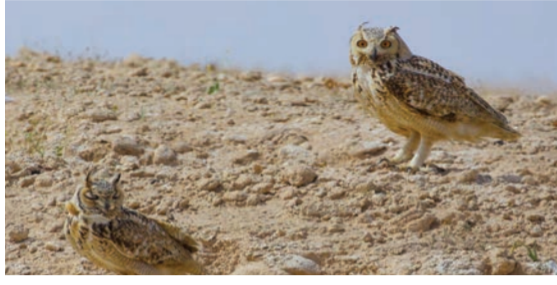




3 Northern demilitarized zone:
A habitat of animals and birds



15 Benzema volley pegs back Chelsea
to leave semi-final in the balance



Fajr 03:42
Shurooq 05:08
Dhuhr 11:45
Asr 15:21
Maghrib 18:23
Isha 19:46

VOLVO



MPs seek special session to approve frontline funding

Bill seeking a fund of KD 600 million still awaits final vote

conspiracy theories

Thanks, Dr Basel



By Badrya Darwish
badrya_d@kuwaittimes.net

Hi guys! It's been a long time since I've written, for several reasons that do not concern the public. But today I was compelled to break my silence and write about something I felt I should comment on.

As all of you know, we are all depressed and suppressed and highly stressed. It's been a year and a half, guys, where the whole world is not living in a normal way. The stress of the pandemic, the stress of politics in the country and the region, the stress of not traveling - and I'm a person who travels a lot - all of this has driven us crazy. And by the nature of the job, journalists criticize.

But today I have nothing but praise. My journalistic instinct was searching for a problem or snag here or there in the halls of Mishref. But I found none. I went to Mishref to get the vaccination yesterday and honestly speaking, I was for the first time impressed by a project accomplished in Kuwait. Highly organized. Efficient. Well-equipped.

The best part of it was that I felt like I was in one of the most advanced countries. There was no discrimination in the queue. Whether you were Filipino, Kuwaiti, Egyptian, Indian, etc, etc, everyone was treated in the same manner. We queued. The police were highly efficient in guiding people where to go and how to queue, as there are many halls. They were polite and well-trained. Even the receptionists inside were polite, well-trained and efficient in their work.

I was also impressed by the speed of the process. From start to finish it took me 10 minutes - from queuing to the jab. And then the nurse will ask you, out of an abundance of caution, to wait another 10 to 15 minutes in case of a bad reaction.

In Arabic, we have a proverb that says those who do not thank people, do not thank God. So I wanted to say thank you all.

I'm sure this effort has taken an incredible amount of work and planning and cooperation from all sides, be it the ministry of health, ministry of interior and all the other ministries and departments involved. Everyone participated and especially the nurses and doctors on the frontline need all our applause. They are not only working full-out, but also putting their lives on the line.

Everyone needs a leader, and Dr Basel has proven himself.



KUWAIT: In this file photo, Kuwait's Health Ministry workers, wearing protective outfits, wait on the tarmac of the Kuwait international Airport to receive Kuwaitis returning from Frankfurt on March 26, 2020. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Ten opposition lawmakers yesterday submitted a motion demanding a special session of the National Assembly to approve a law calling for additional funds for frontline workers combating the coronavirus pandemic.

The government had sent to the Assembly a draft law stipulating additional funds of KD 600 million to be added to the budget to grant financial rewards for frontline workers. The bill was approved in the first reading and sent to the budgets committee before taking the second and final vote.

The Budgets Committee said that the government had not replied to a series of questions sent by the committee and as a result it could not complete its report on the bill.

As Speaker Marzouk Al-Ghanem on Tuesday adjourned Assembly ses-

sions until after the fasting month of Ramadan due to disputes between the opposition and the government, the lawmakers submitted the motion to hold a special session and take the second vote on the bill, allowing the government to pay the money to beneficiaries.

Opposition MPs on Tuesday occupied seats that are reserved for Cabinet ministers, prompting the government to boycott the session. The attendance of at least one minister is necessary for the session to be legal. The opposition MPs were protesting against a decision to postpone the grilling of the Prime Minister until the end of 2022, saying that the decision is not in line with the constitution. They vowed not to allow the Assembly to hold sessions until the prime minister agrees to face the grilling without any further delay.

Continued on Page 2

OPEC+ gearing for production hike from May

LONDON: The 13 members of OPEC and 10 other oil-producing countries, including Russia, said Tuesday they would stick to an agreement for progressive production increases over three months from May given current stable prices and upbeat demand forecasts. "We have examined the market situation and again have confirmed the decisions which were taken a month ago," Alexander Novak, the Russian deputy prime minister whose portfolio includes energy, told Rossiya 24 television following a ministerial meeting, confirming a decision the market had priced in.

"Market prices are currently more or less stable," he added. "We hope this trend continues

Saudi prince seeks 'good' ties with Iran

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's crown prince on Tuesday struck a conciliatory tone towards Iran, saying he sought "good" relations, after sources said the countries held secret talks in Baghdad. The two countries, locked in a fierce struggle for regional dominance, cut ties in 2016 after Iranian protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic missions following the kingdom's execution of a revered cleric.

Apollo 11 astronaut Michael Collins dead

WASHINGTON: American astronaut Michael Collins, who flew the Apollo 11 command module while his crewmates became the first people to land on the Moon on July 20, 1969, died yesterday after battling cancer, his family said.

"Mike always faced the challenges of life with grace and humility, and faced this, his final challenge, in the same way," Collins' family posted on his official Twitter account. "Please join us in fondly and joyfully remembering his sharp wit, his quiet sense of purpose, and his wise perspective, gained both from looking back at Earth from the vantage of space and gazing across calm waters from the deck of his fishing boat." Details about the service would be forthcoming, they added.

Born in Rome in 1930 to a US army officer serving as



RIYADH: OPEC leader Saudi Arabia and Russia have made an oil alliance work during the pandemic

through to year's end."

At its previous meeting at the start of April the alliance had decided to increase production by 350,000 barrels per day in May, as much again in June and then by an additional 450,000 bpd in July.

Continued on Page 2

"Iran is a neighboring country, and all we aspire for is a good and special relationship with Iran," Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in a television interview broadcast late Tuesday. "We do not want Iran's situation to be difficult. On the contrary, we want Iran to grow... and to push the region and the world towards prosperity."

He added that Riyadh was working with regional and global partners to find solutions to Tehran's "negative behavior". That marks a change in tone compared to Prince Mohammed's previous interviews, in which he lashed out at Tehran, accusing it of fuelling regional insecurity. The prince did not mention any negotiations with Tehran. — AFP

military attache there, Collins went on to become a fighter pilot with the air force and retired with the rank of Major General. He is best known for being a member of the Apollo 11 mission when his crewmates Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first people to set foot on the Moon. Collins would go on to say the experience forever changed his perspective, impressing upon him the fragility of our home planet.

"When we rolled out and looked at (the Moon), oh, it was an awesome sphere," he said at a 2019 event at George Washington University commemorating the 50th anniversary. But "as magnificent as that was, as impressive, and as much as I will remember that, that was nothing, nothing compared to this other window out there," he continued. — AFP



Michael Collins

Ramadan Kareem

Reflections of Ramadan

By Mariam-Joyce DSouza

I became a resident of Kuwait in 1985 but only experienced being part of the holy month of Ramadan in 1992! Yes, I embraced Islam on 11 August 1991. And although I had read plenty of books, I still did not know how to pray, what Ramadan was all about, what the Sunnah meant, etc. Since, I had just delivered my first-born (he is almost 30 today!!!!) in December 1991, and unemployed, I decided to visit the Islam Presentation Committee (IPC - Ladies Section on Fahad Al-Salem Street), and enroll in the FREE Arabic Classes that were being offered then. As I walked into that calming and serene atmosphere of the Ladies Section, I felt happy and so at peace. It was the beginning of my journey into Islam and the spiritualism that comes with it. One thing led to another and instead of enrolling in the Arabic Course, I came away with a Voluntary position! This meant I could learn and practice Islam to my elated heart's content. Boy, was I happy!

And since IPC happened to have an in-house creche, I was able to pop into the day-care several times a day just to have a look at all the little tots, mine included, playing with one another. And thus began my journey into that beautiful world of learning, practicing and development. That first year, I enjoyed observing Ramadan with my friends at IPC - we were sent a huge trays filled with meat and rice (laham muchboose), laban, water, tea, sweets and I had that added pleasure of sitting together and sharing the feast. Our visitors, many new Muslims and those wanting to learn about Islam too, visited us and shared in the meals. They also used to treat us to their own home-cooked dishes and that was my very first venture into that yummy, tasty, spicy and delicious Thai food - that delicious green curry with coconut milk, tom yum seafood, pad Thai and several dishes that included bamboo shoots. I keenly observed the iftars, suhoors, Taraweeh, and then the closing of the month by celebrating Eid Al-Fitr.

Continued on Page 2

Local

Amir receives Crown Prince, Speaker, Prime Minister



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



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



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

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace yesterday. His Highness the Amir also received National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem. Furthermore, His Highness the Amir received His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. In the meantime, His Highness the Crown Prince received Ghanem and His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled at Bayan Palace. — KUNA

Zain continues to spread happiness during Ramadan

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, continues to spread happiness during the holy month of Ramadan by delivering 'Machla' (food supplies) in collaboration with its strategic partner, the Kuwait Food Bank. The initiative aims at continuously catering to underprivileged families' needs throughout the holy month.

Zain delivered food supplies to the Kuwait Food Bank storage facility at Sulaibiya with the presence of Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti and Kuwait Food Bank Vice Chairman Meshal Al-Ansari. This year, over 10,000 individuals benefit from the supplies provided by Zain.

Commenting on the initiative, Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti said: "Before the arrival of the Holy Month of Ramadan, we delivered the 'Machla' in collaboration with our strategic partners at the Kuwait Food Bank in an effort to serve the needs of underprivileged families and individuals in Kuwait before the Holy Month arrives and during the pandemic".

Khashti added: "Today, as we reach the first half of the month, we continue this initiative along with our colleagues at the Food Bank as part of our comprehensive Ramadan campaign and under the umbrella of Zain's Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility Strategy".

Khashti further explained: "The Kuwait Food Bank distributes the supplies provided by Zain via special drive-thru routes that were built for this purpose in an effort to abide by health measures and protect everyone from the danger of infection".

Khashti concluded: "We tirelessly seek to serve our community and its members by organizing and supporting valuable humanitarian programs all year round. This is especially true during the Holy Month of Ramadan, given that it carries the values of sharing and giving".

Kuwait Food Bank Vice Chairman Meshal Al-Ansari said: "The 'Ramadan Machla' campaign comes as a continuation to the charitable projects and programs launched by the Kuwait Food Bank in collaboration with the private sector and civil society institutions. All of these projects come under the supervision of the regulatory authorities, and they have witnessed great success during the past period, especially during the coronavirus pandemic".

Ansari added: "The Kuwait Food Bank is considered to be one of the first charitable entities in Kuwait to launch the 'Ramadan Machla' campaign, and it has witnessed success by widely covering the needs of underprivileged individuals in all of Kuwait's six governorates. The bank continues its humanitarian campaigns and projects that aim at providing food aid inside Kuwait".

Ansari affirmed: "The idea behind the campaign centers around providing a



KUWAIT: Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti and Kuwait Food Bank Vice Chairman Meshal Al-Ansari with the Kuwait Food Bank team.

package that contains various food supplies. Charitable work on a huge scale is one of the Kuwait Food Bank's priorities in order to support disadvantaged families."

This year, Zain's distribution plan featured the delivery of food supplies to the biggest certified non-profit organizations across Kuwait to ensure their delivery to those in need throughout the Holy Month and during the pandemic in order to guarantee that disadvantaged families have enough quantities of the most basic supplies. The company hopes this initiative has a deep positive impact on the community's various segments, especially the most vulnerable ones, during such circumstances.



Reconnaissance Research collaborates with French scholar

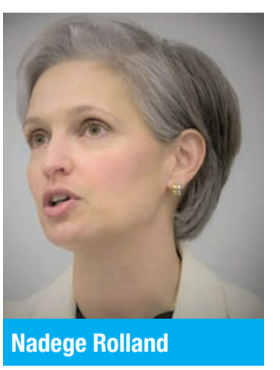
KUWAIT: Reconnaissance Research announced that it will collaborate with prominent French scholar Nadege Rolland to produce an analysis of China's global influence for Kuwaiti and regional media outlets. Rolland is a Senior Fellow for Political and Security Affairs at the National Bureau for Asian Research (NBR).

Her research focuses mainly on China's domestic, foreign and defense policy. She has served for two decades as an analyst and Senior Advisor to the French Ministry of Defense, for which she has been awarded the Medal of Honor.

"Nadege Rolland is a highly respected authority on Chinese affairs, a bona fide expert on China's Vision for a New World Order, China's authoritarian influence, as well as China's evolving military engagement," said Abdulaziz Al-Anjeri, Founder and CEO of Reconnaissance Research. "She has authored many books and publications on the impact of China's dynamics around the world. Her article will build on the series of analytical articles on China that we started with Dr Charles Burton. Nadege's insights will help us understand and define how the Chinese government

works, as China is a force to be reckoned with and we have to gain as much knowledge about it as possible. We believe in the importance of transferring knowledge forward and look forward to producing informative content for our readers."

In a statement, Nadege Rolland said: "I look forward to a productive collaboration with Reconnaissance Research. I hope that our analysis will provide readers in the GCC and around the world with a better understanding of how China's rise affects global dynamics." Rolland holds a MA in China Studies from the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations and a MSc in Strategic Studies from the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. She is also a National Taiwan Normal University alumna.



Nadege Rolland

MPs seek special session to...

Continued from Page 1

The liberal National Democratic Alliance yesterday blamed both the government and the National Assembly including the speaker, the prime minister

and members of the two bodies, for the "unprecedented political turmoil" in the country. The Alliance said in a statement that the intensity of the disputes calls for the intervention of the political leadership and resolution of such disputes to achieve stability in the country. The Kuwait Diwaniya Alliance, a group representing some Diwanis in the country, warned yesterday that political disputes between the government and the National Assembly have reached a flashpoint that does not serve the interests of Kuwait.

OPEC+ gearing for production...

Continued from Page 1

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) said the members of the OPEC+ alliance, formed in 2016, had agreed on the progressive increase in highlighting what it termed the importance of rebalancing the global oil market following last year's downward adjustment of output as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Alliance members are currently leaving around seven million barrels of potential output a day in the ground in order not to flood a market struggling with the economic fallout of the pandemic.

The alliance, which accounts for approximately a third of global oil production, announced it would meet again in June to review output for July and August. It noted ongoing concerns over rising

COVID-19 cases not least in India, which before the virus hit was consuming more than five million bpd, third only to the US and China, according to BP data.

Russia and OPEC leader Saudi Arabia have made a fragile oil alliance work during the pandemic, but their marriage of convenience could be undone as a rebounding market dredges up old tensions, analysts said. The 13 members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and 10 other oil-producing countries, including Russia, formed the OPEC+ alliance in 2016 as a response to rapidly growing competition from the US as well as falling crude prices.

The group drastically cut productions in the face of sluggish demand when COVID-19 turned into a pandemic last year, a move aimed at raising prices. But as prices have returned to pre-pandemic levels hovering around \$65 per barrel in recent months, OPEC+ has slowly increased output.

In a sign of lingering differences, Russia and Kazakhstan were allowed to raise their output between January and April while Saudi Arabia has voluntarily cut its daily production. — AFP

Reflections of Ramadan...

Continued from Page 1

Now, 30 years on, I still remember and relish those moments I spent there with my friends at IPC. I Stayed there for the following 6 years and every year I felt very honored to have another opportunity to experience Ramadan with my new friends and colleagues.

The sacred month of Ramadan acts like a season of unity and serves as a reason for inner reflection, mercy, forgiveness, salvation and spiritual renewal. It continues to give me and those who are fasting an important opportunity to stop and think about what is taken for granted, refocus our minds on faith, and redirect our hearts to charity, so that we can renew our understanding of the lives and experiences of those who are less fortunate than us.

Ramadan is that unique time of assistance and support for those in need, and also a time to join with family and friends in celebration of our common civilization, especially now that we are embroiled, together, in the throes of COVID-19, and fast-losing hope that life may never go back to a 'normal' that we once experienced and shared - the practice of breaking fast together, sharing food across religions and cuisines, establishing links across cultural communities, introducing people of diverse backgrounds to each other, and building new ties of empathy and understanding.

Ramadan was and still is an important part of our lives, but that 'vibrancy' is missing, for a second year in a row. Muslims and non-Muslims used to gather at

Ramadan iftars throughout the country and share in the spirit of fasting and giving. There was, until 2019, a colorful, vivid, bright, lively, and festive aura during Ramadan - and one literally enjoyed the afterglow during the ensuing days (month of Shawwal).

Maybe next Ramadan (here's hoping we succeed battling dear and deadly CORONA into the abyss of bygone days), I and some like-minded people are aiming to, co-host a week-long food festival called 'Imbue & Imbibe in Ramadan Delights'. How this project (which is still on the drawing board) will turn out is open for discussion - but it will certainly involve breaking fast with a wide variety of traditional and international cuisines, giving your taste buds the experience of exotic and exploding flavors, and the pleasure of oneness and harmony. Our aim is to attract large numbers of residents - nationals and expatriates, alike. I want it to be that wonderful example of how Ramadan brings people together in a spirit of friendship, pure contentment, inner peace, unity, and spiritualism - just like what I experienced at IPC, once upon a time. In short, I would like each and every one of you to be able to adorn your wall of memories with your own 'Reflections of Ramadan' one day.

Ramadan truly is a unique and special month (filled with blessings), and on behalf of my family at TIES Center, I would like to sincerely wish everyone a happy, safe and blessed Ramadan.

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

Local

Northern demilitarized zone has varied wild animals, birds: Foundation



KUWAIT: These pictures provided by Kuwait's Environmental Voluntary Foundation show examples of the demilitarized zone's biodiversity. —KUNA photos

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Environmental Voluntary Foundation affirmed the importance of preserving the demilitarized zone in the northern border with Iraq, as it has a unique diversity of various wild animals and plants. Head of birds' club at the foundation Khaled Al-Ghanem said on Tuesday that preserving natural resources, biodiversity and local environmental heritage, and coordination between environmental volunteer-

ing bodies and the Ministry of Interior contribute to protecting the country's natural resources for future generations. The firm protection of this zone led to the reviving of its natural environments, which made them a haven for many animals and birds, he said. Increasing environmental pressures on marine locations and the desert, through overfishing and overgrazing, have led to the deterioration and

decline of ecosystems in the region, he stressed. The foundation's birds entered the zone this winter, and a survey was conducted on general diversity of biology and birds, he said, pointing to 25 species of birds at Al-Salmi sector, he added. Abdulmohsen Al-Sarei, a member of the club, said that some other birds, mammals, reptiles and insects were recorded, in addition to a number of plants. — KUNA

Uproar over body shaming video in Kuwait

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: A locally-produced video by an online show that was posted yesterday on YouTube and reposted on other social media caused outrage in Kuwait. This video was later deleted from all social media channels after the uproar.

In the video, two presenters interview a 13-year-old child, asking embarrassing questions about her weight, including "What size do you wear - L or XL", "How many meals do you eat daily", "How much do you weigh", and so on. By the end of the interview, the child was crying.

Shared widely in Kuwait, the video provoked outrage with several local activists condemning the video for bullying and body shaming. It has since been deleted from the social media channels where it was originally posted.



Man arrested with 10 kg drugs

KUWAIT: The interior ministry said the Drugs Control General Department arrested an Asian man with 10 kg of heroin and shabu from his Farwaniya home. The estimated street value of the confiscated drugs is around KD 180,000. The suspect said the drugs belong to him and another Asian man, who was deported after serving a sentence on drugs charges, the Interior Ministry said in a statement.



