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MPs demand probe into killing of Kuwaiti woman

'Victim had filed complaints over harassment, threats previously'

Maid offices warned against overcharging

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Minister of Commerce and Industry Abdullah Al-Salman said yesterday that the ministry will refer to the public prosecution domestic helper recruitment offices which overcharge the fees set by the authorities.

In response to a parliamentary question, the minister said the ministry has set recruitment fees for domestic maids based on country they hail from: KD 390 for the Philippines, India KD 200 for females and KD 100 for males, Sri Lanka KD 240 for females and KD 180 for males, Ethiopia KD 145 for both and Bangladesh KD 196 for both.

The minister said these are the official fees and expenses only, and do not include commissions for offices and brokers and the expenses of recruitment offices in Kuwait and their profit margins.

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: A number of lawmakers yesterday demanded an investigation into how interior ministry officers failed to provide protection to a Kuwaiti woman who was brutally killed despite filing several complaints. The woman, FA, was abducted by a Kuwaiti man on Tuesday, who allegedly stabbed her and then abandoned her outside Adan hospital in Mubarak Al-Kabeer area. The woman later succumbed to her wounds.

According to MP Hisham Al-Saleh, the woman and her sister had filed several complaints at the police station saying that the man had threatened them. He said that the man was taken into custody and later freed. The sister claimed that the man continued to pursue her and threatened her for several months after her parents refused his request to marry her. The woman told police that he had threatened her repeatedly. The alleged murderer has been arrested by security men.

In a series of questions to Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Al-Sabah, the lawmaker asked the minister about the number of complaints the woman and her sister had filed to the ministry and the measures that



Osama Al-Munawer



Mohammad Al-Mutair

were taken by the ministry before the crime was committed. He also asked why the interior ministry had not provided her with protection despite filing several complaints of threats from the murderer. He asked about the number of complaints of threats on life and abductions the interior ministry received in 2019 and 2020. Saleh asked what would the ministry take to prevent such crimes from happening in the future. The lawmaker asked how many death sen-

tences have been issued by the court of cassation so far and how many of them have been executed. He also inquired about the number of death sentences that had not been carried out and the reasons.

MP Mohammad Al-Mutair called on HH the Prime Minister to order an immediate investigation among senior interior ministry officers and public attorneys into the matter. The lawmaker described the crime as a catastrophe. MP Osama Al-Munawer said death sentences must be the just punishment for such brutal murders and it must be executed as soon as possible to curb criminals.

In September 2020, after years of activism, Kuwait established a new law offering protection for domestic violence. The new legislation creates the framework for the establishment of shelters and a hotline to receive domestic violence complaints, provides counseling and legal assistance for victims, and allows for emergency protection orders (restraining orders) to prevent abusers from contacting their victim. Domestic and gender-based violence against women in Kuwait is a growing matter of public debate as there have been several instances of women killed by family members, or male acquaintances in recent years.

Ramadan Kareem

Ramadan, the blessed month

By Irum Hanif

Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "When Ramadan enters, the gates of Paradise are opened, the gates of Hellfire are closed, and the devils are chained." (Al-Bukhari and Muslim)

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar that follows Sha'ban. Fasting during this month from dawn to sunset is obligatory for all adult Muslims who are not acutely or chronically ill, travelling, elderly, breastfeeding, diabetic, or menstruating. It is revealed in Noble Quran: "The month of Ramadan is that in which was revealed the Quran: a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance, and the criterion (of right and wrong). And whosoever of you is present, let him fast the month, and whosoever of you is sick or on a journey (such a person will then fast) the same number of other days. Allah intends for you ease; and does not intend for you hardship. Rather, He wills for you to complete the number (of prescribed days), and that you extol Allah for (the blessing of faith) to which He has guided you, so that you may be thankful." (Quran 2:185)

Purpose of Fasting: Fasting is the best time to strengthen a person both physically and spiritually by not eating or drinking from dawn to sunset. And if married, it is mandatory to abstain from conjugal rights, sinful speech such as gossiping, backbiting, lying, or arguing - among others. Fasting is the best way of self-reflection, self-improvement, worship and to work on one's spiritual aspect such as self-discipline, self-control, sacrifice, empathy, generosity and to crown all that with giving ZAKAH (compulsory charity) and other forms of charity. Zakah is the fixed percentage of income a believer is required to give to the poor; the practice is obligatory as one of the pillars of Islam. Ramadan is also the best time to reflect on the bounties of Allah (the Almighty and Majestic) in our day-to-day life and attain high levels of gratitude.

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Derek Chauvin found guilty of Floyd's murder

MINNEAPOLIS, US: Derek Chauvin, a white former Minneapolis police officer, was convicted Tuesday of murdering African-American George Floyd after a racially charged trial seen as a pivotal test of police accountability in the United States. The jury deliberated less than 11 hours before finding 45-year-old Chauvin guilty of all three charges against him: second-degree murder, third-degree murder and manslaughter.

A crowd gathered outside the heavily guarded downtown Minneapolis courtroom erupted in cheers, and some wept tears of relief, when the verdicts

were announced after a three-week trial that had an entire nation on edge. Chauvin, who had been free on bail, was put in handcuffs after Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill read out the unanimous verdicts reached by the racially diverse, seven-woman, five-man jury.

Wearing a facemask and displaying no visible emotion, Chauvin was escorted out of the courtroom by a deputy as one of Floyd's brothers, Philonise Floyd, embraced prosecutors. Chauvin faces up to 40 years in prison on the most serious charge-second-degree murder. His sentencing will take place in eight weeks, Judge Cahill said. The 19-year veteran of the Minneapolis police force was seen on video kneeling on the neck of Floyd for more than nine minutes as he lay facedown and handcuffed on the ground saying repeatedly "I can't breathe."

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MINNEAPOLIS, Minnesota: This combination of pictures shows former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin listening to the verdict and being taken away handcuffed in his trial for the killing of George Floyd on Tuesday. — AFP

Submarine with 53 crew aboard missing off Bali

JAKARTA: Indonesia's military said it was searching for a submarine with 53 crew aboard after losing contact with the vessel during naval exercises off the coast of Bali yesterday.

The German-built KRI Nanggala 402 was scheduled to do live torpedo exercises when it asked for permission to dive early yesterday morning.

authorities said. "After permission was given according to the procedure, the submarine lost contact and could not be reached," the defense ministry said.

A helicopter looking for the missing vessel spotted an oil spill in waters where the submarine was thought to have submerged, it added. The navy said it has not pinpointed the exact location of the submarine but had narrowed down the search based on the spill. The oil "could indicate damage on the body" of the submarine, navy spokesman Julius Widjojono told MetroTV. The military has dispatched some 400 personnel and two

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DENPASAR, Bali: The Indonesian Cakra class submarine KRI Nanggala 402 docking at the naval base in Surabaya. Indonesia's military said it was searching for the submarine with 53 crew aboard after losing contact with the vessel during naval exercises off the coast of Bali yesterday. — AFP

Deby's son takes power in Chad; rivals slam coup

N'DJAMENA, Chad: Chad faced an uncertain future yesterday as the son of slain leader Idriss Deby Itno took power in what the opposition called

a coup and Western allies that rely on the country's military might pleaded for stability. Deby had ruled the impoverished desert country for three decades before the army announced his death on Tuesday from wounds suffered while leading troops in battle against rebels.

The shock demise of the 68-year-old led to immediate concerns of a power vacuum in Chad, which sits at the heart of the troubled Sahel region and is key to the West's anti-jihadist efforts. Deby's death was announced only a day after provisional

results declared him the winner of an April 11 election giving him a sixth term in office. The outcome was never in doubt, with a divided opposition, boycott calls, and a campaign in which demonstrations were banned or dispersed.

Allies of the late leader moved swiftly to assure power remained in their hands, installing Deby's 37-year-old son Mahamat Idriss Deby as president and head of a transitional military council while dissolving parliament and the government.

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Local

Amir receives Crown Prince, Speaker, Prime Minister



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



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem.



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

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

His Highness the Amir also received National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem. Furthermore, His Highness the Amir received His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-

Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received Ghanem and His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled at Bayan. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah is seen during his visit to the Army Officers' Club. — KUNA photos



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah is seen during his visit to the Ministry of Interior's Nawaf Al-Ahmad Building.

Prime Minister commends armed forces, police role in combating COVID-19

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah has commended the armed forces for joining state bodies to confront the spread of coronavirus. Ministry of Defense's personnel "have been with the government team since day one of the pandemic, starting with operations by the air force, medical authority

and navy in disinfection and sterilization operations, in addition to establishing quarantine facilities and field hospitals, and supporting Ministry of Interior and National Guard in enforcing partial and full curfew," His Highness the Prime Minister said. He made the remarks during a visit, late Tuesday, to the Army Officers' Club. He was received by Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah and Chief of Staff General Sheikh Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah.

The armed forces' contributions "have been the result of planning, training and readiness to confront any emergency," His Highness the Prime Minister said. He also commended the army for helping the Ministry of Education in ongoing preparations for final tests of grade 12 students, due at end of May. His Highness the Prime Minister also conveyed greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh

Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Meanwhile, Minister Sheikh Hamad said the MoD has mobilized its military and civilian sectors to help the government authorities confront COVID-19. He said the MoD was operating in harmony with the government plan of action in order to help promote the administrative performance thus honor aspirations of the political leadership and Kuwaiti people.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Prime Minister reiterated the crucially important role of the Ministry of Interior in preserving security and stability nationwide, as well as curbing spread of COVID-19. His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, in a visit to the Ministry of Interior's Nawaf Al-Ahmad Building late Tuesday, said spread of coronavirus pandemic has

increased burden upon shoulders of security personnel to contribute to curb spread of disease. His Highness the Prime Minister, who praised the personnel for their service, said deployment of police forces to guarantee implementation of health measures was important as "we are still facing the second wave of this pandemic."

"We are facing great responsibilities towards protection of our nation from this pandemic," he said and explained the rise in infections resulted in imposition of the partial curfew. His Highness the Prime Minister, who was received by Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Al-Sabah and Undersecretary General Essam Al-Nahham, conveyed greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA

Submarine with 53 crew aboard...

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warships in the hunt, while a third vessel was being deployed from the capital Jakarta. It also sent out an international distress signal, and "several countries have responded and are ready to help including Singapore, Australia and India," the defense ministry said. There were 53 crew aboard the vessel, which was believed to be in waters about 700 meters (2,300 feet) deep. Indonesia, which has been moving to upgrade its military equipment in recent years, has five German and South Korean-built submarines in its fleet.

The 1,300-tonne KRI Nanggala 402 was built in 1978, according to a government website. While the Southeast Asian archipelago has not previously suffered a major submarine disaster, other countries have been struck by accidents in the past.

Among them was the horrific sinking in 2000 of the Kursk, the pride of Russia's Northern Fleet. The submarine was on manoeuvres in the Barents Sea on August 12, 2000 when it sank with the loss of all 118 aboard. An inquiry found a torpedo had exploded, detonating all the others.

Most crew died instantly but some survived for several days—with a few keeping heart-breaking diaries written in blood to their loved ones before suffocating. It was the Russian navy's worst-ever disaster. Seventy Chinese naval officers and crew were killed, apparently suffocated, in an accident on a Ming-class submarine conducting exercises in 2003. Then, in 2008, 20 people were killed by poisonous gas when a fire extinguishing system was accidentally activated on a Russian submarine being tested in the Sea of Japan.

In 2018, authorities found the wreckage of an Argentine submarine that had gone missing a year earlier. Crushed from an implosion, the ARA San Juan was located at a depth of more than 900 metres (3,000 feet) in a desolate area of undersea craters and canyons 400 kilometres (250 miles) off the coast of Argentina. — AFP

Ramadan, the blessed month...

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Abu Hurayrah narrated that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "Fasting is a shield; so, when one of you is fasting, he should neither indulge in obscene language nor raise his voice in anger. If someone attacks him or insults him, let him say, 'I am fasting.'" (Muslim)

Essence of Ramadan: Muslims all around the world fast during the month Ramadan not only to implement one of the five pillars of Islam, but also to attain Taqwa (the fear of God). As the reward for every good deed is multiplied by Allah (swt) during the month of Ramadan, it is thus to make you more aware of you daily acts of wrong and right, as revealed in Noble Quran: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you so that you can learn Taqwa." (Quran 2:183)

During the month of Ramadan, Taraweeh an extra nightly prayer during which entire Quran is recited by the end of Ramadan. Recitation of Noble Quran is also one of the main acts of worship as revealed in Quran that it was during the month of Ramadan its revelation took place: "The month of

Ramadan is that in which was revealed the Quran, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion." (Quran 2:185)

Lailat Al-Qadr: The Night of Power known as Lailat Al-Qadr, is believed to fall on one of the odd nights during the last ten days and nights of Ramadan. It is considered the most blessed night in Ramadan because it is believed to be the night in which the Noble Quran was revealed. Abu Hurayrah reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "Whoever stands (in the voluntary night prayer) in Laylat Al-Qadr out of faith and in hope of reward, his previous sins will be forgiven." (Al-Bukhari)

Eidull-Fitr: At the end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate one of their major holidays called Eid Al-Fitr or the "Festival of Breaking of the Fast." A special prayer is held early morning on the Eid day after Fajr Prayer. Food, socializing with friends and family, eating, and presenting gifts to children and adults - among others - are observed throughout this day as a form of joy and celebration.

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

Deby's son takes power in Chad...

Continued from Page 1

They tore up Chad's constitution and established a "Transition Charter" that lays out a new basic law for the country of 16 million people that spans western and central Africa.

The charter issued yesterday proclaimed that Mahamat, a career soldier like his father who had been head of the powerful presidential guard, will "occupy the functions of the president of the republic" and also serve as head of the armed forces. The transition period is meant to last 18 months and lead to democratic elections, though it can be extended once.

Chad's main opposition parties were unconvinced,

Derek Chauvin found guilty of...

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The 46-year-old Floyd's death during his May 25, 2020 arrest for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill sparked protests against racial injustice and police brutality around the world. Ahead of the verdict, cities across the United States had been braced for potential unrest and National Guard troops have been deployed in Minneapolis.

On Tuesday evening, officers in the US state of Ohio released body camera footage of an officer shooting and killing a black teenage girl who appeared to be threatening another person with a knife. Columbus police chief Michael Woods said he wanted to release the footage as quickly as possible. George Floyd's brother Rodney said that black people in America had been victims of deadly injustice at the hands of the authorities for hundreds of years.

"We needed a victory in this case, it's very important, and we got it and hey, we might actually breathe a little bit better now," he added. President Joe Biden called members of the Floyd family to say he was "relieved" by the verdicts, then later he and Vice President Kamala Harris addressed the nation in televised remarks. "This can be a giant step forward in the march towards justice in America," Biden said, as he called on citizens to "unite" against racism and violence.

Harris, America's first female and first black vice president, told the family it was "a day of justice in America,"

denouncing an "institutional coup d'etat" in a statement and calling on citizens "not to obey illegitimate decisions" by the military council. Beyond that, the threat remained from rebels who launched an incursion into the country's north from Libya on the day of the April 11 election despite army claims they had been defeated.

The rebel group, known as FACT, told AFP on Tuesday it would pursue its offensive after a pause for Deby's state funeral on Friday. "We categorically reject the transition," FACT spokesman Kingabe Ogozemi de Tapol said. "Our troops are en route towards N'Djamena."

Gun-toting soldiers in fatigues and members of the red-bereted presidential guard were seen patrolling the capital in the aftermath of Deby's death. But yesterday, banks, markets and most shops were open while the national flag flew at half-mast on public buildings. — AFP

and that "history will look back at this moment."

Floyd family lawyer Ben Crump hailed the conviction as a landmark victory for civil rights and a springboard to legislation currently before Congress to reform police forces in their dealings with minorities. "This verdict is a turning point in history and sends a clear message on the need for accountability of law enforcement," Crump tweeted.

"Justice for Black America is justice for all of America!" Barack Obama, the nation's first black president, said "a jury did the right thing" but "true justice requires much more." Three other former police officers involved in Floyd's arrest are to go on trial later this year. Minneapolis has been tense awaiting the Chauvin verdict and the city has seen nightly protests since Daunte Wright, a 20-year-old black man, was shot dead in a suburb of the Minnesota city on April 11 by a white policewoman.

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 Monday, showed excerpts from the harrowing bystander video of Floyd's death.

"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 added. "Nine minutes and 29 seconds of shocking abuse of authority." Among the 38 witnesses who testified for the prosecution were some of the bystanders who watched Floyd's arrest and pleaded with Chauvin to get off him. — AFP

Local

Alghanim Industries collaborates with INJAZ on Digital Literacy Initiative

Part of a wider initiative with Maharat Min Google

KUWAIT: Alghanim Industries and INJAZ Kuwait prepared more than 2,000 students for their future careers through the Maharat Min Google program, in collaboration with INJAZ Al-Arab and Google. Designed with Arab youth at its core, the initiative provided students with valuable digital literacy skills that will help set them up for success when entering the job market. Participants learned how to enhance their digital presence and market their businesses online, boosting their employability skills and building new connections.

Through the strategic collaboration with Alghanim Industries, the Maharat Min Google initiative provided free in-person and online digital skills training and tools to students, educators, job seekers and small businesses. The online platform is comprised of over 100 lessons and explanatory videos, covering a range of digital marketing skills including search engine marketing, social media, video, e-commerce and more.

Commenting on the impact of the initiative, Alghanim Industries' Executive Chairman, Kutayba Y Alghanim said: "Our support for this program stems from our commitment to equip our youth



Kutayba Alghanim



Bader Al-Kharafi

with the knowledge and skills that will allow them to thrive in an increasingly technology-driven economy. We are especially proud to have partnered with a reputed global entity like Google as well as INJAZ Kuwait which has for many years been empowering the country's youth to build successful and innovative careers."

Despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the initiative succeeded in reaching its target and helped students plan for their future through interactive virtual sessions. Beyond Kuwait, Alghanim Industries' support has also helped

Maharat Min Google reach 9,200 students in Palestine and 8,000 students in Yemen, in collaboration with INJAZ Al-Arab.

