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82 killed as fire engulfs COVID hospital in Iraq

Amir sends condolences to Saleh; Kadhemi fires health minister



NAJAF: Iraqis transport coffins of relatives killed during a fire in a hospital in the capital, ahead of a funeral procession in the holy shrine city of Najaf yesterday. — AFP

BAGHDAD: More than 80 people died yesterday in a fire that ripped through an Iraqi COVID-19 hospital, sparking anger and prompting the suspension of top officials in a country with a long-dilapidated health infrastructure. Many of the victims were on respirators and were suffocated or burned in the smoke and flames when the blaze at eastern Baghdad's Ibn Al-Khatib hospital started with an explosion caused by "a fault in the storage of oxygen cylinders", medical sources said.

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday sent a cable to Iraqi President Barham Saleh, voicing heartfelt and sincere condolences over the victims of the fire that erupted in Ibn Al-Khateeb Hospital in the Capital Baghdad and left a number of people dead or injured.

The Iraqi health ministry said 82 people were killed and 110 wounded, while the Iraqi Human Rights Commission said 28 of the victims were patients who had to be taken off ventilators to escape the flames. The blaze spread quickly across multiple floors in the middle of the night, as

dozens of relatives were at the bedside of the 30 patients in the hospital's intensive care unit where the most severe COVID-19 cases were treated, a medical source said.

"The hospital had no fire protection system and false ceilings allowed the flames to spread to highly flammable products," Iraq's civil defense services said.

Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi suspended Health Minister Hassan Al-Tamimi—who is backed by the powerful Shiite leader Moqtada Sadr—amid angry calls on social media for him to be sacked, as part of a probe that would also include the governor of Baghdad. Kadhemi also declared three days of national mourning, while parliament said it would devote its session today to the tragedy. Witnesses said the evacuation was slow and chaotic, with patients and their relatives crammed into stairwells as they scrambled for exits. "It was the people (civilians) who got the wounded out," Amir, 35, told AFP, saying he saved his hospitalized brothers "by the skin of his teeth".

Continued on Page 2

Ramadan Kareem

The benefits of Ramadan

By Yasmeem Mohammad

Ramadan, the month of blessings and righteousness. The holy month of Ramadan is observed by Muslims all around the world. The followers of Islam celebrate this annual auspicious month by fasting, praying as well as abstaining from pleasures to seek great rewards from Allah (SWT). This holy month marks the day that the Creator of all, Allah (SWT) sent the Noble Quran to the last Prophet and Messenger - Muhammad (PBUH). The Noble Quran was revealed to the Prophet (PBUH) as a mercy to guide all mankind. "We have sent you forth as nothing but mercy to people of the whole world." (Al-Anbya 21:107)

Ramadan has many countless known and unknown benefits and blessings that are bestowed upon us from the All-wise, All-knowing God, Allah (SWT). Some of the few benefits of fasting are the health benefits for human beings. One of the health benefits of fasting is that it acts as a form of dieting and toxin-cleansing. As we know, intermittent fasting has become a health trend over the last few years. Some of the methods include fasting for 14-16 hours every day, and other methods include fasting twice a week. (Refer to www.healthline.com/nutrition/6-ways-to-do-intermittent-fasting#TOC_TITLE_HDR_4).

Fasting was prescribed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) more than 1400 years ago. The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) was asked about fasting on Mondays. He said, "Deeds of people are presented (to Allah) on Mondays and Thursdays. So I like that my deeds be presented to the Almighty Allah while I am fasting." (Reported by Al-Tirmidhi). This shows that Muslims shouldn't only fast for the health benefits, but should seek the good pleasure of Allah (SWT), and in return get abundant rewards In Sha'Allah.

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Opposition MPs vow no sessions without grilling

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Thirty opposition lawmakers yesterday decided to prevent Assembly sessions from taking place unless they are allowed to grill the Prime Minister. The decision came during a meeting of the 30 MPs on Saturday night to discuss the political developments in the country. All the lawmakers then

wrote on their Twitter accounts the same message that unless the Prime Minister takes the podium to be questioned, there will be no Assembly sessions. The Assembly is scheduled to hold its regular sessions tomorrow and Wednesday.

During the Assembly session on March 30, boycotted by the opposition, the Assembly decided to postpone grillings of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah until the end of 2022. Opposition MPs say the decision is illegal because the counting of votes was not done in accordance with the law and the postponement is against the constitution because grillings cannot be postponed for such lengthy periods.

"Tuesday's session is decisive. It is a session of 'be or not to be' in the defense of the constitution," leading

opposition MP Mohammad Al-Mutair said. MP Hasan Jowhar hosted the meeting, yesterday. He said the opposition has enough votes to pass a no-confidence motion against the health minister and replace him.

There were reports on social media that opposition MPs plan to occupy the front row of the National Assembly which is reserved for the Prime Minister and other Cabinet members to press for the Prime Minister to face the grilling.

Meanwhile, MP Osama Al-Shaheen said that he and nine other MPs submitted a request to convene a special session of the Assembly on June 6 to approve amendments to a law criminalizing normalization with Israel. The amendments will make it difficult for any possible dealings with the Jewish state.

Indonesia finds submarine; 53 crew dead

BALI: A missing Indonesian submarine has been found cracked apart on the seabed in waters off Bali, the military said yesterday, as it confirmed that all 53 crew perished in the disaster. Authorities said that they received signals from the location more than 800 meters (2,600 feet) deep early yesterday morning. They had used an underwater submarine rescue vehicle supplied by Singapore to get a visual

confirmation of the KRI Nanggala 402. More parts from the vessel were also retrieved, including an anchor and safety suits worn by crew members, they said.

"There were parts of KRI Nanggala 402 — it was broken into three pieces," said Navy Chief of Staff Yudo Margono. The discovery comes a day after the navy had first confirmed the retrieval of fragments from the submarine, including items from inside the vessel. They had also declared that it had sunk, effectively ending any chance of finding survivors. Among the earlier items recovered were a piece of the torpedo system and a bottle of grease used to

Continued on Page 2

Three killed as Iran fuel tanker attacked off Syria

BEIRUT: At least three people died when an Iranian tanker was attacked off Syria's coast Saturday, in the first assault of its kind since the war started a decade ago, a war monitor said. "At least

three Syrians were killed, including two members of the crew" in the attack that sparked a fire, said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

It was not clear who carried out the attack, the war monitor said. "We don't know if this was an Israeli attack," Abdel Rahman told AFP, adding that "the Iranian tanker came from Iran and was not far from Banias port". It was also not clear if a drone or a missile was used in the attack, the Observatory said.

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DENPASAR, Bali: Military chief Hadi Tjahjanto (front right) watches as his officer shows a diagram of the missing submarine during a press conference in Denpasar, Bali yesterday. — AFP



Smoke billowing from a tanker off the coast of the western Syrian city of Baniyas. —AFP

Local

Kuwait's Amir sends condolences to Iraqi President over hospital tragedy



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 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 yesterday sent a cable to Iraqi President Barham Saleh, voicing heartfelt and sincere condolences over the victims of the fire that erupted in Ibn Al-Khateeb Hospital in the Capital Baghdad and left a number of people dead or injured. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His

Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah voiced similar sentiments in two separate cables also addressed to the Iraqi president.

In other news, His Highness the Amir received His Highness the Crown Prince at Bayan Palace yesterday. His Highness the Amir also received National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, His

Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah. Furthermore, His Highness the Amir received Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Integrity Enhancement Abdullah Al-Roumi.

In the meantime, His Highness the Crown

Prince received Ghanem, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali and Roumi at Bayan Palace. Moreover, His Highness the Crown Prince received Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, and Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah. — KUNA

Kuwait Deputy FM, EU envoy discuss regional, int'l issues

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dhefeeri met with head of European Union Delegation to Kuwait Cristian Tudor yesterday and discussed regional and international developments, as well as bilateral ties. Dhefeeri also had similar discussions during a meeting with Italian Ambassador to Kuwait Carlo Baldocci yesterday. Assistant Foreign Minister for the Deputy Foreign Minister's office Ayham Al-Omar attended the meetings. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dhefeeri meets head of European Union Delegation to Kuwait Cristian Tudor. — KUNA photos



Deputy Foreign Minister Majdi Al-Dhefeeri meets Italian Ambassador to Kuwait Carlo Baldocci.

The benefits of Ramadan...

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Furthermore, there are numerous other health benefits for fasting. Allah (SWT) is the Creator of all and knows best about what is good for us, and some of the health benefits of fasting that we know of, prove that fasting is beneficial for human beings. Fasting has a positive effect on the whole body. It also boosts natural energy and develops the immune system. Moreover, there are certain foods that are recommended to be consumed during Ramadan that are not only nutritious and beneficial for the body, but also, facilitate this natural diet called fasting. An example of these recommendations are eating dates. Dates have been mentioned several times in the Noble Quran and also, Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said, "Indeed in dates there is a cure." (Muslim).

One of the main purposes of fasting is the feeling of sympathy for the poor. We all know that poor people struggle a lot with hunger in their lives. Therefore, when a person abstains from food and water while fasting, he/she will know how the poor people suffer and will most probably feel the need to help the poor and give charity. So, we can say that fasting in Ramadan makes a person grateful and it also encourages generosity.

Another one of the many virtues of Ramadan is that it teaches us self-control. A person that is fasting will naturally learn various valuable moral principles. Self-discipline, sacrifice, perseverance and anger-management are some of the various ethical ways of self-control that a fasting person achieves.

82 killed as fire engulfs COVID...

Continued from Page 1

Iraq's hospitals have been worn down by decades of conflict and poor investment, with shortages of medicines and hospital beds. But many also said negligence and endemic corruption were to blame for the deadly inferno.

"The tragedy at Ibn Al-Khatib is the result of years of erosion of state institutions by corruption and mismanagement," President Barham Saleh tweeted. The fire triggered outrage on social media, with a hashtag demanding the health minister be sacked trending on Twitter, a demand echoed by the human rights commission.

Baghdad governor Mohammed Jaber also called on the health ministry "to establish a commission of enquiry so that those who did not do their jobs may be brought to justice". The Iraqi Human Rights Commission denounced a "crime against patients exhausted by COVID-19 who put their lives in the hands of the health ministry and its institutions.

"Instead of being treated, (they) perished in flames," it added. Witnesses and doctors told AFP many bodies had yet to be identified, the remains too charred by the intense flames.

One of the victims, Ali Ibrahim, 52, had been treated for coronavirus at the Ibn Al-Khatib hospital and

Apart from all the aforesaid benefits of Ramadan, the most important virtues of Ramadan are the spiritual benefits. Ramadan is one of the most important months in Islam and it has been mentioned in the Noble Quran because of its merits for this life, as well as for the afterlife. The great virtue of Ramadan is the revelation of Quran in it. Allah (SWT) says in the noble Quran: "Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (Between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting, but if anyone is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed period (should be made up) by days later. Allah intends every facility for you; He does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period, and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance you will be grateful." (Al-Baqara 2:185)

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) talked about the importance of observing Ramadan and 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)

He (PBUH) also said, "The scriptures of Abraham (PBUH) were revealed on the first night of Ramadan. The Torah was revealed after six nights of Ramadan had passed. The Gospel was revealed after thirteen nights of Ramadan had passed. The Quran was revealed after twenty four nights of Ramadan had passed." (Musnad Ahmad 16536)

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

was buried by his family yesterday at Zafaraniya, a neighborhood near the hospital. "He had spent 12 days in hospital and was due to be discharged on Saturday evening after recovering. He was just waiting for the result of the last COVID-19 test," one of his relatives said.

Kadhemi also suspended the head of the health department in eastern Baghdad, the hospital director as well as those in charge of security and maintenance at the medical facility. All of them are being questioned, he said, adding that no one would be released "until those who have done wrong are brought to justice". He also pledged to submit the results of the investigation to the government within five days.

The UN's top representative in Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, expressed "shock" at the tragedy and called "for stronger protection measures to ensure that such a disaster cannot reoccur". Pope Francis, who paid a historic visit to Iraq in early March, called for "prayers" for all the victims of the fire.

On Wednesday, the number of detected COVID-19 cases in Iraq surpassed one million, the highest of any Arab state. The health ministry has recorded more than 15,000 deaths since the pandemic broke out last year, and has carried out around 40,000 tests daily from a population of 40 million.

Iraq rolled out its vaccination campaign last month and has received nearly 650,000 doses of different vaccines-the majority by donation or through the Covax scheme for low and middle income nations. Around 300,000 people had received at least one dose as of yesterday, the ministry said. — Agencies

Three killed as Iran fuel tanker...

Continued from Page 1

State news agency SANA, quoting the oil ministry, said the fire erupted after "what was believed to be an attack by a drone from the direction of Lebanese waters". The flames were later extinguished. In a report published last month that cited US and Middle East officials, the Wall Street Journal said Israel had targeted at least a dozen vessels bound for Syria and mostly carrying Iranian oil since late 2019.

Hundreds of Israeli air strikes have also struck Syria since the war began in 2011, mostly targeting Damascus regime allies from Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and Syrian government troops. The Banias oil refinery is located in the regime-controlled coastal province of Tartus.

"It's the first such attack on an oil tanker, but the Banias terminal has been targeted in the past," Abdel Rahman said. Early last year, Damascus said divers had planted explosives on offshore pipelines of the Banias refinery, but the damage had not halted operations. And in February 2020, four oil and gas sites in the central province of Homs were attacked by armed drones, sparking fires and causing material damage.

Indonesia finds submarine...

Continued from Page 1

lubricate periscopes. They also found a prayer mat commonly used in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation.

Warships, planes and hundreds of military personnel had led a frantic search for the submarine since it disappeared this week during training exercises, hoping for a miracle rescue before its known oxygen reserves ran out. But yesterday, Indonesian military head Hadi Tjahjanto confirmed there was no chance of finding any of the crew alive. "With deep sadness, I can say that all 53 personnel onboard have passed," he told reporters.

Earlier yesterday, the relatives of First Lieutenant Muhammad Imam Adi, a 29-year-old father of a young son, clung to hope. "My wish now is that my son and all the crew can be found," Adi's father Edy Sujianto said from his home on Java island. "My son had wanted to become a soldier since he was a child. That was his dream."

President Joko Widodo described the missing sailors as Indonesia's "best patriots". "All Indonesians convey their deep sadness over this incident, especially to the families of the submarine crew," he said. Authorities have not given an official explanation for the accident, but said that the submarine may have suffered a blackout and left its crew unable to resurface. They discounted an explosion, however, saying Saturday that the evidence suggested the submarine came apart as it was crushed by water pressure at depths of more than 800 meters (2,600 feet) — pressure much higher than the German-built Nanggala was built to withstand. "Submarine hulls

Saturday's attack comes after a Syrian officer was killed and three soldiers wounded Thursday in strikes launched by Israel, after a missile was fired towards a secretive nuclear site in the Jewish state. The Israeli army said at the time that a surface-to-air missile had been fired from Syria toward the southern Negev desert, where the Dimona nuclear reactor is located.

The exchange of fire came less than two weeks after Iran accused Israel of "terrorism" following an explosion at the Islamic republic's Natanz nuclear facility. Israel is considered the leading military power in the Middle East, and is widely believed to possess its sole nuclear arsenal.

It has never disclosed its atomic arsenal, but foreign experts say the Jewish state has between 100 to 300 nuclear warheads. There were no immediate reports of any casualties or damage on the Israeli side.

Israel has long sought to prevent bitter foe Iran from establishing itself in war-torn Syria. Before Syria's war, the country enjoyed relative energy autonomy, but production has plummeted during the war, pushing the government to rely on importing hydrocarbons. Western sanctions on oil shipping, as well as US punitive measures against Iran, have complicated these imports. Pre-war production was 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) in Syria. But it stood at just 89,000 bpd in 2020, Syria's oil minister said in February, of which up to 80,000 came from Kurdish areas outside government control. — AFP

are pressurized... but when they're breached then water would come flooding inside," said Wisnu Wardhana, a maritime expert at Indonesia's Sepuluh Nopember Institute of Technology. "Can you imagine if water with that kind of pressure hits people?"

Retired French vice-admiral Jean-Louis Vichot earlier told AFP that a submarine's steel shell could break "like a folding accordion" when it hits depths way beyond its limits.

Authorities have warned that any salvage operation would be risky and difficult in the deep waters. Neighboring Malaysia, as well as the United States, India and Australia, were among the nations helping in the search. Search vessels, reconnaissance aircraft and submarine rescue ships had been deployed to scour a zone of about 10 square nautical miles (34 square kilometers). The submarine — one of five in Indonesia's fleet — disappeared early Wednesday while it was scheduled to do live torpedo training exercises off Bali.

The crew asked for permission to dive. It lost contact shortly after. Later, search teams spotted an oil spill where the vessel was thought to have submerged, pointing to possible fuel-tank damage, and a catastrophic accident.

Authorities have said that the submarine — delivered to Indonesia in 1981 — was seaworthy. The model has been used by more than a dozen navies around the world. But investigators would look at the Indonesian submarine's age as a potential factor, analysts have said.

The disaster was among a string of fatal submarine accidents over the past few decades. Among the worst was the 2000 sinking of the Kursk, the pride of Russia's Northern Fleet. That submarine was on manoeuvres in the Barents Sea when it sank with the loss of all 118 aboard. An inquiry found a torpedo had exploded, detonating all the others. Most of its crew died instantly but some survived for several days before suffocating. —AFP

Local

DHAMAN provides healthcare services during partial curfew

KUWAIT: Health Assurance Hospitals Company (DHAMAN) reiterated its congratulations to all citizens and residents of Kuwait on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan, announcing an update in the working hours of its primary healthcare centers as DHAMAN continues providing a range of medical services during the partial curfew throughout this holy month.