No reports on forged PCR tests among passengers to Kuwait

KUWAIT: The health ministry has informed airlines and local aviation authorities that it has not received any reports of forged PCR tests among passengers who came to Kuwait since August 2020, Al-Anbaa Arabic daily reported yesterday quoting an informed source. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, the source said that the ministry discusses increasing the number of approved clinics for PCR tests in several countries. Kuwait had issued a decision on February 7, 2021 banning entry of non-Kuwaitis for a period of two weeks, and the decision

has since been extended until further notice. Meanwhile, the same newspaper reported yesterday that the health ministry plans to provide special refrigerators to store the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in Shaab, Seddiq, Masayel, Naseem and Shalabi clinics, so that vaccination can be provided there by next week.

Kuwait's Ministry of Health had announced Tuesday recording 1,446 new coronavirus infections and eight related deaths in the previous 24 hours. The new figures took the total cases in the country up to 269,681 and deaths to 1,535 respectively, noted the ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad. He pointed out that some 1,377 more people had been cured of the virus over the same period, raising the total of those who have overcome the disease to 252,888. He added that the number of people hospitalized with the virus stood at 15,258, with 216 of them in intensive care units. —KUNA

Kuwait curfew: What you need to know

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

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

show once they reach the shopping center.

Where to obtain a curfew pass?

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

Co-op delivery during curfew hours

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

Omariya Co-op
WhatsApp 6041-0067

Farwaniya Co-op
WhatsApp 6767-8211

Qairawan Co-op
WhatsApp 9000-3749

Jahra Co-op
WhatsApp 5160-2458

Abdulla Al-Mubarak Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-6338

Nuzha Co-op
WhatsApp 9784-5531

Khaitan Co-op
WhatsApp 6777-9745

Ardhiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6902-0779

Rabiya Co-op
WhatsApp 2438-8316

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

Salmiya Co-op
Tel: 22253225

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

Rawdha & Hawally
WhatsApp 9662-2883

Shaab Co-op
WhatsApp 9090-4455

Wafra Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-0539

Keifan Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-1719

Rehab Co-op
WhatsApp 9222-2358

Mishref Co-op
WhatsApp 5055-9900

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

Rumaihiya Co-op
WhatsApp 6066-0045

Bayan Co-op
WhatsApp 9004-2500

Fahaheel Co-op
WhatsApp 5178-9951

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

Salam Co-op
WhatsApp 9788-7832

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News in brief

1.65 million registered
in Kuwait Mobile ID

KUWAIT: Around 1.65 million have so far registered in the Kuwait Mobile ID app, which the Public Authority of Civil Information believes is a good sign in its long-term plan to replace physical IDs with the digital app completely, Al-Rai Arabic daily reported yesterday.

GCC, US examine efforts

KUWAIT: Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhafiri took part on Tuesday in a virtual meeting with GCC foreign ministers along with the special US envoy for Iran Robert Malley. The conferees examined efforts for bolstering security and stability in the region, namely current consultations held in Vienna for reviving the nuclear deal between permanent member States of the UN Security Council plus Germany with Iran. — KUNA

Oil price up

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by 80 cents to \$64.21 per barrel Tuesday as oppose to \$63.41 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. The prices of the Brent crude and West Texas Intermediate, globally, went up with the first going up by 77 cents to \$66.42 per barrel, while the latter went up by \$1.03 to \$62.94 pb. — KUNA

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: This photo that dates back to the 1960s shows pedestrians in winter clothes walking in the old markets area of Kuwait City. (Source: 'Pictures of the old markets of Kuwait' by Ali Al-Rais, Center of Research and Studies on Kuwait 2017. Prepared by: Mahmoud Aakarria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

KIB infuses distinctive
community initiatives
into Ramadan campaign

KUWAIT: As part of its active social commitment to play an active role within the local community beyond the scope of its financial services and solutions, Kuwait International Bank (KIB) announced the launch of its Ramadan campaign for this year. The campaign is set to kick off at the beginning of the Holy Month under the Bank's leading social responsibility program, featuring a variety of recreational, religious, social and sports initiatives and activities.

On this occasion, Nawaf Najia, Executive Manager of the Corporate Communications Unit at KIB, congratulated all members of the Board of Directors, Executive Management, shareholders and employees of the Bank, as well as KIB's valued customers and members of Kuwait's society on the advent of the holy month of Ramadan. "Every year, KIB looks forward to launching its Ramadan campaign to complement its track record of impactful community initiatives, which reflects its unyielding commitment to continue to give back to the community. Additionally, KIB's campaigns epitomize its strategic vision and leading role as an active community member with a solid commitment to having a positive impact on various segments of

Kuwait's society, especially at this time of year; the holy month of Ramadan is a time of deep reflection and generosity for all the society - it brings members of the society together to spread love and encourage acts of benevolence."

Najia pointed out that this year, KIB is introducing a first-of-its-kind marketing project that aims to spread banking awareness and knowledge in an entertaining way, especially given the continuing curfew and lockdowns which has kept people home-bound. Developed in collaboration with a renowned international animation studio, "KIB Family" is an informative animated series that will be released during Ramadan across the Bank's social media platforms. "KIB Family" is the first complete show to be developed by a financial institution that depicts real life events and offers valuable and engaging insights to the Kuwaiti audience.

In celebration of the holy month, KIB is also launching the "KIB Family Competition" where the audience will have to answer questions about each of the episodes to win a cash prize, in addition to Ghatawi KIB - a social media competition on KIBPage with valuable cash prizes for each winner.

Najia added: "In addition to communicating effectively with the public through its social media channels, KIB continues to play a leading role in promoting religious awareness, by creating and sharing content that comprises information and advice, in addition to posting episodes that highlight useful religious, moral and Islamic topics in collaboration with Sheikh Talal Al-

Fakher. Moreover, our Ramadan campaign is packed with content that feature a range of exercising videos and work out tips by Trainer Fahad Al-Jarallah, in order to help maintain a healthy routine during Ramadan, especially amidst pandemic-related restrictions and home quarantine."

Concluding his statement, Najia pointed out that this year, KIB's Ramadan campaign comprises several charitable and humanitarian initiatives aimed at supporting underprivileged families, he added: "The initiatives will promote notions of social solidarity and philanthropic values, which Kuwait has always been known for, including launching its annual "Al-Machla" initiative aimed at providing essential food supplies to underprivileged families in Kuwait in collaboration with the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS). Additionally, KIB is launching its annual Iftar Sa'em initiative and will distribute daily Iftar meals with the help of a dedicated team of volunteers from the Bank as well as dozens of other volunteers throughout the holy month. In addition, the Bank is set to conclude its Ramadan campaign with "Kiswat El-Eid" initiative by distributing purchase vouchers for Eid clothing to the poor and needy, with the aim of spreading and sharing the joy of Eid."



Nawaf Najia

ISSUE NO: 18422 RAMADAN 17, 1442 AH

Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

17- What is the ruling on the use of siwaak by the fasting person?

- A. It is disliked for him
- B. It is prohibited for him
- C. It is recommended for him

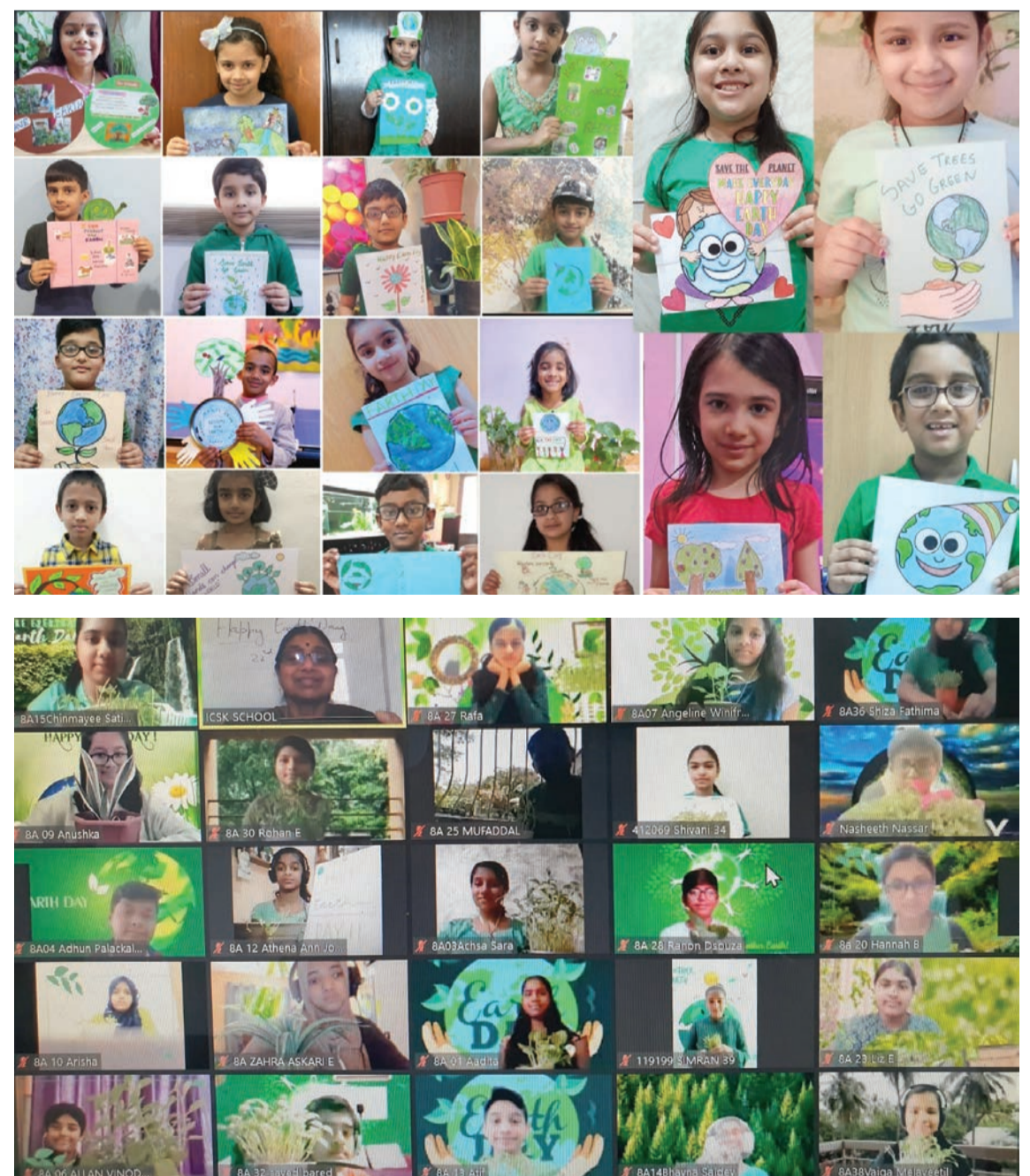
Kuwait Times Ramadan Quiz

Date :
Name :
Civil ID :
Tel :
Email :

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ICSK Amman
celebrates Earth Day

KUWAIT: Earth Day is an annual event on April 22 to demonstrate support for environmental protection. First held on April 22, 1970, with the effort of UNESCO, it now includes a wide range of events coordinated globally by EarthDay.org including one billion people in more than 193 countries.

The Indian Community School Kuwait, Amman Branch also commemorated Earth Day on April 22 this year. Various activities and assemblies were held on that day to bring out the importance of Earth Day. Students from Kindergarten to class 10 participated with enthusiasm and vigor.

Kindergarten: The tiny tots of kindergarten participated with the highest levels of enthusiasm and involvement and exhibited their artistic skills in the CCA (co-curricular activities) on the occasion of Earth Day. They truly made the day memorable.

Primary section: The children of classes one to four aptly chose the main theme "Restore Our Earth" in tune with the Earth Day. Their performances and activities expressed their awareness about Earth and how to better the earth. They beautifully exhibited through paintings, placards, wonderful and thought-provoking speeches, beautiful dances, creative slogans, awesome posters, and lovely cards all blending with the strong idea to save and resort the glory of the earth.

Secondary Section: The students of the secondary section, in sync with the theme expressed their thoughts with great enthusiasm and clarity. They brought out their views through various activities such as creating amazing posters, charts, educational videos, exhibiting the lovely microgreens, speeches, song, poem recitation and a powerful power point presentation. It was one of the most wonderful amalgamation of creative expressions by the students of ICSK, Amman. Kudos to all the children for their active participation. A special thanks to all the teachers who had encouraged the children and been the backbone for this great success.



UK watchdog steps up probe into Johnson's apartment makeover

Relentless new wave sends India COVID death toll past 200,000

Audio leak sought to sow 'discord': Rouhani

Leak of Zarif recording triggers heated debate in Iran ahead of elections

TEHRAN: An audiotape of Iran's top diplomat bemoaning the military's influence was leaked to sow "discord" during talks focused on reviving an international nuclear deal, President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday, after the recording stirred domestic controversy.

The recording of Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was published by media outside Iran, triggering a heated debate inside the country ahead of presidential elections. The talks in Vienna are aimed at getting the United States to return to the agreement it abandoned under former president Donald Trump, lift sanctions, and Iran to resume full compliance with nuclear obligations it retreated from in response.

Rouhani said the audio was leaked just as the Vienna talks were "at the height of their success, so that it creates discord inside" the Islamic republic. "We can only lift sanctions through unity," the president said. Zarif has been under fire since the audiotape emerged on Sunday, with comments he made about Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' foreign operations arm who was killed in a US air strike last year, hitting a nerve. "In the Islamic republic the military field rules," Zarif said in the recording, quoted by the New York Times. "I have sacrificed diplomacy for the military field rather than the field servicing diplomacy."

Zarif, seen as the architect of the 2015 nuclear accord, has been mentioned as a possible contender in the June 18 presidential election, although he has said he does not plan to run. Another potential candidate, parliament speaker Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, weighed in on the issue yesterday, saying "we are sensitive on haj Qasem". "We do not want there to be even a small scratch on the shining visage of this dear," the conservative was quoted as saying by state news agency IRNA.



MUSCAT: Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Al-Busaidi (second right) receives his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif (center) upon his arrival to the Omani capital Muscat yesterday. — AFP

'Domestic infighting'

Known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, the landmark 2015 deal with six world powers promised Iran relief from sanctions in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. But the accord started to unravel in 2018 when Trump pulled out of it and imposed wave after wave of sanctions on Iran, which retaliated a year later by ramping up its nuclear activities. In his first public

reaction to the audiotape, Zarif took to social media to downplay the recording while voicing regret that it had triggered "domestic infighting".

But despite the furious reaction from conservatives, Zarif stuck to much of what he said in the recording, saying he favors a "smart adjustment" between the military and diplomatic spheres. In a post on Instagram, Zarif said an "honest and passionate" argument in a private setting had been

misconstrued as "personal criticism".

The veteran diplomat said the "main point" of his remarks was to emphasize "the need for a smart adjustment of the relationship between" diplomacy and the military. Zarif, who has been on a tour of neighbouring states this week, also said he saw a need for "setting priorities through legal structures and under the great purview of the supreme leader" Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. — AFP

Fires a chronic threat to Iraqi lives, property

BAGHDAD: Worn-out fuses, tangled wiring criss-crossing illegal buildings, poor construction and generators exposed to extreme heat have become a potent recipe in Iraq for frequent deadly and destructive blazes. Between January and March alone, the interior ministry recorded 7,000 fires, the deadliest of which erupted on Sunday in a COVID-19 hospital in Baghdad.

Eighty-two people died and over 100 others were injured in the inferno, which sparked shock and outrage in the country. Baghdad, a sprawling metropolis of 10 million people, has the tragic distinction of being the Iraqi city hit by the most fires every year.

Major General Jawdat Abderrahman, spokesman for the Iraqi civil defense, said "40 percent of the fires in Iraq occur in Baghdad", with 2,800 just since the start of 2021. In Iraqi cities, urban chaos reigns.

New shopping centers are thrown up



Iraqis transport the coffin of a relative who was killed during a fire at the Ibn Al-Khatib hospital reserved for the most severe COVID-19 cases, in the capital Baghdad, on April 25. — AFP

haphazardly, and around one in 10 people live in informal neighborhoods with ad hoc connections to water and electricity networks. "The majority of buildings are not up to standard and thousands do not even have building permits," civil defense head Major General Kazem Buhan said.

The result is a cocktail of fire hazards. A central Baghdad shop owner told AFP that

in 2014, the civil defense asked all businesses to install fire extinguishers. "Some bought them, but not all," he said, declining to give his name. But no one, he added, wants to tackle the underlying issues and overhaul their whole electrical system, in a country whose infrastructure has suffered under 40 years of conflicts only interrupted by a decade of international embargo. — AFP

HIV self-test prices to be cut in half in 135 countries

GENEVA: Poorer countries are set to see their access to HIV self-tests increase dramatically following a deal to slash prices in half and boost production, Unitaid said yesterday. The international health agency said it had closed a deal with US-based global healthcare company Viatris that will see blood-based HIV self-tests made available for under \$2 across 135 low and middle-income countries. HIV self-tests are seen as vital tools to help people more easily discover their status and move towards the treatment they need, and thus also to reducing the HIV burden globally.

This is particularly relevant in poorer countries, where concerns around stigma and difficulties accessing healthcare can create significant barriers, said Unitaid, which works on innovations on major diseases. "Access to

self-tests has been recognized as a key factor in meeting the global goal of 90% of people knowing their HIV status," Unitaid spokesman Herve Verhoosel said in a statement.

In just the past six years, that rate has nearly doubled, from 45 to 81 percent, he said. But achieving broader testing has been hampered by the fact that the market for HIV self-tests in low- and middle-income countries has been dominated by a single affordable oral HIV test, the OraSure. That test is sold at cost in a limited number of poorer countries for \$2, but elsewhere the price is higher, and other options have cost significantly more.

To try to fix that problem, Unitaid and US non-profit Population Services International (PSI) launched a call for proposals last July on ways to drive forward access to the tests. The result was the Viatris deal, which Unitaid said should significantly expand the market and give countries more choice when it comes to self-tests. This, Verhoosel said, would make "it easier to acquire the products and embed them in health systems, with the ultimate aim of helping the eight million people estimated to be unaware of their HIV status know they are infected and get treatment." — AFP

COVID compared with other viruses

PARIS: The global death toll from COVID-19 passed three million Saturday, with the pandemic already having killed more people than most other viral epidemics of the 20th and 21st centuries. But there have been notable exceptions. The post-World War I Spanish Flu wiped out 50 million people, according to some estimates. And over the decades AIDS has killed 33 million.

In 2009, the H1N1 virus, or swine flu, caused a global pandemic and left an official death toll of 18,500. This was later revised upwards by The Lancet medical journal to between 151,700 and 575,400 dead. That brings it close to seasonal flu, which accounts for between 290,000 and 650,000 deaths worldwide every year, according to the World Health Organization. — AFP



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Head of Critical Care Unit	Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) and Board Certificate or Equivalent	3 years as Head of Anesthesia Department
Head of Internal Medicine Unit	Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) and Board Certificate or Equivalent	3 years as Head of Internal Medicine Department
Head of General Surgery Unit	Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) and Board Certificate or Equivalent	3 years as Head of Internal Medicine Department
Head of Emergency Medicine Unit	Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) and Board Certificate or Equivalent	3 years as Head of Internal Medicine Department
Head of Obstetrics & Gynecology Unit	Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) and Board Certificate or Equivalent	3 years as Head of Obstetrics & Gynecology Department
Head of Pediatrics & Neonatology Unit	Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) and Board Certificate or Equivalent	3 years as Head of Pediatrics & Neonatology Department
Head of Laboratory Services Unit	Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) and Board Certificate or Equivalent	3 years as Head of Laboratory Services Department
Head of Radiology Services Unit	Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) and Board Certificate or Equivalent	3 years as Head of Radiology Services Department

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International

UK watchdog steps up probe into Johnson's apartment makeover

Lavish refurbishment of his Downing Street flat escalates into a major scandal

LONDON: Britain's Electoral Commission yesterday announced a formal probe into how Prime Minister Boris Johnson paid for a lavish makeover of his Downing Street flat, seriously escalating a simmering scandal. The commission, which regulates party and election finance, has the powers to demand the repayment of questionable donations, levy fines, or ultimately refer investigations to the police for criminal prosecution.

"We are now satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to suspect that an offence or offences may have occurred. We will therefore continue this work as a formal investigation to establish whether this is the case," the watchdog said.

Its probe significantly darkens the cloud hanging over the Conservative prime minister ahead of UK-wide local elections on May 6, the first polls to be held since the COVID-19 pandemic and since Brexit took full effect this year.

