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Govt boycotts Assembly as MPs occupy ministers' seats

Speaker adjourns Assembly sessions until after Ramadan



By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Opposition MPs yesterday occupied the front row of the National Assembly chamber reserved for ministers, triggering a government boycott of the session and forcing the speaker to adjourn meetings until after the fasting month of Ramadan.

Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem told the Assembly that he was informed by the government that the prime minister and ministers will not attend the session because MPs have occupied their seats. Ghanem then adjourned Assembly sessions until after Ramadan as opposition MPs applauded. The opposition said it resorted to this measure to force the prime minister to face a grilling in the chamber.

Opposition MPs arrived in the chamber early and sat in the ministers' seats. They pasted small stickers in front of them reading "We have sworn 1962" in reference to taking the oath on the constitution, which was issued in 1962.

The opposition has been protesting what they call an unconstitutional decision taken on March 30 to postpone grillings of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah until the end of 2022. Opposition MPs said the decision is null and void because it breaches the constitution and because the voting on the decision was illegal.

The government strongly criticized opposition MPs

for "the unprecedented" action, saying what happened violates "established parliamentary norms and the provisions of the constitution". The statement, read by Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Mubarak Al-Harees, said the government boycotted the session because some MPs sat in the ministers' seats.

The statement said such actions will obstruct carrying out important work needed by the people and the country. The government also called on MPs to cooperate with the government and respect the constitution.

Pro-government MP Saadoun Hammad also lashed out at opposition MPs for taking this unprecedented move and called for forming a medical committee to examine the mental condition of MPs. Opposition MP Hasan Jowhar blamed the government for forcing MPs to take such action. He insisted that it was the prime minister and the government which violated the constitution by delaying grillings.

Opposition MP Marzouq Al-Khalifa said MPs will continue to prevent sessions from convening until the prime minister accepts to be grilled. He called on ministers to resign en masse and appealed to HH the Amir to resolve this standoff as he is the only person who has the solution in his hands, in a clear reference to dissolving the Assembly, as HH the Amir holds the power to dissolve the house and order fresh elections.

KUWAIT: Opposition Members of Parliament wait for the session to start after occupying the front row of the National Assembly chamber reserved for ministers at the Abdullah Al-Salem Hall yesterday.— Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Ramadan Kareem

Seeking Allah's forgiveness after prayer

By Hassan T Bwambale

Believers should always remember Allah (swt), glorify and extol Him, and seek forgiveness from Him. Allah (swt) says what can be translated as: "Just as We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting to you Our verses and purifying you and teaching you the Book and wisdom and teaching you that which you did not know, so remember Me: I will remember you. And be grateful to Me and do not deny Me." (Al-Baqarah 2: 151 - 152)

We also read in the Noble Quran what can be translated as: "O you who believe, remember Allah a lot, and exalt Him morning and afternoon. It is He who confers blessings upon you, and His angels (ask Him to do so) that He may bring you out from darkness into light. And ever is He, to the believers, Merciful." (Al-Ahzab 41 - 42)

When the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) was being barraged with taunts and abuse by the enemies of Islam, and he was made the target of a malicious campaign in order to frustrate his mission, the believers were instructed not to listen to those absurd taunts nor become involved in the doubts and suspicions spread by the enemies. They were rather instructed to turn to Allah (swt) and remember Him more than usual in a special way. "To glorify Allah (swt) morning and evening" means to glorify Him constantly, to express His exaltedness and sublimity.

What's better than gold and silver? Abu Ad-Darda (ra) narrated that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Should I not inform you of the best of your deeds, and the purest of them with your Lord, and the highest of them in your ranks, and what is better for you than spending gold and silver, and better for you than meeting your enemy and striking their necks, and they strike your necks?" They said, "Of course." He said, "The remembrance of Allah (the Infinitely Sublime)." (Then) Mu'adh bin Jabal (may Allah be pleased with him) said, "There is nothing that brings more salvation

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HRW: Israel committing 'apartheid'

JERUSALEM: Human Rights Watch said yesterday that Israel is committing the crime of "apartheid" by seeking to maintain Jewish "domination" over Palestinians and its own Arab population, an explosive allegation Israel firmly rejected. Currently under investigation by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes, Israel blasted HRW's accusations as "preposterous and false", accusing the New York-

based group of having "a long-standing anti-Israeli agenda". Palestinian Authority prime minister Mohammad Shtayeh welcomed the "remarkable" HRW report and said he hoped it might lead the international community to "bear its responsibilities" and hold Israel "accountable for its crimes."

The 213-page report finds that the Israeli government is the "single authority" with primary control "over the area between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea". That area includes the occupied West Bank, the blockaded Gaza Strip, annexed east Jerusalem as well as all the territory within Israel's 1948 borders.

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Saudi destroys bomb-laden boat off Red Sea port

RIYADH: Saudi forces yesterday destroyed an explosive-laden boat off the coast of the Red Sea port of Yanbu, the defense ministry said. "A bomb-laden unmanned (vessel) was intercepted and destroyed this morning," the ministry said in a statement, published by the official Saudi Press Agency.

"Naval units were able to detect and monitor the activity of the bomb-laden (boat) in the Red Sea waters off the shores of Yanbu." No group has

so far claimed responsibility for the incident, which the ministry said was under investigation.

The incident comes as fighting escalates in neighboring Yemen between Saudi-backed government forces and Houthi rebels. Yanbu, 860 kilometers (535 miles) east of the Saudi capital Riyadh, lies some 975 kilometers north of Saudi's frontier with Yemen.

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Iran warships 'approached' 2 US vessels

DUBAI: Warships from Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps "aggressively" approached two American vessels in Gulf waters earlier this month, the US navy said yesterday, the first tense incident this year. This comes amid talks in Vienna between Iran and major powers on the

mechanics of a US return to a landmark 2015 nuclear deal abandoned by former president Donald Trump.

The US Navy's Fifth Fleet said an Iranian Harth 55 vessel-a catamaran-type ship-along with three fast attack crafts, approached the two US coast guard boats conducting routine security patrols on April 2. "The Harth 55 repeatedly crossed the bows of the US vessels at an unnecessarily close range, including crossings both (US ships) Wrangell and Monomoy's bows at a 70 yard (64 meter) closest point of approach," a US statement said.

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JERUSALEM: Palestinian protesters wave the national flag outside the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem's Old City Monday.— AFP



MARIB, Yemen: Fighters loyal to Yemen's Saudi-backed government walk at a position near the frontline against the Houthi rebels in Yemen's northeastern province of Marib Monday.— AFP

Danish group buys Agility's GIL for \$4.2bn

COPENHAGEN: Danish transport and logistics group DSV Panalpina said yesterday it would acquire Global Integrated Logistics (GIL) from Kuwait's Agility for \$4.2 billion, making it one of the world's largest companies in the sector. The

deal comes as growing demand for global freight causes bottlenecks in supply chains and sends prices soaring. Two years after it acquired its Swiss rival Panalpina, DSV said its latest acquisition would make it the world's "third largest transport and logistics company".

Combined revenue would rise around 23 percent, to 142 billion Danish kroner (\$22 billion), it added. It said its combined workforce would total more than 70,000 employees.

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Local

Amir, Crown Prince meet Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace yesterday. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah also received His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad at Bayan Palace. — KUNA photos

Universities study to include blended learning

KUWAIT: Minister of Oil and Minister of Higher Education Dr Mohammad Al-Fares said on Monday that the plan of resuming study at universities includes blended learning, which means both online and regular education. In a press statement, the minister

said that separating the Ministry of Education from the Ministry of Higher Education aimed at upgrading education levels at the two ministries and giving further attention and concentration on them. The Ministry of Higher Education focuses on two systems: learning at the country's universities and overseas scholarships, he said, noting that "we want to help the Kuwait University be in the ranks of the prestigious universities". Concerning the scholarship plan for the next year, Al-Fares declared two internal and external strategies, which aim to make scholarship plans compatible with the labor mar-

ket, noting that this is part of the government's work program. He said that he is responsible before the government for offering an integrated plan to make harmony between scholarships and the needs of labor market. He urged youths to search for specializations needed by the labor market, stating that there would be a link between the private universities or scholarships in opening some specializations, including hospitals management. He referred that the labor market controls outcomes and that scholarships for engineers have been suspended. The minister revealed some rare engineering special-

izations, including mineral, safety and environment. He said that there is coordination with the Civil Service Commission to define job descriptions for many of education outputs in engineering, referring to harmonizing the labor market in the coming period. Online learning was not a new tool as it has been implemented in Kuwait University, he said, asserting that it will be used by many members of teaching staff in the future along with the regular learning. He spoke about a number of locations of the Kuwaiti University like Shuwaikh, Jabriya, Khaldiya, Kaifan and Al-Shadadia. — KUNA



Minister Dr Mohammad Al-Fares

Burgan Bank celebrates 20 years of partnership with KACCH, BACCH

KUWAIT: Since its establishment in 1977, Burgan Bank has sought to influence a positive change in the community. Stepping beyond its banking activities, Burgan Bank's initiatives contribute to the achievement of its social responsibility's strategy and vision, aiming to advance the country as a whole and serve the community better through impactful humanitarian efforts. The Bank's continuous support to the Kuwait Association for the Care of Children in Hospital (KACCH) and Bayt Abdullah Children's Hospice Care (BACCH) for the second consecutive decade is a perfect example of this commitment to the nation's welfare.

Throughout their 20-year long partnership, Burgan Bank was keen to align with the KACCH and BACCH mission and purpose. The Bank's participation in KACCH and BACCH activities falls under the framework of sustaining the leading NGOs' growth and success to enhance

their prominent role catered towards providing care to hospitalized children, which resulted in a long history of remarkable achievements.

Burgan Bank's contributions have helped support the development of healthcare and pediatric facilities in several hospitals where KACCH provides its services. Through the annual donations, KACCH has been able to recruit, train, and educate Child Life Specialists and expand the reach of its Child Life Programmers in Kuwait. Today, KACCH and BACCH are considered among the largest charitable institutions in the country, assisting children and their families to fund treatment and recovery from serious diseases and providing palliative care services for fatal illnesses, further to helping them overcome stress and negative effects of hospitalization.

Commenting on this partnership, Manager - Public Relations, Hessa Hussain Al-Najadah said: "It is with great

pleasure that we celebrate 20 years of distinguished partnership with the Kuwait Association for the Care of Children in Hospital (KACCH) and Bayt Abdullah Children's Hospice Care (BACCH). Throughout the past years, the two associations did not spare any effort in delivering their noble mission and providing full support to the children and their families during their arduous journey dealing with challenging medical cases. As part of its social responsibility, Burgan Bank will continue to play its role effectively in making people's lives better as this remains a top priority. Today, we would like to reiterate our continuous support to KACCH and BACCH in order to enable them to fulfill their responsibilities."

Dr Hilal Al-Sayer, President of KACCH and BACCH, said: "On behalf of the Board of Directors of KACCH and BACCH, it gives me great pleasure to thank Burgan Bank for its 20 years of continued and loyal Sponsorship of the KACCH Child Life programs in hospitals in Kuwait. Over the years, your contributions have supported the development of the Child Life profession in Kuwait, enabling our Child Life Specialists to help children and their families cope with their healthcare experiences, now in seven government hospitals. We very much appreciate and thank you



KUWAIT: Margaret Al-Sayer, Founding director of KACCH and BACCH with Hessa Hussain Al-Najadah, Manager - Public Relations at Burgan Bank and Leena Al Bassam, Officer - Public Relations at Burgan Bank.

for your continued support."

As part of this partnership and with the aim to nurture its in-house sense of social responsibility, Burgan Bank has been engaging its employees through regular visits to the pediatric wards of several hospitals including Al-Amiri Hospital, Makki Juma Hospital, and Al-Adan Hospital during Ramadan and other

occasions.

In this context, Burgan Bank has launched its full-fledged community program entitled 'ENGAGE' - Together to be the change, which sheds light on important aspects affecting every society segment by promoting social welfare through continuous educational, cultural, social, and health initiatives.

HRW: Israel committing...

Continued from Page 1

Within that territory, there is "an overarching Israeli government policy to maintain the domination by Jewish Israelis over Palestinians," HRW said. The rights group pointed to Israeli policies targeting Palestinians that include movement restrictions, land confiscation, forcible population transfer, denial of residency rights and suspension of civil rights.

Human Rights Watch said that while apartheid

was initially coined with respect to institutional persecution of black people in South Africa, it is now a universally recognized legal term. An apartheid system is defined by "inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them," according to the Apartheid Convention. Omar Shakir, HRW's Israel and Palestine director, told AFP there have been warnings for years that "apartheid is around the corner".

"I think it's quite clear that that threshold has been crossed," Shakir said from Jordan. A US citizen, Shakir was the first foreign national deported by Israel for allegedly supporting an international boycott against Israel, an accusation he denied. — AFP

reward." (Muslim # 1,006)

Seeking forgiveness according to the Noble Quran. The Arabic word for seeking forgiveness from God (Allah) is Al-Istighfar, which also means to seek strength and determination from Allah (the Almighty) in order to refrain from sins.

Allah (swt) tells us in the Noble Quran what can be translated as: "Say, O My Servants who have transgressed against their (own) souls, despair not of the Mercy of Allah; for Allah forgives all sins. For He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (Az-Zumar: 53)

Allah (swt) also says what can be translated as: "It is He Who accepts repentance from His servants and pardons evil acts and knows what they do." (Ash-Shura, 25)

Allah's forgiveness according to the Sunnah (sayings, acts, and approvals of Prophet Muhammad - PBUH). Abu Huraira (ra) narrated that Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said, "There are one hundred (parts of) mercy for Allah and He has sent down out of these one part of mercy upon the jinn and human beings and the insects and it is because of this (one part) that they love one another, show kindness to one another and even the beast treats its young one with affection. And Allah has reserved 99 parts of mercy, with which He will treat His servants on the Day of Resurrection." (Saheeh Muslim # 6,652)

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

Danish group buys Agility's...

Continued from Page 1

DSV Panalpina's largest division, Air & Sea, would be particularly bolstered by the purchase,

Iran warships 'approached'...

Continued from Page 1

"The Harth 55 closed aggressively on Wrangell's bow, resulting in Wrangell maneuvering to avoid collision while sounding five short blasts from the ship's horn."

US navy footage showed an Iranian ship cut in front of a US vessel, which abruptly moved to avoid collision. "The US crews issued multiple warnings via bridge-to-bridge radio, five short blasts from the ships' horns, and while the Harth 55 responded to the bridge-to-bridge radio queries, they continued the unsafe manoeuvres," the statement added.

Saudi destroys bomb-laden...

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Houthi insurgents are ramping up a bloody offensive to seize the oil-rich Marib region, the Yemeni government's last stronghold in northern Yemen.

The Houthis, who are battling the Saudi-led military coalition that intervened in Yemen's war in 2015, have also stepped up drone and missile strikes on Saudi targets, including its oil facilities. The rebels have used bomb-rigged boats in the past to target the kingdom.

Last week, Greece said it will transfer a Patriot missile battery to Saudi Arabia to protect its critical energy infrastructure, as the Gulf kingdom grapples with the growing attacks. Maritime security firm Dryad Global said it had received reports that a ship had been "attacked" off Yanbu. But the firm later said

transporting close to 2.8 million containers and more than 1.6 million tons of air freight annually. The group said the acquisition would also increase its warehousing capacity-critical to limit the effects of bottlenecks-by more than 1.4 million square meters (15 million square feet). The transaction is due to be finalized in the third quarter of 2021.

Founded in Denmark in 1976, DSV was until now the fifth-largest transport and logistics group, behind world leaders such as Kuehne + Nagel and DHL. — AFP

It said the Iranian ships moved away after approximately three hours in the encounter, that the US navy "deemed unsafe and unprofessional". The remaining partners to the 2015 nuclear deal have been engaged in discussions aimed to return Washington to the accord it withdrew from and to lift the sanctions it reimposed on Iran, and Tehran's return to nuclear commitments it cut in retaliation. Iran has repeatedly demanded that all US sanctions reimposed since 2018 be lifted, and stressed its readiness to return to nuclear commitments once it has been verified. A US delegation is present at Vienna but holding no direct talks with Iranians, while the European Union acts as an intermediary and coordinates between the two.

Meanwhile, Iran's government said yesterday an investigation had been ordered into leaked audio of Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif bemoaning the military's influence, after its emergence stirred controversy ahead of presidential elections. — AFP

the ship was "not involved in the incident" and it will continue to investigate.

Meanwhile, Yemen government forces have thwarted a "massive" Houthi attack west of Marib city and reinforced their positions as they defend their last northern stronghold, two military commanders and an official said yesterday.

But they said the Iran-backed insurgents had advanced in four areas of the Mashaj front, another key battlefield in their battle to seize the oil-rich region from Saudi-led coalition-backed government forces. Fierce fighting on multiple frontlines around the strategic city has left at least 67 dead over the past 24 hours, including some 27 loyalist personnel, the three sources said.

According to one of the commanders taking part in the defense of Marib, the government forces "succeeded in repelling a massive attack" at Al-Tala'a Al-Hamra, about 18 kilometers (11 miles) west of the city. "Losing it would enable (the rebels) to advance towards hills and sites close to Marib, and the road would be clear towards the western entrance to the city," the source added. — AFP

Seeking Allah's forgiveness...

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from the punishment of Allah than remembrance of Him." (Al-Albani rated it as Saheeh (authentic) in Saheeh At-Tirmidhi # 3,377)

You don't need to be wealthy to give charity or to seek forgiveness. Abu Dharr Al-Ghifarey (ra) narrated that some people among the Companions of the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said to the Prophet (PBUH): "O Messenger of Allah, the wealthy have made off with the rewards; they pray as we pray, they fast as we fast, and they give (much) in charity by virtue of their wealth." He (PBUH) said, "Has Allah not provided you with (easy) things from which to give charity? Indeed, in every glorification of Allah (saying Subhan Allah), there is a charity (for you); in every elevation (saying Allah is the Greatest) there is charity; in every celebration of His praise (saying Al-hamdu lillah) there is charity; in every declaration that He is One (saying La ilaha illa-Lah) there is charity; in enjoining of good there is charity and in forbidding evil there is charity; and in enjoying marital intimacy is charity." They (his Companions) asked, "O Messenger of Allah, is there a reward when we satisfy our sexual desire?" He replied, "Don't you think that if he satisfied his desire illicitly, it would be a sin? So likewise, if he satisfied it licitly, for him is

Local

Health Minister makes positive remarks during Cabinet meeting

Penal code amendment to imprison any person who harms others

KUWAIT: The Cabinet on Monday held its weekly session at Seif Palace under chairmanship of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Following the session, Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah stated that the Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Humoud Al-Sabah addressed his fellow ministers about the latest developments related to the coronavirus, amid spread of the contagion and rise of deaths and infection cases globally.

