawn to the “warmth” of its sound, at a time when the Arab oud did not even figure on Iran’s musical periscope. In the absence of any teachers back then, Nariman taught himself and wrote off letters to Egyptians he had heard playing the instrument on the radio. He received a reply from one of the biggest names in Arab music, Mohamed Abdelwahab.

Instrument to ‘reconcile’

Many years later, Mohammad Firouzi, a student of Nariman, recorded several pieces of music with the undisputed maestro of Persian song, Mohammad-Reza Shajarian, who died in October. Among them were masterpieces such as “Aseman-e Eshgh” in 1991, “Aram-e Jan”, 1998, and “Ghoghaye Eshghbazan”, in 2007. Pashar remembers the first time music teachers showed her an oud, triggering a hunt for the instrument in central Tehran’s Baharestan Square, a paradise for musicians.

She said she found only two, both made in Egypt, and too bulky for a budding musician. Fatemeh Moussavi, who crafts ouds in a small Tehran studio, says very few artisans manufactured the instruments and they were pricey back in the day. Things didn’t change much until the early 2000s, when thousands of ouds landed in Iran, mostly from Syria and



Iranian luthier Fatemeh Moussavi builds a oud at her workshop.

Turkey, bringing down prices. It was a time of liberalization under the reformist Mohammad Khatami who served as president between 1997 and 2005. The arts scene benefitted from this period in the Islamic republic, where the Shiite clergy prioritises study of the Holy Quran and religious jurisprudence.

For Hamid Khansari, who has written an introduction to the oud, the bow-shaped instrument is “a blessing” that “expands the possibilities of creation”. Lebanon’s Charbel Rouhana played the instrument on stage in Tehran with Iranian

group Gardoun in 2016, followed the next year by Yurdaal Tokcan from Turkey. Tunisian Dhafer Youssef has woven Persian poems into his repertoire and given several concerts with Iranian musicians figuring in his international orchestra. In a Middle East tormented for decades by war and conflict, Yahyanejad harbors hope that musical interaction will forge bonds of friendship across religions, ethnicities and cultures. “This instrument could finally help reconcile peoples of the region.” — AFP



Iranian master player and instructor Hamid Khansari tests a new instrument at luthier Fatemeh Moussavi's (unseen) oud-making workshop.



Nouchine Pashar, plays the oud during an interview in the Iranian capital Tehran.

Do we need masks outdoors? Experts weigh in

It’s a familiar sight in some US cities like Washington, New York and San Francisco: people walking on the street, riding bikes or sitting in parks with their masks on even when they’re far away from others. Certain states, like Maine, have kept in place outdoor mask mandates for hiking trails and beaches. So where does the evidence lie? And is there any harm in public health measures that go beyond the science, or if people behave more cautiously than they need?

Outdoors are much safer

Scientists have learned a lot about COVID-19 since the pandemic began. In terms of how it’s transmitted, we now know surfaces aren’t a major vector, and heightened disinfection efforts are a misplaced use of time and resources. Second, the top experts now believe the disease is primarily airborne. That means it’s mostly spread through fine respiratory particles that remain suspended in the air for some time—as opposed to larger droplets from coughing and sneezing that fall quickly to the ground.

This in turn makes outdoors much safer than indoors, said Jose-Luis Jimenez, a leading aerosol scientist at the University of Colorado Boulder. “Indoors are much more dangerous because the walls and the ceiling and the floor trap the air,” particularly if there’s low ventilation, he told AFP. “Outdoors are much less risky because there is a

lot more motion of air,” and exhaled air rises, particularly in warmer weather. But, he stressed, low risk doesn’t mean no risk. Just like you’re bound to inhale some smoke outdoors if you’re close to a smoker, there is a small chance of catching COVID if you spend a prolonged time in close proximity to a carrier outdoors.

What are the odds of infection?

There have now been a number of studies that have attempted to quantify the risk of outdoor Covid spread. Last October, Chinese researchers published a paper in the journal Indoor Air that compiled information on 7,324 cases and included information about where the virus was caught. Only one documented outbreak occurred outdoors, in a village in Shangqiu, Henan—where a 27-year-old man became infected after having a conversation outdoors with a carrier in January 2020. More recently, the Irish Times sought information from govern-

ment authorities on 232,164 cases of COVID caught in the country until March 24, 2021.