'I paid for it'

Just minutes after the commission's announcement, Johnson again denied any wrongdoing during a bad-tempered exchange in parliament. "I've conformed in full with the code of conduct and ministerial code," he said, as he came under sustained opposition pressure to state who paid for the revamp, amid wider accusations of cronyism

and favoritism.

Addressing main opposition Labour party leader Keir Starmer, Johnson said: "He goes on and on about wallpaper when I've told him umpteen times now, I paid for it."

Johnson's press aides have insisted he has paid himself for any refurbishment beyond an annual government allowance, and that Conservative Party funds are not being used. But they have failed to explain if party funds were used initially, amid reports that a rich donor stumped up a donation of £58,000 (\$80,000) which was not reported to the Electoral Commission as required by law.

The investigation comes after a war of words erupted between Johnson and his former top aide Dominic Cummings over the premier's coronavirus policies last year and financial dealings. Cummings, the strategist behind the 2016 campaign for Britain to leave the European Union, quit Downing Street in December under a cloud of acrimony. He wrote on his personal blog on Friday that Johnson had sought to use potentially illegal donations to renovate his publicly funded Downing Street accommodation, reportedly at a cost of up to £200,000.

'Bodies pile high'

Johnson, his fiancée Carrie Symonds and their baby son live in quarters above Number 11 Downing

Street, which are more spacious than those attached to Number 10. "We have been in contact with the Conservative Party since late March and have conducted an assessment of the information they have provided to us," an Electoral Commission spokesperson said.

"The investigation will determine whether any transactions relating to the works at 11 Downing Street fall within the regime regulated by the Commission and whether such funding was reported as required." Opposition parties have seized on the apartment makeover to accuse the prime minister of playing fast and loose with taxpayers' money during the pandemic, when the government handed out many contracts with little or no oversight.

Criticism has mounted after it emerged this week that last year, while the pandemic was still raging in Britain, Johnson had instructed senior civil servants to look into setting up a charitable trust to maintain the Downing Street complex. And yesterday, the opposition Liberal Democrats followed the lead of the Scottish National Party to demand Johnson's resignation if it is confirmed that he callously dismissed the prospect of thousands more dying of COVID-19.

In a front-page headline on Monday, the Daily Mail newspaper reported Johnson had said he would rather see "bodies pile high in their thou-



LONDON: A video grab from footage broadcast by the UK Parliament's Parliamentary Recording Unit (PRU) shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking part in the weekly Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) at the House of Commons in London yesterday. —AFP

sands" than impose another lockdown. Ultimately, Johnson did order new rounds of restrictions in November and January, and he again denied making the remark during Wednesday's fiery exchange in the House of Commons.

But the BBC and other media outlets have quoted sources as confirming he did, and opposition parties accused Johnson of lying. —AFP

News in brief

Germany to monitor COVID skeptics

BERLIN: Germany's domestic intelligence agency will start monitoring leading figures in the protest movement against COVID restrictions, the interior ministry said yesterday, over concerns they pose a threat to democracy and have ties to right-wing extremism. The monitoring will focus on members of Germany's "Querdenker" (Lateral Thinkers) movement, which has emerged as the loudest voice opposed to coronavirus curbs and an active promoter of conspiracy theories denying basic facts about the pandemic. Some protest organizers "have clearly demonstrated that their agenda goes beyond simply mobilizing protests against the government's corona measures", the ministry said in a statement. —AFP

Poland to ease curbs by May end

WARSAW: Poland will lift most of its coronavirus restrictions by the end of May, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said yesterday. "The worst in terms of infections is probably behind us," Morawiecki told reporters, pointing to a decrease in the number of infections and deaths as grounds for "cautious optimism". Shopping malls and museums can reopen on May 4, he said. The three first school years will also resume on May 4, while other schoolchildren will start in-person classes on May 29. Hotels reopen on May 8 and cafes and restaurants will serve customers outdoors from May 15 and indoors from May 29. —AFP

Eight die in blaze at Latvia hostel

RIGA: Eight people died and nine were injured in a blaze that broke out in an illegal hostel early yesterday in central Riga, police and local authorities said. "Eight people have died and nine were injured during the lethal fire in the hostel," Latvia's deputy police chief Andrejs Grishins told reporters in Riga. DNA tests will be used to identify the victims, he added. "The bodies are burned so badly that we cannot tell yet which country they are from. Their documents have gone up in flames. Coroners and experts will try to establish their identities but lengthy DNA tests will be required," Grishins said. —AFP

EU-AZ vaccine court hearing May 26

BRUSSELS: The European Union and AstraZeneca will begin their oral arguments on May 26 in the bloc's legal action against the pharmaceutical giant over coronavirus vaccine shortfalls, a Belgian court said yesterday. The EU is suing AstraZeneca for allegedly breaking their purchase agreement by massively under-delivering doses of the COVID-19 jab for its 27 member states. The British-Swedish company has dismissed the case as "without merit" and insisted it will fight it fiercely in the Belgian courts, which have jurisdiction over the deal. The legal action, which started Wednesday with a procedural session in a Brussels court—is being expedited to speed up a ruling. —AFP

Fish bone lands Uruguay's 'Pepe' Mujica in hospital

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay: Uruguay's leftist ex-president Jose Mujica, 85, will undergo surgery for a fish bone lodged in his throat, staff at the hospital where he was admitted told AFP. The former guerilla fighter, known during his term as the world's "poorest" president, will go under the knife later Tuesday for what his personal physician said was a "minor" procedure.

"Tomorrow he'll be back home," the doctor, Raquel Pannone, told El Pais newspaper. Attempts to remove the bone without anesthesia were unsuccessful, according to local media. Mujica became a cult figure during his 2010-15 rule, known for giving away most of his salary and driving an old Volkswagen Beetle.

He remains a figurehead of the Broad Front, the leftist coalition in power from 2005 until it was ousted in 2019 elections by center-right leader Luis Lacalle Pou. Last October, Mujica resigned from frontline politics, quitting his Senate seat amid the coronavirus epidemic, saying a weakened immune system put him at risk and staying in the office was no alternative to going out and meeting people.

"Honestly, I'm going because the pandemic is tossing me out," he said at the time. Mujica was part of the MLN-Tupamaros rebels that waged an insurgency during the 1960s and 70s against democratic governments. Many Uruguayans blamed them for provoking the 1973 military coup that ushered in a dictatorship that lasted until 1985. Mujica spent a



In this file photo, former Uruguayan president Jose 'Pepe' Mujica attends the presentation of his first book 'La felicidad al potere' in Rome. —AFP

decade in prison during that time, much of it in solitary confinement. —AFP

France detains ex-members of Red Brigades

PARIS: France yesterday detained seven former members of left-wing Italian extremist group the Red Brigades in what was billed as a diplomatic olive branch by President Emmanuel Macron. France has long served as a haven for Red Brigades figures from the 1970s and 80s under a policy set by former Socialist leader Francois Mitterrand, which has caused tensions with Rome.

The so-called "Mitterrand Doctrine", adopted in 1985, offered asylum to the extremists providing they renounced violence and were not wanted in Italy for murder or other "crimes of blood."

A statement from the French presidency said Macron had authorized the detention of seven former Red Brigades figures, while another three were being actively sought. Without naming them, the statement said they were wanted for the "most serious crimes" but it made clear that Macron had not renounced the Mitterrand Doctrine.

"France, also affected by terrorism, understands the absolute necessity of providing justice for victims," the statement said. "With this transfer, it is also part of the urgent need to build a Europe of justice in which mutual confidence must be at the center." Ultra-leftist groups like the Red Brigades sowed chaos during the period in Italy known as the "Years of Lead"—named after the number of bullets fired—from the late 1960s to mid-1980s.

The Red Brigades were the most notorious and were responsible for kidnappings and murders, including of former prime minister Aldo Moro in 1978.

Diplomatic tensions

The presence of hundreds of figures in France who are wanted by Italy for violent crimes has caused tensions between the two neighbors for



In this file photograph, propaganda leaflets written by Italy's notorious Red Brigades announcing the murder of former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro are displayed a few days before they are sold at auction at the offices of the The Bolaffi Auction House in Milan. —AFP

decades. In 2019, far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini said he would write to Macron "to ask him to stop allowing terrorists who have massacred Italians to be free to drink champagne." Relations between France and Italy were at a historic low at the time over a range of issues, but Macron sees new Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi as a close pro-EU ally.

Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio welcomed yesterday's arrests, saying that "one cannot run away from one's responsibilities, from the pain inflicted, the harm caused." He said the arrests were the result of cooperation by authorities on both sides of the border. Among those detained is Marina Petrella, 66, a former Red Brigades member whose extradition was

blocked in 2008 by then president Nicolas Sarkozy after the intervention of his Italian-born wife Carla Bruni.

Petrella, who was in poor health in 2008, has been sentenced to life in prison for murder in Italy and Sarkozy's intervention provoked fury at the time in Rome. Lawyer Irene Terrel, who represents Petrella and four other ex-Red Brigades figures, told AFP she was "outraged" by the arrests.

"Since the 1980s, these people have been under the protection of France. They've remade their lives here for 30 years in the full view and knowledge of everyone, with their children and their grandchildren... and then in the early morning, they come looking for them, 40 years after the facts," she said. —AFP

Pacific Islands Forum regrets leadership row

KOROR, Palau: The Pacific Islands Forum apologized yesterday for its handling of a leadership row that prompted five nations to quit the grouping, but one of the leading dissenters said it meant nothing without remedial action. The dispute erupted in February, splitting the Forum and upending diplomacy in a region where the United States and China are competing for influence.

Micronesian countries, angry their preferred candidate for PIF secretary general was snubbed when it was their turn to fill the role, announced they would leave the 18-member body. Senior Forum members held a virtual meeting with the

Micronesian leaders this week to discuss the rift and look at "restoring the solidarity of the PIF".

Forum chair Kausea Natano said there were "open and frank" talks with the Micronesian members, comprising Palau, the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, and the Federated States of Micronesia. "It was an opportunity for the forum to directly express to the Micronesian leaders our regret and apologies for the current circumstances facing our forum family," he said in a statement issued yesterday.

Natano said he was working with the Micronesians to seek "an amicable way forward to this impasse".

But his apology was dismissed by Palau President Surangel Whipps, who said the only way the Micronesians would rejoin the Forum was if incoming secretary general Henry Puna agreed to step aside. "Sorry for what? An apology should come with a remedy, so I assume they're working on a remedy," Whipps said. "What I've always said is

if Puna's in, Micronesia's out, so I hope they're heading in that direction."

Puna, the former prime minister of the Cook Islands, has kept a low profile since he defeated Micronesia's candidate Gerald Zackios of the Marshall Islands by a single vote in February. But he told the Cook Islands News last week that he intended to take up the role, then push "as hard and as fast as I can, so that the Forum family will remain intact and complete".

The PIF is mostly made up of small island states along with Australia and New Zealand, and is a key element of the US allies' diplomatic efforts in the region. It has become influential on the issue of climate change, amplifying the voice of many of the region's small island states that are threatened by rising seas and ever-more intense cyclones. The spat provides a potential opening for China to boost its influence with the sparsely populated but strategically important Pacific island nations, which would alarm the United States and Australia. —AFP

International

Relentless new wave sends India COVID death toll past 200,000

Countries send supplies as new cases swamp Indian hospitals

NEW DELHI: India's coronavirus death toll crossed 200,000 yesterday as a relentless wave of new cases swamped hospitals and sent desperate families out into the streets of the capital in search of oxygen supplies and medicine. Infection and death rates are soaring in the vast country of 1.3 billion, in contrast with the United States and some European nations taking tentative steps back towards normal life.

for her mother since she became sick a week ago. "Medicines are also not available... I've visited five, six big medical stores," she said. "No matter how much time it takes, I have to wait here... I only have my mum."

'Auspicious'

Despite the rising cases, on Tuesday around 25,000 people took part in the final bathing day at the Kumbh

also appears to be a leading contender for some of the millions of AstraZeneca vaccine doses the United States has said it will export. Despite the crisis worsening in India and other parts of Asia, the Asian Development Bank yesterday raised its growth forecast for developing countries in the region.

China and India are expected to lead the rebound across the vast continent, the lender said, but it cautioned that vaccine rollouts were lagging. By the end of March, developing Asia had administered 5.2 doses per 100 people, it said—trailing the global average of about eight doses per 100.

'Stunning progress'

In the United States, President Joe Biden hailed America's "stunning" progress against the virus, as the country's premier health agency said Americans who had been vaccinated would no longer need to wear masks outdoors. "While we still have a long way to go in this fight, a lot of work to do in May and June to get us to July 4, we've made stunning progress," Biden said, referencing Independence Day as a milestone date in the battle against the pandemic.

In Brazil—which has the highest death toll behind the United States—the Senate opened an inquiry into the handling of the pandemic by Jair Bolsonaro's government, as fatalities surged to nearly 400,000 and a scramble for vaccines continued. Bolsonaro has brazenly defied expert advice on the virus at virtually every turn, attacking lockdowns, resisting vaccines and touting drugs such as hydroxychloroquine that researchers say are ineffective, and shunning masks.

Permission to rock

But in Spain scientists said the humble face covering could be a key element in bringing back live music events. Results from a trial indoor concert held in Barcelona last month were released Tuesday, and showed only six people out of 5,000 revelers had tested positive for the coronavirus. Ahead of the show, everyone underwent mass screening and antigen tests, the crowd wore masks and capacity at bathrooms was limited, but there was no assigned seating or mandatory social distancing.

"There is no sign that suggests transmission took place during the event," said Josep Maria Llibre, an infectious diseases expert. "We can say that it was not a super-spreading event." — AFP

and 'propaganda'. AFP could not independently verify the claim by security forces.

Conflicting reports are common in Papua—a resource-rich but impoverished island, which shares a border with Papua New Guinea just north of Australia—where a low-level insurgency aimed at breaking away from Indonesia has simmered for decades. The spike in tensions comes after Indonesian President Joko Widodo this week ordered security forces to pursue rebels for the general's death.

Papuan separatists have claimed responsibility for his killing. Indonesian security forces have for years been dogged by allegations of widespread rights abuses against Papua's ethnic Melanesian population including extrajudicial killings of activists and peaceful protesters in their efforts to crush the rebel groups. In recent weeks, security forces ramped up military operations in Puncak district after rebel groups killed soldiers and teachers, torching several schools and a helicopter. A former Dutch colony, Papua declared itself independent in 1961, but neighboring Indonesia took control of the region two years later with the promise of holding an independence referendum.

The subsequent vote in favour of staying part of Indonesia was widely considered a sham. — AFP

Mela religious gathering in the northern town of Haridwar, drawn to the banks of the Ganges by an "auspicious" full moon, festival official Harbeer Singh told AFP. The gathering has attracted millions of pilgrims, mostly without masks, sparking criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationalist government for allowing it to go ahead.

A variant of the virus feared to be contributing to the catastrophic wave in India has now been found in more than a dozen countries, the World Health Organization said Tuesday. Many nations have rushed to help, sending desperately needed oxygen and aid.

As part of the global effort, Singapore said yesterday it had sent two plane-loads of oxygen supplies. India

Indonesia kills 10 Papua rebels in gun battle

JAKARTA: At least 10 people were killed in a gun battle between police and rebels in Indonesia's restive Papua region, authorities said, in an apparent retaliation for the execution of a top intelligence chief. The hours-long shootout Tuesday in remote Puncak district ended with nine guerrillas and a police officer dead, while two more officers were wounded, police said.

"We ambushed the area after confirming their whereabouts," Papua police spokesman Ahmad Musthofa Kamal told AFP yesterday. Police said they believed the dozens-strong rebel faction was responsible for the Sunday slaying of General I Gusti Putu Danny Karya Nugraha, who headed Papua's intelligence agency.

But rebel group spokesman Sebby Sambom dismissed the report of rebels being killed as a 'big lie'



Police pallbearers carry the coffin of one of their officers in Mimika Tuesday killed in a gun battle in Indonesia's restive Papua region between police and separatist rebels. — AFP

Australia to upgrade military bases with eye on Pacific row

SYDNEY: Australia announced yesterday it would upgrade military bases in its far north and expand joint drills with US forces after warnings about the "drums of war" beating in the Pacific region.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a plan worth more than half a billion US dollars to revamp four military training facilities in the remote north over the next five years.

The package of upgrades is more extensive and more costly than first conceived two years ago and would allow more joint drills with American forces, including US marines rotating through the northern port of Darwin. "We will always do what is necessary to ensure Australia has the capability it needs to protect and defend its interests," Morrison said yesterday.

His conservative government has sounded a more hawkish tone on defense matters in recent months, as relations with China have soured. Last year, the Morrison government unveiled plans to dramatically tool up its military with high-tech weaponry in the face of greater perceived threats from Beijing.

Defense experts have even suggested the country should consider developing nuclear weapons capability, because Australia's relative small conventional forces are unlikely to be able to defend the vast continent-country from an attack. This week, a top government official warned that free nations "again hear" the "drums of war" in the region and newly installed Defense Minister Peter Dutton openly mused about the prospect of a war between China and Taiwan. Critics have accused the government of manufacturing a crisis to divert attention from a stalled coronavirus vaccine rollout and sliding poll numbers.

Former prime minister Kevin Rudd said Morrison, Dutton and allied media mogul Rupert Murdoch were "trying desperately to shift the domestic political agenda away from the vaccine debacle, the climate change fiasco and abuse scandals in Canberra". — AFP



NEW DELHI: Health workers wearing personal protective equipment (PPE kit) attends to COVID-19 coronavirus positive patients inside a banquet hall temporarily converted into a COVID care center in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

The virus has now killed more than 3.1 million people worldwide, with India driving the latest surge, recording 360,000 new infections—a global record—and over 3,000 deaths yesterday. In the capital New Delhi, car parks have been converted to crematoriums and the soaring body count has sparked a shortage of wood for funeral pyres. Desperate relatives of the sick are crowding outside hospitals and pharmacies in search of treatment and medicines, often in vain.

Arriving in cars, rickshaws and ambulances, patients and their families desperate for oxygen flocked to a tent outside a Sikh place of worship on the outskirts of the capital this week.

Priyanka Mandal, 30, had been searching for oxygen



HONG KONG: Hong Kong passed a new immigration law yesterday that includes powers to stop people entering or leaving the city, raising fears Chinese mainland-style "exit bans" could be deployed in the international business hub.

New immigration law in HK with 'exit ban' powers

HONG KONG: Hong Kong passed a new immigration law yesterday that includes powers to stop people entering or leaving the city, raising fears Chinese mainland-style "exit bans" could be deployed in the international business hub. The legislation sailed through a legislature now devoid of opposition as Beijing seeks to quash dissent and make the semi-autonomous city more like the authoritarian mainland following huge and often violent democracy protests.

Activists, lawyers and some business figures have sounded the alarm over various provisions within the bill, including one that allows the city's immigration chief to bar people from boarding planes to and from the city. No court order is required and there is no recourse to appeal.

The city's influential Bar Association (IHKBA) warned the bill's wording gave "apparently unfettered power" to the immigration director.

Speaking after the bill was passed yesterday, labor activists and legal critics said the legislature had ignored concerns about the law's broad wording and said they feared exit bans could now be employed in Hong Kong. "When they have this power, absolute power, you don't know who they will use it on," barrister Chow Hang-tung, from the pro-democracy Hong Kong Alliance, told reporters after the bill was passed.

Hong Kong's government said the immigration bill was needed to address a backlog of non-refoulement claims and to screen illegal immigrants before they depart for the city.

"It will only apply to flights heading to Hong Kong," the Security Bureau said. However, the wording of the bill does not limit the power to arriving flights or immigrants and legal experts say it could also be deployed against anyone leaving or arriving in Hong Kong. So-called "exit bans" are often used in mainland China against activists who challenge authorities. They have also impacted business figures.

One recent example is Richard O'Halloran, an Irishman who has been unable to leave Shanghai for two years because of a legal dispute involving the Chinese owner of a Dublin-based company for which he works. — AFP



TOKYO: The young widow of an aging Japanese real estate mogul was arrested yesterday on suspicion of murdering the self-described "Don Juan" just months into their marriage, local media said.