Dr Fatema Bendhafari

DHAMAN noted that its Primary Healthcare Centers (PHCs) in Hawally and Farwaniya will receive patients in two shifts during daytimes and evenings. The first shift is from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm, while the second shift is from 7:30 pm to 12:30 am. As for DHAMAN Dhajej PHC, it will only be operational to receive patients during the daytime shift from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm.

Acting Manager of Medical Services at DHAMAN Dr Fatema Bendhafari explained that the services of these PHCs from Saturday to Thursday include family medicine, chronic diseases, dental services and other specialties related to integrated healthcare.

Bendhafari added that "Tatamman" service, which includes medical consultations by phone or video with a specialized doctor, remains available, as well as to the home visit service that is provided by highly qualified medical staff in a range of specialties and integrated medical services.

Bendhafari clarified that to accommodate the citizens and residents of Kuwait, medical consultations are provided in several languages at all centers, during home visits and remotely through "Tatamman" service.

Stressing the need to follow the various official guidelines related to partial curfew, DHAMAN called on all patients wishing to visit its PHCs during the evening, to obtain a medical permit via the link (curfew.paci.gov.kw/request/create) and choose the center to be visited in Hawally or Farwaniya, while making sure to confirm arrival at the center through the Curfew Permits application.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A photo showing a fishing pier with the city skyline seen in the background, taken by photographer Jobanpreet Singh (Instagram: @joban00010). To have your photo considered for Kuwait Times' Photo of the Day, send to local@KuwaitTimes.com or via direct message to Kuwait Times' Instagram account @kuwaittimes. Photos should be high resolution, with no processing or editing.

One million vaccine doses given in Kuwait

KUWAIT: More than one million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been given to people in Kuwait. The Ministry of Health have not confirmed the number of vaccinated people, Al-Jarida reported yesterday. Separately, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported that the COVID-19 vaccine center at the southern island of the Jaber Causeway is expected to open after Ramadan, with a daily capacity of up to 4,000 people a day.

The Health Ministry had announced on Saturday 1,206 coronavirus (COVID-19) infections, 1,497 recoveries and nine deaths. Health Ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad indicated that this brought the tallies of infections and recoveries to 265,404 and 248,633 respectively. Deaths stood at 1,511. He indicated that there were 219 patients at ICU due to COVID-19, while 15,260 cases are receiving regular treatment for coronavirus.

In other news, new domestic helpers recruited from India are included in the government's recent



KUWAIT: People arrive to receive a dose of COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine at the make-shift vaccination center at the Kuwait International Fairground in Mishref yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

decision to ban direct flights from India, the union of domestic helpers office's president Khaled Al-Dakhnan said in statements published by Al-Jarida Arabic daily yesterday. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation had suspended direct commercial flights with India at the recommendation of health authorities after the steep rise of coronavirus cases in the Asian giant.

The indefinite suspension took effect from Friday midnight. Passengers arriving directly from India are banned from entering Kuwait unless they have lived at least 14 days in a third country, a statement by the DGCA said. The ban exempts Kuwaiti citizens and their close relatives - spouses and children - and their domestic helpers. Air cargo flights will continue to operate normally, the statement said.

PAAET College of Nursing obtains ACEN academic accreditation

KUWAIT: The College of Nursing at the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) has obtained the academic accreditation for the bachelor of nursing program from the American Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), valid for five years ending in 2025. The Dean of the College, Dr Ali Al-Hajraf, said the College of Nursing is the first college of PAAET to obtain academic accreditation for all of its programs, as this great achievement serves the health

sector at the state level.

ACEN is considered one of the leading specialized institutions in the world in granting academic accreditation for nursing education programs, and it is one of the two institutions that obtained recognition from the US Department of Education to grant academic accreditation for nursing education programs, Hajraf said. This accreditation would develop students' skills and experiences before joining the labor market, he said, it will also help create a highly professionally qualified and creative human capital that enables them to provide distinguished nursing care that keeps pace with the continuous developments in the nursing profession. The accreditation includes the Bachelor of Nursing with its three options, Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of School Nursing and General Nursing Diploma program, Hajraf said. — 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

Rumaihiya 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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News in brief

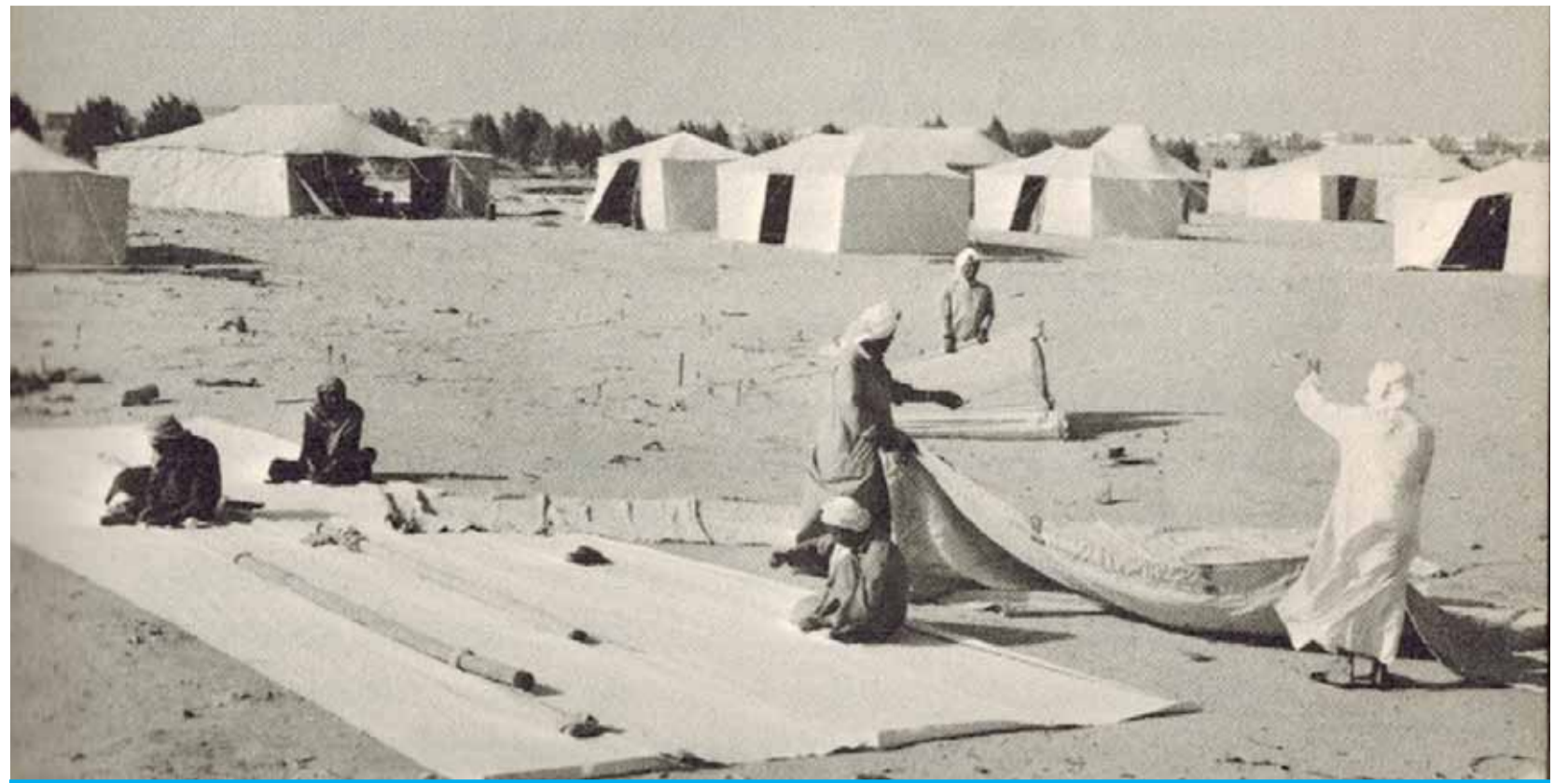
Amir congratulates
Benin president

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah sent a cable of congratulations yesterday to the newly-elected President of Benin Patrice Talon, who secured a second consecutive term in office. His Highness the Amir praised the strong bilateral relations between both nations, stressing the importance of boosting them in various fields. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables. — KUNA

Kuwait supports
Saudi ban

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Ministry expressed full support to Saudi Arabia decision to ban the entry of vegetables and fruits imports from Lebanon due to their exploitation by drug smugglers. In a statement, the Ministry stated the Saudi sovereign decision comes within the framework of the Kingdom's keenness to prevent illegal drugs from entering its lands and to protect Saudi citizens from it. The ministry concluded its statement by calling on Lebanese authorities to work to ensure that their exports are free of any prohibited materials that would subject their exports to bans and prohibitions. — KUNA

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: Tent makers in old Kuwait. Workers can be seen working tirelessly to complete making one of these tents, which are made specifically for sale to people who intend to go for 'hajj' pilgrimage. (Source: 'Kuwait Miracle on the Desert' by David Cooke, New York, 1970. Prepared by: Mahmoud Aakaria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

Ramadan Diwaniya

Pakistan, Kuwait very proactive in
addressing the pandemic: Ambassador

'Our Ramadan celebrations are almost 99 percent similar'

By Ben Garcia

Pakistani Ambassador to Kuwait Syed Sajjad Haider.

KUWAIT: Various ambassadors in Kuwait were interviewed by Kuwait Times to learn more about their local traditions and culture during Ramadan. We also asked about the current coronavirus situation in their respective countries and how they are handling and reacting to this pandemic. The following are excerpts from Kuwait Times' interview with

Kuwait Times: We are in the time of a pandemic now. What are your orders to the Pakistani people in Kuwait with regards to following the local laws of the host country? What is the current situation of your people in Kuwait and back in Pakistan right now?

Syed Sajjad Haider: Both governments have been very proactive in addressing the pandemic. We both implemented several series of preventive measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus. We at the embassy advised our nationals to follow the laws of Kuwait and whatever is mandated by the authorities. We announced it on social media and even on radio and television to appeal to our people. We posted it on government pages, and I am glad that our people have been religiously showing respect to all laws and norms here.

If the government says lockdown, if curfew is implemented, we follow. We respect all laws related to the pandemic and all laws that are implemented. Since last year, we have always been guided by local laws and orders. Similarly, for our working hours, work from home or limiting contacts with people - we also implement that. We also implement social distancing and wearing of facemasks all the time in public, and gatherings are also prohibited.

We have had several deaths in Kuwait because of coronavirus, which is due to the unavoidable circumstances. We are all facing the same threat. That is why we appeal to our people to always follow the rules and avoid close contact with people they don't know.

In Pakistan, we have several challenges - from the number of people to vaccines. But we are glad that we earned the praise of several international bodies because we locked down some places only and not the entire country. Food supplies are okay and we have not experienced shortages of anything. Cases in Pakistan right now are surging, but not as compared to the number of cases in other countries. Challenges are there, but we already have vaccines and people are getting them. Our population is almost 200 million, so definitely there are more cases compared to Kuwait and other countries.

Ramadan celebrations

Kuwait Times: How will Ramadan celebrations differ this year for your embassy and people?

Haider: Our celebrations are almost 99 percent similar. There are some differences in timings and traditions, but mostly we are the same in practice and observance. The very important and probably humorous thing in Ramadan is that we all plan to reduce our weight during the fasting period, but we all gain additional weight and end up eating a lot. We tend to eat more once the fasting time is over.

Pakistan is a populous country, while Kuwait is not. In Pakistan, 96 percent of the population is Muslim. I think it's the same here in Kuwait, although there are expats and they have their own religions. Kuwait and Pakistan have similarities in terms of generosity. Kuwait is recognized as a humanitarian champion, but we do a lot of charity as well. According to estimates, we have given more than \$75 billion in charity.

Ramadan is a purely religious activity between human beings and Allah. Ramadan is said to be an interaction between living beings and God. Fasting is between me and my God - nobody else. Who knows whether you are fasting? You are in the comfort of your home. You can tell me you are fasting but are actually not. But we put our trust in God. During the holy month of Ramadan, we try to pray a lot, read the Holy Quran, take care of all the people among us and try to follow the teachings of our Prophet (PBUH). Also, we are very irritable during the day (because of not eating), but it's okay. The Holy Quran is not for Muslims alone - it is for the whole of mankind.



KUWAIT: Pakistani Ambassador to Kuwait Syed Sajjad Haider speaks to Kuwait Times.
— Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait Times: Tell us about cultural and religious celebrations in Kuwait.

Haider: Ramadan is divided into three separate phases. In the beginning, we will be seeking Allah's mercy for our sins; in the middle part, we seek Allah's forgiveness and in the third part we pray to God to save us from the hellfire. This we all agree on. Also, we believe in the last 10 days of Ramadan is Lailatulqadr (night of destiny). We don't know what Allah has in store for us. The benefits granted to Muslims for praying regularly and visiting the mosque are unlimited. The month of Ramadan is also a month of charity. Many of us give and share something. We also give zakat, equivalent to 2.5 percent of our wealth.

Community activities

Kuwait Times: Are there any activities organized by the embassy during Ramadan and Eid?

Haider: Certainly, when we are back to normal, we will have several community activities during Ramadan and Eid. Breaking the fast is a great time to be with the community members. We break the fast by eating dates, water and laban. We can also break the fast with juice or syrup. Then we offer Maghrib prayers. After that, we have the main course. Then we read the Holy Quran and talk over cups of tea until taraweeh prayers.

This is now my second year in Kuwait as ambassador. I started when the pandemic was raging all over the world. Normal activities at the embassy include parties for the community to celebrate with them. We want to cook and serve traditional foods, either by the community or by catering services. We want to invite community leaders and Pakistani students to meet and know them. But this won't happen as everything is still prohibited.

During Ramadan, in far-flung provinces, we still have people who rise early to beat the drums to wake people up for prayers. After Ramadan, they will ask people for some money for waking them up. It's a tradition in some areas. Some people prefer to go to the mosque to break the fast. But the fast can be broken at home or even at work.

Kuwait Times: What is your special and favorite food during Ramadan?

Haider: All food is special for me, but we like samosas the most. It's a food that is normally on the tables of most Pakistani families. I prefer to eat rice with curry, either chicken or mutton. We have several traditional and famous dishes like nihari, karahi and korma; sweets like halwa puri, falooda, Karachi halwa, kalakand and Umm Ali, along with dates and nuts. The dishes are almost similar to traditional Indian food, as we share a similar cultural heritage. We also eat a lot during the three days of Eid.

Kuwait Times: Do you visit cemeteries during Ramadan or Eid?

Haider: We can visit the graves of departed family members any time we want. I visit the graves of my parents often, knowing that one day, we shall all be resting there too. We have to be constantly reminded that we are all mortals and one day we will also rest like them.

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

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Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

14- Does swallowing saliva invalidate the fast?

- A. It does not invalidate it at all
- B. It invalidates it if the fasting person swallows it intentionally
- C. Swallowing a lot of it invalidates the fast while a little of it does not affect it

Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

Date :
Name :
Civil ID :
Tel :
Email :

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Quiet, calm and going big: Joe Biden's first 100 days

New Delhi extends lockdown as India cases hit new record

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Yemen rebels advance on Marib

Fierce fighting leaves at least 65 dead over the past two days

DUBAI: Yemen's Houthi rebels have made important gains in the battle for the government's last northern stronghold, advancing close to the center of Marib city despite heavy casualties, military sources said yesterday.

The rebels have taken full control of the north-west Kassara battlefield and made progress on western frontlines despite airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition which backs Yemen's government, the loyalist military sources said. Marib and its surrounding oil fields make up the last significant pocket of government-held territory in the north, the rest of which is under rebel control, including the capital Sanaa. Fierce fighting has left at least 65 dead over the past two days alone, including some 26 loyalist personnel, among them four officers, the government sources told AFP. The Iran-backed Houthis rarely disclose their own losses.

With the Houthis taking control of the Kassara front, the battles have moved to the Al-Mil area, which is a mere six kilometers (four miles) from the center of Marib and its population centers, they said. However, mountains around Al-Mil remain a formidable barrier to the rebels who launched their fierce campaign for Marib city in February. The government sources said the Houthis had poured in hundreds of reinforcements in recent days to achieve the gains, resorting to motorbikes after the coalition targeted their military vehicles.

Camps overflowing

The loss of Marib would be a major blow for the Yemeni government and for Saudi Arabia which has

supported its militarily since March 2015, after the rebels captured Sanaa. Observers say the Houthis are intent on capturing the city in order to gain leverage before entering into any negotiations with the government, amid a US push to revive peace talks.

The city's fall could also lead to a humanitarian disaster, as vast numbers of civilians displaced from fighting elsewhere have sought refuge in the area. Around 140 camps have sprung up in the surrounding desert to provide basic shelter for up to two million displaced, according to the Yemeni government. Hundreds of combatants have been killed since the large-scale offensive began, with the toll fuelled by wave after wave of Houthi fighters arriving on frontlines around the city.

A government commander told AFP in Marib earlier this month that the Houthis are deploying young recruits, many of them children, with the goal of wearing out loyalist forces and depleting their ammunition. These recruits are used in first wave attacks, followed by a more lethal wave of experienced Houthi fighters under the cover of constant shelling, the commander said of a rebel strategy that is heaping pressure on loyalist forces. 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, makeshift settlements are overflowing and camp residents say they have repeatedly come under Houthi shelling. The rebels have also stepped up missile and drone strikes against neighboring Saudi Arabia in recent



Yemenis displaced by the conflict in the country live in temporary mountain dwellings in the northwestern Al-Azhour range near the Saudi border. — AFP

months, demanding the opening of Yemen's airspace and ports. They have rejected a Saudi proposal for a ceasefire. The US administration of President Joe

Biden is mounting a renewed push to end the conflict, warning that the suffering will only end when a political solution is found. —AFP

Cyprus rivals head to Geneva for peace talks

NICOSIA: Four years after their last peace talks failed, rival Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders meet in Geneva next week to explore elusive "common ground" on the divided Mediterranean island.