In total, 262 involved outdoor transmission, representing just 0.1 percent of the total. It’s possible even that estimate is high, since the government agency relied on unverified reports that said outdoor activities were involved—such as construction or sport—and these might not have accounted for the individuals involved congregating indoors too. Donald Milton, a professor at the University of Maryland and one of the pioneers in the field of aerosol science, advises people to avoid crowds outdoors, particularly if shouting is involved and the air is stagnant. But he doesn’t think you need your mask on at all times.

“When I go jogging in my neighborhood, where the houses are separated by 10 meters (32 feet) or more and there are only a few people out walking dogs or kids playing in yards, I carry a mask

with me,” he said. “I cannot run very far in warmer weather while wearing it. Then if I stop to chat with other people I can put it on. If I go walking with friends, I wear one.”

Politicized issue

Mask wearing became a politicized issue in the United States early on in the pandemic, with some conservatives, spurred by former president Donald Trump, viewing them as an affront to their personal freedom. Liberals were generally more likely to take the virus seriously, and also saw masks outdoors as a way to signal solidarity with their community in a time of crisis. But Amesh Adalja, a public health expert at Johns Hopkins University, said it was now time to dial back outdoor mask mandates and adopt a more nuanced approach better aligned with the science. “Because masks have become so infused with politics, they have become something where people go around and ‘mask shame’ other individuals, and I think that’s counterproductive,” he said.

“We want people, who are unvaccinated especially, to wear masks when they’re in indoor situations when they cannot social distance.” What’s more, measures that create the impression that the outdoors are risky tend to drive people indoors, which is much more dangerous, he added. Some experts argue that the value of outdoor mask mandates is keeping the messaging simple enough for the public to understand—but Adalja disagrees. “I think that doesn’t do anything but breach the trust between public health authorities and the public,” he said, adding that non-experts are capable of reading medical journals and realizing when the official messaging diverges from the evidence. — AFP



A pedestrian walks past a wall mural depicting a person wearing a protective mask in Mumbai yesterday. — AFP

Stalker-plagued Taylor Swift has break-in at New York home

An alleged stalker of pop superstar Taylor Swift was arrested after she suffered a break-in at her New York apartment, police said Monday. Hanks Johnson, 52, was charged with criminal trespassing after police responded to an emergency call on Saturday, reporting that someone was breaking into Swift’s home in the Tribeca neighborhood of Manhattan. Johnson was released on his own recognizance following an arraignment in Manhattan criminal court Sunday night. According to the New York Daily News, Johnson had shown up at Swift’s building to ring the doorbell at least five times over the past six months.



The 31-year-old Swift—who is back on top of the charts following the release of her re-recording of her hit “Fearless” album—has been a victim of stalking at her various properties for years. In June 2019 an Iowa man was arrested after traveling to Rhode Island, where she owns a home, with burglary tools including an aluminum baseball bat and plans to “visit” Swift. —AFP

Sports

FIFA vows ‘consequences’ for Super League clubs as backlash intensifies

Impossible to throw clubs out of Champions League: Perez

MONTREUX: FIFA president Gianni Infantino yesterday warned that clubs involved in the European Super League could face “consequences”, as the backlash built against the deeply divisive plans. Infantino leant his support to European football’s governing body as it attempts to quash an initiative that threatens its prized Champions League and the health of domestic competitions such as England’s Premier League.

“It is our task to protect the European sport model, so if some elect to go their own way then they must live with the consequences of their choices,” Infantino said at UEFA’s congress in Switzerland. “They are responsible for their choices.”

Twelve powerful clubs — six from England, and three each from Spain and Italy — have signed up for the Super League, which offers guaranteed spots for its founding members and billions of dollars in payments.

Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur are the English clubs involved, together with Barcelona, Atletico Madrid and Real Madrid from Spain and Italian trio Juventus, AC Milan and Inter Milan.

Currently, teams have to qualify for the Champions League each year through their national competitions, and face a lengthy group phase before reaching the high-profile latter stages. The Super League would guarantee a spot for its founding members every year, removing the uncertainty of qualification and the accompanying risks to revenue.

