

Friday Times

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NOTICE

Happy Hijri New Year to all our readers!

Kuwait Times will not print August 8-9 in honor of the Hijri New Year. Readers can stay informed with breaking news and information via KuwaitTimes.net and our digital media channels on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.



National Assembly panel calls for reopening schools, kindergartens

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Vaxxed: Teens Speak Out

Kuwait opened coronavirus vaccines to children aged 12 to 15 in late July/early August. Thousands of children have now been vaccinated. Kuwait Times invited some of these teenagers to share their thoughts on getting the jab.



But I wanted to get the vaccine because it would reduce my chances of getting COVID and spreading it to my family and loved ones, and for me, that was more than enough reason

By Safyre Joseph-Etheridge

I was really nervous to get the vaccine at first. But I wanted to get the vaccine because it would reduce my chances of getting COVID and spreading it to my family and loved ones, and for me, that was more than enough reason. I researched about the risks and spoke to my cousins and family about getting the vaccine, my talk with them encouraged me even more and pushed aside my anxiety.

However, when we arrived, I saw the queue and became hesitant. It was a long line, with hot and angry people all wanting to vaccinate their children. After waiting in the line for about 15 minutes, I was drenched in

sweat, and we were directed to our vaccination booth. I felt nervous and sick, like I was about to throw up — mostly because I hate needles of any kind, but especially the one that was going into me. I knew that there was the chance of possible side effects, but it was too late to back out now.

I gritted my teeth, took a deep breath, and waited.

Prick.

“Done,” the nurse said. I opened my eyes, confused that I had barely felt anything at all.

Even though the process was annoyingly long and hot, I am extremely glad I got it done, and would do it again. Well I’m going to in a couple weeks anyways and I can’t wait :)

By Alexis De Leon

My first experience with the vaccine was faster than I had expected it to be. I have a small fear of needles so I was nervous about it, but from what I had heard, the needles didn’t hurt



that much. While that faded most of my worries, it still made me nervous. Vaccinations are very unfamiliar to me but I know the shot is for the best. A part of me was somewhat excited because a vaccination meant that I will be closer to being able to get back to a normal life. I thought it would take hours like other hospitals, but it took less than half an hour. The needle itself did sting, but it wasn’t as bad as I originally thought it would be. My arm felt a little heavy, but I don’t feel any side effects other than that. I expected it to hurt a lot. My vaccination experience was great and I can’t wait for my second dose.

Local



We've been in this situation for almost two years now. It's literally draining our abilities, halting our desires for greatness and crippling our gifts and talents, so I want this to end

By Rajeev Ezekiel Diesta

I am turning 17 next month. Why did I decide to get the vaccine? I just want to help end this virus soon! We've been in this situation for almost two years now. It's literally draining our abilities, halting our desires for greatness and crippling our gifts and talents, so I want this to end! With my decision and millions of others, maybe this pandemic will come to an end. It's been a crazy chapter of our lives that we don't want to remember! We were unable to study in our classrooms, we were unable to play our favorite sports. In my case I am crazy playing football with friends and because of this pandemic we were stuck in our small rooms and now addicted to some online games! We want the normal way of life without fear and restrictions.

My parents were talking about vaccines for about a year now. They waited like seven to 10 months before they got the vaccine themselves. My mother is a registered nurse—a frontliner too. But she herself would not want to get vaccinated, at least during the introductory period. In fact she waited until my father got vaccinated before she finally decided to get the vaccine. She was scared. But I am not. After I saw they had no serious or adverse effects, that's when they registered my name.

I got the jab last Monday. The vaccination center was crowded. I saw throngs of people queuing for the vaccine. I went home, slept, ate and repeat—I've been anticipating headaches or probably fever, as some of my classmates told me but I was disappointed feeling no pain at all, only small type of insect bite on my arm where I got the jab.



By Angela Jinse

I am studying in 9th grade. We went to the Mishref vaccination center for the vaccine. My brother and sister were also with me to get vaccinated. There was a huge traffic jam before we reached the vaccination center. Outside the vaccination center, there was a large crowd too. We finally managed to enter the vaccination hall, where there was a long queue of people waiting to get vaccinated. Once inside, we were told to sit in the vaccination booth. I was a bit scared of the needle, but when the nurse injected the vaccine, I only felt a little pain. The medical staff were very informative and kind. As we reached the car, I was feeling a bit tired, but after we reached home, I was fine.



By Annice Jinse

I am 14 years old, studying in Gulf Indian School, Fahaheel in grade 9. I went to the Mishref vaccination center to take my first dose of the vaccine. When I reached there, I saw a huge queue in the burning heat. We were last in the queue. Many children were there with their parents. Because of the heat, a few children fainted, and parents were struggling. After 20 minutes we were inside hall no. 5. Again there was a huge crowd, but we managed to reach the vaccination booth. When I saw the needle, I was a little bit nervous, but I was surprised because it finished within seconds with little pain. After we exited the vaccination center, I was feeling tired and had pain in my left hand. This was my first vaccination experience.



By Abdullah Reshamwala

Getting vaccinated opens many opportunities for us. It allows you to enter malls, dine at restaurants, travel abroad, etc. These are some of the things that unvaccinated people cannot access. Countless people have avoided the vaccine fearing its side effects. But I'm sure that the vaccine is completely harmless.

To end the coronavirus, getting vaccinated seems to be the last option left. So I think taking the COVID-19 vaccine shouldn't be a choice, but compulsory. By the end of

this year, every person in Kuwait ought to be vaccinated, because you need it to travel and stay in Kuwait.

I registered on August 4 and got the message on the very same day to come and get the jab the next day. At the vaccination center, there was a very long queue, but it was continuously moving. In 10 minutes I reached the vaccine booth. In the booth there was a nurse who took my civil ID and noted the details on the computer. She asked me to sit in a comfortable chair while she got the syringe ready. Before giving me the jab, she asked me to take a deep



breath. I was kind of scared, so I started thinking about something else. It stung a little but it wasn't painful. It was a pleasant experience.

Tradition and Modernity

Exploring Kuwait's Museum of Modern Art



Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Built in 1939, the former Madrasa Al Sharqiya (Eastern School) is now home to Kuwait's Museum of Modern Art and houses some of the country's most important and relevant artistic creations including several sculptures and paintings by famous Kuwaiti artists like Sami Mohammed, Khaza'al Al Gaffas, Essa Sagr and Thuraya Al-Baqsamani among others. Unfortunately few of the artworks are labeled or provided with detailed descriptions. However, the building itself is reflective of Kuwait heritage and architectural history. Hours of the museum are 9am-1:30pm and 3pm-9pm Sundays through Thursdays. Closed on Fridays and Saturdays. The museum is located in Sharq, in the lot across from Souq Sharq.



PHOTO FEATURE





THE PERSONALITIES THAT EMERGE DURING AN OFFICE MAKEOVER

JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

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After many years, Kuwait Times is getting a makeover. They started with the editorial department, which is my department. Everyone in the office was excited and nervous at the same time. Excited, because we felt that changes are coming our way, and nervous because we had so much stuff gathered through the years that we had to throw away, declutter, organize, put in cartons and take temporarily to another department.

In the beginning, the staff were looking at their cluttered desks anxiously - some had a lot of stuff while others had little. But when you are organizing or decluttering, it takes time and energy to decide what to keep and what to get rid of.

We are all different in nature, and these differences in our personalities are what make our world an interesting place. They help in

our growth and development. Life would be very boring if we were all the same. The remodeling revealed some of the interesting personalities of my colleagues, which I have categorized as follows:

1. The hoarder

Hoarders are people who cannot bear to throw away even the most useless scrap of paper. That describes one of our staff members, who had many books, old magazines, expired coupons, an old CD about Kuwait's currency, a seven-year-old vest for a walkathon, souvenirs, two big dictionaries and files of all her stories published in Kuwait Times. This in addition to toothpaste, toothbrush, extra shoes, makeup kit, perfume, a fourteen-year-old broken mirror, plastic cutlery, phonebook and calendars from 2017 till 2021. She had so much stuff that she needed three boxes to clear her space.

2. The hoarder and collector

Another colleague, who also considers himself a hoarder, kept in his drawers and cabinet old newspapers that have significant front-page stories, personal documents, chargers, headphones, old calendars, mementos, booklets, old receipts, decorative

items and knickknacks. When asked if he was the same at home, he answered that his home is overflowing with things. He also considers himself as a collector who collects refrigerator magnets, coins, stamps, toys, miniature figures, tools and matchboxes.

3. The in-between, private and up-to-date

Those people are very private in their work environment. This is the case of one of our colleagues, who actually does not keep any private items at all that are not related to work. In his cabinet and drawers, he kept important stuff such as documents that are strictly work-related, newspapers of his published stories, books and references, which he threw away and exchanged with digital copies updated on his computer.

4. The decluttering person

Marie Kondo's one basic guideline is: "If it brings you joy, keep it. If not, get rid of it." I personally follow her path in my private life and office. I try as much as possible to simplify or get rid of mess and disorder. This brings me peace of mind. Every now and then, I try my best to declutter and organize my stuff in the office; therefore, the packing process was

somehow easy and smooth. In my cabinet, there were mainly a few official papers, a few magazines, visa applications, souvenirs that I have collected from my business trips or from colleagues who have left, plastic cutlery and a photo of my son. I felt good because it didn't take too much energy to pack.

5. The minimalist

A minimalist is a person that intentionally lives with only the things that they absolutely need. They have and are surrounded by few material items. To my surprise, that was the case of several of my colleagues. They barely had anything in their drawers and cabinets. They did not even need a box to put their possessions in. When I asked them what did you use your drawers for, they all said almost the same thing - a few papers that are work-related, stationery, cables, chargers and photocopies of their official documents. That's it!!

So whether you are a hoarder, collector, a person who loves to declutter or a minimalist, as long as you are happy, productive and creative, just stay the person you are.

Local

Telecom companies back state efforts against coronavirus

KUWAIT: Mobile telephone companies have joined ranks in backing up state apparatuses in the fight against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) since its outbreak last year. The companies have launched joint initiatives, providing back-up applications for long-distance teaching, and offering digital infrastructure for quarantines to facilitate the work of the Ministry of Health (MoH), namely the 'Shlonik' mobile application to follow up on the condition of incoming travellers in isolation. Moreover, they have launched campaigns publicizing medical information and advices for protection against the coronavirus.

'Shlonik' app



Zain telecom has provided a quarantine, built by Kuwait Integrated Petrochemical Industries Company (KIPIC) in Al-

Zour in April 2020, with a digital infrastructure to serve the MoH, where the quarantined could benefit from wireless communications and the internet to remain in touch with their families during isolation.

The company also inaugurated, in coordination with the MoH and the Central Agency for Information Technology, the 'Shlonik' app to monitor condition of travellers who come from abroad and remain quarantined or isolated at their homes for some time.

Furthermore, Zain has contributed to supporting the national program for psychological guidance which provides an electronic interaction platform to provide assistance for free. It has also offered, in coordination with the Kuwaiti Food Bank, 30,000 meals at the fair ground in Mishref.

Awareness campaign

Meanwhile, the mobile telephone company stc launched a campaign during the early phase of the pandemic to enhance awareness of the hazards caused



by the pandemic. It awarded the Ministry of Interior, front line workers, airport personnel and travelers, sanitization devices, protective gear and masks. In the meantime, Ooredoo telecom launched many initiatives to encourage clients stay at home, abstain from mingling with crowds and offered 5G internet service in addition to free local calls for a month.

It granted to the MoH, MoI, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, Kuwait General Administration of Customs, the General Department of Civil Defense and Kuwait Airways Corporation, free internet until end of March 2020, as gratitude to the efforts to stem spread of COVID-19.



Ooredoo awarded free calls for incoming citizens who have returned according to the state evacuation plan to bring back nationals stranded abroad. It also vaccinated more than 1,000 of its employees. — KUNA

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Local

World Bank: Kuwait economy to grow by 2.4% this year, 3.2% in 2022-23

Kuwait, Saudi to boost cooperation at oil-rich joint zone

KUWAIT: The World Bank expects Kuwait's economy to grow by 2.4 percent this year, driven by the oil sector, followed by a rise of 3.2 percent in 2022 and 2023. According to its review on the wider six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, it went on to project a 2.2 percent growth this year. This would be backed by a post-pandemic global economic recovery at a predicted 5.6 percent and the return to the global demand on oil, it predicted.

Commenting on the report at a virtual World Bank-hosted seminar, Issam Abousleiman, World Bank GCC Regional Director, said structural reforms and strategic investments, particularly in digitalization and telecommunications, were needed to further boost economic diversification.

Furthermore, trade and investment analyst Kevin Carey expected Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain's budget deficits to continue between 2021 and 2023, but at lower rates than 2020. These countries' total non-oil output is relatively larger than it was a decade ago, he added, mentioning that GCC countries are obligated to do more in the diversification of their sources of income.

Optimum exploitation

In other news, Kuwait Gulf Oil Company (KGOC) and Aramco Gulf Operations Company (AGOC) have discussed boosting cooperation for optimum exploitation of the crude oil resources in the joint Kuwaiti-Saudi Al-Khafji zone. KGOC said in a statement yesterday the discussions were held between the company's acting CEO Imad Sultan and AGOC's chief manager and head of the operations committee in Al-Khafji, Ali Al-Ajmi. "The talks dealt with boosting brotherly and professional cooperation between the two sides for serving joint interests and optimal exploitation of the two brotherly countries' wealth (namely crude oil) in Al-Khafji joint operations zone," the statement said.

They touched on joint objectives, perspectives, work development in the region, emerging issues and other topics of common concern. The KGOC side affirmed during the meeting maintaining the common approach and mutual cooperation for achieving strategic goals and optimum usage of the natural resources in the joint zone. The company, a subsidiary of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, was established in 2002 to take charge of Kuwait's share of the crude oil in the divided zone between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. —AFP



KFAED inks deal with UNICEF to aid Syrian kids with cancer

KUWAIT: Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) inked an agreement yesterday with UNICEF to aid children suffering from cancer in Syria with an allocation of \$2.7 million. KFAED said in a statement that the program aims at supporting hospitals for treating children afflicted with cancer and minimize deaths among them. The Kuwaiti fund is coordinating with UNICEF to equip four hospitals and supply them with medicines for treating tumors among the young patients. The program, the statement has added, is aimed at covering the 14 provinces and shifting the patients to the four hospitals: Al-Bairouni, Children University hospital, Tichirm and Aleppo hospitals. KFAED had inked several cooperation and humanitarian accords with the UNICEF in the past. —KUNA



KRCS sends eight tons of baby formula to Lebanon

KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) dispatched on Wednesday eight tons of baby formula to Lebanon as part of its humanitarian aid packages dedicated to the Lebanese people.

This aid comes as part of the society's activities, out of Kuwait's supportive role to brothers there, head of KRCS emergency and disaster department Yousef Al-Meraj said. The society is putting its focus on the health sector in Lebanon, mainly boosting the immunity of children in light of the dwindling health conditions of people in the country, he added. In the coming days, KRCS will send another freight of baby formula, he noted, mentioning that the Lebanese Red Cross is being tasked with the receipt and distribution of this aid to those in need. Kuwaiti assistance to Lebanon has been ongoing since the deadly Beirut port blast, which saw its first anniversary on Wednesday. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait's National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem received Egyptian Ambassador to Kuwait Tareq Al-Qooni yesterday, on the occasion of the end of the envoy's tenure. —KUNA

Local

National Assembly panel calls for reopening schools, kindergartens

Cabinet orders all employees back to offices

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The National Assembly's educational committee said yesterday that all schools should be reopened at the start of the next school year in September, adding that kindergartens should reopen on August 15. The Cabinet decided Wednesday night that all public servants will return to their offices starting August 15 and working hours have been adjusted back to normal after a sharp decline in the number of coronavirus cases.

Head of the Educational Committee MP Hamad Al-Matar said that kindergartens should be reopened on the same date from their reopening schedule on September 1 to allow working parents to send their children to kindergartens.

Matar said the committee fully backs the education ministry's decision to reopen schools next month, adding that "it is more dangerous for students to stay at home than being at risk of getting infected with the coronavirus."

The lawmaker also called on the government to completely

abolish the Kuwait Mosafer platform where arriving passengers must register to be able to enter the country. He said the platform has been a cause of trouble for travelers.

MP Abdullah Al-Mudhaf meanwhile said he has submitted a proposal calling on the government to abolish Kuwait Mosafer platform and Shlonik application, saying authorities should ask for the PCR test only. The government's decision to ask civil servants to go back to their offices came after the health ministry said the coronavirus situation has improved substantially during the current week as new cases dropped by 28 percent. There has also been a significant decline in the number of patients in hospitals and at intensive care units.

The Cabinet also decided that pregnant Kuwaiti women are no longer exempted from the vaccination if they want to travel. The only two categories exempted are young children below the age of 12 and those who obtain a certificate from the health ministry exempting them from vaccination. Kuwaiti citizens who have not been fully vaccinated are banned from leaving the country.

Escalator accident child receiving full care: Ministry

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health is monitoring the condition of a child who along with his mother had an accident on a mall escalator recently. Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said in a statement yesterday that the health ministry is keen to provide the best health care for the child and his mother "within the ministry's main principles that aim at applying total quality standards and boost the safety and efficacy of health services presented to all patients."

Dr Sanad thanked medical teams for their efforts "that helped rescue the mother and her child, as they dealt with the case within hours after the accident, as well as those rendering the services now." He wished the child and his family to overcome this ordeal successfully.