The health minister has informed the ministers about the local health status, based on statistics that have indicated that the number of the daily cases since the start of the pandemic as of Monday has amounted to more than 266,000, while the count of recoveries have exceeded 250,000, with a 93.6 percent proportion. He also explained to the executives precautionary measures that have been undertaken to stem spread of the pandemic in the country through vaccinations with Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca, where nearly 1.088 million people have been inoculated in Kuwait, with the aim of reaching the aspired community immunity. The Cabinet called on citizens and residents to continue adhering to health guidelines, and seek to take the anti-COVID vaccines to contain the contagion. Moreover, it expressed appreciation for the ministry's "great efforts" to contain the virus.

Prison for harm

The ministers were apprised with a recommendation by the legal affairs committee with respect of the bill to amend some provisions of the penal code 16/1960 stipulating imprisonment and fining any person who may threaten others to harm them, their reputation or their funds. The Cabinet approved the draft law and referred it to His Highness the Amir pending submission to the National Assembly. The ministers were briefed about a recommendation from the commission to join the Arab treaty concerning transfer and

transplant of human organs and barring trade in these organs. The Cabinet endorsed the bill and submitted it to His Highness the Amir pending submission to the National Assembly.

Moreover, the Cabinet examined a recommendation with regard of suspending vacations' accounts (2020-2021) for civil servants subject to provisions of the civil service law and a bill amending some provisions of the decree 140/2003 granting a license for establishing a local branch of the Dutch Maastricht Business School and another draft law regarding modifications for licensing establishment of the aviation technology college. Other bills that were under examination included a draft law concerning approval of a technical teaching accord between Kuwait and Sierra Leone and another for approving an accord with Indonesia for cooperation in the sector of higher studies and scientific research. The Cabinet approved these bills and referred them to His Highness the Amir.

Meanwhile, the ministers studied a recommendation by the economic affairs committee regarding the priority for purchase of national products by the government after amending law 49/2016 regarding the public tenders and the cabinet decided to assign the central apparatus for public tenders to examine the issue. Furthermore, the ministers were informed about a recommendation regarding the strategic vision of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, where the directorate would take what it sees as necessary measures to ensure efficiency of operating and high quality of services at Kuwait International Airport, in addition to creating work opportunities for Kuwaiti youth and achieving financial proceeds for the state.

Violence against Palestinians

The ministers also discussed the political affairs in light of the report relating to the latest developments on the political arena on both Arab and international levels. In this regard, the Cabinet followed up, with great concern, acts of violence against the Palestinian

Hasan, said: "As per our annual custom, this year we launched several girgean activities to celebrate one of our favorite holidays. Although girgean may look a little different this year, we still made it a point to engage with our local community in an effort to entertain them and spread the joyful spirit of girgean. We are looking forward to spearheading even more activities that will deepen our relationship with our local community, and we hope that we will continue to engage with them year after year."

Gulf Bank's girgean activity is one of the many sustainability initiatives that the Bank organizes and participates in at the community level, with various initiatives taking place during Ramadan. Throughout the holy month, Gulf Bank is also organizing a charity campaign in cooperation with the Kuwait Red Crescent Society to distribute electrical devices to disadvantaged families as part of its social responsibility efforts to support the local community.

Throughout the year, Gulf Bank has remained committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic, and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the Bank. Gulf Bank's social responsibility initiatives go hand in hand with international efforts, aligning with the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Also known as the Global Goals, the SDGs were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.



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

people in Al-Aqsa Mosque committed by some extremist Jewish groups since the early of the holy month of Ramadan. The Cabinet condemned these provocative attacks, hatred and racism that resulted in the injury of many Palestinian civilians. It called on the international community to take effective measures to protect the Palestinian civilians, not to violate their rights and stop these Israeli violations committed by the racist settlers that target the Arab, Islamic and Christian identity of the city of Jerusalem. In addition, the Cabinet demanded taking measures that would create right atmospheres to achieve peace and tolerance in this holy month.

Furthermore, it expressed its sincere condolences to Iraqi President Barham Salih and the Iraqi government as well as the families of victims of the fire incident that broke out in a hospital in Baghdad that led to a large number of victims. It voiced its confidence in the Iraqi government to overcome this painful incident. Meanwhile, the Cabinet voiced its sincere congratulations to President Patrice Talon of Benin on his reelection as leader of the country for a new presidential term, wishing him success. It praised the friendly relations between the State of Kuwait and the Republic of Benin, and affirmed the common aspiration to strengthen them in various fields. — KUNA

Gulf Bank celebrates girgean with local community, frontliners

KUWAIT: This year, Gulf Bank celebrated girgean with several initiatives, with employees distributing treats to frontline workers, and handing out girgean to passersby in the walking paths in residential neighborhoods - all while being mindful of necessary health and safety precautions. In recognition of, and appreciation for, the continuous efforts of frontline workers throughout the past year, Gulf Bank was keen to have them join in its girgean celebration, distributing baskets of various sweets and treats.

As part of its commitment to sustainability at the community level, and its dedication to the various initiatives it spearheads, Gulf Bank managed to create an atmosphere of entertainment and joy for passersby in the Qortuba and Mishref neighborhoods. The girgean initiative, which took place during lockdown walking hours, consisted of Gulf Bank distributing sweets and balloons to children and inviting them to join a digital girgean game, which sparked notable interaction on social media. The digital girgean game allowed community members to participate in the girgean spirit, with winners receiving valuable gifts from Gulf Bank.

Regarding this initiative, the Manager of Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, Reem

Kuwait sends oxygen cylinders to India

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Cabinet had decided during its weekly meeting on Monday to send oxygen supplies and relief items to India which is facing growing numbers of deaths and infections of the coronavirus. The move comes within the framework of the distinguished friendship ties between Kuwait and India that reflect solidarity with the friendly Indian people. The Cabinet expressed its deep concern and regret about the deteriorating health situation in India due to the spread of the new mutated strain of the coronavirus, which resulted in growing deaths and

infections due to lack of oxygen in hospitals. Meanwhile, Kuwait's foreign minister pledged his country's solidarity with India, as it faces record numbers of infections and deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic. Kuwait's "leadership, government and people" stand by the "friendly nation of India" during these "difficult circumstances," said Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, also State Minister for Cabinet Affairs. In a phone call with India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, he also extended his sincere condolences to the families of those deceased along with his heartfelt wishes for a speedy recovery for those injured. He expressed "deep concern and regret" about the deteriorating situation in the country, due to the spread of the virus' mutated strain amongst hundreds of thousands of people. Kuwait is keen to provide India with "all capabilities," he added, including oxygen cylinders, ethanol and urgent relief. — AFP

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.

Omaria Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316

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

Salimiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

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

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

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

Rumaitiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

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News in brief

KD2 car inspection fee

KUWAIT: Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Al Al-Sabah gave orders to collect a KD2 fee for vehicle inspection (KD1 for motorbikes) prior to registration renewal, which is separate from the registration renewal fee, Al-Anbaa Arabic Daily reported yesterday.

Jobs must match permits

KUWAIT: Expats can only be hired in the public sector for openings matching the job titles mentioned in their work permits, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported yesterday. Currently, expat recruitment in the public sector is only available in the health and education sectors in limited capacity.

Graduates complain

KUWAIT: In response to complaints from Kuwaiti petroleum engineering graduates, oil minister Dr Mohammad Al-Fares said that recent expatriates' hiring were done by contractors, noting that plans are in place to 'Kuwaitize' contracts' manpower, Al-Jarida Arabic daily reported yesterday.

Oil price down

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went down by 55 cents to \$63.41 per barrel Monday as opposed to \$64.96 pb Friday, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. The prices of the Brent crude and West Texas Intermediate, globally, went down with the first going down by 46 cents to \$65.65 per barrel, while the latter went down by 23 cents to \$61.91 pb. — KUNA

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: A postcard image from the collection of the British army shows grain sellers in 1928. It shows a group of dry grain (rice, chickpea, etc) vendors offering their goods for sale in front of some shops. (Source: Collection of Ali Al-Rais, Center of Research and Studies on Kuwait 2017. Prepared by: Mahmoud Aakaria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

Ramadan Diwaniya

Tourism hit hard by pandemic, but economy expected to recover: Malaysian Ambassador

'Food and clothes are different, but Ramadan rituals are the same'

By Ben Garcia

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 Malaysian Ambassador to Kuwait Muhammad Ali Selamat.

Kuwait Times: How is coronavirus being handled in your country right now?

Muhammad Ali Selamat: We have enacted a law that guides us on how we are going to react or act in the time of a pandemic. We have two agencies dealing with this pandemic - the Ministry of Health and the National Security Council. Meetings are being held daily, and we are holding regular press conferences to inform the public on the current status of the pandemic and the actions being taken to address the crisis. All the measures and strategies dealing with the pandemic are centralized to avoid confusion and chaos.

The Ministry of Health is in charge of patients and people who have contracted the virus and creates public awareness on what to do. The National Security Council tasks all other agencies to deal with other concerns related to the pandemic. Until now, we have registered 330,000 cases; 15,000 are active cases, recoveries are 95 percent of total cases and the death rate is very minimal at 0.5 percent, only around 1,300.

We take this pandemic very seriously. We restricted travel - only those who have approval can travel. We only allow Malaysians to enter, mostly students and businesspeople. They have to show travel approval before they can enter our territory. Right now, tourists are banned. In other areas, they are requiring PCR tests before they are allowed to enter. The regulations are being reviewed every two weeks - if cases show a downward trend, we will ease control, meaning maybe we could allow more activities depending on the local situations.

Schools opened just last month for face-to-face classes. Some universities and colleges are implementing a hybrid system of studies on a case-by-case basis. Students must be in laboratories, as this cannot be done virtually. Primary, elementary and high school students are allowed to attend school. Before we were holding classes online, but we reopened schools in March.

Kuwait Times: Many countries around the world have seen surges in the number of cases. What about your country?

Muhammad Ali: We have experienced three waves - the first was in January and February of 2020, when we contracted the virus from a Chinese tourist and from a religious group from South Korea that at that time was gathering in Kuala Lumpur. That was the first wave with only a few thousand cases. The second wave was in August and September of 2020. Many of those who brought in the virus were migrants, like those from the Philippines and Thailand. We had local elections in September, so transmissions were really high.

The third wave began in December and January until February, because we opened domestic tourism. People went on holidays, so transmission also surged. But in March we eased controls because cases declined. So we can say that we are managing the virus relatively well.

We introduced several economic packages to help our business and people to emerge from the crisis. We have launched three economic packages and stimulus amounting to \$82 billion. The packages are aimed at empowering our people to regain strength and restart again. Yes, we have people who are out of jobs, since many of our businesses were affected. The latest count is around 750,000 people. I am afraid the number will grow because we are still under the pandemic.

A big contributor to the GDP is the tourism sector. We are badly affected by the fact that people were not able to travel because of restrictions. But I am sure we will return to the pre-pandemic stage. Our projection at this time is that our economy will recover. IMF forecast Malaysia to recover positively and grow by 6.5 percent, thanks to the real estate, manufacturing and food industries. We are trying to come up with a new mechanism to open the tourism industry, and we started with local or domestic tourism. We started bilateral negotiations for a 'travel bubble' with regards to international tourism with neighboring countries such as Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei. We shall start with them before we can offer our tourism destinations again to other countries.

We are opening up slowly but cautiously. We do not want another surge because of this. We are now talking about vaccine passports in the future to ensure the health and safety of our people and travelers. We are still slowly and carefully doing our part to restart the



KUWAIT: Malaysian Ambassador to Kuwait Muhammad Ali Selamat speaks to Kuwait Times.

economy.

Kuwait Times: How many Malaysians are currently in Kuwait?

Muhammad Ali: Before the pandemic we had around 400 people from Malaysia, but after the pandemic, we only have 300.

Kuwait Times: Were any Malaysians in Kuwait infected with the virus?

Muhammad Ali: Yes, around seven people working in private companies and three students. No deaths were reported.

Ramadan celebrations

Kuwait Times: How is Ramadan observed and celebrated in your country?

Muhammad Ali: Ramadan in Malaysia is heavily influenced by Islamic teachings. We were indoctrinated by Arab traders in 15th century, so our culture is influenced by them. Ramadan in Malaysia is almost similar to religious traditions and teachings in the Arab world. But we also blend it with Malay and Nusantara cultures. Fasting during Ramadan is a religious ritual, so it is similar when it comes to rituals. It may only vary in the food we eat and clothes we wear. These are significantly different, but the rituals of Ramadan are the same.

In the place where I was born, we have a tradition that every morning before daybreak, some people roam around to wake us up to pray and eat before fasting begins. Now with the radio and new technology, this tradition has been fading quickly. In our culture, we also visit our parents before Ramadan, or at least a few days before Ramadan, to seek forgiveness and blessings, so we are ready before the holy month comes. Now that we have this pandemic, calls or video calls are made.

In school, we teach our children as early as seven years old how to fast. We normally tell them to fast at least half a day. We promise them gifts, so that at the end of the fasting period, they will get rewards. Gradually, when they become teenagers, we encourage them to do the whole month of fasting. In Malaysia, when you have a menstrual period, you are considered an adult, so you are required to fast. Also when a boy is circumcised, normally at the age of 12, we consider them as adults, so they also have to complete the whole fasting period.

Kuwait Times: What are your traditions from day one to 20 of Ramadan and the rituals during the last 10 days and Eid Al-Fitr?

Muhammad Ali: In our country, it's more about prayers and reading the Holy Quran. We also encourage people to give more charity. We also go to the mosque frequently to get closer to Allah. We base our actions on the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In our traditions, we prepare rice porridge to be distributed to needy people. The message is clear - to be united and encourage giving.

With regards to the last 10 days, normally people will visit mosques and stay there for a longer period to pray and learn the Holy Quran. Sometimes, they also take leave of absence from work during the last 10 days to spend time in the mosque to increase their faith in Allah and do more good deeds, since they are anticipating the rewards promised to them by Allah.

The last 10 days are festive until Eid. People working in Kuala Lumpur normally return to their villages to celebrate with their relatives, so you will see cars leaving and trying to return to their provinces. Shops are full, because people buy new things during Ramadan - new clothes, new furniture, almost everything. Holidays in Malaysia normally last two days, but some people will spend more days, maybe even one week, celebrating.

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Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

16- It was mentioned in an authentic hadith (narration) that whoever fasts on the Day of Doubt has disobeyed the Prophet, sallallaahu alayhi wa sallam. What is meant by the Day of Doubt?

- A. Day of Eid Al-Fitr
 B. Day of Eid Al-Adha
 C. The thirtieth of Shaaban, if sighting the crescent of Ramadan cannot be affirmed

Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

Date :
Name :
Civil ID :
Tel :
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Harris pledges \$310m US relief as Central America tackles migration

Foreign supplies arrive in COVID-stricken India

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Despite woes, Sudanese share Ramadan meal

Traditions endure despite economic troubles

WAD MADANI, Sudan: As night falls in Sudan, villagers rush to pull over travellers with a friendly roadblock of hospitality celebrating holy month of Ramadan, traditions enduring despite dire economic troubles. Rugs are rolled out on the roadside verge in an impromptu al fresco dining room to celebrate iftar, the fast-breaking evening meal to mark the end of a baking hot day without either a mouthful of food or a drop to drink.

"This is a custom that our grandparents began," said Aboulmaali Mohamed Ibrahim, offering a meal in the village of Nuba, some 50 kilometers (30 miles) south of Sudan's capital Khartoum. "They began inviting travellers for meals following the construction of this road in the 1960s." To fasting travellers, the meal is a much welcomed break from their exhausting long trips on Sudan's often rutted roads.

But to residents living in villages along the road, it is part of upholding Sudan's long-held traditions of hospitality to strangers and, amid a tough economic crisis, proof that the important things in life must remain the same. The call for the evening prayer announces the end of another fasting day. A feast is provided. Parched travellers, struggling after a day in the sun without liquid, are firstly handed a cool and refreshing squeezed juice. Jugs of the local speciality "hilw-mor", or "bitter-sweet", a drink spiced with ginger and cinnamon, is also poured into cups.

Then an array of traditional food ranging from porridge to plump dates is placed out for all to share. While some villagers are laying out the food, others are still busy waving to stop cars and buses on the busy highway, encouraging people to stop and join. Ibrahim, despite struggling on the meager income he earns as teacher, has insisted on sharing his iftar meal every day since Ramadan began on April 13.

"We just bring whatever we have to the iftar table, no matter how little it is," he said.

'Never worry'

Sudan has been struggling since the April 2019 toppling of hardline president Omar al-Bashir, fol-



Muslim worshippers break their Ramadan fast along the side of the road of the Jazeera State highway in the village of Al-Nuba, about 50 kilometers south of Sudan's capital. — AFP

lowing protests against his rule triggered by economic hardship. Severe shortages of food staples and price hikes remain among the pressing issues, two years after Bashir's fall, said Ibrahim. Inflation last month shot up over 330 percent, the government said. People now often queue for hours to buy basic foods or to fill their cars with petrol.

Households suffer from frequent power cuts, and gas canisters for cooking are often hard to find. The transitional government, which came to power after Bashir's ouster, has embarked on

painful reforms hoped to rebuild the economy. In February, it introduced a managed float to the local currency in an attempt to close the yawning gap between the official and black market rates. Other bold measures include reducing costly subsidies on fuel and other commodities. But others fear the measures risk fanning popular discontent before coming to fruition.

Mudather Saad, another villager from Nuba, says they typically host around 150-200 travellers to the iftar meals each evening-but on busy nights

even more. "Our guests sometimes exceed 300 — especially on weekends," said Saad, as he joined other villagers to block the road and beckon travellers to eat. With only minutes to go before the call to prayer, Saad and others flag down a bus packed with some 60 passengers. Omar Hussein, the bus driver, travels the route regularly and is always stopped as iftar time approaches. "I never worry about missing iftar," Hussein said. "I am always sure someone will offer us something on the way." — AFP

Civilians flee homes amid fears of Somalia violence

MOGADISHU, Somalia: Civilians caught between pro-government and opposition forces in the Somali capital fled their homes yesterday as the heavily armed rivals reinforced their positions after clashes that left three dead. Mogadishu is witnessing its worst political violence in years after elections were delayed and the president extended his mandate despite warnings that doing so risked instability in the fragile country. Months of talks backed by the United Nations failed to overcome the election impasse and the dispute turned violent Sunday as forces loyal to the president traded gunfire with fighters allied to his political rivals.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on all parties to refrain from further violence while the United States, a key ally, warned of sanctions if negotiations for elections did not urgently resume. Police said Monday that three people-two police officers and one opposition soldier-were killed in the skirmishes as the warring sides barricaded roads and guarded their territory with trucks mounted with machine guns. Tensions remained high yesterday as civilians in some Mogadishu districts began evacuating their homes, piling their



MOGADISHU: Residents start to flee from their home after recent clashes between the Somali security forces and the Somali military force supporting anti-government opposition leaders erupted over the president's bid to extend his mandate yesterday. — AFP

belongings into rickshaws or donkey carts ahead of feared return to violence.