Meanwhile, Chairman of INJAZ Kuwait, Bader Al-Kharafi, said: "INJAZ Kuwait is honored to conclude this program, which has equipped more than 2,000 young men and women in Kuwait with necessary digital literacy skills, especially in these unprecedented times which have propelled all efforts for e-learning across the country. We are grateful for Alghanim Industries' ongoing support to INJAZ Kuwait and we hope to reach a wider number of students in future initiatives."

The Maharat Min Google partnership was developed in response to the increasing demand for digital skills within the job market and the absence of sufficient Arabic-language digital training in MENA educational systems. Furthermore, despite the significant contribution women make to the world of innovation, the region has among the lowest female labor market participation rates globally. As a result of these considerations, the initiative was designed to raise hopes for all Arab youth, especially young women, to achieve their future aspirations.



Kuwait issues stamp to document fight against COVID-19

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Communications (MoC) issued a postage stamp titled "Kuwait Fight Coronavirus Pandemic," in collaboration with the ministry's Postal Sector and Kuwait Philatelic Society, to document this vital global and historical time and the country's fight against COVID-19. In a press statement yesterday, the ministry said that the stamp contains a photo of the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as well as a picture of a Kuwait Airways plane with citizens returning to the country during the plan to evacuate them from abroad. The stamp also includes a picture of the Kuwait gates, symbolizing the protection of the nation to its people from external danger, on the side of the gate policeman, the National Guard, military, medical crew, Kuwait Red Crescent Society and voluntary groups, to document their great role during this pandemic, it added. The stamp of the pandemic was designed and drawn this month by a member of the Kuwait Philatelic Society Jaber Abdulali Al-Hindal, which is available to everyone at 150 fils with 50,000 printed, it stated. — KUNA

Census takers focus on Kuwait household income, expenditure

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Many people were surprised by researchers from the Central Statistics Bureau (CSB) visiting them at home to take information for the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2019-2021. Kuwait Times interviewed Khuloud Shuweiker, Supervisor of Work and Living Statistics at CSB, to learn more about this survey.

Kuwait Times: What is the main goal of this survey?

Khuloud Shuweiker: To provide a platform of economic, social and demographic data to be used by planners, policymakers and those in charge of economic and social affairs to prepare development programs and plans. Furthermore, to know which products and services are consumed by people, and based on that, demand is measured.

The survey also aims to measure the proportion-

al distribution of spending on services and products, and using this data to figure the record of living expenses. In addition, it also aims to calculate the average income of families and individuals and average spending by families and individuals, which are used in national accounts.

Kuwait Times: What questions do the researchers ask?

Shuweiker: They ask about the family's data and demographic, economic and social characteristics of its members. They will also ask about spending by family members on products and services. In addition, they will ask about the income components of the head of the household and all family members older than 15 years of age.

These data are collected through special forms. These include form no. 1 (characteristics of the family and its members), form no. 2 (individual form for family members over 15 years about income and spending), form no. 3 (annual data on family spending) and form no. 4 (two forms to be filled by the family on spending on services and goods).

Kuwait Times: What credentials should the researchers have?

Shuweiker: They should be holding official IDs from the Central Statistics Bureau. They should be also wearing special vests with the CSB logo. They should have a permit, a letter addressing the head of

the household, a letter from the interior ministry and the forms to be filled.

Kuwait Times: Is the survey still going on during the holy month of Ramadan?

Shuweiker: Yes, it's still continuing.

Kuwait Times: When did it start and when will it conclude?

Shuweiker: The survey started on October 20, 2019 and should've continued for a year, but it stopped on March 11, 2020 due to the pandemic. We started again on March 11, 2021 and will continue till the first week of November 2021. The survey is done on a sample of families (around 4,032) divided over 12 months to collect the data.

Kuwait Times: How have people reacted to the survey?

Shuweiker: Around 90 percent of the families that we have visited till now were responsive and cooperative. Apart from personal visits to the families' homes, we also collect data from families through the phone, WhatsApp and the electronic platform.

Kuwait Times: Have you faced any problems?

Shuweiker: Yes, some researchers faced problems with a few families, but they were all resolved. The researchers explained the importance of the survey and clarified any misperceptions, so the families cooperated.

Kuwait opens vaccination for people over 65

KUWAIT: Any person over 65 years of age in Kuwait can receive their COVID-19 vaccine directly and without having to book for an appointment, the health ministry announced. This includes both citizens and expatriates. The ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad made that statement during a

press conference on Tuesday, during which he announced that nearly 74 percent of Ministry of Education employees who have registered in the vaccination platform have already been vaccinated.

Dr Sanad also announced Tuesday that Kuwait has recorded 1,371 new coronavirus infections and 12 related deaths in the previous 24 hours. The new figures took the total cases in the country up to 259,868 and deaths to 1,468 respectively, he noted. He pointed out that some 1,360 more people had been cured of the virus during the same period, raising the total of those who have overcome the disease to 243,056. — KUNA

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

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THE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961

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Kuwait gains WHO drug monitoring program's permanent membership

KUWAIT: Kuwait has obtained a permanent membership in the World Health Organization's (WHO) program for international drug monitoring, said the Assistant Undersecretary for Drug and Food Control Affairs at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health, Dr Abdullah Al-Bader yesterday. In a statement to KUNA, Dr Al-Bader noted that Kuwait was added to the program run by the (Uppsala) International Center for Drug Control in Sweden after successfully meeting all the necessary standards and requirements. The Supervisor of the Pharmaceutical Services at the Ministry, Dr Reem Al-Issa, said that the Uppsala International Center collects reports on the adverse effects of drugs and vaccines received from member states with permanent membership in this program. Kuwait has fulfilled all the requirements for obtaining the membership, represented in providing the main elements of an integrated system for pharmacovigilance in Kuwait in terms of human resources, an electronic system for reporting side effects of drugs and vaccines, and a Kuwaiti guidance code for pharmacovigilance, she added. —KUNA

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: Cafes and their customers in early 1960. The picture shows a group of popular cafes inside the main market close to the Safat Square. Old Cadillac cars are seen parked outside the cafes. (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)

Gulf Bank launches one-of-a-kind marketing program

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank launched the first video of its new "Proverbs That Last With Gulf Bank" series as part of an integrated Ramadan campaign aiming to engage with members of the local community both online and in real life. The video garnered 250K views and more than 6,000 comments on Instagram in its first three days of airing.

Gulf Bank's Deputy General Manager, Consumer Banking - Marketing, Najla Aleisa, said: "Ramadan is one of the biggest seasons for TV ads in the Arab world, and it is a wonderful opportunity for us to not only entertain our community, but to also spread joy among them. This year, we are proud to celebrate Gulf Bank's rich Kuwaiti heritage, a pillar of our local community for over 60 years. Gulf Bank

is so much more than the most rewarding bank in the country - for many of us, it is also the closest one to our culture."

Commenting on the idea behind this year's Ramadan TVC, Aleisa continued: "Every year, Ramadan is a time that celebrates authentic Kuwaiti customs and traditions that remain firmly rooted in our nation's heritage, including the Ghabga, Girgean, and Fawazir (or Ramadan-themed proverbs). As part of our commitment to both rewarding and engaging with our community during the holy month, we have launched our latest campaign, "Proverbs That Last," which consists of three videos, each of which highlights a unique Kuwaiti proverb. Each proverb will air on a weekly basis, giving our followers the chance to not only learn an old Kuwaiti saying, but also win valuable prizes. As one of our personal sayings goes, Gulf Bank is always by your side."



Najla Aleisa

Gulf Bank's integrated Ramadan campaign also includes the Bank's own version of the popular "charades" game, in which locals will be asked to translate proverbs from Arabic to English or act out a proverb without speaking. Each week, Gulf Bank will be announcing three winners of the "Proverbs That Last" competition, each of whom will take home a cash prize of either KD 500, KD 300, or KD 200. In addition, the bank will also be launching an exclusive digital "girgean" game, as well as engaging the general public with entertaining special media competitions.

To watch Gulf Bank's latest TVCs and to participate in its latest social media competitions, customers can head to www.e-gulfbank.com/Ramadan and follow Gulf Bank across various social media channels. Customers can also direct their queries via WhatsApp on 1805805 for round-the-clock assistance from Gulf Bank representatives, or call the Customer Contact Center on the same number. In addition, customers can visit the dedicated Al-Danah account website to learn more about the account and its winners.

ISSUE NO: 18416 RAMADAN 10, 1442 AH

Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

10- In Ramadan you must also abstain from?

- Bad temper
 Working
 Speaking

Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

Date :
Name :
Civil ID :
Tel :
Email :



Kuwait distributes 1,000 food packages for Ramadan in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: The embassy of the State of Kuwait in Pakistan distributed over 1,000 food packs among people in the federal capital Islamabad. The embassy in coordination with Kuwait's Awqaf Affairs Council managed to distribute food packages to 1,000 deserving families for the holy month of Ramadan, as part of the 'Kuwait is by your side' humanitarian initiative. Kuwait's Ambassador to Pakistan Nassar Abdulrahman J Al-Mutairi witnessed the distribution of the packages among the deserving individuals of the community in Islamabad through a welfare trust funded by Kuwait. In a statement to the press on the occasion,

the Kuwaiti envoy said, "Today we and our Kuwaiti people are proud to fulfill our duty for humanity in this holy month of Ramadan. We want to do whatever we can for our Pakistani brothers especially at this time of difficulty when COVID-19 pandemic is on the rise. We wish and pray for our brotherly country Pakistan and we will fight this pandemic together."

The pattern in Chief of the welfare trust, former Chief of Air Staff Sohail Aman also witnessed the distribution process. In his message on the occasion he said, "We started this hospital in 2005 with the help of Kuwait and people of Pakistan living in Kuwait." The ties with Kuwait have become stronger every passing day since then and Kuwait has always stood by us whether it be Ramadan, COVID situation or any other difficult time." He expressed his gratitude to the State of Kuwait, people of the State of Kuwait and Pakistanis living in Kuwait for their generous support. — KUNA



KRCS executes several projects in Yemen

KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) announced the implementation of a number of humanitarian, medical, health and educational projects in Yemen as part of several projects aiming at helping Yemenis who are suffering from difficult humanitarian conditions. In a statement to KUNA yesterday, KRCS Director-General Abdulrahman Al-Oun said the society's projects in Yemen varied between health, development and relief projects in

several governorates, namely Marib, Hadramout, Lahj, Taiz and Aden. KRCS chief added that these projects varied in several aspects. On the health side, a field hospital was established in the city of Tarim, incubators for premature babies were provided to a number of hospitals, in addition to providing Yehr General Hospital with various medical equipment. In addition to water projects, and food baskets distribution, KRCS will build two fully equipped schools in the near future, he confirmed. KRCS is keen on providing all forms of support to the Yemeni people who suffer harsh humanitarian conditions due to the ongoing conflicts in the country, he affirmed. — KUNA

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Houthi offensive roils Yemen's Marib

India reels from COVID 'storm' as Europe vows vaccine push

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Watchdog strips Syria of voting rights

Assad submits candidacy for May presidential vote

THE HAGUE: The global chemical weapons watchdog agreed yesterday to strip Syria of its voting rights in an unprecedented punishment after a probe blamed Damascus for poison gas attacks. Syria will also be banned from holding any offices at the Hague-based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) over its repeated use of toxic arms against civilians.

A two-thirds majority of the OPCW's member states voted in favor of the sanctions, the first time they have been meted out to any country in the agency's quarter-century history. The measures are in response to an OPCW investigation last year that found the Syrian air force had used the nerve agent sarin and chlorine gas in three attacks on the village of Lataminah in 2017.

"The member states of the OPCW have sent a strong message: repeated use of chemical weapons by Syria is unacceptable for the international community," the French delegation to the watchdog said. Britain said it was a "vital step to maintain the credibility of the Chemical Weapons Convention". Syria and its ally Russia have consistently denied that Damascus has used chemical weapons during the 10-year civil war, arguing that the watchdog has become politicized by the West.

'Rights and privileges'

France introduced a motion on behalf of 46 countries also including Britain and the United States to deprive Syria of "rights and privileges" over the 2017 attacks and its failure to declare its chemical weapons. Eighty-seven countries voted in favor of the motion, 15 including Syria, Russia, China and Iran voted against, and 34 abstained, OPCW officials said. "In light of this result the draft

resolution is adopted," said Jose Antonio Zabalgaitia Trejo, the chairman of the meeting of the OPCW's member states.

Syria's rights will remain suspended until member states decide that Damascus has fully declared all of its chemical weapons and weapons-making facilities, the motion says. These include the right to vote in either the annual conference of all member states or the OPCW's executive council, to stand for election in the executive council, or to hold any office in the agency, it said.

The OPCW was created to uphold the Chemical Weapons Convention and says it has helped destroy 97 percent of the world's chemical weapons stocks. It won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013. 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.

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, who has been in power for 21 years, has submitted his candidacy for next month's presidential election, state media said yesterday. The 55-year-old is widely expected to secure a fourth term in office by a comfortable margin in the May 26 vote, which observers have already said would be far from free and fair.

"Parliament was informed by the high constitutional court that Bashar Hafez Al-Assad has filed a request" to run in the upcoming poll, the official SANA news agency said. Five other candidates have so far filed applications with the high constitutional court, it said.

The little-known contenders include a former lawmaker and several businessmen. Presidential hopefuls have until April 28 to put forth their can-



DAMASCUS: A poster depicting Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad superimposed upon the national flag with text in Arabic reading "Syria's workers are with you" is seen on a window in an upper floor of the historic Hamidiyah souk in Damascus yesterday. Assad has submitted his candidacy for next month's presidential election yesterday. —AFP

didacy for the second such vote to be held since the start of the country's civil war a decade ago. They will have to garner support from at least 35 members of the 250-seat parliament, which is dominated by Assad's Baath party. They must have lived continuously in Syria for at least 10 years, meaning that opposition figures in exile are barred.

The previous presidential election was held in 2014 and saw two candidates run against Assad after a constitutional amendment allowing for a multi-candidate ballot. Only two other candidates were approved by the Assad-appointed constitutional court and the incumbent won with 88 percent of the vote. —AFP

Putin uses key speech to warn West as police detain protesters

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin warned Russia's foreign rivals to tread lightly yesterday as he gave a key speech amid deep tensions with the West and arrests of opposition protesters. Addressing lawmakers and senior officials in his annual state of the nation address, Putin said anyone "crossing the red line" with Russia could expect a harsh response.

Hailing the country's battle against the coronavirus and development of vaccines, he said Russia needed to tackle climate change and-with parliamentary elections due in September-announced a raft of populist social spending measures. As he spoke, Russian police were detaining supporters of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny who have called for mass protests yesterday in support of the country's most prominent opposition figure. Two close aides were detained by police in Moscow, while monitors reported police raids on Navalny's offices and arrests of his supporters across the country.

Putin unsurprisingly made no mention of Navalny in his speech-he has always refused to use his critic's name-or of any other opposition to his leadership. He did however hit out at rivals abroad, with Moscow and Western capitals at loggerheads over Navalny, a Russian troop build-up on Ukraine's borders and a series of espionage scandals that resulted in diplomatic expulsions. Putin said it



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin delivers his annual state of the nation address at the Federal Assembly at the Manezh Exhibition Hall yesterday. —AFP

had become "a new kind of sport" in some foreign capitals to blame Russia "for anything".

Belarus 'coup attempt'

He said Russia wanted good relations with everyone in the international community, but warned of a "harsh" response if that was seen as weakness. "I hope that no one will think of crossing the red line in relation to Russia. And where it will be-we will determine that ourselves," Putin said.

Putin backed claims by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko that his security services had thwarted an alleged US plot to assassinate him, suggesting senior US officials were involved in a "coup attempt" and accusing the West of pretending "that nothing is happening". Putin is due to meet Lukashenko-who has faced down historic protests since a disputed re-election last summer-in Moscow today, amid speculation of a major announcement on Russia's policy towards its ex-Soviet neighbor and ally.

Putin began his speech by hailing the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, describing Russia's development of

three vaccines as a "real breakthrough" and saying the country was aiming for herd immunity by autumn. He vowed that Russia, one of the world's major producers of oil and gas, would do its part to fight climate change, setting a target for the country's emissions to be "less than in the European Union".

Navalny's supporters were hoping to steal Putin's thunder yesterday with a series of mass protests starting from 7 pm in cities across the country. Security forces had issued a warning against taking part in "illegal gatherings" and appeared to be moving quickly to deter protesters. Police yanked Navalny ally Lyubov Sobol out of a taxi near Navalny's main offices in Moscow yesterday and detained her. Sobol's lawyer said.

Spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said she was also detained at the entrance to the building, while independent monitor OVD-Info said police had conducted searches and detained at least 53 people in 27 cities. Navalny's team called for the demonstrations after the opposition figure's doctors said his health was failing following three weeks on hunger strike. —AFP

refrain in the run-up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Police started breaking up the demonstrations in the afternoon as protesters were not wearing masks or observing social distancing, a police spokeswoman said. Seven people were arrested, added police.

Dubbed the "emergency brake", the law prescribes tough measures including sweeping shutdowns and overnight curfews in regions with incidence rates of more than 100 new infections per 100,000 people over the last seven days. It would also force schools to revert to virtual teaching in states where the incidence rate exceeds 165. Only one state had an incidence rate below 100 on Wednesday, while seven topped 165 — including the two most populous of Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia.

Fierce opposition

The curfews would apply from 10:00 pm to 5:00 am in areas with high infection rates, with exceptions for lone walkers and joggers before midnight. The proposals have come under fierce opposition, particularly the plans for curfews in a country still scarred by memories of Nazi and communist dictatorships that spied on citizens and

stole their freedoms. In a heated debate over the amendment, Christine Aschenberg-Dugnus of the pro-business FDP said the curfews were "not an appropriate measure" and the party would take legal action against them.

If passed by the parliament, the law will go to a second vote in the upper house, or Bundesrat, today before being signed off by President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Virus restrictions in Germany have so far been decided in consultations between Merkel and the leaders of the 16 states, with the regions ultimately responsible for implementing them. But in many cases, regional leaders have failed to put in place shutdown measures which they agreed with Merkel, with many choosing broad interpretations of the rules.

Merkel warned in a rare TV interview in March that she would not stand by and watch infection rates continue to rise, threatening the regional leaders with a change in the law if they did not play ball. Defending the plan for tougher rules in parliament on Friday, Merkel pointed out that other countries have imposed far more restrictive measures. "The third wave of the pandemic has our country firmly in its grip," she said. —AFP

Black teenager girl shot dead by US police in Ohio

WASHINGTON: Police in the US state of Ohio fatally shot a black teenager who appeared to be lunging at another person with a knife, less than an hour before former officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of murdering George Floyd.