Amir's representative attends Iranian president's inauguration



TEHRAN: Representative of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait's Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, attended Iran's new president Ebrahim Raisi's inauguration ceremony in Tehran, Iran yesterday. Sheikh Dr Ahmad also met with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif on the sidelines of his visit. —Amiri Diwan photos

Minister eulogizes 'devoted educator' Latifa Al-Barrak

KUWAIT: Minister of Education Dr Ali Al-Mudhaf and the education community have mourned the demise of the renowned and wholly dedicated educator Latifa Mohammad Al-Barrak who passed away on Wednesday. Dr Mudhaf, in a statement yesterday, expressed deep condolences and consolations to Barrak's family, underscoring her noticeable role in developing the educational sector. She was among the first Kuwaiti women who taught, and a prominent personality that had done supervisory tasks, he said, noting that she was the first female citizen to work as a school principal. The devoted educator had dedicated 34 years of her lifetime to serving the homeland, namely the teaching sector, Mudhaf said, recalling that she was wholeheartedly dedicated to teaching to the extent that after she retired, she yearned for her days in the service and wished to resume work. Al-Nuzha Elementary School has been named after the lost educator in appreciation for her hard work. —KUNA



KUWAIT: People queue to receive a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the Kuwait Vaccination Center on Tuesday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

91.1% July COVID deaths were non-vaccinated

KUWAIT: Some 91.1 percent of the people in Kuwait who died from COVID-19 in July were not vaccinated, Kuwait health ministry spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said on Wednesday. The remaining four percent received one dose, while 4.9 percent received two doses, added the official. The nationwide COVID-19 vaccination campaign is ongoing at 101 centers, he said, mentioning that daily appointments have reached 100,000. The tangible results of global vaccination campaigns call for optimism, said Dr Sanad. This is demonstrated in the reductions to fatality rates and intensive care admissions. The main path to ending the pandemic's repercussions has become determined by vaccine turnout and maintaining adherence to health measures, he underlined.

Kuwait's daily coronavirus cases had increased by 851 to 400,979 as deaths increased by six to 2,351, the health ministry said on Wednesday. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood at 814 by Wednesday, with 267 of them in intensive care units, Dr Sanad noted, revealing that another 9,748 were receiving regular treatment. Another 1,048 people were cured of the virus on the same day, raising the total of those to have overcome the disease to 388,880, the spokesman said. The total number of swab tests taken in Kuwait reached 3,457,189 as of Wednesday, he indicated. —KUNA



Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad

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Turkey, Greece reel from raging wildfires during record heatwave

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COVID cases top 200 million worldwide as pandemic surges



HERAT: The video screen grab from AFTV shows Afghan special forces patrol the streets of Herat as the Taliban continue a series of offensives against urban areas in Afghanistan.—AFP

Warlord Dostum returns to Afghanistan

Taliban inch closer to taking control of Sheberghan

KABUL: Infamous warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum has returned to Afghanistan as the Taliban inch closer to taking control of his longtime stronghold in the north and fight for control of a string of cities elsewhere. Ehsan Nero, a spokesman for the former army paratrooper, told AFP that Dostum arrived in Kabul on Wednesday night and was meeting senior officials to talk about security in Sheberghan, capital of Jawzjan province.

The former vice president has been in Turkey for months, where he was believed to be receiving medical treatment. "He is waiting to meet President Ashraf Ghani," Nero said yesterday.

Dostum has overseen one of the largest militias in the north, which garnered a fearsome reputation in its fight against the Taliban in the 1990s—along with accusations that his forces massacred thousands of insurgent prisoners of war. A rout or retreat of his fighters would dent the Kabul government's recent hopes that militia groups could help bolster the country's overstretched military.

Fighting in Afghanistan's long-running conflict began to intensify in May, when US and other

foreign forces began the final stage of a withdrawal due to be completed later this month. The Taliban already control large portions of the countryside and are now challenging Afghan government forces in several large cities. The European Union yesterday condemned the Taliban's latest deadly attacks in Afghanistan and demanded "an urgent, comprehensive and permanent ceasefire".

In a statement, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and EU commissioner for aid and crisis management Janez Lenarcic accused the Taliban of breaking their promise to seek a negotiated peace. "This senseless violence is inflicting immense suffering upon Afghan citizens and is increasing the number of internally displaced persons in search of safety and shelter," they said.

The Afghan and US militaries have stepped up air strikes against the insurgents, and the Taliban warned Wednesday that they would target senior government officials in retaliation.

The Taliban threat came after the Afghan military continued a counterattack in the southern city of Lashkar Gah, where insurgents have infiltrated several parts in numbers.

The army told the city's 200,000 people to evacuate on Tuesday. The insurgents have taken control of vast swaths of the countryside and key border towns, taking advantage of the security vacuum left by the withdrawal of US forces. They are now targeting cities, with fierce fighting for a week around Herat, near the western border with Iran, as well as Lashkar Gah and Kandahar in the south. As the Taliban make battlefield gains, months of on-and-off talks between the insurgents and the Afghan government in the Qatari capital of Doha have achieved little and appear to have lost momentum.

A bomb-and-gun attack on Defense Minister Bismillah Mohammadi Tuesday night brought the war to the capital for the first time in months.

But fighting has raged in the countryside since May, when foreign forces began the last stage of a withdrawal due to end later this month.

The Afghan and US militaries have stepped up air strikes against the insurgents, and the Taliban said Wednesday the Kabul raid was their response. "The attack is the beginning of the retaliatory operations against the circles and leaders of the Kabul administration who are ordering at-



Former Afghan vice president Abdul Rashid Dostum. —AFP

tacks and the bombing of different parts of the country," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement on social media.

It represents a major escalation by the Taliban, who have largely refrained from large-scale attacks in the capital since starting talks with the US on their troop withdrawal. — AFP

International

Raisi says Iran backs any moves to lift sanctions

New president takes over, says Tehran won't bow to pressure

TEHRAN: New ultraconservative President Ebrahim Raisi said Iran backs any moves to lift US sanctions but that the Islamic republic will not bow to pressure, as he took the oath of office yesterday. Raisi, who won a June 18 election marked by record abstention, takes office with Iran facing an economy battered by US sanctions, a grinding health crisis and thorny negotiations on its nuclear program. "Sanctions against the nation of Iran must be lifted. We will support any diplomatic plans that will realize this goal," Raisi told his swearing-in ceremony in parliament.

But he stressed that "the policy of pressure and sanctions will not cause the nation of Iran to back down from following up on its legal rights". The ultraconservative former judiciary chief officially began his four-year mandate on Tuesday when he was inaugurated by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Raisi succeeds moderate Hassan Rouhani, whose landmark achievement during his two-term presidency was the 2015 nuclear agreement between the Islamic republic and six world powers. His swearing-in ceremony was attended by around 70 foreign dignitaries, including Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Ismail Haniyeh, leader of Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas. Security was stepped up for the ceremony with traffic restrictions imposed around the parliament and flights suspended for two and a half hours in Tehran and the adjacent provinces of Alborz and Qazvin.

Iran has been grappling with a deep economic and social crisis following former president Donald Trump's decision to unilaterally withdraw the

United States from the nuclear deal in 2018 and impose crushing sanctions. In response, Tehran pulled back from most of its main commitments in the deal formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

Nuclear issue

The 60-year-old also faces warnings to Iran from the United States, Britain and the Zionist entity over a deadly tanker attack last week, for which Tehran denies responsibility. Iran is also battling the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than four million cases and upwards of 92,000 deaths.

Six rounds of nuclear talks between Iran and world powers were held in Vienna between April and June in an attempt to revive the accord. The last round concluded on June 20, with no date set for another. Raisi's presidency is due to consolidate power in the hands of conservatives following their 2020 parliamentary election victory, which was marked by the disqualification of thousands of reformist or moderate candidates.

The new president got to work on Wednesday, chairing a coronavirus task force meeting and also seeing ministers from the Rouhani administration, the presidency said.

'Multiple challenges'

Raisi will have his work cut out for him on several fronts, several Iranian newspapers noted after his inauguration. US sanctions have choked Iran and its vital oil exports, and the economy contracted by more than six percent in both 2018 and

Areas of Iraqi province lose power after attack on pylons

BAGHDAD: Iraq's northern Salaheddin province was left partially without power after "terrorists" blew several pylons, the government said yesterday, as increasing attacks add to the strain on Iraq's electricity network. "Terrorist elements" using "explosive devices" carried out attacks on 13 pylons over the past 48 hours, the electricity ministry said in a statement.

Provincial authorities distributed photos showing the damaged pylons. Several districts in Salaheddin have since been without power, including some neighborhoods in Samarra, one of the province's largest cities, an AFP correspondent said. Unclaimed attacks on Iraq's electricity network have been increasing since the start of summer.

Authorities normally accuse "terrorists" of being behind the attacks, without identifying a particular group. Oil-rich Iraq produces just 16,000 megawatts of power—far below the 24,000 megawatts needed, and even further from the expected future needs of a country whose population is set to double by 2050, ac-

ording to the UN.

The country buys gas and electricity from neighboring Iran to supply about a third of its power sector, which has been worn down by years of conflict and poor maintenance, and is unable to meet the needs of the country's 40 million population. Last month, areas in the country's south were plunged into darkness for several days after a series of similar attacks. Around the same time, Iran briefly suspended its gas and electricity exports because of Iraq's failure to pay a \$6 billion energy debt.

The US blacklisted Iran's energy industry in late 2018 as it ramped up sanctions, but has granted Baghdad a series of temporary waivers, hoping that Iraq would wean itself off Iranian energy.

The failure of Iraq's power system is particularly acute in the baking hot summer months, often a time of social protest exacerbated by electricity shortages, when temperatures shoot past 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit). Energy consultant Harry Istepanian said factors contributing to Iraq's energy crisis included not only the Iranian export suspension but also a "lack of enough generation capacity and fuel supply, lack of maintenance of the existing generation units, high demand... high technical and commercial losses, vandalism and sabotage". —AFP



TEHRAN: Iran's newly-elected President Ebrahim Raisi (center) waves during his swearing in ceremony at the Iranian parliament in the capital Tehran yesterday. —AFP

2019. Raisi will have to "face multiple challenges due to the high number of problems", an editorial in the ultraconservative Kayhan newspaper said Wednesday, including "unprecedented inflation", steep housing prices, a private-sector recession and "corruption".

Ultraconservative daily Javan called on the new government to "implement specific plans to resolve the urgent" problems. It cited "water and electricity, basic products and vaccinations" as among issues that need to be resolved in the short term. Rolling blackouts began in Tehran and other

large cities last month, with officials blaming the impact of drought on hydroelectric power generation as well as surging demand.

Demonstrators took to the streets of Khuzestan province in the southwest over water shortages. Reformist newspaper Shargh expressed the hope that "political games will make way for healthy intellectual rivalry and different discourse and voices" in the new government.

"That will only be possible by promoting press and media freedom and great tolerance on the part of government members," it added. — AFP

Tigray rebels take control of UNESCO site Lalibela: Residents

ADDIS ABABA: Rebels from Ethiopia's war-hit Tigray region yesterday seized Lalibela, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the neighboring Amhara region famed for its 12th-century rock-hewn churches, residents told AFP. "They came in the afternoon, and there was not any fighting. There were no security forces around. The TPLF forces are in the town now," said one resident, referring to the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Tigray has been wracked by fighting since last November, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops to topple the TPLF, the regional ruling party which dominated national politics before Abiy took office in 2018.

Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on army camps. But while Abiy promised victory would be swift, the war took a stunning turn in June when pro-TPLF forces retook the Tigray capital Mekele and the Ethiopian army largely withdrew.

Since then the TPLF has pressed east into neighbouring Afar and south into neighboring Amhara, where Lalibela is located. Soldiers and militia fighters have mobilised en masse in parts of Amhara to head off the rebels' advance, but multiple residents of Lalibela told AFP Thursday that the town fell without a fight.

"The TPLF just arrived in the afternoon. They were dancing and playing in the square of the city," one resident said. "Most of the people are leaving the town to the remote areas," a third resident said, adding that he was hiding in his home with his family.

The TPLF's push into the neighboring regions has drawn global criticism, and both the UN and the US this week reiterated calls for all parties to end hostilities. Billene Seyoum, Abiy's spokeswoman, told a press conference yesterday that more than 300,000 people had been displaced by recent fighting in Amhara and Afar. — AFP

International

Zionists conduct first air strikes against Lebanon in seven years

Beirut condemns escalation, UN urges restraint

JERUSALEM: The Zionist air force said it carried out air strikes on neighboring Lebanon for the first time in seven years yesterday, following a second day of rocket fire across the border. Lebanon condemned the strikes as an “escalation” that could mark a change of tactics by the Zionist entity, while UN peacekeepers urged restraint. “Earlier yesterday, rockets were fired from Lebanon into Zionist territory,” the Zionist air force tweeted. “In response... fighter jets struck the launch sites and infrastructure used for terror in Lebanon from which the rockets were launched.” The air force said, “An additional target in the area from which rockets have been launched in the past was struck as well.”

Zionists’ jets routinely strike Palestinian militant targets in Gaza, and suspected Hezbollah or Iranian targets in Syria. But it was the first time since 2014 that they had hit targets in Lebanon, the air force said. Lebanon’s Al-Manar television, run by the powerful militant group Hezbollah, said Zionist aircraft carried out two strikes at around 12.40 am (2140 GMT) outside the town of Mahmudiya, some 11 kilometers (seven miles) from the border. Lebanon’s official National News Agency also reported the strikes, but provided few details.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun said, “Zionist entity use of its air force to target Lebanese villages is the first of its kind since 2006, and suggests an intention to escalate attacks” against Lebanon. The UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL, which has been deployed in Lebanon since 1978 and has patrolled the

border since the 2006 conflict, said yesterday that Zionist entity and Lebanon should “act with urgency” to deescalate tensions. Meeting with Zionist and Lebanese military officers at a UN position in southern Lebanon, UNIFIL’s head of mission Stefano Del Col called on the sides “to explore ways to reinforce security and stability along the Blue Line,” referring to the UN-demarcated border. “In the most imperfect times, this mechanism has served you well, and now is the time to recommit to it, not allow the spoilers to have the better of us,” Del Col said, in remarks relayed by UNIFIL.

Lebanese army investigating

Zionist warplanes last struck Lebanese territory near the border with Syria in 2014, but they have not targeted Hezbollah’s south Lebanon strongholds since the militants fought a devastating conflict with Zionist entity in 2006. Yesterday was the second straight day that Zionist entity had reported rocket fire from Lebanon. Three rockets were fired on Wednesday, two of which reached Zionist entity, striking near the northern town of Kiryat Shmona, where four people were treated for “stress symptoms”. In response to that attack, the Zionist army said it had carried out three rounds of retaliatory shelling of south Lebanon.

It triggered multiple brush fires in the tinder-dry conditions, but there were no reports of casualties. The Lebanese army said 92 artillery shells fired by Zionist entity landed in southern



AL-KHIYAM, Lebanon: A picture shows the vehicles of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), patrolling in Sahi Al-Khiyam (Khiyam plain) near the border with Zionist entity. —AFP

Lebanon following the Wednesday rocket fire. It said it was investigating who fired the rockets. The exchange came as thousands of grief-stricken Lebanese marked the first anniversary of a devastating explosion in Beirut port, that killed at least 214 people and irreparably scarred the nation’s psyche. —AFP

Top Italian crime boss arrested in Spain

MADRID, Spain: Spanish police said yesterday they have arrested one of the leaders of Italy’s most powerful organized crime syndicate, the ‘Ndrangheta, which controls much of Europe’s cocaine trade. Officers detained Domenico Paviglianiti, “one of Italy’s most wanted fugitives”, on the streets of Madrid’s working-class Cuatro Caminos neighborhood on Monday in a joint operation carried out with Italian police, Spain’s National Police said in a statement. He was carrying fake Portuguese documentation at the time of his arrest as well as nearly 6,000 euros (\$7,000) in cash as well as six mobile phones, it added. Paviglianiti helped control mafia operations in Italy’s north and in South America.

Called “the boss of the bosses” by Italian media for his role in crimes committed in the 1980s and 1990s, including murder and drug trafficking, Paviglianiti was arrested in Spain in 1996. He was extradited three years later to Italy, where he began serving a life sentence, one typically given for top mafia criminals. But his lawyers argued that Spain’s extradition conditions did not recognize life imprisonment, a technicality that allowed his early release after serving over 20 years.

Italian prosecutors issued an arrest warrant for him followed a ruling by a high court that found that he had been erroneously released in 2019. Spanish police located part of Paviglianiti’s family in Barcelona, where he lived for several months before moving to Madrid. Police regularly detain members of Italian mafia in Spain, the main entryway into Europe for cocaine from Latin America and hashish from north Africa. —AFP

24 Chadian troops killed in suspected jihadist attack

N’DJAMENA, Chad: Twenty-four Chadian soldiers were killed in an attack by jihadist fighters in the troubled Lake Chad region, a senior local official said yesterday. “Troops from a returning patrol were resting when they were attacked by Boko Haram” on Wednesday, the region’s deputy prefect, Haki Djiddi, told AFP. “Twenty-four troops were killed, several were wounded and others have scattered into the countryside.” Army spokesman General Azem Bermendoa Agrouna confirmed that an attack had taken place at Tchoukou Telia, an island 190 kilometers (118 miles) northwest of the capital N’Djamena, but refused to give any toll. Troops from “three army sectors have joined the soldiers who came under attack yesterday,” Mahamat Fodoul Makay, the governor of Lake province, told AFP.

Lake Chad is a vast area of water and marshland bordered by

Russia-led drills begin on Afghanistan border

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan: The Russian military’s chief of staff arrived in Central Asia yesterday as Russia held military drills in two ex-Soviet countries bordering Afghanistan where Kabul is struggling to contain a ferocious Taliban offensive.

Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian military’s General Staff flew into Uzbekistan-Central Asia’s most populous country-to observe joint Russian-Uzbek military drills. Both armies also took part in separate exercises with neighboring Tajikistan yesterday. During a meeting with Uzbek counterpart Shukhrat Khalmukhamedov, Gerasimov said the drills took place amid a worsening situation in the region and “to practise actions to repel terrorist threats.”