"This is a horrible situation Mogadishu is facing today. People are fleeing their houses because of this increased military tension", said Said Ali, a witness.

'Fear for our lives'

Residents in Siigaale, a neighborhood in southern Mogadishu, said opposition reinforcements arrived overnight and had taken up positions not far from government troops. "We fear for our lives... We

have decided to get out of here before it is too late," said Shamis Ahmed, a mother of five her abandoned her home.

Tensions had been rising in the capital since February when President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed's term expired before elections were held, and street protests against his rule were broken up with gunfire. Earlier this month the president, better known by his nickname Farmajo, signed a law extending his mandate by two years, further angering his political opponents who declared the measure unconstitutional. — AFP

Westerners feared killed in Burkina

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso: Burkina Faso security forces said yesterday they feared for the lives of four people including three Westerners who were abducted while taking part in an anti-poaching patrol in the east of the country. The landlocked West African nation is struggling with a ruthless insurgency by Islamists who swept in from neighboring Mali in 2015.

An intensive manhunt was under way for two Spaniards, an Irishman and a Burkinabe national seized on Monday, security sources said. A top security source told AFP that eyewitness accounts have led to fears that the abductees "may have been killed by the terrorists", adding that hopes of finding the victims alive "diminish with each passing hour". He said

"large-scale searches... have still produced no results".

The source also said he could not authenticate images circulating on social media claiming to show the victims.

"I have not seen these Westerners before," he added. A Spanish foreign ministry source told AFP in Madrid that two Spanish nationals were missing, while a security source in Burkina Faso said an Irish man was also among the group. The convoy of soldiers, forest rangers and foreign reporters came under attack in the Fada N'Gourma-Pama area, according to a local official, who said three people were injured in the assault.

A security source confirmed that the Westerners "were working on behalf of an NGO protecting the environment" in the country, without naming the organization. "According to survivors, two of the foreigners were wounded during the attack. The search is ongoing" to find the four missing people, the source added.

Abductions frequent

The attackers were aboard two pick-

up vehicles and a dozen motorbikes, according to security sources. They said the assailants made off with vehicles and various weapons. The Spanish foreign ministry source said Madrid's embassy in Mali, which is accredited in Burkina Faso, "is in close contact with the families who are being kept informed about the events and the searches to find" the two Spaniards.

Almost 1,100 people have died and more than a million people have fled their homes since 2015 in Burkina Faso, one of the world's poorest countries. Numerous other foreign workers have been kidnapped in Burkina Faso, a former French colony. In January this year, a priest went missing in the country's southeast, sparking fears he had been kidnapped. Last August, the grand imam of the northern town of Djibo was found dead three days after gunmen stopped the car he was travelling in and kidnapped him. In March 2019, a priest in Djibo was kidnapped, and in February 2018, a Catholic missionary, Cesar Fernandez, was murdered in the center of the country. — AFP

International Monetary Fund Middle East Center for Economics and Finance Kuwait Vacancy Announcement Capacity Development Advisor (Economist)

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

Summary Description

We are seeking an experienced Capacity Development Advisor (Economist) to enhance our CEF-based economics and finance faculty. Prime tasks include teaching of selected courses delivered by the IMF, involvement in curriculum development, and conducting research in support of the CEF's training activities, and series of seminars and conferences.

Main Duties and Responsibilities:

Teaching: Teach several advanced short courses in conjunction with the IMF and other international organizations. The audience will include public sector officials from Arab countries, especially officials from central banks, finance ministries and other government economic agencies.

Course Development:

Develop new courses on topics of relevance to the region, in collaboration with staff in IMF headquarters or other international organizations, as needed. Course development will include the preparation of pedagogical material such as lectures and detailed quantitative case studies based on country experiences.

Research: Conduct original research on economic issues of relevance to the CEF's training mission and cooperate with universities, research institutes, and think tanks in the region.

Qualifications:

Candidates should have strong analytical skills in macroeconomics or finance, at least five years of practical experience with analyzing economic issues especially in emerging and developing countries, as well as a substantial experience and interest in teaching.

Experience in providing advanced training to public sector officials in applied macroeconomic policy issues, finance and econometrics would be highly desirable. Applicants should hold a Ph.D. degree in economics or finance. Excellent teaching and communication skills and experience in Arabic and English are essential.

Closing date of the application is May 9, 2021.

Interested applicants should visit www.imf.org/jobs for the full vacancy information and to apply to job # 21-R873.

International

Harris pledges \$310m US relief as Central America tackles migration

Two governments plan resource center for safe, legal migration

WASHINGTON: Vice President Kamala Harris told Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei during a virtual call Monday the US will give \$310 million in humanitarian relief to Central America, her office said, as the region tackles a wave of migration north.

Harris, who leads President Joe Biden's efforts to address the influx of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to the US-Mexico border, met with Giammattei by videoconference, prior to her visit to Central America scheduled for June. "In light of the dire situation and acute suffering faced by millions of people in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, Vice President Harris announced an additional \$310 million in US government support for humanitarian relief and to address food insecurity," a statement from her office said after the meeting.

It said the two governments will also coordinate law enforcement efforts to tackle criminal organizations whose activities help drive migration, as well as open migrant resource centers to establish safe, legal migration. "The United States plans to increase relief to the region, strengthen our cooperation to manage migration in an effective, secure and humane manner," Harris promised Giammattei.

Biden has asked Congress for \$861 million to address the causes that drive irregular immigration

from Central America, within the framework of his \$4 billion plan for the region.

His proposal is included in the budget project for next year that has yet to be discussed and approved by legislators. More than 172,000 undocumented immigrants, including nearly 19,000 unaccompanied minors, were detained in March at the southern border of the United States, a rise of 71 percent in a month and the highest level in 15 years. Most of the migrants come from the three countries of the Central American Northern Triangle. That area, vulnerable to natural disasters, was hit by two devastating hurricanes in November and is struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic and a prolonged drought. "We want to work with you to address both the acute causes and the root causes (of migration) in a way that gives hope to the people of Guatemala that there will be an opportunity for them if they stay home," Harris also told Giammattei during the virtual meeting.

Giammattei agreed on the need to "create hope" in Guatemala. "The Guatemalan government wants to be a partner (of the United States) to address... not only poverty but also the many evils that affect us all," he said. In addition, the president said he looked forward to Harris' visit in June.

Many migrants in recent weeks say they were given new hope by Biden's reversal of the hardline



WASHINGTON, DC: US Vice President Kamala Harris participates in a virtual bilateral meeting with Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei at the Vice President's Ceremonial Office at Eisenhower Executive Office Building Monday. — AFP

immigration policies of his predecessor Donald Trump. The changes include allowing unaccompanied children to stay and be united with relatives living inside the United States.

The number of unaccompanied children detained after crossing the border illegally, or trying to sneak through official entry ports, doubled in March from February to 18,890, according to the CBP. — AFP

31 Nigerian troops killed in battles with jihadists

KANO, Nigeria: At least 31 Nigerian soldiers were killed when jihadists ambushed a military convoy escorting weapons and overran a base in northeast Nigeria's Borno state at the weekend, two military officers said on Monday.

The army later issued an official statement confirming there had been hours of intense battles on Sunday that also saw warplanes deployed but that its forces had suffered a lower toll of six soldiers and one officer killed. Fighters from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) attacked the convoy with rocket-propelled grenades on Sunday in the town of Mainok outside the regional capital Maiduguri before storming the nearby base, two military officers told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"We lost 31 soldiers, including their commander who was a lieutenant colonel, in the ambush by the terrorists," one officer said about the attack which happened around 1100 GMT on Sunday. The convoy was transporting weapons to Maiduguri when it came under attack, said a second officer who gave a similar toll.

"The terrorists came in several trucks, including four MRAPs (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles) and engaged the convoy in a fierce battle," the second officer said. The militants overwhelmed soldiers, leading to the "colossal loss" of troops, he said.

"We lost a lot of men in very gruesome way." The jihadists seized weapons and two MRAPs in the attack before overrunning and partially burning the base outside the town, the officers said.

Later Nigerian army spokesman Mohammed Yerima issued a statement saying troops deployed in Mainok "came under multi-directional attacks" by jihadists on foot as well as on trucks mounted with guns. He said the firefight lasted "several hours" and that "scores" of fighters were killed while "a number of their gun trucks destroyed."

The Air Force deployed Alpha jets and helicopter gunships to the scene, he added. Yerima said one officer and six soldiers died while five others were wounded but added: "Currently, troops are in full control of Mainok." Mainok, about 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Maiduguri, has been repeatedly targeted by the jihadists who have waged a decade-long jihadist insurgency in the region, killing 36,000 people and displacing around two million from their homes.

ISWAP has frequently set up bogus checkpoints along the 120-km highway linking Maiduguri and Damaturu in neighboring Yobe state on which Mainok lies, killing and abducting travellers. ISWAP split from the mainstream Boko Haram faction in 2016 and rose to become a dominant force in the northeast as Nigeria's conflict has spilt over borders into neighboring Chad, Niger and Cameroon.

Around 2,000 residents of Geidam in neighboring Yobe state fled their homes after a separate attack by ISWAP who invaded the town Friday, local officials said. On Sunday residents fled, crossing to the other side of the river to escape militants who have been in control since they attacked the town.

"Our people are fleeing Geidam which is now under the control of the insurgents," Ali Koko Kachalla, Geidam's political administrator, said. Late on Friday ISWAP jihadists took control of Geidam after a gunfight with troops, looting and burning stores in the town. At least 11 civilians were killed in the fight after a projectile hit two adjoining homes, killing all occupants, according to residents. — AFP

Turkey's Armenians keep heads down after genocide recognition

ISTANBUL: Members of Turkey's tiny Armenian community have kept a low profile since US President Joe Biden recognized the Armenian genocide, fearing retribution should they openly celebrate the landmark step. "Discretion has become a part of our daily lives," said an Armenian Turk who, like many others interviewed by AFP, wished to remain anonymous to protect his local business.

Biden on Saturday became the first US president to brush aside Turkish pressure and call the 1915-1917 events a genocide in which "1.5 million Armenians were deported, massacred, or marched to their deaths in a campaign of extermination". His words caused relief and bittersweet joy in Armenia and among the tiny Caucasus state's vast web of ethnic communities across Europe and the Americas. Once an integral part of the Ottoman Empire's multifaceted socie-

ty, only 60,000 ethnic Armenians are still believed to live in modern Turkey, most of them in Istanbul.

Ankara accepts that both Armenians and Turks died in vast numbers while the Ottomans battled tsarist Russia, but denies the existence of a deliberate policy of genocide. Dozens of angry Turks rallied outside the US consulate in Istanbul on Monday to express outrage at Biden's decision.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called it "groundless, unfair" and detrimental to US-Turkish ties. The Turkish-Armenian businessman said his community faces waves of anti-Armenian sentiments whenever debates resume about the century-old events. "We were raised since childhood not to speak Armenian on the street. We were even told to call our mothers 'anne' (in Turkish) instead of 'mama'," he said.

Napoleon: 2 centuries of conspiracy theories

PARIS: Two hundred years after his death in exile, conspiracy theories continue to swirl about how exactly Napoleon Bonaparte met his end on the windswept South Atlantic island of St. Helena.

The official verdict, supported by an autopsy carried out by his British captors, was that he died aged 51 of stomach cancer on May 5, 1821. But even then many — not just in France — were skeptical, leading to numerous often colorful conspiracy theories.

Poisoned?

Strongest among French conspiracy theories is the belief that Napoleon was slowly poisoned either by the British or by his confidante, Count Charles de Montholon, supposedly in the pay of French royalists opposed to the emperor's return home. The scientific evidence for this is a chemical analysis conducted in 2001 on a

lock of hair cut from Napoleon's corpse that had huge levels of arsenic.

The following year the poison theory was challenged by French publication Science et Vie, which took arsenic readings from 19 hairs taken from Napoleon in 1805, before his first defeat in 1814 and again in 1821. All the samples contained massive doses of arsenic, ranging from 15 to 100 parts per million (ppm), compared with a normal level of only 0.8 ppm of arsenic. The maximum limit considered safe is three ppm.

The most plausible source for this was hair restorer. The balding emperor probably used a product that in the early 19th century typically contained high amounts of arsenic.

His deadly enemy

Others blame mistreatment by overenthusiastic doctors for his early demise. According to forensic pathologist Steven Karch at the San Francisco Medical Examiner's Department in 2004, doctors gave Napoleon an enema every day to relieve his sick stomach and intestinal cramping. This, combined with regular doses of a chemical called antimony potassium tartrate to induce vomiting, would have left him perilously short of potassium. This can lead to a lethal

Eritrean troops block, loot food aid in Tigray

ADDIS ABABA: Eritrean soldiers are blocking and looting food aid in Ethiopia's war-hit Tigray region, according to government documents obtained by AFP, stoking fears of starvation deaths as fighting nears the six-month mark. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray in November to detain and disarm leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the regional ruling party that once dominated national politics. He said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on army camps and that fighting would be over quickly.

But as the war drags on, world leaders are increasingly concerned about what US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday called an impending humanitarian "disaster" — and the role of

Eritrean troops in exacerbating it. Those concerns have been echoed in multiple presentations given to aid groups this month by the Emergency Coordination Centre of Tigray's Abiy-appointed interim government — copies of which AFP has reviewed.

The most recent presentation, dated April 23, says Eritrean soldiers had forced aid workers providing food relief out of multiple parts of Tigray, including the areas of Samre and Gijet south of the regional capital Mekele. It says, in broken English, that Eritrean soldiers have also started showing up at food distribution points in Tigray, looting the supplies after "our beneficiaries became frightened and (ran) away." An official who attended the April 23 presentation, and who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, said aid workers were visibly frustrated over their inability to access parts of the region.

"Some of the NGO workers were crying because of the systemic denial... some of them were screaming, crying," the official said, adding that government officials coordinating relief efforts were also fed up.



THESSALONIKI, Greece: A member of the Armenian community holds a placard during a rally to commemorate the 106th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, in Thessaloniki. — AFP

"Everyone has differences on every issue but when it comes to the Armenian question, everyone is united in Turkey." Yetvart Danzikyan, editor-in-chief of the Turkish-Armenian weekly Agos—whose former editor Hrant Dink was gunned down in Istanbul in

2007 — said the annual commemorations pass in a "climate of tension" in Turkey. "The climate is shaped by (Turkey's) tough response, which goes as far as to hold Armenians responsible" for what happened, Danzikyan said in a telephone interview. — AFP



In this file photo taken on March 25, 2021 a woman walks by the Imperial beer Microbrasserie in Ajaccio. The 200th anniversary of Napoleon Bonaparte's death will be marked on May 5, 2021. — AFP

heart condition in which the blood flow to the brain is disrupted by bursts of irregular heartbeats.

The tell-tale trousers

In 2005, the US National Centre for Biotechnology Information backed the stomach cancer theory based on a study of the emperor's trousers. Researchers from the University Hospital of Basel and the University of

Zurich studied 12 different pairs of trousers worn by Napoleon between 1800 and 1821 to determine his weight at death and to see how it had evolved in the last two decades of his life. "Napoleon's terminal weight loss of more than 10 kilos (22 pounds) is suggestive of a severe progressive chronic illness and is highly consistent with a diagnosis of gastric cancer," the authors concluded. — AFP

Checkpoints blocked

Eritrean Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel denied the allegations yesterday. "No way that Eritrea can block humanitarian assistance or loot them," he told AFP in an email. General Yohannes Gebremeskel Tesfamariam, head of a command post in Tigray, told AFP Tuesday that in the "last two weeks we had access problems to pass some of the checkpoints, especially controlled by Eritreans".

He referenced a critical checkpoint linking the towns of Adigrat and Axum as an example.

"We have sent our staff to talk to the Eritrean commanders who are commanding those troops at the checkpoint. We are waiting to hear the reply," Yohannes said. Mulu Nega, head of Tigray's interim government, told AFP Tuesday that "people are complaining about the roads and food distribution" and said his officials were investigating. Fighting in Tigray disrupted the harvest in a region that was already food insecure. Abiy's government said in mid-April that no one had died from hunger during the war. — AFP

International

Foreign supplies arrive in COVID-stricken India

Belgium, Australia join countries to cut passenger air travel with India

NEW DELHI: The first emergency medical supplies trickled into COVID-stricken India yesterday as part of a global campaign to staunch a catastrophic wave in the latest pandemic hotspot, with the United States also pledging to export millions of AstraZeneca vaccine doses.

India's infection and death rates are growing exponentially, overwhelming hospitals, in contrast to some wealthier Western nations that are starting to ease restrictions. The virus has now killed more than 3.1 million people worldwide, with India driving the latest surge in global case numbers, recording over 350,000 new infections yesterday.

Crates of ventilators and oxygen concentrators from Britain were unloaded at a Delhi airport early yesterday, the first emergency medical supplies to arrive in the country. Elsewhere in the capital AFP images showed smoke billowing from dozens of pyres lit inside a parking lot that has been turned into a makeshift crematorium.

"People are just dying, dying and dying," said Jitender Singh Shanty, who is coordinating the cremation of around 100 bodies a day at the site in the east of the city. "If we get more bodies then we will cremate on the road. There is no more space here."

We will be there for them

The United States, France, Germany, Canada and the World Health Organization have all promised to rush supplies to India. President Joe Biden

announced on Monday the United States would send up to 60 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine abroad.

White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the recipient countries had not yet been decided and that the administration was still formulating its distribution plan. But India appeared to be a leading contender after Biden spoke with Prime Minister Narendra Modi whose Hindu-nationalist government is under fire for allowing mass gatherings such as religious festivals and political rallies in recent weeks. "India was there for us, and we will be there for them," Biden tweeted after the call with Modi, referencing India's support for the United States when it was enduring the worst of its COVID crisis.

'Beyond heart-breaking'

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on Monday described the situation in India as "beyond heartbreaking". "WHO is doing everything we can, providing critical equipment and supplies," Tedros said. France also said it would send eight oxygen production units, as well as oxygen containers and respirators, to India. However many nations have also sought to close borders to travellers from India, fearful of a variant that appears to be one of the drivers of the surge.

Belgium yesterday became the latest territory to ban travellers from India, Brazil and South



MUMBAI: People queue up to receive a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine at a vaccination center yesterday. —AFP

Africa, major countries hit by fast-spreading coronavirus variants. "Passenger travel by air, train, boat, and bus, including transit traffic, from India, Brazil and South Africa to Belgium will be banned," Prime Minister Alexander de Croo announced in a statement.

Australia also cut all passenger air travel with India, suspending flights until at least May 15.

Among the Aussies still in the country are a host of high-profile cricketers playing in the lucrative Indian Premier League, which has attracted criticism for continuing during the crisis. Before the ban was announced, News Corp reported that batsman Chris Lynn of the Mumbai Indians had requested the Australia cricket board put on a chartered flight home for the players once the IPL finishes. —AFP

Frantic scramble for COVID drugs in India

NEW DELHI: Manish Aggarwal celebrates with weary relief after laying his hands on precious doses of COVID-19 medication for his sick father—a victory where thousands across India have not been so lucky. He has been waiting in line outside a small pharmacy in Delhi for eight hours to secure remdesivir, and is rewarded with just two of the recommended six doses.