The breakaway plan prompted a furious reaction from fans and officials, with UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin saying on Monday it was motivated by “greediness, selfishness and narcissism”, and Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp saying its closed



MONTREUX: In this handout photograph released by UEFA yesterday, FIFA president Gianni Infantino addresses the UEFA Congress in Montreux. — AFP

nature was “not right”. On Tuesday, Ceferin implored club owners, particularly those of Premier League teams, to row back on the plans. “There’s still time to change your mind. Everyone makes mistakes,” said the Slovenian. “English fans deserve to have you correct your mistake, they deserve respect.”

Three more clubs are expected to sign up, including “at least two” from France, a source told AFP. Qatar-owned Paris Saint-Germain are a notable absentee, while Bayern Munich, the reigning European champions, have distanced themselves from the project.

A serious threat

Five more clubs will qualify annually for the 20-team, midweek competition, where two groups of 10 will precede two-legged quarter- and semi-finals and a one-off final. The competition is due for launch “as soon as is practicable”.

It constitutes a serious threat to UEFA, which together with the English, Spanish and Italian football authorities said the clubs could be banned from domestic and European competition. The British government also said it was considering invoking competition law to block the breakaway.

Backed by US investment bank JP Morgan, the Super League is offering the founding clubs an initial pot of 3.5 billion euros (\$4 billion) for infrastructure investment and to offset pandemic costs. The clubs, most of them heavily indebted and saddled with enormous player salaries, are expected to receive a further 10 billion euros in “solidarity payments” over the life of the initial commitment — much more than the returns available in the Champions League.

Britain’s culture secretary Oliver Dowden said the English clubs could find themselves subject to a formal review under British anti-trust law, which prevents the formation of monopolies or corporate cartels. “We will put everything on the table to prevent this from happening,” the minister said, vowing a “very robust response”.

However, organizers of the Super League said they would file court motions to stop players being banned and “ensure the seamless establishment and operation” of the competition, according to a letter to Ceferin and Infantino that was seen by AFP.

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez, the head of

the new ESL, said it was “impossible” that clubs would be thrown out of the Champions League, whose upcoming semi-finals feature Chelsea, Manchester City and Real Madrid.

“Madrid will not be kicked out of the Champions League, definitely not. Nor City, nor anyone else,” he said, also insisting that players would still be able to represent their national teams. “Football has to keep changing and adapting to the times. Football is losing interest. Something must be done,” Perez said. Real coach Zinedine Zidane said he “had an opinion” on the Super League but “would not give it”, saying it was “a question for one man (Perez)”.

‘Hopefully it doesn’t happen’

Liverpool midfielder James Milner became the first player of one of the clubs involved to speak openly against the project. “I can only say my personal opinion, I don’t like it and hopefully it doesn’t happen,” Milner said after Liverpool’s Premier League draw with Leeds on Monday.

Fans of both clubs protested outside Elland Road before the match, while Leeds players wore shirts featuring the Champions League logo and the words “earn it” and “Football is for the fans” during the warm-up.

Liverpool manager Klopp was angered by Leeds staff leaving similar shirts in the away dressing room before kick-off. Everton, Liverpool’s Merseyside rivals, accused the Premier League’s ‘big six’ of “preposterous arrogance” and said they were “acting entirely in their own interests”. The breakaway announcement came just hours before UEFA announced a new, 36-team format for the Champions League, which had been conceived to placate the continent’s biggest clubs. — AFP

New Champions League format from 2024

MONTREUX: UEFA on Monday confirmed that a new format for the Champions League will be introduced from 2024 with the number of clubs in the group stage increasing from 32 to 36, despite an earlier announcement that 12 major clubs were planning to break away and start a rival Super League.

The new format — which will see all 36 clubs brought together into one pool instead of the current system of four-team groups — was approved at an executive committee meeting of European football’s governing body in Switzerland. No announcement was made about how the four extra teams would qualify other than that one place would go to the fifth-ranked league in Europe, which is currently France. The announcement came hours after news broke of a proposed breakaway Super League which was met with an acid response from UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin.

“I cannot stress more strongly how everyone is united against this disgraceful, self-serving proposals, fuelled by greed above all else,” said Ceferin. “We are all united against this nonsense of a project. Cynical plan, completely against what football should be. We cannot and will not allow that to change.”

