

Friday Times

ISSUE NO: 18423

RAMADAN 18, 1442 AH | FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 2021

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Kuwait Zoo flourishes despite pandemic closure

See Pages 4 & 5

Local

Nostalgic Ramadan traditions: Then and now



JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

sahar@kuwaittimes.net

“Wake up, wake up, sleeping people! It is time for suhoor! Those who are not sleeping let them wake up those who are!” These are the words and the voice of the mesaharati that I used to hear during Ramadan when I was a little girl.

I can still remember the sounds of his rhythmical drum beating - boom, boom, boom - loud enough to wake the neighborhood. The mesaharati walked everywhere, attired in traditional dress with a tarboush, knocking on doors and shouting in the early hours. Today, as this tradition is fading, I can still hear his voice and the drum beating, but only as a nostalgic memory from my childhood.

You can call me old-school, but yes, I do cherish the days when the family gathered around the table for iftar, where you could find traditional foods, family meals, late nights around the TV, last-minute races for suhoor, and the special Ramadan soaps, especially the fawazeer (riddles) presented by Nelly and Sherihan in the 1980s and 1990s.

During iftar, there used to be signature dishes specially made for Ramadan such as dates, fried potatoes, soup and fatoush as starters, three different kinds of main dishes, gillab or qamr al-deen - a drink that is usually made only in Ramadan - and qatayef with cream or kallag - sweets that are also linked to Ramadan - as desserts.

I miss the days when the family used to talk, discuss and crack jokes during iftar, when life was laidback and stress-free. The colorful and exciting decorations - the amazing and dazzling lights that illuminate the beginning till the end of the neighborhood, and the sounds of the children playing happily outdoors. These are the memories I carried with me from my country of birth, Lebanon.

When I came to Kuwait, I was introduced to new and unique Ramadan traditions such as graish - the pre-Ramadan feast when family members and neighbors gather before the beginning of the fasting month; Girgian - marked on the 13th, 14th and 15th nights of Ramadan - when children go 'trick or treating' to collect candies and nuts around the neighborhood; and ghabqa - a gathering of family and friends in the evenings of Ramadan.

As for food, I was introduced to tashreeb - the most essential dish for Kuwaitis that is made of bread, potatoes, meat and vegetables - and of course, Vimto. Women also compete to dress in their finest daraas (abayas) during visits by family and friends.

Way back in B.C. (Before COVID) - these traditions and customs were practiced. Unfortunately, last year the pandemic made it impossible for people to gather easily and celebrate the traditions that are part of the Ramadan atmosphere.

In the old days, people used to congratulate each other on the advent of Ramadan face-to-face or by a direct phone call, unlike nowadays, after the technological revolution took over our social lives and we began sending each other digital messages and greetings. As if this revolution was not enough to make people distant, the pandemic arrived to cut the last string of connection between human beings.

I know that the core of the holy month of Ramadan is fasting, praying, piety, charity and introspection. But it is also about family gatherings, reaffirming bonds and collecting unforgettable memories. Humans thrive and smile when they recall a scene, scent or a feeling from their childhood, but in the collision of the ancient and the modern, many traditions are fading. It is up to us to hold on to them and pass them to our children, so they can pass them to theirs.

Hoping this holy month will bring you peace of mind, health and prosperity. Ramadan Kareem!

PHOTO OF THE DAY



Until the end of Ramadan, the curfew allows people to walk outdoors from 7pm to 10pm. However rising temperatures, with highs reaching 38C this week, may discourage people from taking advantage of the walking hours. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Ramadan Kareem

Balance between body and soul

By Hassan T Bwambale

A human-being is made up of body and soul. After the soul is breathed into a fetus, then the eye acquires the ability to see and the ear to hear, and the heart become the center of judgment (ie consciousness). With this consciousness, you attain spiritual enlightenment.

When we think about health, diet and exercise are typically the first things that come to mind. However, good health isn't just about the physical body. Our mind and body are interconnected and affect each other. For example, a stressful situation causing negative thoughts can lead to physical pain or illness. It's important to maintain a healthy balance between your mind, body, and soul by nurturing your whole self, including your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. There are many things you can do in your daily life to achieve overall wellness.

In brief, one can achieve spiritual enlightenment by adhering to the following:

- Have a sense of connection to something bigger than yours - Allah (SWT). Note that there is no way we can compare any creature with the Creator.
- Search for the meaning of life and have sense of purpose in whatever you do. For example, think of Prayer (Salah) as a physical and spiritual exercise.
- Follow your religion (Islam) verbatim and feel the spirit or moral of Allah's commands.
- Your actions should be a result of a deep and strong faith with deep feelings of the significance of that faith and acts that prove it.
- Practice honest with integrity.

Here are some more ways to begin cultivating a mind-body-soul balance:

- Read and learn often. Your education shouldn't stop once you're out of school or have reached a particular age. Open your mind to new possibilities, beliefs, and interests by reading, taking online classes, watching documentaries, and attending workshops. Education does not end until you die. Try your best to translate what you learn into action where necessary and possible.
- Meditate regularly. Meditation improves memory, attention, mood, immune system function, sleep, and creativity. All

it takes is a few minutes a day to start reaping the benefits. Allah (the Almighty and Majestic) says what can be translated as: "Say, [O Muhammad], 'Travel through the land and observe how He began creation. Then Allah will bring forth the creation of the Hereafter (ie resurrection after death). Indeed Allah, over all things, is Omnipotent.'" (Al-Ankaboot 29: 20)

- Avoid sitting for extended periods of time. Try to stand or move around while you work, if possible. Too much sitting is linked to heart disease, diabetes, and a shortened lifespan.

- Get at least 15 minutes of moderate to fast-paced exercise each day. Live close to work? Walk or ride your bike the short distance. Exercise is important for heart health, physical stamina, and maintaining a good mood.

- Add more plant-based foods to your diet. Eating lots of vegetables and fruit can help prevent chronic disease. Shop your local farmer's market for fresh, in-season produce.

- Get involved in a volunteer organization or activism group. Use your voice or your talents to do some good in the world. We're all connected, and it's incredible to experience that connectedness when we work toward a common goal. When you use your abilities to help others, your soul certainly feels at peace.

- Fuel your passions. Set aside some time each day to do what makes your soul happy. Many of us work so much that we forget how great it feels to paint, write, garden, or swim.

- Be grateful. Take some time each day to write or think about the things you're grateful for, like family, friends, pets, food, shelter, health, or the beauty of nature.

- Be kind to everyone. This includes yourself!

- Reward yourself for accomplishing a remarkable achievement.

- Do not overburden yourself.

- Do not blame yourself for what went wrong. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said and what can be translated as: "... be keen to do or say what is beneficial to you, seek help from Allah (swt) and do not despair. And if any trouble afflicts you, do not say, 'Had I done such and such, it wouldn't have happened.' Rather say, 'Allah preordained it and He does what He wills.' Indeed, (the statement) 'had I done such and such,' opens the door for Satan to tempt you." (Muslim # 2, 664)

- Courtesy of TIES

Kuwait Times

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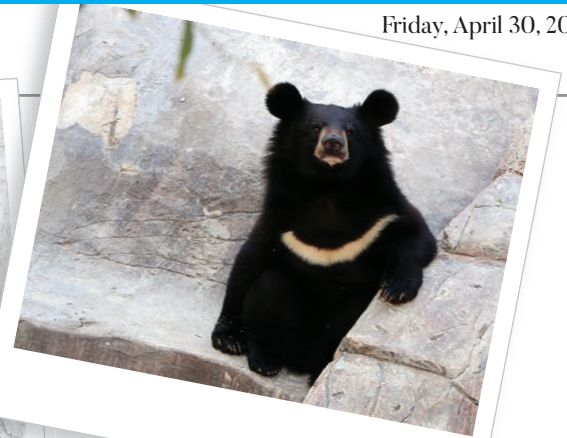
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Local



EXCLUSIVE

New baby bear, loss of one elephant as **Kuwait Zoo** remains closed

By Nawara Fattahova

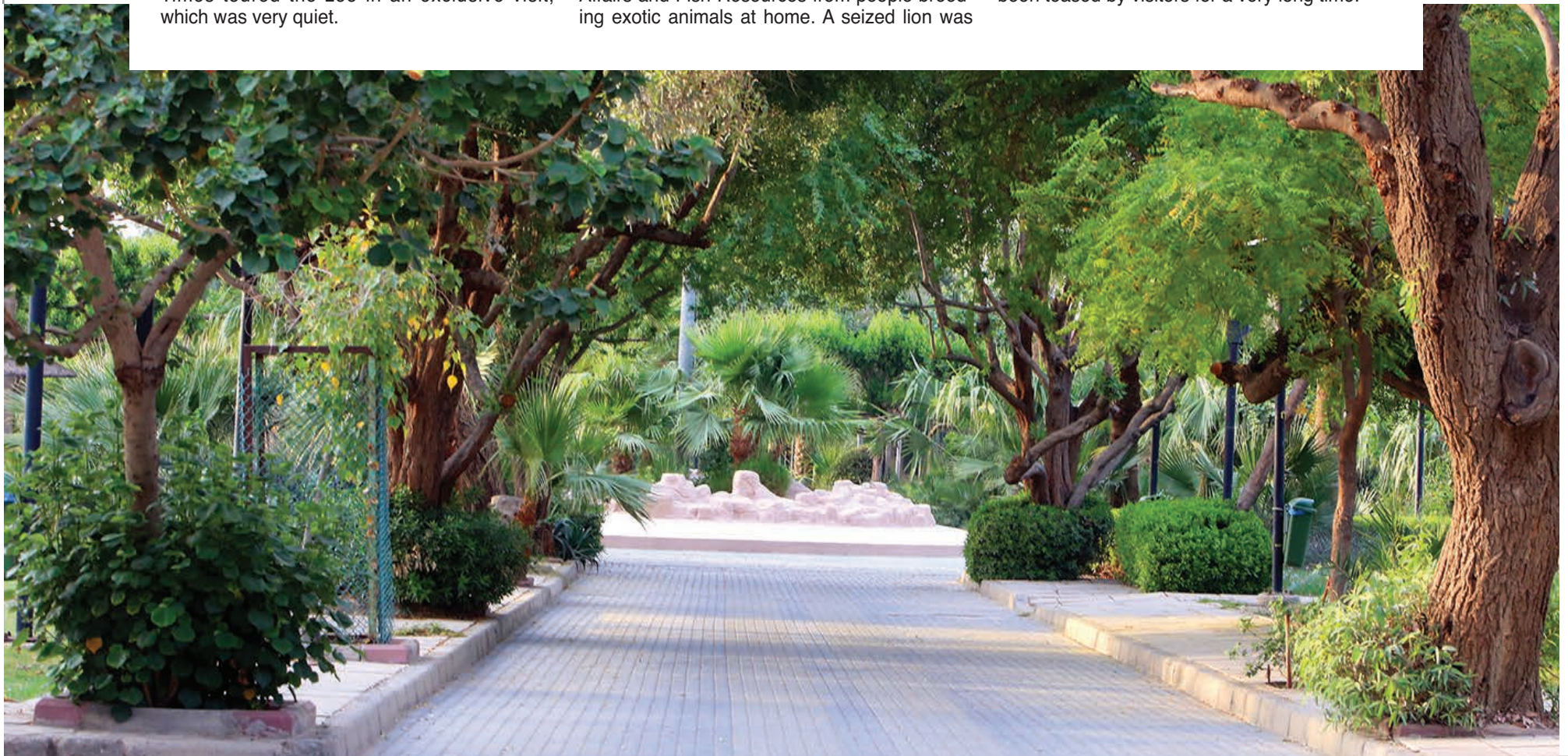
After more than a year of closure, people are wondering when will Kuwait Zoo welcome visitors again. Many also want to know how the animals are faring and what's new at the zoo, as nothing has been published about the park for the past 14 months. Kuwait Times toured the zoo in an exclusive visit, which was very quiet.

During the visit we received both good and bad news. According to our guide, an adorable dark brown baby bear was born after three previously unsuccessful pregnancies. The sad part is that the female elephant Dalal is all alone, after her male companion died last year.

The zoo also gained animals, which were seized by the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources from people breeding exotic animals at home. A seized lion was

quietly resting on a tree in a huge cage, looking very lazy.

In other parts of the zoo, animals relax and enjoy the quiet life with no visitors. A deer that ran towards us to eat a leaf was very nice. A zebra also approached us, as they are used to getting a treat from the zoo staff. The monkeys looked relaxed, probably because they haven't been teased by visitors for a very long time.



Local



The Kuwait Zoo has remained closed for more than a year now due to the coronavirus pandemic.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Dr Abdul Rahman Al-Kandari, a vet and head of the zoo department at PAAAFR, provided more information about the zoo:

Kuwait Times: When do you expect the zoo to reopen?

Dr Abdul Rahman Al-Kandari: This depends on the decisions by the government related to the phases of returning to normal life, along with ensuring the safety of the zoo staff.

KT: Did any renovations or construction work take place during the closure?

Kandari: Yes. Regular maintenance works are going on at the zoo and didn't stop during the pandemic. New cages are also being built.

KT: How did the absence of visitors affect the animals? Was it positive?

Kandari: It didn't affect the animals much, but we noticed some animals became less aggressive due to the absence of visitors for the past year.

KT: Did any animals give birth during the closure?

Kandari: Yes of course; there are normal and seasonal births in some groups of animals, especially among ruminants. These include the Asian bear, European deer and Asian deer. No animals died other than the elephant.

KT: Which animals did the zoo gain during the past year?

Kandari: Seized animals are transferred to the zoo by PAAAFR. During the past year, the zoo received an African lion, a white tiger and a baboon.

KT: Were any of the animals infected with COVID-19?

Kandari: No, we didn't notice any symptoms of the coronavirus in any of the animals.

KT: Is the zoo facing any problems?

Kandari: Our biggest problem is the hot weather and its effect on the animals, along with changes in behavior during the mating season. During this period, some animals become dangerous, so we have to be careful when dealing with them.



Dr Abdul Rahman Al-Kandari



Local

By Abdulla Al Bdaiwi

Curfew

By the time this is published, it will have been a year since the last time a curfew was implemented in Kuwait. And as a result of the rising amount of cases, the government has decided to implement the partial curfew as a way of trying to stop those cases from rising.

But how does having a curfew affect the number of cases? People are still going out, having fun, going to malls, shops, etc. Some people even moved entire weddings from the night to the day, to avoid the partial curfew. Social events have been moved to times between 5 AM and 5 PM, so people still gather, sometimes in large numbers, and still catch COVID-19 cases.

Currently, Coronavirus cases in Kuwait are around 1300 cases a day, with a total of 209 serious cases in the ICU. The partial curfew hasn't done any good yet, and some people are calling for either removing the curfew, or extending it to a full curfew to avoid social events from occurring.



Meanwhile, the COVID-19 vaccination attempts are ongoing, which means that many people have received their dose of the vaccine. As the vaccination rate reaches 9%, many people are calling on the government to exclude vaccinated people from the extreme measures against COVID-19, since they have the immunity required to fight COVID.

In conclusion, it is clear that in the past few weeks, the partial curfew has done nothing but increase the traffic in the streets due to the limited amount of time people have to go out. While the partial curfew really did work last year (because of the fear of the virus), it won't work as well this year due to people being bored of being stuck at home.

Kuwait Times partners with BBS

Kuwait Times is delighted to collaborate with students from Bayan Bilingual School (BBS) to republish articles originally featured in the school's journal, Inkwell.



By Zain Al Sumait

BLM (Black Lives Matter)

Black Lives Matter, also known as BLM stemmed out of racial indifferences occurring mostly in America. Did you know that black drivers are 20 percent more likely to get pulled over than white drivers? After hearing this statistic I want you to put yourself in their situation. Knowing that at any time you are more likely to be pulled over by the cops for unknown reasons, and knowing deep down it's solely because of the color of your skin. How would you feel? I stand before you as an advocate of BLM in order to give light on the matter, and to help make a change in the discrimination that they are facing.

It has been around seven years since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. The recent killing of George Floyd reignited the movement once again. Floyd was brutally suffocated and murdered by a white police officer named Derek Chauvin. All of this commotion happened because of a supposed \$20 counterfeit bill. Ever since the death of Floyd, and many others like him such as Breonna Taylor, riots have broken out around America to protest the rights of black lives. The riots



are like busy train stations waiting for the next train to move on.

However, out of this stemmed "All Lives Matter". Several people have used this phrase because they interpreted Black Lives Matter as being the only race that matters. According to CBS News, "the phrase "Black Lives Matter" does not mean "Black lives matter more," it means, "Black lives matter, as well." The term "All Lives Matter" sent out a message to the black community that their lives did not matter, and that was not their intention. The only message they were trying to convey was that they wanted their lives to matter as well.

All this commotion has reached those higher up in power resulting in major changes

in policy. Take Minneapolis, the place where Floyd took his last breath, as an example. As stated in Women's Health, the city council "decided not just to defund the police, which would mean taking money away and reinvesting in community programs, but to dismantle the force completely, replacing police with trained professionals who respond to different types of calls." Various states around America have followed Minneapolis's footsteps in order to put an end to racism.

Moreover, throughout the riots, the protesters were seen raising a clenched fist. This then turned into a symbol for the movement. Inews stated that, "the black power fist was used to represent the 'hands up, don't shoot' pose. It's been used ever since, in both social media posts and at rallies, as a symbol of resistance and defiance." By raising their fist throughout the protest, they are able to influence many other citizens to acknowledge the racism that is occurring and to help protect them.

In conclusion, BLM is like a horror movie where no one knows what might happen next. The movement was reignited after Floyd's brutal death. Many measures and policies were introduced to ensure that black people are protected and given equal opportunities. Lastly, I would like to leave you with one simple question. What can you do to help the Black Lives Matter movement?

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Local

Cassation court sends ex-MP Dahoum's case to prosecution

Govt denies high level meeting to dissolve assembly

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The court of cassation yesterday sent the case of former MP Bader Al-Dahoum to the public prosecution for opinion about allowing the opposition figure to run for election and then nullifying his membership in the assembly.

Dahoum's case began when he registered to run in the December 5 general elections. An interior ministry commission deleted his name because he had been convicted of insulting His Highness the Amir in a 2014 ruling.

The lower court upheld barring Dahoum from running in the election but later the court of appeals overturned the ruling and allowed him to run. The last ruling was also upheld by the court of cassation, the highest court in the country whose rulings are final and cannot be challenged.

But as Dahoum won the election and became a member in the National Assembly, a small number of voters from his constituency challenged his election to the constitutional court. The constitutional court, whose rulings are also final, ruled that Dahoum's election was null and void on the basis that he had been convicted of

insulting His Highness the Amir.

But Dahoum went again to the court of cassation arguing that its verdict allowing him to run in election was nullified by a court that is lower than the cassation court and demanded a solution to the contradiction in the two verdicts. The court of cassation will wait for the opinion of the public prosecution and then issue its ruling on the case.

In the meantime, government spokesman Tareq Al-Mazrem yesterday denied that the prime minister held a high-level meeting with the assembly speaker and a number of ministers including the interior and defense minister to discuss dissolving the assembly and suspending election for at least one year.

Mazrem said that reports about the meeting were totally baseless and no such meeting had taken place. The denial came after leading opposition MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri asked Prime Minister Sheikh His Highness Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah if the meeting had taken place and if a decision had been taken to dissolve the assembly and suspend elections for one year.

MP Hesham Al-Saleh meanwhile sent a series of questions to Justice Minister Abdullah Al-Roumi asking about public tenders



The Palace of Justice.

won by MPs and their relatives since 2010. He demanded a list of the lawmakers who won such contracts and their relatives up to second-degree relatives. He also asked for details about the values of such tenders and if they involved any violations.

Foreign Minister, US National Security Advisor discuss ties

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Dr Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah on Wednesday received a telephone call from US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. During the telephone conversation, the two sides reviewed the close ties between Kuwait and the US and the frameworks of enhancing cooperation. They also discussed the most outstanding developments on both the regional and international arenas, and all matters aiming to boost security and stability in the region.