The shooting occurred at a tense time with growing outrage against racial injustice and police brutality in the United States, and set off protests in the city of Columbus. The city's police chief Michael Woods said officers were responding to a 911 emergency call about a disturbance Tuesday afternoon from someone who feared being stabbed, around 4.30 pm local time (2030 GMT).

Police also released a portion of the footage from the body camera worn by the officer who shot the teenager. Franklin County Child Services identified her as Ma'Khia Bryant, 16. "We thought it was important to share with the community, to be transparent about this incident, to

let them have some answers that we can provide tonight," said Woods.

The video showed officers arriving at the scene during a scuffle, with a small crowd of onlookers. One teenage girl is seen lunging at another with what appears to be a knife, when shots are heard and the girl collapses on the ground. The officer is later seen tossing a knife away from the girl.

Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther said the girl's death was a "horrible, heartbreaking situation." He called it a "tragic day in the city of Columbus," and asked his city to pray for the teenager's family. Ginther said the officer in the video, whose name has not been released, "took action to protect another young girl in our community." The teenager's mother Paula Bryant told the local CBS station: "She was a very loving, peaceful little girl. She promoted peace. And that's something I want to always be remembered." —AFP

German police fire tear gas in protest against virus law

BERLIN: Police fired tear gas as thousands of people demonstrated in Berlin yesterday against a proposed amendment to give Angela Merkel's government power to impose tougher anti-coronavirus measures. With Germany buckling under a third wave of the virus, the amendment allowing for nationwide curbs like school closures and night-time curfews aims to end a political tug-of-war between the federal government and the 16 regional states over virus restrictions.

Around 8,000 protesters gathered ahead of a vote on the law in the Bundestag lower house of parliament yesterday, with more than 2,000 police officers deployed to the scene. Protesters were carrying placards with slogans such as "Merkel & Co = high treason" and chanting "Wir sind das Volk" ("We are the people") — a common

CONDOLENCES

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on the sudden demise of his father

**Mr. Alexander
Mathew Thoompungal (82)**
who passed away in India
on April 19, 2021

May his soul Rest in Peace

International

India reels from COVID 'storm' as Europe vows vaccine push

Nepal's former king, queen tested positive after attending India festival

NEW DELHI: Oxygen supplies in Indian hospitals were running perilously low yesterday as daily COVID-19 deaths surged past 2,000 for the first time in one of the world's most brutal ongoing coronavirus waves. Governments remain fearful of similar surges elsewhere in the world with many vaccine rollouts hampered by low supplies, and a top European Union official promised to have enough doses available to vaccinate 70 percent of the bloc's adults by the summer.

India-home to 1.3 billion people-is also struggling with low vaccine supplies and has put the brakes on exports of locally produced AstraZeneca shots as it fights a terrifying COVID-19 wave that has overwhelmed its hospitals. "I am scared for my parents and relatives more than I am scared for myself because they are not young anymore and getting admitted into a hospital right now is next to impossible," a resident of the Indian capital Delhi told AFP.

There had been hopes that despite its packed cities and poor healthcare, India had managed to dodge largely unscathed a pandemic that has killed more than three million people around the world. But recent weeks have seen mass gatherings including millions attending the Kumbh Mela religious festival, political rallies as well as lavish weddings-and a terrifying rise in cases.

Nepal's former king and queen have tested positive for COVID-19 on their return from an Indian religious festival attended by millions of pilgrims. Former king Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah, 73, and his queen Komal Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah, 70, returned to Kathmandu on Sunday after a week-long visit to India to celebrate Kumbh Mela. Shah's press secretary Phani Raj Pathak confirmed the couple had tested positive. "They are in self-isolation at Nirmal Niwas," he said in a statement Tuesday evening, referring to their residence. Indian health ministry data yesterday showed nearly 300,000 new infections in 24 hours, among the world's biggest daily totals, as hospitals around the country reported oxygen shortages.

"This second corona wave came like a storm," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in an address to the nation on Tuesday. "Everybody should



AJMER, India: Workers are seen sorting oxygen cylinders that are being used for COVID-19 coronavirus patients at a facility in Ajmer yesterday. — AFP

get vaccinated'. European leaders are aiming to revive the EU's sluggish vaccine rollout with more supplies and choice as some of the bloc's biggest member nations struggle with worrying case numbers. Thierry Breton, the EU's internal markets commissioner, told French newspaper Le Figaro the bloc was now set to have enough doses to cover 70 percent of its adult population by mid-July.

And the EU's medical regulator said Tuesday that blood clots should be listed as a "very rare" side effect of Johnson & Johnson's vaccine, but that the benefits of the shot still outweighed the risks. The single-shot J&J vaccine is approved for use in Europe but has not been given out yet. The United States is also expected to rule on the J&J shot by Friday, with the world's worst-hit nation jabbing millions per week as it aims for a return to normality. Some of the vaccinated in New York City were offered an unlikely freebie on Tuesday: a marijuana joint.

Activists celebrating the recent legalization of recreational pot in New York state handed out free doobies in Manhattan to anyone with proof of receiving at least one shot. "Everybody should get vaccinated. It should not be weed that is getting them there," said freebie recipient Sarah Overholt, 38. "But if it works, then it works." "I want this to end quickly"

Governments in South America, one of the worst-hit regions of the world, also stepped up efforts to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible. Colombia on Tuesday gave the green light for the private sector to buy and distribute vaccines under certain conditions, hoping to boost a slow immunization campaign. Argentina, meanwhile, will be the first Latin American country to produce Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, according to the RDIF sovereign fund, which financed the development of the shot.

But a deadly second wave continued to sweep across Brazil, which has the second-highest death toll in the world after the United States. Staff have been overwhelmed at the Vila Formosa cemetery in Sao Paulo, Brazil's biggest city. "I want this to end quickly, because it is very sad," said one of the gravediggers. "We try not to get upset in our work, but it is sad, it is a lot of people, and a long time." — AFP

Queen Elizabeth II thanks well-wishers as she turns 95

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II yesterday thanked well-wishers for their messages of support after the death of her husband, Prince Philip, as she turned 95 and spent her first birthday without him in more than seven decades. "My family and I would like to thank you all for the support and kindness shown to us in recent days," she said in her first public comments since his death on April 9 aged 99. "We have been deeply touched, and continue to be reminded that Philip had such an extraordinary impact on countless people throughout his life." The Queen-Britain's longest-reigning monarch-said the messages from Britain, the Commonwealth and around the world had been a "comfort" during a "period of great sadness".

Her birthday falls during a two-week period of royal mourning for Philip, who was interred Saturday in the Royal Vault at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle. The Queen, seen at the funeral for the first time since his death, cut a solitary figure due to coronavirus restrictions, sitting alone in mourning black, with a white-trimmed, black face mask.

Close family, also masked, were forced to sit socially distanced in the historic 15th-century Gothic chapel during the 50-minute service attended by just 30 guests. With the ongoing restrictions curtailing socializing, her birthday-typically marked with a traditional gun salute and the release of a new portrait-will be subdued this year. Although the grieving monarch returned to public duties a few days after Philip's passing, there are no plans to mark her birthday publicly. In the Buckingham Palace statement, however, she said: "I have, on the occasion of my 95th birthday today, received many messages of good wishes, which I very much appreciate."

She is expected to be at Windsor Castle, west of London, where she and the late duke had spent much of the past year shielding due to the pandemic. "This is going to be a private day for her and that's how it should be," said Joe Little, managing editor of Majesty Magazine. "I think she will be personally devastated by this, but I don't think the death of the Duke of Edinburgh, her husband of 73 years, is going to impact on her working role. "There's the public queen and there's the private queen, and she's great at being able to compartmentalize."

Xi to attend online Biden climate summit

BEIJING: China's President Xi Jinping will attend US President Joe Biden's virtual climate summit this week, Beijing said yesterday, as the world's top polluting nations seek rare common ground despite wider political tensions. Biden has invited 40 world leaders including Xi and Russia's Vladimir Putin to the meet starting on Earth Day, meant to mark Washington's return to the front lines of the fight against climate change after former president Donald Trump disengaged from the process. The virtual summit will be the first meeting between the two leaders since Biden became president.

Xi will give an "important speech" at the meeting, said the Chinese foreign ministry, days after a trip to Shanghai by US climate envoy John Kerry-the first



In this file photo, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II walks through "The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries" at Westminster Abbey in London. — AFP

'Huge void'

Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted "warm wishes" to the monarch. "I have always had the highest admiration for Her Majesty and her service to this country. "I am proud to serve as her Prime Minister," he wrote. The Queen, now in the twilight of her reign, married Philip in November 1947, nearly five years before she succeeded her father, king George VI.

She has previously described him as her "strength and stay" during seven decades of almost constant presence at her side. Senior royals have conceded his death has left a "huge void" in the Queen's life, and have reportedly been sharing responsibility to comfort her at Windsor.

The Queen and Philip's grandson Prince Harry, 36, flew back from the United States for the funeral, but returned home again to be with his pregnant wife Meghan before his grandmother's birthday, according to The Sun. Saturday was Harry's first public meeting with the family since a reported falling out over his shock move to California, and his stinging criticism of royal life, including accusations of racism in the institution. He reportedly spent several hours with his father and heir to the throne Prince Charles, and elder brother Prince William following the ceremony, prompting speculation that any enduring rift is being healed.

Although the Queen's birthday is on April 21, her official birthday is normally celebrated on the second Saturday in June, in a tradition dating back to 1748. It is marked with an annual military parade, known as "Trooping the Colour", but has been cancelled for a second consecutive year due to the pandemic. — AFP

official from Biden's administration to visit China. Kerry and Chinese counterpart Xie Zhenhua had said they were "committed to cooperating" on tackling the climate crisis, even as sky-high tensions remain on multiple other fronts.

Washington and Beijing's pledge to cooperate comes amid acrimony over accusations about China's policies in Hong Kong and its treatment of Uyghurs in its northwestern Xinjiang region-criticisms Beijing rejects as interference in its domestic affairs. No global solution on climate change is likely without both the US and China on board, since the world's top two economies together account for nearly half of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions.

Biden has made climate a top priority, turning the page from his predecessor Donald Trump, who was closely aligned with the fossil fuel industry. The US president has rejoined the 2015 Paris accord, which Kerry negotiated as secretary of state and which committed nations to take action to keep temperature rises at no more than two degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels. — AFP

250,000 displaced in Myanmar after junta attacks: UN

YANGON: The Myanmar military junta's crackdown on anti-coup protesters has displaced close to a quarter of a million people, a United Nations rights envoy said yesterday. The military has stepped up its use of lethal force to quash mass demonstrations against a February 1 coup which ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. At least 738 people have been killed and 3,300 are languishing in jails as political prisoners, according to a local monitoring group.

"Horrified to learn that... the junta's attacks have already left nearly a quarter (of a) million Myanmar people displaced, according to sources," UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar Tom Andrews tweeted yesterday. "The world must act immediately to address this humanitarian catastrophe." Free Burma Rangers, a Christian aid group, estimated last week at least 24,000 people were displaced in northern Karen state amid military ground attacks and airstrikes earlier in the month.

Karen National Union brigade five spokesperson Padoh Mann Mann said yesterday that more than 2,000 Karen people have now crossed Myanmar's border into Thailand and that thousands more are internally displaced. "They all hide in the jungle nearby their villages," he said. Amid mounting violence, South East Asian leaders and foreign ministers are set to hold talks on the Myanmar crisis in Jakarta on Saturday.

Coup leader Min Aung Hlaing's expected involvement in the summit has angered activists and human rights groups. "Min Aung Hlaing, who faces international sanctions for his role in military atrocities and the brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, should not be welcomed at an intergovernmental gathering to address a crisis he created," Human Rights Watch's Brad Adams said. — AFP



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

United Ireland likely in 25 years: Poll

DUBLIN: A majority of people both north and south of the border predict a united Ireland in the medium term, according to a BBC poll. Some 54 percent in Ireland and 51 percent in Northern Ireland believe the province will not be a part of the United Kingdom in 25 years, it said in a survey published yesterday night. Some 2,845 people were questioned in Northern Ireland in early April, and nearly 1,100 in Ireland.

News in brief

Search for submarine with 53 aboard

JAKARTA: Indonesia's military said it was searching for a submarine with 53 crew aboard after losing contact with the vessel off the coast of Bali yesterday. "The KRI Nanggala 402 lost contact early this morning," said First Admiral Julius Widjojo. "(The navy) is currently searching for it. We know the area but it's quite deep." Indonesia's military chief Hadi Tjahjanto told AFP neighbors Singapore and Australia had been asked for help. The navy had dispatched warships to the area off the northern coast of Bali to search for the submarine, he said. He added there were 53 crew aboard the vessel, which was believed to be in waters about 700 meters (2,300 feet) deep. — AFP

Lesotho PM faces ouster

MASERU, Lesotho: After barely a year in office, the Lesotho prime minister's future hung in the balance yesterday after an overnight split of his ruling party risked upsetting the parliamentary majority he needs to stay in power. Moekele Majoro took power in May last year following the dramatic departure of his predecessor Thomas Thabane, who resigned amid allegations that he conspired to murder his wife in 2017. A cabinet minister and deputy leader of the ruling All Basotho Convention (ABC) Nqosa Mahao, announced on Wednesday that a formal and final decision to form a new party was reached Tuesday night. — AFP

Dog 'vaccines used' on people

SANTIAGO: Two veterinarians in Chile are under investigation for allegedly giving dog coronavirus vaccines to at least 75 people in the months before human jabs arrived in the country, health officials said Tuesday. The pair stand accused of having administered vaccines developed against canine coronavirus, which is not the same as the SARS-CoV-2 virus responsible for the global human pandemic, to people in the city of Calama in Chile's north. Questions first arose last September, when visiting health officials noted workers at a veterinary clinic in Calama operating without masks. Questioned, they claimed they had been vaccinated by a local veterinarian. — AFP

Greece to lend Patriots to Saudi

RIYADH: Greece will lend a Patriot missile battery to Saudi Arabia to protect its critical energy infrastructure, Greek officials said Tuesday, as the Gulf kingdom grapples with growing attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels. Saudi Arabia, the top crude exporter which leads a military coalition against the Houthis, relies heavily on US-made Patriots to intercept missiles and drones fired at the kingdom on a near daily basis by the Iran-aligned rebels. "We signed the agreement to transfer a Patriot battery here in Saudi Arabia," Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said in a statement during a visit to Riyadh with Defence Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos. — AFP

Syria's Idlib to get COVID vaccines

BAB AL-HAWA, Syria: A first batch of COVID-19 vaccine doses was expected to arrive yesterday in war-torn northwestern Syria, where millions of people live in dire humanitarian conditions, a UN official said. The 53,800 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine were dispatched to the rebel-dominated region as part of the Covax facility, which ensures the world's poorest economies get access to jabs for free. "Once the vaccines arrive, we are prepared to start vaccination to priority groups through our implementing partners," said Mahmoud Daher, a senior official with the UN's World Health Organization (WHO). — AFP

France to ease curfew, travel curbs

PARIS: France plans to lift travel restrictions and ease a nationwide curfew on May 2 on expectations that daily COVID-19 cases will soon begin falling, a source close to the presidency said. President Emmanuel Macron also intends to stick to a goal of allowing restaurants to serve patrons outdoors from mid-May, while also reopening cinemas, theatres and museums with reduced capacity, the source said. Non-food businesses will also open their doors mid-May, after Macron announced their closure from April 3 to contain a third wave of coronavirus infections that have again pushed hospitals to the brink. — AFP

Respondents agreed the change would not come within the next 10 years — broadly matching the findings of a separate poll published yesterday in Ireland. That RED C poll, commissioned by lobby group European Movement Ireland (EMI), found only 32 percent of people agreed with the statement that "there will be a united Ireland in the EU in the next 10 years".

Britain's seismic 2016 decision to leave the European Union has stimulated debate around the future of Northern Ireland, which is home to some 1.9 million people. The territory was created 100 years ago when the Irish Republic gained independence from British rule, and its status has been contested ever since. — AFP

International

Houthi offensive roils Yemen's Marib

Rebels reject Saudi call for nationwide ceasefire

MARIB, Yemen: Peering through binoculars, a Yemeni commander scans a forbidding desert moonscape for lurking Houthi rebels, who are ramping up a bloody offensive to seize the strategic oil-rich region of Marib. The outcome of the scorched-earth battles raging around Marib city, the Saudi-backed Yemeni government's last northern stronghold, could significantly alter the future course of a conflict now in its seventh year.

The loss of Marib, gripped by a worsening humanitarian crisis, would be a heavy blow to the government, giving the Iran-backed rebels more leverage in any future negotiations or even spur them to push further south, observers say. Hundreds of combatants have been killed since the large-scale offensive began in February, according to local sources.

Loyalist commanders say the rebels are sending wave after wave of fighters towards frontlines around Marib city, the regional capital, from seemingly inexhaustible reserves. "The Houthi strategy is... aimed at exhausting (us)," a Yemeni commander told AFP at the sand-swept Al-Kana'is battlefield in the north of the city, where loyalist soldiers crouched in sandbag-ringed foxholes and heavy machine guns were loaded on the rear of pickup trucks. In a pattern emerging across multiple frontlines, the commander said the Houthis are pushing zealous waves of young recruits, many of them children, with the goal of wearing out loyalist forces and depleting their ammunition. Hours-long gun battles are typically followed by a brief lull to collect the dead bodies.

Then a more lethal wave of experienced Houthi fighters moves in under the cover of constant shelling, the commander said of a desperate rebel strategy that is heaping pressure on loyalist forces.

"The Houthis don't care how many of their men die," he added, a point echoed by other Yemeni officials, including Marib's governor Sultan Al-Aradah. "They are sacrificing the people of Yemen... But they will not be able to reach Marib no matter the price we have to pay," added the commander, who requested that his name be withheld.

'Sacrifice young men'

Marib is already paying a huge price since the Huthis, who set their sights on taking the area last year, relaunched their offensive in February on the back of large reinforcements. The city of Marib and some outlying areas make up the last pockets of government-held territory in the north, the rest of which is under rebel control, including the capital Sanaa.