UEFA’s new-look Champions League will follow the so-called ‘Swiss system’, more commonly associated with chess, with clubs split into four pots of nine for the draw based on UEFA coefficients. Teams will play against 10 different sides, with five games at home and five away. At the end of this phase, the top eight sides will go through to the last 16, with the bottom 12 eliminated. Meanwhile, the sides finishing between ninth and 24th position will play two-legged play-offs, with those between ninth and 16th drawn against a side finishing from 17th to 24th. The winners of those ties will complete the last-16 line-up, with the losers dropping into the Europa League.

Meanwhile, UEFA said it would announce the final decision over the host cities for this year’s delayed Euro 2020 on Friday, with Munich, Bilbao and Dublin in danger of being dropped from the list if the trio cannot welcome spectators to stadiums. On Monday, Ceferin said European football’s governing body “postponed our final decision until Friday” to allow time for final discussions “with the three cities which could be excluded”.

Munich, Bilbao and Dublin were all given until Monday to provide UEFA with additional information on their plans for spectators, with that deadline now extended. UEFA could take matches due to be played there and relocate them to other existing host cities, although the president of the Spanish Football Federation, Luis Rubiales, has said he will do “everything humanly possible” to ensure Spain keeps its four scheduled Euro games. Postponed by a year due to the pandemic, the European Championship is set to start in Rome on June 11 and is supposed to be played at 12 different venues spread across the continent, a controversial arrangement even before the pandemic brought about widespread travel restrictions.—AFP



NYON: In this file photo taken on March 15, 2019, the UEFA Champions league trophy is exhibited ahead of the draw for the Champions league quarter-final draw, at the House of European football in Nyon. — AFP



LEEDS: Leeds United players wear T-shirts with slogans against a proposed new European Super League as they warm up for the English Premier League football match between Leeds United and Liverpool at Elland Road in Leeds, northern England on Monday. — AFP

Liverpool, Leeds share spoils amid ESL protests

LEEDS: Liverpool were held to a 1-1 draw away to Leeds United on Monday in a match overshadowed by the furious response to the Merseysiders’ planned involvement in a breakaway European Super League (ESL). A draw left sixth-placed Liverpool two points adrift of fourth-placed West Ham in the Premier League.

The Reds opened the scoring before the interval through Sadio Mane only for Diego Llorente to equalize with his first Leeds goal, a header from a corner, three minutes from time. The top four in the Premier League come the end of the season are usually the four English clubs guaranteed a place in next term’s UEFA Champions League.

But even if six-times European champions Liverpool finish in the top four, they may well be banned from the tournament given they are on a collision course with UEFA, the continent’s football governing body, after emerging as one of 12 teams who have established plans to form the ESL. Under the proposals, 15 founder members would compete in the 20-team tournament every year without having to qualify.

Super League shows shift to ‘closed shop’

LONDON: The shock formation of football’s European Super League highlights a shift by the world’s richest clubs away from sporting merit and towards a “closed shop” that gives them more financial security, analysts say. The continent’s best-known teams are seeking to capitalize on their long-running success with the creation of the Super League, under plans denounced as greedy by Europe’s football governing body UEFA.

‘Shift in fundamentals of sport’

“What it means with the shift from the fundamentals of European football — and also European sport in general — it moves from sporting merit being the

primary driver to more of a closed shop,” Tim Bridge, director at Deloitte’s Sports Business Group, told AFP. He added that it was “unclear” whether the six English teams would continue because the Premier League rulebook only allows them to compete in certain other competitions. “What it would mean if those six clubs leave then that would clearly diminish the value of the Premier League rights pretty considerably,” he said. “And so I would expect there are some pretty detailed conversations going on to try and find some way forward from here.”

England’s biggest football teams have long been unhappy that broadcasting revenues are shared quite evenly among the 20 clubs in the Premier League. The system is designed to help fund lower league teams that have fewer fans and weaker finances.

Under the Super League plan, football clubs from England, Italy and Spain will receive a one-off payment of 3.5 billion euros (\$4.2 billion) to be shared with three other European giants yet to sign up.

The pot compares favorably with the huge sums the top clubs already earn from global broadcasting rights, sponsorship and other commercial revenue. And it has been put forward solely to support infrastructure investment of the founding members to offset the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

“A couple of clubs who are in the 12 are in challenging financial situations currently and therefore are probably looking for a greater level of financial stability in the future,” added Bridge. “It’s also that probably some of the driving forces behind the decision are maybe the American owners of certain clubs and they are used to a closed competition.” Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool are all owned by American tycoons — who also control US baseball, basketball and American football teams competing in leagues where they cannot be relegated to lower-tier levels.