"Finally, it's a victory!" he exclaims. But not everybody is as fortunate. In the same queue in the south of the Indian capital are more than 100 people with loved ones in hospital. Only 30 people receive the medicine. Scuffles break out every few minutes as people try to jump the queue. Three armed policemen are stationed nearby for crowd control. The officers keep telling those gathered that no more tokens—pieces of paper with a scrib-

bled number on them—for remdesivir will be distributed today as stocks have run out, and they ask them to try somewhere else.

India is struggling with a catastrophic surge in coronavirus infections as well as severe shortages of medical supplies, with hospitals and crematoriums overwhelmed. "This government has failed us so much that those who can normally survive also die," says an exhausted Vinod Kumar, who has been waiting since 6 am.

He has also had to battle to obtain oxygen for his sick relative. As evening falls and the medical supplier—one of the few places in Delhi where remdesivir is sold at its retail price—shuts up his shop, some people outside start crying. They include a brother and sister in their teens who have been driving around looking for medication for their sick and hospitalized father. Despite India's status as the "pharmacy of the world", the biggest producer of generic drugs has been unable to meet the demand for antiviral medication such as remdesivir.

Many doctors say remdesivir is not essential for the treatment of COVID-19, but hospitals have been prescribing it anyway. Due to the shortages, families are being asked to procure it on their own. Many



CHENNAI: A man holds boxes of Remdesivir, an antiviral drug used to treat COVID-19 symptoms, purchased from government dispensary in Chennai yesterday. — AFP

resort to the black market where the drug is sold for anywhere between \$300 and \$1,350 for a single vial. The usual price is between \$12 and \$75. "When I asked someone for six injections, he said, 'I can give you 600, you just need to pay me 60,000 rupees (\$800) per injection,'" says Aggarwal. — AFP

Myanmar's junta wants 'stability' before peace

YANGON: Myanmar's junta said yesterday it will heed regional pleas to stop violence only when the coup-hit country "returns to stability", as fresh fighting erupted with a major ethnic rebel group along its eastern border. The nation has been in turmoil since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a February 1 coup, triggering an uprising that has seen security forces mount deadly crackdowns against protesters.

The violence—in which more than 750 people have been killed by security forces, according to a local monitoring group—has raised alarm among regional neighbors. Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing attended a weekend meeting on the crisis with the leaders of the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) — his first overseas trip since he seized power. The leaders issued a "five-point consensus" statement that

called for the "immediate cessation of violence" and a visit to Myanmar by a regional special envoy. Yesterday, Myanmar's State Administrative Council—as the junta dubs itself—said it would consider the "constructive suggestions made by ASEAN leaders when the situation returns to stability in the country".

The statement also said its neighbors' suggestions would be "positively considered if it (ASEAN) would facilitate the implementation" of the junta's five-step roadmap. Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun told AFP the regime was "satisfied" with the trip, saying they had been able to explain the "real situation" to ASEAN leaders.

But ASEAN is not known for its diplomatic clout and observers have questioned how effectively it can influence the crisis. The former US ambassador to Myanmar, Scot Marciel, warned that the military's response to the Jakarta summit showed signs of backsliding already.

"ASEAN cannot dither here, as the junta moves to walk back even the limited agreement reached Saturday," Marciel said in a tweet. "There should be urgent follow-up, and costs imposed on the junta for delay. There



YANGON: A protester holds a sign in support of the National Unity Government (NUG) as others make the three-finger salute during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon's Sanchaung township yesterday. — AFP

is a reason no one in Myanmar trusts the Tatmadaw," he said, referring to the military by its Burmese name.

Since February 1, security forces have killed more than 750 civilians, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a local monitoring group tracking the death toll. But the junta—which called AAPP an "illegal organization"—has registered a far lower death toll while blaming the violence on "riot-

ers". Two days after the ASEAN meeting, a teashop owner in Mandalay—a hotspot of unrest—was shot dead amid a protest that saw a violent crackdown by authorities, according to a rescue worker. The anti-coup movement has garnered broad support across the country, including among some of Myanmar's armed insurgent groups which have for decades been fighting the military for more autonomy. — AFP

10 years after death, Bin Laden still mobilizes jihadists

PARIS: A decade after he was hunted down and killed in Pakistan by US special forces, Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden retains the capacity to mobilize extremists even in a polarized jihadist scene that has radically changed in the last years. Even though Bin Laden's body was buried in the Arabian Sea from the deck of a US aircraft carrier hours after his death, to avoid the creation of any pilgrimage site on land, he remains an example and symbol for many radical Islamists.

The Saudi national shrewdly understood the importance of propaganda that has helped project his charismatic image long after his death. In videos he took to appearing with an assault rifle at his side, despite rarely seeing direct combat himself. "Osama bin Laden carefully curated his public persona to cultivate a dedicated following," said Katherine Zimmerman, an advisor for the Critical Threats

Project at the American Enterprise Institute's.

"His image—that of a devout Muslim in more traditional dress, but always with his AK-74 at arm's reach and often in his camouflage jacket—was tailored to portray himself as a leader in the jihad, both spiritually and militarily," she said.

'Unwinnable war'

This calculated image projection was a success, in particular for recruiting fighters, said Colin Clarke, director of research at the Soufan Center, a US-based risk consultancy. "Even though he was criticized at times for his love of the media, he was savvy enough to understand the importance of advancing Al-Qaeda's message on major platforms," Clarke told AFP.

After the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States carried out by an Al-Qaeda cell under bin



In this picture taken on February 11, 2021, local resident Altaf Hussain and neighbor of slain former Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, stands next to a signboard at the site of the demolished compound of Bin Laden, in northern Abbottabad. — AFP

Laden's orders, the West spent billions of dollars trying to defeat radical Islamist extremists. But jihadists are indisputably more numerous worldwide than they were two decades ago. And President Joe Biden, who plans to mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11 by pulling US troops out from Afghanistan by September, will not be able to claim any conclusive victory in the operation. Bin Laden effectively turned war

zones into training arenas for jihadists, with conflicts from Bosnia to Chechnya to Somalia proving fertile ground for extremists who would wreak havoc outside their home countries. "Not only did he threaten to attack the West, but he succeeded, and he was able to drag the United States into an unwinnable war of attrition in Afghanistan, just as he had planned," Clarke said. — AFP

News in brief

Brazil's Sputnik jab refusal flayed

MOSCOW: The developers of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine yesterday criticized Brazil's refusal to import the jab as politically motivated. Brazilian health regulator Anvisa on Monday denied requests from several states to receive batches of Sputnik V, saying it did not have the data needed to verify the jab's safety and efficacy. "Anvisa's delays in approving Sputnik V are unfortunately of a political nature and have nothing to do with access to information or science," the official Sputnik V Twitter account said. It pointed to a recent US government report that said Washington had tried to persuade Brazil not to use Sputnik. — AFP

Woman killed in Chad capital

N'DJAMENA, Chad: A woman was killed by demonstrators in the Chadian capital yesterday as crowds protested the newly-installed junta, despite the military's call to ban the gatherings. Police were out in the streets of N'Djamena yesterday to break up planned demonstrations against the so-called Transitional Military Council (TMC), which took control of the government after the shock death of president Idriss Deby Itono. His 37-year-old son Mahamat now leads the council, and has pledged to hold elections in 18 months. A woman died yesterday when anti-junta protesters attacked a bus in N'Djamena, a prosecutor said. — AFP

27,000 displaced in Colombia in 2021

BOGOTA: More than 27,000 people were displaced during the first quarter of 2021 due to a surge of violence in lawless areas of Colombia, the human rights ombudsman said on Monday. People have either fled or been chased from their land by threats, murders, forced recruitment by armed gangs, clashes between such gangs, and others pitting them against the armed forces. It amounts to a 177 percent increase in displacements on the same period in 2020, the ombudsman said. — AFP

Immunity of neo-Nazi Greek MEP

BRUSSELS: EU lawmakers have voted to lift the immunity of Greek MEP Ioannis Lagos, a former leader of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party sentenced to jail in his homeland, the European Parliament said yesterday. Legislators overwhelmingly approved the move, with 658 backing it and only 25 opposed in a secret ballot held on Monday. A police source in Athens told AFP that Greek judicial authorities had issued an international arrest warrant for the 48-year-old. In a Twitter post Monday, Lagos voiced disdain for the decision and said he would remain "strong and free." — AFP

Bans imposed on Navalny group

MOSCOW: A Russian court yesterday imposed sweeping bans on jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), its director said, while it considers whether to designate the group an extremist organization. FBK director Ivan Zhdanov said on Twitter that the court had banned the group from posting content on the internet, using state media, organizing protests, participating in elections and using bank deposits. Earlier yesterday the Moscow city court's press service told reporters a judge had agreed to a "ban on certain activities" for the FBK without clarifying what they were as the case is being heard behind closed doors. — AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 28, 2021

EU turns page on latest Brexit chapter

Trade deal to officially seal Britain's new relationship with 27-member union

BRUSSELS: The European Parliament was to vote yesterday to ratify the EU's post-Brexit trade deal with Britain, but not without issuing bitter final warnings that trouble lies ahead in cross-Channel ties. The 705-member chamber was expected to overwhelmingly back the bare bones trade deal that was sealed on Christmas Eve after nine months of bad-tempered negotiation.

This will officially seal Britain's new relationship with the 27-member union five years after British voters shocked the world by voting to end its 47-year membership. But the vote comes amid multiple feuds over the UK's implementation of Brexit agreements and angry finger-pointing about the supply of THE COVID-19 vaccine from AstraZeneca.

"We know it will not always be easy and there is a lot of vigilance, diligence and hard work ahead of us," EU chief Ursula von der Leyen told a session of parliament ahead of the vote. "But while today's vote is obviously an end, it is also the beginning of a new chapter," she said. Britain left the EU on January 30 2020, but its new life with Europe only really began after a transition period ended on December 31, when London was no longer bound by the bloc's laws and rules.

Officially called a trade and cooperation agreement (TCA), the deal creates a new relationship that provides for zero tariffs and zero quotas on goods traded between the EU and UK. But it is less ambitious than many Europeans had hoped for, with nothing on foreign policy and defense nor any com-

mitment to close alignment on environment, health and other regulations.

More harmonized rules would have removed the requirement for some customs checks and paperwork on goods moving between the EU and UK, which has made business more burdensome and stirred unrest in Northern Ireland. Cross-Channel trade volumes have plummeted, with EU imports from the UK down by nearly 50 percent and exports into Britain down 20 percent in the first two months of the deal's application. The deal also makes no provision for financial services, threatening the City of London's preeminence as the European hub for capital markets, banking and investment.

'Bad' Brexit

"Brexit is a historic mistake. It was pushed through by irresponsible nationalism, based on false promises and shortsightedness," declared Austrian MEP Andreas Schieder who helped prepare the vote. "Brexit is bad for Britain and Brexit is bad for Europe," he said. MEPs had demanded extra time to vet the pact, which also includes a painfully won deal on fishing that saw EU boat crews lose much of their access to bountiful UK waters.

The European Parliament further delayed its vote in part to protest unilateral delays by London in implementing customs checks in Northern Ireland, one of the most contentious issues in the divorce. Brussels has launched legal action against London over the Irish problem, while a row over the supply



BRUSSELS: (From Left) Members of European Parliament David McAllister, Andreas Schieder, Christophe Hansen and Bernd Lange give a press conference following a debate on the EU-UK trade and cooperation agreement during the second day of a plenary session at the European Parliament yesterday. — AFP

of UK-based AstraZeneca's coronavirus jab has also embittered cross-Channel relations.

But, despite the acrimony, the European Commission, which handles ties with the UK for the Europeans, urged MEPs to approve the pact, arguing that it will better help keep Britain in line. The UK, meanwhile, had made it clear that it would not approve any further delays, despite the risk of the

whole deal being annulled if the MEPs did not vote by April 30. "The UK government should not mistakenly take this for a blank cheque, or a vote of blind confidence in its intention to implement the agreements between us in good faith," warned Luxembourg MEP Christian Hansen. The deal, he insisted, was "an insurance policy against further unilateral deviations from what was jointly agreed." — AFP

Cuban engineers' dreams take flight with home-grown drones

SAN NICOLAS DE BARI, Cuba: Disguised as a sparrowhawk, and convincingly mimicking its predatory cry, a drone made of wood, scrap metal and plastic disperses birds at a Cuban airfield. From afar one could be fooled: Soaring and swooping with its 1.3-m wingspan, the mechanical bird flies autonomously for an hour at a time, and boasts impressive, if somewhat stiff plumage.

It is the creation of a group of engineers keen to develop cheap, local alternatives to foreign-made technology on the communist island under US sanctions since 1962. Eighty percent of the mechanical bird is fashioned by hand - mainly in makeshift workshops set up at the homes of individual engineers, who largely have to make do with the most basic equipment and parts.

Much of the wood used comes from trees chopped down in parks near where they live. "We have been stubborn in maintaining our desire to solve challenges," said Ernesto Aragon, 50, a member of the Alasoluciones drone-making ensemble of five engineers and three technicians. These challenges include finding material, overcoming technical setbacks, but also laws against private commerce on the island where most everything is run by the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC).

Home-grown technology

On some days, the team works in Aragon's garage



SAN NICOLAS DE BARI, Cuba: Erick Carmona (left), CEO of Alasoluciones, and member Mykol Diaz (right) work on drones at their workshop on April 11, 2021. — AFP

among the rice and garlic fields of San Nicolas de Bari, a village of some 20,000 inhabitants 70 km southeast of Havana. A chocolate-colored 1958 Ford Fairlane serves as transport, a work surface, and a mobile workshop when the team tests their mechanical birds outside. Four years into their project, the engineers have managed to develop drones that function autonomously from takeoff to landing.

They have been put to use by the government to help farmers with crop observation, as well as to inspect gas lines, electricity installations and com-

munications towers. The team also has a government commission to provide a mechanical sparrowhawk to scare away birds at the Camaguey international airport, though this project has been placed on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Ironically, even as it has found a client in the communist government, the Alasoluciones team has had to battle Cuban bureaucracy. Under the law in the one-party state, private businesses are outlawed and the team has been unable to register a small profit-seeking enterprise. Until now. — AFP

Archegos fiasco deals new blows to UBS, Nomura

TOKYO: The collapse of US hedge fund Archegos dealt new blows to global banking giants yesterday as Japan's Nomura reported a bigger financial impact than expected and Switzerland's UBS disclosed a surprise hit. Shockwaves rippled through global financial markets and institutions last month when then little-known Archegos sold at least \$20 billion in stocks as it sought to cover obligations to its lenders.

The debacle hit firms including Credit Suisse, Morgan Stanley and several leading Japanese banks for a total of at least \$10 billion. Nomura had already estimated it faced losses of around \$2 billion linked to its exposure. But yesterday the Japanese bank said the damage would be closer to \$3 billion and that it would open an investigation.

In its earnings report, Nomura announced it had booked a loss of 245.7 billion yen (\$2.3 billion) in the 2020-2021 fiscal year. In addition, the bank expects losses of around \$570 million for the fiscal exercise ending March 2022. In Zurich, UBS said it had suffered losses of \$774 million (640 million euros) related to Archegos in the first quarter, although it still reported increased profits.

That was far less than its Swiss rival Credit Suisse, which last week said it would lose a total of 5.0 billion Swiss francs (\$5.5 billion) to cover damage related to Archegos across the first and second quarters. US family-owned hedge fund Archegos, run by former Tiger Asia director Bill Hwang, had taken huge bets on a few stocks with

money borrowed from banks. When several of those bets turned sour, the fund was unable to meet "margin calls" - when the banks demand extra cash or assets to cover losses in a brokerage account.

'Wide-ranging investigation'

Nomura said yesterday it has "unwound over 97 percent of its outstanding positions related to this event". Chief executive Kentaro Okuda added that the group is "committed to... enhancing our risk management framework" in the wake of the blow. Citing people close to Nomura, the Financial Times reported that the bank had suspended the head of its prime brokerage unit that dealt with Hwang.

The scale of Nomura's losses show "the magnitude of the company's risk concentration", said Shunsaku Sato, vice president-senior credit officer at Moody's Japan, in a note. The additional losses realised in April "will drag down Nomura's earnings in fiscal 2021", he added. For the last fiscal year, Nomura reported net income fell 29 percent to 153.1 billion yen.

On Monday, Nomura appointed a new CEO at the US subsidiary involved in the losses. The firm also said yesterday it had launched a "wide-ranging investigation of facts" surrounding the debacle and various reviews of its outstanding exposure and risk-management processes. Nomura has not directly named Archegos, saying only that the losses were linked to "transactions with a US client".

For its part, UBS said it had "exited all remaining exposures" to the fund during April. Additional losses will have to be recorded in the second quarter but are "immaterial" for the group, it said. UBS' group-wide profits for the first quarter were up 14 percent at \$1.8 billion. But the Archegos saga drove pre-tax profits down sharply at its investment banking unit, falling 42 percent year-on-year to \$412 million. — AFP

Germany, France back 21% global minimum corporate tax proposal

BERLIN: Germany and France yesterday voiced support for a call from the United States to impose a global minimum corporate tax of 21 percent, a move which targets huge multinationals like Amazon and Google. "People are fed up with big companies not paying their fair share of taxes," French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire told Die Zeit weekly.

The minister said his country had suggested 12.5 percent, but if the rate suggested by Washington "is the outcome of negotiations, then we would also agree to it". Germany's Finance Minister Olaf Scholz added in the joint interview that he had "nothing against the US suggestion". Washington announced in early April the push for concerted action on a minimum tax rate targeting multinationals, to ensure that digital giants like Amazon pay their fair share of taxes in countries where they are generating revenues.

US President Joe Biden expressed outrage that many of the world's biggest companies have moved to tax havens or used loopholes and pay little to no tax, far less than some individuals. Germany's Scholz said there was "now the right momentum to reach a deal in the summer" given the US push. France in 2019 enacted a digital tax of up to three percent of turnover, pending the adoption of international taxation. — AFP

Dutch surprise rivals in race for Brexit spoils

THE HAGUE: In the race for business lost by the City of London because of Brexit, Amsterdam's stock market has surprised European rivals by carving out the biggest slice so far. The city of canals, cheese and cannabis overtook London in January as Europe's largest share trading center, with more than nine billion euros of EU stocks exchanging hands every day.

Other European Union cities such as Paris, Dublin, Milan and Frankfurt have also benefited from the exodus from London, but none as much as Amsterdam to date. "This trend is, I just want to insist on that point, really affecting in a very positive manner all the locations within the European Union," Stephane Boujnah, CEO of pan-European stock market operator Euronext, told AFP.