Gerasimov also said Moscow was increasing supplies of weapons to the region

Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon as well as Chad. Jihadists from Boko Haram and a rival splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have been using the region for years as a haven from which to attack troops and civilians. The Chadian authorities tend to call the jihadists “Boko Haram” regardless of their affiliation. In March 2020, around 100 Chadian troops were killed in an overnight attack on the lake’s Bohoma peninsula, prompting an offensive the following month led by Chad’s then president, Idriss Deby Itno. After pursuing the militants deep into Niger and Nigeria, Deby said there was “not a single jihadist anywhere” on the Chadian side of the lake region. Attacks have continued, however.

In July, 11 Cameroonian troops and a civilian were killed in two attacks in Cameroon’s Far North region, the tongue of land that lies between Chad to the east and Nigeria to the west. Deby was killed in April 2021 during fighting against rebels in northern Chad and was succeeded by his son, Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, at the head of a military junta. Boko Haram launched a revolt in northern Nigeria in 2009 before extending its campaign into neighboring countries. According to UN figures, more than 36,000 people, most of them in Nigeria, have died and three million have fled their homes. In 2016, Boko Haram split over its indiscriminate targeting of Muslim civilians and use of women suicide bombers. —AFP

amid a deterioration in Afghanistan that he blamed on the “hasty” withdrawal of US-led forces. “The main threat to the Central Asian region today comes from the Afghan direction,” said Gerasimov, who was expected to meet with other top Uzbek officials, according to a Russian defense ministry statement. Moscow has positioned itself as a bulwark against potential spillover from Afghanistan into Central Asia, while casting a suspicious eye on military cooperation between the countries of the region and the United States. —AFP

International

Turkey, Greece reel from raging wildfires during record heatwave

Greek firefighters battle a major blaze near the ancient Olympic site

OREN: Turkish coastguards evacuated hundreds of villagers from a burning power plant yesterday and Greek firefighters battled a major blaze near the ancient Olympic site as a record heatwave wreaked havoc across Europe's southeast.

The two regional rivals have been united this week in their fight against disasters that officials and experts link to increasingly frequent and intense weather events caused by climate change. Eight people have died and dozens have been hospitalized across the southern coasts of Turkey since the wildfires erupted last week.

The blazes in Greece this week briefly cut off the main road leading to Athens and saw worrying fires break out in Olympia — the birthplace of the Olympic Games that is usually crowded with tourists — and on the island of Evia. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said on a visit to the archaeological ruins where the first Olympic Games were held that it was time to “conduct studies as quickly as possible to avoid further disasters”.

Prosecutors also launched a preliminary probe into reports that fires that blocked off Athens on Tuesday and saw air quality over the capital deteriorate sharply again yesterday were caused by an explosion at a public electric company plant. But perhaps the biggest shock came when winds whipped up a flash fire that subsided the grounds of an Aegean coast power plant in Turkey storing thousands of tonnes of coal.

‘Where could we go?’

An AFP team saw firefighters and police fleeing the 35-year-old Keml Hundreds of villagers — many clutching their pets in small bags or belongings grabbed from their abandoned homes — piled onto coastguard speedboats at the nearby port of Oren. But a few older villagers in Oren refused to leave the disaster-hit region even while thousands of others were shuttled out by car or boats racing along the Aegean Sea. “Where do you want us to go at our age?” asked 79-year-old Hulusi Kinic.

“We live here. This is our home. Our last solution was to throw ourselves in the sea (if there was an explosion), but thank God that did not happen.” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's

Tanzania arrests opposition protesters

DAR AL SALAAM: Tanzanian riot police detained a number of protesting supporters of arrested opposition leader Freedom Mbowe yesterday, as a terrorism case against him was postponed.

Mbowe and other officials from the main opposition party Chadema were arrested last month ahead of a planned conference to demand constitutional reform. The 59-year-old has been charged with terrorism financing and conspiracy in a case that has triggered concern among rights groups and some Western nations about rights and freedoms under Tanzania's new leader.

Mbowe had been due to appear in court in the financial capital Dar es Salaam yesterday via a video link from his prison but the case was postponed to today because of connection problems, his defense lawyer Peter Kibatala said. Chadema supporters waving placards saying “Mbowe is not a terrorist” and “Free Freeman Mbowe” gathered outside the court.

Police responded by arresting protesters, the party said on Twitter. Images from the scene showed helmeted police bundling people into a pickup truck and taking them away.

It was not immediately clear how many were detained.

office said an initial inspection showed the overnight blazes left “no serious damage to the main units in the plant”.

‘Asking for reinforcements’

Greek firefighters said they had contained 92 of the 118 blazes reported on Wednesday evening and 180 have ignited in Turkey since July 28 — more than a dozen of them still active on Wednesday night. The EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service said July was the second-hottest on record in Europe. Greek deputy minister for civil protection Nikos Hardalias said earlier this week that the ferocity of the fires meant that “we are no longer talking about climate change but a climate threat”.

The unfolding disasters saw the leaders of both countries come under pressure from local officials for what they felt was an insufficiently resolute response. “We are asking the authorities to reinforce the air and land forces to so as not to risk human lives,” Limni mayor Giorgos Tsapourniotis told Greece's ANA news agency. ANA said Greek aerial assets were struggling to fly over the fast-evolving fire on the eastern island because visibility was being hampered by thick smoke spread by strong winds.

Erdogan on the defensive

Erdogan has come under especially withering criticism for being slow or unwilling to accept some offers of foreign assistance after revealing that Turkey had no functioning firefighting planes. The crisis has posed an unexpected challenge to the powerful Turkish leader two years before he faces an election that could extend his rule into a third decade.

Erdogan tried to mount a political counterattack in a television interview Wednesday that began just as news broke that the fire had reached the Aegean power plant. “When fires break out in America or Russia, (the opposition) stands by the government, We don't have this,” Erdogan said. The prosecutors' office in Ankara said yesterday it has launched an investigation into social media posts about the fire that were “trying to create anxiety, fear and panic in the public, and to humiliate the Turkish government”. —AFP

Chadema also said police had raided its regional office in the capital Dodoma on Wednesday night and assaulted a guard before making off with documents. The party's secretary general John Mnyika urged supporters to turn up at the court again on Friday. “Going to court is not a criminal offence,” he said on Twitter.

Mbowe's arrest came four months after Tanzania's first female president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, took office following the sudden death of her predecessor, John Magufuli.

There had been hopes that Hassan would usher in change from the autocratic rule of her predecessor, nicknamed the “Bulldozer” for his uncompromising style. Prosecutors say the terrorism charges against Mbowe do not relate to the constitutional reform forum Chadema had planned to hold in the northwestern city of Mwanza last month, but to alleged offences last year in another part of Tanzania.

Amnesty International has joined the calls for his release, saying the government must substantiate the charges against him. “Since President Samia Suluhu Hassan's inauguration, the Tanzanian government has taken some encouraging steps towards allowing greater freedom of expression and association in the country,” Amnesty said in a statement on Wednesday.

“This case is a concerning development that casts doubt on whether that progress will continue or whether repression will once again be the order of the day.” —AFP



KOURKOULI, Greece: Residents react as they watch smoke rising from a hill by the village of Kourkouli, North Evia, yesterday as Greek firefighters battled to bring under control two major fires raging near Olympia and on the island of Evia as the country swelters in a record-breaking heatwave. —AFP

Sudan sentences paramilitaries to death for killing

KHARTOUM: A Sudanese court yesterday sentenced six members of a feared paramilitary force to death for killing six protesters during a 2019 demonstration over food and fuel shortages. The protesters, including four schoolchildren, were shot dead in July 2019 in the city of Al-Obeid in North Kordofan, sparking outrage across Sudan. Days later, nine members of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary unit were arrested. At their trial on Thursday, broadcast on Sudan TV, Judge Mohamed Rahma sentenced six of the defendants to death, acquitted two others, and referred one to a juvenile court, as he was under 18.

Rahma said the actions of six found guilty were “unnecessary”, and were “not on par with” the alleged verbal provocations by protesters during the otherwise peaceful demonstration. In Sudan, death sentences are usually carried out by hanging, but the six may appeal the ruling.

Families of the victims demanded “retribution” for the killings during the trial. The RSF was formed in 2013 under now-ousted president Omar al-Bashir, who was toppled in April 2019 following mass protests against his rule. The paramilitary group grew out of Arab militias, known as Janjaweed, which were deployed by Bashir's government to crush an ethnic minority rebellion in the western Darfur region in 2003. The RSF is led by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, known as Hemeti, who is now a senior member of Sudan's ruling council. Sudan has been led by a civilian-military transition since August 2019, vowing to ensure justice to victims of violence.

A protest movement has long blamed the RSF for deadly violence against demonstrators, including the June 2019 breaking up of a mass sit-in in Khartoum. In 2019, protesters set up a sprawling encampment outside the army headquarters in Khartoum, calling for an end to Bashir's rule. —AFP

International

Mexico sues US gunmakers over rising arms-trafficking

If US does not end arms flows, Mexico cannot stop them

MEXICO CITY: Mexico said it filed a lawsuit against major US gunmakers in a Boston court on Wednesday over illegal cross-border arms flows that it blamed for fueling rampant drug-related violence. The Latin American nation, which has long faced pressure from the United States to curb narcotics smuggling, wants its neighbor to crack down on firearms trafficking in the other direction. This kind of legal action is unprecedented for the Mexican government and has the backing of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard told a news conference. "We are going to win the trial and we are going to drastically reduce illicit arms trafficking to Mexico," he said. The companies named in the suit include Smith & Wesson, Beretta, Colt, Glock, Century Arms, Ruger and Barrett. Together they manufacture more than two-thirds of the over half a million weapons that are illegally brought into Mexico each year, according to the Mexican authorities.

Between 70 and 90 percent of all weapons recovered from crime scenes in Mexico were smuggled in from the United States, Mexico's foreign ministry said late Wednesday. The flow of arms generates millions of dollars in profits each year for the US gun industry. The lawsuit seeks compensation—of an amount to be determined during the trial—for the damage caused by the firms' "negligent practices," Ebrard said. But the main aim is to make the companies change their behavior, he added. "If we don't file a lawsuit like this and we don't win it, they won't understand. They

will continue to do the same and we will continue to have deaths every day in our country," Ebrard said. The government wants the implementation of adequate standards to "monitor and discipline" arms dealers.

'Army of lawyers'

Mexico has seen more than 300,000 murders since 2006 when it deployed the military in the fight on drugs trafficking, most of them blamed on criminal gangs. More than 17,000 killings in 2019 involved weapons illegally trafficked from the United States, according to the Mexican government. Ebrard even accused US manufacturers of developing different firearm models especially for Mexican drug traffickers—an argument that is included in the lawsuit. "They are made for that, so that they buy them," he said. Mexico was confident that the lawsuit would not spark a diplomatic spat with Washington because it does not target the US government and the complaint has a "legal and moral" basis, he added.

Experts said that Mexico faces a mammoth task taking on the deep-pocketed gunmakers. The move is "almost an obligation" but likely to be largely symbolic, said Lorenzo Meyer, emeritus professor at the College of Mexico. "The lawsuit is going to receive a response from an army of lawyers," he said, adding that US law "makes it almost impossible for gun manufacturers to be held responsible" for the illegal trade. "It's a piece in a chess game



MEXICO: In this file photo, a man holds a sign reading "No weapons" during the march for peace and against violence in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua state, Mexico. —AFP

that Mexico is forced to play with the United States in disadvantageous conditions," Meyer added. "We are in a situation in which if the United States does not really intend to end arms flows, it is impossible for Mexico to stop them," he said. —AFP

Dixie fire levels California community as residents flee blaze

GREENVILLE, United States: A huge fire has torn through a northern California town, hours after officials urged residents to flee the powerful blaze. Downtown Greenville, a small community in the north of the state, was engulfed by flames after strong winds whipped the natural disaster towards the community. "I'd say the majority of downtown Greenville is completely destroyed," tweeted wildfire photographer Stuart Palley, sharing images of the devastation.

"My heart is broken for this beautiful little town." Authorities had earlier issued alerts to residents still in Greenville and Chester, as winds of up to 35 mph fanned the flames of the Dixie fire, the largest blaze in the state—which has grown so big that it generates its own weather system. "Firefighters are fighting for the town of Greenville," US Forest Service spokeswoman Pandora Valle told the San Francisco Chronicle late Wednesday, but was unable to give further details.

Images taken by an AFP photographer showed the fire's heat had bent street lights to the ground, with only a few structures still standing. The fire entered the town of around 800 people at roughly 4 pm (2000 GMT) according to Jake Cagle, incident management team operations section chief. In a video late Wednesday, he said that firefighters were struggling with those not obeying evacuation orders, leading to them having to divert time and resources to rescue people in the path of the flames. —AFP

In blistering drought, California farmers rip up precious almond trees

HURON, United States: Crushed by a devastating drought and new water restrictions, Daniel Hartwig had no choice but to pull thousands of precious, fragrant almond trees from his California farm. "It breaks your heart," he sighed as he surveyed the once vibrant landscape before him—curled, yellowed leaves covering the shrunken husks that would have been this year's crop of almonds, had the water arrived.

Their exposed roots are already starting to turn powdery with rot, and the temperature of almost 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 degrees Celsius) on this summer morning speeds their decomposition. Moving among them are huge machines that will turn Hartwig's "beautiful prime almond trees" into large piles of woodchips.

'Brutal Shock'

"It's a sudden brutal shock," the farmer said. Hartwig is in charge of water management for the mega-property of Woolf Farms, an estate of over 20,000 acres (8,000 hectares) around the small market town of Huron. This is the first time that the farm has had to uproot so many trees before they reach the end of their life. From drip irrigation systems to cutting-edge sensors installed throughout the property, everything has been designed to optimize the use of water. But almond trees are very thirsty, and this is a valley that is sorely lacking in water.

After several years of very low rainfall and a particularly dry winter, California authorities turned off the tap to agricultural producers. In April, after a series of calculations, the farm had to face the hard facts. "There is not enough water on the market" to keep the almond trees alive, Hartwig said. "It's surely painful to make those changes." And for good reason: The California almond market is worth nearly \$6 billion a year.



HURON: Dead almond trees lie in an open field after they were removed by a farmer because of a lack of water to irrigate them, in Huron, California, a town in the drought-stricken Central Valley. —AFP

'Bad Guys'

California produces 80 percent of the almonds consumed worldwide, a market that has doubled in 15 years driven by demand for substitutes for animal products, such as almond milk. Woolf Farms almonds travel as far as India or Australia. But is that era now over? "There is a perception that farmers are here to waste water," said Hartwig, his hands tucked into his jean pockets. "It makes us sound like we are the bad guys." To irrigate the crops they have managed to preserve, Woolf Farms pumps water found deep underground. "I'm very proud that we can feed the world from here," he said.

"If we don't have the tools to be able to do that, where is that food going to come from?" he asked. Driving through the estate, which stretches as far as the eye can see, Hartwig pointed to a series of fallow fields. "Almost all of this would've been farm," he said. "Now it's just a patchwork of crops." He sighed. "We've done as much as we can." —AFP

International

Stranded migrants low on money in tiny Colombian coastal town

Necocli town of 45,000 flooded with some 10,000 migrants waiting for a route out

NECOCLI, Colombia: Every year, thousands of migrants descend on the little coastal town of Necocli in northern Colombia, most with dreams of one day reaching the United States. That influx dried up in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and border closures — but Necocli was overwhelmed soon after Colombia opened its frontiers in May. The town of 45,000 has been flooded with some 10,000 migrants waiting for a route out-and rapidly running out of money.

Haitian Remi Wilford arrived in Necocli from Chile, where he had saved up \$1,200 over the last four years working as a baker. “I’ve only got \$150 left ... it’s going to be almost impossible to go any further,” he said.

He took two weeks to arrive and has been waiting another two weeks to board a boat that will take him to the border with Panama. There are 12 daily boat trips across the 60-kilometer wide Gulf of Uraba from Necocli to the border town of Capurgana.

It is in Capurgana where migrants begin the perilous journey through the ominous Darien Gap, a thick jungle infested with deadly snakes and murderous drug traffickers.

The only company in Necocli offering boat crossings simply cannot match demand, forcing migrants to spend their precious savings on food and lodging while waiting to move on.

In South America “you work for pesos and pay in dollars” complained Nelson Courcelle, another Haitian, who is paying \$25 a night for accommodation with his partner and seven-month-old baby.

The US dollar is currently trading at record highs against the Colombian peso, hitting migrants even harder in the pocket. Wilford, 34, paid \$105 to enter Colombia illegally from Ecuador, another \$200 for a four-day bus ride to Necocli, and

more still to pay police bribes, he told AFP.

Survival kits

When Colombia started reopening its borders it created a surge in migrant arrivals that had largely been on hold during the 2020 coronavirus lockdowns and border closures. But while authorities grapple with water shortages produced by the surge in demand and fear a health crisis-Colombia is experiencing one of the world’s highest COVID-19 death rates-locals have seized on the business opportunity.

The pandemic emptied the region’s paradisaical beaches of tourists, but the arrival of migrants has boosted the ailing local economy. “People say there’s a problem here, that Necocli is in chaos. No! The people are working,” said Juan Pablo Guevara, 34, who has seen his earnings increase tenfold by renting out a room to migrants.

Rooms go for \$10 a night per person, which is “very expensive” according to Wilford, who shares a room with four other people. Locals are also selling survival kits for \$20 that include a tent, a machete and a liquid they claim scares away snakes.

“We’re not going to stay here, we just want to pass through without harming the country,” Wilford said, adding that some friends are waiting for him in the United States. Necocli’s beach now vibrates to the sound of creole music and tales of frustration and aspiration.