In England, Premier League spending slumped by more than two-thirds to a nine-year low of just £70 million (\$96 million) in the January transfer window as the coronavirus crisis hit budgets. The outlay was dramatically down on last year’s £230 million expenditure, which came just weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic shut down football across Europe.—AFP

News in brief

‘ESL clubs should be barred’

BERLIN: The German football federation called yesterday for the 12 founding European Super League clubs to be thrown out of their domestic leagues and European competitions. “The clubs and their junior teams should be excluded from all competitions, until they have a second thought for their many supporters who made them into the giants of world football, and not just think of their wallets,” DFB president Fritz Keller said in a statement. A Super League, in which founding teams are guaranteed spots every year without the need for qualifying, “is something for the super-rich and the super-scrupulous”, Keller said. “The selfish behavior of these 12 clubs has nothing in common with the game that we all learned to love when we were children.” — AFP

‘Not EU’s responsibility’

ROME: The European Commission vice-president for promoting the European way of life conceded yesterday that Brussels cannot act against plans for a new football Super League, despite condemning it forcefully. Asked in an interview with Italy’s Il Messaggero newspaper what the Commission might do to block the project, Margaritis Schinas said: “Look, this is not the responsibility of the Commission. “Europe has for years recognized the right of (football) federations and UEFA to decide independently. It is they who will have to find solutions to this problem.” Schinas had on Monday joined a chorus of condemnation of plans by 12 of Europe’s most powerful clubs to form a breakaway league. “We must defend a values-driven European model of sport based on diversity and inclusion,” he said on Twitter. — AFP

Spurs appoint interim coach

LONDON: Tottenham confirmed yesterday that former midfielder Ryan Mason would be in caretaker charge until the end of the season following the sacking of Jose Mourinho. Mourinho was dismissed on Monday following a disappointing run of form that has left Spurs struggling to qualify for next season’s Champions League. Former Spurs and Hull player Mason, who was forced to retire from playing in 2018, steps up from his role as head of player development at the club. Mason’s first game in charge is a Premier League match with Southampton today, while he will also lead his boyhood club out at Wembley on Sunday in the League Cup final against Manchester City. — AFP

Sports

Curry hot streak continues
as Warriors down Sixers

11th straight game with 30 points or more

LOS ANGELES: Steph Curry extended his scoring streak with an electrifying 49-point display as the Golden State Warriors upset the Philadelphia 76ers 107-96 on Monday. Curry, who scored 47 points in a defeat to Boston on Saturday, bagged his 11th straight game with 30 points or more to give the Warriors a crucial victory in their fight for a playoff berth.

It was another spellbinding performance from the Warriors talisman, who is fast becoming the frontrunner for this season's NBA Most Valuable Player award with an average of 31.4 points per game.

Curry's 49 points included 10 three-pointers — five of them coming during a 20-point blast of scoring in the final quarter. It marked the 21st time in the Golden State star's career that he has bagged 10 or more three-pointers in a single game.

The next highest ranked player on the list is teammate Klay Thompson, who has five games with 10 three-pointers. Curry's latest masterpiece left Golden State coach Steve Kerr struggling to find adequate superlatives.

"I don't know what else to say," Kerr said of Curry. "When you guys ask me after every game what I think of Steph and his performance, well, whatever I said after the last game — just use that. Because it's the same thing after every game — utter amazement at this guy's skill level, heart, mind and focus. Just amazing to watch."

Kerr described Curry's record of three-point scoring as "mind-boggling stuff" that put the 33-year-old in a league of his own in NBA history as far as shooting was concerned. "Kobe Bryant earlier in his career had a stretch, and obviously Michael Jordan had some stretches where he scored like crazy," Kerr said. "But nobody's ever shot the ball like this in the history of the game. And even by Steph's own lofty standards, this is above and beyond."