Widow arrested over murder of Japan's 'Don Juan'

TOKYO: The young widow of an ageing Japanese real estate mogul was arrested yesterday on suspicion of murdering the self-described "Don Juan" just months into their marriage, local media said, citing police sources. Kosuke Nozaki, who boasted in his autobiography of spending millions of dollars on young, beautiful women, died in 2018 of acute poisoning aged 77.

His widow Saki Sudo, now 25, allegedly killed Nozaki by making him take a large amount of an unspecified stimulant. Some reports said it had been mixed into a drink, as no needle marks were found on his body. Local police declined to confirm the arrest when contacted by AFP.

Nozaki, who ran a real estate business, liquor sales company and money-lending enterprise, claimed in his best-selling autobiography that he had spent three billion yen (\$27.5 million) on wooing 4,000 women. "The reason I make money is to date attractive women," he wrote in the 2016 book titled "Don Juan of Kishu", after the region in western Japan where he lived.

"I have no interest in cars or houses. Instead, I have a boundless desire to have sex with beautiful women," he said in the book, which also included chapters on how to seduce college students and cabin crew. Nozaki built his fortune from nothing, selling everything from metal scraps to condoms to liquor, according to the website of the book's publisher.

In his will, he said he wanted to donate 1.3 billion yen to the city of Tanabe in Wakayama prefecture, where he had lived. But because half of his estate goes to his widow under civil law, the city had been in talks with Sudo about splitting the money, the Sankei Shimbun reported.

Sudo had allegedly been searching for information online about drugs before her husband's death, according to newspaper reports. In a column Nozaki wrote for the Gendai Business website in 2018 — months before his death—he said he was "confident of becoming happy" by marrying Sudo, even though people had warned him she was probably after his money.

He said they met at Tokyo's Haneda airport when he tripped over on purpose to get Sudo, who he said was a model, to help him. In previous columns, Nozaki said he had started to become well known in Japan after a 2016 incident in which a 27-year-old woman he met and dated stole 60 million yen worth of cash and goods from him. — AFP

Malaysia cartoonist faces probe over satirical drawing

KUALA LUMPUR: A prominent Malaysian cartoonist said yesterday he was facing a police probe over a satirical drawing that mocked a senior official, just days after another artist was arrested. They are the latest government critics to be placed under investigation after a scandal-mired party returned to power last year, adding to fears of a widening crackdown on dissent.

Zulkifli Anwar Uhaque—who goes by the pen-name Zunar—is being probed over a cartoon he drew in January related to a decision by Kedah state to cancel a holiday to mark a Hindu festival. It showed the state's top politician, a Muslim, using a meat cleaver to smash a table where people from different races were sitting. Officials had defended cancelling the holiday, blaming the coronavirus pandemic.

Race and religion in Malaysia—which is Muslim-majority but also home to substantial Hindu and other religious and ethnic minorities—are often sensitive. Zunar told AFP he had been summoned for police questioning Sunday in Kedah and is accused of seeking to incite others to commit crimes and improper internet use. "It is politically motivated," he said, adding that authorities were increasingly concerned about satirical artists taking aim at them. "This is a warning. It will make others fearful."

Zunar was repeatedly targeted under the scandal-plagued regime of Najib Razak after drawing cartoons that lampooned the leader and his luxury-loving wife. He was hit with a string of sedition charges—not over his work, rather over comments on Twitter—but these were dropped when Najib lost power in 2018. News of the police probe against him came after leading graphic artist and activist Fahmi Reza was arrested on Friday for allegedly insulting the queen by posting a satirical playlist on Spotify. — AFP

Business

THURSDAY, APRIL 29, 2021

European Parliament closes Brexit saga

MEPs overwhelmingly ratify trade deal vote

BRUSSELS: The European Parliament yesterday overwhelmingly ratified the EU's post-Brexit trade deal with Britain, but promised to keep a close eye on London with cross-channel hostility still high. A big majority of MEPs approved the bare bones trade deal with the bloc's third-biggest trading partner that was sealed on Christmas Eve after nine months of tough negotiations.

The agreement provides the framework for London's new relationship with the 27-member union, five years after British voters shocked the world by voting to end its 47-year membership. In the final tally, 660 MEPs voted in favor of the trade deal, five against with 32 abstentions, results released yesterday showed.

"The European Parliament voted on the most far reaching agreement the EU has ever reached with a third country," said the president of the assembly, David Sassoli. "This can form the foundation on which we build a new forward-looking EU-UK relationship," he said, warning that MEPs would monitor the implementation of the deal and "not accept any backsliding from the UK government".

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson hailed the "final step in a long journey" that brought "stability to our new relationship with the EU as vital trading partners, close allies and sovereign equals". "Now is the time to look forward to the future and to building a more Global Britain," he added.

'Real teeth'

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. Deepening tensions further, France has threatened to block UK financial firms doing business in the EU if the London does not respect its commitments on fishing, a key part of the deal.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen "warmly welcomed" the approval, but in a final debate in parliament on Tuesday, assured MEPs that the agreement had "real teeth" and the legal means to keep the UK in check. "Let me be very clear: We do not want to have to use these tools, but we will not hesitate to use them if necessary."

Britain's Brexit minister David Frost said he "hugely" welcomed the vote to approve the deal he helped negotiate during months of fraught talks with EU counterpart Michel Barnier. "Hope we can now begin a new chapter together as Europeans, characterized by friendly cooperation between sovereign equals," Frost wrote on Twitter. In a tweet, Barnier thanked MEPs for the "big greenlight" and said both sides now had a "joint responsibility" to respect commitments.

Zero tariffs

The vote ends five years of a Brexit saga in which Britain and Europe also sealed a divorce deal that bitterly divided the UK and saw the future of peace on the island of Ireland thrust into doubt. A recent wave of rioting in the British province of Northern Ireland has been blamed on the fallout of



Brexit arrangements with talks underway in Brussels and London to find a long-term solutions.

Britain left the EU on Jan 30 2020, but its new life with Europe only really began after a transition period ended on Dec 31, when London was no longer bound by the bloc's laws and rules. Officially called a trade and cooperation agreement (TCA), the deal has been provisionally applied since January 1 and 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 commitment to close alignment on environment, health and other regulations. Britain pointedly refused deeper harmonization with the EU, saying that UK must defend and embrace its newly found sovereignty. Cross-Channel trade volumes have plummeted this year, with EU imports from the UK down by half in the first two months of the deal's application. — AFP

Blowing in the wind: Fishermen threaten S Korea carbon plans

GOCHANG, South Korea: Resource-poor South Korea wants to spend billions on wind power to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, but its plans are being delayed by fishermen who say the fight against climate change threatens their catches. The centerpiece of the scheme is what the government says will be the world's biggest offshore wind power complex.

The eight-gigawatt farm off Sinan in the country's southwest will help the South become one of the world's top five offshore wind energy powerhouses by the end of the decade, it proclaimed in February when it signed a 48 trillion won (\$43 billion) construction deal. But the scheme faced fierce opposition from local fishermen as soon as it was reported in 2017.

"Those who make a living at sea are basically opposed to the idea," said protest leader Jang Geun-bae. "It will significantly reduce the area in the ocean where we can fish." It took three years for acceptance in principle to be agreed, and the two sides have yet to reach a deal on compensation. "We had to bite the bullet and

agree for now," Jang told AFP. "It's a government-led project so we had to accept it against our will."

In total the South wants to install 12 gigawatts of offshore wind power capacity by the end of the decade. But similar conflicts are slowing down plans for offshore wind farms across the country, with more than 30 government-approved projects yet to start construction, largely due to local opposition, according to the energy ministry.

A 2019 British government and industry expert mission report seen by AFP identified "local acceptance" as a "key barrier" that could prevent the South meeting its target. Throughout the mission, it said, regulators and developers raised concerns about "objections both from residents and, perhaps more significantly, from the fishing community which is a strong lobbying group in South Korea".

Dirty fuel

South Korea is the world's 12th-largest economy but has few energy resources of its own and relies heavily



This picture taken on March 4, 2021 shows a service vessel sailing among turbine towers at an offshore wind farm in waters some 10 km off Gochang. — AFP

on imported coal - a cheap but dirty fuel - for around 40 percent of its electricity. Only around six percent came from renewables in 2020, according to the International Energy Agency. That leaves it a mountain to climb to achieve the goal President Moon Jae-in declared last year of becoming carbon neutral by 2050.

The challenge has been made more difficult by his insistence on phasing out nuclear power as well as coal, leaving the country depending on renewables to square the circle. South Korea is a latecomer to the offshore

wind industry, trailing far behind leaders Britain, China and Germany. But its peninsular location gives it an extensive coastline and several South Korean companies have expertise in offshore construction and wind power.

Becoming the world number five in offshore wind was "ambitious but not unrealistic," said Norm Waite, an analyst at the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis. Its current capacity was a mere 100 megawatts, he said, but it "has the building blocks to become a major player in offshore wind". — AFP

Journalists create brands in growing 'direct' sales model

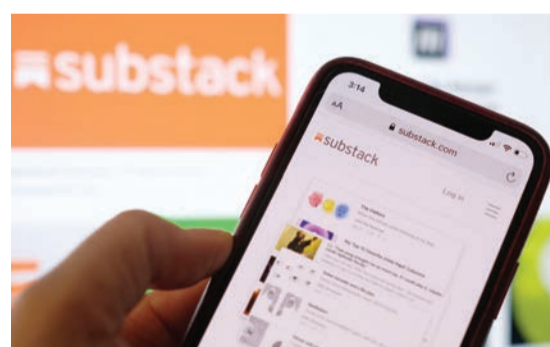
NEW YORK: Anna Codrea-Rado built a name for herself as a freelance journalist, building an audience of 2,500 for her email newsletter, "Lance", aimed at helping other independent writers. Then in 2019 she joined a wave of writers charging a subscription fee for her weekly newsletter using the Substack platform, moving to the direct-to-consumer model. "At the time, I thought it was crazy to charge people for emails," said the British writer who also produces her own podcasts.

But being a freelance writer, this has become "a game changer in terms of actually getting paid on time, and like your cash flow," she said. The number of her subscribers quickly dropped to 130 but then bounced back progressively to over 300. "It was a good revenue stream," even though she suspended the pay model during the coronavirus pandemic.

Codrea-Rado's experience highlights a growing movement in the news media, where legacy organizations are facing growing economic woes, of writers creating their own brands to connect with readers, bypassing traditional outlets. Independent writers may have their own online web page, newsletter, podcast, or even connect by text message via the Subtext platform.

Jeremy Caplan, director of teaching, learning and assessment at City University of New York's Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, said journalists are cashing in on consumers' growing willingness to pay for subscriptions, ranging from services like Netflix to Spotify to meal kits.

"People have just become more accustomed to the idea of small-scale microsubscriptions," Caplan



said. "And they're subscribing to multiple video services and maybe multiple audio or other services from music to fitness."

Small fees add up

Substack has some 500,000 subscribers who pay an average of \$5 to \$10 per month for popular newsletters. The 10 most popular newsletters generated some \$15 million in revenue last year, according to the platform. A few well-known journalists have capitalized on their reputation. For example, Pulitzer Prize winner Glenn Greenwald, who resigned from The Intercept last year in a spat with management, reportedly takes in more than \$80,000 monthly from his Substack newsletter.

Some say the trend is driven by the deepening crisis in the media sector which has made life difficult for many salaried journalists. "The lack of decent pay, and the lack of benefits proposed by companies is causing more and more people to try to remove themselves from those companies and get deals with Substack, or another group," said Jon Schless, president of the NewsGuild, which represents journalists at dozens of news organizations. The market is growing more competitive with new entrants such as Ghost, which offers low-priced newsletters, TinyLetter, ButtonDown and Patreon, a long-running platform for creators and performers. — AFP

Copper reaches decade-high near \$10,000

LONDON: The price of copper on Tuesday hit a decade-high close to \$10,000 a ton, largely on strong Chinese demand and tight supplies of the metal used in popular electric wiring. Copper reached \$9,965 a ton on the London Metal Exchange - the highest level since March 2011 - on strike action in the world's biggest copper producer Chile and owing also to a weaker dollar, according to analysts.

The price has more than doubled since dropping to \$4,371 a ton in March last year as the coronavirus pandemic took hold around the world. But with major copper consumer China enjoying strong economic recovery, the country's demand for the metal has also soared. Copper is meanwhile not far off its all-time record of \$10,190 a ton, achieved in Feb 2011.

Copper, which has been rising strongly in recent months as a weaker dollar makes it cheaper for buyers holding rival currencies, reached its latest decade-high Tuesday "on worries about supply", noted Anna Stablum, analyst at Marex Spectron. "Copper was fueled higher as Chilean port workers protested against the government's Covid-19 relief policies and mining unions said they supported the strike," she added.

In the background is a reduction to investment in the supply side of the mining industry since the "boom" years of 2003-2013 - and the subsequent lack of new expansion plans of existing mines. It comes as demand for copper wiring intensifies, notably for the car sector which is increasingly switching to making electrical vehicles. — AFP

Samsung heirs to pay billions in tax, donate artworks

SEOUL: The heirs to South Korea's Samsung group announced their plans to pay more than \$10 billion in death duties yesterday - one of the world's biggest-ever inheritance tax settlements - and donate an art trove including works by Monet and Picasso. Lee Kun-hee, the late Samsung Electronics chairman, was the country's richest man when he died last October at age of 78 after being hospitalized for years, leaving an estimated 22 trillion won (\$19.6 billion) in assets.

South Korea has stringent inheritance tax laws and high rates, resulting in a hefty bill for the family, including Samsung Electronics vice chairman Lee Jae-yong, who is currently in jail for bribery, embezzlement and other offences. Lee's family "expects to pay more than 12 trillion won in taxes related to inheritance, which is more than half of the value of the late Chairman's total estate," Samsung said in a statement.

"The inheritance tax payment is one of the largest ever in Korea and globally," it added, saying the Lee family will pay it off in six instalments starting this month. The assets include shareholdings in Samsung Electronics, Samsung Life and Samsung C&T, as well as real estate, according to the statement. The late chairman also left a trove of antiques and artworks reportedly worth 2 to 3 trillion won.

Around 23,000 pieces from Lee's collection will be donated, Samsung said, including 14 items classed as National Treasures that will be showcased at the National Museum of Korea. Works by Western artists including a Claude Monet water lilies painting, Salvador Dali's Family of Marsupial Centaurs, and pieces by Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin, Joan Miro and others will be donated to the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, it added.

Reports say the art donations will reduce the family's tax liability. "Samsung has carried out a realistic calculation on donating the late Lee's artworks," said Kim Dae-jong, professor of business at Sejong University in Seoul. "If they had not decided to donate them but instead opted for the children to inherit them, it would have been subject to high inheritance tax. With their donation of such high value works, they don't have to pay that tax while doing general public service at the same time."

Another 1 trillion won will be donated to health causes, half of it to be spent on building South Korea's first specialist infectious diseases hospital. Samsung - whose flagship subsidiary is among the world's biggest smartphone and computer chip makers - is by far the largest of the family-controlled empires known as chaebols that dominate business in South Korea, the world's 12th-largest economy. The conglomerate is crucial to the country's economic health - its overall turnover is equivalent to a fifth of the national gross domestic product. The late chairman's eldest son and the group's de facto leader, Lee Jae-yong, was jailed in January over a sprawling corruption scandal that brought down former president Park Geun-hye. — AFP

Business

Ooredoo Kuwait Group reports revenue of KD 146m for Q1 2021

KUWAIT: National Mobile Telecommunications Company KSCC "Ooredoo" announced its financial results for the quarter ended March 31, 2021:

- Consolidated customer base decreased by 8 percent to 23.6 million in Q1 2021, compared to 25.6 million in Q1 2020 mainly due to a change in methodology in Tunisia.

- Revenues in KD were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and related business limitations across all operations, lower sales in Kuwait, a decrease in Algerian revenue mainly due to currency devaluation. Consequently, consolidated revenue decreased by 6 percent to KD 146.0 million for Q1 2021, compared to KD 155.8 million in Q1 2020.

- EBITDA decreased by 4 percent in Q1 2021 to KD 50.8 million, compared to KD 52.9 million in Q1 2020.

- Net profit attributable to NMTC was KD 1.0 million for Q1 2021 compared with KD 1.7 million in Q1 2020, due to the decline in EBITDA

- The consolidated earnings per share were 2.0 fils per share for Q1 2021, compared to 3.4 fils per share earned in Q1 2020.

Commenting on the company's results, Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, Chief Executive Officer, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "We focused on supporting the community and thus we intensified our corporate social responsibility initiatives, and gave more attention to the safety of our people. Our digital transformation strategy enabled us to improve our cost base and to increase efficiency."

"We constantly aim to keep pace with technological development, contribute to enhancing the local economy, ensure the safety and satisfaction of our employees and customers, and maximize our efficiency, productivity and performance" Al-Babtain added.

Sheikh Mohammad Bin Abdullah Al-Thani, Chairman of the Board of Directors commented: "The first quarter of 2021 was characterised by challenging conditions in several of our markets as the pandemic continued to impact economic activity and disposable incomes. However, throughout this difficult period, we remained focused on the health and wellbeing of our employees and customers, and continued to support the communities in which we operate."

Operationally, however, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital channels across our markets, supporting our digital transformation agenda as we continue to broaden our offering and focus on expanding our customer acquisition channels. This enabled us to maintain a healthy consolidated customer base of 23.6 million in Q1 2021.

Our financial performance for the period was impacted by economic instability due to the pandemic as well as currency depreciation in some of our markets. NMTC reported consolidated revenues of KD 146 million during the first quarter of 2021, down 6 percent compared to the same period last year. Our focus on

cost optimisation enabled us to partially absorb the pressure from our top line, hence EBITDA for the period declined by a slower rate of 4 percent to KD 51 million, supporting a healthy EBITDA margin of 35 percent. Consolidated Net Profit in Q1 2021 was KD 1 million compared to KD 2 million for the same period in the previous year.

In Kuwait, our digital transformation strategy enabled us to optimise our cost base supporting an increase in EBITDA margin to 28 percent in Q1 2021 compared to 25 percent in Q1 2020. In Tunisia, revenue increased 2 percent during the first quarter of 2021 compared to the same period last year due to favourable exchange rates.

In Algeria, our customer base increased by 3 percent to 12.7 million, supported by our strong digital offering.

In Palestine, EBITDA increased 22 percent to KD 2.8 million in Q1 2021 compared to the same period last year, driven by strong revenue growth of 5 percent as well as our ongoing efficiency and cost optimisation initiatives. In the Maldives, we grew our customer base to 360,000, an increase of 3 percent from the end of last year."

Review of Operations

The Group's operational performance can be summarised as follows:

Ooredoo - Kuwait operations

Ooredoo Kuwait revenues were KD 50.5 million in Q1 2021, compared to KD 55.1 million in Q1 2020 and EBITDA stood at KD 14.1 million in Q1 2021 compared to KD 13.9 million in Q1 2020. To promote vaccination against COVID-19, and to support government efforts, Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, offered three months free of charge to all its customers -with post-paid subscriptions- who have had the COVID-19 vaccine.

This stems from the company's determination to stand by the Government and its entities in their efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and inspire the people of Kuwait to take the vaccine. This is mainly driven by the Company's national corporate social responsibility program to achieving sustainable development and improving the lives of members of society as a whole.

Ooredoo Kuwait also won several prestigious awards, the Company was awarded the "Best Internet Service Provider" at the annual Service Hero Awards for the year 2020, endorsing the company's long standing commitment to its customers. Recognized as the benchmark in the telecom industry, Ooredoo Kuwait was recognized for its excellence in offering complete coverage at high speeds, multiple plan options to suit different needs along with offering an excellent customer service.

Ooredoo Kuwait also proudly announced that it has won 3 categories at the 2021 Middle East & North Africa Stevie Awards. The Stevie Awards are widely considered to be the world's premier business awards,



conferring recognition for achievement in programs such as The International Business Awards for 19 years. Ooredoo Kuwait has won in the following categories: "Innovation in Business Information Apps", "Innovation in Customer Service Management, Planning & Practice", and "Achievement in Growth".