Euronext runs the Amsterdam stock market and those of Brussels, Dublin, Lisbon, Oslo and Paris. Last year it also agreed to buy the Milan bourse from the London Stock Exchange. "What's specific in Amsterdam is the consolidation of some players that used to be based in London" but who had offices already in the Dutch capital, he said.

Amsterdam was also seen as "more international" than some other cities, with English virtually a second language and favorable tax conditions offered by the government, he said. This combination "made Amsterdam very attractive", he added.

'It is irreversible'

In January, London was stunned as an average of €9.2 billion (\$11.2 billion/£8.1 billion) of shares were traded each day on Euronext Amsterdam together with two other Dutch share markets, overtaking London's daily figure of 8.6 billion euros, the Financial Times reported. Boujnah said figures were still similar now. The shift has happened because Britain lacks regulatory "equivalence" that would allow it to trade EU shares.

"The trend of the migration of substance is very profound... it is irreversible," Boujnah said. "I don't think we will have a replacement of a company town like the City of London became over the years. Because what is emerging is a very solid network of integrated, interconnected, distributed financial centers."

Like the rest of the world the Dutch economy is still suffering the effects of the coronavirus, but the Brexit boost has been invaluable. In the past month the Amsterdam stock exchange has hit record high after record high. And it's not just the trading of stocks that's on the rise in the Netherlands, but goods as well. Dutch logistics and warehousing companies say they are being inundated with requests from British businesses who are struggling with delays at ports, increased shipping costs, and customs duties on exports to the EU. — AFP

Business

Germany eyes stronger 2021 growth as vaccines offer hope

Hopes growing curbs could be eased in coming weeks

BERLIN: Germany raised its growth forecast for 2021 yesterday, offering a glimpse of light at the end of the coronavirus pandemic tunnel as vaccinations finally begin to gather pace in Europe's biggest economy. "Today's spring projection is an encouragement despite the current serious infectious situation," Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said, upgrading the outlook for 2021 growth to 3.5 percent from 3.0 percent previously. "This is the year when we will really see a trend reversal," he added.

The recovery is expected to extend to 2022, with growth of 3.6 percent for next year, according to the latest government forecasts. Europe's top economy contracted by 4.9 percent in 2020 as the pandemic idled entire sectors and upended hundreds of thousands of businesses. With Germany still firmly in the clutches of a third wave of the pandemic, the country is expected to report weak data for the first three months of the year.

But the pace of vaccinations is accelerating after a stuttering start, with hundreds of thousands of jobs now being administered daily. The mass inoculations could help accelerate a return to some normality after more

than a year of open and close swings to halt COVID-19. Major economic think tanks have already delivered a more optimistic forecast than the government, having predicted growth of 3.7 percent for the year. "Once the risk of infections is removed, the economy will show a strong recovery," they said.

'Still booming'

Germany came through the first wave of the pandemic relatively unscathed, but authorities have struggled for months to put in place concerted action to stop the current wave. On Saturday, a new amended law came into force, giving Chancellor Angela Merkel's government more powers to impose restrictions including night curfews and school closures.

The law ends a tug-of-war between the federal government and Germany's 16 states which had in recent months resulted in an often confusing patchwork of restrictions being implemented. Some states with higher infection rates allowed shops to open while others closed kindergartens.

Under the new regulation, all regions with incidence rates of more than 100 new infections per 100,000

rage of stimulus and monetary easing packages.

The new forecasts project inflation of just 0.1 percent for the fiscal year ending in March 2022, down from a previous outlook of 0.5 percent. The bank sees that rising to 0.8 percent for the year ending March 2023, and only hitting 1.0 percent in the year ending March 2024.

Slow vaccine rollout

The bank said it would continue its existing monetary policy "as long as it is necessary" to achieve the two percent goal. And, repeating the language of previous decisions, it said it would "not hesitate to take additional easing measures if necessary", adding that it expects short- and long-term policy interest rates to remain at current or lower levels.

"By predicting that inflation will remain well below its two percent target by FY2023, (the bank) signaled a prolonged period of inaction," said Marcel Thieliand, senior Japan economist at Capital Economics. "With the slow vaccine rollout set to gather pace over the coming months, activity should start to recover again before long, lowering the need for additional stimulus," he added.

Parts of Japan, including economic centers Tokyo and Osaka, are under a third virus state of emergency that requests the closure of shopping malls as well as restaurants and bars serving alcohol. The country began vaccinations in February, but has only so far approved the Pfizer formula and is inoculating medical workers and the elderly.

Bank governor Haruhiko Kuroda said Japan's slow vaccine rollout was not a major factor behind the speed of its economic recovery. "It is true that advancing vaccinations will have the effect of accelerating recoveries," Kuroda said. "But things won't be decided only by vaccines," he said, adding that other elements such as potential for growth would help set the pace of recovery. — AFP



BERLIN: German Economy Minister Peter Altmaier comments on a graph during a press conference to present the German government's economic spring projection yesterday. — AFP

people over the last seven days are applying shutdowns and overnight curfews. Schools must also revert to virtual teaching in areas where the incidence rate exceeds 165. Seven states had an incidence rate above 165 on Monday, with the national average at 169.

China doubles down on coal plants abroad

BEIJING: China will press ahead with its multibillion-dollar financing of coal plants in developing countries, a top climate official said yesterday, despite Beijing's stated aim of slashing carbon emissions. In 2020, China opened three-quarters of the world's newly funded coal plants, according to the UK-based monitor CarbonBrief, and accounted for more than 80 percent of newly announced coal power projects.

At home, however, President Xi Jinping has pledged to wean China off coal with a peak carbon emissions target of 2030 - and achieve carbon neutrality thirty years later. Those ambitious targets have been met with international praise. But China's overseas drive shows the complexity of untwining the economic drivers of coal power from environmental concerns.

"We cannot simply say that we'll stop supporting coal-fired electricity plants in developing countries," Li Gao, head of the climate change office at the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, told reporters. "Combating climate change is also about letting people in developing countries live good lives."

Vaccine optimism

At the same time, hopes are growing that curbs could be eased in coming weeks as the proportion of inoculated people grows. After a start plagued by huge vaccine delivery problems, the total proportion of Germans with at least one injection has reached 23.4 percent. Merkel underlined on Monday that Europe's biggest economy is aiming to offer every adult a jab from June. ING analyst Carsten Brzeski said that and the fact that Germany's foreign markets have faster inoculation programs will help fuel stronger growth with the country's vital export industry delivering the goods. "German industry is still booming and is benefiting from the fact that other regions are much further ahead with their vaccination campaigns," Brzeski told AFP.

Massive stimulus packages unleashed by the United States, the European Union and Germany itself are expected to translate into bulging order books for industry. Earlier in April, official data showed German industrial orders climbing for a second month in a row in February on resurgent domestic demand. Berlin had previously already expected its economy to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2022 at the latest. — AFP

Echoing Xi's comments at a recent climate summit hosted by US President Joe Biden, Li said poorer nations still need coal to power their economies. "This is wholly in response to (foreign countries') actual needs, and we use very high standards (to build the plants)," he said. Li also suggested that these countries were not sufficiently developed to be able to use renewable energy as their main sources of power.

China is the world's biggest polluter and emits a third of greenhouse gases globally. It has also continued to fund dozens of coal plants abroad, from Zimbabwe to Indonesia, and environmentalists say they are set to produce more emissions than major developed nations. China is making the overseas coal play as part of its trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, a plan to fund infrastructure projects and increase its influence overseas.

In contrast, officials have pledged to "strictly control" coal use domestically to reach ambitious climate goals. Just under 60 percent of power in China still comes from coal, but a new five-year national development plan unveiled in March set a target of generating 20 percent of energy from renewable sources by 2025.

China will continue to build smaller-scale coal plants to ensure reliable power supply across the grid, but their "emissions will not be as large" as traditional coal plants, according to Li. "We will no longer continue large-scale development of coal-fired power plants, this is very clear." — AFP

BoJ lifts growth forecast, keeps policy unchanged

TOKYO: Japan's central bank yesterday raised its growth forecasts for the world's third-largest economy, citing expected stronger demand, and left its ultra-loose monetary policy in place. But it acknowledged that the outlook remains "highly unclear" and could change depending on how the still-raging pandemic evolves and affects the domestic and international economy.

Still, it revised up its forecast for the 2020-2021 fiscal year that ended on March 31, projecting the economy would shrink 4.9 percent, compared with the 5.6 percent contraction it predicted in January. For the current fiscal year, it now expects 4.0 percent growth, against its January forecast of 3.9 percent, while it lifted its expectations for the fiscal year ending in March 2023 to 2.4 percent, from 1.8 percent previously.

"The projected growth rates are higher, mainly for fiscal 2022, on the back of stronger domestic and external demand," the Bank of Japan explained. It said while Japan's economic activity was expected to stay lower than pre-pandemic levels "for the time being", it expects to see the virus's impact "waning gradually".

But the picture was not all positive, with the bank forced to once again revise down its inflation forecasts, putting its long-held two percent goal even further from reach. The BoJ has consistently fallen short of hitting the target it considers key to turbocharging the stuttering economy, despite a bar-



Manager of Support Services Department of ASIC Saheb Khajah with the graduates.

Al-Safat Investment Co holds training program for KIA staff

KUWAIT: Al-Safat Investment Company held an extensive training program for two female employees of Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA). The one-month program is part of the field training of Financial Management Graduation Program, and it covered different skills required for working at the financial sector. This initiative of Al-Safat Investment Co comes in line with its firm belief in employee development and investing in human resources in different fields such as economics, accounting, management skills and IT in reputable financial and investment institutions in Kuwait.

Meanwhile, Manager of Support Services Department at Al-Safat Investment Saheb Khajah said that hosting this training program for young national talents aims at providing them with hands-on experience and field knowledge of the nature of work and activities of local financial and investment institution.

This also contributes to allowing trainees to directly and effectively deal with the markets in which they operate, while giving them the opportunities to hold important posts in the future, which enhances the national efforts in the development of human resources that are reflected positively on the national economy.

"The training program contributed to having onboard, highly qualified and well-equipped national talents that can be an added value for Kuwaiti institu-

tions and for the national economy," Khajah added. "Hosting this field program contributes to giving Al-Safat Investment, the opportunity to explore the talents and unleash the potential of the trainees and then could provide them with job opportunities when jobs are available. The training also gives the opportunity for the trainees to learn more about the jobs available in these institutions and benefit from them". He continued.

Trainee Hanouf Al-Roumi, a graduate of the Accounting Department from the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST), who spent a month at Al-Safat Investment Company moving between different departments, pointed out that this training opportunity has met the field and practical needs of the local labor market.

She added: "We learned the stock market strategies, the correspondence with the financial and investment supervisory authorities and auditing authorities, in addition to the types of investments and portfolios, how to manage them, and how to analyze the financial statements of companies. We also practically learned about the different programs used in corporate accounting and benefited greatly from the training at Al-Safat Investment Co. whose business model increased our knowledge and know-how in everything related to our jobs in Kuwait."



Redemption Notice Gulf Bank K.S.C.P. KD 100,000,000 Subordinated Tier 2 Bonds due 2026

In accordance with the prospectus dated 30 May 2016 (the "Prospectus"), Gulf Bank K.S.C.P. ("Gulf Bank" or the "Issuer") issued KWD100,000,000 Subordinated Tier 2 bonds due 30 May 2026 (the "Issuance"), which comprised KWD 50 million fixed rate bonds at 6.50% and KWD 50 million floating rate bonds at 4.00% + CBK discount rate (the "Bonds").

Unless otherwise defined herein, capitalized terms when used herein shall have the meaning assigned to them in the Terms and Conditions (as defined below).

In accordance with Condition 4(d) (Call Option) (the "Call Option") of the terms and conditions attaching to the Bonds (the "Terms and Conditions") as outlined in the Prospectus, Gulf Bank has the right, subject to the Redemption Conditions and the requirements set out in Condition 4(d), to exercise the Call Option in terms of which Gulf Bank may, on any Interest Payment Date falling on or after the fifth anniversary of the Issue Date of the Bonds, redeem all (but not some only) of the Bonds in accordance with the Terms and Conditions at their principal amount together with interest accrued to but excluding the date of redemption.

This redemption notice satisfies the requirement of serving a prior written notice to the Bondholders within the prescribed period under Condition 4(d) and in accordance with Condition 14 of the Terms and Conditions (the "Relevant Conditions") allowing the Issuer to exercise the Call Option right.

The Issuer - by serving this redemption notice - confirms the satisfaction of the Relevant Conditions and hereby formally exercises its rights under the Call Option.

As such, the Issuer is electing to redeem, by way of exercising its Call Option, all of the remaining Bonds (the "Outstanding Bonds"), in whole at their principal amount together with interest accrued to but excluding the date of redemption, and Kamco Investment Company K.S.C.P. ("Kamco Invest") in its capacity as the Fiscal and Principal Paying Agent shall notify, or cause the notification to, the Bondholders in writing of the accrued interest and total redemption amount payable for the Outstanding Bonds. The redemption will be performed on the Interest Payment Date falling on 5 years from the Issue Date of the Bonds being 30 May 2021 (the "Redemption Date").

The prior written approval of the Central Bank of Kuwait for Gulf Bank to exercise its Call Option was issued on 18 April 2021.

Should a bondholder have any questions regarding the redemption of the Outstanding Bonds by way of exercise of Gulf Bank's Call Option, please contact the Fiscal and Paying Agent Kamco Invest on:

(965) 2233 6982

projectpearl2021@kamcoinvest.com

Fiscal & Paying Agent

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Business

Al-Sager: NBK profits prove our resilient business model

NBK Group CEO: Our digital transformation increases our operating efficiency

KUWAIT: Isam Al-Sager, the CEO of National Bank of Kuwait Group, said that the growth in the bank's profitability for IQ 2021 was a result of steady recovery in operating income, continued cost management efforts and improved cost of risk.

On the sidelines of the Analysts' Conference for IQ 2021, Al-Sager added: "We started 2021 from a position of strength as the Group recorded adequate growth across all business lines even in these challenging conditions. We achieved net profit of KD 84.3 million during IQ 2021, growing by 8.5 percent, compared to IQ 2020, and 8.6 percent compared to the previous quarter."

Despite the headwinds in the markets we operate in, we are pleased to have demonstrated resilience by maintaining good loan growth and safeguarding our asset quality and capitalization metrics, he noted. Al-Sager emphasized that the bank will continue to focus on capitalizing on its diverse geographical presence, which supports provision of an increasingly wide range of products, services in all business lines.

Our regional focus will be to grow organically in key markets, in particular Egypt and Saudi Arabia. We will continue to leverage our local market leading position in both consumer and corporate banking segments while growing Islamic banking contribution through our subsidiary Boubyan Bank, which remains an important driver for earnings growth and diversification, mentioned Al-Sager.

At the same time, the implementation of our Digital Transformation program continues to carry heavy emphasis. The program is designed to have the dual impact of improving the efficiency of operations while catering to a wider clientele in all our markets through a more holistic and seamless experience, he pointed out.

Gradual Recovery

During the first quarter, we continued to see economic activity gradually recovering as vaccines were rolled out across the region. In Kuwait specifically and despite a slow start of vaccine rollout, the pace of the trend picked up significantly, with the administered doses exceeding one million as of today, representing more than 20 percent of the population, Al-Sager said.



Isam Al-Sager

This has led to economic growth slowly returning with private and government consumption as well as higher oil prices driving the rebound.

Mortgage Law

Regarding the updates on mortgage law and the optimism around it in the market, Al-Sager stated that Kuwait is one of few countries that don't have a mortgage law, noting that the existing subsidized structure to finance housing by Kuwait Credit Bank has worked historically but is becoming a bottle neck in today's efforts to resolve the issue of growing residential housing demand with the growing size of the young population.

Al-Sager stressed that a proper financing mechanism should be in place to help accelerate the allocation of land to eligible citizens; as land allocation is becoming very difficult, indicating that the proposed law offers the same benefits to citizens but the execution will be done through the banks to ensure a faster process, expand the loan size and ensure a proper credit underwriting process.

The banks will be a major beneficiary, as they will offer a new product that is expected to have large demand in the Kuwaiti market similar to what we have seen in other GCC countries, he added.

Public Debt Law

Moving to the updates on public debt law, Al-Sager mentioned that there are still ongoing discussions between the government and parliament around the details of the law and mainly the size of the debt ceiling. Talks have been present for some time and faces political divisions hindering its progress.

Although it is not going at the pace we were hoping to see but the overall direction is promising. Also today's low interest rate environment along with Kuwait's very low debt to GDP ratio, make debt issuance the most attractive funding alternative, pro-

vided the law gets approved, indicated Al-Sager.

Recently, the government has managed few temporary solutions to finance the budget deficit, mainly through asset swaps between the General reserve fund and future generation fund but we don't believe this is sustainable, he added.

Loan Deferral Program

On the extension of debt payments for citizens for another 6 months, Al-Sager mentioned that the deferral this time is different from last year, as the current deferral program is approved by virtue of a government law, and the government is to bear the cost of that deferral, unlike last year when banks took the initiative.

Strong Balance Sheet

On his part, Mr. Sujit Ronghe, Acting Group CFO said that IQ21 witnessed gradual improvement underlying operating drivers, volume growth supported by lower provisions and impairments.

Although some areas of our business lines remain challenged; a healthy balance sheet, comfortable liquidity levels and a solid capital base have been a feature of NBK's IQ21 results, he mentioned, adding that the bank saw an improving trend in the NIM over the last few quarters and that was primarily driven by lower cost of funds as our liabilities were repriced at a lower rate as and when they matured, thus benefiting from the drop in funding cost.

We are expecting a good loan growth and CASA deposits to remain stable, which would in turn result in our NIM remaining broadly stable around the levels we saw between 2.22 and 2.26 in the last two quarters, he noted.

Improved Cost of Funding

On the expectations about cost of funding picking up this year, Ronghe explained that the bank had a significant increase in its CASA deposits coming from retail portfolio in both Islamic and conventional banking.

As the economy started opening up in the last quarter of 2020, we were cautious and monitoring the levels of CASA deposits. We have not seen any

attrition in CASA deposits even though loan instalments resumed and people started spending, he added.

We are optimistic that the current lower funding cost will continue and don't expect the funding cost to pick up during this year, indicating that the second deferral of consumer loans instalments which is underway, could result in additional CASA deposit for banks, which could lead to more CASA deposits coming into the system thereby impacting funding cost favorably, he noted.

Fees Income

We saw some growth in fees income during the first quarter and we expect fees income to do better than last year although some sectors remains challenged, Ronghe stated.

For example, a portion of our income comes from credit card spend overseas, and as long as travel restrictions continue we would have to bear with lower income from that side of cards business. However, we are seeing a pick in the trade activities so we are expecting fees income to be better than last year although probably not as good as 2019 levels, he noted.

As regards loan growth, loan growth in 2020 was 5.7 percent and we saw a 2 percent growth during IQ21. We are expecting a mid to high single digit growth for the full year 2021. We expect the full year 2021 net interest margin to remain broadly in this range, he added.