PHILADELPHIA: Stephen Curry #30 of the Golden State Warriors reacts during a game against the Philadelphia 76ers on Monday at Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. — AFP

In the groove

The Sixers had threatened to take a commanding grip on the game in the opening period, jumping out to a 12-point lead against a sluggish Warriors side. But once the visitors got into their stride, the gap narrowed and the first quarter finished locked at 24-24.

The game was tied at 55-55 at half-time, but the

Warriors edged into a five-point lead at the end of the third and then Curry's dazzling late show saw the Dubs outscore Philadelphia 32-26 in the fourth quarter. Curry had support from Andrew Wiggins with 16 points, while Damion Lee had 12 points off the bench.

The win saw the Warriors improve to 29-29 as they chase a playoff place from the Western Conference. "We

need every win we can get," said Kerr. "We've been playing really well for the past couple of weeks. We're in a good groove and there's a really good spirit and energy with the team right now."

The Eastern Conference-leading Sixers, meanwhile, slipped to 39-18 as their four-game winning streak came to an abrupt halt. The Sixers' scoring was led by Joel Embiid, who had 28 points with 13 rebounds and eight assists. Curry's younger brother Seth finished with 15 points for the Sixers, while Matisse Thybulle added 13.

Elsewhere Monday, Devin Booker's free throw with 0.3 seconds of overtime remaining helped the Phoenix Suns squeeze a 128-127 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks at the Fiserv Forum. The game ended in controversy, with PJ Tucker adjudged to have fouled Booker to set up the winning free-throw for the Suns just when a second period of overtime loomed.

Booker led the scoring in a strong all-round offensive performance by Phoenix with 24 points. Chris Paul added 22 points with 13 assists, while Mikal Bridges had 21 points. DeAndre Ayton had 20 points with 13 rebounds while Cameron Payne and Cameron Johnson both cracked double figures with 12 and 13 points respectively. Giannis Antetokounmpo led the Bucks' scoring with 33 points, while Khris Middleton finished with 26 and Jrue Holiday 25.

In Denver, Nikola Jokic erupted for 47 points as the Nuggets defeated the Memphis Grizzlies 139-137 in double overtime. Jokic added 15 rebounds and eight assists while Will Barton had 28 points as the Nuggets improved to 37-20 to remain fourth in the West.

Utah meanwhile maintained their lead at the top of the West with a comfortable 111-97 win over the depleted Los Angeles Lakers at the Staples Center. Jordan Clarkson led the Utah scorers with 22 off the bench as the Jazz cruised to an emphatic victory. — AFP



LAS VEGAS: Patrick Marleau #12 of the San Jose Sharks reacts as he is honored in the first period of a game against the Vegas Golden Knights, his 1,768th NHL game, at T-Mobile Arena on Monday in Las Vegas, Nevada. — AFP

Marleau sets
NHL record with
1,768th game

LOS ANGELES: San Jose Sharks forward Patrick Marleau broke ice hockey legend Gordie Howe's record for the most appearances in NHL history on Monday, playing his 1,768th game in a 3-2 defeat to the Vegas Golden Knights. The 41-year-old made his 899th consecutive appearance to surpass fellow Canadian Howe in the all-time standings. Marleau's milestone appearance was given a salute at the first break in play, with an announcement in the stadium.

A recorded message of congratulations from NHL commissioner Gary Bettman marked the moment as Marleau acknowledged a standing ovation from fans with his stick raised aloft. "To be merely mentioned in the same sentence as Gordie Howe is an achievement most hockey players can only dream about," Bettman

said in his message. "To break one of his records is historic." After the game, the Golden Knights players lined up to shake hands with Marleau. "With everything that's going on, my biggest fear is that I don't thank everybody, that I'm going to miss somebody," Marleau said before the game. I just want to be able to thank everybody, and if I miss somebody, I'm so sorry, but I'll eventually, you know, try and make it right and thank everybody that needs to be thanked. Just very grateful."

Vegas coach Peter DeBoer, who coached Marleau at San Jose from 2015 to 2019, also paid tribute to his former player. "What an accomplishment," DeBoer said. "Any time you're passing Gordie Howe on any list, it's a wow-type moment."