Meanwhile, Dr Sheikh Ahmad discussed yesterday bilateral ties with Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein. The two sides also discussed the distinguished historical relations that bind the two friendly countries and means of enhancing and developing them in all fields. During the call, the two sides agreed to develop the cooperation between the two friendly countries in all vital and important fields, especially economic, investment and commercial, as well as food security and technology. — KUNA

New British Ambassador arrives to Kuwait

KUWAIT: The new British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis arrived yesterday in Kuwait along with her husband and two children. They will spend a period of 14 days in quarantine upon arrival in accordance with Kuwait's health guidelines. Ambassador Lewis looks forward to presenting her credentials to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah once the quarantine period is completed.



Belinda Lewis

Indian embassy celebrates diplomatic ties with Kuwait

KUWAIT: The Embassy of India in Kuwait and Indian Business Network (IBN) in association with Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEEDA) organized a virtual event celebrating the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between India and Kuwait. Ambassador of India to Kuwait Sibi George, speaking at the event, paid tribute to all those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The event marked the popularity of Indian mangoes in Kuwait, especially high quality Alphonso mangoes. Kuwait is one of the top markets for Indian mangoes. Last year, Kuwait imported 1,170 MT of Indian mangoes valued at \$2.22 million.



KUWAIT: Ambassador of India to Kuwait Sibi George speaks at the event.

EPA follows up on Climate Change latest developments

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Environment Public Authority (EPA) affirmed on Wednesday its keenness on pursuing the latest developments of United Nation's (UN) Climate Change conference held in France to limit global warming. EPA said in a press statement that it held a meeting with the Minister of Oil and Higher Education Dr Mohammad Al-Fares to discuss the latest climate developments on the national, international and regional levels, and to associate it with the sustainable development plan. During the meeting, Fares highlighted the efforts of EPA in executing Kuwait's commitments to the treaty. They also displayed a visual presentation that showed the pre-



KUWAIT: EPA Chairman Sheikh Abdullah Ahmad Al-Humoud Al-Sabah (left) meets Minister of Oil and Higher Education Dr Mohammad Al-Fares. — KUNA

diction of temperature, rain rates in Kuwait and the effect of global warming on Kuwait's coastline and islands. Fares also tackled plans of EPA with its Chairman Sheikh Abdullah Ahmad Al-Humoud Al-Sabah, including plans and new commitments imposed by the treaty. — KUNA

Local

Kuwait's emergency aid to reach India on Saturday

NEW DELHI: The first emergency aid from Kuwait to India is set to arrive on Saturday onboard a special military aircraft, Kuwait's Ambassador to India Jassim Al-Najim revealed yesterday. In a statement to the press, Ambassador Najim said that the emergency aid is coming as a noble initiative of Kuwait in order to join the efforts to mitigate the massive impact of the spread of a new mutated variant of coronavirus, which led to a record number of deaths and infections. The Ambassador underlined that this is a token of Kuwait's commitment to lessening the suffering of the Indian people due to this health disaster at this unprecedented time India is passing through. The aid consists of oxygen concentrators, ventilators, oxygen cylinders of various sizes, and other medical supplies meant to meet the shortage at Indian hospitals in the fight against the deadly coronavirus, Ambassador Najim said. During a telephonic conversation with Indian External Affairs Minister Dr Subrahmanyam Jaisankar, Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs of Kuwait Shiekh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah had pledged solidarity of Kuwait's leadership, government, and people with India at this tough time. The Kuwaiti Cabinet in its weekly session last Monday had also decided to dispatch emergency aid to India to help it fight the grim consequences of the spread of a mutated strain of the coronavirus. — KUNA

News in brief

Arson suspected in tires blaze

KUWAIT: Five fire teams battled a blaze in a tire dump in Salmi yesterday, which had spread over an estimated area of 40,000 square meters. No injuries were reported while preliminary investigations show that the fire was deliberately started, Kuwait Fire Force said. Further investigations are in progress.

6,127 expats terminated

KUWAIT: The Civil Service Commission terminated 6,127 expatriates in the public sector in the first three years of the Kuwaitization plan that started in 2017, Al-Rai Arabic daily reported yesterday. CSC plans to terminate 1,840 more staff members this year to bring the total up to 7,970, job rankings department director Aisha Al-Mutawa said.

Awqaf employees to return

KUWAIT: The government approved a Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs request to bring back 179 expatriate employees including imams and others who are stuck abroad, Al-Anbaa Arabic daily reported yesterday.

Lyrica, Neurontin 'psychoactive drugs'

KUWAIT: Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah issued a decision to include Pregabalin and Gabapentin in the psychoactive items' list as per law 48/1987 in regards to fighting psychoactive material, regulate its use and trade. The two most notable trademarks for the mentioned items are Lyrica and Neurontin respectively, which are used for epilepsy and bone pain, Al-Anbaa Arabic daily reported yesterday. A source said the ministry's pharmaceuticals inspection department will inform clinics and pharmacies not to sell any medical trademark with the two mentioned items without a psychoactive prescription, and not with a regular prescription as the case was previously.

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RAMADAN QUIZ 2021

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

ISSUE NO: 18423 RAMADAN 18, 1442 AH

Kuwait Times

Ramadan Quiz

18- What is the first prayer of the day called?

- A. Shuruq
- B. Asr
- C. Fajr
- D. Dhuhur

Kuwait Times

Ramadan Quiz

Date :

Name :

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FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 2021



China launches first module for space station 'Heavenly Palace'

Palestinian leaders weigh delay of long-awaited vote

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WASHINGTON, DC: President Joe Biden addresses a Joint Session of Congress, with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Kamala Harris behind on the dais, on Capitol Hill, Wednesday. — AFP

An America 'on the move again': Biden

President calls for trillions of dollars to rebuild post-pandemic US middle class

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden triumphantly declared that the United States is "on the move again" in a rousing speech to Congress Wednesday, calling for trillions of dollars to rebuild the post-pandemic US middle class and give new life to "forgotten" workers.

Lauding the success of mass vaccination against COVID-19, Biden told Congress and the nation on primetime television that "in America, we always get up." "America is ready for takeoff," he said. "We are working again, dreaming again, discovering again, leading the world again."

Biden, who was celebrating the eve of his 100th day in office, called the vaccine rollout one of "the greatest logistical achievements" in US history. But Biden quickly pivoted to insisting that this national effort must now focus on rebuilding the economy and fighting inequality with "the largest jobs plan since World War II." In a line that could have come from his populist Republican predecessor Donald Trump, Biden said working-class Americans had been ignored, while the top one percent got richer, and that his

plans would give them a chance.

"You feel left behind and forgotten in an economy that's rapidly changing. Let me speak directly to you," Biden said, before going on to promise Americans "good-paying jobs that can't be outsourced."

No more solo America

In every aspect of the primetime television speech, Biden echoed his mantra that "America is back"—both in recovering from the coronavirus disaster and in putting the turbulence of the Trump era behind. On foreign policy he underlined Washington's return to international partnerships damaged under Trump. "No one nation" can succeed alone, he said, in a rebuke of Trump's isolationist policies.

Among his many references to arch-rival China, Biden said that while Beijing is seeking supremacy, "we welcome the competition" and "are not looking for conflict." On domestic issues, Biden made the case for the Democrats' lengthy wish list, including police reform, pro-immigrant

reforms and gun control—some of the most sensitive issues in US politics. "We have to come together to rebuild trust between law enforcement and the people they serve—to root out systemic racism in our criminal justice system," Biden said, urging the Senate to pass a police reform bill already approved in the House.

He pleaded with Republicans and Democrats to work together on one of the nation's most hot-button topics, saying "let's end our exhausting war on immigration." But Republicans showed little sign of listening to Biden's appeals for unity, accusing him of only paying lip service to the idea, while promoting a leftist agenda. "Our best future won't come from Washington schemes or socialist dreams. It will come from you—the American people," Tim Scott, the Republicans' only Black senator and a rising star, said in an official party rebuttal after Biden finished.

"President Biden promised you a specific type of leadership," he said. "Three months in, the actions of the president and his party are pulling us further and further apart."

Yes, new taxes

US presidents usually bend over backwards to avoid or at least hide tax increases. However, Biden is banking on popular support for his idea of leaning on the super-rich to fund his latest new spending proposal, which he unveiled in the speech—the \$1.8 trillion American Families Plan.

The plan, which will need approval by a deeply divided Congress, would pour money into early education, childcare and higher education. To fund this, the top income tax rate would increase from 37 percent, where Trump's plan put it, back to its pre-Trump 39.6 percent.

The Biden plan would also end loopholes and capital income tax breaks, while raising "billions," according to the White House, in a tightened tax regime for inherited wealth. Americans earning less than \$400,000 a year, however, would face no extra taxes. "My fellow Americans, trickle-down economics has never worked. It's time to grow the economy from the bottom up and middle out," Biden said. "What I've proposed is fair." —AFP

International

Destination Dubai: Jets in high demand to escape India horror

Expats fear a prolonged flight ban between India and UAE

DUBAI: Indians from the millions-strong expat community in the UAE, stranded in their homeland during a catastrophic coronavirus surge, are swamping private jet operators with requests to whisk them back to safety. Fearing a prolonged flight ban between India and the Gulf state, they aim to use an exemption for private business planes that was in effect last year during the first wave of the global crisis.

An estimated 3.5 million Indians live and work in the United Arab Emirates. The latest suspension in flights that came into force Sunday has shut down some 300 commercial flights that operated weekly on one of the world's busiest air corridors. Apart from low-paid laborers on short-term contracts, the sudden move has stranded members of long-settled wealthy families who travelled to India for holidays, work or on medical emergencies.

Many are now in a panic as cases in India skyrocket, with 18 million infections and more than 201,000 people dead, and the daily fatality toll rising above 3,000 for the first time on Wednesday.

T Patel, a businessman living in Dubai, is working frantically to bring back his brother's wife and three children, currently stuck in Bangalore. "I am exploring the private jet option. It is a lot of money but if I have no other way of bringing them back, then I will go for it," he said.

Prices surging

After the UAE shut its airspace to curb the spread of coronavirus in March last year, some residents raised the funds for seats on shared chartered planes that were permitted to fly to Dubai. Patel paid \$10,500 to get his parents and niece to Dubai, nearly 20 times the cost of regular tickets.

"I waited for two months and finally hired a private jet for \$42,000, the cost of which was shared by a few equally desperate residents," he said. Dozens of charter flights zipped passengers from India to Dubai in the days before the new ban, after all commercial seats were snapped up, and charter companies say demand has since surged. A 13-seat jet flying from Mumbai to Dubai costs



In this file photo, passengers queue for check-in for flights to India at the Dubai Airport. — AFP

between \$35,000 and \$38,000, around 35 times the price of a regular ticket. Prices from other cities are even higher.

But as demand soars, operators have been scrambling to clarify rules around private planes landing in the UAE. "Chartered flights need to get approval from the General Civil Aviation Authority and the foreign ministry to operate. But we do not know who is exempted to travel," said Tapish Khivensra, CEO of Enthral Aviation Private Jet Charter.

Civil aviation has said UAE nationals, diplomats, official delegations and "businessmen's planes" are excluded from the ban, provided passengers observe measures including a 10-day quarantine.

'At any cost'

Long-term Dubai resident Purushothaman Nair said he was prepared to "spend a fortune" to return to the UAE. "My wife and

I came to India for just 10 days. We have to fly back to Dubai at any cost," he told AFP. "There are many people who are willing to pay up. How can people with business interests and big responsibilities in the UAE afford to stay away for a longer period?" said Nair, who works in the government sector.

"The fear of contracting the virus is a bigger worry." The less well-off are weighing the high cost against the risk of losing their livelihoods. "If I cannot make it in a few weeks, my job is on the line. My employer is already putting pressure on me and asking me to travel to the UAE via other countries," Jameel Mohammed told AFP. Mohammed had not seen his young son for two years when he was granted leave in March. He was thrilled at the prospect of a reunion but is now stranded in the southern state of Kerala. "I can't afford that kind of money. But if the choice is between losing my job and borrowing money, I will do the latter and fly back." — AFP

Iranian separatists plead not guilty to Danish terror charge

COPENHAGEN: Three leaders of an Iranian Arab separatist group pleaded not guilty to financing and promoting terrorism in Iran with Saudi Arabia's backing, as their trial opened in Denmark yesterday.

The three risk 12 years in prison if found guilty. Aged 39 to 50, the trio are members of the separatist organization ASMLA (Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz), which is based in Denmark and the Netherlands and which Iran considers a terrorist group. The three, one of whom a Danish citizen, have been held in custody in Denmark since February 2020. Gert Dyrn, lawyer for the eldest of the three, told AFP that in his client's opinion "what they are charged with is legitimate resistance towards an oppressive regime."

"They are not denying receiving money from multiple sources, including Saudi Arabia, to help

the movement and help them accomplish their political aim," Dyrn said.

His client has lived as a refugee in Denmark since 2006. According to the charge sheet seen by AFP, the three received around 30 million kroner (four million euros, \$4.9 million) for ASMLA and its armed branch, through bank accounts in Austria and the United Arab Emirates.

The trio is also accused of spying on people and organizations in Denmark between 2012 and 2020 for Saudi intelligence. Finally, they are also accused of promoting terrorism and "encouraging the activities of the terrorist movement Jaish Al-Adl, which has activities in Iran, by supporting them with advice, promotion, and coordinating attacks."

The case dates back to 2018 when one of the three was the target of a foiled attack on Danish soil believed to be sponsored by the Iranian regime in retaliation for the killing of 24 people in Ahvaz, southwestern Iran, in September 2018. Tehran formally denied the attack plan in Denmark, but a Danish court last year jailed a Norwegian-Iranian for seven years for his role in the plot. That attack put Danish authorities on the trail of the trio's ASMLA activities. — AFP

Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan armies exchange fire on disputed border

BISHKEK: At least one person died and 18 others were wounded after clashes erupted yesterday between the militaries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at a disputed section of the Central Asian nations' border. Kyrgyzstan's health ministry said in a statement that there were 17 casualties in the clashes, including "one fatality".

Tajikistan's security committee said two of its citizens had been injured, with one in serious condition. The fighting followed a reported conflict over water infrastructure at the frontier between the two countries, which have had a series of border disputes since gaining independence with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. More than a third of the border is disputed, with the area surrounding the de-facto Tajik exclave of Vorukh, where yesterday's conflict erupted, a

regular point of clashes over territory and access to water.

Kyrgyzstan's national security committee said that the Tajik side "deliberately provoked a conflict" at the border. "Shooting has begun between the military units of the (two countries). According to preliminary information, the Tajik side is setting up positions for mortar fire," the committee said. Tajikistan's security committee accused Kyrgyz servicemen of "opening fire on Tajik troops at the site of the Golovnaya water distribution point, located in the upper reaches of the Isfara River." Its national security committee said two people had been admitted to hospital with gunshot wounds, one of whom was in a serious condition.

It said Kyrgyz and Tajik civilians had on Wednesday become embroiled in a conflict over river infrastructure. Seven Tajik nationals were injured after Kyrgyz threw stones at them, it said. Border disagreements between the three countries that share the fertile Fergana Valley — Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan — have their roots in border demarcations during the Soviet Union. The knotting, twisting frontiers left several communities with restricted access to their home countries. — AFP

International

Iran's Zarif backs ceasefire in talks with Yemen's rebel leader

Iran official regrets six-year imposed war on the people of Yemen

MUSCAT: Iran's foreign minister met the Yemeni rebel spokesman in Oman on Wednesday, reiterating Tehran's support for a ceasefire and a return to talks to end the country's long conflict. Mohammad Javad Zarif's comments came a day after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose country leads a military coalition supporting the Yemeni government, called on the Houthis to stop fighting and enter peace negotiations.

At the talks with Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdul Salam, Zarif "once again stressed our country's view regarding the political solution being the only solution to the crisis of Yemen", the Iranian foreign ministry said in a statement.

The foreign minister "emphasized our country's support for a ceasefire and Yemeni-Yemeni talks", it added.

Abdul Salam and other leaders of the Iranian-backed rebel movement live in exile in Muscat. Several meetings have taken place in past years between Iran's chief diplomat and the Houthi spokesman in the Omani capital.

The war in Yemen, in which tens of thousands of people have been killed since the conflict erupted in 2014, has flared anew in the past two months with a rebel campaign to seize Marib

city, the government's last stronghold in the north. Saudi Arabia has proposed a "comprehensive" ceasefire and a return to the negotiating table, a proposal that the Houthis immediately rejected, saying a blockade on the country must first be lifted. Riyadh accuses its arch-foe Iran of supporting the rebels with weapons and missiles and helping them build drones used to attack the kingdom. Tehran denies the allegations and says its support for the Houthis is solely political. On Tuesday, the Saudi crown prince struck a conciliatory tone in a television interview, saying he sought "good" relations with Tehran, after sources said the rivals had held secret talks in Baghdad.

"Iran is a neighboring country, and all we aspire for is a good and special relationship with Iran," he said. The two countries, locked in a struggle for regional dominance, cut ties in 2016 after Iranian protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic missions following the kingdom's execution of a revered Shiite cleric. The talks in Baghdad, facilitated by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi, have been confirmed. In his meeting with Abdul Salam, Zarif expressed regret over "the six-year imposed war on the people of Yemen, and called for ending the war and lifting" the Saudi-enforced blockade on the country. —AFP



Fighters loyal to Yemen's Saudi-backed government mans a position near the frontline facing Iran-backed Houthi rebels in the country's northeastern province of Marib. —AFP

NE Syria running out of COVID testing kits: IRC

BEIRUT: The Kurdish-ruled region of northeastern Syria will run out of COVID-19 testing equipment in a week, the International Rescue Committee warned yesterday. The area has witnessed a surge in cases in recent weeks and the health crisis it faces will be made worse if testing stops, the aid organization said in a statement.

"Testing capacity in the northeast has never been sufficient, and now it may be lost altogether," IRC's regional policy director Misty Buswell said. The IRC said the semi-autonomous region's only COVID laboratory, located in the city of Qamishli, "could be forced to stop COVID testing in less than seven days due to a critical shortage" of kits. "This would have a devastating impact on testing capacity, with health professionals no longer able to identify new cases, track trends, or gain an understanding of the true spread of the disease - just as cases are surging," it said.

IRC said the war-battered region's anti-COVID health infrastructure was "getting very close" to breaking point. The number of detected cases in northeast Syria stands at only 15,769, but testing has been limited. The figure rose by 243 percent between March and April and close to half of tests were positive over the past week. "Currently, 83 percent of patients who receive invasive ventilation in the region are not surviving and we fear that things will only get worse," Buswell said. Northeast Syria has been allocated 100,000 vaccine doses from a batch that arrived in Damascus courtesy of Covax last week, but it has yet to receive them and there is no clear schedule for their delivery. —AFP

Syria finalizes list of presidential hopefuls

DAMASCUS: Syria's lawmakers on Wednesday completed voting for their preferred presidential candidate as nominations closed ahead of next month's polls, which are expected to return Bashar al-Assad for a fourth term. Fifty one Syrians, including seven women, had submitted their names before a constitutional deadline expired, the official SANA news agency said.

In order to run, they need to garner support from at least 35 members of the 250-seat parliament, which is dominated by Assad's Baath party. Lawmakers are only allowed to endorse one candidate.

"The process for lawmakers to endorse candidates for presidential polls has ended," SANA said.

"The voting box has been closed and sealed," it added. The names of approved candidates will now be sent to the high constitutional court, which will announce the final list of contenders at an unspecified date. The May 26 election will be the second since the start of a decade-long conflict that has killed over 388,000 people and forced more than half of Syria's pre-war population from their homes.

Damascus has invited lawmakers from allied countries such as Russia, Iran, China, Venezuela and Cuba to observe the electoral process, SANA said. In New York, Western members of the UN Security Council, led by the United States, France and Britain, on Wednesday rejected the outcome of the May 26 poll in advance, a position denounced by Russia as "unacceptable".

"The failure to enact a new constitution is proof positive that the so-called election on May 26 will be a sham," US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said during a monthly session of the Security Council on Syria. Her Russian



DAMASCUS: Members of the press surround the ballot box containing the votes of Syria's Parliament members for candidates to the upcoming presidential elections, after it arrived at Supreme Constitutional Court in Damascus yesterday. —AFP

counterpart, Vassily Nebenzia, said it was "distressing" that some nations had already rejected the results.