"We go to Geneva... steadfastly committed to resuming negotiations for reunifying Cyprus in a bizonal bi-communal federation," in line with UN resolutions, international and EU law, said Nikos Christodoulides, foreign minister of the Greek Cypriot-run Republic of Cyprus, an EU member.

"There is no common ground... the issue is 'one island, two states'," Tahsin Ertugruloğlu, his counterpart in the internationally-unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), told AFP.

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey occupied its northern third in response to a coup orchestrated by a military junta that sought to annex the island to Greece. On Saturday, three days before the start of the talks, Cypriots on both sides of the divide marched through the streets of the capital calling for a solution to the issue, some holding placards calling for peace and reunification.

The United Nations, whose peacekeepers have been on the ground ever since intercommunal clashes in December 1963-January 1964, is trying to mediate a settlement between the two entrenched



NICOSIA: Cypriot demonstrators gesture during a rally in the capital Nicosia, on the Turkish-speaking side in the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC) of the divided island, Saturday. — AFP

sides. Its mandate was expanded after the 1974 conflict, and to this day a buffer zone runs across the island, including through Nicosia-making the city the world's last divided capital.

'Changed the paradigm'

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who will oversee the Geneva talks on April 27-29, wants to "show that he has exhausted all options", said Kemal Baykalli, a Turkish Cypriot analyst and UniteCyprusNow activist. Guterres "needs to hear officially that the two sides will not find an agreement within the framework currently proposed", which is based on reunification through a federa-

tion, he said. Talks held in July 2017 in Crans-Montana in Switzerland on the basis of reunification under the roof of a federal state failed, hitting roadblocks on the withdrawal of tens of thousands of Turkish troops and Ankara's status as a guarantor power. Turkey has also been invited to Geneva, along with Greece and Britain, the two other guarantors of the island's 1960 independence from London. The European Union's attendance has been strongly opposed by Ankara, and the Cyprus Mail newspaper quoted a source yesterday saying that the bloc would send only two low level officials, who would not participate directly or even formally observe. —AFP

Albania goes to polls after a bitter campaign

TIRANA: Albanians streamed into polling stations yesterday for a parliamentary election, following a bitter campaign marred by a gunfight between rival supporters that drew international concern. Socialist Prime Minister Edi Rama is seeking a third term but faces a challenge from a dozen parties united behind the main opposition Democrats, the candidates striking a conciliatory tone on election day after weeks of hurling insults at each other.

The vote is seen as crucial to Albania's hopes of joining the European Union and all parties are promising the reforms demanded by the bloc, which agreed to open formal membership talks last year. But many voters are jaded with a political culture where each side routinely accuses the other of cheating and corruption.

"Democracy is good, I don't blame democracy, but I do blame the political class-it fights only for itself, never for us," Kosta Raxha, an 80-year-old retiree, told AFP. Opinion polls suggested the Socialists had a lead over their rivals but commentators said a high number of undecided voters made predictions tricky.

'Historic day'

The country of 2.8 million people is among the poorest in Europe and the coronavirus pandemic has made matters worse, with the vital tourism sector suffering a huge slump. Rama, an artist and former basketball player, is banking on a mass vaccination campaign to boost his popularity, promising that 500,000 Albanians will be inoculated by the end of May. He has also promised to boost tourism and repair damage from a 2019 quake that left thousands without homes, while also pleading for the election day to pass peacefully.



TIRANA: Albanian opposition Democratic Party leader Lulzim Basha casts his vote during Parliamentary elections at a polling station in Tirana yesterday. — AFP

"We should never forget that we are all one big family," said Rama after he voted.

His opponents say they will speed up the push for EU membership and revive the economy with help for small businesses. After casting his ballot, Democrat leader Lulzim Basha called for a huge turnout and told reporters: "It is a historic day, a day when all Albanians can express themselves."

Both the main contenders traded barbs throughout the campaign, with Basha accusing his rival of vote-rigging and corruption and Rama belittling his opponent as a puppet of party veterans and President Ilir Meta.

The president, an arch-enemy of Rama whose wife runs a smaller party allied to the Democrats, said "pitchforks" would be ready on Sunday in case the Socialists attempted to tamper with the votes-prompting an unimpressed reaction from the US. "It is unacceptable for anyone to threaten that citizens will take up 'pitchforks'... These threats deserve condemnation," US envoy Yuri Kim wrote on Twitter. The rivalry between the two parties turned deadly in the final week of the campaign, when a row over alleged vote-buying descended into a gunfight in a city near the capital, leaving one Socialist supporter dead and four other people injured. — AFP

Turkey rages at US recognition of Armenia genocide

ISTANBUL: Turkey accused the United States of trying to rewrite history, resoundingly rejecting US President Joe Biden's decision to formally recognize the Armenian genocide. From the streets of Istanbul to the halls of power, Turks were united in anger at Biden's decision to side with Armenia, France, Germany, Russia and numerous other countries in their interpretation of the horrific World War I events.

"Words cannot change or rewrite history," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu tweeted moments after Biden announced his decision. "We will not take lessons from anyone on our history."

The Turkish foreign ministry later summoned US Ambassador David Satterfield to express its displeasure, noting that Biden's decision caused "a wound in relations that is difficult to repair," the Anadolu state news agency reported. Biden became the first US president to use the word genocide in a customary statement on the anniversary of the 1915 to 1917 massacre, which happened as the Ottoman Empire unraveled. Trying to soften the inevitable blow to the pride of the strategic NATO ally, Biden on Friday placed the first phone call since his election to Erdogan.

The two leaders agreed to meet on the sidelines of a NATO summit in June, and Erdogan—who has spent his 18 years in power trying to fight the US decision-carefully calibrated the weight of his response. In a message to the Armenian patriarch in Istanbul, Erdogan accused "third parties" of trying to politicize the century-old debate.

"Nobody benefits from the debates-which should be held by historians-being politicised by third parties and becoming an instrument of interference in our country," Erdogan wrote.

On a more conciliatory note, Erdogan said Turkey was "ready to develop our relations with Armenia based on good neighborhood and mutual respect".

'Very bad step'

But the message from Cavusoglu's foreign ministry was strident. "We reject and denounce in the strongest terms the statement of the president of the US regarding the events of 1915 made under the pressure of radical Armenian circles and anti-Turkey groups," the foreign ministry said in a separate statement. "It is clear that the said statement does not have a scholarly and legal basis, nor is it supported by any evidence," it said.

The Armenians, supported by many historians and scholars, say 1.5 million of their people died in a genocide committed under the Ottoman Empire, which was fighting tsarist Russia in areas that include present-day Armenia. Turkey accepts that both Armenians and Turks died in huge numbers during World War I, but vehemently denies there was a deliberate policy of genocide—a term that had not been legally defined at the time.

Turkey puts the Armenian death toll at around 300,000. —AFP

Biden's first foreign trip to highlight US-Transatlantic ties

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's first foreign trip will be to the G7 summit in Britain this June, followed by NATO and EU summits in Brussels, the White House said Friday. His first overseas travel will "highlight his commitment to restoring our alliances, revitalizing the Transatlantic relationship, and working in close cooperation with our allies and multilateral partners to address global challenges and better secure America's interests," Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

After Donald Trump downgraded historic US ties to European and Asian allies, Biden has stressed the need to rebuild traditional alliances and put Washington back at the center of multilateral groups like the G7. The White House did not say whether Biden would also seek to include a potential summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the trip. He has offered to meet the Kremlin leader in a third country to try and stabilize increasingly tense US-Russian relations.

The G7 summit will run from June 11-13 in Cornwall, England. Psaki said Biden will "reinforce our commitment to multilateralism, work to advance key US policy priorities on public health, economic recovery, and climate change, and demonstrate solidarity and shared values among major democracies." The G7 will also provide an opportunity for bilateral talks with other G7 leaders, including the host, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the White House said. —AFP

International

Quiet, calm and going big: Joe Biden's first 100 days

Performance wins Biden a 59% approval rating: Poll

WASHINGTON: The daily (hourly) White House melodrama of the Trump era is history, but there has been nothing quiet about Joe Biden's 100 days rush to transform the country he inherited. Biden will deliver a primetime address to a joint session of Congress Wednesday-the eve of his first 100 days mark-with ambitions to be one of the most consequential presidents since Franklin Roosevelt and the Great Depression.

At 78, he was the oldest man ever to take the job. And facing the deadliest reported COVID-19 outbreak in the world, a badly shaken economy, and toxic divisions in the wake of four years of Donald Trump, the incoming Democrat had a mountain to climb. But three months on, he has surprised many with his discipline, his hard negotiating edge, and above all hunger, as he puts it, to "go big". It's a performance that according to the latest Pew poll wins Biden a 59 percent approval rating-well above anything Trump ever scored.

Going big, going now

Biden vowed to "heal" America and with a COVID vaccine program that last week recorded its 200th million shot, he's fulfilling the promise literally. The \$1.9 trillion stimulus American Rescue Plan that Biden's party rammed through Congress in March likewise injected money into every corner of the COVID-battered economy. A post-pandemic boom is widely expected. Now Biden's pitching another splurge, a \$2 trillion-plus American Jobs Plan which would revamp US infrastructure in almost every way, from traditional roads and bridges to broad-

band internet and electric car development. Next? That would be the American Families Plan, costing at least another \$1 trillion, to fund child care and education. Republican politicians complain that Biden has unleashed an avalanche of socialism. However, polls show their voters are far more supportive of Biden, allowing him to claim he's making good on promises to rule in a bipartisan fashion.

Global reach

Given a chance, Biden would like to change the rest of the planet's fate too. Entering the White House, Biden brought the United States back into the Paris climate accords, which Trump had ditched, and last week he went further, convening a 40-nation summit where he announced a doubling of US targets for greenhouse gas reductions.

Everywhere else on foreign policy, he's moving quickly. Allies are being reassured that "America is back." Adversaries are being reassessed, with China and Russia classified as frenemies who must be vigorously opposed-except on strategic issues where cooperation is just as important. Proving he can take decisive and perhaps risky action, Biden reportedly overruled top generals to set a firm date of September 11 for the final, complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. And on Saturday he broke decades of US equivocation by openly recognizing the mass killing of Armenians a century ago as genocide-a categorization that infuriates Turkey.

Back to normal?

Perhaps more than anything, Biden was hired by



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden participates in the virtual Leaders' Summit on Climate Session 5: The Economic Opportunities of Climate Action from the White House in Washington, DC, as US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg (left) looks on. President Joe Biden has hit some big targets in 100 days, starting with an epic effort to pull the United States from its COVID-19 nightmare, but headaches lie ahead. — AFP

exhausted voters to make America normal again. Or even boring. And on that, he has delivered. Gone is rule-by-tweet. Gone is the swearing during presidential speeches. Gone is the daily insulting of the media or belittling of critics. Gone are the cult-of-personality style rallies. Still, a glimpse at Washington's Capitol when Biden gives his prime-time address Wednesday will be enough to remind that the country is still far from really normal.

Lingering nervousness in the aftermath of the unprecedented January 6 riot by Trump supporters means the temple of US democracy remains under a severe lockdown. And continued threat from the coronavirus means Biden will only be addressing a thinned out crowd, far from the high-energy gathering that usually greets presidents on the big occasion. "It will not look like or feel like, in many ways, what past joint addresses have," Press Secretary Jen Psaki said. — AFP

Kremlin aide says Putin-Biden summit possible

MOSXCOW: A top aide to Vladimir Putin said yesterday that a possible summit between the Russian leader and his US counterpart Joe Biden could take place in June. Biden earlier this month offered a meeting between the two leaders in a neutral country, as tensions between Russia and the West escalated sharply over the conflict in Ukraine, new sanctions on Moscow and the health of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

The Kremlin has said it is still considering the offer, but yesterday, Putin's top foreign policy aide, Yuri Ushakov, said that planning is underway. "June is being named, there are even concrete dates," Ushakov said on state-run television channel Rossiya-1.

On the same show, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov repeated a statement by his ministry earlier this month that the summit offer "was received positively and is currently under consideration". The White House on Friday said that in June Biden would be attending the G7 summit in Britain and the NATO and EU summits in Brussels, but it did not say whether Biden would also seek to include a potential summit with Putin during the trip.

Austria and Finland have expressed interest in hosting a possible meeting between the two leaders. Tensions between Moscow and Washington have cooled since Friday, with Russia beginning to withdraw its armed forces that had been on drills near Ukraine and Navalny ending his hunger strike. The military drills and Russia's massing of troops on Ukraine's northern and eastern borders as well as on the Crimean peninsula it annexed in 2014 had sparked alarm in the West and calls by Biden for Moscow to back down. — AFP

Moroccan hunger strike journalists in 'danger': Families

CASABLANCA, Morocco: The health of two jailed Moroccan journalists on hunger strike for over two weeks demanding to be provisionally released is deteriorating rapidly, their families warned Saturday. Omar Radi and Soulaïmane Raissouni began their hunger strike earlier this month, having been held in detention for months awaiting a verdict on their cases. "Soulaïmane's life, like that of Omar Radi, is in danger," Raissouni's wife, Khoulood Mokhtari, said. "Their health is deteriorating day by day."

She said her husband had lost 22 kilos (15 pounds) since his arrest, "including seven this week." During a gathering of supporters in Casablanca, Radi's family expressed concern about the "serious consequences" of the hunger strike on his health. The judiciary has repeatedly turned down appeals to provisionally release Radi, 34, who has been held for eight months, and Raissouni, 48, detained 10 months ago in a separate case. Radi, known for his human rights work, was placed in pre-trial detention in July charged with receiving foreign funds for the purpose of harming "state security", the justice ministry said at the time. He is also accused separately of rape. He denies all charges. — AFP

Immigration thrust a new facet to Bush reputation

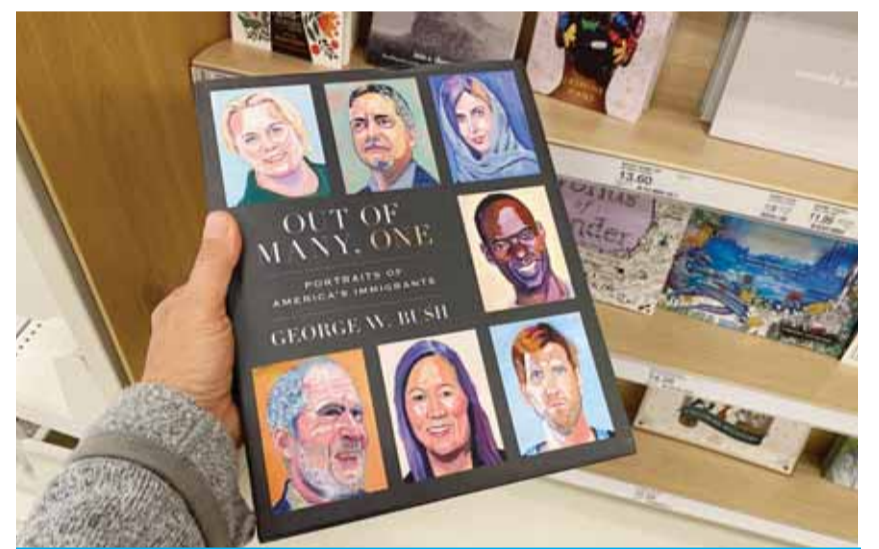
WASHINGTON: Out of office for a dozen years and still castigated for his "war on terror," former US president George W Bush has resurfaced as a passionate immigration advocate just as his Republican Party careens in the opposite direction. The 74-year-old Texan, whose disastrous invasion of Iraq and failure to implement immigration reform helped give rise to Donald Trump, is enjoying a resurgence of sorts in the aftermath of Trump's erratic tenure. US troops in Afghanistan, the "forever war" of Bush's presidency, now face a September pullout under Democratic President Joe Biden.

With Bush nostalgia evident, the 43rd president who normally lays low has released "Out of Many, One," fea-

turing 43 of his own oil paintings of immigrants he has come to know. In a Washington Post op-ed column last week Bush said he compiled the book of portraits of immigrants who have embraced their adopted country as a way to help lower the temperature and "humanize the debate on immigration" in America.

But the man who once served as governor from a state on the front lines of the political fight over border security also unleashed fierce criticism of his own party and its antagonistic anti-immigrant stance. The GOP has become "isolationist, protectionist, and to a certain extent nativist," Bush said this week in an NBC Today interview. Bush supports a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented workers if they pay back taxes and have a clean background check. He advocates for visa reform and is backing the DACA program, which offers protection from deportation and permission to work for people who arrived without papers as children.

Such positions have put Bush at odds with his party's base, and align more with the progressive immigra-



LOS ANGELES: Former US President George W Bush's book of portraits "Out of Many, One". Out of office for a dozen years and still castigated for his "war on terror," former US president George W Bush has resurfaced as a passionate immigration advocate just as his party careens in the opposite direction. — AFP

tion ideals of Democrats-many of whom were fierce enemies of Bush when he was commander in chief. Bush has made rare mention of Trump, who exploited their party's worst xenophobic impulses. And Bush

acknowledged his own views-"border enforcement with a compassionate touch," he said-are not likely to change minds in the most inflexible quarters. "I'm just an old guy they put out to pasture," he observed. — AFP

Armenia PM quits to enable snap polls

YEREVAN: Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan resigned yesterday while staying on in a caretaker capacity, setting the stage for a June 20 parliamentary election aimed at defusing a protracted political crisis. Pashinyan has faced calls to stand down since his November signing of a Russian-brokered peace agreement with Azerbaijan that ended a war between the two arch-foes for control of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

"I am resigning from my post as prime minister today" to hold the snap vote on June 20, he said in an announcement broadcast on his Facebook page. "I am returning to the citizens of Armenia the power they gave me, so that they decide the government's fate through free and fair elections," he said.