Non-aligned observers of the conflict are alarmed at the high casualties around Marib, with one international official telling AFP "the Houthis seem to have a lot of fighters to throw into the battle".

"At the end of the day, the Houthis will say, 'We still have fighters... and we can sacrifice people and young men,'" this official said. An AFP journalist travelled to



MARIB, Yemen: A girl carries a boy as she stands near other women and children by tents at the Suweida camp for people internally displaced by conflict, near Yemen's northern city of Marib. — AFP

Marib from Saudi Arabia in an Apache helicopter at the invitation of the Riyadh-led military coalition battling the rebels. The low-flying aircraft hovered above sprawling oil fields, a natural gas bottling plant and a modern dam that supplies freshwater to the parched region, assets that make Marib a prized target.

"My husband has lost his mind" due to war and constant displacement, said Hala al-Aswad, a 40-year-old mother of four sheltering in Al-Suweida, one of the nearly 140 camps that have sprung up in Marib.

"He keeps beating the children." The escalation in hostilities has displaced 13,600 people in Marib this year, according to the UN refugee agency, putting a heavy strain on the city in the midst of a second coronavirus wave. Lacking clean water and electricity, the makeshift settlements are overflowing and camp residents say they have repeatedly come under Houthi shelling.

One woman in Al-Suweida, on the edge of the city, said she suffered a miscarriage due to the strains of war. Another woman parted her toddler's hair to reveal a shrapnel wound on her scalp. As she spoke, one child held up a piece of twisted metal from what she said was the wreckage of a shell that hit her camp.

'Sons of desert'

"A ceasefire is necessary," pleaded Arafat Asubari, a 31-year-old camp resident, who is a father of six.

If the fighting doesn't stop, he said, "we will all die here". In March, the Houthis rejected Riyadh's call for a nationwide ceasefire. They have instead escalated missile and drone strikes deep inside Saudi Arabia, which provides air support to Marib's loyalist forces. Officials in Saudi Arabia criticize US President Joe Biden's decision to rescind a terrorist designation imposed on the Houthis by his predecessor Donald Trump, saying the concession has emboldened the rebels.

Western officials defend Biden's decision, saying the designation, which came late in the Trump presidency, would have worsened Yemen's humanitarian crisis by further impeding access, while doing nothing to blunt the Houthis' military ambitions. But one Western official said he slammed the Marib offensive as a "big mistake" during direct talks with Houthi negotiators, drawing parallels with stalemated fighting during World War I that only added to widespread suffering.

The plea, the official told AFP, fell on deaf ears. Meanwhile, Marib's tribes have responded to local calls to send their men to reinforce frontlines alongside the loyalists, with many saying that the terrain offered them an edge over the Houthis, known to be more adept at mountain warfare. Describing themselves as "sons of the desert", many Marib tribesmen see a military advantage in a largely flat desert landscape dotted with scrubby bushes. "Let them (Houthis) come," said the frontline commander, quoting a tribal elder from Marib. — AFP

7 crew rescued, four dead in Philippines

MANILA: Seven members of a crew forced to abandon their cargo ship after it ran aground during a typhoon in the Philippines have been rescued and the bodies of four others found, authorities said yesterday. Search teams were still looking for nine crew members two days after the Cebu Great Ocean vessel hit the shore at Malimono town on the southern island of Mindanao. The survivors were taken to hospital for treatment and were in a stable condition, local disaster officer Aladdin Sumampong said.

"I asked them what happened since the ship just ran aground... but they said the order of the captain was to abandon the ship because it will capsize soon due to big waves," Sumampong said. The Philippine-registered vessel-laden with nickel ore and carrying 2,000 liters (528 gallons) of diesel fuel-was still afloat, Sumampong said. Two of the survivors were found on a beach with the bodies of two colleagues they had carried while swimming to shore, he said.

Photos shared by a government disaster office showed a makeshift floating device made out of life rings and water containers washed up on the beach where some of the bodies were found. At least three people have died in the central and southern Philippines as Typhoon Surigae skirts the country, authorities said, forcing tens of thousands to seek shelter from flooding and strong winds.

The slow-moving Surigae is packing maximum sustained wind speeds of 165 kilometers (103 miles) an hour near its center, about 345 kilometers off the northern province of Cagayan.

It is not expected to make landfall. The Philippines is hit by an average of 20 typhoons or storms every year, a dangerous and disruptive part of life in the country. — AFP



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Business

THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 2021

Nigerians feel squeeze as prices soar

COVID-19 pandemic, oil price crash have hammered economy

LAGOS: Nigerian haulage operator Waheed Ibikunle and his family used to eat boiled eggs every day as part of their breakfast. With the price of a crate of eggs almost doubling since January to 1,500 naira (\$4), the family has had to cut them from their daily diet. "I had no choice than to instruct my wife to adjust. The children are not happy because they are used to eating eggs," the father of three told AFP at his modest bungalow in the downtown Agbado area of Lagos. "In Nigeria of today, virtually the price of everything has gone up."

Africa's largest economy was already struggling with a fall in the price of oil, Nigeria's major export, and a weak local naira currency, before the global pandemic struck. Now Nigeria's inflation has soared to a four-year high of more than 18 percent in March, with food prices up 22.9 percent, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

Ibikunle, who is also involved in the import and export trade, blames "poor infrastructure, coupled with falling value of the naira for pushing up prices". At the popular food markets in Ile-Epo and Agege on Lagos mainland, traders and customers painted a similar grim picture of prices. "This tuber of yam was between 700 and 800 naira a few

months ago but it now goes for 1,300 naira," said seller Ajoke Salau, pointing to a barn of yams inside her shop.

Virus, oil prices

As she spoke, one customer picked three tubers and after haggling for a few minutes, she pulled out wads of notes and handed them over. "The cost of living is becoming too high," the customer, who gave her name as Alice, told AFP.

The COVID-19 pandemic and oil price crash have hammered Nigeria's economy, which gets 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings from crude exports, pushing it into its second recession in four years. Nigeria narrowly exited the recession in the fourth quarter of 2020, but the drop in oil revenues led to a balance of payments deficit of \$14 billion last year and has depleted its foreign reserves.

It is not just the naira exchange that is helping push up prices. Poultry farmer Lukman Busari said high costs of feed, a lack of facilities and insecurity are also adding to costs. "In my farm, we spend almost a triple of what we used to spend on feed and diesel. We provide water, electricity and even had to grade the road leading to our farm. These costs are passed on to the

consumers," he said.

As well as inflation, a rise in joblessness has left a third of Nigeria's workforce unemployed at the end of 2020, according to the statistics office. The World Poverty Clock reports that at the latest count, Nigeria had 43 percent of its population or about 90 million people living below the poverty line of less than \$1.90 per day.

'Escalating incidents of banditry'

Business leaders and financial analysts said curbing inflation is key to rebooting the economy. "To curtail inflationary pressure, the key drivers must be identified," said Muda Yusuf, the director-general of Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Problems that need tackling include high transportation costs, rising cost of energy and logistics, the naira exchange rate depreciation, foreign exchange liquidity shortages as well as the impact of the climate change and worsening insecurity on farming communities.

Yusuf said the government should ease the constraints to production and productivity in the economy, including dealing with Nigeria's worsening insecurity. "Escalating incidents of banditry, kidnapping, terrorism, armed robbery are taking a huge toll on economic



MOWE, Nigeria: Vendors display food for sale at a market in Ogun State on April 19, 2021. —AFP

activities, especially agricultural production," he said.

Broker Sola Oni of Sofunxi Investment and Communication said rising inflation is tied with the naira devaluation which has its roots in the "external shocks in the international oil market". Oni said government should tame inflation by diversifying the economy to ease over-dependence on oil

income, such as investing in agriculture and small businesses.

But for many like Lagos civil servant Gafar Adesina, change can't come quick enough. "The situation is very terrible. We are really suffering in this country. The prices of things are beyond the reach of Nigerians," he said. "Our salary is not increased yet prices are going up daily." —AFP

Netflix shares tumble as growth cools

SAN FRANCISCO: Netflix shares plunged Tuesday after the leading streaming service reported cooling growth in paid subscriptions that had caught fire during the pandemic. While revenue jumped 24 percent in the first quarter of this year when compared to the same period in 2020, paid memberships grew less than expected to 208 million, Netflix said in its quarterly earnings release.

New subscriber additions were some two million below Netflix's forecast. "We believe paid membership growth slowed due to the big COVID-19 pull forward in 2020 and a lighter content slate in the first half of this year, due to COVID-19 production delays," executives said in the release. Netflix reported profit was up to a stunning \$1.7 billion on revenue of \$7.2 billion, as subscribers weathered price increases. The Silicon Valley-based company said it expected subscriber growth to accelerate anew later this year as it releases sequels to hit shows. "We had those ten years where we were growing smooth as silk," Netflix chief executive Reed Hastings said on a streamed earnings call. "It is just a little wobbly right now."

Netflix executives had cautioned in past quarters that the pandemic fueled a surge in subscriptions, with people who would have eventually signed up jumping on board sooner than they might have. "We continue to anticipate a strong second half with the return of new seasons of some of our biggest hits and an exciting film lineup," Netflix said in an earnings letter.

A shift from traditional television to streamed services such as Netflix remains a clear trend, according to the company. However, competition is also ramping up from Disney, Amazon and other titans. "More and more new streaming services are launching, reinforcing our vision that linear TV will slowly give way to streaming entertainment," Netflix said. "We're working as hard as ever to continually improve our service so that we are the best entertainment option available."

But the sharp deceleration suggested slower growth ahead from Netflix, sending shares down some 11 percent in after-hours trade. Hastings said that competition in the streaming television market has been consistently fierce, with Amazon Prime and Hulu as rivals for more than a decade. The cooling is a "sign that the world is coming back to more normal at the expense of Netflix," tweeted Gene Munster of the investment firm Loup Ventures. "We think the long-term growth is flattish."

Shows in the wings

Productions delays caused by the pandemic have resulted in the release of many original Netflix shows being delayed until the second half of this year, according to the company. "While the roll out of vaccines is very uneven across the world, we are back up and producing safely in every major market, with the exception of Brazil and India," Netflix said.

The streaming television service expected to spend more than \$17 billion on a wide range of content, much of it original. New seasons of hit shows set for release later this year included Sex Education, The Witcher, La Casa de Papel (Money Heist), and You. —AFP

Millions of Americans are jobless, yet firms struggle to hire

WASHINGTON: More than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of American remain jobless, but even as the economy reopens some employers are finding hiring an unexpected challenge. From fears of being infected with the coronavirus to trouble finding childcare to the lure of generous unemployment benefits, some jobless Americans are holding off on re-entering the workforce.

"It's a paradox for the COVID crisis," said Gregory Daco, chief US economist at Oxford Economics. "We have, and risk having over the coming months, an imbalance between job openings and demand." The US economy has begun to recover as COVID-19 vaccines allow businesses to return to normal, and companies are starting to recruit to meet growing demand.

But not all unemployed workers are ready to return to their jobs, analysts say. "The main issue is we still have a pandemic, and there is huge concern among job seekers about workplace health and safety," said Julia Pollak, an economist for job search website ZipRecruiter. A quarter of the US population is fully vaccinated, well ahead of Europe and many other major economies, but three-quarters of the country nonetheless remains at risk of contracting COVID-19.

And childcare is another challenge for working parents, since only a little more than half of the nation's schools are back to full-time classes after the pandemic forced them to close or modify operations, according to FutureEd, a think tank at Georgetown University.

Graveyard: China's failed share-cycle scheme from above

BEIJING: Handlebars tight in snaking rows of color, thousands of abandoned bicycles line an open field outside the city of Shenyang, relics of a shared bike mania that has overwhelmed China's cities. The turquoise, blue and yellow bicycles, arranged in long lines, some piled on top of each other, bear the logos of the companies that dominate China's bike-sharing sector - Hellobike, Didi and Meituan.

Low cost-shared bikes, which users can unlock using apps and park virtually anywhere, burst onto Chinese streets in the middle of the last decade with investors rushing to fund bike startups like the now-defunct Ofo and Mobike. But the two-wheelers soon took over pavements and spilled over into bike lanes and streets, parked haphazardly by users who sometimes simply tossed the bikes into shrubbery, creating a headache for urban authorities and pedestrians.

Many bikes suffered damage or were stolen, while some were even repurposed into makeshift barricades when COVID-19 broke out last year. The problem is a familiar one to cities around the world battling to round up stray bikes, from metro stations in Washington DC to the bottom of Melbourne's river.

Aerial photographs from the suburbs of Shenyang, Liaoning province, show a bicycle grave-

Search for 'better conditions'

The COVID-19 pandemic destroyed 22 million jobs in the world's largest economy, of which more than half, 14 million, have been restored. However, nearly 17 million people are still receiving government unemployment aid, including self-employed workers, and many are working part-time because they cannot find full-time work.

But Daco said worker shortages are being seen across multiple sectors, including some of those hardest hit by the waves of layoffs, like retail, food service, hospitality and entertainment. In a survey of US businesses conducted between late February and early April, the Federal Reserve noted "hiring remained a widespread challenge, particularly for low-wage or hourly workers, restraining job growth in some cases."

A hotelier surveyed by the Federal Reserve bank in Richmond, Virginia reported that "they were able to hire some front desk workers but had unfilled cleaning staff positions and little interest from workers in those jobs." The central bank's Chicago branch reported a number of factors keeping unemployed workers at home, including "financial support from the government," like the extra \$300 weekly benefit jobless employees will receive through August.

The Chicago Fed cited other complications in the hiring process including finding childcare, concerns about the virus, difficulty obtaining public transportation and "job search fatigue". ZipRecruiter's Pollak said some workers also are fearful that if they take a job, they will simply be let go again.

"Many people experienced getting laid off as a really hard blow," she said, comparing the situation to people "who got divorced now being scared to go back into the dating market and get married again. They're not in a rush to put themselves back in a vulnerable position, especially since the extended and expanded benefits are giving them a little bit of time," Pollak said. —AFP

Internet, the thorn in the side of Cuba's one party state

HAVANA: Cuba's communist leadership has always viewed the Internet with suspicion while trying desperately to control it. Raul Castro, the former president and leader of the Communist Party, who officially retired on Monday, has blasted the medium for "lies," "manipulation" and "subversion". But for Cuba's 11.2 million people who have long been amongst the least connected people on the planet, the internet has become a favorite tool of the outlawed opposition.

The arrival of 3G in 2018 was a boon. There are now 4.2 million Cubans using 3G. President Miguel Diaz-Canel was originally a fan and encouraged the "informatization of society," but he's quickly become disillusioned with the internet, faced with its enthusiastic use to criticize authorities. On Monday, while 300 delegates met for the Communist Party congress in Havana, an amateur video went viral on social media.

It showed dissident artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara being arrested in a poor neighborhood of the capital. Dozens of activists, independent journalists and artists have complained on Twitter that police are preventing them from leaving their homes - a favorite ploy by authorities to prevent mass gatherings that could lead to anti-government protests. Others complained of their internet and telephone lines being shut down. —AFP



SHENYANG, China: This aerial photo taken on April 19, 2021 shows abandoned public shared bicycles at a lot in northeastern Liaoning province. —AFP

yard, one of many which began appearing as early as 2018 as tech start-up darling Ofo imploded, defaulting on debts as its users claimed back rental deposits. Mountains of damaged bikes belonging to other companies have also been discarded rather than repaired, in contrast to the "green" image usually associated with urban cycling.

The bikes now jostle for space on Chinese

streets with hordes of shared electronic scooters, which have also made their appearance elsewhere in the world including Paris and California. Chinese cities have vowed to curb the chaotic fleets of bikes, with Beijing saying it will remove 44,000 bikes from the city center this year in order to cap bike numbers at under 800,000, according to state media. —AFP

Business

Oil prices recover one year on from historic subzero plunge

Demand to rise in countries where COVID jabs are moving apace

LONDON: One year ago, crude oil prices plunged into the abyss, wiped out by the global coronavirus pandemic and disagreement within OPEC. Twelve months on, prices have recovered and are rising, boosted by the global vaccination rollout and brightening optimism over demand. Oil has returned to its pre-pandemic price, hovering around \$65 a barrel, with predictions from Goldman Sachs it will rise above \$80 in the coming months.

Strong indications are that demand will rise in countries where COVID jabs are moving apace, according to the US investment bank. Rival group Morgan Stanley is predicting that crude prices will rise to \$70 a barrel in the third quarter, adding to normal seasonal demand. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA) in its latest forecast, the fundamentals of the oil market - supply and demand - are "stronger" and better balanced.

Even OPEC is more optimistic, and expects global demand for crude to rebound by six million

barrels per day in 2021 to 96.5 million barrels per day. It's a remarkable turnaround from 12 months ago, when the benchmark price for US crude plunged below zero dollars for the first time in history. The market fell as low as -\$40.32 on April 20 as investors were caught between a lack of buyers and an inability to take delivery of barrels due to lack of available storage space. In effect, they had to pay to get rid of the oil.

Optimism

"A lot has changed since the negative price story," said Ipek Ozkardeska, a senior analyst at Swissquote Bank, which specializes in online financial and trading services. "Predictions have gone well ahead of themselves, many pointing at a deeper decline toward the negative \$100 per barrel mark," she told AFP. "But none of that happened, and look, a year after, many reports are now pointing at the positive \$100 per barrel level instead."

In Britain, the government vaccination campaign is moving swiftly. As of Tuesday, more than 33 million people had received a first dose of a vaccine, and 10.4 million a second dose. In the United States - the world's biggest economy - where President Joe Biden has pushed through a massive stimulus package, more than half of US adults or roughly 130 million people have had at least one shot of a vaccine. That bodes well for crude demand because the US is the world's biggest consumer of oil. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is meanwhile projecting global economic growth of 6.0 percent this year after the historic virus-induced recession of 2020.

Overconfidence

In a note to clients on Tuesday, Bjarne Schieldrop, chief commodity market analyst at SEB, warned against complacency over oil prices. "The main point is that it can happen again and that

Saudi Arabia has the power to do it by flooding the market," he said. "Maybe not as extreme as it happened because there were several circumstances involved," he added, citing the Saudi-Russia price war as an example.