Danger everywhere

Many of the migrants come from Haiti and Cuba, nations whose economies have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. Haiti is also in turmoil following the assassination of President Jovenel

racist”. One sore point is “stop and search”, which allows police to frisk people they suspect of carrying weapons or drugs on the street. In the year to March 2020, black people were nine times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people in England and Wales. Ken Hinds, 62, leads a stop and search monitoring group in the London borough of Haringey—the epicenter of the 2011 riots—and believes relations are “at an all-time low” between police and the black community. Frequent rotations of local police commanders and heavy-handed arrests undo any progress, while a lack of accountability blights policing as much today as it did when he set up the group in 2008, Hinds said.

The government has defended stop and search, saying it led to more than 74,000 arrests and 11,000 weapons being seized in the past year, and plans to step up its use.

Hinds, though, doubted the measures will reduce violent crime and homicides, which disproportionately affect young, black men. “We’re not seeing the lessons being learned. What we improve today will get eroded tomorrow,” he told AFP.

Confidence crisis

A government-commissioned report on racial disparities in March controversially concluded the UK was a “model for other white-majority countries” and no longer “rigged” against minorities. But ethnic minorities are under-represented in police forces, especially within senior ranks. The latest figures show 7.6 percent of officers in England and Wales were of a BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) background, compared to 14 percent of the total population. Last week’s parliamentary review warned that representative policing will not be achieved for another two decades. The charity INQUEST, which campaigns against deaths in custody, says BAME people disproportionately die following the use of force or restraint by police. —AFP



NECOCLI, Colombia: Stranded migrants from Venezuela camp on the beach in Necocli, Colombia. Thousands of migrants go through Necocli’s small pier in their weeks-long journey from South America to the US. —AFP

Moise last month in a mysterious plot involving Colombian mercenaries allegedly in the pay of local politicians.

Haiti is a “fake democracy,” Wilford said. “How will I live without a president, with a police force that is of no use?” Courcelle asked. Like many of the migrants that initially head to Chile or Brazil, they say their visas were not renewed so they started to move northwards in search of “a decent life.” —AFP

UK police’s racial disparities persist a decade after riots

LONDON: Mistrust between Britain’s ethnic minorities and the police lingers, a decade after the shooting of a man whose death sparked the country’s worst civil unrest in a generation.

On August 4, 2011, Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old mixed-race father of six, was shot dead by an officer working for a special team targeting gun crime in black communities. Outrage, economic hardship and criminal opportunism then coalesced as riots devastated Duggan’s north London neighborhood of Tottenham and spread across England, claiming five lives and causing substantial damage.

A coroner’s inquest later judged that Duggan was lawfully killed, but London’s Metropolitan Police admitted they had “much more to do” to improve relations with black citizens.

That challenge gained fresh resonance during last year’s worldwide Black Lives Matter protests against racism and police brutality. The anniversary of Duggan’s death comes after UK lawmakers last month decried “persistent, deep-rooted and unjustified racial disparities” in policing and a “systematic failure” to tackle inequality.

Stop and search

The tensions remain even two decades after a landmark report on an investigation into the racially aggravated murder of a black teenager concluded the Metropolitan Police was “institutionally

Record number of migrants cross Channel to UK

LONDON: A record number of migrants crossed the Channel from France on a single day this week, the British government said yesterday, pushing annual figures well beyond last year’s numbers. The Home Office confirmed that at least 482 people made the trip across one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes on Wednesday, many on dangerously overcrowded inflatable boats. The numbers surpass a previous record set only weeks earlier as migrants took advantage of favorable summer weather. Britain’s domestic Press Association news agency said the figures took annual migrant crossings past 10,000 — far more than the roughly 8,500 people the government said arrived in the whole of 2020. The government said they dealt with 21 “events” involving the 482 on Wednesday, while 246 individuals were prevented from reaching southern England by the French.

Dan O’Mahoney, the government’s Clandestine Channel Threat Commander, blamed criminal gangs for the situation, and called the situation “unacceptable” and “dangerous”. The growing number of journeys are proving increasingly embarrassing for the government, which has vowed to clamp down on the arrivals and made tightening Britain’s borders a key issue in its campaign to leave the European Union. —AFP

International

COVID cases top 200 million worldwide as pandemic surges

Delta variant running rampant in Southeast Asia, Thailand records 20,000 new daily cases

PARIS: The number of COVID-19 infections recorded worldwide passed 200 million yesterday, an AFP count showed, as the pandemic surges around the world, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region where the Australian city of Melbourne locked down again. The highly contagious Delta variant has driven the virus to return with a vengeance, the number of daily cases recorded worldwide rising by 68 percent since mid-June.

But as more of the world gets vaccinated against the coronavirus—particularly in wealthy countries—the number of deaths has increased at a slower rate, up 20 percent since the start of July, according to AFP's count.

In Australia, which had initially fended off the virus by slamming shut its borders, almost two-thirds of the 25 million population were in lockdown yesterday as the country struggles to quash a Delta outbreak.

Southeast Asia ravaged

The Delta variant has been running rampant in Southeast Asia, with Thailand recording 20,000 new daily cases for the first time on Wednesday—and again yesterday.

The country also announced 160 deaths in 24 hours, as exhausted morgue workers struggle to cope with the mounting bodies. “I've seen

our personnel faint quite a few times lately so fatigue is definitely starting to set in and we're almost at our limits,” forensic scientist Thanitchet Khetkham told AFP.

Indonesia's total COVID death toll passed 100,000 on Wednesday after it recorded 1,739 of the 10,245 fatalities registered worldwide, the global toll rising past 4.25 million. Japan's capital Tokyo had a new record number of daily cases with 5,042, just three days before the end of the Olympics.

Africa also posted a new record with the 6,400 deaths in the week to August 1 representing the continent's most since the start of the pandemic, the World Health Organization said. Habib Sagna, a cemetery manager in Senegal's Dakar, said that in a normal week, they would hold six or seven funerals. “But now, we can do six or seven in a single day,” he told AFP.

Vaccine inequality

The United States remains the country with the highest number of deaths and infections, however it said that it plans eventually to begin allowing fully vaccinated foreigners back in.

A White House official said that the US administration wants to reopen to visitors from abroad in a “safe and sustainable manner,” though without specifying a timeframe. On



CHICAGO: Travelers arrive at the international terminal of the O'Hare Airport in Chicago, Illinois. The US, which closed its borders to most foreign travelers as the coronavirus pandemic took hold, plans to allow fully vaccinated visitors to enter the country, a White House official said Wednesday. —AFP

the other end of the spectrum China, where the virus first emerged in December 2019, was tightening its borders after recording its most new cases in six months. China's immigration authority announced it would stop is-

suing ordinary passports and other documents needed for exiting the country in “non-essential and non-emergency” cases—but stopped short of issuing a blanket ban on overseas travel. —AFP

Brazil high court orders Bolsonaro investigated

BRAZILIA: A Supreme Court justice ruled Wednesday President Jair Bolsonaro should be investigated for unproven claims Brazil's voting system is riddled with fraud, adding the far-right leader to an ongoing probe on the spread of fake news by his government. The ruling by Justice Alexandre de Moraes came after Bolsonaro stepped up his longtime attacks on Brazil's electronic voting system, claiming—without evidence—that it is fraud-plagued and insisting there will be no elections next year as scheduled if it is not overhauled.

The Superior Electoral Court had asked the Supreme Court to issue the ruling, after itself putting the president under investigation for his campaign against Brazil's voting system. The Supreme Court agreed, finding Bolsonaro should face investigation for slander and inciting criminal acts for his undocumented claims of massive vote fraud.

The electoral court's own probe will investigate the president for abuse of office, improper use of official communication channels, corruption, fraud and other potential crimes.

Bolsonaro has long criticized electronic voting, introduced in Brazil in 1996. He has stepped up his attacks in the build-up to the October 2022 elections, insisting on “printable and auditable” paper ballots as a backstop to the electronic system.

Opinion polls place the 66-year-old leader well behind leftist ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in the presidential race. Bolsonaro's popularity numbers have been sliding, and he is under fire on various fronts, including a Senate investigation into his government's widely criticized handling of COVID-19. — AFP

Myanmar envoy alerts UN to alleged 'massacre'

UNITED NATIONS: Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations, who has refused to leave his post despite being fired after the February coup, has alerted the world body to a “reported massacre” by the military junta.

Kyaw Moe Tun sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday saying 40 bodies had been found in Kani township in July in the Sagaing area of northwestern Myanmar.

The junta has denied the massacre, while AFP has not been able to independently verify the reports due to mobile networks being cut in the remote region. The representative wrote that soldiers tortured and killed 16 men in a village in the township around July 9 and 10, after which 10,000 residents fled the area.

He said a further 13 bodies were discovered in the days following clashes between local fighters and security forces on July 26. Kyaw Moe Tun added that another 11 men, including a 14-year-old boy, were killed and set on fire in a separate village on July 28.

In the letter, the ambassador repeated his call for a global arms embargo on the ruling junta and “urgent humanitarian intervention” from the international community. “We cannot let the military keep on doing this kind of atrocity in Myanmar,” Kyaw Moe Tun told AFP.

“It is time for the UN, especially the UN Security Council,



YANGON: In this file photo taken on February 9, 2021, protesters wear wet weather gear to protect against police water cannon as they take part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon. — AFP

to take action.” Myanmar has been in turmoil since the army ousted the civilian leadership on February 1, launching a crackdown on dissent that has killed more than 900 people, according to a local monitoring group.

Kyaw Moe Tun has passionately rejected the coup and brushed aside the junta's claims that he no longer represents Myanmar. The United Nations still considers him as the rightful envoy. The representative was sacked by the junta in February a day after he gave a three-finger salute at the UN General Assembly following an impassioned speech calling for the return to civilian rule. —AFP

International

India flexes muscles with new aircraft carrier and task force

No plan to house India military base: Mauritius

NEW DELHI: India is flexing its maritime muscles to counter growing Chinese influence, conducting sea trials on its first indigenous aircraft carrier and dispatching a task force for joint exercises with the United States and other allies. The INS Vikrant, which began trials off the southern state of Kerala on Wednesday, will be India's second aircraft carrier in operation.

The Indian Navy said the country can now "join a select group of nations with the capability to indigenously design and build an Aircraft Carrier, which will be a real testimony to the 'Make in India' thrust of the Indian Government." The new 262-metre (860-foot) carrier joins the INS Vikramaditya, the Soviet-made Admiral Gorshkov that India bought in 2004.

The navy said 44 other ships and submarines were being built indigenously. It is also pressing the government for a third carrier, with Navy chief Admiral Karambir Singh saying the force could not remain "tethered". China, vying for influence in the Indian Ocean where New Delhi has traditionally held sway, is currently building its third aircraft carrier.

The Indian Navy said separately on Monday that it was sending a task force of four ships to South East Asia, the South China Sea and Western Pacific for two months of exercises including with Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, Australia and the United States. The deployment "seeks to underscore the operational reach, peaceful presence and solidarity with friendly countries towards ensuring good order in the maritime domain and to strengthen existing

bonds between India and countries of the Indo Pacific," it said.

India, Japan, Australia and the US together form the "Quad" alliance seen as a bulwark against China.

Last year, 20 Indian troops died in a clash on their disputed Himalayan border with China. This year, India has also conducted naval exercises with France and most recently with a British task force in the Bay of Bengal last month led by the new HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier.

Meanwhile, Mauritius has denied a report that it has allowed India to build a military base on the remote island of Agalega, with a government official telling AFP that no such agreement exists between the two nations. Earlier this week, news broadcaster Al Jazeera reported on the construction of an airstrip and two jetties to house an Indian military base on Agalega, located about 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) north of the archipelago's main island.

But on Wednesday, the Mauritian government denied any plans to allow a military installation on Agalega, home to about 300 people. "There is no agreement between Mauritius and India for the creation of a military base in Agalega," Ken Arian, a communications adviser to Prime Minister Pravin Jugnauth, told AFP. Arian said that although work was under way on two projects agreed during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2015 visit to Mauritius—a three-kilometer (1.8-mile) air strip and a jetty—they would not be used for military purposes.

The report raised fears of a repeat of the



COCHIN: In this file photo, Indian naval officers stand guard during the launch of the indigenously-built aircraft carrier INS Vikrant at the Cochin Shipyard in Kochi. —AFP

1965 decision by Britain to separate the Chagos Islands from Mauritius and set up a joint military base with the United States on Diego Garcia, the largest of the isles.

The decades-old move has sparked protests by Chagossians, who accuse Britain of carrying out an "illegal occupation" and bar-

ring them from their homeland. Britain insists the islands belong to London and has renewed a lease agreement with the United States to use Diego Garcia until 2036. Diego Garcia played a strategic role during the Cold War, and then as an airbase, including during the war in Afghanistan. —AFP

Biden offers Hong Kongers in US safe haven

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden announced yesterday that Hong Kong citizens currently in the United States who fear for their safety amid the political crackdown back home will receive temporary safe haven.

Biden said the move recognizes "the significant erosion" of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong by the Chinese government. "By unilaterally imposing on Hong Kong the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the People's Republic of China has undermined the enjoyment of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong," he said in a statement. Biden cited the "politically motivated arrests" of more than 100 opposition politicians, activists, and protestors on charges under the national security law, charges that include alleged secession, subversion and terrorist activities.

More than 10,000 others have been arrested in relation to anti-government protests, he said. The new



Joe Biden

decision allows Hong Kong residents currently in the United States to remain for 18 months and to be allowed to work.

"This action demonstrates President Biden's strong support for people in Hong Kong in the face of ongoing repression by the People's Republic of China, and makes clear we will not stand idly by as the PRC breaks its promises to Hong Kong and to the international community," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said. —AFP

India to deploy 'neutral force' after border clash

NEW DELHI: India will deploy a "neutral force" at the frontier of two states in its north-east, after their long-running border dispute escalated into a deadly showdown, officials said yesterday.

The July 26 clash on the border between Assam and Mizoram left six police officers dead and dozens injured, in a major embarrassment to the central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In a joint statement released yesterday, the governments of both states said a "neutral force" would be deployed by the Indian government in disputed areas. "For this purpose, both the states shall not send their respective forest and police forces for patrolling, domination, enforcement or for fresh deployment to any of the areas where confrontation and conflict has taken place", the statement read. Mizoram was part of Assam until 1972 and became a state in its own right in 1987.

The two states have been wrangling over their border for decades, but such deadly escalations are rare. The government of Mizoram yesterday also expressed regret—for the first time since the clashes—over the death of the six police from Assam. Last week, the chief ministers of both states tweeted that they would seek an amicable approach to the dispute. Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma belongs to Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party while Mizoram chief minister Zoramthanga heads the Mizo National Front—an ally of the ruling BJP alliance. —AFP

International

Australia expands lockdowns as virus fight falters in cities

About 60% of the population are now being told to stay at home

SYDNEY: Almost two-thirds of Australia's 25 million people were in lockdown yesterday, as the country's faltering bid to bring a virulent Delta outbreak to heel prompted a new wave of restrictions. The country's two largest cities received a double blow in their efforts to retain "COVID Zero" status, with authorities reporting a record number of new coronavirus infections in Sydney and imposing a sixth lockdown for virus-weary Melbourne.

In total, about 60 percent of the population in cities from Brisbane to Ballarat are now being told to stay at home. Until now, Australia has dodged the worst ravages of the pandemic through a strategy of closing borders, lockdowns, mandatory travel quarantine, and aggressive testing and tracing.

But those tools appear blunted in the face of the highly transmissible Delta variant that is now threatening one of the world's last havens from COVID. Since a Sydney driver was infected with Delta by an international flight crew in mid-June, the area has reported 4,319 cases and clusters have popped up across the country. After six weeks of lockdown in Sydney, the number of new infections in New South Wales state grew to 262 Thursday, the largest daily tally since the pandemic began.

Health officials said almost all the new cases were in Sydney, but a handful of infections in other districts prompted state premier Gladys Berejiklian to widen stay-at-home restrictions

to neighboring areas. Five positive tests in Newcastle—a coastal city of 320,000 people north of Sydney—prompted authorities to shutter schools and tell residents to stay home for at least a week. It was a similar story in Victoria, where premier Daniel Andrews said he had "no choice" but to make the "very difficult announcement" to lock down Melbourne and the rest of the state—little more than a week after the last lockdown ended. "None of us are happy to be here, none of us," he said, citing the danger posed by eight "mystery" cases that have yet to be traced.

"There is no alternative to lockdown," he said. "The alternative is we let this run that gets away from us, and our hospitals will be absolutely overwhelmed. Not hundreds of patients but thousands." That prospect did not deter a crowd of around two thousand protesters—who unlike most of the city's five million residents who heeded the lockdown—took to the streets to demonstrate.

Police responded in huge numbers, making arrests and using pepper spray in a bid to disperse the crowd as they marched through Melbourne's city center for nearly two hours, chanting "no more lockdown" and calling for Andrews to be sacked.

Under the gun

Barely 20 percent of Australians have been fully vaccinated, thanks to an acute lack of sup-



MELBOURNE, Australia: A woman walks along a street in downtown Melbourne yesterday as authorities there announced a sixth lockdown for the city in efforts to bring the Delta outbreak to heel. —AFP

ply and pockets of vaccine hesitancy. Five people in their 60s–80s have died in Sydney in the past 24 hours, none of whom were fully vaccinated. "I cannot stress enough how it's so important for everybody of all ages to come forward and get the vaccine," Berejiklian said.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has vowed to ramp up vaccine deliveries by the end of the year but put the onus on cities to lock down to contain the spread. "The virus doesn't move by itself. People staying at home ensures that the virus doesn't move," he said yesterday. —AFP

Australian pastor charged with covering up child sex abuse

SYDNEY: An Australian pastor who founded a megachurch with locations around the world was charged yesterday with concealing child sex abuse allegedly carried out by his father in the 1970s.