After Pashinyan announced his

resignation, all members of his cabinet handed in their own resignations, as required by Armenian law. Pashinyan said he would continue to fulfil his duties as head of the interim government before the vote, and that he would stand as a candidate for prime minister.

The move comes a day after Joe Biden became the first US president to recognize the 1915 killings of Armenians by Ottoman forces as genocide, in a landmark move that drew praise from Pashinyan and condemnation from Turkey's ally Azerbaijan. Ex-Soviet Armenia has been embroiled in a political crisis in the wake of its humiliating defeat to Azerbaijan, which was backed by Turkey during the conflict.

The defeat spurred mass protests in the impoverished tiny Caucasus nation on the borders of Turkey and Iran, which came to a head in February after Pashinyan accused Armenia's top military official of staging a coup. To defuse the crisis, Pashinyan last month announced the snap election, which was welcomed by prominent members of the opposition.



YEREVAN: Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan arrives to address the nation in Yerevan. Pashinyan announced yesterday his resignation while retaining interim duties formalizing a parliamentary vote to be held June 20. — AFP

Clinging to power

Fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh broke out in September and saw Azerbaijan's better-equipped army make steady gains against Armenia's military, which uses ageing Soviet-era hardware. The six weeks of fighting claimed around 6,000 lives and saw Armenia cede swathes of territory to Azerbaijan under the peace deal signed by Pashinyan. Pashinyan has insisted he handled the war correctly, saying he had no choice but to con-

cede or see his country's forces suffer even bigger losses and that snap polls were the best way to end the post-war political stalemate.

Analysts say Pashinyan will likely retain his grip on power after the June 20 election. His Civil Contract party "may not garner more than 50 percent of the vote needed to form new cabinet, but would retain a parliamentary majority in coalition" with other parties, political analyst Stepan Grigoryan said. — AFP

Morocco summons Spain envoy over Polisario leader

RABAT: Morocco summoned the Spanish ambassador Saturday in "exasperation" after the leader of the Western Saharan independence movement was allowed into Spain for medical care, an official source told AFP. The Spanish foreign ministry said Thursday that Brahim Ghali, who heads the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, is being treated for Covid-19 and had been transferred to Spain for "strictly humanitarian reasons".

"This will not obstruct or trouble the excellent relations Spain has with Morocco," Spanish foreign minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya said at a press conference Friday. But her counterpart Nasser

Bourita expressed Morocco's "incomprehension and exasperation" and "demanded an explanation" from Spain's ambassador, a Moroccan official told AFP late Saturday.

The status of Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony which the United Nations classifies as a "non-self-governing territory", has for decades pitted Morocco against the Polisario, who demand a referendum on an independent state. Ghali, who is in his seventies, is recovering well, according to the movement. On Saturday a group of refugees appealed to the Spanish authorities to arrest him, in a video published by Moroccan media.

They allege that he is responsible for human rights crimes carried out at a camp for refugees from Western Sahara in the town of Tindouf in neighboring Algeria run by the Polisario. Human Rights Watch in 2014 published a report alleging that residents of several Polisario-run camps around Tindouf faced curbs on some rights, pointing to "credible allegations" of harassment of critics.

The Polisario fought a war of independence with Morocco from 1975 to 1991 and its leaders proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in February 1976. A war with the Polisario ensued, ending in 1991 with a UN-brokered ceasefire. Morocco has offered autonomy but maintains the territory is a sovereign part of the kingdom. Tensions rose sharply in November 2020 after Rabat deployed the army to reopen the kingdom's only highway into West Africa, which had been blocked by the Polisario, who argued it was built in violation of the UN truce deal.

The two sides have since exchanged regular fire along the demarcation line, though claims are difficult to independently verify in the hard-to-access area. The Polisario Front announced earlier this month that its police chief Addah Al-Bendir was killed in the field, in an attack that has been reported as a possible first ever drone strike by the Moroccan military in the contested territory. — AFP

International

New Delhi extends lockdown as India cases hit new record

PM says India had been shaken by a 'storm', urges people to get vaccinated

NEW DELHI: India's capital New Delhi yesterday extended its lockdown as the country's COVID-19 crisis grew with infections and deaths hitting record highs. The announcement came as the healthcare system struggled to cope with the huge surge, with reports of severe oxygen and medicine shortages and patients' families pleading for help on social media.

The vast nation of 1.3 billion people recorded 349,691 fresh cases and 2,767 deaths in the last 24 hours—the highest since the start of the pandemic. The northern megacity-home to 20 million people and the worst-hit in India—had imposed a week-long lockdown on Monday.

"We have decided to extend the lockdown by one week," Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said. "The havoc of corona(virus) continues and there is no respite. Everyone is in favor of extending the lockdown." Delhi on Saturday reported just over 24,000 new cases—with more than one-quarter of those tested returning positive results—and a record-high 357 deaths. The country has administered almost 141 million vaccine shots so far, but experts say the mass inoculation program needs to be significantly stepped up to combat the worsening outbreak. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a monthly radio address yesterday that India had been shaken by a "storm", and called on people to get vaccinated and not "get swayed by any rumor about the vaccines".

There's been growing criticism of Modi's government over allegations it was caught underprepared ahead of the surge. Yesterday, Twitter confirmed it withheld dozens of tweets critical of the unfolding crisis at the request of the Indian government. The social media giant said the tweets were blocked in India after a legal demand from New Delhi, months after similar action was taken against comments critical of the government's new

agriculture laws that sparked violent protests.

Some tweets included comments, including from regional opposition lawmakers, about the overwhelmed healthcare system.

'Watched him die'

In the last seven days, India has recorded more than two million cases—an increase of 58 percent on the previous week, according to data compiled by AFP. Indian-administered Kashmir on Saturday became the latest region to impose curbs on movement and activities as it announced a weekend lockdown. Vinod K Paul, a member of the government advisory body NITI Aayog, warned in a presentation to the prime minister and state leaders on Friday that daily cases could rise to as high as half a million by mid-May.

"(The) number of deaths may increase due to lack of treatment facilities," the Indian Express reported Sunday, citing the presentation. Numerous reports have emerged in badly affected regions of some patients dying even before they were admitted to hospitals.

"He was gasping for air, we removed his face mask and he was crying and saying 'save me, please save me'," Mohan Sharma, 17, said of his father, who died in a queue outside a northeast Delhi hospital. "But I could do nothing. I just watched him die," Sharma said.

Boosting oxygen supplies

The government has stepped up its efforts to provide oxygen supplies through special trains and airlifts of containers from other countries including Germany, Singapore and Saudi Arabia. More than 500 oxygen-generation plants were also to be set up in government hospitals, the health ministry said yesterday. Businesses and entrepreneurs have said they



CHENNAI: A partially deserted road is seen during the Sunday lockdown imposed as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus in Chennai yesterday. —AFP

would pitch in as well.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Sunday tweeted that the administration was "working closely with our partners in the Indian government".

"We will rapidly deploy additional support to the people of India and India's health care heroes," he added. Arch-foe Pakistan offered medical equipment and supplies after Prime Minister Imran

Khan tweeted prayers for a "speedy recovery".

The neighboring country is also struggling with the virus and yesterday reported 157 deaths in the previous 24 hours—the highest since the start of the pandemic. Sri Lanka passed 100,000 cases yesterday, while the tiny Himalayan nation of Bhutan, which has vaccinated more than half of its population with first vaccine shots, has reported 1,000 overall infections. —AFP

Myanmar shadow govt hails ASEAN call to end violence

YANGON: Myanmar's shadow government of ousted lawmakers has welcomed a call by Southeast Asian leaders for an end to "military violence" after their crisis talks in Jakarta with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing. The general attended a high-level summit Saturday with leaders from the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to discuss Myanmar's mounting crisis.

Since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a February 1 coup, Myanmar has been in an uproar with near-daily protests and a nationwide civil disobedience movement. Security forces have deployed live ammunition to quell the uprising, killing more than 740 people in brutal crackdowns, according to local monitoring group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

The ASEAN meeting produced a consensus that there would be "an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar", the bloc said Saturday. It added that ASEAN will also have a special envoy to "facilitate mediation" between all parties, and this representative will be able to travel to Myanmar.

But while they "heard calls for the release of all political prisoners", a commitment to free them was not included in the consensus statement. A spokesperson from the shadow government—known as the National Unity Government (NUG) — on Saturday said ASEAN's statement was "encouraging news".

"We look forward to firm action by ASEAN to follow up its decisions and restore our democracy and freedom for our people and for the region," said Dr Sasa, the NUG's minister of international cooperation, who is currently in hiding with the rest of his fellow lawmakers.

The lawmakers—most of whom were part of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party—are wanted for high treason by the junta. Overnight, European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the bloc will continue to call for the release of political prisoners.



A protester throwing red paint onto a welcome sign for Myingyan town, during a 'red paint protest' as part of demonstrations against the military coup in Myingyan in Myanmar's Mandalay division yesterday. —AFP

As Myanmar nears three months under the military regime, escalating violence by its security forces—especially in urban centers—has pushed protesters and prominent activists into hiding. The junta has also throttled communications across the country, imposing a nightly internet shutdown for 70 consecutive days and restricting mobile data to a mere trickle. —AFP

Canadian couple witnesses to China's Uyghur repression

OTTAWA: During the decade they lived in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, Canadians Gary and Andrea Dyck had a front-row seat to Beijing's "very methodical" repression of the Uyghur people, which Canada's parliament and others have declared to be genocide.

"We saw these things starting to happen and we knew this is not going anywhere good," Andrea Dyck said. "We started to see more and more restrictions. Every week there was a new rule or a new development." Rights groups say up to one million Uyghurs, a mostly Muslim Turkic minority with a culture distinct from China's ethnic Han majority, are now detained in internment camps.

China has strongly denied allegations of human rights violations, saying training programs, work schemes and better education have helped stamp out extremism in the northwest region and raise income. The Dycks, who are fluent in Uyghur and Mandarin, settled in Xinjiang in 2007 and ran a composting business for agricultural waste.

"We just really enjoyed life, enjoyed being with the Uyghur people and being accepted and welcomed into relationships and the culture, and it was a very special time—until it wasn't," Andrea told AFP on Friday from their home in Manitoba. Following violent riots in 2009 that they witnessed, "traditional Uyghur neighborhoods had started to be dismantled, people were moved more and more into apartment buildings, away from their communities," she said.

Targeting of Uyghur culture that Gary called "very methodical" started with restrictions on Islamic traditions, and expanded later to include rules on food, clothing, and even language.

The couple said some versions of the Koran were banned, and eventually all books in the Turkic language. "In a prominent market I saw a sign posted that said it's not allowed to speak Uyghur," Andrea said. "Every single thing became mandated in a way, (people are told) it's permitted, but then in this way only," she explained. In 2016, as the crackdown intensified, the couple said they started noticing an increased police presence, with checkpoints set up at every major intersection and closed-circuit security cameras installed all over. —AFP

Philippine coast guard holds drills in South China Sea

MANILA: The Philippine coast guard is conducting drills in the South China Sea which an official said yesterday were part of efforts to secure "our maritime jurisdiction" over the disputed waters. The exercises near the Philippine-occupied Thitu Island and China-controlled Scarborough Shoal come amid heightened tensions over the resource-rich sea.

The latest diplomatic wrangle between the two countries was triggered by the detection last month of hundreds of Chinese vessels in the Spratly Islands. Most of the boats have since dispersed around the contested archipelago. China—which claims almost the entirety of the sea—has refused repeated demands by the Philippines to call back the ships, which Manila says are maritime militia vessels and Beijing says are fishing boats.

In response, the Philippines has deployed more patrol vessels, including coast guard and navy ships, to intensify surveillance and prevent illegal fishing.

The coast guard drills began last week. "We are supporting the whole-of-nation approach in securing our maritime jurisdiction," coast guard spokesman



In this undated handout photo received from the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) yesterday, coast guard personnel conduct maritime exercises near Thitu island, in the disputed South China Sea. —AFP

Commodore Armando Balilo said.

The exercises involve training in navigation, small boat operations, maintenance and logistical operations. They are being held near Thitu Island and Scarborough Shoal, as well as the Batanes islands in the north, and the southern and eastern parts of the country.

Scarborough—one of the region's richest fishing grounds—has long been a flashpoint between Manila and Beijing. China seized it from the Philippines in 2012 following a tense standoff. The drills began as Philippine armed forces held joint exercises with US soldiers that ended Friday. —AFP

Johnson under pressure after ex-aide's attacks

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson faced growing scrutiny yesterday following explosive accusations by his former chief aide Dominic Cummings earlier this week that he lacks competence and integrity. Cummings, who stepped down as his top adviser in December, used a personal blog Friday to allege Johnson tried to solicit potentially illegal donations to renovate his publicly-funded Downing Street flat.

He also claimed the UK leader suggested blocking an internal inquiry into government leaks, because the culprit identified was a close friend of Johnson's fiancée Carrie Symonds. Johnson's office has dismissed the damning accusations, insisting all "reportable donations" are transparently disclosed and that the prime minister "has never interfered in a government leak

inquiry". International Trade Secretary Liz Truss said Sunday the claims were "a massive distraction" and that she had been assured all rules have been fully complied with. "This is tittle tattle that's being promoted and I don't think it addresses the key issues the people of Britain care about," she told Sky News.

But the charges, which follow weeks of stories about allegedly inappropriate lobbying and sleaze involving Johnson, his ministers and officials, have dominated news headlines and front pages this weekend. Some Conservatives have joined the condemnation of Johnson, with former attorney general Dominic Grieve, a long-time critic, branding him "a vacuum of integrity".

They have also prompted the main opposition Labour Party to call for a "root and branch" independent inquiry into the use of taxpayers' money by Johnson's government. "Whether I back Dominic Cummings' view or Boris Johnson's view, what we need is a proper independent inquiry where it isn't about two boys fighting and is about taxpayers in our country," Labour lawmaker Jess Phillips told Sky News. She confirmed the party will pose an urgent question in parliament next week about the allegations surrounding Johnson's flat refurbishment. —AFP

News in brief

Spain nabs fugitive Moroccan

MADRID: A Moroccan man suspected of stabbing to death six family members, including two minors, while they slept has been arrested in Spain, police said yesterday. The unidentified man is wanted in Morocco over his alleged role in the murders in February of his brother and his sister-in-law, as well as their two adult children and their two grandchildren, in Sale in northwestern Morocco. He was arrested in Castellon in northeastern Spain where he has lived since 2002 with his wife and one of his sons, Spanish police said in a statement. The man had been involved in a dispute with various members of his family over an inherited piece of land and had threatened over the phone to kill his brother and his family "in their home at night," the statement added. —AFP

Shark kills surfer off New Caledonia

NOUMEA, France: A 53-year-old man has died of suspected shark bites while paddle boarding near a beach in Noumea, New Caledonia, prosecutors said yesterday, the latest in a number of attacks since the start of this year. The man was found lifeless on his board by a boater late Saturday just off the Nouvelle peninsula, on the main island of the French South Pacific territory. An autopsy to confirm the cause of death is expected today. "At this stage, investigators do indeed suspect a shark attack," state prosecutor Yves Dupas said in a statement. Authorities regularly issue shark alerts and warn swimmers to be vigilant for several species found in the waters surrounding New Caledonia. —AFP

LA police shoot man in Hollywood

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles police said on Saturday officers shot dead a driver wearing body armor who had reversed into a patrol car in Hollywood. The officers were responding to a call when a car pulled in front of them on Sunset Boulevard, hit the brakes and backed into their vehicle, the LA Police Department tweeted Saturday. "The driver of the car exited, was wearing body armor, & had his right hand concealed behind him," LAPD tweeted. "He moved toward the (officers) who had exited their patrol car. He counted '3, 2, 1' & began to move his arm to the front of his body, at which time there was an OIS (officer-involved shooting)." The man was hit by gunfire and pronounced dead at the scene, police said. —AFP

Anti-lockdown protests in London

LONDON: Police in London said Saturday they arrested five people, and eight officers were injured, after disorder at large-scale protests against England's remaining coronavirus restrictions, the mandatory use of masks and possible introduction of so-called vaccine passports. Demonstrators had gathered early afternoon and marched along several major arteries, including the main shopping district Oxford Street, with videos and photos showing thousands in attendance. Hundreds then rallied in Hyde Park later following the march, an AFP reporter said, where "small pockets of disorder" broke out, according to London's Metropolitan Police Service. —AFP

Pope 'sad' over 130 migrants

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis yesterday voiced his "sadness" and "shame" over the fate of 130 migrants who went missing after their boat capsized in the Mediterranean. European humanitarian group SOS Mediterranee said Thursday that ten bodies were spotted near a capsized rubber boat off the coast of Libya, which had around 130 people aboard. "I confess to you that I am very saddened by the tragedy which once again occurred in recent days in the Mediterranean," he told the faithful gathered in Saint Peter's Square. —AFP

Business

MONDAY, APRIL 26, 2021

Lebanon launches first electric car

Production of up to 10,000 vehicles hoped to start later this year

BEIRUT: A Lebanon-made electric car made its debut Saturday, the first time the Mediterranean country has manufactured an automobile, despite struggling amid a dire economic crisis with frequent power cuts. The red sports car - named "Quds Rise", using the Arabic name of Jerusalem - is the project of Lebanese-born Palestinian businessman Jihad Mohammad.

It's the "first automobile to be made locally", Mohammad told reporters, at the unveiling in a parking lot south of Beirut. It was built in Lebanon "from start to finish", he said of the prototype, emblazoned at the front with a golden logo of the Dome of the Rock, the shrine in Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound, Islam's third holiest site. The car is to cost \$30,000.