The Gold Stevie Award for "Innovation in Business Information Apps" category was awarded in recognition of the company's My Ooredoo application. My Ooredoo allows customers to fully control their account through their smart devices at any time. Customers can pay their bills or recharge multiple lines at once, check their pack usage and balance, activate their Nojoom account and keep track of their points, activate several digital services and buy e-vouchers and more.

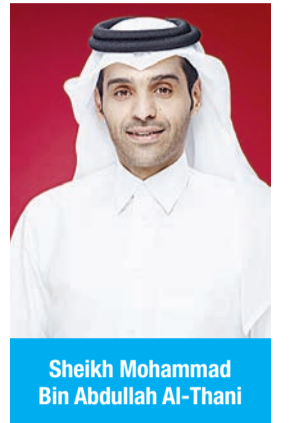
The Silver Stevie Award for "Achievement in Growth" category was in specific recognition of Ooredoo Kuwait's milestones in business, technology and digital services in the telecommunications sector. Ooredoo has won numerous awards for providing an exceptional customer experience in the past, and today, Ooredoo is definitely thrilled to add this award to its portfolio.

For years, Ooredoo Kuwait has maintained its success and even achieved growth by exploring new innovative techniques to conduct business efficiently, allowing it to reach new markets, expand its product and service portfolio, and expand the competencies of its human resources. Among the most important of these achievements are the launching of eSIM on its network as the first telecom operator to offer this service in Kuwait and one of the first in the region, launching the 5G in mid-2018 providing a superior 5G experience and improving its network capabilities, followed by the first international 5G video call in the MENA region between Ooredoo Kuwait and Ooredoo Qatar. These important steps come in tandem with the company's digital transformation strategy and affirming its leadership in digitalization in Kuwait, in addition to providing its customers a full-fledged and unique digital experience.

Ooredoo Kuwait also received a bronze Stevie Award for "Innovation in Customer Service Management, Planning & Practice - Telecommunications Industries" category. The company's most important achievements represented in completing 1000 days of launching its state of the art data center with zero downtime since its launch in 2017. The data center provides a suite of managed hosting services tailor-made to fit corporate and business needs. These services are ideal for corporates and businesses looking to better manage their data, platforms and applications.



Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain



Sheikh Mohammad Bin Abdullah Al-Thani

Ooredoo - Tunisia

Revenues increased by 2 percent to KD 32.7 million in Q1 2021 compared to KD 32.1 million in Q1 2020 supported by favourable Foreign Exchange rates. EBITDA decreased to KD 13.5 million in Q1 2021 compared to KD 14.1 million in Q1 2020. Ooredoo's customer base in Tunisia decreased to 6.9 million customers in Q1 2021. Ooredoo Tunisia has changed the reporting of its prepaid customer's base from the original life-cycle definition to the 90 days network activity definition to align with a common methodology across mobile operators within Tunisia. This change translates into a drop in the reported customer base of approximately 2.3 million with no impact on the reported financials

Ooredoo - Algeria

Business in Algeria was negatively impacted by the devaluation of the Algerian Dinar. Consequently, revenues decreased to KD 45.8 million in Q1 2021, compared to KD 49.9 million in Q1 2020. EBITDA was KD 15.6 million in Q1 2021, down from KD 16.8 million in Q1 2020. Algerian Dinar depreciated by 12 percent year on year. Customer base in Algeria increased by 3 percent to 12.7 million in Q1 2021 compared to 12.3 million in Q1 2020.

Ooredoo - Palestine

Revenue increased by 5 percent to KD 8.3 million in Q1 2021, compared to KD 7.9 million in Q1 2020. EBITDA was strong, increasing 23 percent to KD 2.8 million in Q1 2021, compared to KD 2.3 million in Q1 2020, driven by operational efficiencies across the business. Customer base in Palestine decreased to 1.3 million customers in Q1 2021 compared to 1.4 million in Q1 2020.

Ooredoo - Maldives

Ooredoo Maldives reported 18 percent decrease in revenues to KD 8.8 million in Q1 2021, compared to KD 10.8 million in Q1 2020. EBITDA was KD 4.7 million in Q1 2021 compared to KD 5.7 million in Q1 2020. Ooredoo Maldives now serves a total of 360k customers.

NBK Economic Brief

Economy improving slowly but should be buttressed by reforms

KUWAIT: Kuwait's economy so far in 2021 looks to be recovering gradually from the economic dislocation caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The contraction in GDP in the second and third quarters last year was the sharpest on record (data back to 2011), while the public finances registered one of the largest deficits amid a big drop in oil prices. Inflation has continued to rise on the back of higher food prices and supply-side constraints.

High frequency economic data in the first quarter of 2021 shows that improvement was driven by consumer spending and household borrowing. The stock market has also performed relatively well during IQ21, lifted by vaccine optimism and expectations of improved business activity down the line. Hopes are high that, with an increase in awards in IQ21, activity in Kuwait's projects market will finally gain traction this year following the pandemic-affected 2020. This is taking place against a backdrop of markedly higher oil prices, which, in turn, is a reflection of OPEC+ supply side management and improved global oil demand growth.

Having said that, uncertainty is still high: the reintroduction of partial curfews amid rising coronavirus infections both in Kuwait and abroad will have slowed down the normalization process. In Kuwait, lending to businesses has been soft, though the approval of the "loan guarantee" law should provide some support. The impact of the deferral of Kuwaiti loan repayments for six months is uncertain on economic activity although it would add to the fiscal burden, and so would the recent KD0.6 billion to front line workers.

The still tense relation between the newly elected parliament and the government does not augur well for the legislative and long-awaited reform agenda, especially on the fiscal front, including the much debated debt law.

GDP contracts sharply in Q2 and Q3 2020, to rise in 2021

Third quarter 2020 GDP data released last month revealed a fourth consecutive year-on-year contraction for the Kuwaiti economy. Real GDP declined by 11.5 percent y/y in 3Q20, weighed down especially by weakness in the oil sector (-14.8 percent) due to OPEC+ cuts while non-oil economic activity was adversely affected by pandemic-related restrictions, as businesses were only being opened gradually in a phased sector-specific approach. That said, consumer spending skyrocketed in 3Q20 (+26 percent y/y) once full curfew had been lifted - and growth has been in double digits ever since.

In light of these quarterly figures, we now see GDP growth in 2020 as a whole at -8.0 percent y/y. This year should see a return to growth, of 1.2 percent, driven by non-oil sector gains (4 percent) stemming from private consumption due to pent-up demand and higher government spending due to higher oil prices.

Oil GDP is projected to improve in the remainder of the year following the recent OPEC+ decision to release gradually more oil into the market starting in May. (Saudi Arabia will restore its 1 mb/d of the voluntary cut production as well.) Kuwait's compliance with the OPEC+ supply cut agreement was in excess of 100 percent (average) during the quarter with production averaging 2.33 mb/d but is expected to rise to 2.43 mb/d in line with its new quota. Production is then seen at this level until the expiration of the OPEC+ agreement in April 2022.

Consumer price inflation stood at 3.0 percent y/y in February, largely driven by a continued, significant climb in

international food prices (10.4 percent) due to supply-side disruptions brought on by the pandemic and higher food prices. The housing services index, meanwhile, has not budged since June 2019, despite reports of variations in rents pre and post-pandemic, especially considering the exodus of thousands of expatriates and anecdotal reports of decreases in rents given to some tenants during the pandemic. Core inflation, which excludes food and housing costs, fell slightly to 2.7 percent y/y. Looking ahead, we expect inflation to average 2.5 percent this year, edging up a bit further if VAT were to be implemented next year.

Oil prices rally to 22-month highs

Optimism about the prospects for a global economic recovery amid increasing vaccinations and the OPEC+ mediated supply tightness are the primary reasons for the increase in oil prices. Brent price closed out the first quarter of the year up 22 percent q/q at \$63.5/bbl, having almost breached a 22-month high of \$70 in mid-March.

Prices have been largely range-bound heading into April on renewed demand-side concerns sparked by the re-imposition of coronavirus lockdowns in several economies. Recently, though, better-than-expected economic data out of the US and China (although India, a large consumer of oil, has been hammered by massive infections which could affect oil demand) and the International Energy Agency's upward revision to global oil demand in 2021 appear to have improved sentiment. Kuwait Export Crude (KEC) has outperformed Brent, gaining 26 percent in IQ21 to \$63.9/bbl at end-March.

Large fiscal deficit in FY20/21

Lower oil production and prices are likely to push the budget deficit in the fiscal year that ended in March to a high level if lower than projected in the official budget. Low oil revenues drove the increase in the deficit with the KEC oil price down 35 percent y/y during the period to \$41.5/bbl, while oil production declined by 12.6 percent on OPEC+ production cuts. Moreover, non-oil revenues, although relatively small, shrank by 16.1 percent amid repercussions of the COVID pandemic. Meanwhile, while government spending fell by 7.4 percent due mainly to the sizeable decline in capex (-29 percent) on delays and postponements to project work. The government registered a deficit of KD6.0 billion during the first 11M of FY20/21 (April-February). However, based on seasonal spending patterns, the deficit could end up at about KD9 billion (28 percent of GDP) for the whole fiscal year.

The recent rise in oil prices if sustained will help reduce the government's financing needs for the current fiscal year. Aside from halting transfers into the Future Generations Fund (FGF), the government has taken additional steps to boost liquidity at the General Reserve Fund (GRF) in all likelihood for a few months through some swap operations (with the FGF) and collections of retained earnings from state-owned enterprises including the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation. The budget deficit for this fiscal year could end up at about KD7-8 billion, much lower than projected in the draft government budget (KD14.1 billion) but large enough not to be financed with existing resources without passing the debt law or withdrawing from the FGE.

The latest available data for 3Q20 showed an improvement in the external position due to the rebound in oil prices from their pandemic-lows and also high returns on investments abroad (FGF and PIFSS) due to a rebound in international markets. With oil prices rising, the current account should have improved further in IQ21. With a possible easing of restrictions and travel in the remainder of the year, we could witness a widening of the service account but the external position should remain robust.

Financial Results for First Quarter of 2021



The Board of Directors of National Mobile Telecommunication Company K.S.C.P (Ooredoo) is pleased to announce to its shareholders that the Company has achieved a consolidated Net Profit attributable to shareholders of **KD 1 million**, translating to an earnings per share of **1.96 fils**, and Total Revenues of **KD 146 million**.



The Board of Directors takes this opportunity to express their gratitude and appreciation to NMTC (Ooredoo) esteemed shareholders and valued customers for their ongoing trust and support, in addition to the Company's employees for their continuous efforts during the past quarter.

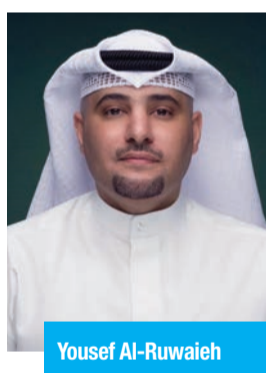
Business



Faisal Al-Sraei



KFH program in Ramadan confirms its leadership in social responsibility



Yousef Al-Ruwaieh

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) maintains its leadership in social responsibility through its Ramadan program "Increase Good Deeds in Ramadan 6" which is rich in social activities and different youth, sport and awareness initiatives.

Group Deputy General Manager Public Relations and Media at KFH, Yousef Abdullah Al-Ruwaieh said that KFH's efforts in social responsibility are in line with its strategy to achieve sustainable development, and reflect its keenness to play its national and social role as a leading financial institution in the private sector.

Al-Ruwaieh explained that the exceptional



initiative that encourages people exercising during the permitted walking hours under the theme "better health, better life". This comes in collaboration with V-thru app using V-FIT feature which enable participants to gain KD 1 for every km of walking. This credit can be donated or used for orders.

Youth and Sport activities

Seeking to promote sports and support youth activities and develop their talents, Al-Ruwaieh said that KFH sponsors football tournaments organized by Li3ib app and is the strategic partner to "Penalties" program which is shown daily on KTV1. He added that KFH renewed its strategic partnership with Flare Fitness as part of its keen interest in health and sport activities.

Communicating with public during exercise hours

Al-Ruwaieh said that KFH is keen on communicating with the public during the permitted partial curfew walking hours in different locations in Kuwait. This included different contests and prizes for all participations.

Visits to security points

He added that KFH voluntary team organized in Ramadan multiple visits to security points with the aim of communicating, and in appreciation of the dedication of the frontline heroes while performing their national duty for the sake of serving Kuwait and the safety of its people.

Food baskets for needy families

He pointed out that KFH participated in a

social initiative to distribute food baskets and iftar meals to needy families as part of its Ramadan program and its commitment to social responsibility towards different segments of society.

Ramadan awareness competitions and segments

He pointed out that KFH is launching a series of awareness segments in various fields giving religious, social and health advice and guidelines as well as awareness messages in cooperation with official institutions and entities, such as Al-Salam Hospital and health and sport specialists. He stressed that the various awareness videos made by KFH are well-received by the public.

Ramadan gains with Dr Al-Tabtabai

KFH launches a host of videos with awareness messages, religious guides and issues relating to Holy Ramadan, including rules and virtues of Ramadan presented by Dr Sayed Mohammad Al-Sayed Abdul Razzaq Al-Tabtabai, Chairman of Fatwa and Sharia Supervisory Board in KFH.

The 'Half an Hour' program from KFH

KFH has launched a special program of its Instagram channel which hosts physicals, engineers and specialists to discuss topics ranging from health culture, volunteering, e-teaching, training and others.

Strategic partnership with Sheikh Fahad Al-Kandari

Al-Ruwaieh added: "in a strategic partnership with KFH, Sheikh Fahad Al-Kandari con-

tinues his Ramadan appearances via the daily program 'Wisam Al-Quran' which is broadcast on KTV and his YouTube channel.

'KFH Reciters' Quran reciting competition

He pointed out that KFH has launched the 'KFH Reciters' competition for reciting the Holy Quran during the Holy month of Ramadan for the customers of "Baiti" and "Hesabi" online in conformity with the current health guidelines.

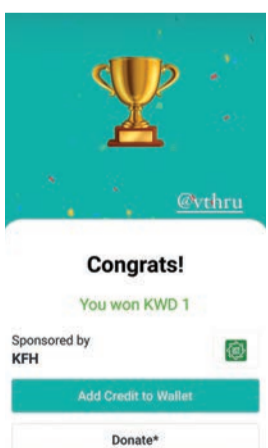
The Holy Quran app gift from KFH

Al-Ruwaieh added that KFH provides the public with a high-quality copy of the Holy Quran app for iPhone and iPad devices with a new page display system, multi-language display support, user choice of screen direction, support for the new manuscript of the Medina with side margins to enhance content aesthetics, multi-page display, possibility of operating another app on the screen, multi-lingual interpretations and translations, night reading and other features.



Virtual Ghabqa

Al-Ruwaieh said that "Increase Good Deeds in Ramadan 6" program wasn't limited to society, but also included the employees through different social initiatives such as virtual ghabqa with the participation of the executive management. The event aimed to enhance bonding of employees and communicating with them.



conditions didn't prevent KFH from virtually communicating with customers and engaging with society in Ramadan. He added that KFH was able to adapt its activities to suit the current circumstances, relying on the innovation element by using various e-channels, stressing the keenness to abide by health guidelines as this is key for the health and safety of people.

Better health, better life

Due to the growing popularity of e-sports, Al-Ruwaieh said that "Increase Good Deeds in Ramadan 6" maintains its sport and social activities which are gaining momentum in society.

He added that KFH has launched an initia-



Business

KD 69.8m stc's revenues for the first quarter of 2021 with KD 8m net profit

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company (stc), a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced its financial results for the three-month period ended 31 March 2021.

The financial results for the three-month period ended March 31, 2021
 KD 69.8 million
 Total Revenue KD 18.9 million
 EBITDA KD 8.0 million
 Net Profit 16 Kuwaiti fils
 EPS KD 383.0 million
 Assets KD 200.2 million
 Shareholder's Equity 401 Kuwaiti fils
 Book Value 1.8 million
 Customer base

On this occasion, Dr Mahmoud Ahmad Abdulrahman - stc's Chairman, stated: "stc has demonstrated its resilience and viability in providing the best services and products to the individual and business sectors on a continuous basis, throughout the potential risks and critical economic conditions resulted from the continued global spread of COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, as the negative effects of COVID-19 continue to significantly hit most of the vital sectors worldwide, stc is constantly keen on developing precautionary plans that enable the company to maintain its operations during the curfew and lockdown periods in order to ensure service delivery and customer satisfaction.

"In line with the industry global trends, market changes and the company's corporate strategy, stc updated its strategic framework to enhance its position as a leader in the digital arena. Over the past couple of years, stc's corporate strategy has enabled the company to optimize its operations, invest in developing the largest 5G network in Kuwait and enhance its digital channels to provide its customers with an unrivalled experience".

Commenting on the financial results for the three months period ended March 31, 2021, Dr Abdulrahman said: "stc's revenues reached KD 69.8 million in the first quarter of 2021 compared to KD 72.2 million during the same period of 2020. The overall drop in revenues for Q1-2021 is contributed to the

continuing repercussions of the current crisis, which continues to strain the operational and financial results of the Telecommunications sector, in particular the individual sector, as a result of the continued partial curfew imposed in Kuwait due to COVID-19 pandemic.

"Furthermore, the continued imposed restrictions on the airport and the suspension of flights have also contributed to the drop in stc's revenues due to the decline in the number of residents in the State of Kuwait over the past year, resulting in a decline in the demand for the individual sector in addition to the significant and almost total decline in the roaming services. Despite the decline in revenues, stc recorded a growth in EBITDA by 10.9 percent and net profit by 22.6 percent in the first three months of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020.

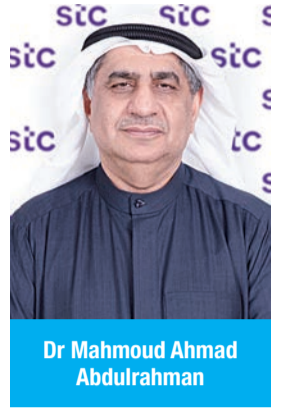
Considering the Company's financial position as of March 31, 2021, total assets reached KD 383.0 million, while total shareholders' equity reached KD 200.2 million, with a book value of 401 Kuwaiti fils per share. Furthermore, stc boasts a strong financial solvency position, considered to be amongst the best in comparison to telecom companies in the Middle East. Furthermore, stc's customer base stood at 1.8 million customer at the end of March 2021".

Dr Abdulrahman noted, "stc's financial results for the first three-month period of 2021 demonstrates its ability to compete and enhance its position as the second largest telecom operator in the Kuwaiti telecom market with a revenue market share of approx. 35 percent. With the ongoing repercussions and challenges we are facing due to the COVID-19 crisis, the significant increase in Company's financial results is attributed to the decline in stc's bad debt and its implementation of the cost optimization program in order to achieve the best results and enhance profitability through adopting a balanced and effective financial policy in relation to the operational and capital expenditure".

In regards to the Company's financial results, engineer Maziad Alharbi - Chief Executive Officer of stc, said: "stc was able to achieve these results due to the great efforts provided and the dedication of its employees in addition to being flexible in implementing the company's digital transformation strategy and providing integrated advanced technical solu-



Maziad Alharbi



Dr Mahmoud Ahmad Abdulrahman

tions that serve the Kuwaiti government's outlook with regards to the social distancing for the individual and enterprise segments.

"stc has focused its efforts on building on the 5G network to deliver a range of services, including entertainment and digital services, meeting the growing demand for broadband high-speed networks, in addition to the corporate and institutional requirements for online institutional and educational interaction with the highest quality and efficiency. Accordingly, stc proved its ability to overcome potential unprecedented challenges due to the great efforts provided and the dedication of its employees and their determination to provide services to customers with the same quality standards through the digital platforms".