Police charged 67-year-old Hillsong Church co-founder Brian Houston with failing to report the sexual abuse of a young boy following an investigation lasting years.

Houston is a prominent Pentecostal religious figure in Australia with ties to the country's conservative prime minister. His father, Frank, who died in 2004, has been accused of sexually abusing a seven-year-old boy while a preacher at the Assemblies of God Church. A royal commission in 2015 found the younger Houston was told about the allegations in 1999 but failed to report them to authorities, sparking the investigation by police.

Brian has previously rejected allegations of a cover-up and said he confronted his father about the claims at the time. He said he did not report his dad as the victim told him he did not want to go public or approach police. "These charges have come as a shock to me given how transparent I've always been about this matter," he said in a statement yesterday. "I vehemently profess my innocence and will defend these charges, and I welcome the opportunity to set the record straight." — AFP

Australia to make reparations for 'stolen generation'

SYDNEY: Australia will provide one-off cash payments of US\$60,000 to many Indigenous Australians who were forcibly removed from their families as children, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced yesterday, to redress what he described as a "shameful" period in the nation's history.

Thousands of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were taken from their homes and put in foster care with white families under official assimilation policies that persisted into the 1970s. "What happened is a shameful chapter in our national story," Morrison told parliament of the "Stolen Generation" of Indigenous Australians. "We have already confronted it with the national apology but our deeds must continue to match our words," he said. The tales of the suffering caused were "not simply stories of the past but stories that continue to reverberate through the generations".

Campaigners for the rights of Indigenous Australians, who remain heavily disadvantaged in terms of health, income and education, welcomed the announcement but said it was long overdue. Morrison said Aus\$378.6 million (US\$280 million) would be allocated to redress the human damage of the assimilation policy. The payments will be available to those living in territories that were run by the Commonwealth at the time of

the forced removals—the Northern Territory, the Australian Capital Territory, which is home to the capital Canberra, and Jervis Bay territory.

Some other Australian states have set up redress schemes but the federal government had not followed suit until now. The scheme offers survivors a one-off payment of Aus\$75,000 in recognition of the harm caused; a "healing assistance" payment of Aus\$7,000; and the opportunity to tell their stories to a senior government official and receive a face-to-face or written apology. The federal payments are part of an Aus\$1 billion plan to reduce the sharp inequalities faced by Indigenous Australians.

'Our mothers were chasing the car'

Fiona Cornforth, head of the Healing Foundation—a non-governmental group that works with Stolen Generation survivors—welcomed the reparations. "Redress is fundamentally about acknowledging the past wrongs inflicted upon Stolen Generations, and the lifelong experience of trauma and grief that is still carried as a burden today," she said. The policy comes nearly 25 years after a pivotal "Bringing Them Home" report in 1997, which followed a national inquiry into the forced separations, acknowledged the human rights violations suffered and set out measures to support those affected.

"We jumped on our mothers' backs, crying, trying not to be left behind. But the policemen pulled us off and threw us back in the car," one confidential witness said in the report, recalling events of 1935 in Western Australia. "They pushed the mothers away and drove off, while our mothers were chasing the car, running and crying after us. We were screaming in the back of that car." — AFP

LIFESTYLE

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Rihanna 'worth \$1.7bn': Forbes

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PETA France (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) members disguised as dinosaurs, race in Bayonne, Southwestern France, yesterday, in the frame of an action against bullfighting. — AFP
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Lifestyle | Features

Meghan turns 40, asks for help getting women back to work



In this file photo Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex arrives at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. —AFP

Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex, marked her 40th birthday Wednesday with a video asking celebrity friends to help women get back to work after the pandemic. The two-minute turn shows the wife of Britain's Prince Harry joking with actress Melissa McCarthy, and comes two months after she gave birth to the couple's second child, Lilibet. "Because I'm turning 40, I'm asking 40 friends to donate 40 minutes of their time to help mentor a woman who is mobilizing back into the workforce," says the Duchess.

Millions of people around the world have lost their jobs in shutdowns sparked by Covid-19, as governments try to tamp down the spread of the disease. "I think if we all do it,

and all commit 40 minutes to some sort of act of service, it will create a ripple effect," she adds. Harry, whose criticism of his family and step away from official royal work has provided fodder for Britain's tabloid press, is seen juggling in the background as Markle and McCarthy joke about tattoos and yacht parties. The couple, who now live in a plush part of California alongside some of the United States's wealthiest celebrities, are forging careers outside the British royal family.

Their ventures include the Archewell organization that released the slick video. Meghan and Harry, 36, sat in March for a bombshell interview with US talk show host Oprah Winfrey, triggering the royal family's biggest crisis in decades. During the two-hour sit-

down, viewed by more than 17 million people in the US and over 11 million in Britain, Harry and Meghan said racism had played a part in their departure from Britain. They said a senior royal had speculated how dark their child's skin would be before he was born. Meghan is biracial; her mother is Black and her father is white. Their first child Archie is now two. Lilibet Diana-named for Harry's grandmother Queen Elizabeth II and his late mother-was born in early June. Markle's video comes weeks after it was announced that Harry will pen an autobiography that he pledged would be a "first-hand account of my life that's accurate and wholly truthful." — AFP

Lions kill three children near Tanzania wildlife reserve

Three young children were killed by lions near Tanzania's world-renowned Ngorongoro wildlife reserve as they went to look for lost cattle, police said yesterday. The youngsters aged between nine and 11 had arrived home from school on Monday and gone into a forest near the Ngorongoro Conservation Area to search for the missing animals, Arusha police chief Justine Masejo said. "That is when the lions attacked and killed three children while injuring one," he added. Ngorongoro in northern Tanzania is a World Heritage Site that is home to wildlife including big cats such as lions, cheetahs and leopards.

"I would like to urge the nomadic communities around the reserved areas to take precautions against fierce animals especially when they task their children to take care of the livestock. That will help to protect the children and their families," Masejo said. Tanzania allows some communities such as the Maasai, who graze their livestock alongside wild animals, to live within national parks. However, they are often in conflict with animals such as lions and elephants which can attack people, livestock and destroy crops. Last year, Tanzania relocated 36 lions from the Serengeti National Park after attacks on humans and cattle from the surrounding communities. — AFP

GERMANY FINES MUSICAL INSTRUMENT SECTOR FOR ORCHESTRATING PRICES

Germany's competition watchdog said yesterday it has slapped three leading makers of musical instruments and two dealers with heavy fines for price-fixing. The Federal Cartel Office said in a statement that it fined heavyweights Yamaha, Roland and Fender a total 21 million euros (\$25 million) for acting in concert to "systematically" limit price competition. Two dealers, Thomann and Music Store, were also fined. According to the watchdog, the companies colluded in setting minimum prices for their goods. When these were undercut, the instrument makers would contact the dealers and ask them to increase their prices.

Yamaha and Roland both used price-tracking software to monitor and ensure dealers stayed in tune with minimum prices, the cartel office said. "For years, manufacturers and retailers of musical instruments have systematically endeavored to restrict price competition for the end consumer," said cartel office chief, Andreas Mundt. "With this fine, the Federal Cartel Office is sending a clear signal not just to the affected companies, but to the musical instrument sector as a whole that infringing the ban on price-fixing will not be tolerated." The proceedings were initiated in April 2018 with a dawn raid following tip-offs from market participants, the cartel office said. — AFP



In this file photo shows a cleaner mops the floor in front of a Nintendo's Super Mario game character decoration at Narita Airport in China prefecture. — AFP

Nintendo Q1 profit down as pandemic gaming boom slows

Nintendo's first-quarter net profit fell nearly 13 percent as the video-game lockdown boom lost momentum, the Japanese firm said yesterday, after reporting record earnings in the previous financial year. Long periods of stay-at-home orders and other restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic fuelled a run of good fortune for game-makers worldwide. But analysts warn of a slowdown in demand for indoor entertainment as vaccines help life move towards normality, despite the spread of the Delta variant.

Nintendo said it generated 92.7 billion yen (\$846 million) for the three months to June, compared with 106.5 billion yen in the same period last year. It left its forecast for the year to March 2022 unchanged, still expecting to

report a 340 billion yen net profit on sales of 1.6 trillion yen. The firm posted its highest ever annual profit in 2020-21, propelled by the runaway popularity of its Switch console and the family-friendly game "Animal Crossing". "Hardware and software sales in the first quarter of last fiscal year were substantially driven by the March 2020 release of 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons'," Nintendo said in a statement yesterday. "So compared to then, hardware sales were down 21.7 percent and software sales were down 10.2 percent year-on-year."

Last month, Nintendo announced it would release a new model of the Switch in October-but analysts are divided over prospects for the Switch OLED, with the recommended price higher than that of the original console. "The results were weaker than expected, partially due to sluggish sales of Switch Lite consoles," Hideki Yasuda, an analyst at Ace Research Institute in Tokyo, told AFP. "The lockdown boom is slowing, but its performance remained competitive," he said. "Nintendo still has a good chance to upgrade its full-year forecast later this year." — AFP



In this file photo Louis C.K. performs on stage during 10th Annual Stand Up For Heroes at The Theater at Madison Square Garden in New York City. — AFP

Disgraced comedian Louis C.K. schedules major new tour

US comedian Louis C.K., whose previously high-flying career was derailed by sexual misconduct revelations, on Wednesday announced a major international tour beginning next week. C.K. admitted to masturbating in front of multiple women following a newspaper expose in 2017, just a month after revelations about Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein triggered the global #MeToo movement. After a series of low-key “come-back” gigs in 2018 drew more heated criticism for jokes about school shooting survivors and non-binary people, C.K.’s attempt to return to major touring last year was postponed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“I’m really looking forward to seeing your faces as I tell some rather impolite jokes and

stories,” the former “Louie” star told fans in an email Wednesday. New and rescheduled tour dates on his website include shows in cities across the United States, Germany, Denmark, Romania and Ukraine. In November 2017, the New York Times published allegations against C.K. by five women, who accused him of masturbating or asking to masturbate in front of them or on the telephone, in separate incidents dating from the late 1990s to 2005. The six-time Emmy winner did not deny the allegations, and his mainstream career went up in flames.

He was dumped by Netflix, his publicist, the television networks FX and HBO, while a movie project about the relationship between an ageing filmmaker and a teenage girl was scrapped. Last year, C.K. released a comedy special via his website in which he referred to the scandal, asking the audience “how was 2018 and 2019 for you guys?” “I learned a lot,” he said. “I learned how to eat alone in a restaurant with people giving me the finger from across the room.” — AFP

Rihanna ‘worth 1.7bn’: Forbes

Singer and businesswoman Rihanna is worth a whopping \$1.7 billion, Forbes said Wednesday, making her one of the richest woman musicians on the planet. The R&B songstress parlayed success in the singles charts into a huge make-up and fashion empire, with earnings that now dwarf those of other music megastars like Madonna and Beyonce. The Barbados-born Robyn Rihanna Fenty exploded onto the scene in 2005, and logged global hits like “We Found Love” and “Umbrella”, a collaboration with Jay-Z.



In this file photo Singer/actress Rihanna attends the World Premiere of OCEAN'S 8 in New York. — AFP

BIG SCREEN IS BACK AT LOCARNO FILM FESTIVAL

The Locarno Film Festival opens Wednesday, with thousands set to return to the open-air giant screen in the idyllic Swiss town after last year’s edition was forced online by the pandemic. Founded in 1946, Locarno is one of the world’s longest-running annual film festivals and focuses on auteur cinema. Held on the shores of Lake Maggiore, in the Italian-speaking Ticino region of southern Switzerland, films are screened in Locarno’s central square before up to 8,000 people—a feature of Swiss national life depicted on the country’s 20-franc banknotes. However, the 2020 festival could not be staged in the usual way due to the COVID-19 crisis and so switched to a hybrid format, with films and content made available online.

“Last summer the Piazza Grande was a sorry sight, with no chairs, no people, no thrilling atmosphere in the evening,” said the festival’s president Marco Solari. “Despite the disastrous impact of the global pandemic, however, we never gave up.” But the coronavirus pandemic has changed some aspects of the 74th festival, which runs until August 14. Entry to the Piazza Grande—featuring one of the largest screens in the world—is restricted only to those with a COVID certificate: proof of either double vaccination, a recent negative test or having recovered from the disease. “What did we miss the most during these 18 months? The pleasure of being together in front of a big screen,” said the festival’s artistic director Giona Nazzaro. “Now we can recon-

nect with those sitting next to us. They’re with us, being thrilled, moved or scared.”

Casta, Landis honored

The festival’s top prize is the Golden Leopard. Previous winning directors include Roberto Rossellini, John Ford, Stanley Kubrick, Milos Forman, Mike Leigh and Jim Jarmusch. Seventeen films are in the running for the award, including movies from France, Russia, Italy, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Spain and Indonesia. The Golden Leopard comes with a prize fund of 75,000 Swiss francs (\$83,000, 70,000 euros), shared between the director and the producer. The festival features 209 films being shown in 12 venues, including 100 world premieres and 21 debut movies.

The festival will open with French actress Laetitia Casta receiving the Excellence Award, for film personalities who have left their mark on contemporary cinema. “When we thought about someone who could sum up the ideals of returning to the piazza... who better than Laetitia Casta?” said Nazzaro. “She embodies what it means to be a creative, liberated actress.” Following the ceremony, the opening film will be the world premiere of “Beckett”, a thriller by Italian director Ferdinando Cito Filomarino starring John D. Washington and Oscar-winner Alicia Vikander. It tells the story of a US tourist on holiday in Greece who becomes the target of a manhunt following a tragic accident.—AFP



The large open-air screen and yellow chairs at the Piazza Grand square with old buildings in Locarno for the Annual International Film Festival, Switzerland. — Shutterstock



This picture shows volunteer from Mehmankhana, a non-profit organization, preparing food for pandemic affected people during a lockdown to contain the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, at Lalmatia area. — AFP photos

No animal left behind: Kenya holds first national wildlife census

The flimsy planes tethered to metal drums to prevent them from accidentally becoming airborne are unlikely weapons in Kenya's fight to protect threatened species as it conducts its first national wildlife census. Decades of unbridled poaching, expanding human settlements and climate change have taken a heavy toll on the global wildlife population—and central Kenya is no exception. African savanna elephants have been particularly hard-hit, with their numbers plunging by at least 60 percent during the last half-century, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

So the pilots preparing their aircraft at the tiny airport at Isiolo know they are on the frontlines of a battle with far-reaching consequences. "Elephants are the key animals, but when you are able to locate (any) endangered species, you feel like the census is on the right track," pilot Chris Cheruiyot tells AFP as he fastens the safety belt of his passenger, Julius Kabete. A camera and audio recorder dangling from his neck, Kabete will spend the next few hours counting Somali giraffes, Grevy's zebras, oryxes and other animals as the pair cruise the windy skies and refuel their two-seater Aviat Husky aircraft at specially set up stations in the forest.



The ambitious exercise, which kicked off in May, covers major species in more than 50 of Kenya's national parks and reserves as well as private and community conservancies, and includes marine life. Much of the existing data on the country's wildlife population are gathered individually by local advocacy groups or international conservationists, contributing to a scattershot approach to animal protection. Furthermore, training spotters is often both time-consuming and expensive. —AFP

Bangladesh street kitchens battle to keep free food on the menu

Mohammad Masud braves Dhaka's sweltering summer heat to pedal across the Bangladeshi capital in his rickshaw and queue at one of the last charities still feeding those left destitute by the pandemic. Nearby are hundreds of out-of-work or struggling security guards, transport workers, domestic servants and homeless children finishing their plates of rice and lentils at Mehmankhana, or the "dining place for guests". "I have been hungry all day," 28-year-old Masud told AFP. "I did not make enough to buy food." When Bangladesh shut down for more than two months last year during its first COVID outbreak, hundreds of charities, civic groups and political parties gave out food, cash, masks and sanitizer to those who had lost their jobs.

But coronavirus fatigue has set in and people have become less willing to finance the goodwill as the pandemic drags on. A new lockdown started in July, but only a handful of charities are on the streets. "Last year we got a lot of cash donations," said Jashim Uddin Khan of the Shonge Achi Foundation, a group helping feed needy people, stray dogs and even monkeys in Dhaka. "This year we haven't had many donations. There is a major fatigue for charity work." Official figures say more than 20,000 Bangladeshis have died of coronavirus, though experts say the toll is at least four times higher.

2020, which helped bring down the poverty rate to 20 percent. The SANEM research foundation says the rate has shot back up to 40 percent during the pandemic as businesses, schools and government offices have shut down. While the government has allowed some garment factories to reopen and spent \$15 billion on stimulus packages, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs. Groups like Mehmankhana have stepped up operations but more and more people are suffering hunger.



Pandemic affected people eating food distributed by Mehmankhana.

"There are days when I only have one meal," said Johra Begum, a 27-year-old mother of four in the Mehmankhana queue, who lost her job as a domestic servant. Asma Akhter Liza, a 36-year-old actress, and her cousin launched Mehmankhana in March last year after the start of the first nationwide lockdown in Bangladesh. They say they feed more than 2,500 people a day and are proud to tell patrons that they can "eat as much as you like". Liza said she resolved to start the charity after seeing children trying to break into a food store while she was out feeding street dogs. "I thought stray dogs would be the hardest hit during the lockdown," she said.

"But then I saw this break-in and I realized many thousands of people, including many who had decent jobs before the lockdown, are going hungry." At first she borrowed money to fund the kitchen, but now gets private donations from across the country. Liza said many middle-class people now come to the street kitchen in the evening "when they can enjoy some kind of anonymity". Around 10,000 people ate there for the recent Eid Al-Adha Muslim festival, she said. One of her patrons is Selim Ahmed, a 45-year-old trader who said his daily income had shrunk to less than 100 taka (\$1.20). "Many people would have gone hungry if Mehmankhana wasn't here," he said. — AFP

Economic toll

Bangladesh recorded economic growth averaging seven percent in the decade to



Water witcher David Sagouspe poses for a photo under a dust-covered almond tree, July 24, 2021 on a farm in Fresno, California.