He denounced "unacceptable interference in Syria's internal affairs." With the exception of Assad, who has been in power for 21 years, the presidential contenders are mostly little-known figures unlikely to mount a serious challenge. Electoral law stipulates that candidates need to have lived in Syria continuously for at least the past decade, ruling out all exiled opposition figures.

Assad was elected by referendum in 2000 and 2007. For the first multi-candidate poll in 2014, only two candidates besides Assad out of 24 applicants were allowed to run.

Syria is grappling with a severe economic crisis that has seen the value of the pound plummet against the dollar on the black market. Assad took power following the death of his father Hafez, who ruled for three decades. —AFP

Algeria arrests top opposition figure weeks ahead of election

Detention comes as Hirak movement tries to regain its lost momentum

ALGIERS: A leading Algerian opposition activist has been detained and was to appear before prosecutors yesterday, his lawyer said, weeks ahead of elections he and other opponents have pledged to boycott. Karim Tabbou, a key figure in demonstrations that forced longtime president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign in 2019, was handed a one-year suspended sentence last year for “undermining state security”.

His detention comes as the pro-democracy protest movement known as Hirak has sought to regain some of the momentum it lost when it suspended street rallies just over a year ago due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tabbou was summoned to the police station on Wednesday evening to respond to a complaint filed against him by Bouzid Lazhari, the president of the National Council for Human Rights, an official body.

The 47-year-old was to appear before a prosecutor yesterday, lawyer Me Ali Fella Benali said on social media. “Algeria’s youth is determined to fight for their right to a dignified life,” Tabbou told AFP ahead of his detention. He became one of the most recognizable leaders at mass demonstrations that broke out in February 2019. The Hirak protest movement was sparked in February 2019 over Bouteflika’s bid for a fifth term in office. The ailing autocrat was forced to step down weeks later, but the Hirak has continued its demonstrations, demanding a sweeping overhaul of a ruling system in place since Algeria’s independence from France in 1962. Since the group’s second anniversary in February, thousands have returned to the streets, defying a coronavirus ban on gatherings.

Ordinary Algerians ‘fed up’

Tabbou said his own party, the Democratic Social Union, was now “the largest political party” in the North African country, despite it being unregistered by the authorities. His detention comes as activists warn of an increasing climate of repression, with political opponents and journalists targeted in the run-up to the legislative elections on June 12. Earlier this month, security forces arrested eight people they said were linked to the Hirak movement over an allegedly foreign-financed criminal association.

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune this month warned Hirak activists against “non-innocent activities” that “attempt to hinder the democratic process”.

Authorities say the protest movement is being infiltrated by Islamist activists who are trying to drag it towards violence. President Tebboune served as a prime minister under Bouteflika and won a presidential election in December 2019, in a poll that was boycotted by the protest movement. Official data put the turnout at less than 40 percent. In further moves dismissed by the protest movement as window dressing, Tebboune oversaw a constitutional referendum late last year and brought the legislative elections forward, in a bid to soothe the political and socioeconomic crisis.

“This election does not concern us,” activist Tabbou said. “The regime mobilized colossal resources to hold a false presidential election, a false referendum—and now it organizes false legislative elections,” he said. Ordinary Algerians were fed up, he said. “We see the country as a barracks”. — AFP



In this file photo taken on July 2, 2020 Karim Tabbou, one of the most prominent figures of “Hirak”, is greeted upon his release from prison outside the Kolea Prison near the city of Tipasa, west of the capital Algiers. — AFP

Roof collapses over famed Aztec temple in Mexico

MEXICO CITY: The roof over the most important Aztec temple in Mexico City has partially collapsed in a hailstorm, officials said, just one day after the capital’s archaeological zone reopened from pandemic closures. The modern roof, made of metal and acrylic panels, was installed to protect the ancient ruins underneath.

The extent of damage on Wednesday to the famed Templo Mayor in the city’s historic zone was not immediately clear, though archaeologists said it was not severe. “Despite the spectacular nature of the accident, the damage to the archaeological heritage is not great,” said Leonardo Lopez Lujan, director of the Templo Mayor Project.

One person was injured but did not need hospitalization after the structure’s partial collapse in the torrential storm, according to a local administrative office. Images circulating on social media showed soldiers guarding the taped-off area where the roof, along with a part of the site’s



MEXICO CITY: The Aztec archaeological zone of “Templo mayor” is pictured after being affected by heavy rain, in Mexico City, Wednesday. — AFP

fence, had been damaged. Built and rebuilt throughout the 14th and 15th centuries, Templo Mayor was the sacred heart of the Aztec capital and believed to be the site of many human sacrifices.

The vast religious building was destroyed when the Spanish conquistadors

razed Tenochtitlan in 1521 and rebuilt a colonial city on top of it. Archaeologists first uncovered the temple in 1914, but the ruins were not excavated in earnest until the 1970s. The historic center of Mexico City was named a UNESCO heritage site in 1987. —AFP

Nigeria police probe killing of 19 herders

LAGOS: Nigerian police are investigating the murder of a family of 19 Fulani herders in the southeast of the country, a spokesman said yesterday, in a region where separatist tensions are rising. The victims, including children, were attacked in their settlement in Oyi area of Anambra state on Sunday by gunmen who shot them at close range before mutilating their bodies, police said.

No group has claimed responsibility for the killings, but long-standing rivalries between communities of Fulani herders and farmers over land and water have revived ethnic tensions in different regions. The outlawed separatist movement, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which seeks an independent state for Igbo people, is also active in the region where the massacre took place. “We are investigating the unfortunate incident to determine who are behind these gruesome murders of innocent people,” state police spokesman Tochukwu Ikenga told AFP.

Local media said the victims were the family head, nine women, six children and three men. Some cows and sheep belonging to the herders were killed while their houses and belongings were vandalized, the media reported. Residents as well as students of a nearby university have left over fears of reprisal attacks. Ethnic clashes are not uncommon in Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country with more than 250 ethnic and linguistic groups. — AFP

International

Cyprus settlement talks fail to make breakthrough at UN

Guterres: Two sides, three guarantors and UN to meet again soon

GENEVA: Talks with rival Cypriot leaders failed to find common ground that could pave the way towards resolving the decades-old division of Cyprus, the UN chief concluded yesterday. The United Nations is trying to mediate a deal for the eastern Mediterranean island, nearly six decades since it first deployed peacekeepers.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres travelled from New York to Geneva to oversee the three days of informal talks in various formats, but said they had not managed to overcome the differences between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot positions. "The truth is that in the end of our efforts, we have not yet found enough common ground to allow for the resumption of formal negotiations in relation to the settlement of the Cyprus problem," Guterres told a press conference.

"But I do not give up," he said. "My agenda is strictly to fight for the security and well-being of the Cypriots—of the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots—that deserve to live in peace and prosperity together." The talks were attended by the Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades, the Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar, and the foreign ministers of Greece, Turkey and Britain—the three guarantors of the island's 1960 independence—plus the UN.

Future talks penciled in

Guterres outlined that the Greek Cypriots wanted to see a bizonal, bi-communal federation with political equality, while the Turkish Cypriots want a solution based on two states cooperating with each other. "This was not an easy meeting," he concluded. Guterres said the two sides, the three guarantors and the UN would meet again within two to three months, "with the objective to move in the direction of reaching common

ground to allow for formal negotiations to start".

"We are determined to do everything we can to make this dialogue move on and to make this dialogue, at one moment, to be able to reach positive results." British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said there was no common ground yet to proceed to formal negotiations, but welcomed the commitment by all sides to meet again in the near future. "The UK will continue to work with all parties to seek a fair and lasting settlement," he wrote on Twitter. Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey occupied the northern third in response to a coup orchestrated by an Athens-backed junta seeking to annex the island to Greece. The Turkish-occupied zone later declared independence, but remains heavily dependent on Ankara. A UN-controlled buffer zone separates the breakaway state from areas controlled by EU member the Republic of Cyprus.

Squaring the circle

According to Greek Cypriot authorities, the conflict has cost some 3,000 lives, left 1,400 people missing and displaced thousands from their homes. Negotiations for a solution have repeatedly failed, with the last round stalling in 2017. The mandate given to Guterres by the UN Security Council is based on finding a federal solution for a reunited Cyprus. Asked whether the mandate should be changed given the positions of the two sides, Guterres said that was a question for the UN Security Council. However, he was hopeful that consultations before the next set of meetings could create the conditions that might allow them to be successful.

"To square the circle is an impossibility in geometry, but it is very



GENEVA: UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres arrives to press conference yesterday at the end of a 5+1 Meeting on Cyprus. —AFP

common in politics," said Guterres. Since the last set of talks in 2017, also held in Switzerland, several factors have added to the traditional sticking points over security guarantees, political equality, territorial adjustments and refugees' property rights. Obstacles to the process include rising tensions in the eastern Mediterranean Sea over conflicting claims to offshore oil and gas involving Cyprus, Greece and Turkey. —AFP

Navalny network disbands ahead of 'extremism' ruling

MOSCOW: A key aide to jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny said yesterday his organization was disbanding its national network ahead of a court ruling expected to declare it an extremist organization. The announcement came as Navalny made his first video appearance in court since ending a hunger strike last week, appearing gaunt in a prison uniform and with a buzz haircut.

During the hearing, which is part of an appeal by Navalny against a defamation sentence imposed in February for insulting a World War II veteran, the opposition figure said he had lost more weight but had started eating again.

"I was taken to a bathhouse yesterday... there was a mirror there, I looked at myself—I am just a horrible skeleton," Navalny told the court, according to an audio recording released by the independent Dozhd television channel. Another court was holding a hearing yesterday into a request from prosecutors that Navalny's regional network and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) be recognised as extremist, equating the organisations with the Islamic State group and Al-Qaeda.

If the request is met, their activities would be banned, putting members and supporters at risk of lengthy jail time. The head of the regional networks said yesterday it had already been decided to shutter the network. —AFP

Legal setback for Merkel's climate plan as Greens surge

BERLIN: Germany's highest court ruled yesterday that the government's flagship climate protection plan was "insufficient", a major setback for Angela Merkel's right-left coalition in an election year when environmental issues are expected to take center-stage. Partially upholding a series of claims by environmentalists and young people, Germany's Constitutional Court ruled that Berlin's current goal of reducing CO2 emissions to 55 percent of 1990 levels by 2030 was "incompatible with fundamental rights". The current measures "violate the freedoms of the complainants, some of whom are still very young" because they "irreversibly offload major emission reduction burdens onto periods after 2030", the court ruled.

It argued that while the state had not violated its duty to protect citizens against climate change, the government had nonetheless not set out the timeline for further emissions reductions in enough detail.

Assessing that the risk of "serious burdens" being put on generations beyond 2030 as significant, the court called on Berlin to "at the very least determine the size of the annual emission amounts to be set for periods after 2030".

Nine young claimants

Besides an emissions target for 2030, Germany's new climate change law introduced by Merkel's government in 2019 includes a range of policies, including incentivizing renewable energies, expanding electric car infrastructure and carbon trading. The law was passed in order to comply with the 2016 Paris Agreement, under which countries aim to keep the global temperature increase to under two degrees Celsius, and ideally closer to 1.5 degrees, by 2050.



BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel attends a video-conferenced meeting with China's Premier Li Keqiang (unseen) Wednesday at the Chancellery in Berlin, during virtual German-Chinese governmental consultations. —AFP

Germany said last month it had met its annual climate goals set out by the law in 2020, in part due to a reduction of activity during the coronavirus pandemic. Yet activists have long argued that the law does not go far enough, prompting a series of legal claims against the government to toughen the measures.

Supported by Greenpeace and German Fridays for Future activist Luisa Neubauer, the claimants included a group of nine young Germans whose families' agricultural or sustainable tourism businesses have been threatened by heatwaves and floods. "We have won! Climate protection is not a nice-to-have, it's a fundamental right," tweeted Neubauer, 25, in reaction to the ruling. The government also appeared to welcome the ruling, with conservative Economy and Energy Minister Peter Altmaier calling it an "epochal" decision for "climate protection and young peoples' rights", which would also give "planning security to business". —AFP

International

Palestinian leaders weigh delay of long-awaited vote

Elections expected to bolster faith in Palestinian governance

RAMALLAH: Palestinian leaders were set to decide whether to hold elections next month as scheduled or call a delay that could trigger further frustration in a divided society which last voted in 2006. Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and blockaded Gaza Strip have voiced hope that the polls could help restore credibility and heal rifts. Fatah, which controls the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority, reached an agreement with its long-standing rival Hamas, the Islamists who control Gaza, to hold legislative polls on May 22 and a presidential vote on July 31.

The official Wafa news agency said yesterday that PA president Mahmud Abbas, also Fatah's leader, would chair a meeting "tonight in Ramallah that includes all the political factions to discuss the latest with the elections and whether they should be held or cancelled." "A final decision" would be made before Friday, Wafa reported. Hamas said Wednesday it "rejects any attempt to postpone the elections."

Hamas won a surprise victory in the 2006 elections but it was not recognized by Abbas. The Islamists took power in Gaza the following year in a week of bloody clashes. Abbas critics charge that he is seeking to buy time as Fatah's prospects have been threatened by splinter factions, including one led by a nephew of iconic Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and another by a powerful, exiled former Fatah security chief, Mohammed Dahlan. "If Abbas delays elections, we will start with demonstrations," Daoud Abu Libdeh, a candidate with Dahlan's "Future" faction, told AFP in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem

Palestinians insist on the right to hold elections in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, which Palestinians claim as the capital of their future

state. During the last Palestinian election, east Jerusalem residents cast ballots on the outskirts of the city and thousands voted in post offices, a symbolic move agreed to by Israel. Israel, which now bans all Palestinian political activity across Jerusalem, has not commented on whether it would allow voting in the city.

In a meeting with EU diplomats this week, Israeli foreign ministry political director Alon Bar said elections were "an internal Palestinian issue, and that Israel has no intention of intervening in them nor preventing them." Wafa quoted top official Fatah Mahmoud Aloul as saying that holding elections that excluded Jerusalem would be "treason". Palestinian journalist and Abbas critic Nadia Harhash, a candidate on the "Together We Can" electoral list, said using Jerusalem as an excuse for postponement "is definitely not a smart move for the PA". She argued it would give Israel de facto veto power over the Palestinian right to vote.

Hamas said a delay amount to a surrender to "the (Israeli) occupation's veto". Tensions in Jerusalem surged at the weekend as Palestinians clashed with Israeli police over the right to gather in an Old City plaza after evening Ramadan prayers. Following several days of unrest that left dozens injured, Israeli police removed the barricades blocking Damascus Gate, allowing Palestinians to resume their gatherings. Hamas said such "heroic victories" should encourage Palestinians to press ahead with Jerusalem voting.

Factions

The elections are seen in part as a unified effort by Hamas and Fatah to bolster international faith in Palestinian governance ahead of possible renewed US-led diplomacy under President Joe Biden, after four years



JERUSALEM: Palestinian supporters of Mohammed Dahlan's 'Future' party rally against a possible delay of elections in Jerusalem. —AFP

of Donald Trump that saw Washington endorse key Israeli objectives.

Harhash argued that Abbas had hoped the elections would allow Fatah and Hamas to continue sharing power, but felt threatened by the emergence of strong splinter factions and the rise of new political groups critical of his leadership. The main challenges to Abbas include the "Freedom list" headed by Arafat's nephew Nasser Al-Kidwa, which has been endorsed by Marwan Barghouti, who is serving multiple life sentences in Israel prison. Dahlan, who poses another threat, has been credited with bringing coronavirus vaccines into Gaza and distributing financial aid across the enclave, as well as in the West Bank. —AFP

Myanmar air bases come under rocket fire

YANGON: Two Myanmar air force bases came under rocket attack yesterday, the military said, as the country grapples with violence in the wake of the February 1 coup. Myanmar has been in turmoil since the generals seized power, ousting civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and unleashing a wave of near-daily street protests calling for a return to democracy.

Security forces have sought to quell the unrest with a brutal crackdown on protests, with more than 750 civilians killed, according to a local monitoring group. Fighting has also flared up between the military and Myanmar's numerous ethnic rebel armies, some of which have backed the protest movement and sheltered activists on the run from the junta.

A military spokesman said air bases in the central cities of Magway and Meiktila came under rocket fire early yesterday morning, but no damage was done. It is not clear who was behind the attacks, but the military has launched air strikes in recent weeks against the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the leading ethnic rebel armies. The KNU, which holds territory along the border with Thailand, on Tuesday attacked and razed an army post, prompting the military to respond with fresh air strikes.

The upsurge in clashes between the military and ethnic rebels has prompted some observers, including the UN, to warn that the country's crisis could spiral into a broader conflict. Some 756 civilians have been killed and more than 4,500



This handout photo taken and released by Dawei Watch yesterday shows a protester holding signs supporting the newly formed opposition National Unity Government (NUG) during a demonstration against the military coup in Pandale village in Dawei's Launglone township. —AFP

arrested in the military's crackdown on protests, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a local monitoring group.

The military authorities—which have labelled the AAPP an unlawful organization—say only 258 protesters have been killed, along with 17 policemen and seven soldiers. Suu Kyi, held under house arrest since February 1 and apparently kept unaware of the chaos raging in the country, has been hit with a raft of charges that could see her barred from politics for life. Protest leaders are also facing legal action with one, Wai Moe Naing, charged with murder and treason according to state media. —AFP

Capitol riot trial tests freedom of expression limits

NEW YORK: Free speech may be sacred in the United States but calling for the killing of US lawmakers on social media is unlawful, a New York jury ruled Wednesday after a weeklong trial that revisited the January 6 riot at the Capitol. The federal trial, the first related to the storming of Congress by supporters of ex-president Donald Trump, was viewed as a test case for the limits of freedom of expression protected by the First Amendment of the US constitution.

After just three hours of jury deliberations, Brendan Hunt, a 37-year-old court employee who uses the alias "X-Ray Ultra," was found guilty of threatening to murder elected officials including Democratic congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, and progressive congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. He was convicted of an "intent to impede, intimidate and interfere" with the performing of their official duties, specifically Congress's vote on January 6 that confirmed President Joe Biden had won November's election over Trump.

Hunt was also charged with "intent to retaliate" over the electoral college vote count, which affirmed that Trump would have to leave the White House after just one term. The charges related to several messages that Hunt posted on social networks. —AFP

International

Philippines' Duterte refuses to stop South China Sea patrols

Country's claims to the waterway 'cannot be bargainable': President

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has said he will not withdraw navy and coast guard boats patrolling the disputed South China Sea, insisting the country's sovereignty over the waters is not negotiable. Tensions over the sea—which China claims almost entirely—have spiked as Beijing refuses to pull out vessels from the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone and Manila steps up maritime patrols. Duterte is under growing domestic pressure to take a harder line, but has been reluctant to confront China over the issue as he fosters closer ties with the economic giant.

He said late Wednesday that while the Philippines is indebted to its "good friend" China for many things, including free COVID-19 vaccines, his country's claims to the waterway "cannot be bargainable".

"I'll tell China, we do not want trouble, we do not want war. But if you tell us to leave—no," Duterte said. "There are things which are not really subject to a compromise, such as us pulling back. It's difficult. I hope they understand, but I have the interest of my country also to protect."

Duterte's remarks came after the country's defense department said "China has no business telling the Philippines what we can and cannot do with our own waters". The Philippine coast guard

is conducting drills near Thitu Island and Scarborough Shoal, as well as the Batanes islands in the north and the southern and eastern parts of the country.

Scarborough—one of the region's richest fishing grounds—has long been a flashpoint between Manila and Beijing. In response to the exercises, China's foreign ministry said Monday the Philippines should "stop actions complicating the situation and escalating disputes". In recent weeks, Manila has boosted "sovereignty patrols" involving the navy, coast guard and fisheries in the Spratly Islands—an archipelago contested by several countries. Beijing has ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the South China Sea to be without basis.

Once-frosty ties between Manila and Beijing have warmed under Duterte, who set aside the ruling in exchange for promises of trade and investment—which critics say have not materialized.