Marleau is a two-time Olympic gold medalist with Canada's national team but has never won ice hockey's biggest prize, the Stanley Cup, during a career that has straddled four decades. "I just love being out there and playing, and every kid's dream is to hoist that Stanley Cup so I've been chasing that all this time," Marleau said in an interview last week. Asked on Monday why he continued to play, an emotional Marleau replied: "I just love it." — AFP

China's Ding ahead
in snooker's World
Championship

LONDON: China's Ding Junhui established a narrow 5-4 lead over former title-holder Stuart Bingham on Monday as he looked to join compatriot Yan Bingtao in the second round of snooker's World Championship. Ding had a difficult start against Bingham, the 2015 world champion.

Although he had to come through qualifying after dropping out of the world's top 16, the Englishman made a fine break of 131 in the opening frame and was 3-1 ahead at the mid-session interval thanks to a contribution of 129. But world number nine Ding responded with clearances of 105 and 86 before a fluked black saw him take a hard-fought ninth frame.

No Asian player has yet won snooker's prestigious title, with Canada's Cliff Thorburn (1980) and Australia's Neil Robertson (2010), the only world champions from outside Britain and Ireland in the modern era. Ding, however, lost 18-14 in the 2016 final to England's Mark Selby and has long been tipped to be China's first world champion. Meanwhile Tian Pengfei saw his hopes of a shock upset win over John Higgins dashed as the four-times world champion won six frames in a row to clinch a 10-7 success.

'Dodged a bullet'

Tiang led 7-4 but the Chinese cue-man was undone by a combination of his nerves and some typically resilient matchplay from Higgins. The Scottish veteran moved one frame away from victory with a break of 127 before the match was paused as it risked delaying the evening session, with the players made to wait until Anthony McGill had defeated Ricky Walden to complete the match. "I've dodged a bullet there big time because Tian had enough chances to beat me," said Higgins. "I've brought him down to my level and it's a big relief."

Reigning Masters champion Yan Bingtao's bid for Crucible glory started with a 10-6 win over qualifier Martin Gould on Sunday. The 21-year-old Chinese will now face either 2005 champion Shaun Murphy or Mark Davis in the second round. — AFP



ARLINGTON: In this file photo taken on November 26, 2020 Alex Smith #11 of the Washington Football Team looks to pass during the second quarter of a game against the Dallas Cowboys at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas. — AFP

Quarterback
Alex Smith
retires from NFL

LOS ANGELES: Veteran quarterback Alex Smith announced his retirement from the NFL on Monday, bringing the curtain down on a 16-year career that saw him battle back from a life-threatening leg injury. The 36-year-old former number one draft pick, who was released from the Washington Football Team last month, confirmed his decision in a video posted on Instagram. "Even though I've got plenty of snaps left in me, after 16 years of giving this game everything I've got, I can't wait to see what else is possible," Smith said in the video. Smith played eight times for Washington last season, completing a remarkable comeback after suffering a compound fracture to his right leg in 2018 that would eventually require 17 surgeries.

At one stage during his recovery, a flesh-eating bacterial infection almost cost Smith his life and nearly required the amputation of his leg. "Two years ago, I was stuck in a wheelchair staring down at my mangled leg wondering if I'd ever be able to go on a walk with my wife again or play games with my kids in the yard," Smith said Monday. "Putting my helmet back on was the farthest thing from my mind. I kept asking myself, 'All this for a stupid game?'" — AFP

Classifieds

HOSPITALS

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Rawda	22517733
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Adaliya	22517144
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Khaldiya	24848075
Mubarak Al-Kabir		Kaifan	24849807
Hospital	25312700	Shamiya	24848913
Chest Hospital	24849400	Shuwaikh	24814507
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Adan Hospital	23940620	Nuzha	22526804
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Qadisiya	22515088
Physiotherapy Hospital		Dasmah	22532265
24874330/9		Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Clinics		Shaab	22518752
Kaizen center	25716707	Qibla	22459381
		Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082

Announcement

Please note that Mr. **Mohammed Quasi Mohammed Marwan Al Hussainee**, of Syrian nationality and holds a Civil ID No. 264022800876, use to work for us in Imperial Group for General Trading & Contracting Co. (W.L.L.) as an executive manager and his services were terminated as of 28/09/2018 and he has no authority to deal with any business or act in any way on our behalf and in our name, or in the name of any branch of our company since that date, and that the company is not responsible for any behavior that the aforementioned does in name and title of the company and its branches, and it holds the aforementioned and everyone who deals with him legal responsibility for that.