A field of grapes irrigated with drip irrigation are seen on a farm in Fresno.



Water witcher David Sagouspe demonstrates his technique. —AFP photos

Divining intervention: Drought-hit Californians enlist 'water witch'

Holding a V-shaped branch point down, David Sagouspe examines the cracked soil of a California farm. Under the blazing sun, he takes a breath and sets off, mechanically turning the branch five times towards the sky and five times towards the ground. He stops, marks the spot with a pink flag and nods. "People would pay a lot of money for that strata right there," he says, referring to underground water. For more than 40 years, Sagouspe has worked as a dowser, also known as a "water witch," offering to help the largest farmers in central California find groundwater.

around the bottom, that he keeps on the dashboard of his white pickup truck. "The stick, it becomes almost bonded to me," he says. "When I witch from my truck, it starts tingling in my hands when I know there's going to be water."

'renegade'

Sagouspe swears he doesn't use any tools, maps or geological surveys in his work. "I'm a renegade," the 70-year-old says mischievously. Instead, he bases his work on very precise knowledge of the region and the neighboring mountain range that irrigates the valley with water-when there is any. His father, who transferred this "energy" to him, also worked as a dowser in the area. Sagouspe offers to "pass that energy down" to AFP, but without much success.

For each supposed water source that he marks with his little pink flags, Sagouspe makes \$1,000. During the severe drought in 2014, "I paid for my daughter's wedding, I had so many people calling me," he says. In 2021, with orchards parched, animals dehydrated and farmers panicked, he also stands to make record revenues. Farmers who hire the dowser have no guarantee of actually finding water at the spots he marks. They then have to pay tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars to build wells and extract water-or come home empty-handed. But they take that risk because specialized companies cost more, without necessarily being more precise, says Bikram Hundal, a farmer who in the past dug an expensive well nearly 900 feet (300 meters) deep without finding even a drop of water.

'Successful'

During his first meeting with the dowser, Hundal-whose company packages 20 million

pounds (nine million kilograms) of almonds per year-said he didn't take Sagouspe seriously. "Are we doing a probe, are we using a satellite?" Hundal, standing in the middle of his almond field, recalls asking. "He said, 'No, I can feel the electromagnetic currents of the water.'" "I was like, 'This is BS,'" says Hundal, who has an engineering background. But then..."I've used him five times, and he's been successful five times," says Hundal.

'Call me'

Experts bristle at such examples, arguing that if you dig deep enough, you can find a

certain amount of water almost anywhere. But it won't necessarily be of high quality, and digging it up can endanger already fragile water tables. "The dowser commonly implies that the spot indicated by the rod is the only one where water could be found, but this is not necessarily true," warns the United States Geological Survey. Sagouspe insists that the wand doesn't lie. "Sure, you're going to have your skeptics," he says, shrugging. "Until you have a ranch that is completely dry," he adds, smiling. "Then, call me." — AFP



Water pumped up from an underground well flows into a cistern on a farm in Fresno.

Proudly claiming to live in "America's orchard" but desperate in the face of increasingly extreme droughts, farmers are turning to him more and more. In order to find water in a region that severely lacks it, Sagouspe can't use just any piece of wood. "Some people use willow, but it is too fast-reacting for me," he says, as if it were obvious. His tool of choice is a piece of olive wood, wrapped with black tape



The dried and cracked soil in an irrigation ditch next to a cornfield on a farm in Fresno.



Trevor (right) and Marda Norris, and their dog, Clyde, search on the Woodford Truffle farm, for Black Winter Perigord truffles in an orchard of specially-planted oak trees, close to the town of Ceres, in the Western Cape Province. — AFP photos

S Africa's 'crazy' mountain farmers cash in on truffle bet

Only shrubs grew naturally in the sandy acid soil that farmer Volker Miros chose as a site to test the potential for truffle production in South Africa. The determined mycophile saw no reason why the highly prized fungi could not grow on the plateaus of South Africa's rugged Cederberg mountains

in the west of the country, where the climate is similar to that of Mediterranean Europe. "We looked at where truffles are grown in the rest of the world and it's in the northern hemisphere, about 32 to 35 degrees north," said the white-bearded Miros, wearing a black beanie on a chilly winter day.



An afternoon harvest of Black Winter Perigord truffles is weighed in the kitchen on the family farm, where Woodford Truffles cultivate, close to the town of Ceres, in the Western Cape Province.



Volker Miros founder of Woodford Truffles inspects the roots of an Oak sapling to see how much the truffle has colonized.



Paul Miros of Woodford Truffles, holds some Black Winter Perigord truffles, which he found with his dog (not visible), on the family farm.



Volker Miros, founder of Woodford Truffles, smells a Black Winter Perigord truffle, as he prepares food in the kitchen on the family farm, where the truffles are cultivated.

"The same thing needs to be looked at 35 degrees south"-where the family farm lies around 1,100 meters (3,600 feet) above sea level, he said. Miros, 81, who picked mushrooms with his grandfather as a child in Germany, is a pioneer of South Africa's budding truffle cultivation industry. In 2009, he imported spores of the French Perigord variety-touted as the "black diamond" of the culinary world-and used them to inoculate the roots of oak seedlings that were then planted in the area.

After six years of trial and error, and tons of calcitic lime to counter the soil's acidity, the first truffles were finally unearthed. Today the family is

South Africa's number one Perigord grower and supplier, with almost 100 hectares (250 acres) of truffle orchards planted not only in the Cederberg region but also in other pockets of the country with similar climates. The most prolific of the orchards yields close to 10 kilograms (22 pounds) of truffles per hectare each season, which spans South Africa's coldest months from June to August.



A view of bread puddings and truffle ice-cream, with shavings of Black Winter Perigord truffles in the kitchen on the family farm.



Truffle ice-cream mixes in the kitchen, made from Black Winter Perigord truffles cultivated on the Miros family farm.



Paul Miros, of Woodford Truffles, grates a Black Winter Perigord truffle as he prepares truffle ice-cream.



(From left) Paul Miros of Woodford Truffles and Brian Bullard, the farm manager, inspects Oak saplings, in the nursery on the family farm, where they cultivate Black Winter Perigord truffles in an orchard of specially-planted oak trees, close to the town of Ceres.

Lifestyle | Feature

A plate of Black Winter Perigord truffles in the kitchen on the family farm.



'Wet forest floor smell'

"We were the crazy farmers on top of the mountain," Miro's son Paul chuckled, squinting in the winter sunlight as he looked over neat rows of inoculated oak trees and shrubs surrounded by snowy peaks. A dog sat obediently by his side, having recently uncovered a tuber the size of a tennis ball. The highest quality Miro's truffle sells for 20,000 rand (around \$1,370) per kilo this year, almost at par with the European market rates. Most buyers are local high-end restaurants that have only recently started to incorporate the delicacy into their dishes.

"People in South Africa don't know truffles that well," said Paul Miro's, 56, likening their taste to "the smell of a wet forest floor". "One of our biggest challenges was getting... peo-

ple to buy truffles in their fresh state, because they only last about three weeks out of the ground," he noted. "It needs a proper chef who understands how to cook with it," he added. A small but growing number of restaurants have worked the pungent tuber into their menus, conquering delighted customers with fresh truffle pastas and buttery potato dishes. Paul Miro's, who relishes experimenting with truffles in the kitchen, swears by a more unusual pairing. "I like making vanilla ice cream with a little bit of truffle in it," he said. "That creamy texture... really carries the truffle flavor excellently." — AFP



Truffles are cleaned of soil in the kitchen at Woodford Truffles on the family farm.



A view of bread puddings and truffle ice-cream, with shavings of Black Winter Perigord truffles in the kitchen on the family farm.



A view of grated Black Winter Perigord truffles in a prawn and rice dish with peppers and mushrooms.

K9 cuddles bring joy to kids at Chile hospital



Therapy dogs Morrón (right) and Pipa are seen at the Exequiel Gonzalez Pediatrics Hospital during a session with girl who will undergo surgery.

At a children's hospital in Santiago there is a flurry of excitement over a delegation of special visitors: a four-legged quartet has arrived to offer some reprieve from sickness and pain with their wagging tails and soulful eyes. Pipa, Morrón, Pepe and Chimú are regular visitors to the Exequiel Gonzalez Pediatrics Hospital in the Chilean capital, where they bring as much joy to children awaiting surgery as to their caregivers, many emotionally and physically drained by months battling the COVID-19 pandemic. Sporting hospital visitor's tags with their names and mugshots, the motley crew—two big dogs and two small—make their way from bed to bed, sharing cuddles and sitting patiently through the often inept attempts of small hands at brushing their coats.

For a moment, the little ones forget their pain, their bandages, and the incessant beeping of hospital electronics. In one bed, a girl—her face bandaged but beaming with joy—brushes then hugs Morrón, a black Labrador. In the corridor a girl in a bright pink tracksuit gleefully walks two of the dogs on leashes—or rather, they walk her. “To see how

a child's face lights up is what gives this meaning,” said canine therapist Fernanda Romero of the Tregua Foundation, the group that organizes the visits. “It is a near-magical experience,” she told AFP.

‘Helps reduce anxiety’

The foundation organizes hospital visits to calm young patients before and after surgery. “We have noticed in more than 90 percent of the children that canine therapy helps to reduce anxiety,” pediatric surgeon Yolanda Poulin told AFP. “A child who is crying, fearful and hungry because they have had to fast for

several hours—the therapy helps them.” The dogs—mainly Labradors and Golden Retrievers, animals known for their calm demeanor—are trained from an early age to handle the stressful hospital environment with its bright lights and constant machine noises.

During the pandemic the dogs have also been brought in to calm the hospital's doctors, nurses and technicians, exhausted after months of coronavirus duty. The dogs have been shown to relieve stress among the adults as well as kids, said Nicole Faust, one of the canine therapists. “Many say: ‘How

nice that the dog was here, I needed it, I was so stressed, I just had a super complicated patient, I just went through a hard experience’,” she said. “It has helped them a lot to forget work for a while,” said Faust, concerned for the mental health of medical personnel in the frontline of the battle against a pandemic that has claimed some 35,000 lives in Chile. — AFP



Therapy dog Morrón is seen at the Exequiel Gonzalez Pediatrics Hospital during a session with girl who will undergo surgery in Santiago.



Therapy dog Chimú is seen during a session with a health worker.



Therapy dogs Morrón (center) and Pipa are seen at the Exequiel Gonzalez Pediatrics Hospital during a session with girl who will undergo surgery in Santiago. — AFP photos

Kids Page

Word Search



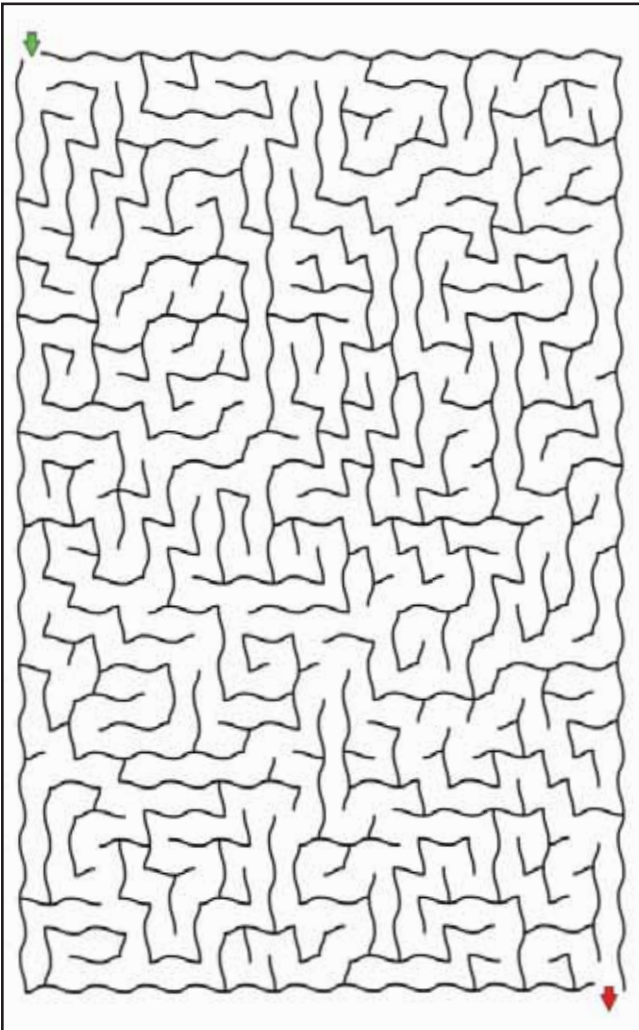
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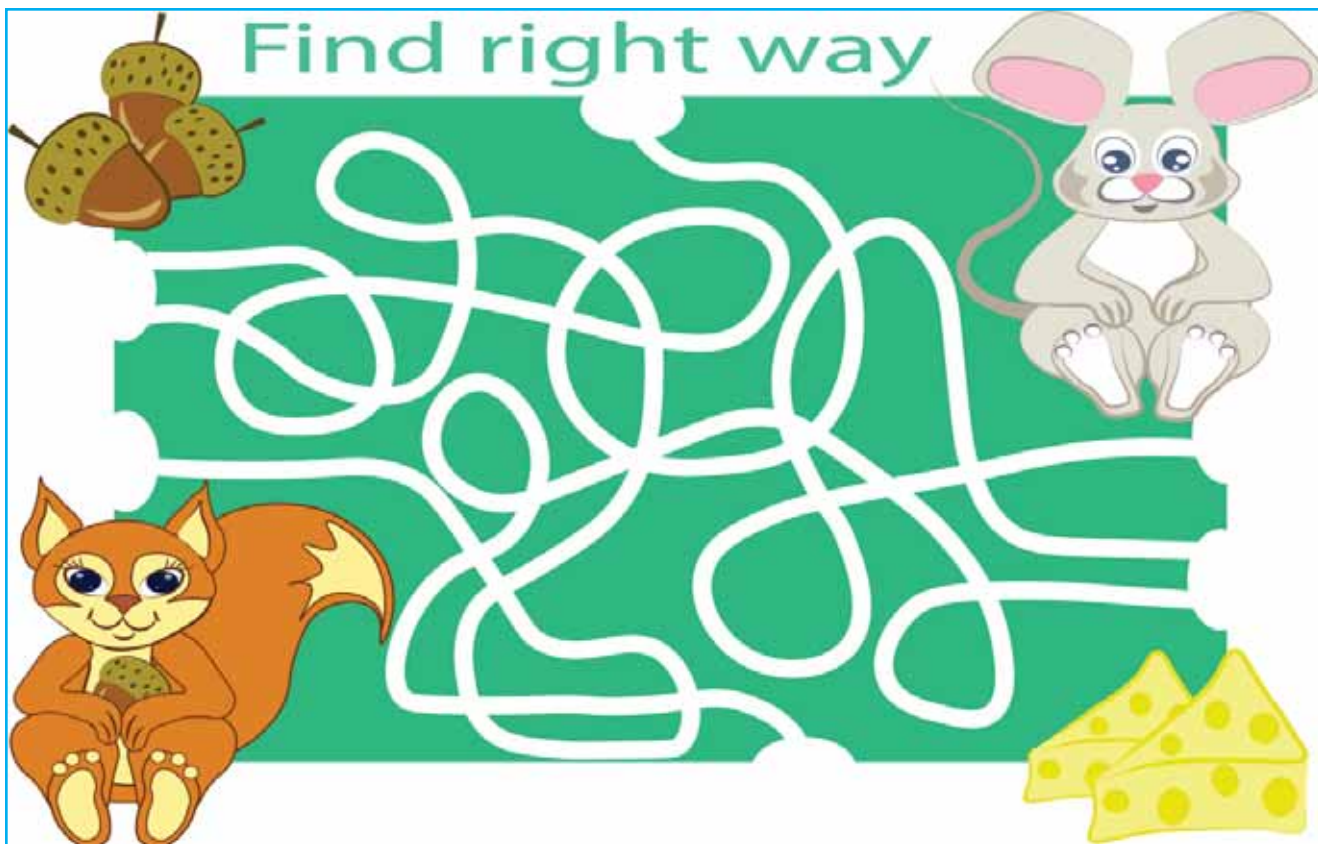
Kids Mazes




Color It



Find the way



Word Scramble



Forest Mix-up

Word Scramble

The wind blew through the forest and scrambled the trees in all directions. Can you figure out the tree names by unscrambling the letters?