The row between Moscow and Riyadh at the OPEC+ ministerial summit in Vienna on March 6, 2020 compounded the effects of the pandemic. The short but intense falling out between two heavyweights in the 13-member cartel of oil-producing nations and its 10 affiliates threatened world crude storage capacity levels with cheap oil. A fragile truce has since returned to the alliance which, after drastically cutting production to adapt supply to sluggish demand, is gradually turning back on the taps.

Bjornar Tonhaugen, an analyst at Rystad, said the next step for producers to negotiate could well be energy transition, which could transform the market between now and 2050, as consumption of hydrocarbons falls and renewables surge. —AFP

In Texas, a rancher swaps his oil pumps for wind turbines

SAN ANGELO, Texas: Cattle rancher Bobby Helmers cranes to listen as the blades of his six giant wind turbines slice through the air in the same Texas fields that once echoed with the sounds of oil pumps. Like JR and Bobby Ewing, lead characters in the hit 1970s and 80s TV series "Dallas," Helmers hosted oil wells on his land for decades. But with renewable energy increasingly viable even in the petroleum-rich Lone Star State, the 79-year-old is among several ranchers who have plugged their pumps and made the shift to wind power.

He still marvels at how little noise comes from the massive turbines, each of which cuts a 120-meter diameter over the property, and the taste of modernity that they brought three years ago to a traditional cattle ranch owned by his wife Sandra's family for three generations. "The Stetsons and the horses have been replaced by caps and pickups," Helmers said, referring to the iconic brand of wide-brimmed cowboy hats.

The cows, however, remain on the ranch in San Angelo, some 400 km southwest of Dallas. The Helmers and an employee raise 125 head of Brangus, a hybrid between the Angus breed prized for its tender beef and Brahman known for their resistance to heat. But today, half of the ranch's operating revenue comes from the turbines.

Texas wind champion

A few miles away, in a small building set among juniper bushes and cacti, Kevin DeFoor manages some 10 workers tasked with maintaining the wind farm of 76 turbines, including those on the Helmers land. "The region developed itself thanks to agriculture, ranching and oil," said 48-year-old DeFoor, an employee of French energy giant Engie, which manages the wind farm.

It took a while before the area native realized that local riches were not just found in the soil. In 2007, DeFoor, a former prison warden, became the first in his family to work in the wind energy sector - and he has been having about the area's wind consistency ever since. "Our turbines turn 50 percent of the time," DeFoor said, in what he called a "great performance" for the US wind sector. President Joe Biden's call for a clean energy revolution has resonated in Texas. The state known for its fossil fuels has invested heavily since the early 2000s to become the nation's top wind energy producer and second-biggest producer of solar energy.

"Contrary to popular belief, Texas governor (and later US president) George W. Bush, and then his successor Rick Perry didn't want Texas to be solely reliant on oil," according to Joshua Long, an associate professor of environmental studies at Southwestern University near Austin. "They viewed Texas as 'The Energy State,' with a diversity of energy sources." As a result, fossil fuels and renewables have coexisted in Texas for years.

'Stable' revenue

Such transformations will be in focus later this week when Biden hosts an Earth Day summit



ELDORADO, Texas: Cattle rancher Bob Helmers, who recently allowed utility company Engie to build several wind turbines on his land, stands among some of his cows on his ranch on April 16, 2021. —AFP

aimed at reinvigorating the world's climate change fight. But it is not out of environmental conviction that Helmers flipped from oil to wind. Installed in the early 1990s, his oil pumps began producing steadily shrinking returns, and after about three decades, the contractor operating them eventually threw in the towel.

In a slice of good fortune, the Infinity Renewables group arranged to meet with Helmers and his neighbors in a nearby restaurant, where the potential royalties from wind energy the suitors described convinced Helmers to make the switch. Oil reserves and profits can drop, he said, while "in wind, the production is stable," and profit shares rise over the years as the investments are amortized. —AFP

Morocco looks to fear-free hashish farms

KETAMA, Morocco: After decades without legal cover, farmer Mohamed Morabet looks forward to selling his hashish this summer on the open market now that Morocco plans to legalize cannabis for medical use. The government of the world's top hashish-producing nation last month ratified a draft bill to legalize its medical use, and parliament is expected to debate the legislation this week.

"We will finally come out of clandestinity," said Morabet as he tended to his freshly sown fields of "kif" - literally "pleasure" in Arabic and the term used for cannabis in Morocco. "We used to live in fear," added the 60-year-old farmer whose fields lie in the fabled northern Ketama region at the foot of the marginalized and underdeveloped mountainous region of Rif.

According to a report released last year by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Morocco is the world's biggest producer of cannabis resin, or hashish. Cannabis output in the North African country was estimated to total more

than 700 tonnes in a study last year by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.

That same year more than 217 tons of cannabis were seized by authorities, according to official figures. It was banned in Morocco in 1954 but has been tolerated as its cultivation provides a livelihood for 80,000 to 120,000 families, according to unofficial estimates. Now the kingdom hopes that cultivating cannabis for medical use will become a lucrative business and place Morocco on the global market.

Reaping profits

According to Morocco's interior ministry, the market worldwide is growing at an annual rate of 30 percent, and by 60 percent a year in Europe. Farmers, who only made a small profit while traffickers for decades reaped the benefits from the sale of cannabis, are also hopeful for a more profitable future. But some, like Morabet, have voiced reservations.

"When the bill becomes law we will have fewer problems, but we worry that prices will drop," said Fadoul Azouz surveying his ploughed fields in the Ketama. But authorities and experts say these fears are baseless. Officials estimate that farmers could make a 12 percent profit in a "legal market" compared to only four percent now, the official MAP news agency reported.

Botanical researcher Ismail Azza agrees, predict-

costs four times less to produce than potatoes or green beans. It also requires less water and fertilizer, while strong market demand means he can rake in a stable income for the first time in years. "When we planted vegetables we couldn't even buy fuel for heating," Abu Ali said.

'Not high life'

He has dedicated two hectares of land to hashish cultivation - enough to produce around 100 kg every harvest. One kilogram sells for an average of two million Lebanese pounds (\$160 dollars at the black market rate), but its price could reach up to five million pounds depending on quality. "I'm not living the high life, but... I can feed and support my family," Abu Ali said.

Hashish production was once limited to a few villages in the Baalbek, including Yammouneh, but its deputy mayor Hussein Shreif said it is now gaining traction across the whole region. "Many farmers have given up on growing their usual produce because of losses," he said. Cannabis, on the other hand, "costs less to produce and rakes in a profit irrespective of how much it's sold for."

Lebanon is the world's fourth biggest hashish producer behind Morocco, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United Nations said in a 2020 report. At least 40,000 hectares of land are planted with cannabis, the UN says, even though its sale and consumption are officially banned in Lebanon. A year ago parliament voted to legalize growing



KETAMA, Morocco: Farmers stand at a cannabis field as it waits for the next planting and harvest season in the region at the foot of the marginalized and underdeveloped mountainous region of Rif on April 8, 2021. —AFP

ing that "revenues in a legal circuit will certainly be better than those on the black market". According to several sources in the Ketama region, a kilogram of hashish extracted from hybrid plants would sell for around 2,500 dirhams (\$261) a year ago - and four times as much if the cannabis came from the fabled "beldiya" (local) seed. But following a crackdown on drug trafficking, a kilogram now sells for around 1,500 dirhams. —AFP



BEKAA, Lebanon: Women sift dried cannabis to prepare hashish in eastern Lebanon's Bekaa Valley on March 6, 2021. —AFP

cannabis for medical use, to boost revenues for the crippled economy. However, authorities have yet to take action, even though hashish could rake in \$350 million a year in revenues and up to \$1 billion by the fifth year, outgoing agriculture minister Abbas Mortada told AFP. The government still needs to create a regulatory body to oversee legalization and a months-long delay in the formation of a new cabinet means it will not likely see the light anytime soon, he said. Mortada explained that he was working with international institutions and drafting plans to boost an agriculture sector that has been "neglected for decades". —AFP

'Torn': Living with top US greenhouse gas spewing plant

WEST JEFFERSON, Alabama: The exhaust-belching smokestacks of America's most greenhouse gas-emitting power plant tower over Jennifer Chesser's neighborhood, but she'd likely fight to keep them from falling silent. The James H. Miller Jr site faces no immediate shutdown threat and has the backing of many locals because of the jobs it offers - despite sending about as much planet warming carbon dioxide into the sky last year as 3.7 million cars.

"It's a double-edged sword for me," Chesser said of the coal-fired generator just northwest of Alabama's largest city Birmingham. "It's harming the planet but at the same time it helps us because it's what's making our living. So I'm torn." Coal is her family's business - she's the daughter of a sixth-generation miner and her husband works in the industry too - so a blow to Miller would be one against her personally.

"We don't have any other options," Chesser, a 46-year-old homemaker, told AFP. The plant highlights a key problem in counteracting climate change - even for people who accept it is happening, the threat can be overshadowed by pressing daily needs. That ongoing battle will bring together world leaders this week for a virtual summit as President Joe Biden works to revitalize a global effort left in chaos by his predecessor Donald Trump.

Out at the Miller plant, workers' cars line the parking lot at the sprawling site along the Locust Fork of the Black Warrior River, where coal arrives by rail cars and deceptively innocent-looking white exhaust pours into the air day and night.

'War on coal'

The road that winds past the facility leads to a cluster of homes, one was rotting and abandoned with a dead tree in the front yard and a view of the stacks through its dirty kitchen window. From that plant 18.8 million tons of heat-trapping carbon dioxide were released in 2020, making Miller the top emitter among US power plants, according to a February report by advocacy group Environmental Integrity Project. It has been a top source for years.

Alabama Power, which operates Miller, declined an interview request from AFP but emailed a statement saying the plant is "efficient" and produces more electricity than any other coal plant in the United States. They also claimed to have "achieved significant carbon reductions - 47 percent across our generation fleet from 2007-2020 - and expect carbon emissions to be further reduced over time."

Though the United States remains the world's second top producer of carbon dioxide behind China, things are changing as the nation's reliance on coal power recedes. The amount of electricity produced with coal in 2019 hit its lowest level in 42 years as natural gas and wind-power output jumped, according to the US Energy Information Administration. Even as Trump pledged to end what he called the "war on coal" with government money and slashed regulations during his presidency, the pace of reduction in capacity was reportedly faster than under Barack Obama's environmentally-focused administration. Biden has already sent clear signals of his intent to further move America away from fossil fuels. "We need to be bold. So let me be clear: That includes helping revitalize the economies of coal, oil and gas and power plant communities," he said a week after taking office in January. —AFP



WEST JEFFERSON, Alabama: Fred Chesser Jr, 57, a coal miner, speaks with AFP across from his house as steam rises from the Miller coal power plant on April 11, 2021. —AFP

Business

NBK Group CEO to Al Arabiya TV: NBK is well-seasoned in weathering crises

Al-Sager: NBK has strength, stability, operating resilience to face all scenarios in 2021

KUWAIT: Isam Al-Sager, National Bank of Kuwait Group CEO, said that the bank continued to build on the good operational momentum witnessed since the end of last year, posting a KD 84.3 net profit for the first quarter of 2021, compared to KD 77.7 million for the same quarter of 2020, boosting by 8.5 percent.

Al-Sager added in an interview with Al Arabiya TV that the first quarter profits demonstrated the resilience of the bank's well-diversified business model, prudent risk management, as well as the feasibility of its investments in technology over the past years.

Al-Sager noted that, in continuation of the signs of recovery seen by the end of 2020, provisioning has improved, starting from the fourth quarter of 2020, and the momentum of this improvement will continue into the first quarter of 2021, indicating that the continued reduction in provisioning will positively reflect on profitability in 2021.

Al-Sager stressed that the key driver of the bank's profit growth is its strategy that focuses on growing income from core banking activities, as well as diversification in key growth markets, as well as continuing to invest in advanced technologies.

NBK takes into consideration that the pandemic is not yet over, and that its fallout is still weighing on the operating environment. Therefore, it will continue to embrace a conservative policy without deviating from its strategic plans or future growth track, he pointed out.

Throughout its history extending for seven decades, NBK has been able to weather many crises with finesse, and acted as a key contributor in the economic recovery in the markets in which it operates, Al-Sager explained.

Advice and support

Speaking on the corporate loan deferment program, Al-Sager emphasized that repayments are performing according to expectations over the past period, noting that the corporate loan deferment program was evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and the resulting interest was postponed for two quarters, the last of which is the first quarter of 2021.

He pointed out that the size of corporate loans deferrals was less than 5 percent of the total corporate loan portfolio, and it had no

material impact on the revenue side during 2020, stressing that NBK works closely with its customers and provides them with the necessary advice and support to weather this crisis.

Solid financial position

Regarding the bank's redemption of the USD 700 million perpetual bonds issued back in 2015, Al-Sager mentioned that these bonds were redeemable after 6 years, and the bank succeeded in repurchasing these securities in full in this month.

On the other side, last February, the bank issued additional Tier 1 capital bonds worth \$ 700 million, which was used to finance the bank's repurchase offer of its securities issued back in 2015.

Al-Sager added that NBK's latest bond issuance captured strong demand from international investors, which is the third issuance within 6 months, giving the bank a significant advantage in pricing these bonds as one of the lowest regionally. NBK Group CEO affirmed that the bank's priorities will continue the course of preserving a solid capital position and providing financial buffers in line with its historic directions. The bank will also seek to diversify its financing base and enhance capital adequacy ratios in accordance with Basel III requirements and the directives of the Central Bank of Kuwait.

Net Interest Margin

On a question about how Net Interest Margin (NIM) is expected to evolve during this year in view of the record-low interest rate environment, Al-Sager stated that average NIM for 1Q 2021 was 2.26 percent, compared to 2.22 percent for 4Q 2020.

He explained that as interest rate environment is likely to remain unchanged on the medium term, we expect NIM indicators to remain within this range during the entire 2021, noting that, generally speaking, the bank recorded an improvement in NIM starting from the fourth quarter of last year, which was expected, thanks to our liability structure including term deposits that mature and get replaced by lower-cost deposits reflecting the current reduced discount rate.

Generating profits

In an answer to a question about dividend

plans for 2021, Al-Sager mentioned that NBK has had a consistent dividend policy over the past years, noting that even in 2020, which was a challenging year amidst tough operating environment, the bank maintained the same dividend distribution ratio, underscoring the bank's ability to generate profits and ensure sustained dividends for its shareholders.

Al-Sager indicated that in 2021, the bank will continue moving in the same direction while keeping a conservative policy of enhancing capital adequacy ratio and maintaining comfortable capitalization levels.

Operational resilience

Regarding the outlook for 2021, NBK Group CEO stated that the key challenges this year are the continued uncertainty regarding the end of this pandemic, which weighs on the operating environment.

Al-Sager emphasized that NBK has the strength, stability and operational resilience to face all possible scenarios, adding that on the other hand, over the past years, we have taken great steps to prepare our bank for the future through strategic investments in our people, operations and digital platforms.

Focus on digital transformation

Regarding the bank's expansion plans, Al-Sager said: "We have a clear strategy that we are committed to implement, which is to focus on digital transformation and diversification, to continue focusing on growth in all our business lines, and to boost our competitiveness in our international markets."

NBK seeks to expand in the retail and wholesale banking in the Egyptian market by investing in digital banking services as well as to strengthen its regional footprint in wealth management, added Al-Sager. In Saudi Arabia, we will continue to strengthen our recently established wealth management proposition and link it to the Group's global wealth management platform, he pointed out.

Good quarterly performance of loan portfolio

On loan portfolio performance during 1Q of 2021, Al-Sager commented: "Loan portfolio performance is compared with pre-pandemic levels. Therefore, we have to take into consideration that our loan portfolio recorded strong



growth in the 1Q of 2020, before contracting for the rest of the year due to the consequences of the pandemic."

When we compare loan portfolio performance on a quarterly basis, we are talking about a very good growth of 2 percent in the first quarter of 2021, compared to the fourth quarter of 2020, he noted.

Al-Sager said that during 2021, loan portfolio is expected to witness an average to high single-digit growth for the full twelve-month period, hoping that the increase in consumer spending recorded at the end of last year will continue, and that the decent pace of lending citizens will be sustained. He also expected that the pace of awarding and implementing government projects in Kuwait will restore the momentum, which would be reflected on the private sector's activity, thus contributing to create financing opportunities for banks.

Fintech

Al-Sager mentioned that the bank regards Fintech companies from a partnership perspective, as banks have the infrastructure that these companies can benefit from in providing their services. On its part, and within its tireless efforts to prepare for the next generation of Fintech, NBK has established its Digital Factory to support our digital transformation agenda across the entire Group. The Digital Factory will act as a bridge to engage and partner with creative

and innovative Fintech professionals, which will help the bank provide more advanced banking products, he added.

Financing challenges

Regarding the possibility of approving the public debt law, Al-Sager said that the efforts to pass the public debt law still face political divisions, but it is expected that, eventually, a consensus will be reached regarding this law, which will contribute to securing the State's financing needs. Al-Sager added that failure to pass the law will lead to depleting the liquidity available in the GRF soon, thus limiting the government's ability to meet its obligations and exacerbate the financial and economic risks facing the Country.

Al-Sager warned of the possibility that Kuwait may undergo further downgrade of its credit rating in case economic reforms are not implemented and long-term financial challenges are not addressed, adding that according to the bank's estimates, the general budget deficit for the fiscal year 2020-2021 is projected at KD 10 billion, which will lead to major financing challenges.

Al-Sager accentuated the need for Kuwait to benefit from the current globally low interest rates during and to have a presence in the debt market, indicating that in light of its very low public debt, Kuwait has room that can be utilized to secure the financing needs at a low cost.

vEU unveils AI rules to tackle Big Brother fears

BRUSSELS: The EU unveiled a plan yesterday to regulate the sprawling field of artificial intelligence, aimed at helping Europe catch up in the new tech revolution while curbing the threat of Big Brother-like abuses. "With these landmark rules, the EU is spearheading the development of new global norms to make sure AI can be trusted," EU competition chief Margrethe Vestager said.

"By setting the standards, we can pave the way to ethical technology worldwide and ensure that the EU remains competitive along the way." The European Commission, the bloc's executive arm, has been preparing the proposal for more than a year and a debate involving the European Parliament and 27 member states is to go on for months more before a definitive text is in force.