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Qatar defies virus, presses on with major sport events

DOHA: Qatar has defied soaring coronavirus numbers to stage high-profile sporting events, serving as a test bed ahead of the Tokyo Olympics and the 2022 World Cup, but also suffering high-profile setbacks. Doha, among the most controversial World Cup hosts of the modern era, has bucked the trend of more established sporting nations which have cancelled or postponed a slew of elite events.

Instead it has deployed multi-billion dollar venues, luxury hotels-turned-quarantine centers and formidable virus testing system to host football, golf, tennis, motorcycling, judo and beach volleyball events — some with spectators.

Simon Chadwick, professor of Eurasian Sport at EM Lyon University, said full-fledged tournaments complete with fans were key to Qatar's strategy to diversify its economy away from gas and oil dependence. "It is reckless to be staging events during times of rising infection, but... the inconvenient truth for Qatar is that the country has rolled the dice big on sporting events," he said.

Since winning the role of World Cup 2022 host back in 2010, Qatar has been dogged by accusations of worker mistreatment, corruptly obtaining the tournament, and being an unsuitable venue because of the desert nation's inhospitable climate. Now it looks certain that coronavirus and efforts to suppress the pandemic instead will dominate the lead-up.

'COVID-free World Cup'

Doha and FIFA have insisted that 2022 will proceed with fans from across the globe, and a minister last week said Qatar was in talks with vaccine makers to ensure all attendees could be vaccinated, to make the World Cup "COVID-free".

However, breaches of Qatar's elaborate and costly efforts to stage sports have highlighted the risks and vulnerabilities in enforcement, issues the organizers of the Tokyo Olympics will have to confront this summer.

Bayern star Thomas Mueller tested positive ahead of February's Club World Cup final in Doha, while American tennis player Denis Kudla learnt he was positive mid-game while qualifying for the Australian Open.

Another case was detected in the beach volleyball "bubble", while there were prominent biosecurity breaches including VVIPs sitting in player boxes at the Qatar Open and players greeting non-bubble guests at the Club Cup. A Qatari official said authorities worked with each events' organizers to "pick the best (biosecurity) option while keeping track of local transmission rates".

"The Club World Cup model was very successful," he added, suggesting fans attending did not increase infections. James Dorsey, author of the Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer blog, said trying different approaches to containment was "not a bad strategy — because at least you know what works". The MotoGP, which resumed in Qatar this month after a virus hiatus, offered vaccines to everyone in the paddock. Dorsey said an inoculation requirement for 2022 attendees "would make sense".

"Verifying vaccines would certainly be possible, Qatar vaccinating (fans) would not necessarily be feasible. But it also depends on how travel develops," he said. As for soccer powerhouses like Brazil that traditionally send thousands of fans to World Cups but which has turned into a COVID epicenter and struggled to vaccinate, Dorsey warned "they may get penalized".

Olympics 'very risky'

"We can all learn from each other's experiences," said Andrew Murray, Chief Medical Officer for the PGA European Tour which visited Qatar in March.



AL-RAYYAN: In this file photo taken on February 11, 2021 a sanitation worker sprays disinfectants on the goal post following the FIFA Club World Cup 3rd place football match between Egypt's Al-Ahly vs Brazil's Palmeiras at the Education City Stadium in the Qatari city of Al-Rayyan. — AFP

"For the 2022 World Cup, strong progress is being made regarding vaccination both in Qatar and internationally. This may increase opportunities for international visitors, all being well."

Qatar has suffered a surge of cases and deaths in recent months, with almost 25 percent of its more than 380 fatalities recorded so far in April alone. In the past 30 days, more than 25,000 people tested positive compared to just 7,501 in January, among a population of 2.75 million, although there is no evidence linking sporting events to the surge.

Doha blames new virus variants and social gatherings, emphasizing that more than 1.2 million

vaccine doses have been administered. Organizers of the 2022 tournament have so far been spared the intense coronavirus scrutiny of the Tokyo Olympics — due to begin a year late in July despite a senior Japanese politician warning they could still be cancelled.

"The Olympics are going to be very risky, given the pandemic is ongoing and cases in many countries are rising steeply," said Michael Head, a global health researcher at the University of Southampton. "In my view, the Olympics and other mass gatherings that require international travel would be best postponed for another year." — AFP

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