Alharbi added, "stc's EBITDA increased by 10.9 percent in the first three months of 2021 to reach KD 18.9 million compared to KD 17.0 million during the same period of 2020. EBITDA margin reached 27 percent in Q1-2021 compared to 24 percent in Q1-2020. Accordingly, stc reported an increase in the net profit by 22.6 percent to reach KD 8.0 million (earnings per share of 16 fils) with a profit margin of 11 percent compared to KD 6.5 million (earnings per share of 13 fils) with a profit margin of 9 percent in 2020.

stc demonstrated its ability to overcome the potential challenges and risks with the ability to keep up its operations and open its doors to serve its customers in such circumstances. Whereby, in order to maintain its operations and continue delivering uninterrupted services to customers, stc carried on its comprehensive business continuity plan. Earlier in the year, the Company was certified with the latest

version of the ISO Certification in Business Continuity (ISO 22301:2019) after completing a rigorous auditing process performed by TopCertifier. The certification comes as a testament to the diligent approach taken by stc to implement protocols and guidelines across all business-related aspects during the pandemic.

It is worth noting that the first quarter of 2021 carried extraordinary events for stc, whereby, the Company received the approval from the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority's (CITRA) to launch the first-of-its-kind mobile virtual network operator (MILLION-VO) license to launch Virgin Mobile Kuwait in partnership with Virgin Mobile Middle East & Africa. Virgin Mobile Kuwait will operate using stc's network, with stc acting as a Host Facilities Based Provider "FBP" with Virgin Mobile Kuwait, offering prepaid plans to users, and making it the first virtual telecom service in the country.

In addition, solutions by stc, the Company's specialized business arm, launched its ultimate solution in cyber security and protection, "Shield". The pioneering service ensures online protection for businesses by identifying risks in possible data breaches, offering 360 degrees protection, and assessing critical assets to enable worry-free environments for businesses to thrive digitally".

Gulf Bank grows net profit by 39%

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank KSCP ("The Bank") announced its financial results for the first quarter ending 31 March 2021. The Bank recorded a net profit of KD 12 million, an increase of KD 3.4 million or 39 percent compared to the first quarter of 2020 net profit of KD 8.6 million. This increase was mainly due to the significant improvement in net interest income.

The Bank's return on assets improved from 0.5 percent in the first quarter of 2020 to 0.8 percent and return on equity grew from 5.3 percent to 7.6 percent. The improvement in Net profit was mainly driven by a 13 percent or KD 3.7 million increase in net interest income caused by a continuing decline in the cost of funds. The higher operating expenses of KD 1.7 million were set off by lower credit costs (including general provisions) of KD 2.2 million.

Compared with December 31, 2020, total assets increased by 2.6 percent to KD 6.3 billion, loans and advances to customers climbed 2.7 percent to KD 4.2 billion, customer deposits grew by 3.6 percent to KD 4.2 billion, and shareholders' equity stood at KD 637 million.

The Bank's regulatory capital ratios remained strong as the Tier 1 ratio of 14.3 percent was 485 basis points above the regulatory minimum of 9.5 percent and the Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 17.7 percent was 621 basis points above the regulatory minimum of 11.5 percent.

Commenting on the results, Gulf Bank's Chairman, Jassim Mustafa Boodai, said: "I am pleased to announce that Gulf Bank has started 2021 strong, with an increase of 39 percent in net profit during our first quarter compared to the same period last year. Despite the challenges that we continue to face as a result of the coronavirus pandem-

ic, Gulf Bank managed to increase our profitability, generating an operating margin of KD 21 million, an increase of 8 percent compared to the first quarter of 2020. These results are a testament to Gulf Bank's sound policies and prudent management, and they demonstrate that the Bank is on the right path to achieving its strategy, while continuing to create value for its shareholders."

Steadfast Path

Gulf Bank's CEO, Tony Daher, commented: "During the first quarter of the year, Gulf continued to generate strong profit growth despite the challenges facing the economy and the banking sector. Thanks to our stability and prudent risk management policies, we were able to achieve a balanced performance. These results increase our confidence, and confirm that we are on the right course to achieving Gulf Bank's strategic objectives and push us to intensify our efforts as we continue on our path to leadership in the sector."

On March 27, 2021, Gulf Bank held its Annual General Meeting and obtained approval from its shareholders to pay cash dividends of 5 fils per share, representing a 50 percent payout ratio for the fourth consecutive year.

Diraya Awareness Campaign

As part of its ongoing commitment to enhancing economic sustainability, Gulf Bank is participating in the Diraya campaign, an awareness campaign initiated by the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Kuwait Banking Association to educate customers about their banking rights and the general public about all matters related to banking and finance. The campaign aims to increase public awareness of the important role of the banking sector, as well as the various services it provides.

Commenting on the Diraya campaign, Daher continued: "With the latest advancements and progress witnessed by the financial and banking industry, the need for greater

financial awareness is more important than ever, in the hopes that customers can make the most of all the services available to them without compromising any rights or security. Gulf Bank fully supports the Diraya campaign and encourages all its customers to follow the campaign's activities and stay tuned to all its awareness messages."

Gulf Bank is currently supporting the Diraya campaign by providing dedicated educational and informative messages through the Banks' various channels, concerning topics such as: banking cybersecurity, customer rights, and the role of banks in the overall development of the economy.

"A" Credit Ratings

Gulf Bank continues to be well recognized in terms of its creditworthiness and financial strength internationally, rated "A" by all four leading credit rating agencies. Moody's Investors Service affirmed the Long-Term Deposits Rating of "A3" with a "Stable" outlook.

Fitch Ratings affirmed the Bank Long-term Issuer Default Rating of "A+" with a "Negative" outlook. S&P Global Ratings affirmed the Bank Issuer Credit Rating at "A-" with a "Negative" outlook. Capital Intelligence affirmed Gulf Bank's Long-term Foreign Currency Rating of "A+" with a "Stable" outlook.

Gulf Bank, Bank of the Future

Gulf Bank has also set its upcoming five-year strategy, which will focus on:

- Promoting growth in the corporate banking segment by increasing product offerings and focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises;
- Increasing the Bank's market share in the retail banking sector, and targeting youth and affluent client segments; and
- Developing the Bank's digital banking platforms to increase competitiveness and improve customer service.



Tony Daher



Jassim Mustafa Boodai

Digital Transformation

Commenting on the Bank's digital transformation strategy, Daher said: "As part of Gulf Bank's strategy, we are digitally transforming most of the Bank's major activities in a way that increases efficiencies, enhances the Bank's performance, and strengthens its corporate controls. We anticipate that our technological enhancements will facilitate smoother operations for both our customers and the Bank, and we are continuously enhancing our security levels to elevate Gulf Bank's customer protection and improve service."

Thanks & Appreciation

Boodai concluded his remarks by stating: "On behalf of the Board of Directors, we would like to extend our appreciation to the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Capital Markets Authority for their dedicated efforts in supporting and promoting Kuwait's banking sector. I would also like to thank our shareholders, customers, and Board of Directors for their valuable contributions, with a special note of appreciation to our team members for their loyalty over the years."

Burgan Bank offers free Eideya delivery service to premier banking customers

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank announced yesterday the free Eideya Delivery service to Premier Banking Customers in collaboration with "Qiblah" company for concierge services. This service enables Premier Banking customers to receive new bank notes before the Eid holidays at their offices or homes, avoiding the hassle of waiting in the branches at that time of the year.

To request this service, Premier customers can simply contact Qiblah concierge services from 10 am to 4 pm, by calling 22317755, or emailing Burganpremier@qiblah.com.kw to request the amount of Eid money required and state their address in order for the concierge messenger to deliver it accordingly. Noting that this service is available from 30th of April till 12th of May 2021. The bank's collaboration with "Qiblah" for concierge services stems from its commitment of supporting its customers' everyday requirements with an unmatched personalized experience. Burgan Bank's premier customers can access concierge services from a selected list of more than 20 services such as travel bookings, airport transfers, visa assistance, party planning, valet parkers and others.



Total Revenues

69.8

KD Million

The Board of Directors of Kuwait Telecommunications Company (stc) is pleased to announce to its shareholders that the company has achieved a net profit of KD 8.0 million for the three months ended 31 March 2021.

EBITDA

18.9

KD Million

Q1-2021

Net Profit

8.0

KD Million

Q1-2021

EPS

16

Kuwaiti Fils

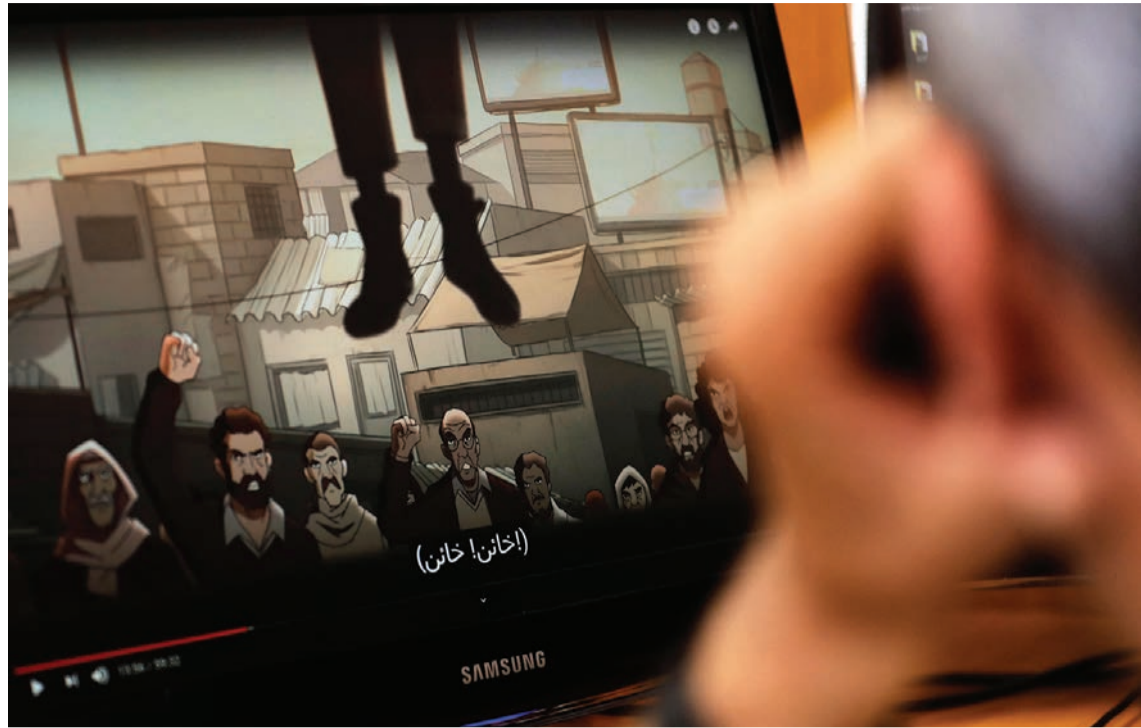
Q1-2021

Subscribers

1.8

Million Subscribers

31 March 2021



These photos show a man watching "Alephia 2053", an Arabic-language animated feature, on YouTube at his office in Beirut. — AFP photos

ANIMATED TOPPLING OF DYSTOPIA TAKES ARAB STREAMING WORLD BY STORM

"Alephia 2053", an Arabic-language animated feature set in a bleak future, has struck a chord in a region all too familiar with autocratic rule and bold, bloody resistance. Released on YouTube on March 21, a decade after the Arab Spring uprisings, the Lebanese-made thriller has already garnered more than eight million views. The 60-minute film's success is a testament to the growing popularity of online streaming platforms because of the coronavirus pandemic. But it is also "proof that the movie reflects people's thoughts", says Rabiha Sweidan, the film's Lebanese creator and executive producer.

"Everyone sees it from their perspective and they see themselves and their communities in it." The storyline, set in 2053 in the fictional Arab state of Alephia, follows a



group of undercover agents plotting to take down hereditary ruler Alaa Ibn Ismail and his autocratic regime, described as the most tyrannical in the world. Through a meticulous operation led by operatives who have infiltrated top regime ranks, the "resistance" succeeds in toppling the dictator in a coup and ending a century of autocratic rule. They are buoyed by crowds

taking to the streets chanting the now-famous Arab Spring refrain — "the people demand the fall of the regime" — in the face of heavily armed security forces who respond with live fire.

The movie closes with a familiar scene: fists are thrown into the air as a euphoric crowd pulls down the statue of the fallen dictator with ropes. Sweidan says Alephia 2053, with its uncannily familiar-looking dictator figure, is "a fictional movie but it is based on reality. It is a description of social reality". It is not inspired by any single Arab country but depicts conditions familiar to many across the world, he says. "The world has become a small village, where the situation is the same in more than one place," Sweidan adds. "Alephia could be the 23rd country in the Arab League," which has 22 members.

Brighter future

The animation, directed and illustrated by Jorj Abou Mhaya, is produced by Lebanon's Spring Entertainment company. "More than 70 percent of the work took place in Lebanon and was done by Lebanese," says Sweidan, though it also received backing from Malil'Art animation studio in Angouleme, France. Though the movie is highly reminiscent of the 2011 uprisings, Sweidan says it is an attempt to break away from what he calls an obsession with the past. "There is always a tendency in the Arab world to imagine what might have happened in the past, but there is no theatrical or cinematic work that imagines what the Arab world will be like in the future," says Sweidan, who first thought of the plot four years ago.

"The idea for the film came from a

question: What will the Arab world look like in 20 or 30 years?" According to Sweidan's vision, the future holds more promise. The film tries to express this through color grading: the closing scenes incorporate a livelier gradient than the dim and dusty scheme that dominates the first chunk of the film, says Sweidan. "Things can't always remain dark," he adds. "What this film wants to imagine is a future that's not as bad as the past or the present." Lebanese cinema critic Elias Doummar called it "a milestone in Arab animation". "It portrays Arab reality, and its audience just keeps on growing." — AFP



Bieber hopes to love herself when she is old

Hailey Bieber hopes she's able to love herself when she's "old and saggy". The 24-year-old model - who is married to Justin Bieber - thinks self-acceptance is a "continuous journey" and she doesn't feel it's something that will "ever stop", even when she's in her senior years. She said: "It's a continuous journey to love yourself. It doesn't ever stop. I hope I'm on it even when I'm old and saggy. I hope I love myself then." Hailey also admitted it took her "years" to feel comfortable as a model but now she's learned to push herself out of her comfort zone as that often sparks the best pictures, while the career lessons she's learned can also apply to other parts of her life. Speaking to the new issue of America's Harper's Bazaar magazine, she said: "It took me years to feel comfortable as a model. Now I'm a lot more adventurous and I try different things. "You realize if it doesn't work, it doesn't work!" "For example, sometimes when I'm doing something really stupid, I get the coolest image. If I'm doing a really awkward body shape, it turns out great. "Don't be afraid to explore. This applies to so many different things." And Hailey credits her early ballet training for giving her a sense of discipline and focus on her goals. She said: "Having done ballet for 12 years, I have that muscle memory. It plays a big part in my body type and in my athleticism. It's kept my body healthy, and mentally it taught me how to be committed to something. "I started modeling and travelling around the world when I was 17. It's a business. You have to be disciplined, on time, and want to do it. "Everything I learned from being a dancer still contributes to who I am today. I'm so grateful I did it, and I miss it. I have such a deep love for dancers."

Lavigne says she 'had an immediate connection' with boyfriend

Avril Lavigne felt an "immediate connection" with Mod Sun. The 'I'm With You' hitmaker was romantically linked with the 34-year-old singer in February but before then they had worked together on duet 'Flames', and the 36-year-old pop star revealed the pair hit it off as soon as they got into the studio. Avril told People magazine: "[We] had an immediate connection from the first day in the studio. "He's an incredible artist and producer. This is the first of many. Proud of what we made with 'Flames.'" Last week, the pair released a stripped-down, acoustic version of the duet and Avril thinks they have brought extra "emotion" to the "very special" song. She said: "'Flames' is a very special song. "I love how the acoustic version turned out. It really brings another lay-

er of emotion to the song." Her partner explained he wanted to "offer a bright side to the story" with the new take on the track. He added: "I felt like sonically I could paint that landscape through acoustic guitar and a string section. "I wanted to make something that felt like we were performing in your living room." It was previously claimed the 'Complicated' singer - who was previously married to Deryck Whibley and Chad Kroeger - was recently reported to have fallen for Mod after working with him in the recording studio. A source explained: "Working together has brought them closer and Avril has a history of falling for people that she works with. She falls in love with them for their musical creativity and expression. "Her working relationships often turn romantic." Avril and Mod - who

previously dated Disney star Bella Thorne - relished spending time together in the studio amid the coronavirus crisis. The insider shared: "Avril and Mod Sun have been spending a ton of time together and getting to know each other better." Avril previously insisted she hadn't given up on love, despite going through two divorces. The 'What the Hell' hitmaker - who split from her previous boyfriend, Phillip Sarofim, in January 2019 - claimed she hasn't allowed heartache to undermine her faith in true love. Asked if she'd like to get married again, Avril replied: "I don't really care so much about that; I just care about being in a healthy relationship and just being happy."



Britney Spears to appear in court for guardianship case

Britney Spears has requested to speak in court in the legal battle over her father's control of her affairs, her attorney said Tuesday. The 39-year-old US pop singer is the subject of a "FreeBritney" online campaign from her adoring fans who believe the guardianship in place since 2008 should be ended, but has rarely spoken directly about the issue herself. A Los Angeles judge set a June 23 hearing following a request from her lawyer which did not explain why the singer wanted to address the court. Interest in Spears' legal case exploded following the February release of the documentary "Framing Britney Spears", which chronicled the highly publicized breakdown that led to her father's long-standing legal guardianship over her finances. Spears filed last year to remove her father Jamie Spears from the conservatorship and give sole power over her estate to a financial institution. Her court-appointed lawyer said she was "afraid" of her father. A judge ruled in February that both Spears' father and Bessemer Trust would oversee the pop star's finances, denying Jamie Spears' bid to keep sole power to delegate investments, though the case is ongoing.

Bilson clears the air with Malek

Rachel Bilson has insisted things are "totally fine" between her and Rami Malek. The 39-year-old actress revealed last month that her old high school friend had got in touch in 2019 to ask her to remove a throwback photo of them as teenagers and admitted she was "super bummed" to have upset him, but the former 'O.C.' star revealed he's been in touch since she told the story and they have cleared the air and been able to "move on". Speaking on the 'LadyGang' podcast, she said: "Rami and I actually have talked since that came out. He connected with me, and we're all good. He, you know, was so sweet and we're totally fine now and we talked about it and we're good. "He was so gracious, and I totally understood where he was coming from and he understood me. And I was just so happy we were able to squash it and, like, move on... "He knew I wasn't doing it with any ill intention." Rachel never expected her story to be as big as it was, and her humiliation led to her speaking to her therapist to find a way to handle the situation as she feared she would upset the 'Bohemian Rhapsody' star again. She said: "My friend sent me a

CNN link to it. I was like, 'Are you kidding me?' "I was so mortified though. Like, I was having a panic attack. "I had to go to therapy that day, and I was like, 'I am having anxiety. I did not want this to resurface in this way. I feel so bad. Oh my god. Rami is going to think I'm doing this again.'" But now the brunette beauty is glad the story resurfaced because it led to the 'Mr. Robot' actor getting back in touch with her. She said: "It actually turned out to be a good thing for a reason, because we were able to reconnect and, like, make it better and everything is great." Rachel had previously admitted she shared the "super nerdy" photo from a school trip she and Rami had taken during their time at California's Notre Dame High School because she thought it was funny. She said: "Obviously, he gets super famous and he's always been extremely talented ... even in high school. "I had posted a throwback of us from our senior trip to New York. We're super nerdy ... just the dorkiest picture of the both of us. But I throw it up, 'cause it's funny and I think it's so important to be able to make fun of yourself." However, the Oscar-winning actor subsequently contacted Rachel via social media to ask her to remove the photo. She revealed: "I don't usually check my DMs on my Instagram ... maybe a week goes by and I actually look and I have a message from Rami. But it wasn't like, 'Hey! How are you?!' It was straight to: 'I would really appreciate if you take that down."