Delays in COVID-19 vaccine deliveries has left the Philippines heavily reliant on the CoronaVac jab developed by China's Sino-vac. Around 3.5 million doses of CoronaVac have been sent to the Southeast Asian country so far, including one million donated doses. —AFP



A Philippine coastguard ship is seen sailing past a Chinese coastguard ship near Scarborough shoal, in the South China Sea. —AFP

French officers face sanctions after 'civil war' warning

PARIS: Eighteen French soldiers, including a few officers, who signed an open letter warning about the risk of "civil war" in France will face sanctions before a military council, the armed forces chief of staff said Wednesday. "Each one (will go) before a senior military council," General Francois Lecointre told Le Parisien newspaper, and could be "delisted" or "put into immediate retirement".

The open letter, published by right-wing magazine Valeurs Actuelles last week, predicted that failure to act against "suburban hordes"—or residents of mainly immigrant suburban areas—and other groups who "scorn our country" will lead to "civil war" and deaths "in the thousands".

Prime Minister Jean Castex labeled the rare intervention in politics by military figures "an initiative against all of our republican principles, of honor and the duty of the army". The 18, including four officers, were among hundreds of signatories to the open letter. "I believe that the higher the responsibilities, the stronger the obligation of neutrality and exemplarity," said Lecointre.

The main instigators of the letter are alleged to have ties to far-right, anti-immigration movements in France. The first signatory, Jean-Pierre Fabre-Bernadac, ran security in the 1990s for the National Front leader, the Canard Enchaîné newspaper reported.

Others include retired general Antoine Martinez, who founded "Volontaires pour la France", a right-wing group committed to defending "traditional French values". However, Lecointre denied that there was any far-right radicalization in the army. The letter went on to say, "laxist" government policies would result in chaos requiring "the intervention of our comrades on active duty in a perilous mission of protection of our civilizational values". —AFP

US sounds alarm over Hong Kong 'exit ban' fears

HONG KONG: The United States said yesterday it was "deeply concerned" by a new Hong Kong immigration law which includes powers to stop people leaving the city, raising fears Chinese mainland-style exit bans could be deployed there. The law was passed on Wednesday by a city 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.

It grants the immigration chief powers to bar people from boarding planes to and from the city. "We are aware of this legislation and share widespread concerns in Hong Kong about its content, potential uses, and lack of oversight or accountability," a State Department spokesperson said in a statement yesterday. "We have long standing concerns about the PRC's arbitrary use of exit bans without due process of law, including against American citizens."

China warns US against imposing democratic ideals

BEIJING: China warned the United States yesterday against imposing its democratic ideals, while criticizing trade sanctions and military moves in Beijing's backyard just hours after President Biden's speech on American geopolitical priorities. The remarks came after Biden's first address to Congress, in which the US leader placed a renewed focus on diplomacy and said the country was in competition with China and others to win the 21st century.

Biden added that "autocrats think democracies can't compete", while noting the US welcomes competition and is not looking for conflict. Asked about the speech, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman

We are deeply concerned by the prospect of Hong Kong authorities adopting similar arbitrary measures," the spokesperson added.

Hong Kong's government says the law will not be applied to people leaving the city and is aimed at stopping illegal immigrants travelling to the business hub. But 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 Hong Kong.

In a potential recognition of those concerns, Hong Kong's government late Wednesday said it would draft subsidiary legislation specifying that the law would only be applied to inbound flights.

The US statement urged the Hong Kong government to honor this "public commitment" to not use the law "as a pretext to deny boarding for outbound passengers". Britain's Foreign Office also issued a brief statement.

"The right of people to leave Hong Kong is guaranteed under the Basic Law and should be upheld," a spokesperson said, referring to the city's post-handover mini-constitution. So-called "exit bans" are often used by mainland China against activists who challenge authorities. They have also ensnared business figures involved in commercial disputes. Local activists and lawyers from Hong Kong's influential Bar Association warn the bill gives "apparently unfettered power" to the immigration director to do the same, should they wish to. —AFP

Wang Wenbin said it was normal for the US and China to compete in some areas. "But this kind of competition should be a track and field race, not a duel to the death," he told a regular press briefing yesterday. Wang also warned that "forcing other countries to accept one's democratic system... will only create divisions, intensify tension, and undermine stability."

In his speech, President Biden also said the US would stand up to unfair trade practices such as subsidies for state-owned enterprises and intellectual property theft. But China lashed out a day later at the US for "violating the market principle of fair competition" and "politicizing" issues such as the economy, trade and technology, in reference to the trade war between both countries in recent years. "China is committed to developing a relationship with the US based on non-conflict and non-confrontation," Wang said.

While Biden said he told Chinese President Xi Jinping the US would maintain a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific to prevent conflict—just as it did with NATO in Europe—China highlighted issues with US deployments in the region. —AFP

International

Millions vote in final phase of marathon India election

Many voters in rural parts of W Bengal fail to observe social distancing rules

KOLKATA: Millions voted in the final phase of a marathon election in India's West Bengal yesterday, despite a record-breaking spike in COVID-19 infections and deaths that has devastated the country. Long queues of voters appeared outside polling booths as temperatures soared. Many in rural parts of the state failed to observe social distancing rules, with some wearing masks but others hanging them loosely on their chins or from their ears.

Sporadic violence was reported from several constituencies, with crude bombs thrown and vehicles damaged. Thousands have been killed in political violence in West Bengal over the decades, and this year's polls—held in eight phases over the course of a month—have also triggered deadly clashes between rival parties.

Winning power in the state of 90 million would be a major victory for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, which is seeking to end a decade of rule by the state's firebrand leader Mamata Banerjee. Nearly 8.5 million people are eligible to vote in the eighth phase of polling in the state. Results will be released on May 2.

"In line with the COVID-19 protocols, I call upon people to cast their vote and enrich the festival of democracy," Modi tweeted yesterday.

India's oxygen crisis: Why is there a deadly crunch?

NEW DELHI: A devastating surge in coronavirus infections has exposed India's dilapidated health infrastructure and a deep shortage of oxygen—a key treatment for seriously ill COVID-19 patients. AFP looks at the reasons behind the shortage:

Why is medical oxygen vital?

Oxygen therapy is crucial for severe COVID-19 patients with hypoxaemia—when oxygen levels in the blood are too low. "Some clinical studies show that up to a quarter of hospitalized (COVID-19) patients require oxygen therapy and upwards to two-thirds of those in intensive care units," community health specialist Rajib Dasgupta told AFP. "This is why it is imperative to fix oxygen supply systems in hospital settings as this is a disease that affects lungs primarily." Experts have long raised the alarm about shortages of medical oxygen in India and other poor countries to treat pneumonia, the world's biggest preventable infectious killer of children under five. But the government has for years failed to invest enough money into such infrastructure, experts say.

Does India produce enough oxygen?

The short answer: yes.

Experts say the vast nation of 1.3 billion people is producing enough oxygen—just over 7,000 tons a day. Most is for industrial use, but can be diverted for medical purposes. The bottlenecks are in transport and storage. Liquid oxygen at very low temperatures has to be transported in cryogenic tankers to distributors, which then convert it into gas for filling cylinders.

Packed election rallies attended by mostly maskless crowds including in the restive eastern state, along with huge religious festivals, have been blamed for India's surge in cases over the past few weeks. Before and since voting kicked off in late March, the Indian leader, along with Banerjee and other minor parties, held numerous rallies before cutting back as virus cases grew.

Major cities such as the capital New Delhi and financial hub Mumbai have borne the brunt of the recent surge, but infections are also rising fast in West Bengal and its capital Kolkata. "One of the two persons undergoing RT-PCR tests in Kolkata and its suburbs is turning out to be positive," Kolkata Municipal Corporation's chief administrator, Firhad Hakim, told AFP.

"Hospitals are running out of beds. Bodies are also piling high at crematoriums," he said, adding that burial plots were running out and authorities were searching for new sites. Just over 17,000 new infections were recorded by the state's health department on Wednesday, while almost 55,000 tests were carried out on the same day. Nearly 30 million voters are also expected to take part in village elections yesterday in India's most-populous state Uttar Pradesh, which has been badly hit by the virus. —AFP

But India is short of cryogenic tankers. And such special tankers, when filled, have to be transported by road and not by air for safety reasons. Most oxygen producers are in India's east, while the soaring demand has been in cities including financial hub Mumbai in the west and the capital Delhi in the north. "The supply chain has to be tweaked to move medical oxygen from certain regions which have excess supply to regions which need more supply," the head of one of India's biggest medical oxygen suppliers Inox Air Products, Siddharth Jain, told AFP.

Meanwhile, many hospitals do not have on-site oxygen plants, often because of poor infrastructure, a lack of expertise and high costs. Late last year, India issued tenders for on-site oxygen plants for hospitals. But the plans were never actioned, local media report.



MUMBAI: Local resident Shah Nawaz Shaikh, who sold his SUV car to raise funds in order to start free service to provide oxygen cylinders to the needy people, checks the pressure of an oxygen cylinder at a distribution center in a slum in Mumbai. — AFP



KOLKATA: Voters queue up to cast their ballot during the final phase of West Bengal's state legislative assembly elections in Kolkata yesterday. — AFP

India COVID deaths surge again, more global aid flown in

KOLKATA: India's coronavirus disaster deepened yesterday with its daily death toll climbing above 3,600, as more international aid was flown in with the United States sending nearly one million test kits. The United States and several European nations have started to ease restrictions this week following successful vaccination campaigns, but the pandemic continues to worsen in many parts of the world. Among the most devastating of those waves is in India, where the death and infection rates have been rising exponentially throughout April.

Yesterday, India reported 3,645 deaths over the past 24 hours, while confirmed new cases were a global record at more than 379,000. The official numbers are widely believed to be far lower than the reality. The pandemic has claimed at least 3.1 million lives around the world, with India accounting for more than 200,000 fatalities.

In many Indian cities, hospitals are running out of beds as relatives of the sick crowd outside pharmacies and suppliers for medicines and oxygen cylinders. "We rushed to multiple hospitals, but were denied admission everywhere," said the son of an 84-year-old woman who died at home this week after a desperate search for a hospital bed and oxygen in Kolkata, capital of West Bengal state. The spiking body count has also overwhelmed crematoriums and graveyards, and caused a shortage of wood for funeral pyres. The Indian government will open vaccinations to all adults from Saturday. It had previously limited

shots to the over-45s and certain other groups. Several states have warned, however, that they do not have sufficient vaccine stocks and the expanded rollout is threatened by administrative bickering, confusion over prices and technical glitches on the government's digital vaccine platform. Many nations have rushed to help India, including the United States which on Wednesday announced it was sending more than \$100 million in supplies.

A first US military flight, carrying 960,000 rapid tests and 100,000 face masks for frontline health workers, was due to arrive yesterday. The World Health Organization has said the virus variant feared to be contributing to the catastrophe in India has now been found in more than a dozen countries. But the body stopped short of saying it is more transmissible, more deadly or able to dodge vaccines. Ugur Sahin, the co-founder of vaccine developer and Pfizer partner BioNTech, said he was confident his company's shot works against that variant.

In the United States, President Joe Biden on Wednesday hailed his nation's inoculation program as one of "the greatest logistical achievements" in American history. More than 234 million doses had been administered by Wednesday in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control. The rollout has boosted hopes that the world's biggest economy is primed for recovery.

Countries are looking to do the same in Europe, where more than 50 million known infections have been logged since the start of the pandemic, according to an AFP tally of official data Wednesday. The Netherlands on Wednesday ended a curfew and eased restrictions on outdoor bars and terraces. It followed similar moves in Italy, Portugal and Switzerland. France is hoping to join the trend and ease more restrictions this month.—AFP

International

China launches first module for space station 'Heavenly Palace'

A milestone in Beijing's ambitious plan to establish a human presence in space

BEIJING: China launched the first module of its "Heavenly Palace" space station yesterday, a milestone in Beijing's ambitious plan to establish a permanent human presence in space.

Billions of dollars have been poured into space exploration as China seeks to reflect its rising global stature and growing technological might, following in the footsteps of the United States, Russia and Europe. The Tianhe core module, which houses life support equipment and a living space for astronauts, was launched from Wenchang in China's tropical Hainan province on a Long-March 5B rocket on Thursday, state television showed. Chinese President Xi Jinping called the space station a key step in "building a great nation of science and technology" in a congratulatory message yesterday.

The Tiangong space station, whose name means "Heavenly Palace", is expected to be operational by 2022 after around 11 missions to deliver more modules and assemble them in orbit. Live footage from state broadcaster CCTV showed space program employees cheering as the rocket powered its way through the atmosphere billowing flames from the launch site. Crowds wearing sunhats and wielding smartphone cameras gathered under the coconut trees of a nearby beach to watch the launch as a band played in photos published by the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation.

"A palace in the sky will no longer be just a romantic fantasy of the ancients," the CCTV anchor said. The completed station will be similar to the Soviet "Mir" station that orbited Earth from the 1980s until 2001. The Chinese space station is expected to remain in low orbit at between 400 and 450 kilo-



People watch a Long March 5B rocket, carrying China's Tianhe space station core module, as it lifts off from the Wenchang Space Launch Center in southern China's Hainan province yesterday. — AFP

metres above Earth for a lifespan of around 15 years.

The completed station, weighing little more than 90 tons, will be around a quarter the size of the International Space Station. The station will have two other modules for scientific study and will be equipped with solar panels as well as experimental equipment including an ultracold atomic experiment apparatus, according to the Chinese Society of Astronautics.

the Fire to Carry us deftly to new heights and to the future. We will miss you. May you Rest In Peace." US President Joe Biden said that while Collins "may not have received equal glory," he was "an equal partner, reminding our nation about the importance of collaboration in service of great goals." Born in Rome in 1930 to a US army officer serving as military attache there, Collins went on



In this file photo obtained from NASA, shows the official crew portrait of the Apollo 11 astronauts taken at the Kennedy Space center on March 30, 1969, (shown left to right) are Neil A. Armstrong, Commander; Michael Collins, Module Pilot; Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin, Lunar Module Pilot. — AFP

The core module will give three astronauts 50 cubic metres of living space, equipped with advanced telecommunications equipment that will allow astronauts to browse websites "no differently from normal people using the internet and phones on Earth", Bai Linhou, deputy chief designer of the space station, told CCTV. China launched the Tian-gong-1 lab, its first prototype module intended to lay the groundwork for the permanently crewed station, in September 2011.—AFP

to become a fighter pilot and test pilot with the air force. He applied to NASA after being inspired by John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth, and was selected to be an astronaut in 1963.

Collins' first spaceflight was on the Gemini 10 mission, where he made a then record-breaking two spacewalks. But he is best known for being a member of the Apollo 11 mission when, on July 20, 1969, his crewmates Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin took their giant leaps for mankind. Remarketing on Collins' role, a NASA press officer would later tell reporters: "Not since Adam has any human known such solitude." Collins spent half a century trying to debunk that myth. "I would enjoy a perfectly enjoyable hot coffee, I had music if I wanted to," he said at a 50th anniversary event in 2019.

"Good old Command Module Columbia had every facility that I needed, and it was plenty big and I really enjoyed my time by myself instead of being terribly lonely." He was worried, however, that Armstrong and Aldrin might not make it back alive—remarketing once that being the mission's sole survivor would have made him "a marked man for life." Ultimately, Apollo 11 was a success and after the crew splashed down in the Pacific, they embarked on a worldwide tour, at the end of which they were all awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.—AFP

China's long march to Moon and beyond

BEIJING: The launch of the first module of China's new space station - "Heavenly Palace" - yesterday underlined how far the country has come in achieving its space dream. The Tianhe core module houses life support equipment and a living space for astronauts, and is another key step in Beijing's grand plans to establish a permanent human presence in space.

Beijing has poured billions into its military-run space program, with hopes of having a crewed space station by 2022 and eventually sending humans to the Moon. The country has come a long way in its race to catch up with the United States and Russia, whose astronauts and cosmonauts have decades of experience in space exploration. But Beijing sees its space project as a mark of its rising global stature and growing technological might. Here is a look at China's space program through the decades, and where it is headed:

Mao's vow

Soon after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957, Chairman Mao Zedong pronounced: "We too will make satellites." It took more than a decade, but in 1970, China launched its first satellite on a Long March rocket. Human spaceflight took decades longer, with Yang Liwei becoming the first Chinese "taikonaut" in 2003. As the launch approached, concerns over the viability of the mission caused Beijing to cancel a live television broadcast at the last minute.

But it went smoothly, with Yang orbiting the Earth 14 times during a 21-hour flight aboard the Shenzhou 5. China has launched five crewed missions since.

Space station and 'Jade Rabbit'

Following in the footsteps of the United States and Russia, China is striving to build a space station circling the planet. The Tian-gong-1 lab was launched in September 2011.

In 2013, the second Chinese woman in space, Wang Yaping, gave a video class from inside the space module to children across the world's most populous country.

The craft was also used for medical experiments and, most importantly, tests intended to prepare for the construction of a space station. That was followed by the "Jade Rabbit" lunar rover in 2013, which first appeared a dud when it turned dormant and stopped sending signals back to Earth.—AFP

Michael Collins: 'The loneliest man in history'

WASHINGTON: American astronaut Michael Collins was hailed as a lifelong advocate of space exploration: erudite and witty yet also self-effacing, maintaining in a 2009 interview with NASA that his historic accomplishments were "90 percent blind luck" and that astronauts should not be celebrated as heroes. Collins who piloted the Apollo 11 command module while his crewmates became the first people to walk on the Moon, died on Wednesday after battling cancer.

Sometimes called "the loneliest man in history" because of his long solo flight while his colleagues loped across the lunar surface, Collins never earned the same global name recognition as Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin.

But "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. Crewmate Aldrin led the tributes, writing on Twitter: "Dear Mike, Wherever you have been or will be, you will always have

Friday Times Lifestyle

FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 2021

www.kuwaittimes.net



A visitor peeks out of a bowl of fruit, part of an optical illusion installation, at the Illusion Museum in Erbil, the capital of Iraq's northern autonomous Kurdish region. —AFP



Ancient Egypt martial art enthusiasts eye Olympic status

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ANCIENT EGYPT MARTIAL ART ENTHUSIASTS EYE OLYMPIC STATUS



Youths take part in a training session of Egypt's combative sport of 'tahtib' (stick-fighting), at a sporting club in the Rihab suburb on the eastern outskirts of the capital Cairo. —AFP photos

Egypt's tradition of tahtib (stick fighting), popular at festivities and dating back at least 5,000 years, has become a modern martial art that enthusiasts hope will eventually make it to the Olympics. French-Egyptian Adel Paul Boulad, who for some 15 years has been the driving force behind modern tahtib, calls the push a "unifying project" and a "cultural revolution". The modern practice "is an updated sports version of a multi-millennial art", said the 69-year-old martial arts teacher. "It is a sporting practice that is codified, structured... and which spans the entire history of Egypt," he told AFP.

In traditional tahtib, popular in Egypt's rural south, two men perform a dance while wielding bamboo-like rods, in a face-off somewhat resembling a fencing duel. Folk musicians with loud drums accompany the performance, which is popular at weddings and festivities, and pump up the crowd encircling the men, who don traditional galabeya robes. The UN cultural agency UNESCO in 2016 listed the martial art as "intangible cultural heritage of humanity".

'Get moving'

France-based Boulad, who was also behind tahtib's UNESCO candidacy, formalized its intricate moves and broke it down to 12 forms—the equivalent of katas in Japanese martial arts. The "secrets of combat" were inscribed in stone on the walls of temples and tombs of ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom (2,700 to 2,200 BC) until the arrival of the Greeks, who conquered the North African country around 300 BC. Boulad, who is also a business coach, wants to see tahtib included as a combat sport at the Olympics in the coming years. Wearing a red belt with three tips—reminiscent of the style of ancient Egyptian warriors—and black outfits, competitors wield a 1.3-metre rattan stick. Unlike traditional tahtib, women can partici-



pate in its modern version.

With exhibitions, notably at the International Martial Arts Festival in Paris in 2016, modern tahtib already has attracted followers internationally, but is still trying to gain a foothold in Egypt. Boulad said he had given himself two to three years, with the help of private financing, to create “regional centers” across the world for spreading the sport further, including in Canada, Colombia and Hungary. “I say to Egyptians, get moving, otherwise tahtib will go to the Olympics without an Egyptian team representing it,” he said.