Ronghe mentioned that cost to income ratio is currently at 37 percent similar to 2020. A challenging interest rate environment, the current macroeconomic situation together with the continuation of our investment program in support of various Group initiatives, will result in this ratio remaining in the high thirties.

Although business and economic activities have partially resumed, the pandemic is not yet over and its global repercussions are still unfolding. Hence we are of the opinion that it is not prudent to give guidance on cost of risk and consequently on earnings / capital adequacy. We are, however, hopeful of maintaining capital adequacy ratios in line with our internal targets above the regulatory minimum.

ABK announces net profit of KD 7.1m for Q1 2021

KUWAIT: Al Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced a net profit of KD 7.1 million for the first quarter of 2021, an increase of 18 percent compared to the same period last year. ABK's balance sheet remains healthy with strong capital and liquidity reserves. Capital Adequacy Ratio was 17.78 percent, while Total Equity stood at KD 594 million. The Non-Performing Loans (NPL) ratio was 2.2 percent with a coverage ratio of 275 percent.

Commenting on these results, George Richani, Group CEO of ABK, stated: "Despite the economic



George Richani

downturn due to the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), we are starting to see some signs of restoring confidence in the retail and corporate business sectors. ABK has achieved good results in the first quarter, making use of a prudent business model and sound management of the COVID-19 crisis. Throughout the first quarter, we continued to effectively manage our expenses and non-performing loans."

"ABK continues to simplify its banking services, which is the core of our strategy and operational ethics. With the increasing number of retail and corpo-

rate customers using digital banking services, digital improvements to our banking products will remain one of the Bank's top priorities," added Richani.

ABK maintained strong investment grade ratings of A+ from Fitch and A2 from Moody's. The ratings capture ABK's robust capital structure and strong fundamentals, including its capital position, resilient earnings capacity, stable funding and liquidity sources. ABK continues to support the banking sector by raising the efficiency of its employees and developing its technological infrastructure, as well as enabling customers to use modern technological tools.

Most recently, the Bank supported Kuwait's nationwide joint initiative, led by the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) and Kuwait Banking Association (KBA), through its participation in the 'Let's Be Aware' campaign. ABK will continue to provide valuable information, driving a deepening of financial literacy amongst its clients and the greater public, enabling them to make informed financial decisions.

KFH inks strategic partnership agreement with V-Thru

KUWAIT: In line with its program "Better Health ... Better Life", Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has signed a strategic partnership agreement with V-Thru application for organizing daily virtual walking challenges to the public throughout the month of Ramadan covering various areas. This partnership comes as part of KFH's social responsibility and efforts to engage with people to promote virtual activity and daily exercise lifestyle.

Assistant Manager Public Relations and Event Management at KFH- Fahad AlSaad, said that the virtual activity will take place during the walking hours allowed by the government. "Everyone will be invited to participate by opening the app and completing the challenge of walking a certain distance (1 km). Everyone who completes the challenge in time will receive KD 1 in their balance on the App which can be used for in-app purchases from various cafes and restaurants. People could also have the option to donate the daily prize of KD 1 to charity inside Kuwait", he added.

AlSaad pointed out on the sidelines of signing the partnership agreement, that the partnership also confirms KFH's keenness to support small businesses and the entrepreneurial initiatives of the Kuwaiti youth, especially during these difficult circumstances.

He explained that at the end of the month of Ramadan KFH will reward the top 10 in the scoreboard with X-Pay compatible wearable devices (Garmin, Fitbit, Samsung). "In addition to the daily walking challenge, KFH will organize side challenges by encouraging people to activate their Digital Wallet on their fitness wearable device and upon finishing the daily challenge, they show one of KFH representatives proof of activation for an extra credit reward of KD 2," AlSaad said.

Meanwhile, CEO V-Thru Abdullah AlShalabi praised the collaboration with KFH, indicating the application is in line with the healthy lifestyle and the social responsibility of V-Thru, not to mention it meets the aspiration of people for virtual daily exercise. He added that the app has different features such as V-Fit for virtual walking, walk-thru for orders, and the nutrition calculator, indicating there will be constant updates to the app for making life easier.



Gulf Air carries out first in-house C-Check on 787-9 and A320neo

MANAMA: Gulf Air, the national carrier of the Kingdom of Bahrain, has marked the successful completion of the first scheduled C-Check maintenance event on its Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner fleet. The check was carried out fully in Bahrain by Gulf Air's team of engineers and technicians comprising of more than 90 percent Bahraini qualified staff.

This achievement reinforces Gulf Air's technical capabilities in line with the airline's ongoing efforts to streamline its operations for greater quality standards, efficiency and cost reduction, besides being an initiative to contribute to the Kingdom's development in the field of aircraft maintenance. This marks the second important milestone, after the first C-Check insourcing of the Airbus A320neo in 2020.

A ceremonial event, that obeyed the social distancing rules amidst the current situation, was headed by Gulf Air's Acting Chief Executive Officer Captain Waleed AlAlawi who congratulated the Technical team on this important achievement and expressed appreciation to all parties who supported this project, espe-

cially the Bahrain Civil Aviation Affairs for their continued support to the national carrier. With a view to optimise the cost and continue developing its capability, Gulf Air currently is maximising the utilisation of the available aircraft ground time to carry out periodic maintenance activities on the fleet and perform checks in a more efficient and effective manner and the C-check maintenance on B787-9 and Airbus A320neo was a major step as part of such initiative.

At the event, Gulf Air's Acting CEO said: "The successful completion of this milestone demonstrates our strong in-house technical expertise and capabilities - for which I congratulate the entire Gulf Air's Technical Division. I look forward to marking additional accomplishments over the coming months utilising our robust aircraft maintenance system that delivers the highest quality and standards of aircraft maintenance while providing an opportunity for necessary cost savings for our national carrier. I also thank the Bahrain Civil Aviation Affairs for granting the necessary approval for carrying out this check".

KIB mandated lead arranger in \$200m financing for Daewoo

KUWAIT: Kuwait International Bank (KIB) continues to be committed to developing and expanding its financing footprint on local, regional and international levels. Accordingly, the Bank has participated, as a Mandated Lead Arranger, in the Islamic tranche of the \$200 million syndicated facility for Daewoo Engineering & Construction (E&C), along with a consortium of international, regional and local banks. This three-year amortizing facility will be utilized for general corporate purposes and aims to support Daewoo's current projects in Kuwait and the GCC region.

Commenting on the successful closure of this transaction, Mohamed Khadiri, General Manager of the International Banking and Large Corporate Department at KIB, said: "The transaction was initially launched at USD 115M and was upsize to USD 200M due to significant oversubscription following an overwhelming response from the market. This reiterates Daewoo E&C's solid business fundamentals and confirms its strong credit appetite."

Khadiri added: "While Daewoo has regularly tapped the syndicated loan markets in the past, this transaction represents another important milestone in the expansion of its growing investor base by tapping Islamic liquidity available in the region through a longer dated issuance. Our participation in this syndicated facility comes as part of KIB's strategic vision to provide Islamic financing solutions to multinational companies, government-affiliated entities, as well as large private conglomerates across the globe." Khadiri concluded by saying: "This deal adds to KIB's portfolio of noteworthy achievements and its strong track record in providing sharia-compliant financing products and services, as well as financial advisory to the corporate sector. We will continue our efforts to pursue KIB's strategic objectives in order to strengthen and cement our position as a leading banking institution amongst local and regional banks, as we continue to fulfill the needs and requirements of our customers."



Mohamed Khadiri

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Lifestyle | Features

Marianne Faithfull turns to poetry as COVID robs her of song

Iconic British artist Marianne Faithfull fears she may never sing again after a brutal dose of COVID-19 last year, but a new album of poetry set to music has given her a beautiful outlet. The 74-year-old spoke to AFP by phone from her home in London, but sounded even further away, her voice heavy with fatigue. "I caught it really badly and nearly died and now I've got what they call long-term COVID," she said. "It's not the virus but it certainly feels like it. It's in my lungs so I can't talk for very long." Asked if she will sing again, she is saddened: "Darling, I don't know. I hope I can. I do singing practice once a week. A friend comes over and plays my lovely guitar and I practice."

"It's an awful thought," she added. "Whatever happens, I can't change it." But far from defeated, she has spent the



In this file photo British singer Marianne Faithfull performs at the Bataclan concert hall in Paris. — AFP

past few months completing an album begun before the pandemic. It features her reading some of her favorite poetry—Byron, Shelley, Keats and other 19th century romantics—with backing music from an all-star cast that includes Warren Ellis,

Nick Cave and Brian Eno. It was Cave that suggested "She Walks In Beauty" as a title. She had wanted a different line from Byron—"So We'll Go No More a Roving"—but Nick thought that was a bit negative," she said with a laugh. She seems genuinely surprised that the album has worked out so well. "Warren and I listened to quite a few records that people have made with poetry and music behind them, and most of them are awful. It's quite hard to do it right. We were very lucky," she said.

Survivor

The poems have been close to her heart since her schooldays in 1950s England, for which she thanks a Mrs Simpson, one of the only teachers at her convent school who was not a nun. That was before her famous entry into

Swinging Sixties' London, spotted at a party by the manager of the Rolling Stones and becoming a muse to Mick Jagger, with all the sexist baggage that came along with that status. She enjoyed the highs of sudden fame and fortune, but also deep lows of drug addiction and homelessness, and emerged on the other side with tales to tell.

She built a long career with more than 20 albums to her name, including the landmark "Broken English" from 1979 that has become a touchstone for dark, orchestral pop, ensuring a steady stream of younger artists keen to work with her, including PJ Harvey, Jarvis Cocker and Beck. Ever the survivor, she faced her hardest trial yet with the pandemic that nearly took her life last year, but she pushed through and managed to record the album at a distance. "It was not as

hard as I thought it would be," she told AFP.

"But it was a bit of a problem. When you're in the studio together you can tell a lot about what people are thinking from their body language. We didn't have that at all. It's incredibly lucky that it turned out as well as it did," she said. Though she worries about losing her singing ability for good, perhaps the poetry offers a way forward. Would she consider a French version, in memory of the many years she spent in Paris? "I'd love to do Baudelaire, Rimbaud, but I don't speak French well enough. I'll have to think about it..." she said. — AFP



People attend the Sunset Strip Late Night Drive-In Oscars Watch Party on the parking lot of the Andaz Hotel, in West Hollywood, California. — AFP

Oscars audience halved in massive ratings drop

This year's Oscars audience plummeted by more than half to a record low 9.85 million viewers, broadcaster ABC said Monday—a staggering if widely expected drop for a ceremony that many viewers found short on humor and star power. The whopping 58 per cent tumble from last year's previous 23.6 million nadir had been anticipated for Hollywood's biggest night, after other award shows held during the pandemic also suffered precipitous declines.

With movie theaters shut for most of the year, many viewers had not seen or even heard of nominees such as Chloe Zhao's "Nomadland," which was the night's big winner with three prizes but which has taken just over \$2 million at the domestic box office. Several blockbuster films whose stars could have drawn interest at this year's Oscars saw their release dates shunted to next year due to the pandemic, from Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story" and the mega-budget sci-fi "Dune" to an array of popular superhero titles.

That exodus left an unfamiliar crop of nominees competing at Sunday's ceremony, with Daniel Kaluuya and Youn Yuh-jung winning the supporting acting Oscars a year after Brad Pitt and Laura Dern prevailed. One big name who did win—but was in bed sleeping some 5,000 miles away in Wales—was Anthony Hopkins, who was unexpectedly named best actor for "The Father" in what was the night's final prize. The Oscars typically end with best picture, but producers decided to reorganize the categories—and the lack of an acceptance speech at the show's grand finale was criticized by many viewers as anti-climactic.

"At 83 years of age, I did not expect to get this award, I really didn't," said Hopkins in video posted to his Instagram page from Wales on Monday morning. "I want to pay tribute to Chadwick Boseman who was taken from us far too early," he added, referring to the late "Black Panther" star who had been expected to

win best actor for his final role in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

'Preaching'

This year's unorthodox Oscars ceremony was moved from a Hollywood theater to a glammed-up Los Angeles train station to abide by strict Covid-19 protocols, and reunited Hollywood filmmakers and actors en masse for the first time in more than a year. Reviews of the show were mixed, with several critics complaining about the show's lack of humor and musical performances. While many Oscars begin with gag-heavy monologues, producers turned this year to Regina King, who was one of many stars who referred to racism and police violence—specifically last week's conviction of Minneapolis cop Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd.

"I know that a lot of you people at home want to reach for your remote when you feel like Hollywood is preaching to you," she predicted. Variety slammed the decision to go without a host for a third straight year, calling the ceremony "lost and guide-less." But the decision to strip out musical performances and most clips of nominated movies—and allow winners to speak at length without being "played off" the stage by an orchestra—drew some praise. Deadline called the "relatively fast-paced and deeply personal ceremony" a "true Hollywood reinvigoration." The ratings drop also continues an broader, multi-year downward trend for the Academy Awards—and most other award shows. The Oscars drew more than 43 million viewers as recently as 2014, but audiences have become increasingly fragmented in the streaming era. The 9.85 million viewing figure is based on early Nielson data ordered by ABC, with an official ratings release expected yesterday — AFP



In this file photo musician, Kanye West performs onstage during the 50th annual Grammy awards held at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

during the 2008 Grammy Awards as he performed "Hey Mama" and "Stronger." The sneakers, which were part of a collaboration between Nike and West, were prototypes, with the resulting model not going on sale until April 2009.

Sturdy investment?

The shoes were acquired by RARES, a sneaker investment marketplace that allows users to invest in rare pairs of athletic footwear. Individuals can buy shares in a

No, we're not born with alcohol deficit: Doc behind 'Another Round'

A Norwegian psychiatrist denied Monday inventing the so-called theory that forms the basis for the Oscar-winning film "Another Round", reiterating that man is not born with a lack of alcohol in his blood. Crowned the best international feature film at Sunday's ceremony, the Danish movie is a dark comedy about four high school teachers who carry out a drinking experiment. The four test a theory attributed to Norwegian psychiatrist Finn Skarderud which supposedly claims that man is born with a deficit of 0.05 percent alcohol in the bloodstream.

But that is "fake news" that comes from a "selective reading" of the preface Skarderud wrote for the Norwegian translation of "The Psychological Effects of Wine" by Italian author Edmondo de Amicis, the psychiatrist himself said Monday. "On the first page, I wrote that after one or two glasses, yes, life's pretty good, we think maybe we're born with a 0.05 percent deficit," he told Norwegian public radio NRK.



Danish director Thomas Vinterberg poses with the award for best international feature film for "Another Round" in the press room at the Oscars, at Union Station in Los Angeles. — AFP

But "in the following paragraph, I reject that theory entirely," he stressed. At first he was concerned about having been misquoted. "Initially it was a little uncomfortable because I am after all a doctor, a psychiatrist, I treat people suffering from addiction, I meet their families," he told NRK. But, the mini-notoriety also led the film's director, Thomas Vinterberg, to contact him and ask him to serve as "a sort of consultant" during the shooting of "Another Round". The storyline is "balanced," he said. Alcohol "is not either or." The film is very measured. "We can discuss the effects of alcohol. Alcohol is to a very large extent a social lubricant," he said. "The difficulty is in finding the right balance, to not abuse it." — AFP

pair, just as investors buy stock in a company. RARES, launched in March by former American football player Jerome Sapp, bought the Air Yeezy 1s through a private sale from sneaker collector Ryan Chang. The sale price exceeded Sotheby's estimate of \$1 million. "That was actually the grail of grails," said Sapp. The sneaker is expected to list on the platform's "stock exchange" at around \$15-20 per share on June 16, he explained.

Sapp predicts that the company will carry out three or four IPO-like listings before then, including a pair of Nike Air Force 1s made in collaboration with rapper Jay-Z. Before collaborating with West, Nike had named shoes only in honor of famous athletes. The Air Yeezy 1 was released, in limited edition in 2009, followed by the Air Yeezy 2 in 2012. Most Air Yeezy 1s sell for between \$2,000 and \$4,000, depending on the model. West initially teamed up with Nike before switching to Adidas to create his own line.

Brahm Wachter, head of streetwear and new collectibles at Sotheby's, said Monday's price "speaks volumes of Kanye's legacy as one of the most influential clothing and sneaker designers of our time, and of the Yeezy franchise he has built which has become an industry titan." — AFP



Founder of Energy Garden Agamemnon Otero tends to a herb and vegetable section near the platform at Brondesbury Park Overground train station in north west London. — AFP photos

In London, rail-side gardening blossoms during pandemic

A busy commuter train station is an unlikely place to find a haven for flowers, bees and hedgehogs. But a decade-old project in London bringing an eco-friendly combination of gardening, horticulture and so-called rewilding to the urban jungle is bearing fruit during the pandemic. Hiding in plain sight, 34 solar-powered sites created by the community-led project Energy Garden are dotted around the British capital, adjacent to train platforms used daily by hundreds of thousands of commuters before coronavirus hit. With lockdowns now easing, the passengers are returning, and the project's chief executive Agamemnon Otero hopes its success can help address a longer-term challenge.

"Energy Garden is really about building resilience in communities. It's about how we directly address the climate change issue that everybody feels they are powerless to do," he told AFP. "Most of the time, train operators will cut down huge swathes of trackside space and leave it denuded from any type of life. "These are corridors for biodiversity to come in and so it's very important that a section of every garden is still wild." Community interest has grown steadily since the initiative started in 2011, but has spiked during lockdown as more volunteers joined to work-socially distanced-tending to the gardens. The first site was established at Brondesbury Park station in northwest London, part of the Overground network that generally services outer suburbs where the Underground does not reach.

'Out and helping'

Layers of rubble were dug out and the site replanted with vibrant flowers, fruit trees, fragrant herbs, tea plants and an array of vegetables including potatoes, kale and Jerusalem artichokes. There are even hops from which Energy Garden brews its own beer. Jaylyn Miguel, in her 20s, was one of the volunteers who joined during lockdown last year. "I guess it was for my own mental health, I wanted to just be out and helping the community," she said. "I want to learn more about sustainability. Collectively it's really important, so that we can make sure people have access to organic food. "I certainly didn't have experience growing food, and

I've been learning quite a lot over this period. It's good to just learn from others."

The gardens' solar panels power water hoses that help cultivate the various plant life, and excess electricity is sold back to transport companies to offset their carbon footprint. That, in turn, generates a revenue stream to fund more community gardens, with Otero planning to expand on a national scale. Funding also comes from corporate and community investment. Individuals can become part of a "one vote, one share" cooperative system that gives each shareholder a say in the running and evolution of their garden. The designs for each site are formally approved by the agency Transport for London, which manages the capital's sprawling network. The project also runs school workshops and youth training programs to teach youngsters about sustainable practices, and the gardens are maintained by more than 300 volunteers.



Founder of Energy Garden Agamemnon Otero tends to a herb and vegetable section near the platform at Brondesbury Park Overground train station.