RIPA AND CONSUELOS 'OLD-FASHIONED' MARRIAGE

Kelly Ripa and Mark Consuelos have an 'old-fashioned' marriage. The couple - who have been married for 25 years and have kids Michael, 23, Lola, 19, and Joaquin, 18, together - may be "politically progressive" but behind closed doors, they take on "traditional" roles within their household. Appearing alongside her husband on the



"Double Date" podcast, Kelly said: "What's funny is I think of us as such a progressive as a couple. I always think of us as politically progressive. "Yet, when it comes to our own family and our marriage and our roles, I think of us as very traditional and almost old-fashioned in our roles." Mark agreed, and suggested there is "only room for one man" in their marriage. He added: "I'm a traditional guy. I feel like there are certain roles - it's hard to explain exactly what those roles are. "We had a conversation where I said, 'Hey listen, there's really only room for one man in this relationship and it's going to be me.'" Kelly's morning talk show meant she was able to use New York City as a base for their children, while 'Riverdale' actor Mark was travelling for work.



Lifestyle | Features

Meet Basque chef **Elena Arzak** and her 3-star 'sea-rooted' cuisine

From the fourth generation of one of Spain's most celebrated culinary families, Elena Arzak has won plaudits for taking traditional Basque cuisine in a new direction. After years working at her family's 19th-century eatery on the northern Spanish coast, her constantly evolving, research-based approach to cooking and experimentation with flavors won her international recognition as the world's top female chef. Now, nearly a decade on, this energetic 51-year-old is still experimenting with unexpected combinations and new textures using mainly local ingredients at "Arzak", the family restaurant in San Sebastian which is renowned for its fine dining.



Chef Elena Arzak

"It is research for the good of cuisine," says Arzak, who is the only woman running a restaurant that holds three Michelin stars in Spain. Inside her flavor lab above the restaurant, a 3D printer and a centrifuge sit next to shelves piled to the ceiling with thousands of clear boxes of flavors, textures and other culinary secrets. All are carefully labeled with QR codes that contain detailed information about the contents. For now, she is using the printer to create unique, very visual geometrical shapes that are used in plating up, but

she has not printed anything edible as the results haven't been good enough. "The art of cooking must make people happy. We can use all the technology in the world, but it must bring something to the dish," she says.

Arzak's great-grandparents founded the restaurant in 1897 in what was then a village but has now been engulfed by San Sebastian. Dubbed the father of modern Basque cuisine in the 1970s, her father Juan Mari won a third Michelin star for the establishment in 1989 which it has managed to keep ever since. She herself

returned to San Sebastian in 1995 and since then has been working alongside him, being named the top female chef in the World's Best 50 Restaurants list of 2012. Five years ago, she took over the kitchen at Arzak as part of a "slow" transition, although her 79-year-old father still helps out.

The preference for local ingredients has not changed at the restaurant, which experts regularly rank among the world's best. "I love parsley, anchovies, squid, garlic, tuna," she says, listing ingredients which features heavily in Basque cuisine alongside other flavors like hake or txangurro, flaked spider crab meat. "My cuisine is an identity cuisine, Basque, very rooted in the sea." And while training at top European restaurants such as London's Gavroche and Louis XV in Monaco, her "fondness" for seafood and her Basque heritage meant she was often assigned to prepare fish dishes.

Art on a plate

Arzak, who studied cooking in Switzerland, said being the daughter of a culinary giant has not been an issue. "It could have been a handicap that everyone compared me to him. But I was con-

scious of it," she said. While restaurant kitchens are usually male dominated, 70 percent of Arzak's staff are women. "I am only interested in talent, gender does not matter," she said. After taking charge of the eatery, she changed the menu to include dishes with fewer ingredients. "People eat faster, more vegetables, healthier," said Arzak, who admits she's currently "devouring" vegan cooking magazines. "People want more of an 'experience'," she reflects. Although the focus is on using local produce, Arzak has long been open to other cultures and has never shied away from new techniques, using photos to explain some of her more innovative dishes.

One, called "Baby squid tattoo", features a small squid with a squid tartare in ink served on a plate decorated with an elegant sketch of an octopus drawn in parsley juice. Another is mackerel in shio koji, a fermented Japanese marinade, served with pureed tomato and fish collagen, "a natural gelatin". And a dessert called "Enigma" features white-chocolate filled churros shaped into letters perched on two balls of fruit fibre-a texture between mousse and jelly-one almond-cherry flavour, the other orange, but

coloured a vibrant fuchsia by using beet-root extract.

'Tireless'

Her talent has been hailed by big names in gastronomy. French chef Pierre Gagnaire, her supervisor when she worked at his Paris restaurant, said he appreciates "her reserve and modesty". "Delicate and joyful, she symbolises the Basque Country so much," he told AFP. Spanish chef Carme Ruscadella, whose Sant Pau restaurant in the northeastern Catalonia region that also had three stars before closing in 2018, described her as "a woman who doesn't tire".

And close friend and top French chef Helene Darroze calls her a "pioneer". Arzak, who has two teenagers, said the restaurant's three stars don't weigh on her. "If you don't have pressure, you accidentally relax," she admitted. Although the restaurant has been closed since December because of the region's ongoing nighttime curfew to curb virus cases, Arzak says she's gearing up to reopen. "We need to encourage people because we've all had a really difficult time." — AFP



This picture shows music student Wang Zhaoxue showing the 'blind box' toys she collected, during an interview at her home in Beijing.



Two women looking at a bag at a shop selling 'blind box' toys in Beijing.

PRINCE HARRY, MEGHAN AND BIDENS TO APPEAR AT VACCINE BENEFIT CONCERT

Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan will co-chair a fundraising concert urging more vaccinations that will air May 8, which the Bidens will also participate in, event organizers announced Tuesday. Along with US president Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris will also appear at "Vax Live: The Concert To Reunite The World" where performers will include Jennifer Lopez, Eddie Vedder, J Balvin and HER. Put on by Global Citizen, an international advocacy organization, the campaign is pushing businesses to "donate dollars for doses," and for G7 governments to share excess vaccines.

It also urges pharmaceutical companies "including Moderna to make vaccines available at not-for-profit prices." The concert will be pre-taped on May 2 in Los Angeles, and will stream on YouTube along with American television networks



In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex (left), and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex leave after attending the Endeavour Fund Awards at Mansion House in London. — AFP

'BLIND BOX' CRAZE GRIPS CHINA'S YOUTH AND MINTS TOYMAKERS A FORTUNE

Tiny unicorns and cartoon girls in clown costumes line the shelves of Wang Zhaoxue's study in Beijing-tokens of China's mania for "blind boxes" that has made fortunes for toymakers and even caught the attention of those in power. The 18-year-old music student is one of the legions of young Chinese hooked

and decorating the desks of white-collar workers and livestreams of box-opening influencers across the country. The blind box market was worth 7.4 billion yuan (\$1.14 billion) in 2019, according to market research firm Qianzhan Intelligence, which added that could soar to 30 billion yuan by 2024. Similar to the collectability of baseball cards, most fist-sized packages hold toys, from fairies to miniature King Kongs, but buyers can often be landed with one they already have. But once in a while, a rare or even "hidden" item-one that does not appear in advertisements for the range-will emerge from the box, the holy grail of the collecting craze.

Wang said she has in the past queued overnight for new releases at toy conventions and proudly shows off autographed limited-edition figurines in her family's Beijing apartment. Her older family members are also fervent toy collectors-her mother displays by the front door a group of baby-faced figures riding cats. "It was something quite novel, which got my attention," said Wang, who has now amassed hundreds of the toys. The element of mystery is a big part of the fun, although "if you shake it, and then feel the box, you can sometimes deduce what's inside". Wang has turned her passion into a small business, customizing duplicates and selling them online for hundreds of yuan apiece.



Music student Wang Zhaoxue showing a picture of a "blind box" toy on her mobile phone next to one from her collection.

On the vibrant second-hand market, rare figures can fetch dozens of times the original price of an unopened box, which usually costs \$10-\$20. Liu Xiaoli, a nickname, has been collecting blind box toys since 2018. The advertising professional, in her thirties, pulls thousands of followers to a Bilibili video channel where she documents her box-opening adventures. She has adopted a technique of weighing some boxes before opening them to build the anticipation of what might be inside. "It feels good to see them all arranged neatly," said Liu, who has more than 200 toys.

Her favorites are modeled after a cherubic, doe-eyed character called Molly, produced by Beijing-based mystery toymaker Pop Mart, which made its \$670 million debut on the Hong Kong stock exchange last year. The competition is so intense that the most sought-after toys, such as the archaeology-themed blind boxes sold by Henan province's official museum, sell out almost immediately after their online release. But the craze has not escaped criticism, with state media earlier this year comparing the trend to gambling and warning that the products bred addiction. In a commentary in January, Xinhua called for more regulation of the sector and said the boxes should not be sold "blindly" to consumers, accusing some brands of "persuading consumers to keep buying and even hyping up a speculative second-hand market".

"One of the reasons behind the success of blind boxes is that they divide their products into different categories of rarity," Steffi Noel, a consumer analyst at Shanghai-based Daxue Consulting, told AFP. "They set a barrier, expressing the idea that not everyone can get the most special boxes. It generates a sense of competition." — AFP



Vaan, the storekeeper of a toy store, showing a "blind box" toy.

on snaffling up the toys-from pop art-inspired figurines to mini-archaeological treasures-to complete whole "ranges" through endless purchases.

The toys, first popularized in Japan, have fixated China in recent years, also driving a booming second-hand market



Music student Wang Zhaoxue showing how to make up a "blind box" toy.



A staff member of a toy store showing a "blind box" toy series at his store in Beijing.

ABC and CBS on May 8 at 8pm ET. It will also air internationally on Brazil's Globo, Colombia's Caracol, SABC in South Africa and MultiChoice in Africa. French President Emmanuel Macron and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will also appear at the event, whose audience will comprise of fully vaccinated frontline and essential workers.

"Over the past year, our world has experienced pain, loss, and struggle-together. Now we need to recover and heal-together," Harry and Meghan said in a statement. "We can't leave anybody behind. We will all benefit, we will all be safer, when everyone everywhere has equal access to the vaccine. We must pursue equitable vaccine distribution, and in that, restore faith in our common humanity. This mission couldn't be more critical or important." Last year Global Citizen partnered with the World Health Organization to put on a virtual concert packed with A-listers like The Rolling Stones and Taylor Swift, to celebrate health workers and fundraise for the battle against COVID-19. — AFP

Sports

Tokyo 2020 organizers delay decision on local spectators until June

TOKYO: Tokyo Olympics organizers yesterday said they won't decide how many spectators — if any — can attend the Games until June, as coronavirus surges raise fresh uncertainty. They also announced athletes will have daily coronavirus tests, increased from an initial plan for tests every four days, as they firm up virus rules in a bid to build support for the postponed 2020 Games.

With less than three months until the opening ceremony, parts of the country including Tokyo are under a state of emergency following several spikes in infections. Overseas fans have already been barred and organizers had intended to set a domestic attendance limit this month.

But that has now been put back and a decision could come just a month before the opening ceremony on July 23. "As we look into the evolving situation with the domestic infections status involving new strains, we have agreed that a decision regarding spectator capacity at the Olympic and Paralympic venues will be made in June," Olympic officials said after top-level talks yesterday.

More details are expected soon on other virus rules for athletes as organizers update their "playbooks" for the Games. But among those announced after the meeting was the daily test requirement for all athletes "and those in close proximity... to minimize the risk of undetected positive cases".

"We are ready with you to take all the necessary measures to minimize the risks to make the Japanese people feel safe," International Olympic Committee chief Thomas Bach said at the start of the talks. "Our top priority is health and safety for everyone — not

only for the participants of the Olympic Games but, first and foremost, also of our gracious hosts, the Japanese people."

'People are anxious'

With the Games looming, Japan faces what some experts have called a fourth wave of the virus. A new state of emergency was imposed on Tokyo and three other areas on April 25, and the government's top medical advisor warned Wednesday that discussions should start soon on how the Games could be held if infections remain high by the summer. "What's very important is the situation of the infections and how overwhelmed the medical system is," Shigeru Omi told parliament in response to a question from an opposition lawmaker.

"I think it is time to discuss the Olympics," he added, while stopping short of calling for either a postponement or cancellation. Polls show most Japanese oppose holding the Games this summer, backing either another delay or scrapping the event altogether. But Olympic officials insist it can be held safely, with Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto last week saying that organizers are "not thinking about cancellation". "There are so many people who are looking forward to the Games," she said yesterday. "But, on the other hand, there are a lot of people who are anxious. That's the reality, and we need to look at both sides." Olympic chiefs took the unprecedented decision to ban overseas fans in March, in a bid to reduce virus risks.

Domestic ticket sales have not yet resumed after last year's postponement. Organizers said around



TOKYO: International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach (on screen) speaks as Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee president Seiko Hashimoto listens during a five-party meeting of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

4.48 million tickets had been sold in Japan, and nearly a million for the Paralympics. Tickets purchased by overseas fans are being refunded, and organizers

have also said that anyone who bought tickets in Japan is eligible for a refund if crowd numbers are cut. —AFP

Lawrence heads new quarterback class at NFL draft

LOS ANGELES: College gridiron prodigy Trevor Lawrence heads a new generation of quarterbacks expected to dominate the top picks when the 2021 NFL Draft gets underway in Cleveland tonight. A year after COVID-19 forced National Football League chiefs to stage the 2020 Draft virtually, the annual selection of top college talent returns to its more familiar in-person format.

Three days of festivities will take place at locations across Cleveland, with draft picks announced and introduced on a stage set against the backdrop of Lake Erie. Tonight's first round gets underway at 5:00 pm local time (21:00 GMT), where barring a monumental surprise, the Jacksonville Jaguars will recruit former Clemson quarterback Lawrence with the top pick.

The 21-year-old is widely seen as one of the most talented college quarterbacks to emerge in decades, already being mentioned in the same breath as NFL icons such as Peyton Manning and John Elway. At 6ft 6in (1.98m) and 220 pounds (100kg), the long-haired Lawrence has physical presence allied to a skill set that includes a powerful arm, rare deep-ball accuracy and poise in the pocket.

Those attributes helped Lawrence lead Clemson to a national championship during his freshman season in 2018, the highpoint of a college career that included 34 wins and only two defeats. The prospect of the Jaguars landing Lawrence with the No.1 pick was enough to persuade legendary college coach Urban Meyer to cut short his retirement to enter the NFL with Jacksonville.

Meyer said Lawrence's down-to-earth demeanor had already made a strong impression, noting that the young quarterback preferred to watch the draft with a small group of friends and family tonight, eschewing the glitz and glamour of the Cleveland festivities.

'Refreshing' focus

"All he ever talks about is winning," Meyer told ESPN. "All he ever talks about is getting better. It's not social media following — he's not even going to the NFL Draft. There's not a whole lot other in his life than his faith and his family. I'm intrigued by that. I've talked to many of his players on his team, obviously his coaches, but I always like to ask players too. Especially at that position. And you have to be a leader and you have to be respected or quarterbacks will fail. And he checked those boxes with big black check marks in his boxes. He is respected by his teammates and just his focus in his life is really refreshing."

With the No.1 pick all but locked in, the most intrigue in the draft surrounds the remaining top selections. The New York Jets own the second overall pick and are tipped to draft Brigham Young University quarterback Zach Wilson to fill the vacancy created by the departure of Sam Darnold earlier this month.

The San Francisco 49ers meanwhile are also expected to opt for a quarterback with the No.3 slot, a decision that has raised questions about the future of Jimmy Garoppolo, who led the team to a Super Bowl appearance in the 2019-2020 season.

Although head coach Kyle Shanahan reportedly wants tonight's draft pick to work as a back-up, he declined to guarantee whether Garoppolo would remain on the 49ers roster by the end of the week. "I can't guarantee that anybody in the world will be alive Sunday, so I can't guarantee you who will be on our roster on Sunday," Shanahan said. "So, that goes for all of us."

The 49ers coach refused to give any clue however as to which young quarterback the team were most interested in, with Alabama's Mac Jones, North Dakota State's Trey Lance and Ohio State's Justin Fields all in the running. "Do we know exactly who we want?" Shanahan said. "Maybe. Probably. But maybe not. I don't feel like we need to say that." —AFP

Nets book playoff berth with Raptors win

LOS ANGELES: Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving combined for 26 points as the Brooklyn Nets became the first Eastern Conference team to punch their playoff ticket on Tuesday with a 116-103 victory over the Toronto Raptors.

The Nets overturned a six-point deficit with just under 10 minutes remaining in the final quarter to pull away for a win which leaves them on top of the conference with 42 wins and 20 defeats. Durant finished with 10 rebounds, four assists and two blocks while Irving ended with nine points on a night when seven Brooklyn players posted double-digit points totals.

Jeff Green led the Brooklyn scoring with 22 points while Blake Griffin delivered another solid performance with 17 points from 22 minutes on court. Joe Harris had 16 points while Landry Shamet had 14 off the bench. Toronto's Kyle Lowry led the scoring for the 2019 NBA champions with 24 points while OG Anunoby had 21.

Nets coach Steve Nash saluted his team's character for securing a playoff place despite injuries which have prevented their big three of Durant,

James Harden and Irving from playing together regularly this season. "We have our eyes on bigger things but it's a nice first step to clinch a berth," Nash said. "For this group, facing all we've faced to be in this position with 10 games left is very positive."

Nash meanwhile singled out Griffin for praise following his important 17-point cameo. "Blake's been great," Nash said. "His IQ, his toughness, his physicality, his willingness to give up his body and be physical. It's a different role for him than being asked to carry or produce — he's a complementary player now and he's accepted that with joy and pride. He's been great."

In Charlotte, Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 29 points and grabbed 12 rebounds as the Milwaukee Bucks solidified their hold on third place in the Eastern Conference with a 114-104 win over the Hornets. Brook Lopez pocketed 22 points and Khris Middleton added 17 as the Bucks improved to 38-23 to edge closer to the postseason. Charlotte remain in contention for a place in the play-in tournament despite falling to 30-31 for the season. Devonte Graham led the Hornets scoring with 25 points while Miles Bridges had 21.

Elsewhere Tuesday, Anfernee Simons had 27 points as the Portland Trail Blazers blew away the Indiana Pacers in Indianapolis, dishing out a



TAMPA: Kevin Durant #7 and Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets talk during the game against the Toronto Raptors on Tuesday at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Florida. —AFP

133-112 beatdown at the Bankers Life Fieldhouse arena. Simons went on a blistering three-point blitz, making nine out of 10 attempts from outside the arc in his 24 minutes on court.

Damian Lillard added 23 while CJ McCollum added 20 as Portland moved to within striking distance of an automatic playoff place. The Blazers are now seventh in the West on 33-28, just behind the sixth-placed Dallas Mavericks.

The Mavericks meanwhile

improved to 34-27 with a brutal 133-103 pounding of the Golden State Warriors in San Francisco. Luka Doncic finished with 39 points, six rebounds and eight assists as Dallas showed no mercy to an out-classed Dubs line-up. The Mavs raced into a 36-12 first quarter lead and kept their foot down, at one stage stringing together a 28-0 run and building a 43-point lead.

Stephen Curry led the Warriors scorers with 27 points. —AFP

Mayweather to fight YouTube star Logan Paul June 6

LOS ANGELES: Former world welterweight king Floyd Mayweather said Tuesday he will face off against YouTube personality Logan Paul in an exhibition bout at Miami's Hard Rock Stadium on June 6. "Logan Paul and I are going to fight at Hard Rock Stadium. Mayweather Promotions, Fanmio and Showtime will team up to give you an epic event," Mayweather wrote on Instagram.

A separate post from Mayweather Promotions billed the contest as a "historic crossover event" dubbed

"Bragging Rights." The announcement gave no further information about specifics of the fight such as number of rounds or what size gloves would be used.

Paul, 26, first ventured into white-collar boxing in a bout with British YouTuber KSI in 2018 that reportedly generated 1.3 million pay per view buys worldwide, before a rematch in 2019 in Los Angeles. The 44-year-old Mayweather meanwhile has not fought since beating mixed martial arts star Conor McGregor by technical knockout in a money-spinning cross-combat superfight in Las Vegas in 2017. Mayweather (50-0, 27 KOs) came out of retirement for that contest after hanging up his gloves two years earlier after an unbeaten career spanning three decades. —AFP



Floyd Mayweather (left) and Logan Paul.