The EU is looking to set the terms with its first ever legal package on AI and catch up with the US and China in a sector that spans from voice recognition to insurance and law enforcement. The bloc is trying to learn the lessons after largely missing out on the internet revolution and failing to produce any major competitors to match the giants of Silicon Valley or their Chinese counterparts. But there have been competing concerns over the plans from both big tech and civil liberties groups arguing that the EU is either overreaching or not going far enough.

'High-risk'

To promote innovation, Brussels wants to provide a clear legal framework for companies across the bloc's 27 member states. "Today's proposals aim to strengthen Europe's position as a global hub of excellence in AI from the lab to the market," EU internal market commissioner Thierry Breton said. The draft regulation lays out a "risk-based approach" that would lead to bans on a very limited number of uses that are deemed as presenting an "unacceptable risk" to EU fundamental rights.

This would make "generalized surveillance" of the population off-limits as well as any tech "used to manipulate the behavior, opinions or decisions" of citizens. Anything resembling a social rating of individuals based on their behavior or personality would also be prohibited. On the rung below, the regulation requires companies to get a special authorization for applications deemed "high-risk" before they reach the market.

These systems would include "remote biometric identification of persons in public places" - including facial recognition - as well as "security elements in critical public infrastructure". Special exceptions are envisioned for allowing the use of mass facial recognition systems in cases such as searching for a missing child, averting a terror threat, or tracking down someone suspected of a serious crime.

Military applications of artificial intelligence will not be covered by the rules. Other uses, not classified as "high risk", will have no additional regulatory constraints beyond existing ones. Infringements, depending on their seriousness, may bring heavy fines for companies. —AFP

Jazeera focuses on post pandemic expansion

KUWAIT: Jazeera Airways yesterday held its annual general meeting (AGM), approving the company's financial results for the year ended December 31, 2020 and discussed other regulatory matters on the agenda.

Speaking to shareholders, Chairman Marwan Boodai reiterated that Jazeera's flexible business model has proved once again its success in adapting to times of crisis to protect its customers, employees and shareholders' value. He said: "We were able to reallocate our resources to support our local community and economy in a commitment to our role as a Kuwaiti national carrier, served our customers when government regulations permitted and continued to commit to our obligations."

During 2020, which was qualified by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) as the "Worst Year in History for Air Travel Demand", flights were suspended at Kuwait International Airport for close to six months from March 13 and extremely restricted for the rest of the year at Kuwait International for most of the year.

While the airline postponed some of its expansion plans as it overcame the COVID-19 restrictions, Jazeera placed its resources to serve local efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to focusing on connect-

ing flights between points that have high demand and were underserved. The airline also started full-cargo flights and continued to work on its future expansion plans once travel traffic returns.

The airline ended the year with a healthy asset base and a very strong unrestricted cash balance, which stood at KD19.7 million by the end of the 2020 financial year. During the year, Jazeera managed to contain its monthly cash burn at the level KD10 million, enabling it to weather the prolonged challenging conditions even under the more restrictive operating environment since the beginning of 2021. Last week, the company's Board of Directors recommended a capital increase as a precautionary step as operations remain constrained by the prolonged closure of Kuwait International Airport.

2021 outlook

Boodai added: "2020 was specifically exceptional in Kuwait with very strict restrictions and a conservative approach to fighting the pandemic when compared to neighboring countries and the situation of other Low-Cost Carriers in the world. With the start of 2021, these restrictions continue, challenging growth in the first half of the year.

Positive results

Al-Majed highlighted the most significant numbers recorded by the bank during the first quarter of this year where the total of customers' deposits grew by 12.5 percent to reach KD 5.2 billion, while the financing portfolio grew by 8 percent to reach KD 4.9 billion, and operating income grew by 9 percent to reach KD 45 million.

Speaking of the bank's market shares, the bank's share of local financing increased generally to 10.4 percent approximately, while Boubyan Bank's share of retail finance grew to about 13 percent, thereby positioning Boubyan Bank in the third place among local banks in terms of the financing portfolio. Al-Majed went on to highlight prominent achievements during Q1 of this year, the most significant thereof was the bank's regional and international success in covering the USD 500 million sukuk issuance at 3.95 percent annual profit rate. He added: "The total subscription requests exceeded USD 1.3 billion (the issuance was oversubscribed by 2.6 fold the issued sukuk). This confirms Boubyan Bank's international and regional status and reputation, gained owing to its achievements over the past years across many levels."

The best in customer service

On the other hand, the crisis caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kuwait has revealed the strength of Boubyan Bank and how it continued with its quality customer service without compromising the high levels maintained over the past years. This helped the bank continue topping the pyramid of customer service in Kuwait, which was confirmed by being named the Best Islamic Bank in Customer Service for the eleventh year in a row since 2010 by Service Hero, the international consumer-driven customer satisfaction index.

Furthermore, as a part of the growth plans for our bank's branches across various areas of Kuwait to serve its customers, the bank inaugurated its new Mubarkiya Branch that will serve both retail and corporate customers. The branch is divided into two main parts: one to serve retail customers while the other will be serving corporate customers.

The bank continued supporting its human resources by



Marwan Boodai



Boodai affirmed that demand for travel will always exist. He said: "With the Government of Kuwait taking bold steps to vaccinating its people, as well as vaccines rolling out worldwide and airports easing restrictions, we expect travel to gradually return to its pre-2019 levels by the fourth quarter. We are very optimistic for the year 2022."

IATA's baseline for 2021 is for a 50.4 percent improvement on 2020 demand that would bring the industry to 50.6 percent of 2019 levels. These figures are based on global performance.

Boodai concluded: "We are ready to serve our customers once again. Our pilots, crew members and supporting teams have taken their vaccines. Our aircraft and Terminal 5 follow strict hygiene and safety rules. We continue to take delivery of new aircraft on order to support the expansion plans."

Boubyan Bank records KD 12.6m in profits for first quarter of 2021

KUWAIT: Boubyan Bank has announced KD 24.8 million in operating profits for the first quarter of this year, while continuing to allocate provisions amounting to KD 12 million, thereby recording KD 12.6 million approximately in net profits at a growth rate of 23 percent compared with past year, while the earning per share amounts to 3.97 fils.

Boubyan Bank's Vice-Chairman & Group Chief Executive Officer, Adel Al-Majed, stated: "We are still adopting the same strategy and same plans of the past year where we combated the COVID-19 pandemic in view of the continued crisis and its repercussions clearly affecting the banking industry."

"Despite the exceptional circumstances we are going through, Boubyan Bank has confirmed its ability to weather this storm and to continue providing the highest levels of customer service while maintaining flexibility in incorporating our services and products via our various digital channels to make the lives of our customers much easier," he added.

Al-Majed went on to add: "We hope that the economic sectors in Kuwait return to work normally in light of the efforts exerted by the various bodies in Kuwait to vaccinate the majority of Kuwaitis and expats in order to pave the way for the reopening of all sectors and the gradual return to normal life." "Of course, we had to allocate additional precautionary provisions to support the bank's financial position, and to bolster our ability to face any future repercussions of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, which is normal as a result of this unprecedented crisis: a first in our modern world," he elaborated.



Adel Al-Majed

announcing the acceptance of a new group of employees in GUST's MBA program, which has been launched since 10 years to support the bank's human resources, making Boubyan the only bank that supports its employees in their journey to earn an MBA by providing them with moral support and financial incentives. Since 2012, more than 100 male/female employees earned their MBA degrees from GUST within the framework of the joint program by Boubyan and GUST, which is managed by Itqan Academy, the training arm of the bank.

Meanwhile on another front, the bank started a staff campaign two months ago to encourage its employees to get vaccinated. This campaign was an instant success since the number of vaccinated employees jumped to more than 30 percent and is expected to grow over the coming weeks to reach the targeted percentage by the government.

Serving our society and interaction with our customers

In an attempt to support the government efforts, Boubyan Bank has launched a campaign to encourage its customers and employees to get the COVID-19 vaccine in reach the first one million of vaccinated people in Kuwait to order to achieve herd immunity, thereby making Boubyan the first among local banks to practically support these efforts.

The campaign included a group of activities which will begin with collaboration with a number of Boubyan SMEs customers, where the bank's customers will earn free products from these SMEs upon showing the Vaccination Certificate. Through this type of events, the bank will achieve two goals: supporting the bank's SMEs customers, and giving simple gifts to customers holding any of the various accounts with the bank to show appreciation for their keenness on the health of the society, the safety of others and that of Kuwait.

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Lifestyle | Features



French, London-based artist Camille Walala poses inside the newly created High Street shop in the Design Museum in west London. — AFP photos



A gallery assistant fills a shopping trolley with products designed by emerging artists inside the newly created High Street shop.



Bottles of Bombay Sapphire gin are pictured on a shelf, created by artist Russ 'Ruff' Mercy.



Tins of Kidney Beans are pictured on a shelf, created by Japanese artist Kentaro Okawara.

COVID-hit UK museum reopens early... as a supermarket

Touching artwork is strictly forbidden in most museums, let alone buying it and taking it home. But the Design Museum in London wants visitors to do precisely that. It has transformed its gift shop to create what it describes as "the world's first artist-designed supermarket" as a way of getting around coronavirus lockdown rules. Under the government's plan to ease restrictions, museums in England have to remain shut until May 17 at the earliest, even as gyms, hairdressing salons and pubs have reopened. But the west London museum has avoided weeks of further closure by converting its gift shop into a store selling essential items.

The products—ranging from rice and coffee to the most modern of essentials, face masks—are wrapped in packaging designed by 10 emerging artists. Proceeds from the five-day exhibition, which runs from Wednesday to Sunday, with financial backing from gin company Bombay Sapphire, will go towards a fund for artists and designers. Images of empty shelves and shortages of toilet paper and pasta at supermarkets marked the start of the pandemic in the UK last March. But the Design Museum shop and its products are far from mundane: clean lines of brightly coloured jars and cans are neatly arranged on the shelves, with nothing out of place.



Jars of Porridge Oats are pictured on a shelf, created by British artist Amy Worrall.

What's essential?

Museum director Tim Marlow said the exhibition called into question the nature of what is judged to be essential in everyday life. So-called non-essential retail reopened in England on April 12. "Isn't creativity essential? We're in a shop that's actually a work of art. From the street you see this flattened pattern or canvas, but once you're inside the experience is completely different," he told AFP. "You can buy essential food items at com-

petitive prices. It's about who profits, who funds, and exchange as much about culture. "There's a fun element to it, there's a questioning and critical element and a culturally serious aspect to it.

"We're bemused by the fact that non-essential retail, gyms and hairdressers can open and museums will have to wait until the 17th (of May), but it is as it is." The Design Museum lost 92 percent of its income due to forced closures but received a govern-

ment grant of almost £3 million (\$4.1 million, 3.4 million euros) last year to keep it afloat. And Marlow believes the cultural sector has an important role to play if it adapts to the reality of the post-pandemic world. "We've done this in two months—that's quite quick and requires a lot of agility," he said. "I want to affirm the relevance of museums. We're not just about spectacle. We are about showcasing and researching solutions for the problems we face post-pandemic."

Joyful exhibition

Lead artist Camille Walala embodied the brightness of the reworked shop, sporting large blue earrings, colourful clothing and thick yellow, red and blue bangles. She said of the project: "Budgets get cut in the creative industry but creativity is everywhere. Creativity is essential and it (the exhibition) gives a platform to creative people to showcase their work.

"It is a nice platform, bringing artwork in everyday products. People will buy them and keep them as an affordable piece of art. It is a really nice way to display art. "People should come because it is exciting to get out of the house, see art and be inspired—it's a joyful exhibition." Her message seems to have been grasped by Peter Williamson, 64, who was peering through the windows to catch an early glimpse of the exhibition. "I walk by every day and was intrigued when they were doing the fake shop. I think it's brilliant, the elements of the old supermarket being installed within a very modern display," he said. "I love the installation of the trolley stand. Peeking through the windows, I think it looks brilliant and exciting." — AFP



Rolls of Toilet Paper are pictured on a shelf, created by British artist Michaela Yearwood-Dan.

Documentary tells 'unknown' story of Titanic's Chinese survivors

A new documentary film has revealed the "completely unknown" story of six Chinese men who survived the sinking of the Titanic and adds a new chapter to the history of the world's most famous ship. With Oscar-winning director James Cameron as executive producer, "The Six" has earned glowing reviews in China and at one point trended on the country's Twitter-like Weibo after its release on Friday.

Director Arthur Jones hopes it will have the same impact when it is screened overseas and finally dispel myths that have endured for more than a century. For the Briton and lead researcher Steven Schwankert, "The Six" gives a voice, life and faces to a small band of Chinese men who were among about 700 people to survive the Titanic's sinking in 1912. Jones said that a painstaking project stretched over several countries and years began as little more than a joke between the long-time friends, both of whom are based in China.

"Steven came to me and said that we should do the Chinese Titanic story with the Chinese guys who were on the Titanic," Jones, 47, told AFP at his studio in Shanghai. "I thought he was joking because I thought it was just one of those things that we would laugh about. "I looked it up, and it was true. But initially my thought was: I don't know if the world needs another Titanic film or another Titanic documentary." Jones said they knew they were onto something when they mentioned it to Chinese

friends. "They were just amazed that there's this completely unknown story from Titanic, it just seemed an extraordinary thing," he said.

Last survivor

"The Six" sees Schwankert and his fellow researchers pore over archives and meet descendants across continents as they try to piece together what happened to the men after surviving the most famous sinking of all time. "It became fairly epic in terms of the research," said Jones. Eight Chinese were aboard the fateful vessel, in third class, when it sank after hitting an iceberg. Six, most of them sailors but not working on the Titanic, made it out alive on life rafts.

Cameron, who won best director and best picture at the Oscars for his 1997 smash-hit "Titanic", was fully supportive of the documentary and allowed Jones to show a scene which was not included in the cinema version of the blockbuster. In the cut scene, an Asian-looking man hanging on for life on a piece of wood is plucked from the freezing water, perhaps becoming the last person to be saved.

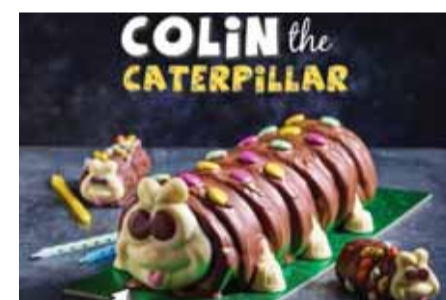
When Schwankert and his team tracked down the man's son in real life, it turned out that he knew almost nothing of what his late father had endured because he never really spoke about it. As they delved further into what became of the six men, word spread of their project, drawing more people to come forward with information. Even now fresh details are coming to light.

Parallels with today

A strong element of the film is the prejudice that Chinese immigrant workers like the seamen faced as they sought new lives in the West. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited Chinese labourers from the United States, slamming the door on their "American Dream". The men arrived in New York with the other survivors but were shipped out of the country less than 24 hours later.

The parallels between anti-Asian sentiment then and now, in particular in the United States, are not lost on Jones and Schwankert. "People—whether it's in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom or anywhere else—didn't suddenly develop these negative feelings in the last two or three months," Schwankert, 50, said by video call from Luoyang, in the central province of Henan. "These are deep-seated problems."

The film also debunks claims that the Chinese men sneaked onto the lifeboat that saved them by disguising themselves as women or hiding on the raft. Chinese viewers are happy that their countrymen's true survival story has now been told. "Above anything else, audiences here are saying thank you for filling in this little bit of unwritten history, or maybe badly written history," Jones said. —AFP



Crumbs! UK retail war over chocolate caterpillar cake

It's one of Britain's more unusual legal wrangles, involving a chocolate cake in the shape of a caterpillar and two of the country's best-known retailers. Marks and Spencer has threatened its cheaper supermarket rival Aldi and the high-street giants have traded barbs on social media. M&S' food store chain last week lodged an intellectual property claim with the High Court in defense of its trademarked chocolate-iced sponge character Colin the Caterpillar. It argued that the German supermarket chain Aldi was misleading customers with its "Cuthbert" cake, which is also sold in green packaging, and wants it to desist from further sales or similar products. Aldi on Tuesday urged M&S to drop the legal action, tweeting: "Can Colin and Cuthbert be besties?" It defiantly vowed to sell a limited-edition version of the cake to raise funds for cancer charities. M&S tweeted back: "We just want you to use your own character, this is proposing 'Kevin the Carrot Cake'."

Many have pointed to the legal claim's selective nature, given that at least six other UK supermarkets sell caterpillar cakes similar to the M&S one, while Aldi's version is the cheapest. Aldi suggested Tuesday that all the supermarkets selling similar cakes—with names such as Curly, Clyde, Charlie, Morris and Wiggles—should work together to "raise money for charity, not lawyers". Waitrose tweeted that its Cecil cake was a "caterpillar of the community...count us in!"

M&S Food, specializing in high-end ready-made dishes, apparently fears an association with discount chain Aldi will leave a nasty taste in consumers' mouths. The store is famous for its breathy slogan: "This is not just food, this is M&S food". Aldi parodied this: tweeting "This is not just any court case, this is #FreeCuthbert." It also posted an image of Cuthbert behind bars. —AFP

Four weddings and a fine: Taiwan couple maximize leave with repeat weddings

Keen to make the most of a statutory holiday for newlyweds, a couple from Taiwan found a novel way to maximize their honeymoon—by marrying four times in just over a month. The unusual story, confirmed by Taipei's Labor Department yesterday, is the latest to go viral and highlight innovative, if somewhat bizarre, loophole wrangling by Taiwanese citizens. Taiwanese companies are legally obliged to offer eight days of paid leave to newlyweds. But an unnamed bank employee decided to game the system last year, claiming 32 days of leave using a novel ruse.



Over a period of 37 days, he and his wife got married four times and divorced three times, claiming the full eight days for each of their nuptials. The bank balked and the employee appealed to Taipei city labor department, which initially fined his employer Tw\$20,000 (\$670) for violating the leave regulations. That was because as far as the law goes, there is currently no restriction on how often an employee can apply for marriage leave. The bank, which was only willing to offer eight days off, said the man had "abused" the law. The case has sparked heated online criticism of the bank employee for taking advantage of legal loopholes and the labor department for issuing the fine.