‘Part of history’

In Cairo’s upmarket eastern suburb of Rehab, a leisure park welcomes the first enthusiastic Egyptian instructors trained by Boulad, and their eager students. Nasser Refai, 44, a physical education teacher and one of the trainers, said the Egyptian fighting style inherited from the time of the pharaohs was a “treasure”. “It’s something we have to keep. Like any art form, if we don’t practice, we lose it,” added Refai, known affectionately as Captain Nasser to his students. He and his associates have slowly started attracting young local admirers of the sport via social media.

“It’s not just about fighting, it’s about respecting and changing yourself,” he told AFP, adding that it would be his “dream” to see tahtib recognized as an Olympic sport. Stick in hand and wearing a headscarf, Jasmine Anwar, 25, is keenly taking part in her first training session. “I will continue. I won’t stop at just knowing how to hold the stick,” the school-teacher said. New recruit, Jouba Ayoub Mohammed, a 27-year-old graphic designer, expressed interest in promoting the sport to others of his generation. But “we must first let Egyptians know that tahtib is not a folk dance that is performed only at weddings and other cultural events,” he said. “It’s a part of ancient Egyptian history.” —AFP

From Miami and Havana, singers take aim in battle of song



Israel Rojas, lead singer and director of the Buena Fe music band, poses for a picture during an interview with AFP in Havana. —AFP

An ideological battle is being waged over Cuba’s communist government between musicians in Havana and Miami, with political slogans set to reggaeton, salsa and rap. The latest volley will be fired on Sunday when hip hop duo Gente de Zona will perform, live for the first time, their YouTube hit “Patria y Vida” in Miami. The title of the track—a collaboration with other Cuban artists based in Florida and at home—translates as “Fatherland and Life,” a spin on the slogan “Patria o Muerte” (Fatherland or Death) coined by the late communist leader Fidel Castro in 1960. The tune is a no-holds-barred critique of the island’s six-decade-old communist government, rattling off a long list of grievances about poverty, repression and misrule. “It is over,” declare the singers. “We are not afraid.” It is this song, recorded in Havana and Miami and launched online on February 16, that unleashed the battle of song. Cuban state television declared it a “campaign against Cuba” and soon started hosting its own pro-government musical fare. Florida, home to the largest group of Cuban living abroad, is across the ocean just 90 miles (145 kilometers) from Cuba.

‘A critical moment’

“‘Patria y Vida’ came about because Cuba is in a critical moment,” Randy Malcolm of Gente de Zona told AFP. Malcolm and his singing partner Alexander Delgado have come under pressure from other exiles in their adopted Miami to use their public profile to speak out against the Cuban government. And speak out they do. “There is repression like never before. There is no freedom of expression. Human rights are not respected,” said Malcolm. “Many people who are here (in Florida) fighting the dictatorship have never done so before. We, too, didn’t have the courage” until now, said Malcom, who left Cuba for the United States in 2013. But the fear that Cubans have “is disappearing bit by bit.”

‘Cuba cries freedom’

Back home the Cuban government launched a musical counter-assault. State TV has on repeat a music video entitled “Patria o Muerte, por la vida” (“Fatherland or Death, for life”) featuring artists “committed to the



Alexander Delgado (left) and Randy Malcom (right) of Cuban reggaeton duo “Gente de Zona”, pose for a photo during an interview with AFP ahead of their Miami concert at Marine Stadium in Key Biscayne, Florida.

Cuban Revolution.” To salsa vibes, a quintet prances in front of a Cuban flag and in song accuse the makers of “Patria y Vida” of being paid to “lick the arrogance of the empire”—meaning the United States. US sanctions on the island were tightened under former president Donald Trump. The quarrel continues, and just about every week a new song emerges on one or the other side of the Florida Straits. In Miami, rapper El Micha released “Cuba Cries Freedom,” while in Havana youngsters dressed in police uniforms sing “I won’t sell myself for a car and a mansion.” Mixing politics and music is hardly new to Cuba. In cradle of rumba and kingdom of salsa, artists have often defended the revolution, and its leaders Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, in song. Since the 19th century “a political point of view” has been present in Cuban music, said music historian Emir Garcia. But he is not convinced that the recent explosion of hastily-made, tit-for-tat melodies will sway anyone new. “In three months it will be over. Even if there are 60 more songs, people will forget. People are not interested in this,” he said.

‘Strength of a country’

The heated musical war however shows the growing divide between Cubans and home and US-based exiles - forcing Cuban artists to pick a side, said Havana-based singer Israel Rojas. His duo, Buena Fe, has released a song called “The strength of a country”—a tribute to Cuba’s quest for a home-grown coronavirus vaccine. “In times of radicalization, looking away and sticking your head in the sand is truly a pity and sad, because you end up on the side of the aggressor”—the United States, Rojas told AFP. Those criticizing Cuban-based artists were doing so from an “erroneous reading of the cause of our poverty, from the comfort of a full refrigerator,” he insisted, wearing a T-shirt proclaiming: “Proud to be Cuban”. From Florida, singer Alexis Valdes calls for appeasement. “No-one stops being Cuban... for having emigrated and having different opinions on the government,” he told AFP in Miami. “We (Cubans) have been super divided, and it is a catastrophe for the country, because a country so divided does not advance” —AFP



In this file photo taken on April 29, 2011 Britain's Prince William and his wife Kate, Duchess of Cambridge, look at each other as they come out of Westminster Abbey following their wedding ceremony, in London. — AFP photos



In this file photo (from left) Albert Windsor, Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge holding Prince Louis, Prince George, Princess Charlotte and Britain's Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge stand with other members of the Royal Family on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to watch a fly-past of aircraft by the Royal Air Force, in London.

ROYAL FUTURE: WILLIAM AND KATE CELEBRATE 10 YEARS OF MARRIAGE

Prince William and his wife Kate mark a decade of marriage yesterday, with the popular couple increasingly seen as the British monarchy's future as other senior royals age or recede from view. Second-in-line to the throne William, 38, and Kate, 39, married at Westminster Abbey on April 29, 2011, after first meeting at university and then dating for more than seven years. They now have three children—seven-year-old Prince George, Princess Charlotte, five, and Prince Louis, three—and their family represents several generations destined to head the centuries-old institution for years to come. After 10 years carrying out solo and joint royal duties as the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, as they have been formally known since tying the knot, the couple are among the most popular monarchy members. "We really have as near to normal a family in the Cambriges as we've ever seen in the royal family and that all bodes well for the future," said royal writer Penny Junor ahead of the anniversary.

Strained relations

The pair have been more in the spotlight recently during a tumultuous period for the royal family that has included the death of Queen Elizabeth II's 99-year-old husband Prince Philip, William's grandfather. The monarchy has also been rocked by Prince Harry and wife Meghan's shock decision to step back from the institution last year and move to the United States, amid rumours of a rift with his sibling William. Harry, 36, and Meghan, 39, followed their departure by giving

a bombshell television interview in March in which they accused the monarchy of racism, and failing to support them.

Harry also said William and their father, Prince Charles, were "trapped" by royal convention while Meghan singled out Kate as having made her cry ahead of her 2018 wedding. The accusations gave a rare glimpse into strained relationships within Britain's most famous family and the four younger royals, who were once dubbed the "Fab Four". The explosive charges, which engulfed it for weeks, prompted William to defend the institution he will eventually lead, telling reporters: "We're

very much not a racist family". Harry appeared to begin healing any enduring rift with his brother after reportedly spending several hours with him after Philip's funeral earlier this month, their first public meeting since the furore.

'Very special'

The saga appears to have won Harry and Meghan few fans in Britain, with surveys showing their popularity remains low while most royals' have received a boost lately—likely due to sympathy over Philip. Kate in particular drew widespread praise for her demeanor and style at his funeral, with a striking photograph of her

arriving by car wearing a black veil and face mask making waves around the world. The image, in which her eyes stare down the camera lens, drew comparisons with William's late mother, Princess Diana.

"She has got such poise and elegance and she's not in competition with William," Junor added on Kate. "Everything about her is measured. She's a grown-up." The couple, who began dating when they were both studying at St Andrew's University in Scotland, got engaged in 2010 after William proposed with Diana's engagement ring. "When I first met Kate I knew there was something very special about her," he said in an engagement interview.

Popularity

During their early years as a couple Kate kept her distance from major monarchy events, but was gradually integrated in her future duties and is widely seen to have flourished as a working royal, and as the family's unofficial photographer. With William, they have been especially active during the past year of lockdowns, from baking goods for local vulnerable people to carrying out video calls, supporting key workers and promoting mental health initiatives. Polls show they enjoy significant popularity. William is far more preferred than his 72-year-old father, with around a third of Britons wanting him to succeed his grandmother Queen Elizabeth II instead. Meanwhile, Kate is the third most popular family member behind the 95-year-old queen and William. —AFP



In this file photo Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge and Britain's Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge visit a coronavirus vaccination center set up at Westminster Abbey.

Sotheby's sneaks up on younger market via sneaker sales



This handout photo courtesy of Sotheby's shows the black high-top Yeezys worn by rapper Kanye West during the 2008 Grammy Awards. — AFP photos



A pair of basketball legend Michael Jordan's famous Air Jordans from his rookie season are seen in Geneva during a preview of sale by auction house Sotheby's entitled "Gamers Only".

Sotheby's is staging its first international dedicated sneaker sale, seeing the boom in a formerly niche market as a way to attract younger clients into the world of auctions. Fine art, jewellery and antiques might be the more traditional stock in auction house trade, complete with a packed room and auctioneer banging a wooden gavel. But the coronavirus pandemic has triggered a shift towards smartphone-accessible online auctions. Sotheby's says it has also noticed that younger people are being drawn to auctions by design classics with a back story.

On Monday, the auction house sold a pair of Nike Air Yeezy 1s worn by rapper Kanye West for \$1.8 million (1.5 million euros) — triple the previous record for sneakers. That sale is being followed by "Gamers Only"—Sotheby's debut global dedicated sneaker auction, conducted entirely online. It features 13 pairs of match-worn basketball shoes from some of the NBA's greatest athletes, including Michael Jordan and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The sale runs until 1400 GMT on May 12. Josh Pullan, managing director of Sotheby's global luxury division, said that aged between 20 and 40, the client profile for sneaker sales was generally younger than in regular auctions. "What's also really interesting is that more than 50 percent of the buyers and bidders are new to Sotheby's, so we're seeing this as a great way to bring in new clients," he told AFP.

Yeezy does it

Pullan said that the auction house made a major shift towards digital sales last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic—"and there's no going back", he said. However, the live physical auctions will remain for showpiece sales events. The record price for sneakers has been broken several times recently, as what was seen as a niche interest 10 years ago is now one of the fastest-growing markets, attracting attention from the general public as well as leading collectors. The Nike Air Yeezy 1s, worn by West during the 2008 Grammy Awards, fetched an amount that shattered the previous sneakers auction record of \$615,000 set in August last year.

That sum, achieved by auctioneers Christie's, was for the Nike Air Jordan 1 pair worn by Michael Jordan when he famously shattered the backboard in a 1985 match. "The sneakers category is really exploding," Pullan said. "We're seeing that collectors who are passionate about a category and understand design and a story attached to those items are prepared to chase and purchase those items," he said. "This is a market that we see growing as people's understanding and appreciation continues to grow. That means more people in the space, more competition and more excitement."

Jordans and jewels

The "Gamers Only" collection is on show

at the Bucherer boutique in Geneva alongside standout jewels, watches and handbags from Sotheby's Luxury Week of sales in the Swiss city. The star sneakers are a pair of Jordan's famous Nike Air Jordan 1s. They are estimated to fetch between \$110,000 and \$164,000 but could go for much higher following the buzz around the Yeezy world record. Nike Air Jordan 1s "not only changed basketball footwear forever but are also considered foundational to the development of sneaker culture", Sotheby's said.

The pair on sale—in the Chicago Bulls' red, white and black—were worn by Jordan during his stellar 1984-1985 debut season. Jordan, now 58, went on to become a six-time NBA champion and is widely considered the greatest basketball player of all time. "The Air Jordan 1s are one of the grails," said Pullan. "There's a bit of wear on the toe and around the heels and that gives us a feeling for what happened in the game when they were worn," he added. "This pair is from someone who knew Michael Jordan personally, so they really come with that impeccable provenance." The sale also includes sneakers worn by NBA greats Stephen Curry, Scottie Pippen, Shaquille O'Neal, Charles Barkley, Steve Nash, Kevin Garnett, Patrick Ewing, Dominique Wilkins, Allen Iverson, Moses Malone and Isiah Thomas. — AFP

A year on, Saint Laurent continues rebellion against fashion calendar

It has been a year since Saint Laurent broke away from the traditional fashion calendar, and with its latest collection again presented as an online film Wednesday, many wonder if the old schedules will ever return. The pandemic accelerated an existing trend of major fashion houses questioning whether the punishing rhythm of endless fashion weeks and midseason shows was good for creativity or the climate. Saint Laurent was first to take the leap, announcing in April 2020 that it would skip Paris fashion week that year. And it has not returned, with its latest winter collection again delivered as an online short film outside of any normal timetable.

Set in stunning but barren landscapes of black volcanic rock, ice floes and sheer rock faces, it looked designed to emphasize its distance from the usual champagne-and-celebrity settings of the fashion world. One might wonder whether the models, many in tiny miniskirts and skimpy bodysuits, had enough clothes, or indeed a high enough body-mass index, to survive for long in the Arctic conditions, but stepping out of the comfort zone was precisely the point.

"I want Saint Laurent to be more light and playful, but... it's not just about going out to bars and parties," designer Anthony Vaccarello told Vogue ahead of the release. "Life can't just be when it's bad we are all in black and pajamas and when it's good we are in slutty dresses." Nor should the moody vibe of the



French dancer Zizi Jeanmaire (left) kisses designer Yves Saint-Laurent on July 30, 1962 after the presentation of the Haute couture fashion show in Paris. — AFP photos

video be taken too literally, he added: "Fashion should be something you don't take too seriously. Especially now, when nothing is really necessary. It's good to laugh about life."

'Hacking'

Other big names agree that new approaches are needed. Already before the pandemic, Celine's Hedi Slimane told Le Monde in January 2020: "The notion of the calendar seems obsolete... These days, creating a sense of event and rarity seems more essential than an obligatory exercise at a fixed time," adding that the whole idea of fall/winter and spring/summer seasons was "archaic". Gucci's Alessandro Michele followed



French designer Yves Saint-Laurent poses at his office at La Boetie street in Paris on September 22, 1961.

Saint Laurent's lead in May 2020, saying he would reduce his shows from five to two per year.

In keeping with Michele's efforts to give an "anti-establishment" veneer to the fabled fashion house, he made a huge splash earlier this month with a 100th anniversary show for Gucci—again outside the usual calendar—that knowingly ripped off styles from his friend, Balenciaga stylist Demna Gvasalia (he called it "hacking"). The new-found sense of freedom is "a sign that fashion is not finished and will never finish—independently of any fashion week. Fashion is a representation of life and can self-manage." Michele told industry magazine WWD. — AFP



Aerial view of Puerto Ayora in Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos Islands, some 900 km off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean.

COVID-19 brings tourism, science to a halt on *Galapagos Islands*

When the coronavirus pandemic reached South America human activity on the Galapagos Islands, in the Pacific west of Ecuador, ground almost to a halt, leaving giant tortoises, iguanas and other endemic species to themselves. A four-month lockdown starting in February 2020 after COVID-19 was first detected in the region resulted in a total halt of tourism and near complete shutdown of scientific research. “The impact of COVID was very tough .. the shutdown was immediate, from one day to the next,” complained Juan Carlos Moncayo, 50, who runs a scuba diving center and had to make his six employees redundant.

“We had no time to prepare ourselves.” Since July, the archipelago of 234 islands has partially reopened to tourism-but that has been limited to just 6,000 visitors a month, compared to an average 23,000 before the pandemic. Moncayo’s business hasn’t recovered. Sometimes his boat sets out to sea with just two customers-each paying a minimum

\$160 — when he needs five to make a profit. Other scuba diving businesses didn’t have enough funds to renew their licences. “Out of 12, there are just six left in business,” said Moncayo. Even though tourists must present a negative COVID test to come to the islands, “everything has changed because we go out to work, but with a bit of fear.”

Many businesses have kept their shutters down. Hotels and restaurants are deserted. The tourism sector lost out on \$850 million from March 2020 to March 2021, the local tourism chamber estimates. Some 85 percent of the local economy is dependent on tourism. With the pandemic, airport closures and travel restrictions tourism dropped by 75 percent

compared to the 271,000 visitors in 2019, said Monica Paez, a tourism ministry representative. One lesson she’s learnt is the need for tourism that is “based more on durability ... as a natural heritage site for humanity, that’s a responsibility we have to the whole world.”

‘Disneyland for biologists’

Scientists, too, found themselves twiddling their thumbs, particularly during the lockdown. “I’ve never spent so much time without seeing the ocean since I was in my mother’s womb,” joked Pelayo Salinas, a biologist in Santa Cruz-one of the four inhabited islands-and director of the shark project at the Charles Darwin Foundation. Only 30,000 people live on these volcanic islands located around 1,000-kilometers west of Ecuador. The archipelago is home to more than 2,900 species, a quarter of which are found nowhere else.

“For a biologist, the Galapagos Islands are Disneyland,” added Salinas. But the pandemic “changed our projects, we couldn’t go on



Aerial view of Puerto Ayora in Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos Islands, some 900 km off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean. — AFP photos

Lifestyle | Feature



Artisanal fishing boats are seen in Puerto Ayora in Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos Islands, some 900 km off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean.



People are seen in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos Islands.

the ground” any more, the 37-year-old Spanish researcher told AFP. British naturalist Charles Darwin developed his theory of evolution following a long trip that took in the archipelago of 21 volcanoes, including 13 active ones, the tallest of which is the Wolf at 1,707-meters. While Salinas’s position meant he was allowed to stay, many foreign researchers and interns were repatriated and more than 100 projects ground to a halt.

There was “a direct impact on the scientific program: 60 percent of research activities planned for 2020 were suspended,” said Danny Rueda, the director of the Galapagos National Park (PNG), responsible for 97 percent of the Galapagos land area and a vast marine reserve of almost 800,000 hectares. Thanks to its 300 forest rangers, the PNG has been able to maintain its “investigative activity ... supervising sharks, marine tortoises’ nesting sites, conserva-

tion ... of iguanas, sea lions, etc,” said Rueda. But “movement from one island to another was not allowed.” Park boats have instead been used to transfer COVID-19 patients or move testing equipment.



Aerial view of Puerto Ayora in Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos Islands.

Lifestyle | Feature



Young giant tortoises are seen at a breeding center of Galapagos National Park in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island.

'Time to breathe'

The archipelago has recorded 1,384 cases and 16 deaths from COVID-19, compared to the 375,000 infections and 18,400 fatalities in all of Ecuador, population 17 million. The government plans to vaccinate all adults on the islands by the end of May, making it "the first archipelago in Latin America" free of COVID-19. One unexpected benefit of the lockdown was that scientists have had time to compile and publish their research. "It's given us a chance to breathe, to organize and analyze the data we've compiled," said Paola Lahuatte, 30, another biologist from the Charles Darwin Foundation, who is studying an invasive species of fly threatening 18 bird species. — AFP



Marine iguanas bask in the sun at Galapagos National Park in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos Islands.



People walk by a tourist shop in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos Islands.



Picture of a restaurant in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos Islands.



Wild horses flourish in Chernobyl 35 years after explosion

Down an overgrown country road, three startled wild horses with rugged coats and rigid manes dart into the flourishing overgrowth of their unlikely nature reserve: the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Thirty-five years after the world's worst nuclear disaster—an anniversary commemorated in the ex-Soviet country on Monday—surging flora and fauna have taken over deserted tower blocks, shops and official buildings topped with communist icons. Ukrainian authorities say the area maybe not be fit for humans for 24,000 years, but for now this breed of wild horse has thrived.