Production of up to 10,000 vehicles is hoped to start later this year in Lebanon, with cars to hit the market in a year's time, said Mohammad, the director of Lebanon-based firm EV Electra. Mohammad, 50, said he set up the company four years ago after years abroad, employing Lebanese and Palestinian engineers among 300 members of staff.

He says his long-term goal is to compete on the international market for hybrid and electric cars, as well as to make sales in Lebanon. But the unveiling comes as Lebanon struggles amid



KHALDEH, Lebanon: (Left) Palestinian members of the Al-Quds association flash the victory sign as they pose by the "Quds Rise", the first ever electric car produced in Lebanon, during an unveiling ceremony in south of the capital Beirut on Saturday. (Right) Lebanese-born Palestinian businessman Jihad Mohamad, arrives in the "Quds Rise". —AFP



its worst economic crisis in decades, and imported car sales are at a record low, in part due to capital controls and drastic devaluation on the black market.

'Step in the right direction?'

Dealers sold just 62 new cars in the first two months of 2021, almost 97 percent less than the same period a year before, figures released by the Association of Automobile Importers in

Lebanon showed. The economic crunch since late 2019 has plunged more than half the population into poverty.

But Mohammad said potential Lebanese buyers would be offered the opportunity to pay for half the new electric car in dollars, with the rest paid in Lebanese pounds at an exchange rate better than the black market one, to be paid over five years without interest. Lebanon also relies on fossil fuels for

power generation, already insufficient for a population of around six million who suffer daily power cuts.

To power its new electric cars, the firm plans to set up around 100 recharging stations across the country connected to generators. These could then be fueled by solar and wind power generation, Mohammad said. Independent energy analyst Jessica Obeid welcomed the innovation, but

said the vehicles would only be environmentally friendly if the power sector underwent serious reform.

"The energy sector is the biggest contributor to Lebanon's greenhouse gas emissions," and already under pressure due a shortage in dollars to import fuel, she told AFP. But, she added, "if the electric vehicles have solar charging stations, then this would be a step in the right direction." —AFP

Apple moving forward on app privacy

SAN FRANCISCO: An update to the software powering some billion iPhones around the world kicks in today with an enhanced privacy feature critics fear will roil the internet advertising world. Apple will begin requiring app makers to tell users what tracking information they want to gather and get permission to do so, displaying what have been referred to as "privacy nutrition labels".

The move by Apple, which has been in the works for months, has sparked a major rift with Facebook and other tech rivals and could have major implications for data privacy and the mobile ecosystem. Digital ads are the lifeblood of Internet giants such as Google and Facebook, and are credited with paying for the cornucopia of free online content and services.

An update to the iOS software that powers iPhone, iPad, and iPod devices brings with it an "App Tracking Transparency framework" that stops apps from tracking users or accessing device identifying information without permission. "Unless you receive permission from the user to enable tracking, the device's advertising identifier value will be all zeros and you may not track them," Apple said this week in an online message to developers. The requirement, which some developers adopted early, will apply to all iOS apps as of today, according to Apple.

'Change agent'

Mobile Dev Memo analyst and strategist Eric Seufert said Apple's new framework could "upend" the app economy along with digital advertising more broadly, calling the new policy "a change agent". Seufert said in a blog post, "It's impossible to dismiss the fact that digital advertising on mobile is conducted through what Apple defines as 'tracking': Explicitly purging this activity from the ecosystem will require the mobile operating model to change."

With more than a billion iOS powered devices in active use around the world, a change to the mobile operating system that potentially hampers the effectiveness of digital ads could be significant. Platforms such as Facebook or Google that rely on advertising typically get paid only when someone takes an action such as clicking on a marketing message. Ads made irrelevant because less is known about users could mean fewer clicks and, by extension, less revenue.

Mobile apps and the Internet in general have flourished by providing information, games, driving directions, and more free of charge, with ads bringing in money to keep data centers running and profits flowing. While some people using iPhones might grant permission for tracking, marketers fear many will opt for privacy.

During an earnings call early this year, Facebook warned that Apple's change to its mobile operating system will likely make it tougher to target ads. Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said in the call that Apple was becoming one of his company's biggest competitors, with its rival smartphone messaging service and tight grip on the App Store, the sole gateway onto iPhones. —AFP

New bloodletting hits Spanish banking sector

MADRID: In Spain where bank tellers were once legion, the sector is again reeling from thousands more job cuts as a 10-year trend gathers pace due to the ongoing pandemic. Two more big banks announced thousands of layoffs last week with 8,300 jobs to be axed at CaixaBank, or one in five of its staff, and 3,800 at its smaller rival BBVA, accounting for 16 percent of the workforce.

The announcements drew an angry response from Spain's big unions, the UGT and the Workers' Union (CCOO), who denounced the cuts as "brutal" and "scandalous". Late last year, Banco Santander, Spain's largest bank, said it would cut 3,500 jobs while Banco Sabadell moved to lay off 1,800 staff.

All of them have made the same argument: that in a context of low interest rates which is expected to continue, they have to cut costs by reducing the number of branches rendered unnecessary by the growth of online banking. Online transactions at BBVA have grown by 87 percent over the past two years, while branch-based operations have fallen by 48 percent, the bank said on Thursday.

Waiting for Wi-Fi: Italy's digital divide

COLLE DI TORA, Italy: The last time a customer tried to pay by card in Anna Rita Pani's grocery store in Colle di Tora, a small town outside Rome, things got a bit awkward. "We had to wait 15 minutes for the card reader to work... Meanwhile, we were just standing there, staring at each other," she told AFP.

Her card reader works with Wi-Fi, but Colle di Tora is one of the least connected towns in Italy - itself a digital laggard compared with the rest of the European Union. Closing the gap is a priority for Prime Minister Mario Draghi and his drive to revive Italy's coronavirus-ravaged economy with EU-funded investments.

He will today present to parliament his plan to spend some euro 191.5 billion (\$232 billion) in loans and grants from the EU's post-virus recovery fund between now and 2026 - with digitalization expected to be a major focus. For Italy, part of the challenge is to transform places like Colle di Tora, which are not so much cut off from the modern world, as a little behind.

Weather halts service

The medieval town some 80 km northeast of Rome is a relatively

popular tourist resort, nestled on a ridge overlooking a lake and close to waterfalls, woods and natural reserves. "The situation here is OK, but if you need to send a bigger email it might take a few minutes instead of a few seconds," said Mayor Beniamino Pandolfi.

Fortunately, Colle di Tora is on a government list of 200 municipalities earmarked for the publicly-subsidized rollout of fiber optic broadband. Last week, workers were laying fiber optic cables in one of the main squares, and telecoms company Open Fiber said super-fast Internet would be operational by the year's end. "We'll welcome it with open arms," the mayor said.

At the moment the post office - which the town's 360 residents rely on to withdraw cash, as there is no bank - sometimes closes down because its Internet fails. Bad weather can disrupt the signal, and is also a problem for mobile phone reception and streaming TV services. Poor connectivity has become a serious problem since the start of the pandemic, which has forced people to spend months at home.

Simona Cardella, owner of a dry-cleaners, said her teenage daughter struggled with online lessons while schools were closed. With video calls, "sometimes the audio is off, sometimes the video is off, and if the weather is bad the signal cuts off completely", she said. Sometimes unable to download the syllabus or upload her homework, her daughter

This bloodletting is not new in Spain: between 2008 and 2019, the sector shed around 100,000 staff - or nearly 40 percent of its employees - after narrowly escaping collapse during a financial crisis when banks only survived thanks to a massive public bailout.

Consolidation

As a wave of consolidation took hold, Spain's huge network of smaller local banks which fuelled a property bubble two decades ago by lending willy-nilly, were absorbed by bigger rivals who began slashing staff. In the past decade, the number of bank branches were cut in half, a report by the Moody's ratings agency found. "Over the past decade, the Spanish banking system has undergone one of the most profound consolidation processes in Europe," it said.

Between 2008 and 2019, Spain had the highest number of branch closures and job cuts in Europe, with 48 percent of its branches shuttered compared with a bloc-wide average of 31 percent, and 37 percent of its staff laid off compared with 19 percent in Europe. "In Spain, the two things we have a lot of are bars and bank branches... but it's a model that is no longer profitable," remarked Ricardo Zion, a banking expert at the EAE Business School.

With the explosion of online banking, "only older people go to branches, not the younger generation," he said. According to World Bank figures cited in the report, Spain had 105 bank branches per 100,000 residents in 2008, three

times the European average. By 2019, that figure had dropped to 46, still double the European average. "The employment restructuring process is not yet over," nor is the consolidation, predicted Robert Tornabell, a banking specialist at the Esade business school.

To remain profitable, "banks must get bigger... and close branches that need a lot of staff but don't justify the cost," particularly in rural areas, he said. The coronavirus pandemic has only aggravated the problem because in a sluggish economy, banks make less money and look elsewhere for profitability, Zion said.

In the case of CaixaBank, a merger with smaller rival Bankia that was finalized last month would entail the closure of many branches, some side-by-side on the same street, Tornabell said. For staff, this new wave of layoffs was likely to be more traumatic than those in the past that largely involved people close to retirement.

CaixaBank has warned that half of its 8,300 cuts would involve people under 50. "It won't be easy for these people to get back into the job market," Zion warned. Their fate has caused some concern within Spain's Socialist-led government. "These are highly-educated people, meaning they are a human resource that needs to be protected as much as possible," said Economy Minister Nadia Calvino. "At the same time, I have expressed my concern about the high salaries and bonuses of senior managers within financial institutions" that are slashing jobs, she said. —AFP



COLLE DI TORA, Italy: Colle di Tora mayor Beniamino Pandolfi is pictured on April 21, 2021 by the City Hall of the medieval town some 80 km northeast of Rome. —AFP

was reduced "to do lessons via WhatsApp", Cardella said.

Offline Italy

The government wants every Italian to have access to super-fast internet by 2026 - but it has a long way to go. Nearly a quarter of Italians do not use the Internet, and one third of households have no fixed connection, according to figures released last month by national statistics agency Istat. Meanwhile only 30 percent of households had access to latest-generation broadband in 2019, albeit up 6.1 percentage points from the previous year.

Italy - the eurozone's third biggest economy - was ranked

fourth from the bottom in the European Commission's latest index of digital competitiveness (DESI), beating only Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. Mayor Pandolfi notes that taking latest generation broadband to isolated areas like Colle di Tora could make them attractive locations for remote working.

For other residents, it would just bring them into the 21st century. Pani's 22-year-old son Nicolas is a keen gamer, but he complains it can take "four-five days" to download a PlayStation game that his friends in Rome can get in a couple of hours. "It's not like I cannot live without it," he said. "But if (the Internet) was a little bit better it would be nice." —AFP

Business

Farming region in China becomes 'lingerie capital'

Success of early movers inspires industrial revolution

GUANYUN, China: Americans like their lingerie to be risqué, Europeans prefer it more classy, and Chinese remain a bit shy but are opening up. But the biggest order of all came from North Korea. So goes the street-corner discussion in Guanyun, a sleepy coastal county that for generations followed the rhythms of wheat and rice cultivation, but today concerns itself with global preferences on sensual wear.

The flat farming region between Beijing and Shanghai is China's self-proclaimed "Lingerie Capital", where sewing machines hum in village-level micro-factories to meet up to 70 percent of the fast-growing domestic demand. Millions more items are exported annually in a textbook example of the ability of Internet-enabled Chinese entrepreneurs to profit from even the most off-the-wall idea.

The man widely credited with lighting the spark is Lei Congrui, a lanky 30-year-old with a ponytail and cap who would look at home on a skateboard. It all happened almost by accident. As a teenager, Lei began making extra cash by hawking various consumer goods on China's rapidly growing e-commerce sites 15 years ago.

"Customers kept asking if we have any lingerie. I had never heard of it before, but I just said 'yes' and then looked up what it was," he said. Lei "figured out a way" and now employs more than 100 workers who push lacy black and red panties and bustiers through stitching machines. His brands such as "Midnight Charm" pull in more than \$1.5 million in annual revenue, he said.

The success of early movers like Lei inspired an industrial revolution. Guanyun's government says there are now more than 500 factories employing tens of thousands and churning out more than \$300 million worth of lingerie annually.

'Attitudes are catching up'

Loosening Chinese sexual attitudes made it all possible. Communism left a prevailing legacy of

modesty. Pornography is banned and authorities launch periodic crackdowns on anything deemed "vulgar". But prolonged exposure to more open foreign attitudes is liberating a younger generation, especially women.

Market consultancy iiMedia said Chinese online sales of sex-related products grew 50 percent in 2019 to \$7 billion. It predicted a further 35 percent growth in 2020 despite pandemic disruptions. "Youth attitudes are catching up and bringing sensuality into the home. (Lingerie) is becoming popular," said Li Yue, a local lingerie factory worker.

When Lei first started, most buyers were over 30 and many had lived abroad or had some other exposure to foreign ways. But by around 2013, volumes soared as younger Chinese consumers began discovering their sensuality, Lei said. Most buyers are now between 22 and 25. Initially, loose-fitting, not-too-revealing designs were favored in China. Today, semi-transparent, "body-hugging" numbers dominate.

'Everyone loves lingerie'

Guanyun's industrial reinvention didn't happen overnight. Early pioneers found it hard to hire squeamish local staff. "When they first came in contact with these things, they didn't quite understand," said Chang Kailin, 58, who runs a factory and is Lei's uncle. "But after the industry got bigger and stronger, people could make money and shake off poverty. Now everyone loves it."

Lei exports 90 percent of his output, mostly to the United States and Europe. Significant volumes also go to South America, where sales indicate role-playing costumes rule the bedroom. Middle Eastern buyers - favoring longer, more modest items - are also surprisingly active, as are Africans, who like a splash of color. Southeast Asia is growing fast as well. But Lei's biggest single order, worth \$1 million, came from a mysterious North Korean buyer in 2012. The customer abruptly backed out without explanation



GUANYUN, China: This photo taken on March 25, 2021 shows a worker sewing at a lingerie factory in this county, some 50 km from Lianyungang in China's northeastern Jiangsu province. —AFP

and the merchandise was sold elsewhere.

'Ready to play again'

Lingerie has transformed Guanyun, with factories sprouting up next to wheat fields, and newfound wealth displayed in new homes and cars. Previously, many of the county's roughly one million inhabitants left for the hard life of a migrant worker in far-off factories. No more, said Li, the garment worker. "Working away from home, you get homesick," said the mother of two. "These companies allow us to come home to work. It's not easy out there."

Guanyun is feeding its golden goose. It has broken ground on a \$500 million, 1,700-acre lingerie-themed industrial zone that will "integrate R&D and design, fabric accessories, e-commerce operations, warehousing and logistics". Pandemic lockdowns last year hit output. It has since roared back, but demand remains tepid in overseas markets still struggling with the coronavirus while home-bound consumers are concentrating spending on basic household necessities, said Lei. "After these problems are solved," he says with a smile, "they will be ready to play again." —AFP

Greensill: Main personalities linked to scandal

LONDON: The collapse of Greensill Capital has sparked a political scandal in Britain and cast a light on a shadowy world of finance. Outlined below are the main political and financial personalities caught up in the affair:

David Cameron

Former British prime minister David Cameron, who resigned his premiership after backing the losing horse in the 2016 Brexit referendum, is the biggest name dragged into the scandal. An advisor to Greensill after leaving office, Cameron privately lobbied senior UK government officials, including finance minister Rishi Sunak, for state support before the firm's business model of supplying interim finance to companies imploded. Cameron, whose bumper Greensill shares have become worthless, is most directly in the firing line because of his personal and undeclared lobbying. He denies any impropriety.



David Cameron

Lex Greensill

Lex Greensill, the Australian financier who in 2011 founded the London-headquartered Greensill Capital, obtained inside access to the Downing Street machine during Cameron's spell as prime minister after offering to advise the government on financial technology. Greensill, the 44-year-old son of sugarcane planters, has been largely silent since his group went bankrupt. His company, which bypassed strict regulations forced upon traditional banks, specialized in short-term corporate loans via a complex and opaque business model that ultimately sparked its declaration of insolvency last month.

Sanjeev Gupta

The Indian-British billionaire and his GFG Alliance steel empire have both been rocked by the Greensill collapse. Not only has it been suggested that thousands of steel-sector jobs are at risk due to GFG having been Greensill's biggest client, the affair has shone a light on Gupta's own criticized business practices. The UK government last month refused GFG a rescue package totaling £170 million (\$234 million). That came as Britain's business minister Kwasi Kwarteng described the GFG structure as "very opaque".



Sanjeev Gupta

Investors

Some of the world's biggest banks have become caught up in the scandal. It was creditors including Credit Suisse and the Association of German Banks who on Thursday placed the Australian parent of Greensill Capital into liquidation. Switzerland's second-largest bank - rocked also by the bankruptcy of US hedge fund Archegos - has been forced to suspend four funds with an exposure to Greensill totaling \$10 billion. In Japan, Softbank is counting the cost after investing \$1.5 billion in Greensill two years ago. And the Association of German Banks counts losses of A2.0 billion after investing communities' money with the Bremen-based subsidiary of Greensill. —AFP

Turkey probes second crypto exchange as market implodes

ISTANBUL: Turkey on Saturday detained the chief of one of the country's biggest cryptocurrency firms after launching a manhunt for the founder of another exchange who fled to Albania. The Turkish crypto boom threatens to go bust quickly as companies fold and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government prepares to rein in the unregulated digital currency market.

The volume of crypto purchases in the nation of 84 million people rose 10-fold between November and March as Turks sought ways to preserve their savings during a steep drop in the value of the lira currency. But the market began to unravel when the Istanbul-based Thodex exchange's founder Faruk Fatih Ozer fled to Albania with a reported \$2 billion in investors' assets last week. Thodex shut down while holding investments from nearly 400,000 users.