TTCNHUSE _____	BBAABO _____
RPJEINU _____	HBCRI _____
FLOPAR _____	KEYUBCE _____
BCEHE _____	OTIMMAS _____
SAENP _____	YROSMACE _____
LIANAGOM _____	LKOEMCH _____
WDRDOEO _____	TLUNWA _____
YERPCSS _____	ONGIGK _____
PMLA _____	ECUSRP _____
OKA _____	DAECR _____
LLIWWO _____	EALPM _____
LIEVO _____	CLIAL _____

Join the dots



Business

FRIDAY, AUGUST 6, 2021

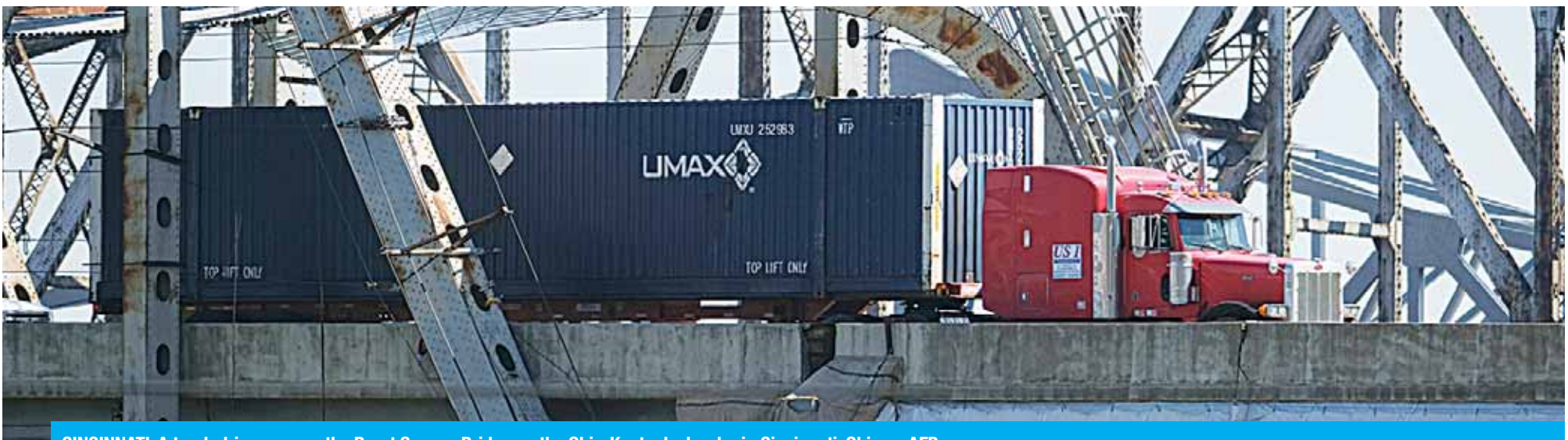
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CINCINNATI: A truck drives across the Brent Spence Bridge on the Ohio-Kentucky border in Cincinnati, Ohio. —AFP

Inside the \$1tn US infrastructure plan

Beyond roads and bridges: Revitalizing the country's neglected infrastructure

WASHINGTON: Lawmakers in Washington are closing in on doing what has eluded administrations for years: passing a bill to revitalize the country's neglected infrastructure. The Senate's \$1 trillion proposal — backed by Democratic President Joe Biden — would channel money towards everything from fixing roads to expanding broadband and clean energy, though passage through is not assured in either chamber of the US Congress.

Repairs to traditional infrastructure

The country's road infrastructure gets \$110 billion, one of the largest single allocations in the bill. That money will go to renovations "with a focus on climate change mitigation, resilience, equity and safety for all users, including cyclists and pedestrians," according to a White House summary.

Of that money, \$40 billion will be specifically directed towards repairing or replacing old bridges, the largest share for that purpose since the US interstate highway system was built decades ago, the Biden administration said. Another \$16 billion would go towards unspecified "major projects."

Trains, planes and ... canals

In what the White House calls "the largest investment in passenger rail since the creation of Amtrak 50 years ago," \$66 billion will go towards modernizing passenger rail infrastructure, including a popular line connecting major cities in the northeastern United States. Part of this money will go towards creating new rail links between cities, including high-speed rail.

The system of inland waterways is crucial in keeping sectors like American farms competitive, but its locks and dams are in need of maintenance and expansion, so the plan would allocate \$17 billion towards the waterways and ports. Another \$25 billion would go to fund projects at airports, including deferred maintenance.

Cleaning up the environment

To aid in cleaning up pollution from toxic waste, abandoned mine lands and gas wells that have been left unplugged, the proposal sets aside \$21 billion. It also allocates \$15 billion towards replacing water pipes that carry lead. But that represents only a third of the amount needed to replace them nationwide, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Fighting climate change

A number of measures, big and small, are aimed at cutting emissions and mitigating the impact of climate change, funded by a \$50 billion infusion. The White House said floods, wildfires and other natural disasters in 2020 cost up to \$100 billion, and the money would go towards improving communities' resiliency against such calamities, and against cyberattacks.

The bill also dedicates \$5 billion for emissions-free school busses and \$2.5 billion for ferries. To boost the electric vehicle market, \$7.5 billion would go towards constructing a national network of chargers for the cars.

Broadband internet

Expanding broadband internet access is a priority of the Biden administration, both for people in rural areas where access is scarce and who live in cities but cannot afford it. The bill would allocate \$65 billion towards expanding broadband infrastructure, while also putting in place new regulations to lower prices as well as a program aimed at providing internet to low income families.

Keeping the lights on

A potent winter storm in February knocked out power for millions of people in Texas and caused water shortages in the second most-populous state. If the infrastructure bill is passed, \$65 billion would go towards building thousands of miles of new power lines that would carry electricity generated from renewable sources. It also would invest in research for new technologies like carbon capture and "clean hydrogen," as well as in nuclear power research.

Paying for it

Biden's original proposal had a \$2.3 trillion price tag and included provisions that did not make it into the bipartisan compromise, like raising wages for childcare workers. Republicans said the initial proposal was too expensive, so the bipartisan bill includes only \$550 billion in new spending.

The rest of it is paid for by unspent money from previous COVID-19 pandemic aid packages, new tax enforcement on cryptocurrency, and some corporate user fees, the White House said. The bill also assuming higher economic growth will take care of some costs by raising tax revenues. —AFP

Business

Afterpay mega-deal puts spotlight on 'buy now, pay later' platforms

Sector growing rapidly and grabbing attention of regulators

PARIS: The \$29-billion takeover of Australia's "buy now, pay later" app Afterpay by US firm Square has thrown a spotlight on a sector that is growing rapidly and grabbing the attention of regulators.

The seven-year-old Sydney-based app—which allows users to pay off smaller purchases in regular instalments—is aimed at millennials who embrace a cashless lifestyle. It now boasts more than 16 million customers worldwide and works with almost 100,000 retailers. Afterpay is the best-known "buy now, pay later"—or BNPL—app, alongside Sweden's Klarna. Its success caught the eye of Square, a digital payment platform owned by Twitter chief Jack Dorsey, who announced the mega deal on Sunday. But other big-name players are also vying for a piece of the cake, including electronic payment service PayPal, online retailer Amazon and banks.

According to a study by Kaleido Intelligence, the valuation of the BNPL sector quadrupled to nearly \$80 billion globally between 2018 and 2020 and could rise to as much as \$250 billion by 2025. "It's a principle that has been around for quite a long time, but the process of signing up to it has never been so fluid, effective and responsive," said Thomas Rocafull, banking analyst at Sia Partners.

Unlike a credit card, BNPL users are not charged interest or a joining fee and spending limits are kept low. Companies make most of their money by charging retailers for transaction costs. In the case of Afterpay, stores using the app lose around four percent of the value of the transaction, but get the rest of the cash upfront and are not exposed to the risk of non-payment. "For users, it offers a cheaper alternative to credit cards for financing purchases, and is convenient for them during the checkout process," said Nick Maynard, analyst at Juniper Research.

"For a merchant, it is relatively simple to integrate BNPL in their checkouts, and it can allow them to boost their average order value

and conversion rate." According to Kaleido Intelligence analyst Steffen Sorrell, retailers offering a BNPL option see the number of visitors to their site finalizing a purchase rise by around 20 percent.

Congested market

Kaleido Intelligence estimates that Americans are the biggest customers for such apps and accounted for around one-third of worldwide BNPL market in 2020. But Asia is also gaining ground rapidly, while the picture in Europe is much more mixed. According to Sia Partners, BNPL payments made up for 23 percent of online retail turnover in Sweden in 2020 and 19 percent in Germany. By contrast, in countries such as Spain and Italy, where consumers still prefer traditional methods of payment, the proportion was only two percent, and in France four percent. Nevertheless, Rocafull said he expected the market in southern Europe to "explode" in the coming years. Jean-Pierre Viboud, head of BNPL specialist Oney Bank, said the market a projected annual growth rate of 30 percent in Europe. However, as the providers of such BNPL services has grown in number, "the market is very congested," said Maynard, predicting a "period of consolidation" in the foreseeable future. Square's purchase of Afterpay is only the latest in a series of recent mergers and acquisitions in the sector. In January, Affirm—set up by PayPal's co-founders—acquired Canada's PayBright. Last year, Klarna bought Italy's Moneymour. In France, banking giant BNP Paribas last week signed an agreement to purchase online consumer credit provider Floa. In May, Banque Postale teamed up with fintech start-up Alma.

Not risk-free

But there are risks, too, with critics arguing that Afterpay and similar apps may tempt people to spend money they do not have.



The success of Afterpay caught the attention of Square, a digital fee platform owned by Twitter chief Jack Dorsey

The BNPL industry is largely unregulated in most countries, and there have been calls for regulators to step in to protect consumers.

"Some consumers are not aware of the consequences of what happens if they default on payments, which is bad for the overall industry," Sorrell said. Users who fail to meet their scheduled payments are hit with substantial late fees. The board of the UK's Financial Conduct Authority said in February that there was a "strong and pressing case to bring buy-now pay-later business into regulation". An FCA-commissioned report said the use of BNPL products had nearly quadrupled in 2020, standing at £2.7 billion (\$3.8 billion) with five million users. The review found that while BNPL products give consumers an alternative to more expensive credit, it "also represents a significant potential consumer harm". —AFP

Lebanon central bank chief quizzed over alleged graft: source

BEIRUT: A Lebanese judge yesterday questioned central bank chief Riad Salameh over graft allegations as part of a probe into financial misconduct, a judicial source said. Salameh, one of world's longest-serving central bank governors, is facing a spate of allegations, including in Switzerland and France, over suspicions of money laundering and embezzlement.

Lebanon opened a probe into his wealth in April, after Switzerland requested assistance for an investigation into more than \$300 million which Salameh allegedly embezzled out of the central bank with the help of his brother.

Salameh has repeatedly denied the accusations. Yesterday, judge Jean Tannous questioned Salameh as part of Lebanon's own investigation into allegations of "embezzlement of public funds, fraud... money laundering, tax evasion, and illicit enrichment", the source said. The grilling lasted three and a quarter hours, the source said. The judge decided to "keep him under investigation until questioning is completed in further sessions," the source added, without giving a timeframe.

Salameh, who rarely appears before the judiciary, did not have his attorney present yesterday because of a strike organized by the Beirut Bar Association, the source said. In January,



Governor of Lebanon's Central Bank Riad Salameh

he was summoned by Lebanese judges to answer questions submitted by the Swiss attorney general.

Critics at home have blamed Salameh's monetary policies for a financial crisis in Lebanon but there have been no serious calls for his removal from a ruling class accused of benefiting from his central bank schemes. After Switzerland opened its probe, France also launched a similar investigation into charges of aggravated money laundering in May. Lebanon is grappling with an economic crisis branded by the World Bank as one of the worst since the mid-19th century. —AFP

Biden to set target of half of US car sales

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden will set a target that half of all cars sold in the United States by 2030 will be zero-emission vehicles, the White House announced. Biden's plan follows the dramatic loosening of many environmental regulations and climate protections under the Donald Trump administration.

"The President will sign an Executive Order that sets an ambitious new target to make half of all new vehicles sold in 2030 zero-emissions vehicles, including battery electric, plug-in hybrid electric, or fuel cell electric vehicles," a White House statement said.

The order, due to be signed later, will position "America to drive the electric vehicle future forward, outcompete China, and tackle the climate crisis," it added. The three big American auto manufacturers—Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis—expressed their "shared aspiration to achieve sales of 40-50 percent" of electric vehicles including battery electric, fuel cell and plug-in hybrid vehicles by 2030.

In another statement, the manufacturers BMW, Honda, Volkswagen and Volvo—whose electric vehicles are often considered more advanced than their US competitors—applauded the initiative. —AFP

Business

Gulf Bank built a solid foundation to continue tackling headwinds

Virtual analyst conference call reviews bank's financial performance during H1 2021

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank held a virtual analyst conference call to review and discuss the Bank's financial performance during the first half of the year 2021 on August 3, 2021. The conference call was organized by EFG Hermes and attended by Ahmad Al-Duwaisan, GM Corporate Banking and Acting CEO of Gulf Bank, and David Challinor, Chief Financial Officer of Gulf Bank. The discussion was moderated by Dalal Al-Dousari, Head of Investor Relations at Gulf Bank.

On behalf of Gulf Bank CEO Tony Daher, Ahmad Al-Duwaisan commenced the virtual analyst call with key updates regarding Gulf Bank's operating environment during the second quarter of the year 2021. Al-Duwaisan commented, "We started the quarter with partial curfew and further restrictions on businesses and travel for locals and foreigners, however by the month of May, most of these restrictions were lifted helped by the acceleration in the rollout of vaccination efforts which reached on average 20,000 doses a day. Starting first of August, vaccinated foreigners are now allowed to enter Kuwait. Growth prospects have improved with the lifting of most restrictions. Consumer sentiment is more upbeat and increased demand has boosted consumer spending growth."

Strong capital

Al-Duwaisan also announced the completion of issuance of Tier 2 Compliant Subordinated Bonds of KD 50 million: "Despite the challenges that we continue to face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gulf Bank has successfully completed the redemption of its existing KD 100 million subordinated Tier 2 bonds, and the issuance of new KD 50 million Subordinated Tier 2 Bonds which was oversubscribed. This issuance optimizes the Bank's capital adequacy, in compliance with Basel III frameworks, and supports our overall investment plans towards making Gulf Bank the leading Bank of the Future."

Partnership with Murex

As part of Gulf Bank's ongoing digital transformation plan, Al-Duwaisan indicated that Gulf Bank is happy to launch the new treasury system after an 18-month partnership with Murex. The integrated solutions will offer a robust technological infrastructure that meets the evolving requirements of today's customers and provide an even more seamless workflow and better risk management. Moreover, the launch of the new treasury system seeks to make most of the Bank's ongoing digital transformation, transforming Gulf Bank into a fully integrated digital bank.

Sound financial performance

Al-Duwaisan summarized Gulf Bank's first-half results for 2021 with five key messages:

1. Net profit grew by 40% for the first half 2021, to reach 16.5 million in comparison to 11.8 million reported in first half of 2020.
2. Reported operating income reached 83.2 million for first half 2021, growing by 8% compared to the first half of 2020. This growth was driven primarily by a significant decline in the cost of funds that exceeded the decline in interest income and improvement in fees and commission income.
3. Asset quality remained resilient, as Gulf Bank's non-performing loan ratio in the second quarter of 2021 stood at 1.4%, an improvement when compared to same period of last year of 2.2%. In addition, Gulf Bank has ample provisions with a coverage ratio of 443%.
4. Relaxed capital regulatory minimums that were introduced in 2020 remain in place, allowing the Bank additional buffers over the minimums. Gulf Bank's Tier 1 ratio has a buffer of 480



Dalal Al-Dousari



Tony Daher



David Challinor

basis points (14.3% vs. 9.5%) and capital adequacy ratio has a buffer of 510 basis points (16.6% vs. 11.5%). With these comfortable buffers in place, Gulf Bank exercised the call option for the redemption of the KD 100 million subordinated tier 2 bonds that matured in May and issued a new tier 2 compliant bond at a maximum of KD 50 million at favorable rates.

5. Gulf Bank maintained its 'A' ratings from the three major credit rating agencies, noting its ratings as of today:

- a. Moody's Investors Service maintained the Long-Term Deposits Rating of "A3" with a "Stable" outlook.
- b. Fitch Ratings affirmed the Bank Long-term Issuer Default Rating of "A+" with a "Negative" outlook.
- c. Capital Intelligence affirmed Gulf Bank's Long-term Foreign Currency Rating of "A+" with a "Stable" outlook.
- d. In addition S&P Global Ratings has recently changed the Bank Issuer Credit Rating to "BBB+" from "A-" and revised the "Negative outlook to "Stable". This most recent rating action followed the S&P downgrade of Kuwait Sovereign rating from "AA-" to "A+" with a "Negative" outlook.

Al-Duwaisan also noted that although the Bank continues to operate in challenging times, it has also built a solid foundation to continue tackling the headwinds while supporting the growth needs of its customers.

Increasing profitability

Gulf Bank's CFO, David Challinor, discussed Gulf Bank's H1 results of 2021 in more detail, noting three positive factors. First, net interest income is up KD 4 million, due to the continued decline in cost of funds. Second, as economic activity regained momentum so did the Bank's fees and foreign exchange income which improved by 2.6 million, and third, the Bank's cost of credit improved by 5.4 million. However, these positive drivers were partially offset by a 6.7 million increase in operating expenses.

Challinor highlighted that liquidity conditions remained favorable, and that the Bank's interest expense declined by 26 million or 50 percent, from 52 million in the first half of 2020 to 25.9 million in the first half of 2021. Operating income grew by 8 percent to KD 83.2 million compared to KD 77.2 million during the first half of 2020. This was due to interest expense falling more than interest income.

Operating expenses has increased by KD 6.7 million or 20 percent year on year. Gulf Bank continues to invest in its business as it focuses on its digital transformation strategy going forward. Challinor also pointed out that credit costs have declined from KD 28.4 million during the first half of 2020 to KD 24.8 million during the first half of 2021.

Gulf Bank's financial position

Challinor also presented Gulf Bank's financial position, indi-

cating how individual line items have moved from 30th of June 2020 to 30th of June 2021. Challinor also presented the Bank's mix of assets and highlighted its changes over the last 12 months. He said: "over the last 12 months, Gulf Bank's total assets increased by 266 million or 4 percent to 6.3 billion compared to 6.0 billion the year before. This was largely driven by a 160 million or 12 percent increase in Liquid Assets, and a 123 million or 3 percent in-

crease in Net Loans. While, on a year-to-date basis, Net Loans grew 210 million or 5 percent and total assets grew by 179 million or 3 percent, reflecting a pick-up in overall economic activity." He continued, "In terms of the major components of total assets, the mix is essentially unchanged from a year ago."