“It’s really a symbol of the reserve and even the exclusion zone in general,” said Denys Vyshnevsky, head of the scientific department of the Chernobyl nature reserve created in the area five years ago. The explosion in the fourth reactor at the nuclear power plant in April, 26, 1986 left swathes of Ukraine and neighboring Belarus badly contaminated and led to the creation of a no man’s land within a 30-kilometre



Pasha, a 24-year-old greyish white Lipizzan horse, stands in a paddock.

(19-mile) radius of the station.

Dozens of villages and towns were evacuated, turning the area into a giant reserve unprecedented in Europe by its size. More than three decades after the incident there has been an influx of visitors to the area, spurring

officials to seek official status—and protection—from UNESCO.

A ‘unique’ chance to save biodiversity

Since the disaster, the area has become a haven for elk, wolves—and the stocky endangered breed of wild horse native to Asia, Przewalski’s horse. The breed, named after Russian scientist Nikolai Przewalski who discovered it in the Asia expansive Gobi desert, became all but extinct by the middle of the 20th century, partially due to overhunting. It was reintroduced by scientists to areas of Mongolia, China and Russia as part of preservation efforts. In a different program, 30 of the horses were released into the Chernobyl zone in 1998, replacing an extinct horse native to the region, the Tarpan.

The experiment in Ukraine was soon halted but the horses remained and now number around 150 in parts of the exclusion zone, with around another 60 over the border in Belarus.

“Paradoxically, this is a unique opportunity to preserve biodiversity,” Vyshnevsky said.

Under the right conditions, the Ukrainian herd could eventually increase to 300 or even 500 animals, said Sergiy Zhyla, Senior Researcher, Chernobyl Biosphere Reserve. Researchers at the Prague zoo participating in the conservation efforts now say the global population of Przewalski’s horses has grown to some 2,700. Following the success in Chernobyl, there is discussion over introducing other endangered species to Ukraine’s zone.

Vyshnevsky sees one potential candidate in the European bison—which already roams over the border in Belarus—and discussions are currently underway with the World Wildlife Fund, a global environmental NGO. “We’ll be able to recreate the landscape that was here before humans began intensely exploiting the region,” he said. — AFP



Zeljko Ilicic, the owner of Old Hill sanctuary, plays with a horse in a stable.



Zeljko Ilicic, the owner of Old Hill sanctuary, leads a horse, in a sanctuary near the town of Lapovo.



Violeta Jovic, one of the volunteers, releases the rescued donkeys from the stable in sanctuary near the town of Lapovo.

Kids Page

Word Search

Breakfast Favorites

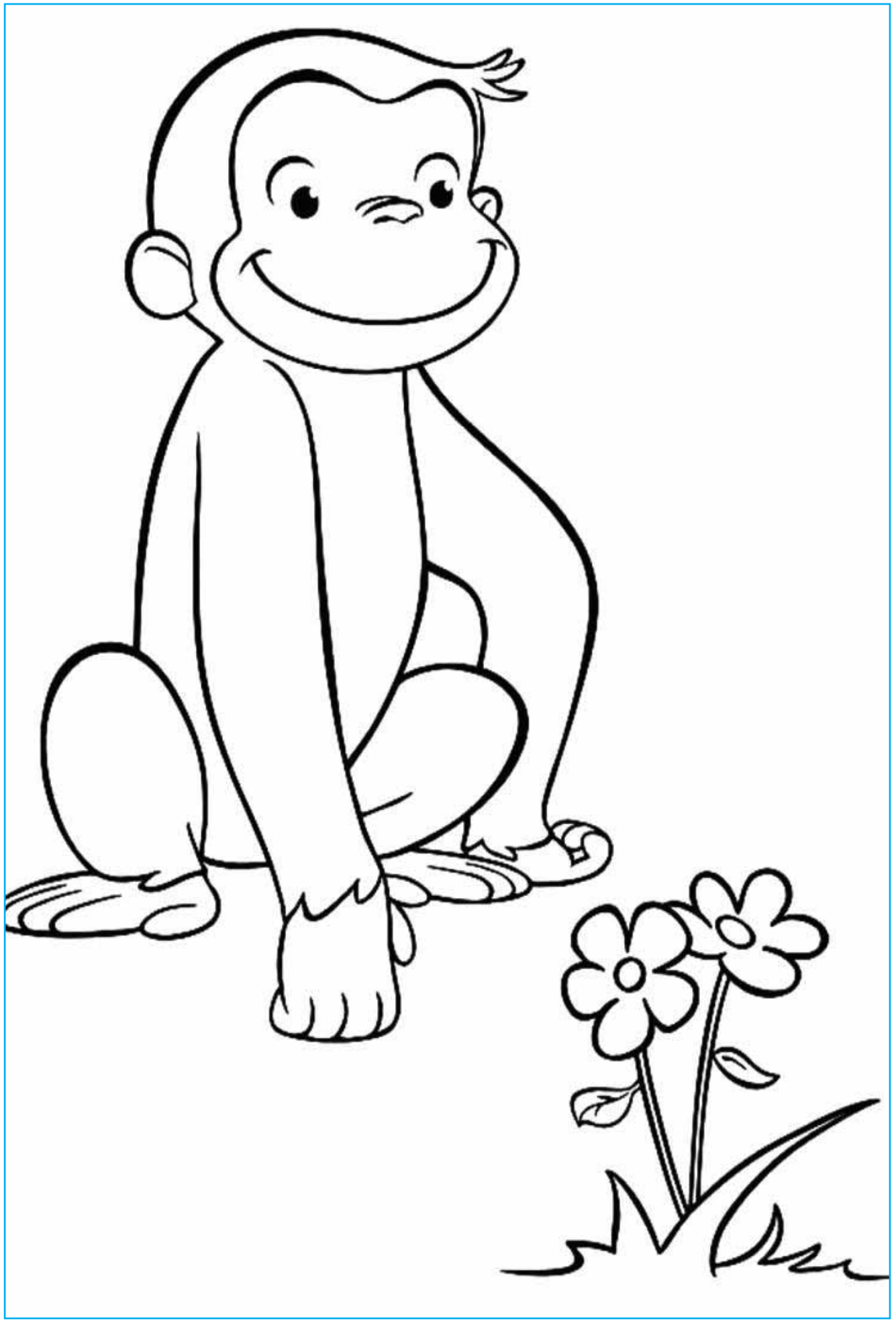
DIRECTIONS: Find and circle the vocabulary words in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.



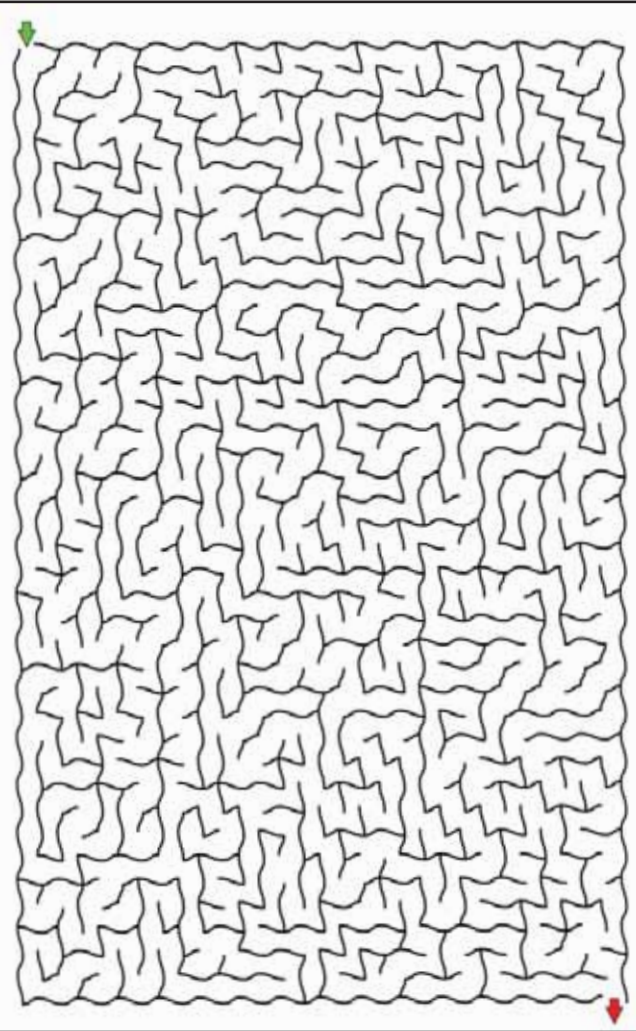
- | | | |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| BACON | CROISSANT | MAPLE SYRUP |
| BAGEL | DANISH | OATMEAL |
| BISCUITS | DONUTS | OMELET |
| BREAD | EGGS BENEDICT | ORANGE JUICE |
| BUTTER | ENGLISH MUFFIN | PANCAKES |
| CEREAL | FRUIT | SAUSAGE |
| CINNAMON ROLL | GRANOLA | SCRAMBLED EGGS |
| COCOA | GRITS | SMOOTHIE |
| COFFEE | HASH BROWNS | TEA |
| COLD PIZZA | HONEY | TOAST |
| CREPES | JAM | WAFFLES |



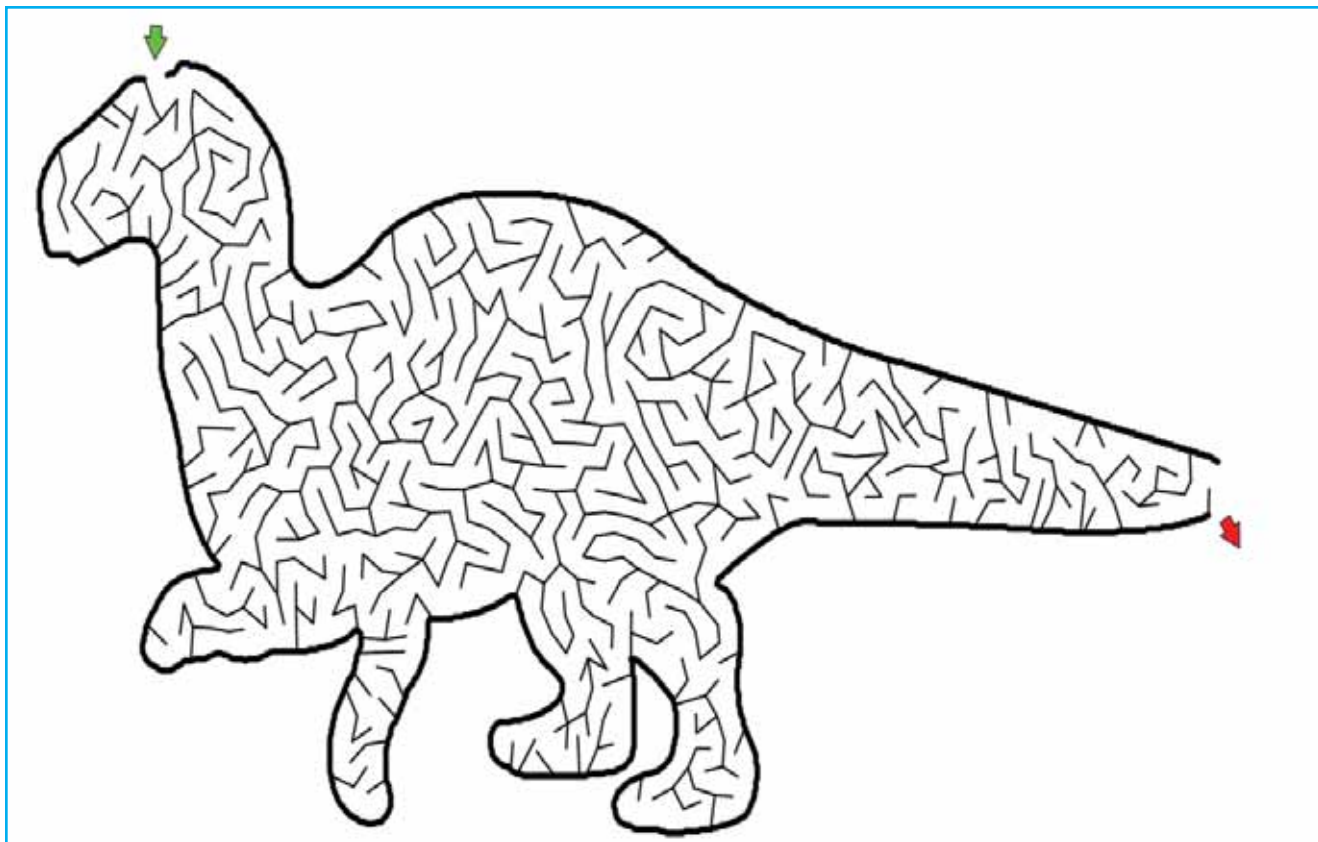
Color It



Kids Mazes



Find the way



Word Scramble

State Capitals Word Scramble 1

All of the scrambled words below are names of state capitals. Can you put the letters in the right order to spell the 25 different state capital names correctly? Careful! Some of the names are made up of two words.

EUAJUN	
ANSNGIL	
UABOGERNTO	
EPRIER	
ATSNIU	
VOEDR	
OXPIEHN	
ESNIOSDME	
CMUIOBLA	
OELRENTMIP	
HRDRATFO	
ALNAATT	
SLAEM	
SALPANUIT	
KIMARCBS	
ASONCJK	
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BioNTech eyes COVID jab for teens from June

FRANKFURT: BioNTech said yesterday that it expected its COVID-19 vaccine, jointly developed with Pfizer, to be available to 12 to 15-year-olds in Europe from June. The German firm's CEO Ugur Sahin told Der Spiegel weekly that it was "in the final stretches" of preparing its submission for European regulatory approval. The evaluation of the trial data "takes four to six weeks on average", he added.

Vaccinating children is seen as a crucial next step toward herd immunity and ending the pandemic. The prospect of getting older children inoculated before the next

school year starts would also relieve the strain on parents who are juggling the demands of homeschooling while keeping up with jobs.

"It's very important to enable children a return to their normal school lives and allow them to meet with family and friends," Sahin told Spiegel. Separately, German Health Minister Jens Spahn also voiced confidence that teens would be able to get their jabs in coming months. "During the summer holidays at the latest, we will be able to vaccinate over 12-year-olds once the authorisation is there," he said.

Germany's 16 states stagger their summer holidays, with the first regions to go on their break from June 21 this year, and the last to end their vacation on September 13. BioNTech/Pfizer already applied for emergency US authorization of their jab for 12 to 15-year-olds earlier this month.

Sahin expects to submit a similar request to the European Medicines Agency (EMA) next Wednesday, he told Spiegel. The move comes after BioNTech and Pfizer in late March announced that phase 3 clinical trials of their vaccine for children aged 12-15 showed it was 100 percent effective

in warding off the disease.

Both companies are also racing to get the jab approved for younger children, from six months upwards. "In July, the first results for five to 12-year-olds could be available, and those for younger children in September," he said. Ongoing trials so far are "very encouraging", Sahin said, suggesting that "children are very well protected by the vaccine". The BioNTech/Pfizer shot is based on novel mRNA technology and was the first COVID-19 jab to be approved in the West late last year. — AFP

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I, Caral Cracy Dsouza holder of Indian passport no. K9616034 has been correcting the spelling of my name to Carol Gracy Dsouza in my passport. (C 0243)

I, Mohamed Oliyil, Oliyil House, Mampuram P.O., VK Padi, Malappuram holder of Indian passport no. K2098646 issued at Kuwait on 29/01/2012 have changed my name as Mohammed K, S/O



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BY DAY: Hot with light to moderate freshening at times north westerly wind with speed of 12 - 40 km/h .

BY NIGHT: Rather hot to fair with light to moderate north westerly wind with speed of 10 - 32 km/h .

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Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

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Shuwaikh	24814507
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Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

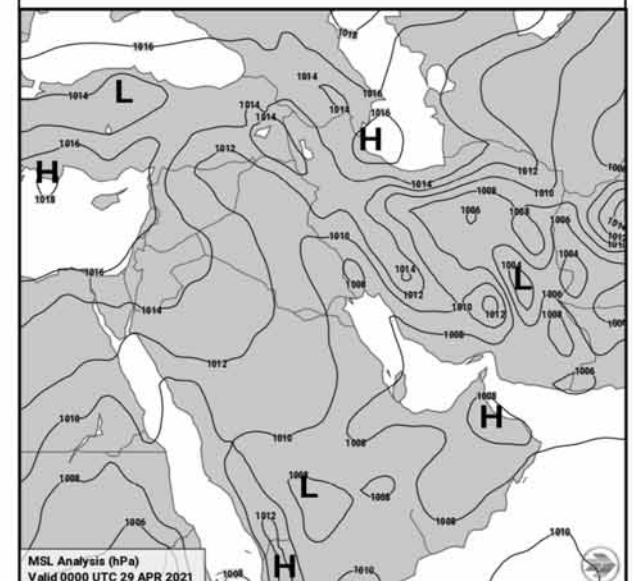
WEATHER WARNING

No Current Warnings

STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	38 °C	26 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	39 °C	24 °C
ABDALY	41 °C	19 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	41 °C	25 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C
SALMIYAH	36 °C	26 °C
AHMADI	34 °C	26 °C
NUWAISIB	42 °C	22 °C
WAFRA	41 °C	20 °C
SALMY	41 °C	20 °C

SFC. CHART

29/04/2021 0000 UTC



4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	04/30	Hot with a chance for rising dust over open areas	41 °C	26 °C	NW	12 - 45 km/h
Saturday	05/01	Hot	42 °C	27 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 35 km/h
Sunday	05/02	Hot and Partly cloudy with a chance for rain that might be thundery at times	39 °C	28 °C	VRB-SE	08 - 45 km/h
Monday	05/03	Hot and Partly cloudy and some scattered clouds will appear	38 °C	27 °C	VRB-SE	08 - 32 km/h

PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	03:42
Sunrise	05:08
Zuhr	11:45
Asr	15:21
Sunset	18:23
Isha	19:47

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	37 °C
MIN. Temp.	24 °C
MAX. RH	41 %
MIN. RH	14 %
MAX. Wind	NW 39 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

All times are local time unless otherwise stated.

UP.0

Business

FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 2021

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35 Border parcel business thrives during pandemic



36 In Buenos Aires shantytowns, COVID sends poverty soaring



Taxing the rich back in spotlight

US corporations, wealthy must 'pay their fair share': Biden

PARIS: It's an idea championed by US President Joe Biden, leading economists and even the International Monetary Fund - make the rich pay more taxes to replenish public coffers and narrow huge wealth gaps. Biden wants to end his predecessor Donald Trump's tax cuts for the rich and close what US officials see as loopholes benefiting the wealthiest Americans in order to fund a \$1.8 trillion middle-class families spending program.

But even as other governments seek to revive economies pummeled by the coronavirus pandemic, such initiatives would face an uphill battle as tax rates for the rich have been coming down everywhere for the past 40 years. The prominent French economist Thomas Piketty called for a global tax of two percent on all fortunes exceeding €10 million in a column in the newspaper *Le Monde* earlier this month.

Such a levy would raise €1.0 trillion (\$1.2 trillion) per year, Piketty told AFP. He said the funds could be used to narrow the gap between the world's richest and poorest nations since "the sums would be shared among all countries as a proportion of their population."

Tax the rich 'now'

Also this month, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, professors at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote a column in *The Washington Post* titled "Don't wait for billionaires to sell their stock. Tax their riches now." The combined fortunes of the 400 richest Americans amount to the equivalent of 18 percent of US gross domestic product, twice the level seen in 2010.

But Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Elon Musk of Tesla, Larry Page of Google and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook "contribute little to the public coffers", the two Frenchmen wrote. "They structure their affairs so as to have little taxable income," by forgoing huge salaries and holding on to shares in their companies to avoid capital gains taxes, the economists argued.

Saez and Zucman suggest therefore that billionaires should be taxed on "unrealized capital gains" in the form of an exceptional levy that could raise as much as \$1.0 trillion. Biden's plan, which he presented in his first speech to Congress on Wednesday evening, would nearly double the capital gains tax to 39.6 percent for households making over \$1 million, the top 0.3 percent of Americans. And it would also close what the White House says is a loophole allowing the wealthiest Americans to pass down their accumulated gains to their heirs tax-free. "How do we pay for my jobs and family plan? I made it clear we can do it without increasing the deficit," Biden told the joint session of Congress. "I will not impose any tax increase on people making less than \$400,000. But it's time for corporate America and the wealthiest one percent of Americans to begin to pay their fair share."