Turkey issued an international arrest warrant and detained dozens of Thodex employees in raids staged across the country on Friday. Officials also blocked the account of the Vebitcoin exchange - one of Turkey's five-largest - and launched an investigation after it also abruptly ceased operations. Local news reports said police detained Vebitcoin chief executive Ilker Bas and three other company employees on Saturday as part of a broader fraud probe.

"Due to the recent developments in the crypto money industry, our transactions have become much more intense than expected," Vebitcoin said on its website. "We would like to state with regret that this situation has led us to a very difficult process in the financial field. We have decided to cease our activities

Fed set to hold the line as US economy recovers

WASHINGTON: The Federal Reserve finally has what it wants and predicted: signs of a US economic recovery that could undo some of the damage done by the COVID-19 pandemic. But when the central bank's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) opens its two-day meeting tomorrow, analysts do not expect officials to raise rates or otherwise signal any backing away from the easy money policies rolled out to aid the US bounceback, despite some fears of rising inflation.

"No one is expecting any major policy changes in terms of rates or the Fed's asset purchases," Andrew Hunter, senior US economist at Capital Economics, told AFP. In fact, Fed officials have clearly stated that they will not be spooked by temporary price increases into reacting too quickly and pumping the brakes on stimulus measures.

The government in recent weeks has reported the first signs that COVID-19 vaccines are bringing laid-off workers back to work and ending the suffering of businesses hard-hit by closures meant to stop the contagion. Labor Department data showed unemployment claims hit the lowest point since the pandemic began, while the economy regained 916,000 jobs in March, pushing the unemployment rate down slightly.

Retail sales surged in March to a level 27.7 percent higher than the pre-pandemic rate a year earlier, while the Institute for Supply Management's services index hit an all-time high last month and new home sales hit a 15-year high. Yet even with signs hiring has picked up, more than 17 million people remain out of work and Fed Chair Jerome

in order to fulfil all regulations and claims."

Stolen wallets

Data shared with AFP by the Chainalysis and Kaiko analytics firms show the daily volume of all crypto purchases in Turkey rising from around 500 million liras (\$60 million) in November to as much as six billion liras in March. Coinhills ranks Turkey as the fifth-biggest crypto market in the world. It could be bigger still because many Turkish traders use popular off-shore exchanges in countries such as Malta.

But Erdogan's government is preparing to tighten regulations after deciding to ban cryptos from being used for purchases of goods and services starting on April 30. The Turkish central bank warned last week that cryptocurrencies "entail significant risks". "Wallets can be stolen or used unlawfully without the authorization of their holders," the central bank said.

The problems at Thodex started after it ran a promotion offering Dogecoins to investors at one-fourth the price the popular currency was selling on other exchanges. But Thodex users complained that it was a scam that prevented them from re-selling the coins at their full market value or trading them for other cryptos. Turkish prosecutors accused Ozer of "aggravated fraud and founding a criminal organization".

The tumult in Turkey created ripples across the global crypto market and saw the value of bitcoin slip back under \$50,000 after reaching \$57,000 at the start of the week. Analysts say the lack of oversight makes users more susceptible to fraud in Turkey than they would be in countries, where digital trades are reported to officials and taxed.

"Because cryptocurrency is currently unregulated (in Turkey), it could be more vulnerable to abuse and illicit activity," Chainalysis' government affairs chief Jesse Spiro told AFP. "In general, regulations help build trust in this new asset class. On the other hand, the instability of the lira could make cryptocurrency more attractive." —AFP

Powell has warned the economy will not achieve "maximum employment" this year. "I expect that the Fed will stay resolutely patient in spite of the inflexion in the US data towards stronger growth and more rapid employment gains," Evercore ISI Vice-Chairman Krishna Guha said.

More than a rescue

The Fed moved quickly as the COVID-19 pandemic began in the United States in March of last year, slashing its benchmark lending rate to zero and stepping up asset purchases to inject liquidity into the economy. The steps, together with trillions of dollars in stimulus spending approved by Congress, have been credited with keeping the world's largest economy from a worse downturn.

But the central bank's pledge to keep rates lower for longer has sparked fears the Fed will allow inflation to get out of hand. However, Powell and other policymakers have reiterated that while they expect inflation to spike as the economy improves throughout this year, they do not expect the increase to be long-lasting. They plan to hold off on raising the policy lending until inflation passes 2.0 percent and stays there for some - unspecified - time, and they forecast this rate "liftoff" will not happen until after 2023.

That is a shift from the Fed's previous approach of raising rates before price hikes were visible in the data, and comes after a decade when inflation stayed resolutely below the 2.0 percent target. There already have been signs of the expected increases, with the consumer price index climbing 0.6 percent in March, its biggest monthly increase since 2012, which put it 2.6 percent higher than a year ago.

Hunter said he thinks price increases "may end up a bit more persistent than the Fed expects," and pointed to rising inflation expectations as well as reports that firms are struggling to bring back workers, which could push wages up. Even so he does not expect any deviation in course from this meeting. "I wouldn't say that there's going to be anything at this stage that would have changed their minds," he said. —AFP

Computer chip shortage may leave auto sector idling

PARIS: What was initially downplayed as a brief hiccup in the supply of semiconductors looks more and more like a shortage that may last throughout the year in what would be a big blow to automakers. They were planning to rev up production this year to meet an expected surge in demand from consumers as the pandemic wanes and to recover from last year's losses. But without enough chips those hopes are fading.

Stop and go manufacturing

The shortage of chips has pushed automakers to idle production lines for brief periods when they temporarily run out of supplies. Toyota, Volkswagen, Ford, Peugeot, Fiat, Jeep, Honda, Jaguar Land Rover and even the Chinese startup Nio have had to pause production in their factories in the past months.

Automakers have reduced the stocks of parts they keep on hand in recent years as part of cost-cutting measures, so delivery delays can quickly force an entire shutdown. Renault CEO Luca de Meo told shareholders this past week that "the semiconductor shortage could cause a drop in production volume this year of at least 100,000 vehicles."

In Germany, thousands of autoworkers were on reduced work hours or temporary unemployment as Volkswagen and Mercedes factories were forced to halt production. Fiat slowed production at its Brazilian factory in Betim for the second time this month. The Stellantis factory in Rennes-La Janais in France, where 2,000 people work, was also nearly idle.

Essential chips

Computer processors are a key element in today's vehicles, which can easily have several dozen to control elements such as the engine, automatic braking system, airbags, automatic parking system and the infotainment system. The main manufacturers are located in Asia, such as TSMC in Taiwan and Samsung and SK Hynix in South Korea, although there are still some factories in the United States and Europe. The surge in demand for electronic devices during the pandemic is the main cause of today's shortage of chips. A fire in a Japanese factory didn't help and now a drought in Taiwan may force a reduction in output.

Automakers adapt

Automakers say they are managing the situation on a day by day basis and are trying to avoid shutting down production lines completely. Due to the chip shortage, "GM is building some vehicles without certain modules when necessary," the US carmaker said in a statement. "They will be completed as soon as more semiconductors become available," it added.

Stellantis was able to resume production of the new Peugeot 308 at half the normal pace after a three-week halt. It went back to a dashboard console that uses an analogue speedometer. Most automakers say they hope to make up lost production during the second half of the year. Current shortages of semiconductor chips that are slowing car production worldwide "can be compensated for by the end of the year", Daimler CEO Ola Kallenius said in a statement. —AFP

CLINIC PAGE



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Vespa scooters are pictured in Cervinia, Italian Alps.

Fashion designer Alber Elbaz, ex-Lanvin director, dies

Alber Elbaz, the fashion designer whose audacious designs transformed the storied French house Lanvin into an industry darling before his shock ouster in 2015, has died aged 59, the Richemont luxury group said yesterday. "It was with shock and enormous sadness that I heard of Alber's sudden passing," Richemont chairman Johann Rupert said in a statement. No cause of death was given. Elbaz, an Israeli born in Morocco, restored the luster to Lanvin during his 14 years at the helm of France's oldest couture brand, giving classic tailoring a more playful edge. He also earned fans with an affable demeanour that set him apart in an industry known for prickly personalities.

But he was unceremoniously fired as creative director in October 2015, reportedly after a clash with Lanvin's majority shareholder, the Chinese billionaire Shaw-Lan Wang. Elbaz never joined another fashion house afterward but formed a series of partnerships, including with the Swiss-based conglomerate Richemont in 2019. "Alber had a richly deserved reputation as one of the industry's brightest and most beloved figures," Rupert said. "His inclusive vision of fashion made women feel beautiful and comfortable by blending traditional craftsmanship with technology-highly innovative projects which sought to redefine the industry." — AFP



In this file photo Moroccan-born Israeli fashion designer for Lanvin Alber Elbaz, acknowledges the public at the end of the Spring/Summer 2013 ready-to-wear collection show in Paris. — AFP

Symbol of youth, Italy's Vespa marks 75th birthday

Ever since Audrey Hepburn took control of her Vespa in the 1953 classic "Roman Holiday", the Italian scooter has been a symbol of joy and style and on its 75-year-old birthday, many Italians remain fondly attached to theirs. "I've had a Vespa for 12 years, I'm on my third," said Marco Guerrieri, a Roman accountant in his 40s. "I wanted a more original two-wheeler than the Japanese scooters, plus it's made of metal and not plastic, it's much more resistant," he told AFP.

While it is mostly a practical mode of transportation for him, he laments that for many "it's a status symbol-in my neighborhood all the successful people have a Vespa". Hepburn and Gregory Peck's adventures in Rome made the Vespa famous in the 1950s, but its history dates back to April 23, 1946, when the first patent for its manufacture was registered in Italy. Legend has it that the name-which means "wasp" in Italian-came from Enrico Piaggio, founder of the eponymous motor company, who compared the noise of its engine to the insect's buzz.

Seventy-five years and 19 million units



In this file photo Vespa scooters are parked on Sordello Square in Mantova, northern Italy, during the 8th edition of Vespa World Days. — AFP photos

later, Vespas have lost none of their charm, despite the problems of driving them in Rome, with their small wheels unsuited to potholes and slippery cobblestones. "These are 19 million stories of guys and girls, entire generations who dreamed of and gained their freedom astride a Vespa," enthused a statement

from Piaggio marking Friday's anniversary. Since 1946, the Vespa has been made at Pontedera, in Tuscany, although in recent years also in a factory in India and another in Vietnam. — AFP



In this file photo, Audrey Hepburn's sons Shawn (right) and Luca pose with the Vespa scooter that was used in the iconic film "Roman Holiday" (Vacanze Romane), during the exhibition "Audrey in Roma" at Rome's Museum of Ara Pacis.



An elderly woman poses with her Vespa scooter in Cervinia, Italian Alps.



In this file photo Vespa enthusiasts ride in front of the Castle of San Giorgio in Mantova.

Celebrated Italian singer Milva dies at 81

Celebrated Italian singer Milva, who achieved fame with her beloved performances in the 1960s and 70s, has died aged 81, Italian media reported on Saturday. She died Friday evening in Milan after a long illness, her daughter told the Ansa agency. "Her voice has aroused intense emotions for entire generations," Culture Minister Dario Franceschini said. "A great Italian, an artist who started from her homeland and rose to international stages."

Maria Ilva Biocati-her full name-was born in the village of Goro in Emilia-Romagna. She was later nicknamed "The Panther of Goro." Known for her striking red hair, her career went far beyond Italy's borders, with fans in Latin America, Spain, France and especially Germany, a country whose language she learned. — AFP



This picture taken in Paris on January 16, 1987 shows the Italian singer and actress Maria Ilva Biocati, known as Milva, during the exhibition "Les Amis de Velazquez" at The Institut de France. — AFP

Dior to launch inter-season collection in Athens in June

French fashion house Dior will hold a runway show on June 17 in Athens to launch its inter-season collection by designer Maria Grazia Chiuri, it said Friday. After several online-only fashion weeks in recent months, it was not clear if an audience would be present for the lat-

est "cruise collection" show in Greece, with Dior saying only that it would be held "in full respect of health measures". So-called cruise collections fall between usual spring/summer and autumn/winter collections-and French houses often visit other countries for the launch.

"The house has chosen Athens, an exceptional destination, cradle of Western civilization and European art, for its 2022 cruise collection," it said in a statement. Last summer, Dior launched its cruise collection in Piazza del Duomo in Lecce, Italy with only "friends and family" invited. The

trip to Athens will pay homage to an iconic photo session at the Acropolis 70 years ago for an haute couture collection by Christian Dior. Chanel's cruise collection is being launched online on May 4 with a film shot in southern France. — AFP

Florian Zeller, French writer conquering global stage and screen

His plays have been staged in more countries than any French writer of his generation, and with his first film up for six Oscars, Florian Zeller looks set for still greater success. At 41, Zeller has already had a glittering career, described as a "genius" by Le Figaro and "the most exciting new theatre writer of our time" by The Guardian. In Britain, he is compared to one of his heroes, Harold Pinter, and in France,

to his most fabled of predecessors. "He is a child of Moliere," said French actor Pierre Arditi, who appeared in two of Zeller's plays, "The Truth" and "The Lie".

"When we read his plays, we think that it's simple but it's much more complex, and that is what defines a great writer... He's a young surgeon of the human soul." But it was in creating a film adaptation of his most successful play, "The Father", that Zeller achieved one of his most cherished dreams: to work with Anthony Hopkins. "I consider him the greatest living actor, and had the feeling he would be particularly powerful in this role," Zeller told AFP. "When I spoke to friends about it, I felt they were smiling politely when I said I could work with Anthony Hopkins, but I was stuck on the idea and until something is proved impossible, it remains possible."

When they finally met, Hopkins already knew the play thanks to its Tony-winning Broadway production, and agreed to take



In this file photo French writer and movie director Florian Zeller attends the 2020 Sundance Film Festival - "The Father" Premiere at Eccles Center Theatre in Park City, Utah.

on the grueling part as an elderly man suffering dementia. The partnership has proved a huge success, with Hopkins winning best actor and Zeller best adapted screenplay at Britain's BAFTA awards this month.

'Powerful hidden currents'

Already a household name in France thanks to a series of novels, the first published when he was just 22, Zeller fell in love with theatre after iconic French author Francois Sagan recommended him to a director. "The French stage was a marvelous destination and a dream," he told AFP. "But it was when my plays were staged in London and had a big success, with three at the same time... that's when they started being picked up in Asia, Latin America and the US." They have now been performed in more than 40 countries, and won awards from Tokyo to New York. It perhaps made sense that Zeller, who considers Pinter a "major inspiration", made his mark in England.

"There is something that is close to the British soul in my work, where the subtext is as important as the text, where the apparent simplicity of the language hides power-

ful hidden currents that can be quite violent," he told AFP. He went further at the BAFTAs, saying: "I'm French, as you can hear, but in my heart I'm English." Christopher Hampton, Zeller's English translator and a renowned playwright in his own right, says it was nonetheless tough to get backing when they first tried to bring "The Father" to the British stage. "It wasn't easy to get the producers to believe this was the kind of play people would want to see," Hampton told AFP.

They got a short run in a small Bath theatre but despite strong reviews, still struggled to have it taken to London, only getting slots at smaller theatres before finally transferring to the West End. "Even then, I think they took the theatre for only eight weeks... and what happened was that it was so sold-out that they had to take another run," said Hampton. "It was a runaway success." —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

In Iraqi Kurdistan, book clubs and science fiction offer 'escape'

Huda Kathem waits anxiously for feedback on her first novel, scrutinized by a book club in Iraqi Kurdistan's Arbil, where young authors are breathing new life into a centuries-old oral culture. "This is the first time my book is being critiqued," the 17-year-old first-year medical student told AFP. "I learnt a lot about how to improve my writing and storytelling," she said, adding that comments from other writers, readers and professors had given her "enormous encouragement" to continue. With a published children's book under her belt, the young author's first novel, titled "Barani Marg" (Death Rain), tells the story of a Kurdish boy who runs away from a broken home and a broken heart to join the army at age 15.



Members of a book club meet to review a novel at a book store in Arbil.

It's a familiar story for more than a few residents of the autonomous northern region of Iraq, a country ravaged by decades of conflict. The eight book clubs that have sprung up in Kurdistan in recent months make a point of giving homegrown authors a platform, and regularly discuss narratives tackling social issues. Novelist Goran Sabah led the way by launching his book club in January in a cafe in Arbil.

'Enlightenment school'

For Sabah, who has a PhD in journalism from Kansas University, book groups are "the best way to exchange ideas and create a sense of belonging among young people" in the Kurdistan region. "Every one of these book clubs is an enlightenment school, that creates generations who gain confidence in changing society from the bottom up" in the face of youth poverty, growing unem-

ployment and ingrained conservatism, he said. "Some youths watch football to escape this reality, while others read and write novels and books," Sabah added. Bakhtyar Faruq, a Kurdish language teacher and member of Sabah's club, agreed.

"Kurdish youths are writing to express their anger and the suffering they are going through, as well as to forget their harsh reality for a brief moment." An Iraqi passport doesn't open many doors, so many Iraqis "read novels to travel", Faruq said. "We can visit Paris in our imaginations." Kurdish literature, today mostly published in Sorani and Kurmanji, Iraq's two main dialects, is rarely translated. Occasional books are distributed in Arabic, Farsi or Turkish, aimed primarily at Kurdish audiences in neighboring countries who speak a different dialect.

Heroine of Arbil

Sabah chalked limited translation and promotion of Kurdish literature up to a "lack of political will". "Many countries allocate a budget to introduce their literature to the outside world, but this has not happened here so far," he said. A small publishing house, Nusyar, established two years ago in the Danish capital Copenhagen, is taking steps to fill this gap. Each year, it hands out three awards to young Kurdish authors, and it is translating a collection of modern Kurdish poetry into Danish and two novels into Danish, English and Farsi.