'Our space'

Volunteer and project investor Terence Tehranian visits the Brondesbury Park garden regularly with his young children to lend a hand. "I think it really is making London a better place to live. It's making the environment better because more plants means less carbon dioxide and it's bringing people together," he said. "I think those things are important for a huge city like London where that often doesn't happen."

Otero said it was fitting that the gardens are part of the transport network, counterbalancing a sector that in 2019 produced 27 percent of net greenhouse gas emissions in Britain—although most of that was road traffic rather than rail. "What we wanted to do was really have a discussion around the biggest consumer of energy and the biggest generator of emissions," he said. "I'm really excited for people to get involved and join a garden, and even become investor members. "This is our space. We need to take back the spaces and make them what we want to see." — AFP

Kanye West sneakers shatter sale records at \$1.8 million

A pair of Nike Air Yeezy 1s worn by rapper Kanye West sold for \$1.8 million, triple the previous record for sneakers, Sotheby's said Monday, as the market for rare sports shoes soars. The shoes beat the record held by a pair of Nike Air Jordan 1s which sold for \$615,000 in August 2020 at a Christie's auction. The record price for sneakers has been broken several times recently as what was seen as a niche market 10 years ago now attracts interest from the general public as well as leading collectors. "The sale marks the highest publicly recorded price for a sneaker sale ever," Sotheby's said in a statement.

"The sale also marks the first pair of sneakers to top \$1 million," it added. The black high-top Yeezys were worn by West



Agamemnon Otero tends to a herb and vegetable section.

Lifestyle | Features



A photo shows an aerial view of a beach of the small southern Greek island of Elafonisos.



A photo shows a view of a hotel under renovation on the small southern Greek island of Elafonisos. — AFP photos

Tourist-starved Greek islands strive for 'COVID-free' image

White sandy beaches make Elafonisos a popular holiday destination but it's the Greek island's small population that puts it top-of-the-list for COVID jabs as the country pushes to restart tourism before summer. In January, the Greek government said it would prioritize immunity on smaller islands, promising they would be fully vaccinated by the end of April. To that end, jabs are being distributed to inhabitants of dozens of islands in the Aegean sea to the east and the Ionian sea to the west, where municipalities are hungry to reopen fully to tourists next month.

"Seventy percent of the island's population will be vaccinated before mid-May," says Elafonisos mayor Efi Liarou, a move she said would "provide a kind of shield for the inhabitants." "It's a very important

step that guarantees the launch of the tourist season and sends a message of optimism," she continues, proud of what she sees as her island's "COVID-free identity". Seated outside the island's vaccination centre, Panagiotis Aronis, 70, awaits his turn to receive his second COVID jab. "The sky is clear, the process is going well," he says, casting his eyes to the blue above him. "With a little luck we will all be able to survive," Aronis muses.

Jabs by ferry

Parked outside the center is a medical truck stacked with special boxes full of COVID-19 vaccine doses. Doctor Anargyros Mariolis, in charge of vaccination on Elafonisos, escorted the truck from the mainland by ferry on Friday. And after finishing a day of giving jabs at the centre, Mariolis begins visits to home-

bound elderly residents. "Our goal is to create a wall of immunity to get back to normal as fast as possible," he tells AFP. The jab campaign is completely voluntary and doesn't apply to anyone under the age of 18.

Nevertheless, Mariolis hails as "exemplary" the deployment of "Operation Freedom"-as Greek health authorities have dubbed it-echoing the optimism of the health ministry's secretary general Marios Themistocleous. "Soon we will have finished vaccinating on islands with fewer than 1,000 residents," Themistocleous said last week while inspecting efforts on the island of Irakleia. "We will then accelerate our efforts on the bigger islands," he said.

Measuring just 18 square kilometers (7 square miles), Elafonisos lies just off the Peloponnese peninsula and welcomes an average of 200,000 tourists every year-

but that number was decimated by the pandemic in 2020. The third wave of the pandemic has hit Greece particularly hard with the majority of the country's nearly 10,000 virus deaths occurring over the last few months.

"We're going to make it"

Greece has been under virus restrictions-including a curfew of varying strictness-since November. But like other tourism-dependent Mediterranean economies, Greece began to re-open non-essential businesses and schools in early April, while restaurants and cafes are set to offer outdoor seating on May 3. One week ago, Greece lifted a mandatory seven-day quarantine for travellers from European Union countries, the UK, the US, Israel, Serbia and the United Arab Emirates, with tourists required to

provide proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test.

On Monday, US operator Delta Airlines said it would resume flights to Greece via New York on May 29, and add a direct flight from Atlanta on July 3. Local business people on Elafonisos are counting on their image as a safe haven from the virus to help draw their customers back. "The COVID-free identity is a privilege for our island," says Chryssoula Kataga, 43, who owns a restaurant in the island's port. "It reassures tourists after this whole period of confinement," she said. Babis Aronis is finishing renovations on his hotel nearby and says he's already started getting calls for reservations. "After May 14, everything will be better," he says. "We're going to make it this summer."—AFP



A picture shows a closed tavern on the small southern Greek island of Elafonisos.



A couple enjoys the beach on the small southern Greek island of Elafonisos.



A fisherman cleans his nets at the harbor of the small southern Greek island of Elafonisos.

New York startup aims to leave a mark with ephemeral tattoos

Neither a permanent mark nor a paper transfer: a New York start-up has created the first tattoos that fully disappear after a while, aiming to open the body inking market to new clientele. "It's going to fade so I'm not too concerned," says Abigail Glasgow with a mischievous look in her eye, as the first letter of her fiancé's name is tattooed on her forearm. For years, amateur tattoo artists around the world-mainly in Asia-have offered "semi-permanent" tattoos, claiming that using vegetable ink and less penetration of the skin will cause them to disappear eventually.

But in practice, the tattoos tend only to deteriorate, without vanishing completely and often causing lesions, to the point that several professional tattooists have sounded the alarm. After six years of development, the company Ephemeral has created an ink composed of biodegradable polymers that dissolves naturally between nine and 15 months after the same inking

process as a conventional tattoo. Josh Sakhai, one of the three co-founders of Ephemeral, was a student at New York University when he wanted to get a permanent tattoo but was "too scared" because of how his Iranian-origin family might react.

So he set out to create a temporary tattoo made of ink that fades. The endeavor

laboration with dermatologists. They only used products approved by the US' Food and Drug Administration regulator. Sakhai assures that, like permanent tattoos, the ephemeral tattoos do not dilute or blur sporadically over time. Instead, the lines remain crisp and the designs fade evenly, he says.



Abigail Glasgow receives a temporary tattoo by tattoo artist Marissa Boulay at Ephemeral tattoo shop in New York City. — AFP photos

required 50 different formulations before he found the right one, a number of which Sakhai tested on himself. Jokingly describing himself as a "guinea pig," Sakhai points to several places on his arms where he says he used to have tattoos. Sakhai developed the formula in a laboratory in Milford, Connecticut, just north of New York, in col-

'Playful'

The Ephemeral tattoo parlor opened in the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn at the end of March. For now, only black ink is available, but other colors are expected. "What we're doing is we're opening up the possibility of tattoos for a whole new clientele that previously wasn't getting a perma-

nent tattoo," says Sakhai. The ephemeral tattoo, which costs between \$175 and \$450, can be a step towards people deciding to get a permanent tattoo, according to the young entrepreneur. "This really expands the possibilities for the traditional community," he says.

Ephemeral has recruited tattoo artists that are more used to inking permanent designs, such as 29-year-old Marissa Boulay, who draws the "M" on Glasgow's forearm, which also features permanent tattoos. "I can be more playful," says Glasgow. "I can decide more off the cuff what I want to do" in terms of design and location. It is also an opportunity for her to test out a flower design to see whether she likes it enough to get it done permanently.

Tattoos, once associated with society's rebels, are increasingly mainstream among millennials. Some 40 percent of 18-34-year-olds in the United States have at least one tattoo, according to a 2019 study by the Nielsen Institute. "We're not trying to change anything. We're just embracing the changes that are happening," says Boulay, an 11-year tattoo industry veteran who is covered in tattoos herself. "I think tattoos are about self-expression and art. And I think we're just trying to make it easier for more people to have that experience," she adds.— AFP

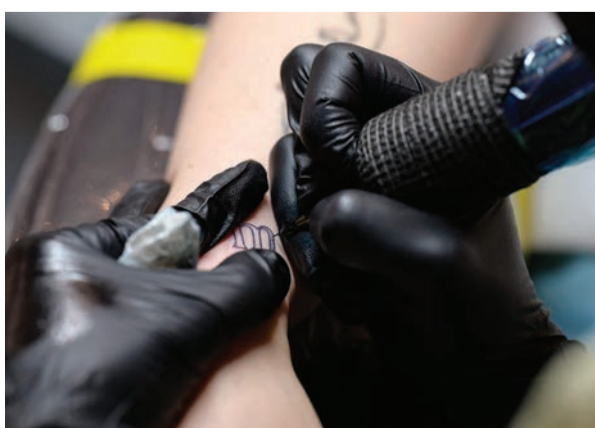
Russian man 'trapped' on Chinese reality TV show finally voted out

The reality TV ordeal of a Russian who joined a Chinese boy band show by accident-and made it to the finals despite urging fans to vote him off-has finally ended after nearly three months. Vladislav Ivanov, a 27-year-old from Vladivostok, was kicked out of the Produce Camp 2021 on Saturday, after viewers ignored his pleas to leave and backed him all the way to the final. Ivanov, who speaks fluent Mandarin, originally joined the show as a Chinese teacher.



Vladislav Ivanov

But he said he was invited to sign on as a contestant after the directors noticed his good looks. "They asked if I'd like to try a new life," Ivanov said during the show. He appeared to regret his decision almost immediately, but could not leave without breaching his contract. His lack of enthusiasm played out in half-hearted singing, rapping and dancing alongside the other, more eager contestants. Performing under the stage name Lelush, he urged the public to vote him out, saying he did not want to be among the 11 winners of the show, who are contractually obliged to form a boy band. "Don't love me, you'll get no results," he said on one episode.— AFP



Abigail Glasgow receives a temporary tattoo by tattoo artist Marissa Boulay.



Ephemeral's co-founder Josh Sakhai poses for a portrait at Ephemeral tattoo shop.



Abigail Glasgow shows her temporary tattoos at Ephemeral tattoo shop.

Sports

'Impossible now' - Japan's Olympic host towns pull out over pandemic

TOKYO: Hundreds of Japanese towns and cities have been forced to rethink plans to host Olympic teams because the coronavirus will prevent public appearances and require costly safety measures. The western town of Okuizumo spent more than \$5 million preparing to welcome India's hockey team for a pre-Games training camp, only to scrap the visit because of COVID-19. After sinking money into upgrading sports facilities, Okuizumo balked when it became clear it would have to provide bubble-like biosecurity measures with regular virus tests and medical care. "We wanted to have one of the world's top tier teams visit our town and show their skills to local children," town official Katsumi Nagase told AFP. "But that seems impossible now."

More than 500 municipalities signed up to host athletes and officials in a scheme aimed at broadening the Olympics' benefits beyond Tokyo. Some, like Okuizumo, have already scrapped plans to host overseas athletes, while others are devising careful programs they hope will keep everyone safe.

Instead of giving residents the chance to meet elite athletes and try out new sports, towns will have to ditch any physical contact, school visits and public training sessions. Kurihara city in northern Miyagi prefecture was planning to host South Africa's hockey team, but decided the expense was no longer worth it given the limitations imposed by virus measures.

"It's a project that will use our tax resources," Hidenori Sasaki, an official with the local board of edu-



NARITA: Artwork by Japanese painter Akira Yamaguchi titled 'Imayou yuraku-zu' is displayed at Narita International Airport terminal 1 in Narita, Chiba prefecture yesterday, as part of the Look of the Games - the visual identity of the Tokyo 2020 Games to welcome athletes and Games stakeholders from around the world to Japan. — AFP

cation, told AFP. "If it becomes just athletes holding a training camp without any exchanges with local residents, local citizens won't enjoy the benefits."

In some cases, Olympic teams have cancelled, worried about the risk of infection before the Games. Australia's swimming team ditched its plan to train in Niigata's Nagaoka city, its mayor told media in March.

And Canada's table tennis team will no longer go to Nagano's Okaya city, which instead plans to put posters of athletes around town, said Tomoko Hirose of the city's planning division. "Our cheering may become a one-way engagement, without physical exchanges, but given the situation, we just have to move on," she told AFP.

Limited contact

Not all host towns have given up on their plans. Tsuruoka city in northern Yamagata prefecture will host several dozen Olympic and Paralympic athletes and officials from Moldova and Germany. The city has had ties for years with Moldova, said Takayuki Ito, an official with the city's board of education. "What's important for us is to continue our exchanges," Ito told AFP, describing recent online archery competitions held with Moldovans.

"There are things you can do without spending a lot of money," Ito said. "We have a good feeling about our program." But it won't be simple. The athletes will stay in their own dormitory and move only along designated routes to gyms and training fields, avoiding contact with residents.

In western Tottori, Yonago city will host several dozen people from Jamaica's swimming, gymnastics and Paralympic boat teams. The city has had ties with Jamaica since 2015, and believes its host duties will strengthen that bond, said Kyohei Takahashi at the city's sports promotion division.

The athletes will be on a designated floor and use a staff elevator of their hotel, avoiding the lobby and main entrance to limit contact. They will also be offered frequent virus testing, as well as designated routes to gyms and pools. "We planned very early," Takahashi said. "We won't be able to have exchanges with athletes this time. But the legacy will remain," he added. — AFP



NEW YORK: Devin Booker #1 of the Phoenix Suns passes the ball as Reggie Bullock #25 of the New York Knicks defends in the fourth quarter at Madison Square Garden on Monday in New York City. — AFP

Booker, Paul shine as Suns halt Knicks win streak

LOS ANGELES: Devin Booker scored 33 points as the Phoenix Suns snapped the New York Knicks' nine-game winning streak with a come-from-behind 118-110 victory at Madison Square Garden on Monday. The Suns roared back to life after trailing by 15 points in the first half, outscoring the in-form Knicks by 31-23 in the decisive fourth quarter to complete victory by an eight-point margin. Mikal Bridges added 21 points for Phoenix, while veteran Chris Paul chipped in with 20 points — including a vital late burst of scoring — to help shepherd the Suns ever closer to a playoff berth. The Suns improved to 43-18 with the win and remain in second place in the Western Conference, just behind leaders Utah, who suffered a surprise loss against the Minnesota Timberwolves on Monday. "We knew it was going to be a dogfight from beginning to end," Booker said afterwards. "Obviously the streak they've had is unbelievable. But we wanted to come in here and show them what we've got." The Knicks had pulled to within four points with just under two minutes remaining, but eight quick points from Paul — including a dagger three-pointer — sealed the Suns win. "He's been here before," Booker said of Paul's late scoring spree. "The proof is in the pudding. We've been seeing what this guy can do for 16 years — that didn't surprise anybody." Derrick Rose led the Knicks scoring with 22 points, while Julius Randle finished with 18. RJ Barrett and Reggie Bullock added 17 apiece.

The shock of the day came in Minneapolis, where D'Angelo Russell's driving layup with 4.2 seconds

remaining helped the Timberwolves upset the Jazz 105-104. Russell finished with 27 points as a Utah line-up missing the injured Donovan Mitchell slid to defeat against an already-eliminated Minnesota team helping prop up the Western Conference with just 17 wins this season. Another win streak bit the dust in New Orleans, meanwhile, as the Los Angeles Clippers' four-game run ended with an emphatic 120-103 drubbing by the Pelicans. Zion Williamson led the Pelicans with 23 points, while Eric Bledsoe and Lonzo Ball both had 18 each in the win.

Happy returns for Lakers

In Washington, Bradley Beal scored 45 points, but it was not enough to prevent the San Antonio Spurs halting the Wizards' eight-game winning streak with a 146-143 win in overtime. Wizards ace Beal missed a three-pointer on the buzzer to tie it up, while Russell Westbrook had a triple-double with 22 points, 13 rebounds and 14 assists in a losing effort for Washington. DeMar DeRozan led the Spurs scoring with 37 points and 10 assists, while Dejounte Murray added 25 points and Keldon Johnson 21. San Antonio improved to 31-29 with the win, while Washington fell to 27-34. In Orlando, Anthony Davis helped make it a happy return for the Los Angeles Lakers in a 114-103 victory over the Magic. Davis, who is working his way back to full fitness after a lengthy injury layoff, scored 18 points in a roller coaster win for the Lakers, playing in Orlando for the first time since last season's NBA Finals victory. "Last time we were here, good things happened," Davis said. "I'm happy to come back here and have another good thing happen with the win."

The Lakers were made to work for the victory though, recovering from a disastrous second quarter when they were outscored 40-22 to regain the lead at the end of the third quarter. A late burst from Dennis Schroder, with 13 of his 21 points coming in the final quarter, helped the Lakers close out the win.—AFP

Messi's boyhood club Newell's creates school for kids with disabilities

ROSARIO: Stefano may be just a kid, but he feels like a champion when he dribbles and scores like his beloved Lionel Messi. The boy is one of nine children who just enrolled at the brand new football school for kids with learning disabilities, created by the Argentine great's childhood club Newell's Old Boys.

"We're a real football family. My husband played for the club, my other two sons did too and the oldest got to the fourth division," said Stefano's mother, Marisa Meroi. "Stefano wanted to be like his brothers," she said.

Now he gets to practice dribbling, passing and shooting like his football hero who was on the Newell's books as a child. "I like Messi, I like (Nacho) Scocco (a Newell's striker). I play well. I love my family, I love my mom," said Stefano, 10, who has Down's syndrome, adding that the club is "my life."

Stefano gets kitted out in the Newell's colors and

then joins the eight other children aged from 6 to 12 with similar learning disabilities at the Griffa Sports Center used by the first team. Based in Rosario, some 300 kilometers (185 miles) north of Argentina's capital Buenos Aires, Newell's are not the only club to launch such an initiative but theirs is a weekly training session that is free for the participants.

Going to training is a highlight of the day for the children, but also for the parents who watch their young players' progress from the sidelines. Sometimes the parents also join coaches in holding kids by the hand as they learn to control the ball. Some children shoot into an empty net before celebrating wildly. Stefano is skillful and a natural footballer. "He plays in another club with kids that don't have special needs. Now he's crazy about this. It's amazing to have an inclusive school given the times we live in," said Meroi.—AFP

Blow for Enyimba ahead of must-win clash with Pirates

JOHANNESBURG: Nigerian club Enyimba will be without suspended captain and leading scorer Augustine Oladapo when they host South African outfit Orlando Pirates today in a crucial CAF Confederation Cup group game. Only a final-round victory against the unbeaten Buccaneers will give the twice African champions a chance of a top-two finish and qualification for the quarter-finals. "I knew this group would go down to the wire. We must collect maximum points against Pirates to keep alive our hopes of becoming the first winners from Nigeria," said Enyimba coach Fatai Osho.