Biden has made two proposals to revamp the US economy after the COVID-19 pandemic caused a severe downturn in 2020, the latest of which was the \$1.8 trillion American Families Plan unveiled earlier in the day that would pour money into early education, childcare and colleges and universities. The president has also proposed a more than \$2 trillion infrastructure plan that would pay for renovating roads and bridges while also funding green technology, expanding broadband internet access and fixing household water supplies.

But unlike the \$1.9 trillion pandemic rescue measure he signed last month, Biden is under pressure to find ways to pay for his latest proposals, and in a speech where he called for higher taxes on the rich, the president aimed his rhetoric at the middle class. "I know some of you at home are wondering whether these jobs are for you. So many of the folks I grew up with feel left behind, forgotten in an economy that's rapidly changing," Biden said. "My fellow Americans, trickle-down economics has never worked. It's time to grow the economy from the bottom up and middle-out."



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden addresses a joint session of Congress as US Vice President Kamala Harris and US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi applaud at the US Capitol on Wednesday. —AFP

The IMF has backed the idea of raising more revenue from individuals and companies which have thrived during the pandemic. One option would be a "COVID-19 recovery contribution" in the form of a surcharge on the personal or corporate income tax given that some "have done very well and have done very well in terms of stock market valuation," said Vitor Gaspar, head of the IMF's Fiscal Affairs Department, earlier this month. "There is an opportunity there, and that is one of the options that is on the table," he said while also suggesting closing loopholes in capital income taxation, property taxes and inheritance taxes. In a blog in January, World Bank senior adviser Jim Brumby said most countries are "extremely hesitant" to introduce wealth taxes.

"But if ever there were a time that wealth taxes could help, it may be now," he wrote, not-

ing that inequality was "out-of-hand", with the wealthy getting "far wealthier" while COVID-19 pushed 100 million people into poverty.

However, apart from Argentina and Bolivia which have introduced an exceptional "COVID contribution" on large fortunes - purely symbolic in the case of La Paz - few countries seem willing to impose a wealth tax, even in the form of a one-off levy. It is certainly not on the table in Australia, Britain or Germany, even though 54 percent of Britons are in favor, according to a recent poll. France, which eliminated a wealth tax in 2018 after almost three decades, has ruled out fresh hikes.

But not all economists believe a wealth tax is a good idea. Nobel prize-winning economist Angus Deaton told Bloomberg News earlier in April that such a tax would be "very difficult to implement" and give the wealthy "huge incentives to avoid it - and avoid it they will". —AFP

Business

Fed's Powell stomps on inflation fears, pledges continued stimulus

Pandemic key factor in economic outlook

WASHINGTON: Temporary price jumps will not spook the Federal Reserve into pulling back on the stimulus it has pumped into the US economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, the central bank's chair Jerome Powell said on Wednesday. While the world's largest economy is coming back from the depths of last year's crisis, the recovery has ways to go and it is too soon to even talk about easing off the gas, Powell said as the policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) concluded its two-day meeting. He highlighted the Fed's commitment to keep the benchmark lending rate near zero, where it has been since the start of the crisis, and to continue its massive bond buying program until employment recovers and inflation exceeds the two percent threshold "for some time". Responding that policymakers could let inflation get out of control, Powell snapped back: "We understand our job. We will do our job."

Speaking at a press briefing, he again acknowledged that inflation will increase in the coming months as business ramps up, but he stressed that the main factors pushing it higher will dissipate. "An episode of one-time price increases as the economy reopens is not the same thing as, and is not likely to lead to, persistently higher year-over-year inflation," Powell said in response to a question from AFP. After falling sharply in the early months of the pandemic as demand tanked when the economy shut down to contain the virus, prices of many goods and services have spiked in recent weeks, including gasoline as travelers and commuters return to roads and airports. But those recent increases - including a 2.6 percent year-on-year jump in consumer prices in

March - are caused largely by the bounceback from last year's declines and will go away shortly, he said. However, he acknowledged the resolution of supply bottlenecks, which also is contributing to the inflation pressures, is "harder to predict".

'Out of hand'

Noted Harvard economist and former Treasury secretary Lawrence Summers has been the leading voice flagging concerns about what he sees as the Fed's complacent attitude towards price increases. In a seminar last week, Summers cited the old Fed maxim that its goal is to "take away the punch bowl before the party gets out of hand," and lamented that "what we are now saying is we are not going to do anything until we see a bunch of drunk people staggering around".

He has pointed to the example of the 1960s and 1970s when US inflation spiraled, requiring the Fed to sharply raise interest rates to bring it under control even though that caused a recession. Powell said the current situation is far different from past decades, and these price increases are "not calling for a change in monetary policy, since they're temporary and expected to resolve themselves". Still, the central bank remains firm in its commitment to fight inflation if it appears to be persistent, and has the firepower to do so, he added. "No one should doubt that we will be prepared to use our tools," Powell said, stressing that "a transitory raise above two percent this year would not meet this standard."

In addition, the central bank chief noted that in the decade following the 2008-2010 global financial crisis - a time when

the Fed's policy interest rate was mostly near zero - inflation struggled to hit the two percent target. "The Fed has decided it is more willing to risk a bit of overheating than derail a burgeoning boom. We need a boom to recover what was lost to the crisis, and get back to our pre-pandemic trend," Economist Diane Swonk of Grant Thornton said.

The FOMC was more upbeat about the US economy, saying that employment is showing signs of improving, but Powell noted the recovery remains "uneven and far from complete". Even after a big jobs gain in March, the United States has 8.5 million fewer positions than in Feb 2020. The committee again acknowledged that the pandemic is a key factor in the economic outlook, saying the "ongoing public health crisis continues to weigh on the economy, and risks to the economic outlook remain". However, that stance was less dire than in its statement last month, when the FOMC pointed to "considerable risks" to the outlook. —AFP



Jerome Powell

Amazon to raise pay for 500K workers after unionization drive

SAN FRANCISCO: Amazon will increase pay between 50 cents to \$3 an hour for more than half a million workers on its fulfillment, delivery and sorting teams, the US tech giant announced Wednesday. The raises, which will take effect between May and June, come ahead of a federal hearing over a defeated unionization drive and after President Joe Biden singled out Amazon for avoiding federal income taxes.

The Seattle-based e-commerce empire has gone on a hiring spree during the pandemic, adding 500,000 people last year. It now employs around 1.3 million people globally. Typically, the company reevaluates salaries every fall, ahead of the holiday shopping bonanza. But it moved the annual review forward this year as it seeks to additionally hire "for tens of thousands of jobs across our operations in the US," Darcie Henry, a worldwide operations vice president said in a statement.

The pay boost will be doled out to employees on the customer fulfillment, delivery, package sortation and specialty fulfillment teams, while other teams will see their annual compensation reviewed throughout the year, the statement added. In 2018, Amazon raised its minimum wage to \$15 an hour for all US employees and has recently joined several other large corporations in advocating the federal minimum be increased to the same amount. —AFP

From diapers to cereal, price rises loom in US

WASHINGTON: Just as life shows signs of returning to normal after a year of upheaval due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans will feel the pain in their wallets as major companies announce price increases on a wide array of household goods. Citing the pandemic, logistics costs and bad winter weather, the 3M Company on Tuesday was the latest to warn of coming price hikes on its full line of products ranging from Post-it Notes to band-aids. Cleaning and beauty supply giant Procter & Gamble has warned that Pampers diapers and its Always and Tampax feminine hygiene products will see prices rise five to 10 percent in the United States as the company faces rising raw material costs. And consumers are unlikely to find better deals by shopping around: Kimberly-Clark said it will increase prices for its Scott toilet paper and Huggies diapers.

The price surges are the result of a "combination of supply chain disruptions," among other factors, economist Diane Swonk of Grant Thornton told AFP. Factories shut down as the pandemic began, and restarting production is no simple task, she said. "It's easier to turn the lights out on a plant than to ramp it back up again, especially amidst a pandemic where you have to do safety protocols and run workers' shifts more spaced out," Swonk added.

Expensive breakfast

Consumers worldwide also stepped up ordering goods, many of which are made in Asia, creating bottlenecks in factories and ports. Ships then stayed at sea for longer periods of time, causing a global shortage of containers. US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell has warned the constraints could last for a year, but also said price spikes are likely to be temporary.

The Labor Department reported wholesale inflation spiked to its highest yearly rate in nearly a decade last month, while the consumer



CHICAGO: In this file photo, Scotch tape manufactured by 3M is for sale at a big box retailer on Jan 28, 2020. —AFP

price index rose 2.6 percent compared to its level in March 2020, when the pandemic began. Analysts generally believe the increases are temporary as the global economy rebounds from the ravages of the pandemic, which have radiated far and wide. Among products in short supply are semiconductors, a market already squeezed by the trade war between the United States and China that saw additional stress when homebound consumers rushed to buy computers and gaming consoles. The shortages have caused slowdowns in production of automobiles and consumer electronics.

Breakfast is set to get more expensive, as prices have risen for the popular Cheerios cereal, while food giant JM Smucker has raised prices on peanut butter since August. "Inflation is very broad-based and it's actually global," Jeffrey Harmening, chairman and CEO of Cheerios maker General Mills, said during a recent earnings call. —AFP

Business

Border parcel business thrives during pandemic

DUNDEE, Canada: The Canada-US border has been closed since the start of the pandemic more than a year ago, but not for Paul-Maurice Patenaude who operates a parcel handoff service from his house, which straddles the international boundary. "I am both in Quebec and in the State of New York, look how beautiful it is!" laughs the 82-year-old pensioner, one foot on either side of a black line marking the border through the ground floor of his 200-year-old stone and wood building.

Dozens of packages of all sizes left in his "drop-off" box have been sorted and stored on shelves to await pickup. The imposing three-storey former bar and grocery store has two addresses, and two entrances. One is on the south side, in New York State, where parcels are delivered by FedEx or UPS; the other on the north side, in Dundee, a tiny Quebec town of 420 residents, where Canadian customers come to collect their goods.

"Placed like this, between two customs offices, I'm pretty sure it's unique," says Patenaude, leaning on his walker as he gives an AFP reporter a tour. Thanks to an 1842 treaty, his house is one of few in Canada and the United States to be split in two, and according to him, the only one being used as a courier package stopover. The process is simple: Packages arrive at the American door, and Patenaude walks them over to the other side of his house for pickup by Canadian customers who mosey over to a Canada Border Services Agency office next door for checks, and to pay any duties owed. This permits Canadians to avoid a mandatory 14-day quarantine imposed on all non-essential travelers since March 2020, as well as high international shipping rates for some US online purchases. Many US businesses also don't ship abroad. Business is booming.

"Over the past year, I've had an additional 1,800 customers, almost three times more than usual," says the former mayor of Dundee. On average, 50 parcels a day are delivered through his

house. The small business, registered in the United States as Half Way House Freight Forwarding, is in the name of his three children, he says: Two live in the United States, the third in Quebec. Patenaude lives on the upper floors and comes down to help out five days a week. He's been living in this house since 1951.

'Life and death' deliveries

Customers come mainly from Quebec and neighboring Ontario province. A few come from further afield. Richard Lachance drove an hour from his home west of Montreal to pick up American football boots ordered online for his son. "I have a post office box in Plattsburgh (upstate New York) but with Covid we can't cross borders," he explains.

By using Patenaude's "halfway house" for parcels, he estimates that he saved about US\$200 (Can\$250) in shipping costs to Canada, which can sometimes be more expensive than the product itself. Patenaude charges between Can\$2 and Can\$10 per parcel. It varies according to size, weight and sometimes "my mood," he says with a smile. But the influx of new customers has actually been overwhelming at times, to the point that he said he "almost stopped everything". He says that he hopes the Canada-US border reopens soon to allow him to reclaim his otherwise peaceful small-town life, including going fishing more often with his son. "If you think I want (the border) to stay closed to increase my clientele, never, ever! That's the least of my desires," he insists.

It was his customers' heartfelt stories, he says, that made him persevere. "For some, it's almost a matter of life and death: I have people who are sick, who need prescription drugs, products that they cannot get in Canada," he says. "This service gives satisfaction to thousands of people, so I said to myself: Maybe we will have to continue doing it a little while longer." —AFP



DUNDEE, Canada: Canadian Paul-Maurice Patenaude, who runs a cross-border parcel drop-off and pick-up service out of his centuries-old house, poses for a photograph on April 23, 2021. —AFP

Colombians protest tax reform proposal amid pandemic

BOGOTA: Tens of thousands of people marched in Colombia Wednesday against a proposed tax reform they say will leave them poorer as the country battles its deadliest phase yet of the coronavirus pandemic. President Ivan Duque's government wants to tax the incomes of those earning more than \$656 a month, lowering the threshold to broaden the tax base. It also wants to impose a tax on basic services in upper-middle class areas and on funerals.

The measures are meant to raise some \$6.3 billion in ten years for the country which saw GDP drop 6.8 percent in 2020 - its worst performance in half a century. Protesters took to the streets of several cities to denounce the reforms which they see as an unwarranted attack on the middle class in a time of dire economic straits. "We do not accept the tax reform. We are thinking of our children, of ourselves... Either we die of the virus or we die of hunger," said protester Victor Cordoba, 33. Some 47,500 police and security personnel were deployed countrywide.

Millions will go hungry

Colombia, where almost one in five people are unemployed and the minimum wage is the equivalent of \$248 per month, is battling a deadly new wave of COVID-19. Its planned reform "will make millions more Colombians go hungry," said Francisco Maltese, president of the CUT workers' union. In Bogota, thou-



BOGOTA: Demonstrators clash with the police during a demonstration against the tax reform proposed by the Colombian President Ivan Duque on Wednesday. —AFP

sands marched on the central square, which houses the presidency and congress, to the rhythm of drums.

Caravans of taxis, trucks and motorbikes slowed traffic on the capital's main roads, and there were reports of confrontations with police. "We are tired of abuse the population must endure ... we are tired of our president not doing anything about it. We are more afraid of our government than of the virus," protester Added Felipe Zapata, 24, told AFP in Bogota. In the southeastern city of Cali, indigenous protesters pulled down a statue of Spanish conquistador Sebastian de Belalcazar. Cali mayor Jorge Ivan Ospina said one person died in an incident "related to the demonstration," and advanced to 1:00 pm the 6:00 pm curfew in place for epidemic control. Thousands more people marched in Medellin, Barranquilla and other cities. —AFP

EU inches closer to COVID certificate for travel

BRUSSELS: The European Parliament yesterday agreed its position on how a COVID certificate should work, bringing the EU closer to launching a document to open up travel within the bloc. Europe intends to have a certificate showing the bearer's vaccination status, COVID test results and/or evidence of having survived the disease up and running in June, in time for the continent's summer vacation period.

While technical work has been ongoing to ensure the certificate is recognized across all 27 EU member states, final details have to be worked out involving capitals, the European Commission and the parliament. The first change MEPs have called for to a commission proposal is the name. Instead of a "digital green certificate" they want to call it an "EU COVID-19 certificate" - to avoid any implication of it becoming a "vaccine passport".

They said the document should "neither serve as travel document nor become a precondition to exercise the right to free movement" and should only be in use for 12 months. Stressing that the certificate should not result in discrimination, parliament demanded that COVID-19 tests for travel should be free of charge. —AFP

Business

In Buenos Aires shantytowns, COVID sends poverty soaring

Almost everyone uses soup kitchens in slums

LA MATANZA, Argentina: Before the coronavirus pandemic, Daisy Garcia used to serve meals to around 80 people at a soup kitchen in a poor slum on the outskirts of the capital Buenos Aires. Now she distributes meals for almost 1,000. "We never, never imagined it would come to this," said the 26-year-old.

Since she emigrated from Paraguay 14 years ago, Garcia has lived in the La Matanza department, the most populous in Buenos Aires province. Ominously, the department is named after a massacre. Garcia's soup kitchen, funded by charitable donations, is located in a two-story building made of concrete - a luxury in this area of slums, where the dirt roads are piled high with rubbish.

"We never stop. Before we worked with 70 to 80 portions but now the pandemic has changed everything: Between 450 and 500 at lunchtime and at night 350 to 400 portions a day. We also work weekends," said Garcia. "Many people need it and many voices are asking for it. People come here from all over the place."

Situated 20 minutes by car from the center of Buenos Aires, La Matanza and its "misery villages", as slums are known here, illustrates the explosion of poverty in Argentina. Poverty levels in the country of 45 million reached 42 percent in 2020 as the pandemic exacerbated three years of economic crisis. Almost half of La Matanza's 1.7 million population live in poverty.

COVID-19 cases are spiraling as the country, and wider Latin American region, reels from a second wave of the pandemic: Last week there were 6,680 new cases in La Matanza, 1,000 more than the previous week. In the western area of La Matanza, drug-

related crime hasn't diminished. There's also a lack of electricity, water and sewers. The nearby La Matanza river floods regularly and the slums' streets overflow with filthy water. "We've been abandoned," complained one man.

'They rob each other'

Silvana Grisel Meza wants her two-year-old son to have more opportunities than she has had. "You don't learn anything good in here," she said indicating the slum where she lives: Puerta de Hierro. She's talking from experience. One of her brothers was killed in a settling of scores while another is in prison for murder. She met her husband in a rehabilitation clinic. She's only 20. A housewife, her husband does odd jobs but during the pandemic "it's difficult to get any of those."

The San Petersburgo slum is one of the most violent in the area and surrounded by police control posts. It recently saw a reduction in its violence related to drug crime, but with the pandemic "things went back to the way they were before," said Martin Portillo, a 47-year-old resident. "As they can't get out" due to COVID restrictions, "they rob each other. They need to get money from somewhere." The pandemic has ravaged Argentina, where about 40 percent of people live off the informal sector and where inflation was 36 percent in 2020. Many cannot afford to buy food.

In these neighborhoods, almost everyone uses soup kitchens. In San Petersburgo, Silvia Rodriguez feeds her seven children thanks to a soup kitchen. But a lack of water presents a constant challenge. "If we don't have water, we don't have anything," she



LA MATANZA, Argentina: Women serve food at a soup kitchen in the Puerta de Hierro neighborhood in La Matanza municipality on April 12, 2021. —AFP

said. It's the same in Ciudad Evita where every time Natalia Elizabeth Colbet wants to wash her hands, she has to take a bucket to the communal tap she shares with neighbors. "The truth is, it's a struggle," she said. "With the pandemic, everything has become difficult, too difficult." —AFP

'Abandoned' Renault workers press strike over foundry sale

CAUDAN, France: Around 100 metalworkers blocked access for a third day yesterday to a Renault factory in western France, demanding that the government intervene to halt the site's sale and ensure its viability.irate employees held managers against their will at the foundry near Lorient on Tuesday when they launched their strike against the sale, which Renault says is needed as it tries to boost profits. "There hasn't been any progress, we're at a standstill so we're going to continue with the blockade," Mael Le Goff of the CGT union told AFP. "We are still asking for talks with the state and Renault," he said, since the government owns a 15 percent stake in the automaker and has extended billions of euros in financial aid during the COVID-19 crisis.

The strikers accuse Renault of outsourcing much of its cast iron operations to lower-cost countries such as Turkey, Portugal and Spain, depriving the Lorient site of sufficient orders for its 350 workers. The car maker "strongly condemned" the detention of seven local managers on Tuesday morning in a so-called "boss-napping". They were allowed to go after almost 12 hours.

Many are hoping for a repeat of 2008 and 2009, when Renault bought the foundry out of bankruptcy and invested millions in a modernization drive. "We were at death's door, but we fought and managed to save the company," Christophe, a 50-year-old striker who only gave his first name, told AFP this week. —AFP

Uber adds 'valet' car rentals as it looks to rev rides

SAN FRANCISCO: Uber on Wednesday added valet delivery of rental cars as part of a suite of offerings as it aims to be "one-stop-shop" for post-pandemic venturing out or dining in. As COVID-19 vaccines make it safer for people to move about, Uber aims to be a hub for summoning rides, running errands, or renting vehicles.