"It is extremely difficult and costly to translate and introduce Kurdish literature to the world, but it is a dream and we want to achieve it," Nusyar founder Alan Pary, himself a poet and translator, told AFP. One of the two novels Nusyar is working to promote is a science fiction story penned by Sabah, who says it is the first novel of its genre ever written in Kurdish. "Life Enders" tackles suicide, a highly taboo, but increasingly common, issue in Iraq. Set in the year 2100, it tells the story of a young Kurdish woman from Arbil who ends a wave of suicides after religion, technology and science fail to stem the tide. The book has been a hit with young Kurds, and is set to be reprinted after the first 500 copies, published at the end of February, flew off the shelves. — AFP



Members of a book club meet to review a novel at a book store in Arbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq. — AFP photos



An Iraqi Kurd searches for a book at a book store in Arbil.

Couple plans wedding in Florida mansion, owner unaware

A Florida couple who planned their wedding at a multimillion-dollar mansion near Miami thought they could get hitched without a hitch until one tiny detail got in the way: the owner was home and had no idea about their party. Courtney Wilson and Shenita Jones, referring to themselves as "the Royal Couple," invited friends and family

to the "dream home and estate," which includes a tennis court, pool and theater, plus nine bedrooms and 15 bathrooms, the local Sun Sentinel newspaper reported Wednesday.

With the \$5.7 million mansion up for sale, Wilson, the groom, visited it several times, taking photos and pretending to be interested in buying it. Assuming no one lived at the vacant home, he invited guests to his wedding and related festivities, which included a red-carpet cocktail on Saturday afternoon and a breakfast on Sunday morning, the paper reported. Owner Nathan Finkel, who lives elsewhere on the property, was therefore up for a surprise when the groom and another person arrived Saturday morning ready to set up.

"I have people trespassing on my property," an irritated Finkel told a 911 dispatcher, according to the paper. "And

they keep harassing me, calling me. They say they're having a wedding here and it's God's message. "I don't know what's going on. All I want is (for) it to stop. And they're sitting at my property right at the front gate right now." Police who arrived at the scene encouraged the wedding party to leave, without making any arrests. Keith Poliakoff, an attorney for the Southwest Ranches suburb where the mansion is located, said that Wilson "figured it was a vacant house and didn't realize Nathan lived on the property in a different home." "This guy had no idea he lived there. You know the shock that must have been on his face when he showed up at the gate and the owner was home?" Poliakoff said. — AFP



Courtney Wilson (left) and Shenita Jones (inset) had planned to get hitched on the US\$5.7 million mansion in Miami. — AFP



A customer orders "Buchteln", an Austrian speciality filled with marmalade, as a grandmother packs them, in the Vollpension cafe. — AFP photos



A grandmother fills "Buchteln" with marmalade.



A grandmother looks at an oven with baking "Buchteln" in it.



A grandmother looks at the camera as she prepares "Buchteln", an Austrian speciality filled with marmalade, in the kitchen of the Vollpension cafe, in Vienna.

Baking away solitude: Vienna cafe hopes to unite world's grandmas

Framed by wooden cabinets, Karin Hofbauer holds a stick of butter to her laptop camera and imparts to the novice bakers gathered virtually in her kitchen the secrets of kneading shortcrust dough. "It's a simple recipe, I've made it so many times for friends and family, and it's always a success," the 62-year-old Austrian says before filling the baked apple tart with nuts and vanilla custard. The five Germans and Austrians taking notes have come to the online class because the recipes are simple and straightforward and because they're taught by real-life grandmothers like Hofbauer, who will soon be joined by fellow grannies and grandpas from across the world in a scheme run by a Vienna cafe.

Two years ago, Hofbauer retired from an administrative position at a hospital. Healthy, active and eager to "do something meaningful", she joined about 50 other "grannies" at Vienna's Vollpension cafe, a social enterprise where retirees bolster their often meagre state pensions and bake away the loneliness many senior citizens can feel. The idea was born almost 10 years ago, over a too-dry slice of cake at a Vienna cafe. "Nobody makes better cakes than grandma," Vollpension's co-founder Moriz Piffil-Percevic tells AFP, recalling how wistful the dry sponge made him for the comforting indulgence of his grandma's cakes.

Following a "Granny Wanted" classified in a local paper and some trials as pop-up cafes at festivals, the intergenerational team opened the first "Vollpension"—a German term referring to both full retirement and accommodation with full board. At the social enterprise's two cafes, coffee is served in old mugs with flower prints and cross-stitches of border collies grace the walls. The clientele, many of them hipsters, are often joined by the elderly part-time hostesses, of course, a pandemic forces them to shut.

'Keep our grannies going'

When Austria's first virus lockdown hit, patrons donated 140,000 euros (\$170,000) to maintain the extra income that many of the staff depend on—especially single women who, after years as homemakers, receive relatively small state pensions. That, however, is just one benefit of the social enterprise. "Older people want to feel needed, that is something incredibly essential to age-

ing, and that's something that Vollpension provides," says Franz Kolland, a professor at the University of Vienna who focuses on social aspects of old age.

As people grow older, "they face two decades of retirement during which they are mobile. They want to do something—they just have to be approached," Kolland says, lauding Vollpension as a "role model". Piffil-Percevic says he is

Going global

When the most recent Vollpension cafe opened—just before the pandemic—more than 300 eager seniors applied within 24 hours. The baking courses' success with hundreds of participants is now prompting Vollpension to go global. In several languages, Vollpension is this week calling on grandmas and grandpas from all over the world to join them. "Vollpension was founded to give people



A grandmother holds trays with "Buchteln".

touched when friends and family report how much their grandma's wellbeing improved after joining Vollpension. "Suddenly they don't feel their hip aching anymore, or they've stopped drinking a little too much," he says.

To "keep our grannies going" during the pandemic, Piffil-Percevic and his colleagues began looking for alternatives beyond takeaway cake. Taking the grandmas' and grandpas' baking skills online was the next logical step. An army of volunteers helped create a baking studio similar to those of TV chefs, and filmed on-demand baking classes ranging from Christmas cookies to vegan cakes, while Hofbauer and others are hosting live baking classes in their own kitchens. After overcoming the familiar pitfalls of Zoom meetings, Hofbauer is passing on her knowledge from decades of baking—including on the best apple peeler: "It doesn't have to be something expensive—I think mine cost three euros," she says, laughing.

like us a place where they find meaning, and can lead a life worth living even in old age," one granny says in Italian in a video promoting the call for applications.

People from all over the world can learn to bake with "original family recipes from the region, and straight from grandma's kitchen," another one says in Spanish. "It's about local and national recipes—mango with sticky rice being taught by a Thai grandma, and panna cotta by a Sicilian," Piffil-Percevic says. Hofbauer, who says she has had participants tune in from Boston and Crete, is already looking forward to see the baking classes go global. "I found new friends, new acquaintances, and if we're going international, it's going to be even more fun," she says, the scent of warm apple tart now filling her 80s-style kitchen. "The more the merrier." — AFP

Sports

Knicks win ninth straight game, Bucks dominate struggling Sixers

LOS ANGELES: Julius Randle carried the offense, scoring 31 points and grabbing 10 rebounds as the New York Knicks won their ninth NBA straight game by routing the Toronto Raptors 120-103 on Saturday. The Knicks are in the midst of their longest winning streak in eight years, since they won 13 straight in the 2012-13 NBA season.

RJ Barrett scored 20 of his 25 points in the second half and had 12 rebounds and Derrick Rose chipped in with 19 points for the Knicks, who also won their seventh consecutive home game. "We're peaking but we can still get a lot better," Randle said. "Obviously offensively we're playing well, but defensively for a full 48 minutes I feel like we can be a lot better."

New York shot 56 percent from the floor and made 16 shots from beyond the arc in front of the pandemic-limited crowd of 1,900 at Madison Square Garden. The Knicks improved to 34-27 on the season and are six and a half games behind the first place Brooklyn Nets in the Eastern Conference. The 12th place Raptors dropped to 25-35.

Fred VanVleet and OG Anunoby scored 27 apiece for Toronto, who saw a four-game winning streak halted. Pascal Siakam poured in 26 points, and VanVleet added 11 assists for the Raptors, who shot 43.4 percent from the floor.

A week ago, the thought of any team beating the Philadelphia 76ers twice in three days would have seemed a daunting task. But Milwaukee took care of business Saturday as Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 24 points to move into second place in franchise history for points scored as the Bucks clobbered the struggling

Sixers 132-94 in Milwaukee. Antetokounmpo also had 14 rebounds and seven assists as he passed Glenn Robinson to reach 12,023 in his career. Robinson finished with 12,010. Antetokounmpo trails only Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (14,211) for the club record.

"It's a great compliment," Antetokounmpo said. "I've got to keep working hard. It's a marathon. It's not a sprint. So I've got to keep working hard, keep believing in myself, keep polishing my skills, keep having great teammates that I love to be playing (with), a great coaching staff. It's good. It's a lot of hard work that paid off, but I've got to keep moving forward."

The Bucks completed the three-game season sweep of the Sixers and now hold a playoff tiebreaker if both teams finish with the same record. Milwaukee sits two-and-a-half games behind the Nets in the East.

The demands of the recent schedule have been extraordinarily tough for Philadelphia, who were without Ben Simmons for a fourth straight game with an illness. Just prior to tip-off the Sixers learned star center Joel Embiid couldn't play because of a sore shoulder. Embiid has now missed 19 games this season.

Bobby Portis added 17 points, Bryn Forbes and Jordan Nwora each had 13 and Jrue Holiday had 12 points for the Bucks. Shake Milton and Tyrese Maxey led the Sixers with 15 points apiece. Seth Curry added 13 points and Dwight Howard chipped in 12 rebounds for 76ers, who have lost four straight. In Dallas, Luka Doncic finished with 18 points, 13 assists and eight rebounds as the Dallas Mavericks came from behind to defeat the Los Angeles Lakers 108-93. Dallas trailed by 17 points but then seized command in the fourth and



NEW YORK: Julius Randle #30 of the New York Knicks handles the ball during the game against the Toronto Raptors on Saturday at Madison Square Garden in New York City, New York. — AFP

stretched their lead to double figures before putting the finishing touches in the stretch drive.

Dwight Powell posted a game-high 25 points and nine rebounds, Dorian Finney-Smith finished with 21 points and seven rebounds in the win. Ben McLemore

scored 20 points to lead the Lakers, who shot a dismal 12-for-45 from the three-point range. In Salt Lake City, Karl-Anthony Towns scored 24 points with 12 rebounds as the Minnesota Timberwolves stormed back from a 17-point deficit to upset the Utah Jazz 101-96. — AFP



SAN ANGELO: Riders carry the Texas state flag during the opening ceremony of the San Angelo Stock Show and Rodeo, April 16, 2021 in San Angelo, Texas. — AFP

In Texas, cowboys buck up at return of rodeos

SAN ANGELO: It took Jeff Bertus 14 hours to drive from his small town in South Dakota to reach the Friday night rodeo in San Angelo, Texas, fueled by the young cowboy's hope of seeing eight seconds of action — tops. The baby-faced American aged 29 is a bull rider, one of the stars that rodeo crowds wait for all evening and who are often the reason people buy tickets.

Their job is to try and stay on the back of an out-of-control bull for eight seconds. Once flung to the ground, they have to avoid being gored or crushed by the powerful animals. Only the boldest (and luckiest) earn a reward of \$2,000 to \$7,000 as best rider of the evening. But despite the high stakes, the San Angelo rodeo is a real relief for the riders: after a year in which the coronavirus pandemic closed down much of the rodeo circuit, the event is a sign that things are starting to go back to normal.

Bertus is excited to finally get back in the saddle, where he's been comfortable since childhood. "I've been doing it for quite a while, I guess," he says, smiling, as he uses resin to coat the rope that will go around the bull's stomach, and that he'll cling to while getting bucked around. "Since I was little and started out with calves and slowly kept on, getting on more and more." In winter, riders generally participate in a few competitions over the weekend. But during the summer, the high season, there are about five rodeos each week.

Masks recommended but rare

Then begins a busy, but also expensive time for them: "You can make a lot of money riding bulls in rodeos, but you also spend a lot of money like on fuel, plane tickets, hotels... all that stuff," says Ty Wainwright, a 22-year-old from Louisiana. "Just going up and down

the road." At San Angelo, the evenings are packed with patriotic tributes and Wild West-style competitions — the national anthem, cowgirl races, Texas flag parades, lasso contests... The rodeo, which takes place in the heart of ranching country, draws 5,000 spectators per night over three weekends.

Mask wearing is recommended but rarely followed. Fifteen days after the rodeo opened in early April, health authorities said that infection rates have stayed low in the county, with only three new cases out of 120,000 residents.

The pandemic has not disrupted this event at all, unlike so many others: the 2020 rodeo was scheduled a few weeks before the crisis broke out in the United States, and the 2021 rodeo was set a month after the state reopening announced by Governor Greg Abbott in early March.

'Full swing'

Other rodeos were not so lucky. The biggest one in Texas, in Houston, was canceled in early February for the second year in a row. "There's a couple of months when there wasn't any rodeos," says Jake Orman, a 29-year-old professional cowboy and a specialist in team calf roping. There were a few during the summer, but "we had to drive like ten hours to every rodeo, and they didn't pay very good," he said. "But at least they were having rodeos."

Bull rider Wyatt Gregg, who coaches a Texas university rodeo team with his wife, says he stayed home doing "cowboy work, mainly." "Stuck at the house, so (I got) a lot of fence work done and rebuilding, and working with cattle and horses at home for the most part," says the 31-year-old. "But now it's set up, back in the full swing, summer round is coming up and (I) decided to be at it all summer long."

The rodeo gets off to a good start for Gregg because, unlike Bertus and Wainwright, he manages to stay on his bull for eight seconds. Although he is well ranked, he is eventually surpassed by a high-schooler, Jace Trosclair, who managed to make the most of the past odd year.—AFP

break coming in the 24th minute, when Cristian Roldan's long-range blast bounced off the post. The rebound landed in front of Joshua Atencio, whose left-footed shot sailed over the crossbar.

Mark-Anthony Kaye came close to doubling LAFC's lead early in the second half, but his shot at an open goal rolled past the far post. And Seattle, who fell to the Columbus Crew in the MLS Cup final last season, pulled level in the 54th as Australian forward Smith headed in the rebound after Raul Ruidiaz's effort was blocked by Pablo Sisiniega.

Elsewhere on the second weekend of the 2021 season, San Jose's 17-year-old Cade Cowell scored one goal and set up another in the Earthquakes' 3-1 victory over FC Dallas. An all-Canadian affair saw Toronto FC and Vancouver Whitecaps play to a 2-2 draw in Orlando, as the league's Canadian clubs continue to play south of the border amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. In Colorado, Cecilio Dominguez scored twice in the second half to lift expansion team Austin FC to a 3-1 win over the Colorado Rapids. Inter Miami rallied for a 2-1 win against the Philadelphia Union as Gonzalo Higuain and Federico Higuain became the first pair of brothers to score in the same MLS game. — AFP

Saudi giants stunned by Tajiks in Asian Champions League

DOHA: Saudi giants Al Hilal crashed to a humiliating 4-1 defeat against Istiqlol in the Asian Champions League on Saturday, a result that boosted the Tajik side's chances of qualifying for the knockout stage. Three-times continental champs Al Hilal had beaten Istiqlol 3-1 on Wednesday but were in for a massive shock in the return.

Russian-born midfielder Manuchekhr Dzhalilov and Manuchehr Safarov each grabbed a brace at the Prince Faisal bin Fahad Stadium in Jeddah. Al Hilal, who last won the tournament in 2019 but were kicked out last year following a spate of coronavirus infections in the squad that left them without enough players, showed early intent on Saturday.

They opened their account through a header from French striker Bafetimbi Gomis in the 34th minute. But that was the only bright moment for the Saudi side as Dzhalilov struck twice in the span of six minutes to give Istiqlol a 2-1 lead at half-time.

When play resumed, Istiqlol continued to build pressure and it paid off with Safarov taking charge this time. The 19-year-old defender made it 3-1 in the 49th minute with his intended cross from the right dropping into the goal stunning goalkeeper Abdulla al-Maiouf. Safarov completed his double four minutes later with a powerful low shot after receiving a pass from Rustom Soirov to leave the Saudis, who were hugely favoured to top Group A, stunned.

In another match, the UAE's Shabab Al Ahli defeated Uzbekistan's AGMK 3-1 to join Al Hilal and Istiqlol on seven points and leave Group A wide open. Only the group winners and three best second-placed teams make the last 16 phase. Harib Suhail, Carlos Eduardo and Ahmed Hashmi scored for Shabab in the first half while Shohruh Gadoev accounted for AGMK's only goal of the match.

In Group C, Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli kept alive their slim hopes of qualifying for the knockout phase with a 2-1 win over Iraq's Al Shorta. Abdulrahman Ghareeb's 79th minute goal clinched three points for the two-time runners-up at their home ground at the King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah, one of the three bio-secure hubs in Saudi Arabia where the west zone matches of the tournament are being played.

Syrian striker Omar al-Somah had given the Saudis a fifth minute lead, scoring from inside the six-yard box off a Driss Fettouhi corner. But their joy was short-lived as Fahad Youssef restored parity in the 26th minute after he gathered the ball following a free-kick and blasted it past goalkeeper Mohamed al-Owais. After several close chances for both teams, Ghareeb made amends for his miss earlier with a low shot from a pass from al-Somah to seal Al Ahli's second victory over the Iraqis, who crashed out of the tournament with their fourth consecutive defeat.