Entente Setif of Algeria host Al Ahly Benghazi of Libya in the other Group A fixture and all four clubs have a chance of reaching the knockout stage. Here, AFP Sport previews matchday 6 with already-qualified clubs in two of the other three sections striving to finish first, and avoid other group winners in the draw.

Group A

Enyimba hope the dribbling skills of rising star Anayo Iwuala can help unlock a Pirates defence that has conceded only one goal in eight qualifying and group matches. That goal was scored by Oladapo, but it could not prevent the Nigerian visitors losing 2-1 in Soweto with Tshhegofatso Mabasa snatching a late winner. Enyimba have won their last four CAF home matches, all by one-goal margins, and a 1-0 win or a two-goal victory will ensure they finish above Pirates on head-to-head record, and progress.



RIVADH: Al Sadd's players speak with Foolad's defender Moussa Coulibaly (center) during the AFC Champions League group D match between Iran's Foolad and Qatar's Al-Sadd on Monday, at the Prince Faisal Bin Fahd Stadium in the Saudi capital, Riyadh. — AFP

Xavi's Al Sadd close in on Asian Champions League knockouts

DOHA: Al Sadd boosted their chances of making the knockout stages of the Asian Champions League on Monday after a hard fought 1-0 win over Iran's Foolad Khuzestan put them top of Group D. It was the third win in five matches for Xavi's side who now have 10 points, two ahead of Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr who suffered a shock 2-1 loss to Jordan's Al Wehdat.

At the Prince Faisal bin Fahad Stadium in Riyadh, South Korean star Nam Tae-hee scored the only goal of the match to give former champions Al Sadd a vital three points in the race to top the group. Nam rose high to head in a cross from Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos in the 64th minute as Al Sadd broke the deadlock following several missed chances at both ends.

Foolad's loss means they have to win their next match and hope Al Nassr slip up against Al Sadd on Thursday to stand a chance of making the cut as the second placed team. Al Wehdat however have no chance of making the round of 16 with just four points from five matches and will at best finish in third position if they win their next match. Al Wahda ended Persepolis' four-match unbeaten run in the competition with a 1-0 win that raises their hopes of qualifying for

the knockout phase as Group E winners. Slovenian forward Tim Matavz's fifth-minute strike proved decisive in the match in Margao, India, and took the Emirati club to 10 points from five matches, two behind Iranian giants Persepolis. The result means that both teams will have to win their sixth and final group phase match to ensure qualification in a format where only the five group winners and three best second-placed teams make the round of 16.

Abu Dhabi-based Al Wahda were beaten 1-0 by Persepolis in the first week of the tournament but on Monday the Iranians were caught napping early in the match as Matavz raced into the penalty area and struck the winner with a powerful shot to the roof of the net. Persepolis hardly had a close look at the Al Wahda goal in the first half and almost conceded their second on the night, but goalkeeper Hamed Lak made a fine save after Omar Khribin had attempted to score with an audacious shot from inside his own half.

The Iranians did have a few chances in the second half but Hossein Kanani headed wide and Ehasan Pahlavan saw his shot crash onto the crossbar. Al Wahda next play FC Goa on Thursday, while Persepolis take on Qatar's Al Rayyan to decide the group winners.

Salem Shah scored twice as Sharjah topped Group B with a match to spare after beating Iraq's Air Force Club 3-2 at the Sharjah Stadium. Sharjah have 11 points while Iran's Tractor FC are in second spot with seven after playing out a goalless draw against Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor. — AFP

Sports

Mahrez's 'unlikely' journey from Paris suburbs to Champions League semi against PSG

SARCELLES: Born and brought up in a gritty Paris suburb, Riyad Mahrez has gone on to become one of the leading players of his generation and returns to the French capital with Manchester City in the Champions League semi-finals this week. Yet his route to the top, sidestepping the usual youth academy apprenticeship, is variously described by his former coaches in Sarcelles as "unlikely" and the player himself as an "anomaly".

Now 30, the winger has been a key player for City this season, scoring in their Champions League quarter-final win over Borussia Dortmund and playing the 90 minutes as Pep Guardiola's side defeated Tottenham Hotspur in the English League Cup final on Sunday. He has also won the Africa Cup of Nations with Algeria, the country from where his father emigrated to France.

Mahrez himself grew up in Sarcelles, in the "banlieues" around 20 kilometers north of Paris, and learned the game at a local amateur club, leaving a mark on those who played with him as he made his journey to one of Europe's biggest sides.

"The only person who believed was Riyad himself," Hayel Mbemba, who played with Mahrez at AAS Sarcelles, told AFP. "He has a strength of character which is above the average. He is football crazy, and that is an understatement."

"He owes his success entirely to himself. He had an unwavering self-confidence. Some people might think it's arrogance but it's not the case," explains Mohamed

Coulibaly, who runs the local club. The production line of world-class players coming through the Paris suburbs is remarkable and seemingly never-ending, from Thierry Henry to Paul Pogba, Kylian Mbappe and many more in between.

However, while Mahrez was always a young player with outstanding technical gifts, that was no guarantee he would make it in the game. His former coaches recall how his frail physique seemed to work against him, but aged 18 he left Sarcelles for a trial at Quimper, an amateur fourth-tier club in distant Brittany.

From there he earned a professional deal at Le Havre, the second-division club where Pogba first played. Mahrez spent four years in the Normandy port city before crossing the English Channel to sign for Leicester City, then in the second-tier Championship.

He has never looked back since moving to England, but sources close to Mahrez say he was "hesitant" and that he "sought the advice of his friends in Sarcelles who convinced him to go". It is just as well he went. Mahrez won the English Premier League with Leicester, against all odds, in 2016 and is now on the brink of a second Premier League title in three seasons with City.

The Champions League could follow, if Mahrez can help City get the better of his home-town club first. "His journey is something of an anomaly in football. He has beaten the odds all thanks to his technical ability," says Mbemba, and there is a belief that missing out on youth academy coaching has allowed him to retain an

element of the street footballer so rarely seen in the modern game.

"When I watch him on the television he dribbles in the same way he did when he was 10 years old," says Franck Satougue, who once coached Mahrez. Satougue watched Mahrez play as a kid and remembers how, even after he turned professional at Le Havre, he would come back to Sarcelles on a Sunday and play in the neighborhood where he grew up.

Local pride

"His journey is the dream of every kid in the 'banlieues'. He is just a few steps away from winning the greatest trophy in European football despite his unlikely route to the top." Sarcelles may be PSG territory, but there is still plenty of local pride at Mahrez's success.

"Riyad is a respected person with exemplary physical and mental discipline. He is a source of inspiration for the people of Sarcelles," says Patrick Haddad, the mayor of the town. He awarded Mahrez the medal of Sarcelles in 2019.

Mahrez may be the captain of Algeria but he remains attached to the suburb where he grew up and is involved in a scheme which allows youths from Sarcelles to travel to Manchester to watch City. A stadium named after Mahrez will be inaugurated later this year in Sarcelles. "He is a good lad who is still a child at heart and who expresses himself with the ball," adds Mbemba. PSG had better watch out. — AFP



MANCHESTER: In this file photo taken on December 29, 2019 Manchester City's Algerian midfielder Riyad Mahrez controls the ball during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Sheffield United at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England. — AFP



LONDON: Chelsea's German head coach Thomas Tuchel shouts instructions to his players from the touchline during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Brighton and Hove Albion at Stamford Bridge in London on April 20, 2021. — AFP

Chelsea's Tuchel criticizes Champions League reforms

LONDON: Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel has launched a scathing attack on the new Champions League format, saying coaches and players had not been consulted on plans to add more games to an already packed schedule.

UEFA last week approved changes to its flagship club competition, which will take effect from 2024, but the announcement was overshadowed by the launch and subsequent collapse of the European Super League (ESL).

The number of teams participating in the group stage of the Champions League will increase from 32 to 36, with each side guaranteed at least 10 matches. Chelsea were one of the 12 clubs to sign up to the ESL project, which would have put an even greater strain on players, with a minimum of 18 regular-season games for all the clubs involved.

The Blues and the other five Premier League clubs who had signed up for the breakaway league quickly withdrew following a fierce backlash against the proposals from fans, players and authorities. Tuchel welcomed Chelsea's U-turn on the ESL but, speaking ahead of Tuesday's Champions League semi-final against Real Madrid, said not enough focus had been placed on the reforms to the existing competition.

'More games'

"I'm not sure if I like it because I can only see more games out of it," Tuchel said on Monday. "More games in the schedule we have. It's very hard for me to be

excited at all. All these discussions about Super League made us forget we have a new format of Champions League very soon. Did they ask any coach, any player about this? They did not ask me. We have so many new formats with the Nations League and a world championship for clubs coming soon. So much stuff, more games, more teams in the European Championship in the summer. This is not more quality, just more games."

Manchester City midfielder Ilkay Gundogan has also spoken out in strong terms against the changes to the Champions League, saying the current format made it the most popular club competition in the world. "More and more and more games, is no one thinking about us players?" the German international tweeted. "The new UCL format is just the lesser of the two evils in comparison to the Super League."

City play Paris Saint-Germain in the first leg of their semi-final today. UEFA had agreed to change the current format of 32 teams split into eight groups of four under pressure from many of the biggest clubs behind the ESL project.

As well as ensuring more matches between the European elite, two places in the Champions League will also be set aside each season for clubs with the best historical record in the competition, who have failed to qualify in any given season.

UEFA had threatened sanctions against the clubs involved in the ESL proposals, including potentially throwing them out of the Champions League. But Tuchel insisted the players and coaches of Chelsea and Madrid, who were one of the leading drivers of the plan, had earned the right to remain in the competition.

"We deserve to be in the semi-final, like Real Madrid deserve to be in the semi-final," said the former Paris Saint-Germain boss. "We don't deserve because of political influence, or because of size, or our shirts, or our logo. We deserve because we came a long way." — AFP

Rodgers hails Iheanacho as Leicester close in on top four

LONDON: Brendan Rodgers has hailed "phenomenal" Kelechi Iheanacho after the red-hot forward struck again as Leicester strengthened their grip on a Champions League spot — further vindicating his decision to pair him with Jamie Vardy.

The 24-year-old Nigeria international's 10th Premier League goal of the season — and 17th in all competitions — secured a 2-1 win for the Foxes against Crystal Palace on Monday. He has now scored more goals in the top-flight this season than he managed for Leicester over the previous three campaigns.

Leicester, who suffered the agony of missing out on the top four on the final day of last season, now have a seven-point lead over fifth-placed West Ham with just five games to play. Iheanacho and Vardy only started eight games together last season and did not do so this campaign until February 28 — due to injuries to other players, including James Maddison.

But they have both played every match since. "The top priority for me as a coach is helping players to develop," said Rodgers. "It's been difficult for Kels because of the style we normally played, which was one striker — Jamie Vardy. We had to change it around with injuries, he's come in and been exceptional. Not just his goals, he's so happy to work hard for the team and his quality is phenomenal."

News in brief

Navas extends PSG deal

PARIS: Goalkeeper Keylor Navas has signed a contract extension that keeps him with Paris Saint-Germain until 2024, the French champions announced on Monday. Costa Rica's Navas, 34, who joined the Parisians from Real Madrid in 2019, has started all the club's games on their way to this year's Champions League semi-finals. "I am very happy that I can continue my journey with Paris Saint-Germain," Navas said in a video posted on PSG's social media platforms. Mauricio Pochettino's men host Manchester City in the first leg of the Champions League last four today before the return fixture on May 4. — AFP

Ibra, Lukaku fined

ROME: Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Romelu Lukaku were handed small fines by the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) on Monday for their part in an on-field altercation during an Italian Cup tie in January. AC Milan forward Ibrahimovic taunted Inter Milan striker Lukaku during the local derby quarter-final by evoking voodooism before the pair went head-to-head, trading insults with a furious Lukaku needing to be restrained by his teammates. "A fine of 4,000 euros for Ibrahimovic, 3,000 euros for Lukaku, 2,000 euros for Milan and 1,250 euros for Inter," FIGC said in a statement. Sweden forward Ibrahimovic denied any racist motive behind the comment. Both players were booked over the incident and Ibrahimovic was subsequently sent off in the second half of the match, won 2-1 by Inter, after picking up a second yellow card. — AFP

Bogota bars two matches

BOGOTA: Colombia's capital Bogota on Monday barred two continental club football matches from taking place due to the city's health system teetering on the verge of collapse from the coronavirus pandemic. Santa Fe were due to host Brazilians Fluminense in the Copa Libertadores today while La Equidad were meant to take on Venezuelans Aragua in the secondary Copa Sudamericana a day later. But Bogota's health system has been ravaged by a third wave of the coronavirus pandemic sweeping not just Colombia but South America as a whole. The city's mayor's office has declared a code red that bans "sports activities, such as professional football tournaments," a spokesperson told AFP. It comes just over a month and a half before Colombia is due to co-host the 2021 Copa America alongside Argentina. — AFP

Correa keeps Lazio in Champions League hunt

ROME: Joaquin Correa ensured Lazio kept their hopes of Champions League qualification alive on Monday with a double in a 3-0 win over AC Milan while Napoli jumped up to third thanks to a 2-0 triumph at Torino. Correa opened the scoring for Lazio with only a minute on the clock at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome and added the second five minutes after the break.

Ciro Immobile struck the third with three minutes left as Lazio moved five points off the Champions League spots with a game in hand on their rivals. "This was like a final for us, the last chance to stay in with a shout for the top four... it was a clear and dominant victory," Lazio coach Simone Inzaghi told Sky Sport Italia.



ROME: Lazio's Argentine forward Joaquin Correa celebrates after scoring during the Italian Serie A football match Lazio vs AC Milan at Olympic stadium in Rome on Monday. — AFP

Inzaghi's side sit sixth, behind AC Milan who are level on 66 points with Napoli and Juventus — third and fourth respectively — but have dropped down to fifth after their second straight league defeat. They are 13 points behind leaders Inter Milan, who can win their first league title since 2010 on Saturday if they beat Cremonese and second-placed Atalanta fail to win at Sassuolo on Sunday.

Stefano Pioli's Milan, who started the weekend in second place, could have been beaten by a larger margin as Manuel Lazzari was denied a goal just before the break by the tightest of VAR offside calls and Italy forward Immobile struck the post seven minutes before he scored his 18th league goal of the campaign.

Pioli was however left frustrated by Correa's second, which was given after a lengthy VAR check following what he felt was a foul on Lucas Leiva on Hakan Calhanoglu. "I don't understand how it wasn't given as a foul on Calhanoglu, said Pioli. "He looked at it again and from the replay you cannot say Leiva doesn't catch Calhanoglu and completely miss the ball."

Napoli moved into third thanks to first-half goals from Tiemoue Bakayoko and Victor Osimhen earlier on Monday. They could have been further ahead at the break following a dominant opening period in which Piotr Zielinski hit the post and Matteo Politano was unlucky to see his deflected shot slide wide.

Lorenzo Insigne, playing his 300th Serie A match for Napoli, also hit the upright with a curling shot just before the hour mark. They failed to add to their tally but ran out winners to put pressure on their rivals.

Torino meanwhile are staring at the prospect of relegation following the defeat, which leaves them hovering above the drop zone. They sit 16th, level on 31 points with Benevento, who occupy the final relegation spot, and 17th-placed Cagliari who boosted their chances of survival with a 3-2 win over Roma on Sunday. — AFP



LEICESTER: Leicester City's Nigerian striker Kelechi Iheanacho celebrates their win on the final whistle in the English Premier League football match between Leicester City and Crystal Palace at King Power Stadium in Leicester, central England on Monday. — AFP

Nagelsmann to coach Bayern Munich from next season

BERLIN: Julian Nagelsmann will take over as Bayern Munich coach from next season to replace Hansi Flick, the reigning German champions announced yesterday. Nagelsmann, who is just 33, will move from RB Leipzig on a five-year contract after Flick, whose relationship with the club's powerful sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic has deteriorated over transfer policy, asked to be released from his contract.

"I am convinced that Bayern's sporting future will be a very successful one with Julian Nagelsmann," Oliver Kahn, the club's former goalkeeper who will succeed Karl-Heinz Rummenigge as Bayern chairman next year, told the club's website.

Nagelsmann has never hidden his desire to coach Bayern, especially as he comes from the Bavaria region. Last season, he led Leipzig to the semi-finals of the Champions League as well as third place in the Bundesliga, and this season his side has replaced Borussia Dortmund as Bayern's main title challengers.

With three games of the season remaining, Leipzig are the only team who can still prevent Bayern from winning a ninth consecutive Bundesliga title, although they sit seven points off the pace. Bayern will get another chance to wrap up the title for a record-extending 30th time in the Bundesliga era when they host Borussia Moenchengladbach next weekend.

Flick took over as Bayern coach in late 2019, succeeding the sacked Niko Kovac. He won the Bundesliga and German Cup last season and added the Champions League, as Bayern beat Paris Saint-Germain behind closed doors in the final in Lisbon to become European champions for the sixth time. Bayern added the UEFA and German Super Cups at the start of this campaign and then won the Club World Cup in Qatar at the start of this year.

Flick: 'Unforgettable'

However, as reports of a rift between the former

Germany assistant coach and Salihamidzic emerged, Bayern were knocked out of the Champions League in the quarter-finals by PSG earlier this month. "FC Bayern agreed to current head coach Hansi Flick's request to have his contract terminated on 30 June 2021, two years earlier than its original expiry date," the club said.

Flick said: "The last two years will be unforgettable for me. The emotions, the wins, the titles, but also the day-to-day work on the pitch have been a lot of fun for me, it's been an amazing time."

Nagelsmann spent time on the books at Bayern's neighbors 1860 Munich, before his playing career was cut short by a knee injury at the age of just 20. He moved into coaching and became the youngest permanent head coach in Bundesliga history when appointed by Hoffenheim in February 2016 at the age of 28.

He steered the small club from south-western Germany to safety in that season before successive top-four finishes in the next two campaigns. His star has continued to rise at Leipzig where a young side has established itself as a leading force in the Bundesliga and in Europe — they again reached the Champions League knockout stage this season, losing to Liverpool in the last 16.

"Julian Nagelsmann represents a new generation of coaches. Despite his young age, he already has an impressive CV. We are convinced that with Julian Nagelsmann, we can continue the magnificent successes of recent years," Bayern president Herbert Hainer said.

One of the stars of his Leipzig team has been French international defender Dayot Upamecano, the 22-year-old center-back who will also join Bayern next season. That transfer was announced in February. Upamecano, who had a 43 million-euro (\$51.9 million) buyout clause in his contract, will also sign a five-year deal at the Allianz Arena. — AFP



MUNICH: This file photo taken on February 9, 2020 shows Bayern Munich's head coach Hansi Flick (right) and Leipzig's German head coach Julian Nagelsmann (left) prior to the German first division Bundesliga football match FC Bayern Munich v RB Leipzig in Munich, southern Germany. — AFP



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