"Unbelievable, this guy is like playing house with his marriages and divorces. What if he wants get married and divorced every day? He should be granted sick leave rather than marriage leave," read one social media post. Last week the Labor Department revoked the fine against the bank "to recognize a mistake and improve," it said in a statement. Not to be deterred, the employee, who later quit the bank, has called the Labor Department to complain that his former employer still owes him 24 days of leave, an official who asked not to be named told AFP. —AFP



In this picture Arthur Jones, director of a documentary about the Titanic's Chinese survivors, The Six, poses during an interview in Shanghai. — AFP photos



This picture shows a board with information about the Titanic's Chinese survivors during an interview with Arthur Jones, director of the documentary, The Six, in Shanghai.

Lifestyle | Features



People ride their bicycle along the river Tiber in Rome. — AFP photos



A man rides his bicycle across a bicycle lane at Ponte della Musica bridge in Rome.



Women ride their bicycle across the Sant'Angelo bridge in Rome.



People ride their bicycle along Lungotevere Aventino on one of the city's new bicycle lanes in Rome.

Veni, vidi, bici: Is Rome ready for a cycling 'revolution'?

With its historic seven hills, crazy traffic, cobbles and notoriously crumbling roads, Rome has never been the ideal city for cyclists-but with the coronavirus pandemic, things are changing. As elsewhere, streets emptied by COVID-19 restrictions have given cyclists room to breathe, but a new network of bike lanes and generous government subsidies to buy bicycles have also helped fuel the boom. One of the converts is Valeria Picchi, a 36-year-old mother-of-two who sold her scooter last year and bought an e-bike with a kids' trailer. "I feel like a rare bird," she told AFP. "People look at us, my kids are thrilled... I'm becoming a bit of a celebrity in the neighborhood."

Many in Rome still balk at the idea of setting off on a bicycle into the throng of buzzing Vespas, dented old Fiats and other kings of the Roman traffic jungle. Cyclists in the eternal city also have to brave streets so badly potholed that Honda, Piaggio and other motorbike manufacturers reportedly use them to

test the limits of the suspension of their new models. Picchi was persuaded by the fact that she can do much of her commute and the school run on a proper bike lane, protected from traffic-a privilege denied to most Romans, at least for the moment.

She also took up a government scheme offering up to 500 euros (\$600) to people buying a new or second-hand bike or electric scooter, which received 119,000 applications last year. "A revolution is under way and I am part of it!" she exclaimed, wheeling her bike around the Villa Leopardi park in the northern Nomentano district on a sunny but chilly spring morning. "We're not Denmark, we also need a revolution in our way of thinking, but we will slowly, slowly get there."

Painting over cobbles

Some think the progress is too slow. "Five years ago you hardly saw any bicycles in Rome. Nobody used them except for a ride in the park on

Sundays," said Roberto Scacchi, regional head of pro-environment lobby Legambiente. But speaking to AFP from a main road near the Termini train station, where a bike lane was recently added, he said: "I don't see any revolution... It's still one bicycle for every 100 cars." According to the European Cyclists' Federation, which has collated data about European capitals from different years, only 0.6 percent of Romans cycle regularly, against 49 percent of Copenhagen residents.

Mayor Virginia Raggi last year announced 150 kilometers (90 miles) of new bike lanes, adding to an existing network of around 250 kilometers, and getting the city closer to its own ideal target of 500 kilometers. But Legambiente complains that just some 15 kilometres have been completed so far, and most of them are "temporary", meaning a line of paint on the side of the road, with no barriers to protect cyclists from cars. One major cycle lane in the north of the city abruptly turns into cobbles at points-



A long exposure photograph shows bicycle riding along Lungotevere Aventino on a bicycle lane.

rather than being replaced with tarmac, they have simply been painted over.

'Bubble could burst'

Giulio Maselli, a bike shop owner in central Rome, reported a jump in sales of at least 50 per cent last year, but said Rome urgently needs to upgrade its cycling infrastructure to keep up with demand. "Otherwise this bubble is destined to burst," he said. Local authorities

insist they are on it. Stefano Brinchi, head of municipal transport agency Roma Mobilita, said the city was working to foster an "irreversible" shift towards greener mobility. "We need to dispel the myth that Rome should be considered a bike-unfriendly city," he said, pointing to, among other things, the grand plan of a 45-kilometre cycling ring road around the city.

The so-called GRAB (Great Bicycle Ring Road) would join the Colosseum, the Vatican area and the hip Trastevere district to lesser known districts in the east of Rome, like Tor Pignattara, and big parks in the north, like the Aniene natural reserve. According to campaigners, the project is fully funded, officially endorsed by the city of Rome, and could be ready by the end of 2022. "It's going to be the most beautiful cycle path in the world," Legambiente's Scacchi said. "Today, unfortunately, it's the most beautiful cycle path, but in the virtual world." — AFP



Caroline Jurie (second left) removes the crown of Pushpika de Silva during the onstage fracas. — AFP

SRI LANKA'S 'MRS WORLD' QUILTS AMID CRIMINAL CHARGES

Mrs World winner facing criminal charges after an on-stage fracas at a Sri Lankan beauty pageant has relinquished her title, organizers said yesterday. Caroline Jurie made international headlines after yanking the crown off the winner at the local segment of Mrs World in Sri Lanka at a Colombo theatre this month. Jurie won the entire Mrs World competition last year in Las Vegas but California-based Mrs World Inc. said in a statement she had now voluntarily stepped down and the 2020 crown has now gone to runner up Kate Schneider of Ireland.

Jurie had faced social media calls to give up her title after being arrested with an associate Chula Padmendra, following the unruly scenes on stage. Both have been charged with using criminal force and causing damage. They are on bail ahead of a first hearing on June 28. Jurie had claimed that this year's Mrs Sri Lanka winner Pushpika de Silva was ineligible for the prize as she was divorced. The Mrs Sri Lanka victor qualifies to enter the next Mrs World competition.

To qualify for the title, contestants must be married. De Silva is estranged from her husband, but they are legally married. The local franchise holder for the pageant, Chandimal Jayasinghe, has demanded compensation from Jurie for damage to the stage and dressing rooms where several mirrors were smashed. — AFP



This file photograph shows the logo of the social network Instagram on a smartphone, in Toulouse, south-western France.

Instagram lets users filter insults in private message requests

Instagram started offering users yesterday the option to filter incoming direct message requests for hurtful language, a step aimed at showing the Facebook-owned social network is serious about reducing online harassment. "Because DMs are private conversations, we don't proactively look for hate speech or bullying the same way we do elsewhere," Instagram said in a blog post.

But requests to open new private chats are "where people usually receive abusive messages," it added. Running on the user's device to preserve privacy, rather than Instagram's servers, the new filters will block requests to open a direct messaging conversation that contain offensive words, expressions or emojis. As well as a set of pre-defined filters, users will be able to add their own terms to their personal block list, just as they already can for comments on their posts.

At first, users in seven countries-Britain, France, Ireland, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada-will be given the option, with more to follow "over the next few months". "These are the countries where public figures, especially football players, have been victims of abuse and offensive language in direct messages," Instagram public policy manager in France Clotilde Briand told AFP. "Most hate speech comes in these direct message requests. We'll give everyone the option of reporting these messages to us, or not," she added.

Facebook is also considering rolling the filter out to its other chat properties Messenger and WhatsApp, Briand said. With more than one billion users, Instagram has like other social networks spent years trying to fight harassment, hate speech and disinformation. In 2019, it set up artificial intelligence-based warnings to people trying to post insulting messages, and recently said it would use machine learning to work out users' real age. — AFP

Swiss hit the gym and cafes as COVID measures ease

The Swiss hit the al fresco dining tables and were back pumping iron on Monday as the country reopened outdoor cafes and indoor gyms despite rising COVID case rates. At the Lausanne Weightlifting and Bodybuilding Club, 74-year-old Francois Jeanmonod was delighted to be back after months away due to the pandemic. He was at the club to meet other bodybuilding enthusiasts, all retirees, from "the first hour" that the facility reopened. "We don't just come to build big muscles-we come to chat," he told

AFP, cleaning down equipment with a wet wipe.

Though daily coronavirus case numbers are going up, Switzerland eased anti-COVID restrictions on Monday, notably reopening cinemas, sports halls, and cafe and restaurant patios-along with several large-scale vaccination centers in cities like Lausanne and Geneva. Some 9,830 people have been killed by the virus in Switzerland, population 8.6 million, while nearly 634,400 have tested positive.

At the weightlifting club, facemasks do not need to be worn if gym-goers keep 1.5 meters apart, but they are required in the changing rooms. Even if club members have been out exercising on the shores of Lake Geneva, they all said that getting back in the gym was priceless. "For morale and mates," said 74-year-old Jean-Jacques Subilia, perched on a gym bike. "It's a relief. Coming here is social," said Didier Dewarrat, 72. The fitness rooms were near full on reopening.

Waiting on tables

"We had a lot more people than we

expected, and everyone expressed their relief after a winter at home," said Filipa Amorim, 24, manager of a Let's Go Fitness center in Lausanne, where about 50 people, all fairly young and masked, worked out on weight machines. "Many are happy to see the coaches again," she said, stressing that mask-wearing was mandatory even during cardio activities. Fitness instructor Tatiana Atanasio, 32, said: "It's part of my lifestyle. A year without coming really got to me. I used to play sports outside but it's not the same because I hate doing sport on my own."

Nearby cafes reopened their outdoor tables, after months of waiting. They were not crowded due to the cool spring air, but bright sunshine still drew in customers. Theatre student Sarah, 20, could not resist stopping by for a coffee. She had organized her day meticulously in order to celebrate the reopening of outdoor tables. "After ... we will have alcoholic drinks tonight," she beamed. "Mental health has been completely forgotten during the lockdown, compared to physical health, which the hospitals took care of. We forgot all

about those people who live on their own." Seated nearby, Herve Lesserteur, 52, added: "The bistrot and its outdoor tables are a social hub. Seeing people counts for something."

"I work in schools, we are surrounded by children all day long, and until now we could not go for a drink on the terrace with friends." Daily case rates in the landlocked Alpine nation are roughly the same as in neighbors Germany and Italy, though lower than the European Union average-and half the rate in France. Swiss rates bottomed out in the second half of February but have been on the rise since early March. Nearly two million vaccine doses have been administered. After more than a year of the pandemic, including several spells of semi-confinement, Lesserteur has learned to take things with a pinch of salt. "Things open, things close again," he said. "This should not stop you living your life." — AFP



Customers gather on a terrace beside Lake Geneva in Lausanne, as terraces reopened in Switzerland. — AFP photos



Sports

Irving bounces back as Nets down Pelicans; Clippers, Knicks win

Harden injury setback, out 'indefinitely'

LOS ANGELES: Kyrie Irving scored 32 points as the Brooklyn Nets shrugged off the injury absence of Kevin Durant to down the New Orleans Pelicans 134-129 on Tuesday. An impressive all-round offensive display helped Brooklyn to a win which saw them close to within half a game of the Philadelphia 76ers at the top of the Eastern Conference.

With Durant suffering from a thigh contusion and James Harden still missing with a hamstring strain, it was left to the Nets' supporting cast to back up Irving. Joe Harris finished with 24 points and Landry Shamet added 18 while Blake Griffin delivered 16 points from the bench. Bruce Brown added a double-double with 11 points and 11 rebounds. "We needed everything tonight from everyone," said Irving. "I feel like we found something good in the second half."

Irving had taken responsibility on Sunday after the Nets' scoring dried up down the stretch in an agonizing 109-107 defeat to Miami. But the 29-year-old led from the front in the fourth quarter on Tuesday, piling up 15 points in the final period to get Brooklyn over the line. "We just made shots," said Irving. "In the last three minutes against Miami we should (have) had two or three plays. Tonight we were just playing off each other really well and it worked in our favor."

'Tip your hat'

Nets coach Steve Nash had a simple explanation for Irving's improved fourth quarter performance. "The ball went in tonight and it didn't go in last time," Nash said. "At the end of the day he made some really difficult shots. You tip your hat to the star player that makes the shots."

Nash meanwhile saluted the scoring effort from the depleted Nets roster in the absence of Durant and Harden. "When you're down a couple of superstars, some guys have to take more responsibility and more minutes. And if they don't play well you can find yourself in a big hole. Tonight they played really well."

Zion Williamson led the Pelicans scoring with 33 points while Brandon Ingram added 27. Lonzo Ball and Naji Marshall added 15 points apiece for New Orleans, who remain just outside playoff contention in the West on 25-33.

The Nets had announced Tuesday that Harden has suffered an injury setback during his recovery and faces an indefinite layoff. A statement from the Nets said Harden's injury had flared up during an on-court rehab session on Monday. "Following an evaluation today which included an MRI, Harden will remain out indefinitely," the team said. "Updates regarding his status will be provided as appropriate."

Harden has not played since April 5, when his return from a hamstring injury was cut short after only four minutes in a win over the New York Knicks. The 31-year-old point guard is a key figure in the Nets' hopes of mounting a strong challenge through the playoffs.

Clippers, Knicks win

Elsewhere Tuesday, Paul George scored 33 points as the Los Angeles Clippers staged a late rally to pip the injury-hit Portland Trail Blazers 113-112. George scored the Clippers' final six points, including two nerveless free throws with 4.8 seconds remaining, to give Los Angeles their 41st win of the season. "Tonight it just came down to defense,"



NEW ORLEANS: Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets high-fives teammates during the game against the New Orleans Pelicans on Tuesday at the Smoothie King Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. — AFP

George said. "We weren't shooting the ball well, but both teams were scoring at a high clip. "It just came down to who was going to play defence and make the most stops, and it just happened to be us down the stretch."

CJ McCollum had a chance to snatch victory for Portland on the buzzer, but his 14-foot pullup shot just bounced out of the rim as the Clippers held on. McCollum finished with 28 points for the Blazers,

who were without the injured Damian Lillard and Jusuf Nurkic.

Elsewhere, the New York Knicks bagged a seventh straight victory as R.J. Barrett scored 24 points in a comfortable 109-97 defeat of the Charlotte Hornets. Derrick Rose and Immanuel Quickley each finished with 17 points while Julius Randle added 16 with 10 rebounds and seven assists to maintain the Knicks' push for the playoffs. — AFP

'Justice served' NBA, players praise Chauvin guilty verdict

LOS ANGELES: NBA chief Adam Silver applauded the outcome of the Derek Chauvin murder trial on Tuesday, saying justice had been served against the former police officer found guilty of killing unarmed Black man George Floyd.

In a joint statement with the National Basketball Players Association executive director Michele Roberts, the NBA chief said the league would continue to campaign for criminal justice and police reforms. "George Floyd's murder was a flash point for how we look at race and justice in our country, and we are pleased that justice appears to have been served," Silver and Roberts said.

"But we also recognize that there is much work to be done with the National Basketball Association and the National Basketball Players Association, together with our newly formed Social Justice Coalition, will redouble our efforts to advocate for meaningful change in the areas of criminal justice and policing," they added.

NBA players joined nationwide protests against Floyd's killing in Minneapolis in May last year, and the league later encouraged players to share social justice messages when the pandemic-interrupted season resumed. The words "Black Lives Matter"

Virus surge to delay Olympics fan decision till June

TOKYO: Tokyo Olympics organizers may put off an announcement on how many fans can attend until June, media reported yesterday, as surging coronavirus infections play havoc with preparations. Organizers have already barred overseas fans from the pandemic-delayed Games, and were expected to announce an upper limit on domestic spectators sometime in April.

But Japanese reports said the decision was now likely in June, possibly just a month before the Games open on July 23. The move would further delay ticket sales, which were put on hold when the Olympics were postponed last year. The organizing committee said the timing of the decision needed to stay "flexible" as the coronavirus situation develops.

"We remain in discussions with the IOC and IPC (International Olympic Committee and International Paralympic Committee) and intend to reach a consensus on the direction to take," a Tokyo 2020 statement added.

Athletes may also face daily virus testing, rather than once every four days as originally planned, separate reports said. Japan's sharp rise in cases is causing further disruption for the postponed Games, with a number of test events delayed, cancelled or moved abroad.

In the latest upheaval, an artistic swimming qualifying competition has been moved from Japan, organizers said, and spectators will reportedly be barred from an athletics event at the main Olympic stadium.

The artistic swimming qualifier was originally set to take place in Tokyo in March before being rescheduled to May 1-4, but will now be held in June at "a location to be defined, outside Japan",



STUTTGART: Germany's Laura Siegemund reacts after winning against Germany's Mona Barthel during their singles match on day 2 of the Women's Tennis Grand Prix WTA 500 tournament in Stuttgart, southwestern Germany, on Tuesday. — AFP

Siegemund sets up Barty clash in Stuttgart

STUTTGART: Former Stuttgart champion Laura Siegemund will face world number one Ashleigh Barty of Australia in the second round of the clay-court WTA tournament after seeing off qualifier Mona Barthel on Tuesday. Siegemund, 33, who won the Stuttgart tournament in 2017 and reached the 2016 final, needed just over two hours to seal a 6-4, 3-6, 6-1 first-round win over Barthel, who fired down four aces without reply.

Barty will make her debut in Stuttgart in the second round against the 33-year-old Siegemund, ranked 58th in the world, having won the only previous meeting between the pair in Doha on hard court last year. "I am looking forward to it, but it won't be an easy task for sure," said Siegemund of facing top-seed Barty.

"It wasn't an easy first match for me. I hadn't played for a few weeks, while she came through qualifying, so there is room for improvement," Siegemund added having made 30 unforced errors. Stuttgart is the second clay-court tournament this season for Barty, the 2019 French Open champion, who lost to Spain's Paula Badosa in the quarter-finals of the Charleston tournament at the start of April.

Former double Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova of the Czech Republic won her first round match with a 6-4, 6-3 win over Australian Open finalist Jennifer Brady of the USA. Kvitova, the seventh seed in Stuttgart and the 2019 champion, will face Maria Sakkari of Greece in the second round.

"I was surprised to have to face her so early," said Kvitova, with Brady ranked 14th in the world, just four places below her. "It could just as easily have been a Grand Slam quarter-final or something like that. I struggled with my serves at the start, but it was great to be back on the court and I feel well here. I'm looking forward to playing Maria."