"Uber wants to be and is the one-stop shop for getting to where you need to be," Uber engineer Adib Roumani said on a video briefing with journalists. "That's really ultimately what we're after and we want to make sure that Uber speaks to all those use cases." Use of Uber's food delivery service, Eats, surged during the pandemic as people avoided going to stores or restaurants, while its core ride-share offering stalled.

"While much of the world stood still over the last year, our team at Uber has been reimagining how the world moves to help us return - not just to normal, but to a better normal," Uber chief executive Dara Khosrowshahi said in a blog post. Uber has been among the tech firms pitching in with vaccination efforts, and is seeing some "green shoots" as more people get jabbed, according to executives. The San Francisco-based firm's vision has long been to get people using a combination of its services, for example enticing fans of Uber Eats to tap the app for rides or rentals. Uber is making it possible for people taking shared rides to order items for pickup from shops in route, or have deliveries waiting for them when they get home.

A "valet" option added to Uber's car rental feature available in



the United States will let people use the app to book vehicles from Avis, with more partners to be added. "Your rental car will be brought to your doorstep so you can hit the road sooner," Khosrowshahi said. "And when you're done, a driver will meet you to take the car back."

Uber Rent with Valet launched in Washington, DC, and was to be gradually expanded to other US cities. "If I was Hertz, I would be worried about this," analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group said of an Uber alliance with Avis. "Merged those two companies would create a fairly powerful contender in the rental space."

Avis, Budget, and Hertz were already among companies taking part in an Uber feature that lets people rent cars for pickup. Uber combining its services smoothly in a single smartphone app could be win and keep users, provided the experience is a good one for users, Enderle reasoned. "The idea is excellent," the analyst said. "But, it's going to depend on the execution and Uber's execution has been anything but even." —AFP

Sports

Suns and Sixers clinch NBA postseason berths

LOS ANGELES: Chris Paul scored 28 points as the Phoenix Suns punched their ticket to the postseason for the first time in 11 years with a 109-101 win over the Los Angeles Clippers on Wednesday. Paul scored 15 of his points in the fourth quarter. The Suns improved to 44-18 on the season and are now two games ahead of the third place Clippers and one game back of the Utah Jazz (45-17) atop the West.

The Suns were coming off an East Coast road trip where they went 3-2, including snapping the New York Knicks' nine-game winning streak. Paul also had 10 assists and three steals and Devin Booker added 21 points and six rebounds against the Clippers. Clippers new signee DeMarcus Cousins did not play Wednesday after scoring 16 points in their last game. Los Angeles was without all-star Kawhi Leonard (foot) for a fifth straight game. Paul George had 25 points and 10 rebounds, and Marcus Morris added 16 points in the loss.

In Philadelphia, Seth Curry scored 20 points as the Philadelphia 76ers clinched a playoff spot with a 127-83 rout of the short-handed Atlanta Hawks. Joel Embiid and Tobias Harris each finished with 17 points and seven rebounds as the Sixers rolled over the Hawks, getting double figure scoring from a half dozen players in the 44-point victory.

The Sixers improved to 41-21 on the season by using a balanced attack that saw all 15 players get on the scoresheet. "Coming into the season, our goal was to win a championship," Embiid

said. "There are a lot of steps to get there. But we have everything we need to make it happen."

Shake Milton and Furkan Korkmaz scored 12 apiece and Tyrese Maxey had 11 for Philadelphia. John Collins finished with 21 points, Solomon Hill tallied 14, Skylar Mays had 11 and Lou Williams 10 in the loss. The under-manned Hawks played without key players including Trae Young (left ankle), Cam Reddish (right Achilles) and De'Andre Hunter (right knee). Clint Capela finished with eight rebounds, snapping his double-figure rebounding streak at 14 straight games.

In Washington, Bradley Beal scored a team high 27 points and Russell Westbrook recorded a triple double of 18 points, 18 rebounds and 14 assists as the Washington Wizards defeated the struggling Los Angeles Lakers 116-107. The Wizards boosted their playoff chances by improving to 28-34 on the season as Westbrook posted his 30th triple double of the season. The Wizards currently hold the final playoff position in the Eastern Conference standings.

Playoff boost

"We earned that win with what we've done," said Wizards coach Scott Brooks. "We've got two really high, high-level players, but our other guys are coming along." Anthony Davis scored a team high 26 points for the Lakers, who shot 43 percent and grabbed just 49 rebounds compared to the Wizards' 61. Andre Drummond had 17 points and 11 rebounds for the Lakers, who



PHOENIX: Paul George #13 of the LA Clippers looks to pass around Chris Paul #3 of the Phoenix Suns during the first half of the NBA game at Phoenix Suns Arena on Wednesday. — AFP

have lost four of five.

Westbrook fed Smith for a dunk with 9:11 left in the fourth quarter to extend the Washington lead to 19 points. Back-to-back dunks by Ben McLemore and Davis made it 102-93 with 5:29 remaining. But Westbrook scored on a driving layup and Beal drained a three-pointer to make

it 112-98 with just over three minutes left and the Wizards would cruise from there. In Salt Lake City, Bojan Bogdanovic scored 24 points as the Utah Jazz set a franchise record for most points in a game by clobbering the hapless Sacramento King 154-105 in Sacramento. Eight players were in double figures for Utah. — AFP

Australian cricketers beat flight ban to flee COVID-hit India

SYDNEY: Two Australian cricketers arrived back home yesterday after withdrawing from the Indian Premier League and fleeing the COVID-stricken country, circumventing a ban on flights by travelling via the Middle East. Kane Richardson and Adam Zampa flew into Melbourne from Doha and are currently undergoing quarantine, according to Cricket.com.au.

Earlier this week Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a temporary ban on arrivals from India due to the worsening coronavirus outbreak, leaving thousands of Australians - including high-profile cricketers - stranded. Zampa, Richardson and Andrew Tye then left the IPL, the world's richest Twenty20 tournament, which is taking place in biosecure conditions behind closed doors in six cities until the end of May.

Fourteen of their compatriots remain in India with the league's eight teams, including David Warner, Steve Smith, Pat Cum-



NEW DELHI: A policeman walks outside the Arun Jaitley Stadium on Wednesday during the 2021 Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match between the Sunrisers Hyderabad and the Chennai Superkings with no spectators in attendance. — AFP

mins and Glenn Maxwell. Morrison has so far rejected calls for charter flights to bring Australians home, with the ban set to remain in place until at least May 15. Australian national broadcaster ABC reported the pair had not been given special permission to fly and had booked their flights to Doha within the existing rules.

Their return follows Tye's arrival back

in Australia earlier this week. The Australians' exit comes as India's daily death toll from COVID-19 climbed above 3,600, while the daily infection number hit a global record at more than 379,000. The Board of Control for Cricket in India has said all players remaining in the country, who are isolated in biosecure bubbles, are "totally safe". — AFP

Bingham and Murphy join Selby and Wilson in world snooker semis

LONDON: Stuart Bingham and Shaun Murphy both came through hard-fought quarterfinals on Wednesday to ensure three of the last four players left vying for this year's world snooker crown are former champions. Bingham, the 2015 world champion, edged out Anthony McGill 13-12. Meanwhile, 2005 title-winner Murphy defeated current world number one Judd Trump, who took the title two years ago, 13-11.

Those matches were in marked contrast to the two quarterfinals completed earlier at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre. Mark Selby overwhelmed fellow three-time former champion Mark Williams 13-3 while 2020 finalist Kyren Wilson reeled off five frames in a row to seal a 13-8 victory over 2010 champion Neil Robertson. Wilson will now play Murphy in the semifinals, with Selby facing Bingham in an all-English last four.

Bingham won a final-frame decider to see off Scotland's Anthony McGill 13-12. McGill, who had caused the shock of the tournament by knocking out reigning champion Ronnie O'Sullivan in the previous round, made a fine break of 106 to extend his overnight lead to 10-7. But Bingham, who came through qualifying, won five consecutive frames only for McGill to take the next two to level at 12-12. — AFP

Sports

'Club is dead': Footballers unpaid and angry as Chinese teams fold

SHANGHAI: The team bus of Liaoning Hongyun will be auctioned to help pay its former players, but it will take much more than that to raise the \$850,000 that Jacob Mulenga says he is owed. The Zambian striker is not the only player trying to claw back unpaid wages from Chinese football clubs that have gone bust after a spate of frenzied investment fell flat.

Croatian midfielder Marko Basic is in the same predicament, as are other foreign and Chinese footballers. It is unclear how many. Both allege that their signatures were forged to cover up the non-payment of their salaries. Both are angry. Clubs failing to pay their players and going under is not new to Chinese football, but the problem hit a fresh low with the collapse of Jiangsu FC in February - barely 100 days after they won the Chinese Super League.

"I want to make it as public as possible, make it as big as possible. Until my money is paid, everyone has to be held responsible," Mulenga, who now plays in the Dutch second tier, told AFP by telephone. "How are you going to explain \$850,000 being owed to someone in his last years playing football?" asked the 37-year-old, addressing football's world governing body, FIFA.

"All you can say is: the club is dead, so we can't do anything," added Mulenga, who says he was not paid throughout his second season with Liaoning. The former heavyweight club, Asian champions in 1990, disbanded in May last year. "Meanwhile, the Chinese federation (football as-

sociation) will go on... registering foreign players like nothing happened," said Mulenga. FIFA did not respond to requests for comment. Chinese league management authorities blame "a small number" of clubs and say it is a matter for courts and labor arbitration departments.

'They faked our signatures'

More than 20 clubs have been kicked out of China's professional leagues because of financial problems in the last two years, Xinhua news agency says. Their demise left fans bereft and some players out of pocket, and raised doubts about President Xi Jinping's ambitions to make the world's most populous nation a leading football country.

It is also a warning to players considering moving to China, which attracted foreign stars such as 60-million-euro Oscar in 2017 but is now tightening its belt. FIFPro, the global footballers' union, voiced concerns to the Chinese Football Association last year. "Given a significant number of clubs which have been shutting down with barely any notice, we are concerned not only about the sustainability of professional football in China but the alarming lack of mechanisms in place to protect the livelihood of players," FIFPro told AFP.

The 32-year-old Basic says that Taizhou Yuanda, who were in China's second division last season, owe him two months' salary, or about \$90,000. The club abruptly closed in March after



DALIAN, China: This photo taken on Oct 7, 2018 shows Jacob Mulenga (right) of Liaoning Hongyun FC heading the ball during the China League One football match between Dalian Transcendence FC and Liaoning Hongyun FC. — AFP

existing for only four years. Like Mulenga, he alleges that the club forged players' signatures on documents stating they had been paid, so they could be cleared to play by the CFA.

"They faked our signatures and just applied for the registration," Basic, who did not wish to

divulge his story before leaving China, told AFP from his home in Switzerland. "They faked maybe 15 signatures to say that we got all the salaries." Basic, who says part of his wages were paid in cash, wrote to the CFA in January but had no response. — AFP

Portugal stage for Lewis v Max - Act III

PORTIMAO, Portugal: The third instalment of what is shaping up to be one of Formula One's finest title duels in years moves to Portugal's sun-blessed Algarve this weekend with Lewis Hamilton leading Max Verstappen by a single point. That the seven-time champion tops the nascent drivers' standings is for once a surprise with Red Bull enjoying a rare speed superiority over the Mercedes.

But a Verstappen error contributed to Hamilton's opening win in Bahrain and a timely safety car intervention played kindly into Hamilton's hands after an uncharacteristic mistake at Imola. A probable pointless finish after planting his car in a gravel pit was almost magically transformed into second behind the Dutch driver, with a fastest lap giving him the slimmest of leads.

For Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff, Red Bull were guilty of failing to exploit their cars' evident speed advantage. "To come away leading both championships almost felt like a get out of jail free card, because our rivals didn't maximize the opportunity we gave them," he told the German team's website. "And it just proves what a challenging season we have ahead of us and how quickly things can turn around in Formula One." The Algarve International Circuit holds a special place in Hamilton's heart as it was here six months ago that he notched up his 92nd Grand Prix win to surpass Michael Schumacher as the most successful F1 driver of all time. — AFP

Benzema embodies survival spirit after leading Real recovery

MADRID: Real Madrid might not reach the Champions League final but Karim Benzema has given them a chance, his genius against Chelsea the embodiment of a team that still never knows when it is beaten. Benzema's thunderbolt volley gives Madrid parity at the end of a first leg that could have been won decisively by Chelsea, who were the superior team overall and, for 25 minutes, made their opponents look weary, rigid, even out of date.

But the most recent additions to Real Madrid's 13 European Cups have come from their ability to bend these matches to their will, to weather the storms and then accelerate when the wind is behind them. Again and again, they have shown themselves to be masters of moments, their belief that in the end they will win creating certainty when it is needed most and for their opponents, doubt, just when they think they have the upper hand.

It comes from a history of success and the hubris of a club convinced it has earned the right even to play in a Super League, only ever against the biggest teams, bypassing the need to qualify, and for theoretical fans that see Real Madrid winning as the beginning and end of the sport. It comes from a coach too in Zinedine Zidane, whose philosophy is not so much possession or pressing but calm, and players, like Cristiano Ronaldo, Sergio Ramos and on Tuesday night, Benzema.

Eight minutes before his goal, it was Benzema stirring the first signs of recovery. He robbed the ball off Antonio Rudiger on the halfway line and played two passes, each time demanding it back, before circling into the centre and firing off a shot that shaved the



MADRID: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring during the UEFA Champions League semifinal first leg football match between Real Madrid and Chelsea at the Alfredo di Stefano stadium on April 27, 2021. — AFP

outside of the post. In the stadium, it was a trigger, Madrid's substitutes raised to their feet and Ramos behind them also standing up, flapping his hands and shouting "Come on guys! That's it! A bit more now! Believe!"

Chelsea's were still in charge but from that moment their dominance began to fade. Benzema turbo-charged another counter-attack down the right, his punching pass out to Toni Kroos on the opposite side the one that led to Kroos winning the corner, that led to Benzema throwing his body at the ball and the ball flying into Chelsea's net. — AFP

Sports

Mature Man City move closer to Champions League glory

LONDON: After 10 years of trying and billions spent to make it possible, Manchester City are closer to winning the Champions League than they have ever been. A come-from-behind 2-1 win away to Paris Saint-Germain on Wednesday has put Pep Guardiola's side in sight of the final. The threat posed by PSG's star duo Neymar and Kylian Mbappe remains ahead of Tuesday's semifinal, second leg in Manchester, but City appear to have learned from many years of harsh lessons in Europe's premier club competition.

A clash between the French champions and soon-to-be-crowned Premier League winners was also a proxy battle between Qatar-owned PSG and Abu Dhabi-backed City. Despite changing the face of European football with their investment in the transfer market over the past decade, both clubs are still waiting for the ultimate glory of winning the Champions League. PSG came closest when they lost last season's final 1-0 to Bayern Munich.

Having this time seen off the German giants in the quarterfinals, Mauricio Pochettino's men started like a team determined to go one better this year. Captain Marquinhos powered home Angel di Maria's corner on 15 minutes in a blistering start by the hosts. In Guardiola's first four seasons in charge of City, setbacks in Champions League knockout ties have often deteriorated into collapses.

Monaco, Liverpool, Tottenham and Lyon all scored multiple times in quick succession to oust City before the semi-final stage. But crucially,

there was no repeat of that this time as Champions League's meanest defense kept PSG at bay until after the break.

No surprises from Guardiola

In another change from previous seasons, there was no surprise in Guardiola's team selection for a big Champions League tie. The former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss has often been accused of overthinking his tactics in the latter stages of this competition, only to cause confusion among his own players. This time he stuck by the striker-less system that has carried City to the brink of a third Premier League title in four years.

The flexible front four of Kevin De Bruyne, Phil Foden, Riyad Mahrez and Bernardo Silva took the ball and control of the game away from PSG in the second half. "We are good playing in a certain way, we cannot do it another way," said Guardiola, on his side's passing rhythm. "Only what I want is to be ourselves in the second game."

Perhaps most importantly of all, City's luck on the Champions League stage may also have changed. Controversial refereeing decisions and VAR interventions played a major part as they bowed out to Liverpool, Tottenham and Lyon in the past three years. There was no debate over the red card shown to PSG midfielder Idrissa Gueye 13 minutes from time.

But City were fortunate for both their vital away goals. Firstly, De Bruyne's teasing cross nestled in the far corner with goalkeeper Keylor



PARIS: Manchester City's Algerian midfielder Riyad Mahrez celebrates after scoring a goal during the UEFA Champions League first leg semifinal football match between Paris Saint-Germain PSG and Manchester City at the Parc des Princes stadium on Wednesday. — AFP

Navas flat-footed. Then the Belgian's decision to step aside for a free-kick 19 minutes from time proved inspired as Riyad Mahrez's strike slipped through a gaping hole in the PSG wall.

Last weekend, Guardiola lifted his seventh major trophy as City boss with a fourth consecutive League Cup. By the time PSG arrive in Manchester next week, his third Premier

League title could have been sealed, to go with three league crowns in both Spain and Germany. But the trophy Manchester City covets most is the one that has eluded him since he won his second Champions League as Barcelona coach in 2011. City's mission is not yet complete, but they finally have the look of Champions League winners. —AFP

PSG left hoping for another big away day

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's best results this season have come away from home and coach Mauricio Pochettino remains optimistic they can reach the Champions League final despite throwing away the lead to lose 2-1 at home to Manchester City in the semi-final first leg on Wednesday. PSG held a deserved half-time lead at the Parc des Princes after Marquinhos headed them in front in the 15th minute, but City fought back after the break with Kevin De Bruyne scoring from a cross and Riyad Mahrez from a free-kick to swing the tie their way before next week's return.

However, Pochettino has reason to be confident going to the Etihad Stadium, as PSG aim to go a step further in Europe than last year, when they lost the final to Bayern Munich under former coach Thomas Tuchel. After all, PSG have already reached this stage of the competition on the strength of their away performances, beating Barcelona 4-1 at the Camp Nou in the last 16 and defeating Bayern 3-2 in Munich in the quarter-finals, results that enabled them to advance despite failing to beat either side in Paris.

It was a similar story in the group stage, when they lost 2-1 at home to Manchester United under Tuchel but triumphed 3-1 at Old Trafford. "Of course it's going to be difficult but we need to really believe we can do something there in Manchester," a bullish Pochettino said as he looked ahead to next Tuesday's second leg. "They are a very good team but we need to believe, and we have the talent. Tonight was a painful night, the way we conceded the goals was painful but we need to look forward, try to be optimistic, be positive and believe we can win the game and be in the final."

Since arriving at PSG in January, Pochettino has drawn on the



PARIS: PSG's French forward Kylian Mbappe controls the ball on Wednesday. — AFP

devastating pace of Kylian Mbappe in particular to turn the French club into a potent counter-attacking force, in stark contrast to their often woeful home results. It is a wonder that they remain in a position to reach the Champions League final next month in Istanbul given their results at the Parc des Princes this season.

Meanwhile they sit second in Ligue 1 with four games left, but they are just a point behind surprise leaders Lille and so could still retain their domestic crown despite losing at home to Lille, other title rivals Lyon and Monaco, as well as Marseille this season. PSG have another home league game on Saturday, against Lens, before they can focus fully on the second leg against City. "It is going to be different next Tuesday. — AFP

NZR backs plan to sell All Blacks stake to US investors

WELLINGTON: New Zealand Rugby backed a "revolutionary" plan to sell a stake in the All Blacks to US investors yesterday, ignoring opposition from top players who fear the deal will sully rugby's most storied team. The NZR's provincial unions unanimously backed the deal with California-based Silver Lake Partners at its annual general meeting in Wellington, with chief executive Mark Robinson calling it a one-off chance to reset the cash-strapped body's finances.

"We believe it is an exciting and truly transformational opportunity that can benefit the entire game for generations to come," he said. But the proposal faces a potential veto from the Rugby Players Association - which represents the sport's elite talent - some of whom believe the soul of their beloved All Blacks is being auctioned off.

Concerns around the deal have intensified in the wake of the European Super League fiasco, when Europe's top football clubs shelved a US-backed breakaway competition within days, after an outcry from fans and officials. Under the deal, Silver Lake will pay \$280 million for a 12.5 percent stake in New Zealand Rugby's commercial rights, and the right to negotiate merchandise and broadcast deals worldwide. —AFP



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