Also in Group C, Qatar's Al Duhail and Iran's



RIYADH: Al Hilal's midfielder Andre Carrillo (left) is marked by Istiqlol's midfielder Alisher Dzhalilov during the AFC Champions League group A match between Tajikistan's Istiqlol and Saudi's Al Hilal on Saturday, at the Prince Faisal Bin Fahd football stadium in the Saudi capital of Riyadh. — AFP

Esteghlal played out a 2-2 draw at the King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah. Michael Olunga, who had scored a hat-trick against Esteghlal three days ago when Al Duhail won 4-3 again excelled for the Qataris. He scored two goals with the result consolidating his team's position at the top with eight points. — AFP

Aussie Rules match attracts 'record' pandemic crowd

MELBOURNE: Just over 78,000 spectators packed a Melbourne stadium yesterday for an Australian Rules football match, in what is believed to be the biggest crowd at a sporting fixture since the COVID-19 pandemic began. However, the crowd size at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) fell short of expectations that 85,000 could attend the traditional Anzac Day match between the Collingwood Magpies and Essendon Bombers.

The MCG can seat 100,000 people and the Australian Football League (AFL) had hoped health authorities would allow the match to be played in front of a capacity stadium. However, officials ordered ticket sales to be capped at 85 percent of capacity, up from a previous limit of 75 percent. A spokeswoman for the MCG said 78,311 people attended yesterday. One commentator for Channel 7, which broadcast the match, said "we think that's a world record crowd for any sporting event since the pandemic hit".—AFP

Sounders escape with 1-1 draw against LAFC

LOS ANGELES: Seattle's Brad Smith grabbed the second-half equalizer as the Sounders escaped with a 1-1 draw against Los Angeles FC in a clash of Major League Soccer Western Conference heavyweights on Saturday.

LAFC, who were without forwards Carlos Vela and Diego Rossi, had seized the lead in the second minute on a free kick from Eduard Atuesta from just outside the penalty area. Xavier Arreaga was whistled for a foul on Kwadwo Opoku and Atuesta slotted the free kick underneath the Sounders' defensive wall and past diving Seattle keeper Stefan Frei. The goal in the 85th second was the fastest ever scored by LAFC.

The lead would stand through the opening half, Seattle's best chance to pull back a shot before the



LOS ANGELES: Pablo Sisiniega #23 of Los Angeles FC makes a save against the Seattle Sounders during the second half at Banc of California Stadium on Saturday in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

Sports

Below-par Real Madrid held by Betis with Chelsea test to come

MADRID: Real Madrid handed the initiative back to Atletico Madrid in La Liga on Saturday by drawing at home to Real Betis, a result that raises doubts about the team's condition ahead of tomorrow's Champions League semi-final against Chelsea.

Eden Hazard was thrown on for the last 15 minutes of the 0-0 draw at Valdebebas in what was only the Belgian's second appearance in three months but Madrid could not find a way through. Real Madrid struggled for chances and the concern will be that numerous injuries and fatigue are catching up with Zinedine Zidane's side at a crucial moment in the season.

"It's two points dropped, that's obvious, we lacked a lot going forward, especially at the start of the game," said Zidane. "We weren't sharp but that can happen. We have to go again on Tuesday." They play Chelsea at home tomorrow in the first leg of the Champions League semi-finals and it is possible none of Toni Kroos, Sergio Ramos, Ferland Mendy, Fede Valverde or Lucas Vazquez, all absent due to injury, will return. Kroos and Mendy have the best chance, with Zidane saying afterwards they would be assessed on Sunday.

Hazard could feature against his former club after coming on for the final quarter of an hour but the fact Zidane waited so long to introduce him suggests he is still not considered match fit, having now played 30

minutes since the end of January. "I think in 15 minutes he did well," said Zidane. "He played with spark, with energy. The most important thing was nothing was bothering him. He can make a difference, absolutely, and we're going to need him."

After an impressive few weeks in which Real Madrid knocked Liverpool out of the Champions League and became favourites to overhaul Atletico in La Liga, Zidane's team have now been held to three draws in their last four matches, all of them without scoring a goal.

Neither side had much success in the first half but the game opened up in the second as the rain poured down and the ball began to skid across the turf. Rodrygo struck the bar, his overhit cross almost flying in, before Betis had three chances in 10 minutes, the best of them falling to Borja Iglesias but he hesitated and Dani Carvajal intervened.

Madrid, though, came again as Luka Modric's bending effort was saved before Marcelo found space in the box but skewed his finish wide of the post. Marcelo and Alvaro Odriozola had come on, with Zidane deploying wing-backs to find a winner, and then Hazard was introduced with 15 minutes left. Hazard weaved inside and picked out Vinicius Junior but Vinicius slipped with the goal in sight. Madrid had to settle for a point. — AFP



MADRID: Real Madrid's French defender Raphael Varane touches his head at the end of the Spanish League football match between Real Madrid CF and Real Betis at the Alfredo di Stefano stadium in Valdebebas, on the outskirts of Madrid, on Saturday. — AFP



MAINZ: Bayern Munich's German forward Thomas Mueller (center) reacts during the German first division Bundesliga football match Mainz 05 vs FC Bayern Munich, in Mainz, western Germany, on Saturday. — AFP

Bayern miss chance to secure title after loss

BERLIN: Bayern Munich blew the chance to clinch the Bundesliga title for a ninth successive season on Saturday as the club world champions crashed to a 2-1 defeat away to Mainz. First-half goals by Jonathan Burkardt and Robin Quaison sealed Mainz's third straight win, pulling them away from the relegation fight and forcing Bayern to wait to be crowned champions. On his return from a knee injury, Bayern striker Robert Lewandowski scored just before the end to leave him four short of Gerd Mueller's all-time record of 40 Bundesliga goals in a season. "We just have to put the game behind us, we just weren't assertive enough," said Bayern coach Hansi Flick who wants to leave at the end of the season.

'Too few chances'

"That was too little from us in the first half, you can't win games like that, in terms of body language and our build up," said Bayern captain Manuel Neuer, who was at fault for the opening goal. "We created too few chances and were punished for our own mistakes."

Mainz made sure Bayern had to put the champagne back on ice by capitalizing on the visitors' errors. With just three minutes gone, a speculative shot by Germany Under-21 striker Burkardt from the edge of the area deceived Neuer and flew into the Bayern net.

The hosts doubled their lead before the break when Swedish striker Quaison got in between David Alaba and Thomas Mueller to power his header past Neuer. Bayern showed an unusual lack of discipline as Jerome Boateng, Leon Goretzka and Alaba were all shown yellow cards within six minutes late in the first half.

Mainz had also been 2-0 up at half-time against

Bayern at the Allianz Arena in January until the hosts roared back to win 5-2 when Lewandowski scored twice. However, this time Mainz held their nerve to earn their first home win over Bayern for nearly a decade. Lewandowski's goal four minutes into added time was the visitors' only consolation.

Haaland nets twice

In Wolfsburg, Erling Braut Haaland netted twice as Borussia Dortmund boosted their hopes of qualifying for the Champions League next season with a 2-0 away win. Haaland sprinted clear of the defense and fired home from a tight angle with just 12 minutes gone. Dortmund played with 10 men for the last 31 minutes after 17-year-old England midfielder Jude Bellingham was sent off for a second yellow card. However, Dortmund doubled their lead when Mahmoud Dahoud won the ball on the edge of his own penalty area and his pass found Haaland.

The 20-year-old raced clear and slotted past Wolfsburg goalkeeper Koen Casteels for his 37th goal in 38 games this season in all competitions. With three games left, fifth-placed Dortmund are one point from the Champions League places and face RB Leipzig, Mainz and Bayer Leverkusen.

Haaland roared "Yeesss!" at the final whistle and defender Manuel Akanji said Dortmund are determined to play Champions League football next season. "A few weeks ago we were still 11 points behind Wolfsburg, now it's just two," said Akanji. "We're not giving up and want to win every game."

Dortmund's cause was boosted later when Eintracht Frankfurt, who are a place and a point above them in the table, lost 3-1 at Bayer Leverkusen. The hosts scored second-half goals by Leon Bailey and a deft Lucas Alario chip. Frankfurt top-scorer Andre Silva headed in his 25th goal in added time just before Kerem Demirbay crashed in Leverkusen's third from outside the area to seal the win. Finland striker Joel Pohjanpalo struck a hat-trick as Union Berlin romped to a 3-1 home win against Werder Bremen to move up to seventh and a point from the European places. — AFP

the first leg of his side's Champions League semi-final against Real Madrid tomorrow. However, Chelsea's superior strength in depth showed against an injury-hit West Ham without Michail Antonio, Declan Rice and Aaron Cresswell. "We did not talk one word about Super League from Tuesday on," said Tuchel. "I felt everybody very concentrated and enjoying the focus on just the game."

The result could have been very different had Chelsea defender Cesar Azpilicueta not escaped strong claims for handball inside his own area as he deflected a shot wide midway through the first half. Werner has failed to live up to his £50 million (\$69 million) price tag since joining from RB Leipzig last summer.

But the German ended his two-month goal drought with a composed finish from Ben Chilwell's cross two minutes before half-time. After the break, though, Werner showed the profligacy in front of goal that has characterized his season as he somehow turned the rebound wide after Lukasz Fabianski parried Mason Mount's long-range effort.

The in-form Jesse Lingard came closest to an equalizer for the hosts as his looping effort drifted just wide. But the Hammers' hopes were killed off 10 minutes from time when Fabian Balbuena was harshly sent off after a VAR review for his follow-through on Chilwell after clearing the ball. "I thought it was a rubbish decision," said West Ham boss David Moyes. "I think it is a decision made by somebody who has never played the game." — AFP

News in brief

PSG top of Ligue 1

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe scored twice for the second game in a row but picked up a thigh injury as Paris Saint-Germain climbed top of Ligue 1 on Saturday with a 3-1 victory at Metz. The France striker was rested for the midweek cup rout of Angers and returned to bolster PSG's title hopes as he netted either side of Fabien Centonze's equaliser to send the defending champions above Lille. However, Mbappe was substituted in the closing minutes with a heavily strapped thigh, a worrying sign for PSG ahead of Wednesday's Champions League semi-final first leg at home to Manchester City. Mauro Icardi sealed the victory with a penalty a minute from time. "He took a knock to his quad, it's a dead leg. We don't think it's anything serious," Pochettino told Canal Plus, playing down concerns Mbappe could miss the City game. — AFP

Watford promoted

LONDON: Watford bounced back to the Premier League at the first time of asking after Saturday's 1-0 win over Millwall sealed promotion. Brentford's win at Bournemouth earlier in the day meant that only three points would be good enough for Xisco Munoz's men to be promoted alongside Norwich, who came down with them last season. Prior to Munoz's appointment on December 20, automatic promotion looked unlikely after dip in form under Vladimir Ivic. However, 17 wins in just 24 league games under the Spaniard helped amass a 10-point lead over Brentford, who have just three games left to play. Brentford are now at least guaranteed a playoff spot with Bournemouth, Barnsley and Swansea almost certain to join them in the battle for the final promotion place. — AFP

Crotone survives

MILAN: Nigerian forward Simy scored twice as Crotone delayed their Serie A relegation on Saturday with a 4-3 win over fellow strugglers Parma. Both clubs look destined for Serie B next season with second-last Parma 11 points off safety with five games left, and Crotone two points behind. A defeat would have seen the Calabrians mathematically demoted, instead they grabbed their first away win this season. Also, eighth-placed Sassuolo kept their push for Europa League football alive with a 1-0 win over Sampdoria. Earlier, Genoa boosted their hopes of Serie A survival with a 2-0 win over Ligurian rivals Spezia, who still risk a return to the second-division. — AFP

Super League teams in UEFA president's sight

LONDON: UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has refused to rule out a ban from next season's Champions League for all 12 clubs involved in trying to set up a breakaway European Super League. But Ceferin also told Britain's Mail yesterday that the six English clubs — Chelsea, Manchester City, Arsenal, Tottenham, Liverpool and Manchester United — deserve greater leniency as they were the first to back out.

He said their stance was in contrast to that of Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus, ridiculed by Ceferin as "the ones who feel that Earth is flat and... think the Super League still exists." In the space of 48 hours beginning last Sunday, UEFA, aided by fans and politicians, quelled a mutiny by English, Spanish and Italian clubs attempting to form a quasi-closed tournament designed to supplant the existing Champions League.



UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin

Nine clubs, including all six in England, subsequently withdrew. But Ceferin, who thanked British Prime Minister Boris Johnson for his opposition to the Super League, said disciplinary action remained an option for UEFA, European football's governing body. "Everyone has to take consequences for what they did and we cannot pretend nothing happened," he warned.

However, the Slovenian lawyer, elected UEFA president in 2016, added: "But for me it's a clear difference between the English clubs and the other six. They pulled out first, they admitted they made a mistake. You have to have some greatness to say: 'I was wrong.'"

"But everyone will be held responsible. In what way, we will see," he said. The irony is that UEFA were on the brink of enacting changes that would have entrenched the position of many of the established Champions League powers behind the Super League. But Ceferin said he was open to dropping the two extra Champions League spots in an expanded competition that were meant to be reserved for clubs based on their historic record. — AFP

Werner tightens Chelsea's grip on top four

LONDON: Chelsea took control of the battle to secure Champions League football next season as Timo Werner's goal earned a 1-0 win over West Ham on Saturday. After a week dominated by England's 'big six' aiming to guarantee top level European football every season via a breakaway Super League (ESL), Chelsea and Liverpool turned their attentions to trying to earn a top-four Premier League finish on the field.

Manchester City, Manchester United, Arsenal and Tottenham were the other four English clubs involved in proposals for the ESL, which collapsed within 48 hours of its launch after a furious backlash from governments, governing bodies, players and fans.

The Blues are now in pole position for fourth as just a second Premier League goal in 22 games for Werner opened up a three-point advantage over the fifth-placed Hammers. Thomas Tuchel blamed the distraction of huge protests outside Stamford Bridge on the night the ESL proposals crumbled for a 0-0 draw against Brighton last Tuesday.

The German made six changes with one eye also on



LONDON: Chelsea's German striker Timo Werner (2nd left) looks on as his shot beats West Ham United's Polish goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski for the opening goal of the English Premier League football match between West Ham United and Chelsea at The London Stadium, in east London on Saturday. — AFP

Usman, Namajunas secure KO title fight wins as UFC welcomes back fans

LOS ANGELES: The UFC welcomed back American fans for their first live event in over a year on Saturday night and three of its greatest fighters — Kamaru Usman, Rose Namajunas and Valentina Shevchenko — rose to the occasion with stunning knockouts at UFC 261 in Jacksonville, Florida.

Nigerian-American welterweight champion Usman knocked American challenger Jorge Masvidal out cold with a thunderous straight right to the chin at 1.02 of the second round in the main event and warned those gathered — and other fighters — “I’m still getting better.”

“Jacksonville, Florida, You wanted violence? You’re welcome,” Usman said afterwards as he moved his unbeaten run to 18 fights. “I told everybody... I am pound for pound the best fighter on the planet right now.”

The pair had met back in July last year with the 33-year-old Usman overpowering his 36-year-old opponent in the clinch and on the ground and pounding away at will across five rounds. This time he got straight to the point with a punch that saw Masvidal crumpled to a knockout for the first time in a career that has now taken in 50 fights.

Before that moment of magic, though, the night had been all about Namajunas. The 28-year-old American strawweight challenger seized back the title with a stunning head-kick knockout of Zhang Weili with just 1 minute and 18 seconds gone of the first round, bringing to an end to the Chinese fighter’s 21-fight winning streak in a flash of pure, poised skill.

“I’m the best,” Namajunas said in the middle of the cage afterwards. “I did it

again. I didn’t see her move and I wasn’t sure if she could come back from that. So just a couple of hammer fists and it was out.”

Namajunas had won the strawweight crown in 2017 but had lost it in 2019 and struggled with her inner demons, and motivation. On Sunday, she was at her brilliant best, even though the fight only lasted just over a minute. Namajunas was a blur of movement and had the 30-year-old Zhang looking for a low kick when she went high. And it was all over.

The first of the three title fights on the card saw Shevchenko of Kyrgyzstan use her superior strength and a nine-centimeter height advantage to overpower Brazilian challenger Jessica Andrade. There were five takedowns by the champion in the first round, and one early in the second that gave her top position, and she pounded away to take the TKO with 3.12 on the clock.

That made it seven straight wins for a 33-year-old fighter in Shevchenko who somehow still seems to be getting better and, like Usman and Namajunas, looks destined for the UFC Hall of Fame. “I like to surprise people,” she said afterwards, in the understatement of the night.

‘It’s just my history’

Saturday’s fight card inside the VyStar Veterans Memorial Arena welcomed American fans to a live UFC event for the first time since Las Vegas last March. Restrictions on public gatherings due to the global pandemic had forced the UFC to either host fan-free events in the US, or to take up residence inside a restricted “sports hub” in Abu Dhabi.



JACKSONVILLE: Kamaru Usman of Nigeria punches Jorge Masvidal of the United States during the Welterweight Title bout of UFC 261 at VyStar Veterans Memorial Arena on Saturday in Jacksonville, Florida. — AFP

There were an estimated 15,000 people gathered Saturday despite the US’ continued struggles with COVID-19. Local officials had in the hours before the event reported 7,411 new cases of the coronavirus on Saturday, and 53 deaths.

There had been a whiff of controversy in the lead up to the card when

Namajunas referenced the American Cold War anti-communist slogan of “better dead than red” when describing how she was motivating herself before facing the Chinese champion.

Zhang dismissed the notion that she might have taken the words to heart — or had even taken them seriously — and Namajunas attempted to clear the

matter up shortly after victory. “All the stuff in the media was not my intent, to ever personally attack her. It’s just my history and my past and that’s it,” said Namajunas, whose parents had escaped to the US from Soviet-era Lithuania. “I love all people, all cultures and everybody in the world.” — AFP



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