Earlier, Anett Kontaveit of Estonia set up a second-round tie with third-seed Sofia Kenin of the USA after a 6-2, 6-3 win over German qualifier Julia Middendorf. Later fifth-seed Aryna Sabalenka of Bulgaria powered her way past China's Zhang Shuai, needing just over an hour to seal a 6-2, 6-2 first-round win. The 22-year-old Sabalenka will next face German qualifier Anna-Lena Friedsam. — AFP



ATLANTA: The Atlanta Hawks and Orlando Magic observe the guilty verdicts in the Derek Chauvin case prior to the game at State Farm Arena on Tuesday in Atlanta, Georgia. — AFP

were painted prominently on courts at games staged in the NBA's bubble in Orlando.

Meanwhile, the Minnesota Timberwolves and Minnesota Lynx WNBA teams both praised Tuesday's verdict in a joint statement. "One year ago, George Floyd was murdered, causing unimaginable

pain and trauma for his family, the Minneapolis community, and communities across the nation," the teams said. "We are hopeful that today's decision will serve as a step forward, but it does not ease the physical and emotional pain that continues in an environment where systemic racism exists." — AFP



TOKYO: A Tokyo 2020 Olympics Games banner is displayed on the wall of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government building in Tokyo on April 13, 2021. — AFP

organizers said late Tuesday.

World swimming governing body FINA said in a statement that "challenges related to the international calendar and the necessary adaptation of the venue to the Olympic Games operations" were behind the decision.

FINA has already rescheduled a Diving World Cup event in Tokyo and moved a marathon swimming Olympic qualifier from Japan to Portugal, amid reported dissatisfaction over virus countermeasures. Japanese media said yesterday that an athletics test event — which will double as a World Athletics Continental Tour Gold meet and feature athletes from overseas — will be held without spectators.

Organizers were set to allow 20,000 fans into the May 9 meet, according to Kyodo news agency, but tougher restrictions imposed by the Tokyo city government this month have forced a rethink. Virus restrictions are expected to be tightened further this week, with Tokyo and several other regions seeking a state of emergency to tackle rising cases. Despite the situation, Olympic organizers and local officials insist the Games can be held safely. They will unveil updated virus rulebooks later this month. — AFP

Van der Breggen takes seventh straight women's Fleche Wallonne

CHARLEROI: World champion Anna van der Breggen won the women's Fleche Wallonne for a record-extending seventh successive occasion yesterday. Dutch rider van der Breggen edged Poland's Katarzyna Niewiadoma in a two-way sprint with Italian Elisa Longo Borghini in third after 130km of racing in Belgium.

Earlier, Tour de France champion Tadej Pogacar's Team UAE Emirates withdrew from the men's race just hours before the classic started due to COVID-19 cases. Pogacar was scheduled to compete alongside last year's Fleche Wallonne winner Marc Hirschi.

"We regret to inform that UAE Team Emirates will not participate in Fleche Wallonne due to 2 members returning positive tests for COVID-19 on April 20," the outfit said in a statement. "The two members of the team concerned, Diego Ulissi and one staff member (who is also vaccinated), returned two negative tests in the days before travelling to Belgium."

"Upon arrival to Belgium both underwent a subsequent test which returned a positive result," they added. UAE Emirates said they aim to participate in Sunday's Liege-Bastogne-Liege, another key early season race.

Belgian Wout van Aert won the first Ardennes classic of the season, the Amstel Gold Race last Sunday, but has been omitted from Jumbo Visma's lineup for yesterday's Fleche Wallonne which starts in Charleroi. Van Aert's team-mate Primoz Roglic and world champion Julian Alaphilippe are among the contenders in the 194-kilometer race. — AFP

Sports

English fan power forces Super League billionaires into retreat

LONDRES: In just 48 hours, English football fans forced four billionaires, a Russian oligarch and an Emirati sheikh into a hasty retreat as the European Super League collapsed with the withdrawal of six Premier League clubs.

The owners of Manchester United, Liverpool, Manchester City, Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham had signed up with six other Spanish and Italian clubs to a money-spinning ESL project, but with far-reaching consequences for the rest of the football pyramid.

On the back of a fans' revolt, governments and governing bodies mobilized to threaten the "dirty dozen" with expulsion from domestic and continental competitions. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson even proposed dropping a "legislative bomb" on the Premier League "big six" threatening to breakaway.

After more than a year in soulless stadiums, with supporters shut out due to coronavirus restrictions, perhaps those running the clubs forgot the importance of the match-going fan. The show has gone on behind closed doors to protect lucrative television contracts of the sort the breakaway clubs thought they were buying into. A \$3.5 billion pot was to be shared among the founder members of the ESL, borrowed against future TV rights revenues.

However, after years of being pushed around to accommodate prime kick-off times in San Francisco and Shanghai, inflated ticket prices and with less say in how their club is run, supporters in England have emerged triumphant.

"It doesn't matter what club you are, it doesn't matter allegiance, it's not tribal, it's about the rich, the few, the minority trying to take what is our

game," said Chelsea fan Will Todd, at a fan protest ahead of Tuesday's Premier League game against Brighton.

The furious backlash could prove the tipping point over the issue of the open nature of club ownership in England. "The whole ESL move shows how out of touch these owners are," said British culture secretary Oliver Dowden in promising to still press ahead with a fan-led review of football governance.

'I've let you down'

The disconnect with English football culture is a physical as well as emotional one. Not one of the owners from the breakaway six live in Britain. United, Liverpool and Arsenal are owned by US-based billionaires, used to working in the American sports franchise model without the perils of having to earn a place in the top leagues every year by performing on the pitch.

Chelsea and Manchester City have become global brands on the back of investment from Roman Abramovich and Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Mansour. Tottenham are the only British-owned club of the six, but even their billionaire owner, Joe Lewis, resides in the Bahamas.

"In this endeavor I've let you down," said Liverpool owner John Henry in a humiliating climb-down. "Again, I'm sorry, and I alone am responsible for the unnecessary negativity brought forward over the past couple of days. It's something I won't forget. It shows the power the fans have today and will rightly continue to have."

Buoyed by their victory, fans' groups are now rallying to build on their momentum for further change, starting with the boardrooms of their own clubs. The Manchester United Supporters' Trust (MUST) said:

"This is our club, not yours"

Bayern on verge of ninth straight Bundesliga title

BERLIN: Bayern Munich can be crowned Bundesliga champions this weekend after taking a 10 point lead at the top of the table with a 2-0 win at home to Bayer Leverkusen on Tuesday. Bayern seized control at the Allianz Arena with early goals by Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting and Joshua Kimmich after second-placed RB Leipzig had earlier suffered a shock defeat at relegation-threatened Cologne.

With just four games to go, club world champions Bayern will be guaranteed a ninth German league title in a row with a win at Mainz on Saturday. "I told the team before the game, that we could take a huge step towards the title, which we have done. We want to now also win in Mainz," said Bayern coach Hansi Flick.

Off the field, Bayern are in disarray since Flick dropped a bombshell on Saturday by saying he wants to be released from his contract at the end of the season. Bayern's senior bosses responded by saying it "disapproves of the one-sided communication by

Hansi Flick" and wants to focus on this week's games.

The Bavarian giants were also adamant on Tuesday that they will not join the breakaway Super League. On the pitch, it was business as usual as Bayern quickly dominated Leverkusen and scored from their first attack.

When Thomas Mueller's shot was saved, Choupo-Moting was on hand to tap home the rebound on seven minutes. Kimmich added Bayern's second goal on 14 minutes when David Alaba's cross only went as far as the Germany midfielder who fired home from the edge of the area.

Leverkusen raised their game after the break with Leon Bailey firing past Manuel Neuer, but his goal was ruled offside. Choupo-Moting had the ball in the Leverkusen net for the second time with 25 minutes left but his effort was ruled offside.

Bailey's cross across the six-yard box was then fired off the crossbar by Karim Bellarabi on 69 minutes. Eintracht Frankfurt moved up to third with a 2-0 home win over Augsburg thanks to goals by midfielder Martin Hinteregger and striker Andre Silva, who claimed his 24th league goal this season.

Schalke relegated

Bottom side Schalke had their relegation confirmed by a 1-0 defeat at Arminia Bielefeld after 30 consecutive years in Germany's top flight. Earlier, RB Leipzig crashed to a 2-1 defeat at second-from-bottom Cologne, whose captain Jonas Hector scored the first Bundesliga brace of his career to end a miserable run of nine league games without a win.



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's Cameroonian forward Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting (left) celebrates with Bayern Munich's German midfielder Joshua Kimmich after scoring the opening goal during the German first division Bundesliga football match FC Bayern Munich vs Bayer 04 Leverkusen in Munich, southern Germany, on Tuesday. —AFP

"Cologne fought and showed passion," admitted Leipzig attacking mid-

fielder Emil Forsberg. "We had a few chances, but unfortunately we aren't taking advantage of them at the moment and, of course, we are disappointed about that."

After a goalless first-half in Cologne, the match burst into life after the break. Germany international Hector headed his side into the lead just 56 seconds into the second half with the visitors' defence napping. —AFP

Time ticking for Woodward after Super League failure

LONDRES: Manchester United executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward failed in his high-stakes gamble to join a European Super League and the clock is now ticking on his tenure at Old Trafford. When he was a banker with JP Morgan — the US investment giant that was set to finance the ESL — Woodward once complained about colleagues moaning they were losing their jobs and reminded them that "part of the high rewards were the high risk".

Although he was already due to step down, the timing of the announcement on Tuesday appeared no coincidence on a breathless evening when United and their Premier League rivals withdrew from the Super League after fierce opposition from supporters. Clubs in Spain and Italy followed suit yesterday as the project fell apart.

Many United fans would say it was not a moment too soon for a man they never warmed to and who people that know him term charming but ruthless. Just as manager David Moyes had a hard act to fol-

low in Alex Ferguson, so Woodward, who is stepping down at the end of 2021, had a tall task to emulate his boardroom predecessor, David Gill.

Woodward has been executive vice-chairman at Old Trafford since 2012. He took over the responsibilities of departing chief executive Gill the following year. However, while Gill managed to move from a successful career outside football to being a perfect partner for Ferguson, Woodward never quite managed the leap.

Part of that was due to a lack of success since Ferguson stepped down — United have not won the Premier League since 2013. Woodward, 49, had appeared to retain the backing of United's US owners, the Glazer family, despite having no league title or Champions League trophy to show for investment of nearly £1 billion (\$1.4 billion).

In a defiant statement to accompany the announcement of his departure, Woodward insisted he believed the money was well invested. "We have invested more than £1 billion in the squad during my time here," he said. "I am particularly delighted with the progress the players have made under the astute leadership of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and his coaching team in the last two years."

Instead of Woodward leaving it was the managers who came and went through the revolving door — Moyes only lasted 10 months. Dutch coach Louis van Gaal — "the perfect choice" as



LONDRES: Football supporters demonstrate against the proposed European Super League outside of Stamford Bridge football stadium in London on Tuesday, ahead of the English Premier League match between Chelsea and Brighton and Hove Albion. —AFP

"This must be a turning point for football, and it must be a turning point for United too."

The Glazer family's controversial leveraged buy-out of the Red Devils in 2005 has left the club picking up the bill for hundreds of millions of pounds in interest payments, while the Glazers regularly take out dividends.

"This is a real opportunity for the Glazers to now change the current path of their legacy and open the door to supporter shareholding with full voting rights," added the MUST. The Chelsea Supporters Trust said it had "little or no confidence in our cur-

rent leadership at board level".

There remains a long road ahead for supporters if they want to oust unpopular owners. The valuations of the six Premier League clubs are in the billions. But for once the collective power of the humble fan has brought down the plans of billionaires to further line their pockets.

"This is our club, not yours," said Liverpool fan group Spion Kop 1906. "Never take us for granted because once again you have seen that it's the fans who have the power, not the men with the briefcase." —AFP

News in brief

Alaba to join Real Madrid

BERLIN: Austria defender David Alaba will join Real Madrid at the end of the season on a free transfer when his Bayern Munich contract expires, according to reports on Tuesday. Sky claim the 28-year-old, who has won the Champions League twice with Bayern, will sign a five-year deal with Real after spending 13 years in Munich. Alaba played in Tuesday's 2-0 home win against Leverkusen which leaves Bayern 10 points clear at the top of the Bundesliga. Bayern can be crowned Bundesliga champions for the ninth consecutive season at Mainz on Saturday. Having made 428 appearances for Bayern, Alaba is on the verge of his 10th Bundesliga title with the club world champions. —AFP

Brazil face Germany

ZURICH: Reigning champions Brazil were yesterday drawn with 2016 runners-up Germany, the Ivory Coast and Saudi Arabia in the Tokyo Olympics men's football group stages. Hosts Japan, who last won a medal in the men's event with a bronze in 1968, will play France, South Africa and Mexico in Group A. Group C includes Egypt, Spain, Argentina and Australia while Group B has South Korea, New Zealand, Romania and Honduras. The tournament starts on July 22, a day before the opening ceremony of the Games that were postponed last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the women's draw record four-time champions the USA will feature against Sweden, Australia and New Zealand. Home side Japan will play Great Britain, Canada and Chile. —AFP

Chinese season underway

SHANGHAI: A crowd of about 30,000 saw Fabio Cannavaro's Guangzhou FC held 2-2 by Guangzhou City on the first day of the Chinese Super League season on Tuesday. As part of a lively opening ceremony at Tianhe Stadium in Guangzhou, the CSL trophy was flown into the arena — delivered by the passenger of a large red and white drone. In the other opening-day match, Marouane Fellaini's Shandong Taishan defeated Chongqing 2-0. All games in the first stage of the CSL are being played in either Guangzhou or Suzhou, near Shanghai, as part of efforts to thwart the coronavirus. The 16 teams will be housed in hotels and kept away from the public. However, unlike sport in some countries, supporters will be allowed into some matches, with the virus largely under control in China. —AFP

UK govt scores political goal in attacking 'big six'

LONDRES: Britain's government, exploiting a populist cause ahead of elections next month, is vowing no let-up in its pressure on England's biggest football clubs despite the implosion of a renegade European league.

The abortive plan involving the "big six" Premier League sides brought about a rare display of bipartisan opposition from political parties in Britain, mirroring the united hostility of fans who are normally sworn enemies.

After threatening to drop a "legislative bomb" on the billionaire and mostly foreign tycoons who run the English clubs, Prime Minister Boris Johnson commended them for abandoning the plan late Tuesday. But culture and sports secretary Oliver Dowden yesterday said the government would press on with a long-delayed review to examine the future of Britain's national game. He called the German model of majority-fan ownership at

clubs a "good idea" in principle, but stressed he did not want to pre-empt the review's findings and still welcomed foreign investment.

"It would be a popular move — and really symbolize a break with the recent, neoliberal past," Queen Mary University of London politics professor Tim Bale said. "And they could still convincingly argue that this is a special case that wouldn't spilling socialism for other sectors," he told AFP.

For Johnson's Conservatives, there is a particular imperative to safeguard the working-class "Red Wall" vote in northern English seats that were held for decades by the center-left Labour party before flipping

at the 2019 general election.

In the buildup to UK-wide local polls on May 6, that translated this week into some rather un-Conservative rhetoric about preserving community values against the interests of big business and the owners of the top six.

There is a preponderance of smaller clubs in "Red Wall" seats, and Bale said the government could not ignore the mass outcry from millions of fans. "They include those who live in marginal seats whose football teams play in lower divisions but dream one day of making it into the Premier League and maybe even Europe. No government could go against that," he said. —AFP

Super League dead as Italian and Spanish clubs follow English exodus

LONDRES: The two Milan giants and Atletico Madrid followed all six English Premier League clubs in pulling out of the European Super League yesterday, dealing a fatal blow to the project. The withdrawals by Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea and Tottenham came just 48 hours after the league's unveiling late on Sunday following a furious response from fans and officials.

The three Italian clubs involved — Juventus, AC Milan and Inter Milan — admitted defeat and La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid also pulled out. Real Madrid and Barcelona — the last of the initial group of 12 clubs to sign up — have yet to make any comment but the project in its current form is dead in the water.

AC Milan were one the main drivers behind the plans, having missed out on the Champions League for the past seven seasons. The seven-time European champions said change was necessary due to the changing football landscape but admitted they "must be sensitive to the voice of those who love this wonderful sport". Italian champions Juventus said they remained "convinced of the soundness of the project's sport, commercial and legal premises" but accepted it could not go ahead in its original form.

Cash injection

The Super League promised guaranteed entry for its founding clubs and billions of dollars in payments. Most of the clubs have huge debts and wage bills, and suffered a sharp drop in revenues

during the coronavirus pandemic. But the project was vehemently opposed across the football spectrum, from fans to players, coaches, politicians and UEFA and FIFA, the European and world football bodies.

The clubs were threatened with a ban from domestic and European football, while their players could even have been barred from representing their countries. UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin struck a conciliatory tone on Wednesday, saying he wanted to "rebuild the unity" of European football, and described the English clubs as "back in the fold".

"I said yesterday that it is admirable to admit a mistake and these clubs made a big mistake," Ceferin said in a statement. "But they are back in the fold now and I know they have a lot to offer not just to our competitions but to the whole of the European game. The important thing now is that we move on, rebuild the unity that the game enjoyed before this and move forward together."

Shares in Juventus plunged by more than 13 percent on Wednesday following a slump in the value of Manchester United stocks. In response to the English pull-outs, the Super League had said it was looking for ways to "reshape", insisting the "status quo of European football needs to change".

"We shall reconsider the most appropriate steps to reshape the project," its statement said. Liverpool owner John W Henry apologized for his part in the planned Super League after club captain Jordan Henderson said the players did



MILAN: An illustration picture taken in Milan on Tuesday shows the Giuseppe Meazza stadium (San Siro), home of Italian Giants AC Milan and Inter Milan. — AFP

not want it to happen. "I want to apologize to all the fans and supporters of Liverpool Football Club for the disruption I caused over the last 48 hours," the American said in a video posted on the club's Twitter site. "It goes without saying but should be said, the project put forward was never going to stand without the support of the fans."

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson

hailed the English pull-outs, telling parliament: "The announcement was the right result for football fans, for clubs and for communities across the country." The English Football Association also welcomed the withdrawals, praising fans for "their influential and unequivocal voice". Reigning European champions Bayern Munich and French giants Paris Saint-Germain had both come out strongly opposed to the breakaway

league, dealing it a heavy blow. Adding to the drama on Tuesday, Manchester United announced that executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward would step down from his role at the end of 2021. Several players at the English clubs had voiced opposition to the Super League, and Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola commented: "It's not a sport when success is already guaranteed." — AFP



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