All Blacks or greenbacks? New Zealand Rugby mulls controversial US investment

WELLINGTON: New Zealand Rugby is poised to vote on the sale of a multi-million dollar stake in its legendary All Blacks franchise to a US private equity firm, opening a new front in the battle over big money in sport. New Zealand rugby's governing body is expected to approve the \$280 million offer from California-based Silver Lake investments at an annual general meeting in Wellington today. But the proposal faces a potential veto from players, some of whom believe the soul of rugby's most storied national team is being sold.

The vote comes just a week after the European Super League fiasco, when Europe's top football clubs shelved a US-backed breakout competition within days, after an outcry from fans and officials. The All Blacks are a national obsession in New Zealand. Their players are household names, and countless youngsters dream of running out to perform the famed haka pre-match challenge to opponents.

Over the decades the team has won worldwide recognition for the attacking verve that has delivered three World Cups and a win rate of almost 80 percent.

That success has made the team a valued asset, attracting Silver Lake, which wants a 12.5 percent stake in New Zealand Rugby's commercial rights, and the right to negotiate merchandise and broadcast deals worldwide. The deal would value New Zealand Rugby's commercial assets at a whopping \$2.2 billion.

New Zealand Rugby chief executive Mark Robinson said the deal would be "transformational" for rugby in New Zealand, and for club sides that are perennially short of cash despite the All Blacks' on-field success. He said the game's financial woes — partly driven by rising player wages and the limited broadcasting funds available in New Zealand — had worsened during the pandemic.

"We believe the game needs to change and we have a strong leadership role to play in providing opportunities for that to happen," he told reporters. But critics point to the European Super League debacle as evidence that mega-rich foreign owners often chase cash and care little about a sport's tradition and culture.

'Sold their souls'

"Clubs have sold their souls and then had to do complete backflip," former NZR chief executive David Moffett told Radio NZ. He said Silver Lake, which boasts assets under management of \$79 billion, was not buying into New Zealand Rugby as a benefactor and would want to squeeze all it could from the All Blacks brand.

He said that may involve the team playing "meaningless" exhibition matches in the United States to generate income from large crowds without providing a genuine sporting contest. "You will see the All Blacks playing more games, and perhaps more meaningless games, and that just devalues the greatest brand in rugby," he said.

All Blacks fans reacted angrily to a shirt sponsorship deal with US insurance giant AIG in 2012, flooding the team's Facebook page with comments accusing NZR of disrespecting a jersey that until then had been largely commercial free.

But in contrast with the fury vented by football fans recently, Kiwi rugby supporters have been largely silent about the private equity proposal, seemingly content to let the players' union spearhead opposition to the move.

Silver Lake, which started out as a technology investment vehicle, has moved into sport recently, taking a 10 percent stake 18 months ago in City Football Group, owners of English Premier League giants Manchester City. City were among those willing to participate in the short-lived move by 12 top clubs in Europe to form the rebel Super League.

Documents released before the vote revealed \$28 million of the Silver Lake money would be released to New Zealand Rugby stakeholders and a proportion would also be put into a long-term "legacy fund" to ensure the game remained sustainable. —AFP

Sports

Benzema volley pegs back Chelsea to leave semi-final in the balance

MADRID: Karim Benzema came to Real Madrid's rescue again on Tuesday, his acrobatic volley earning them a 1-1 draw against an impressive Chelsea side in the first leg of the Champions League semi-final. Christian Pulisic grabbed Chelsea a deserved away goal in a soaking wet contest at Valdebebas but they might regret not pulling away, with the struggling Timo Werner again missing a golden chance.

It means Madrid will be satisfied too, after recovering from a chastening opening half an hour before Benzema's brilliance left the tie in the balance. Eden Hazard was given 24 minutes off the bench against his former club but despite some twinkling touches, he was unable to add a late twist. "It's always good to play against friends," Hazard told BT Sport afterwards.

By the time the Belgian entered the contest, it was drifting, the early adrenaline lost, with both teams seemingly content to defer to the return leg at Stamford Bridge next Wednesday. Benzema's goal was his 71st in the Champions League, making him the joint-fourth top scorer in the competition's history with Raul, behind only Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Robert Lewandowski.

When Real Madrid were suffering, and in the absence of the injured Sergio Ramos, Benzema was the one dragging his team back into this match, at times through sheer force of will. With Werner clearly short of confidence, the Frenchman's precision at the other end could yet prove the difference. "We should have won the first half," said Chelsea coach Thomas Tuchel. "We should have scored at least one more."

"The result is fair," said Zinedine Zidane. "Our first half wasn't the best, their pressure caused us difficul-



MADRID: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring during the UEFA Champions League semi-final first leg football match between Real Madrid and Chelsea at the Alfredo di Stefano stadium in Valdebebas, on the outskirts of Madrid, on Tuesday. — AFP

ties but we adapted and in the second half we were better." These two teams were both among the Super League's 'Dirty Dozen', with Madrid president Florentino Perez, the face and voice of the breakaway project, watching on at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium. Despite stirring scenes of protests outside Premier League stadiums last weekend, Real Madrid's - admittedly remote - training ground was untouched by any

sign of discontent with the club.

And there was no Real Madrid revolt against UEFA either, with the Champions League anthem ringing out as normal and the stadium announcer loyally declaring: "The UEFA Champions League brings together the best teams in Europe." Chelsea were electric in the first half an hour, their passing slicker and their movement quicker than Madrid, who were unable to keep up.

after this season. The move completes a meteoric rise for Nagelsmann, who will turn 34 in July and is younger than Bayern club captain and goalkeeper Manuel Neuer.

Flick to replace Loew?

Germany's football association (DFB) said Tuesday it planned to hold talks with Flick about becoming the replacement for national team boss Joachim Loew after Euro 2020. Flick will leave the reigning German champions at the end of the season after he asked Bayern to be released from his contract. "It's well known that Hansi Flick is held in high regard by the federation. We can confirm that, in this context, we will now also have discussions with him and Bayern officials," a DFB spokesperson told AFP subsidiary SID.

"At this time, we will not be making any more comment on the rest of the procedure, which we will coordinate internally first with all the parties concerned, with all the necessary care and calm," the spokesperson added. Flick won the Bundesliga and German Cup last season and added the Champions League and his side could wrap up the German title again early next month, but his relationship with Bayern's powerful sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic has deteriorated over transfer policy.

The 56-year-old is considered the German FA's primary choice to take over from Loew, who is set to step down after the European Championship following 15 years in charge. The DFB had repeatedly said in recent weeks it would not approach a coach still under contract, and ruled out paying any compensation to a club. Flick served an assistant to Loew between 2006 and 2014, helping Germany win the World Cup in Brazil. He later worked as the DFB's sporting director. — AFP

Marsch to succeed Nagelsmann; German FA to speak with Flick

BERLIN: Salzburg's American coach Jesse Marsch has agreed terms to succeed Bayern Munich-bound Julian Nagelsmann at Bundesliga club RB Leipzig, German media reported yesterday. Wisconsin-born Marsch, 47, had "turned down Tottenham Hotspur and decided to move to Leipzig", according to German football magazine Kicker.

The country's most widely read newspaper Bild also claimed that Marsch had reached "an agreement in principle" with Leipzig director Oliver Mintzlaff. A former assistant coach of the US men's national team, Marsch has long been a rising star within Red Bull's sprawling global football network.

The Leipzig job would be his third in charge of a Red-Bull backed club, following a three-year spell at the helm of New York Red Bulls and two years in the Salzburg dugout. Marsch also previously worked at RB Leipzig as an assistant coach to Ralf Rangnick in the 2018-19 season, helping the club to a German Cup final and top-three finish in the Bundesliga.

He then moved to Salzburg, winning the Austrian league and cup double in his first season as head coach. At Leipzig, Marsch would replace 33-year-old German coaching prodigy Julian Nagelsmann, who was announced as the next Bayern Munich coach on Tuesday. Bayern reportedly paid a fee of up to 30 million euros (36 million dollars) to secure Nagelsmann as a replacement for Hansi Flick, who will leave Munich



LOUISVILLE: Hot Rod Charlie walks on the track during training for the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs on Tuesday in Louisville, Kentucky. — AFP

Favorites handed outside posts in Kentucky Derby draw

LOS ANGELES: Kentucky Derby favorite Essential Quality and rival Rock Your World were handed outside starting positions on Tuesday for this weekend's 147th running of the US horse racing showpiece.

The Brad Cox-trained Essential Quality, the 2-1 favorite, will start from post 14 while Rock Your World (5-1), will bid for glory on Saturday from slot 15. "It got a little nerve-wracking with both horses still to go and the rail still being out there," said Cox. "I think it'll be a good spot. He's got good tactical speed that he'll be able to get into a good position from there."

John Sadler, the trainer of unbeaten Rock Your World, was satisfied with 15th. "It's a good post and we're happy with it," Sadler said after Tuesday's draw. The Godolphin-owned Essential Quality heads into Saturday's race fresh from a victory at the Blue Grass Stakes at Keeneland on April 3, a win which extended his undefeated record to five races since his debut win last year.

Cox, who has never won the Kentucky Derby, is bidding to become the first Louisville-born trainer to do so. The \$3 million race staged at Churchill Downs is the highlight of the US racing season and kicks off the Triple Crown, with the Preakness Stakes set for May 15 and Belmont Stakes due on June 5.

The Kentucky Derby is returning to its traditional slot in May this weekend after the calendar was upended by Covid-19 last year, forcing the race to be moved to September behind closed doors. A reduced-capacity crowd of around 45,000 spectators is expected for Saturday's "Run for the Roses", instead of the regular capacity of around 165,000.

Highly rated Known Agenda, meanwhile, was handed the number one post on the rail, to the dismay of trainer Todd Pletcher. "It's just not an ideal post to start," Pletcher said. Legendary US trainer Bob Baffert meanwhile is chasing a record seventh Kentucky Derby win with Medina Spirit, ridden by John Velazquez.

Medina Spirit (15-1) was handed the eighth post in Tuesday's draw. "He's a horse that's never failed me," Baffert said. "He's light on his feet and stays out of trouble — and that's what you need in a Kentucky Derby. "Quick out of the gate, get away from that stampede and hopefully by the first turn he'll be in a good spot." — AFP

Werner misses sitter

Werner should have scored when Mason Mount's deflected, looping shot was headed across goal by Pulisic but he missed from six yards, his volley blocked by the right leg of Thibaut Courtois. But Chelsea's dominance was such that another chance never felt far away, in the 14th minute Pulisic taking advantage.

Antonio Rudiger was given time to float a delightful ball over the top for the darting American, whose first touch took him left but he recovered his poise, nipping past Courtois and firing between Marcelo and Raphael Varane on the line. Chelsea were rampant but as the rain began to pour, Madrid found a way back. Benzema led the resistance, one shot from distance shaving the post before another from close drew Madrid level. A short corner worked its way to Marcelo on the edge of the area and his cross was headed back in via Casemiro and Eder Militao. Benzema, with his back to goal and surrounded by blue shirts, tamed the ball with his forehead before throwing his body into the air and volleying in before his markers could react. Marcelo and Jorginho were both guilty of sloppy passes early in the second half but neither Werner nor Benzema could capitalize.

And for 20 minutes the game drifted, both sides nervous of opening up. Four substitutes came on just after the hour, Hazard and Kai Havertz among them. Hazard was making his third appearance in three months. But Benzema's shot was blocked, Hakim Ziyech's free-kick curled into the hands of Courtois and a late Madrid cross flashed past the far post. A draw was a fair result. — AFP

News in brief

Owners shown commitment

LONDON: Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta said yesterday he hopes a strong statement from the club's owners underlining their commitment to the club will end speculation over a potential takeover bid from Spotify founder Daniel Ek. Swedish billionaire Ek last week sent a tweet saying he would be interested in buying the Premier League club, which is owned by American billionaire Stan Kroenke through his Kroenke Sports & Entertainment (KSE) business. On Friday, Ek said he was considering a takeover bid and reports this week suggested former Arsenal players Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira and Dennis Bergkamp would be part of an advisory group. But any potential deal appears to have been scuppered following a staunch response from the Gunners' American ownership, which said it had not received any bids. — AFP

Giggs denies charges

LONDON: Wales manager and former Manchester United star Ryan Giggs yesterday denied charges of assaulting two women and controlling or coercive behavior as he appeared in court. Giggs pleaded not guilty to an allegation he was violent and engaged in behavior towards his ex-girlfriend including isolation, belittling, humiliation, harassment, degradation and abuse during a short hearing at Manchester Magistrates' Court. Giggs, 47, also entered a not guilty plea of actual bodily harm relating to PR executive Kate Greville, 36, at his home in Greater Manchester on November 1 last year. He has also been charged with the common assault of Emma Greville, understood to be Greville's younger sister, during the same alleged incident. — AFP

Istiqloq top AFC group

DOHA: Alisher Dzhazilov struck a dramatic second-half stoppage time winner as Tajik debutants Istiqloq went top of Group A with a 1-0 win over the UAE's Shabab Al Ahli in the Asian Champions League on Tuesday. The Group A match at the King Fahd International Stadium in Riyadh was heading for a draw in the sixth minute of added time when Dzhazilov was gifted an open net after Shabab goalkeeper Majed Nasser found himself hopelessly out of position. It gave Istiqloq their third victory and they top Group A on 10 points from five matches. Saudi giants Al Hilal are level on points with a game remaining after they beat Uzbekistan's AGMK 3-0 on Tuesday, second on head-to-head record. — AFP

Union stun Atlanta

MIAMI: Philadelphia Union put one foot in the semi-finals of the CONCACAF Champions League on Tuesday, stunning Major League Soccer rivals Atlanta United with a 3-0 first leg away victory. Two goals from Polish striker Kacper Przybylko left Union firmly on course for a place in the last four in what is the Pennsylvania club's first campaign in the regional club competition. Philadelphia's third goal was almost a carbon copy of their second, only this time it was Przybylko playing creator, unselfishly squaring to Anthony Fontana to make it 3-0 four minutes from time. In the other half of the draw on Tuesday, Mexico's Cruz Azul outclassed Toronto FC 3-1 in their quarter-final first leg game at the Canadian club's temporary home at the Raymond James Stadium in Tampa. — AFP



VILA-REAL: Villarreal's Spanish coach Unai Emery gestures during the Spanish League football match between Villarreal CF and FC Barcelona at La Ceramica stadium in Vila-real on April 25, 2021. — AFP

Europa League: Emery threatens Arsenal's shot at salvation

LONDON: Arsenal are relying on Europa League success to save a sorry season, but face former manager Unai Emery with a point to prove in tonight's semi-final first leg against Villarreal. Sitting 10th in the Premier League, the Gunners are on course for their worst league finish since 1995.

But Mikel Arteta's men are also just three games away from only the club's third ever European trophy and a much-needed ticket back into the Champions League for the first time in five seasons. All is not well at the Emirates on or off the field. Ahead of Friday's 1-0 defeat by Everton, thousands of fans demonstrated against Arsenal's owner Stan Kroenke, calling on the American billionaire to sell the club following his role in a collapsed European Super League.

Arsenal were one of 12 breakaway clubs seeking the reassurance of top level European football every season without facing the perils of having to qualify. It is easy to see why Kroenke sought the guaranteed income the Super League would provide.

For 19 seasons between 1998/99 and 2016/17, the Londoners never failed to qualify for the Champions League. Now they are set to finish outside the Premier League's top four for a fifth consecutive year. That decline started prior to Emery's 18-month spell in charge between May 2018 and November 2019. The Spaniard missed out on the top four by a point and got to the Europa League final in his only full season in charge, but was dismissed just four months into his second.

"It ended in unwanted circumstances," Emery told uefa.com ahead of the tie. "I want to win for myself and for Villarreal. (Two years ago) I was defending Arsenal's red colors in that final against Chelsea, now I feel that affinity for the yellow of Villarreal. I have that competitive instinct, that responsibility I owe the club and everyone I represent with my decisions."

A three-time Europa League winner during his time at Sevilla, the 49-year-old has won 28 out of 31 knockout ties in the competition across spells at four different clubs. Revenge is also on Villarreal minds for those with a far longer connection to the club than Emery. A first ever major trophy is also the Spanish side's only route into next season's Champions League. Arguably the closest they have ever come to silverware was a Champions League semi-final against Arsenal, when Jens Lehmann's last-minute penalty save from Juan Roman Riquelme in 2005/06 prevented the tie from going to extra-time. "The two clubs have their own history between themselves," added Emery.

"It will be a great contest, regardless of my having coached there recently." In the other semi-final, Manchester United boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is aiming to reach a final at the fifth time of asking since taking charge of the Red Devils against Roma. Under the Norwegian, the English giants have twice fallen at the last four in the League Cup and in the semi-finals of last season's Europa League and FA Cup. With United realistically assured of a top-four finish in the Premier League, but too far off Manchester City to mount a title challenge, ending a four-year trophy drought is the major prize left on offer for Solskjaer's men this season. "It feels like a proper European tie because Roma is a club with lots of history," said Solskjaer when the draw was made. Like Arsenal and Villarreal, there is even greater motivation for the Italians, who sit seventh in Serie A. Victory in next month's final in Gdansk is the best shot at European football next season for Paulo Fonseca's men. — AFP

Qatar stages draw for key pre-World Cup test tournament

DOHA: Qatar staged the draw on Tuesday for the Arab Cup tournament this winter which will serve as a key test of the country's readiness for the 2022 World Cup. The event in an opera house in the Qatari capital Doha saw a much-reduced field of officials and regional football legends rubbing shoulders amid tight virus prevention measures.

"(It) will be a fantastic event — the first of many, the first FIFA Arab Cup... as an event to prepare for the World Cup, as an event to unite the Arab World," said FIFA president Gianni Infantino ahead of the draw. "Everything is almost ready."

The tournament, which will see 23 teams vie to be Arab champions, will be staged until December 18 at six of the eight stadiums which will host games in 2022. "This is the main test event for us prior to the World Cup in 2022," said World Cup 2022 chief executive Nasser Al-Khater. "At previous editions of the World Cup the Confederations Cup which had eight teams was their main test event, this will have 23."

So far Qatar has inaugurated three new venues and one refurbished ground with four still to open. Khater said two would be inaugurated before December. The 14 lowest-ranked teams according to the April edition of the FIFA world rankings will participate in single-leg playoffs ahead of the tournament.

Only a handful of selected guests were flown in for the draw and were required to undergo coronavirus tests and stay in a bio-secure bubble ahead of the event. Qatar national team coach Felix Sanchez said "this is a tournament Qatar is ready to deal with — they have all the stadiums, all the logistics that they need".

While FIFA has insisted the World Cup will be played in full stadiums, the virus prevention measures for this year's event have not yet been



DOHA: This handout picture released and taken on Tuesday by the FIFA shows Gianni Infantino, President of FIFA, speaking during the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2021 Official Draw at Katara Opera House in Qatari capital Doha. — AFP



Nawaf Al-Temyat of Saudi Arabia holds the name of Qatar during the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2021 Official Draw.

disclosed. "We really want to host the tournaments with the full return of fans. We hope the medical world will get us back to that stage by the end of the year," Khater added. "We're ready for any eventuality."

Whirlwind of criticism

Qatar has suffered a whirlwind of criticism over its rights record and efforts to improve treatment of workers in recent months. Several European teams staged protests ahead of their qualifiers for the 2022 tournament, with the Danish football federation calling on FIFA to

probe worker deaths.

The issue of worker deaths is ultra-sensitive in Qatar which disputed media reports of avoidable deaths among migrant laborers who are predominantly from South Asia. Campaigners regularly accuse employers of exploitation and forcing laborers to work in dangerous conditions. Qatari authorities insist they have done more than any country in the region to improve worker welfare.

"In relation to Qatar, and as confirmed by the International Labor Organization and many others, the (tournament) has already now con-

tributed significantly to the transformation of the labor rights situation there," FIFA said in a statement.

"Important legal changes (are) being implemented by the Qatari authorities. Since construction began in 2014, FIFA's local partner, the Supreme Committee, has recorded three work-related fatalities on FIFA World Cup sites and 35 non-work-related deaths among its workforce." The numbers do not include worker fatalities on projects not directly supervised by the World Cup organizers which have not been disclosed publicly. — AFP



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