As for Gulf Bank's funding, Challinor indicated that nearly all of Gulf Bank's funding comes from Due to Banks, Deposits from Financial Institutions, and Customer Deposits. As a result of growing its customer deposits and attracting more short-term bank funding, Gulf Bank was able to reduce the deposit mix coming from financial institutions. The Bank's non-performing loan ratio also increased from 1.1 percent at the end of December 2020 to 1.4 percent at the end of June 2021, and its coverage ratio exceeded 443 percent at the end of June 2021.

Prudent financial management

Challinor also indicated that as of 30 June 2021, Gulf Bank's total provisions reached KD 298 million with IFRS 9 ECL requirements at KD 191 million, allowing the Bank KD 107 million in excess provisions, representing 36 percent of total provisions.

In addition, Gulf Bank's loan stages are fairly stable with Stage 1 loans are above 90 percent for the three periods, while Stage 2 declined from 7.7 percent at the end of June 2020 to 5.6 percent at the end of June 2021. Stage 3 also improved from 2.2 percent to 1.5 percent for the same period.

As for Gulf Bank's IFRS 9 ECL Stages composition, Challinor indicated that Stage 1 reached 21.8 percent as of 30 June 2021, moving from 14.7 percent a year ago, Stage 2 is in a declining trend moving from 44.2 percent a year ago to 38.5 percent as of 30 June 2021 and Stage 3 reached 39.6 percent moving from 41 percent a year ago. Challinor also highlighted that, as of 30 June 2021, the IFRS 9 ECL coverage for gross loans and contingent liabilities and commitments was: 0.6 percent for Stage 1, 19.4 percent for Stage 2, and 85.1 percent for Stage 3. Overall coverage, however, is much higher since the Bank has provisions of KD 107 million over the IFRS 9 ECL requirement of KD 191 million.

Challinor said, "Gulf Bank's regulatory capital ratios remain well above both our current minimums and our pre-Covid-19 minimums. Our Tier 1 ratio reached 14.3 percent, 480 basis points above our current regulatory minimum of 9.5 percent, and 230 basis points above our pre-Covid-19 regulatory minimum of 12 percent. Our Capital Adequacy Ratio of 16.6 percent was 510 basis points above our current regulatory minimum of 11.5 percent and 260 basis points above our pre-Covid-19 regulatory minimums of 14 percent."

He continued: "Our risk weighted assets fell by nearly 0.3 percent mainly due to increase in collaterals and reduction in market risk in comparison to the same period of last year." He

Business

continued. "Our leverage ratio as of 30 June 2021 reached 9.5 percent, which was higher than 9.2 percent for the same period of last year, and well above the 3 percent regulatory minimum."

Regarding the Bank's key liquidity ratios, average daily Liquidity Coverage Ratio reached 324 percent as of June 30, 2021, and Net Stable Funding Ratio also reached 109 percent for the same period. It is also worth noting that both ratios are still well above their respective new minimums of 80 percent and pre-COVID-19 minimums of 100 percent.

Q&A

Following the management presentation of Gulf Bank's performance during the first half of 2021, the virtual call was open for participants questions. Dalal Al-Dousari, head of Investor Relations at Gulf Bank moderated the Q&A session.

of any adverse long term credit cost trend. When you look at the first half of 2021, we have a cost of risk of 112 basis points which is much lower than both the full year 2020 and full year 2019. So, despite an uptick in Q2, we are still on track, at this stage, to be lower than the previous 2 years."

He continued "I think it's also important to point out that not only did our NPL percentage drop from Q1 to Q2, its now at 1.4 percent, but that we also increased our total coverage which stands at 443 percent. Also, when you look at the percentage of our loan book that's in stage 2, we saw that decrease from Q1 to Q2 and its' now only 5.6 percent."

Another inquiry was related to receiving a judgment from the Court of Cassation, Al-Duwaisan responded: "As we have mentioned in previous earnings calls and disclosures, the Court of Cassation issued a judgment which restored Gulf Bank's right to

When asked about NIM's and the trends over the past quarters and the expectation for the rest of the year. Challinor commented: "On the NIM, we've seen this has remained broadly stable now for the last 5 quarters at around 2.1 percent. We are probably at the end of any further cost of funds reductions and there may be some asset yield pressure going forward. To offset this, we are very focused on CASA and also the extension of the regulatory liquidity concessions from CBK until the end of this year should help. The refinancing of our Tier 2 bond in Q2 will also help. We don't see any underlying interest rate moves in 2021 so the best guess is margin will likely remain broadly stable for the rest of this year."

Another question was related to the expected normalized run rate for operating expenses for the year 2021, Challinor commented: "The good news is we saw operating expenses fall from the Q1 level of 20.5 million to Q2 of 19.7 million. Having said that, the headline year on year growth is still 20 percent when comparing first half 2021 to same period last year. This is due to a combination of a number of things. First, the low base effect of the pandemic year, second a continued investment in our digital transformation program and third the presence of some lumpy items in the first half that we are not expecting to recur in the second half of the year. So, we think the costs could reduce in the second half of the year and given the income growth we are expecting, we should see some improvement in the Bank's cost to income ratio."

The last question during the discussion was related to the Bank's loan growth drivers, Challinor commented: "I'm pleased with loan growth and this is a positive story for the Bank. We saw strong growth in the first half of the year of 181 million which brings the half year percentage loan growth to 4.1 percent which is more than double the system. The growth was driven by both the consumer and corporate segments, but we did see consumer slow due to the second deferral program in the second quarter. Going forward we will look to increasing market share in our target segments in line with our strategy." Dalal Al-Dousari concluded the conference by thanking the participants and invited analysts to visit the Investor Relations page on Gulf Bank's website for any further inquiries.

- Gulf Bank started the first half positively, with an increase of 40% in its first half net profit compared to the same period of last year.
- The launch of the new treasury system seeks to make most of the Bank's ongoing digital transformation into a fully integrated digital bank.

When asked about loan provisions, Challinor commented: "If we start first with Q1, we saw a fairly low credit cost of 8.3 million which translated into a cost of risk of 76 basis points. This was much lower than what we'd seen for the full year 2020 where the cost of risk was 131 basis points. We've previously stated that we think a more normalized level of cost of risk is around 100 basis points and that we probably wouldn't return to a normalized level during 2021. The timing of provisions can often lead to some lumpiness from quarter to quarter but we're confident that this second quarter level, which was primarily driven by increasing coverage on existing NPLs, isn't indicative

complete the execution measurement. The impact of this judgment and the financial position of the Bank will be determined upon completion of the execution measures. The timing of the execution is dependent on multiple variables as stated above. However, based on past experience this is an unpredictable timeline and is likely a medium to long term process depending on the nature of the assets being attached and claims if any of other creditors. This exposure was fully provided for and written off in prior years, accordingly recoveries if any would be recorded through income statement depending on the completion of the execution measures."

BoE sees inflation surging but keeps stimulus

LONDON: The Bank of England yesterday predicted the UK annual inflation rate to continue surging this year as pandemic-hit economies reopen, but kept its record-low interest rate and emergency stimulus intact.

The BoE forecast inflation reaching four percent from 2.5 percent currently, adding to fears that a spike in prices worldwide will force central banks to hike interest rates sooner than expected, in turn hindering economic recovery. Following a regular meeting, the BoE left its interest rate at an all-time UK low of 0.1 percent. It said that "inflation is projected to rise temporarily in the near term, to four percent... owing largely to developments in energy and other goods prices".

The BoE then expects the inflation rate to fall close to its 2.0-percent target. Britain's Consumer Prices Index hit 2.5 percent in June as its government led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson lifted virus curbs.

The UK has lifted most lockdown restrictions, enabling its economy to press on with recovery despite worries over the fast-spreading Delta variant of the coronavirus.

Stimulus unchanged

Steered by governor Andrew Bailey, the BoE at its latest meeting decided also against tapering the vast amount of cash stimulus pumping around the UK economy. As the pandemic erupted in March 2020, the BoE slashed its key interest rate to the current record-low level.

It also began pumping massive sums of new cash into the economy. The bank has created £450 billion (\$627 billion, 529 billion euros) under its quantitative easing (QE) program since



March last year, when COVID-19 prompted Britain's first coronavirus lockdown. Prior to this it had pumped hundreds of billions of pounds worth of QE into the UK economy over a decade following the 2008-09 global financial crisis and Brexit.

The central bank's total emergency stimulus package stands at £895 billion. Analysts said the BoE will be mindful of an expected jump in British unemployment after the UK government next month ends its furlough scheme that has kept millions of Britons in private-sector jobs during the pandemic.

Markets are looking to see when central banks will begin to

scale back their stimulus packages. Following weak US jobs data on Wednesday, Federal Reserve vice chairman Richard Clarida raised the prospects of the US central bank scaling back its huge stimulus, or bond-buying, program and lifting interest rates as soon as 2023.

The ultra-accommodative measures have been a key driver of the rally in global financial markets from their nadir in March 2020. Clarida said that as the economy emerges from the pandemic, tapering of the quantitative easing scheme could begin later this year, with analysts tipping a possible move in November. —AFP

Stars

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

You may feel a bit short on inspiration today, Aries. Don't be discouraged! Start whatever project is in question, even if your thoughts are elsewhere. During the course of the "bad" work you may churn out at first, your muse gently alights on your shoulder. It sometimes takes a little discipline to lead to delicious rewards!



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

You may feel a bit short on inspiration today, Aries. Don't be discouraged! Start whatever project is in question, even if your thoughts are elsewhere. During the course of the "bad" work you may churn out at first, your muse gently alights on your shoulder. It sometimes takes a little discipline to lead to delicious rewards!



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Today you may be inspired to have a little fun with your looks, Gemini. You may wish to change your haircut or experiment with different colors or styles of clothing. It would be fun to get out of your routine, even if it just means donning funky sunglasses or bright Hawaiian patterns. You will feel lighter and more flirtatious.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Today's energy has you rethinking all areas of your life, Cancer. If you aren't as challenged by your job as you think you should be, perhaps it's time for a change. The trick for you will be figuring out what it is that you want to do. You have a tremendous amount of creative ability. If you aren't using these talents, why not explore a career that would let you develop them further?



Leo (July 23-August 22)

You're ready for dramatic change in your life, Leo. It isn't that you're dissatisfied with your career or personal life. Rather, you feel like you're missing out on something great, if you only knew what. Be receptive to whatever opportunities arise and explore them all. You may find the answers you seek through travel or more education. Bring a friend if you're afraid to explore on your own.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Virgo, expect to meet someone new who will be a tremendous influence in your life - probably in your career. If you've been frustrated by your lack of progress up the corporate ladder, take heart. This new person may be able to show you another way up. In spite of your frustration, you should continue to work in your usual manner. You're on the right path, even though you may doubt it now.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

You've been on a wild ride for several months, Libra - all that excitement in your personal life and career! If major changes for the better haven't yet occurred, know that they will. A promotion is in order, most likely accompanied by a raise. Don't act so surprised - you've had this coming for a long time. Celebrate tonight with someone dear to your heart.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

Foreign lands and new opportunities beckon today, Scorpio! Keep your eyes and ears open as these opportunities may come to you from an unusual or unexpected source. You're ready for a change of some kind in your personal or professional life. It's up to you to take steps in whatever new direction you decide to go. Don't rule out a few classes as a way to further your career.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

The astral energy indicates that you may have extra money in your pocket, Sagittarius. Take care to invest this money wisely rather than spend it all. You will be happier sacrificing short-term gratification for future financial gain. Positive relationships and socializing are indicated this evening. Make a point to get together with close friends and loved ones.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

This will be an interesting day provided you keep your eyes and ears open to the opportunities that arise. Don't be afraid to take on new challenges. Even if you feel unsure about your abilities, embrace the chance to test them. If others think you're up to the challenge, you should give yourself the same benefit of the doubt! New friends are indicated - make a point to smile.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

Aquarius, you finally begin to feel like you're making progress. You're intent on completing some projects that have long been in the works. After many hours of concentration and focus, you make the last adjustments and proclaim it finished. You can expect to be rewarded for your efforts. Your skills are extraordinary. You can enjoy a real sense of satisfaction. Celebrate a little!



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

This is a passionate, creative day, Pisces. Your blood is hot and passion is on your mind. With luck, you have a significant other who can benefit! If not, you will have to find another way to burn off that energy. Invite a close friend for a jog. You're in the mood to socialize. If you can't have physical intimacy, be satisfied with emotional closeness.

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina Faso	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027



Aussie teen wins skateboarding gold with top-secret trick

TOKYO: Flying Australian teen Keegan Palmer said he was “beyond stoked” after unleashing a top-secret trick to claim the inaugural men’s park skateboarding Olympic gold medal yesterday. Palmer, 18, threw down the gauntlet with 94.04 points in his first run of the final, before incredibly bettering his score to 95.83 in his third and last run. That stunning mark came thanks to a kickflip 540 he had been saving for the occasion, after putting “blood, sweat and tears” into practicing it.

“My last run, no one had seen it until this day,” said the San Diego-based Palmer, who returned to Australia earlier this year to train for the Games. “That was the game plan since the start of this year — just have a solid plan and make sure no one knows what’s happening. I came out swinging.”

The spectacular trick comfortably gave Palmer the gold ahead of Brazilian silver medalist Pedro Barros (86.14) and America’s Cory Juneau, who claimed bronze with 84.13. But Palmer revealed he only managed to master it just weeks before the Games began. “I never really got it down until I got back to America,” he said. “Just before I came here, I started putting it down on concrete. So to run away with it was pretty insane, and I’m beyond stoked about it.”

American Heimana Reynolds, the world number one and reign-

ing world champion, did not reach the final after failing to complete any of his three rides in qualifying. The day belonged to Palmer, who was born in the United States and moved to Australia as a baby, before returning to San Diego as a 14-year-old.

“I take myself as full Australian — my accent isn’t so strong so sorry to everyone Australian out there that hears this,” he said. “It was where everything started — where I learned how to skate, all the hard work, all the blood, sweat and tears. It was almost like I had to bring it back for Australia and I did, so I’m so grateful.”

Luiz Francisco, one of three Brazilians to reach the final, had the best score in qualifying. He was followed by Australia’s Kieran Woolley, who knocked over a cameraman on one run and shared a fist bump with him afterwards.

Reynolds’ American compatriot Juneau scraped through in eighth, before going on to claim the bronze. Juneau planted a kiss on Palmer’s head as he walked past him after the medal ceremony, reflecting the good spirit in which the competition was held.

“It just feels amazing to be out here really experiencing this story — something you usually only see in fairytales,” said Barros. “All these athletes competing against each other but really cheering on each other, wanting the best for each other, sharing love.” — AFP



TOKYO: Gold medalist Australia’s Keegan Palmer poses on the podium of the men’s park final during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at Ariake Sports Park Skateboarding in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

‘Bag of misfits’: Vet skateboarders flip out in Tokyo

TOKYO: Sky Brown and the teenage tyros of women’s skateboarding blazed a trail for youth at the Tokyo Olympics, but a pair of old-timers have shown age is no limit. Denmark’s Rune Glifberg and South Africa’s Dallas Oberholzer — both 46 years old — competed in the men’s park competition on Wednesday, a day after 13-year-old Brown won bronze for Britain.

The two grizzled veterans failed to make the eight-man final, finishing last and second-last in the overall standings. But both enjoyed their time in the Olympic spotlight, having taken up the sport when it was considered an activity for rebels and outlaws.

“I never would have thought skating would take me to the Olympics — it was taboo, it was frowned upon, it was a waste of time,” said the grey-haired Oberholzer, wearing a zebra-print shirt. “But now it’s more open and for everyone, and anything goes. I’m happy where skateboarding is now. It’s just going to go up, big time.”

Glifberg and Oberholzer have both had long and colorful careers in skateboarding, with the Dane even featuring in the first “Tony Hawk” video game. He said the Olympics were “probably one of the most uncool things” for young skaters growing up in the 1980s, and something that he “didn’t really pay attention to”. But with skateboarding one of four new sports in Tokyo, he said it was “a huge honor” to be the first to tackle the park course in the heats.

‘Beautiful thing’

“We’re here to show the world that skateboarding is a beautiful thing,” Glifberg said. “It’s not about medals and records and who’s the fastest and who can go the highest on a skateboard. We’re here to show the world skateboarding in its truest form.”



TOKYO: South Africa’s Dallas Oberholzer competes in the men’s park heats during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at Ariake Sports Park Skateboarding in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

Glifberg admitted his advanced age prevents him from practicing as much as he used to, saying “35 years of skateboarding will take a toll on you”. That marked a stark contrast to the women’s park event in Tokyo, where 19-year-old Sakura Yosozumi and 12-year-old Kokona Hiraki joined Brown on the podium.

Glifberg, known as “the Danish Destroyer”, thinks the next generation of women skaters will be “biting at their heels” for the 2024 Paris Games. “Women’s skateboarding has a long way to go, and the progression is rapid with the really young girls,” he said. “The older girls pave the way for the younger people, and when the younger people get a little bit older, they surpass that level that they’ve been looking up to. It’s natural evolution.”

Glifberg and Oberholzer are unlikely to be there when skateboarding returns in Paris, but the South African was happy to leave his mark in Tokyo. “I don’t have to prove anything else now — I made it to the Olympics at 46,” said Oberholzer. “I don’t think ever again there will be guys in their 40s. I think you’ll be lucky to make it here in your 30s in the future. Rune and I are happy to represent the older generation and make sure skating is remembered as a mixed bag of misfits.” — AFP

China’s Feng celebrates with 64 at Olympics golf

KAWAGOE: Feng Shanshan turned back the clock yesterday to put thoughts of retirement on hold as she celebrated her 32nd birthday with a superb round of seven-under 64 in the women’s Olympic golf tournament. The Rio 2016 bronze medalist said this will be her last Olympics, but not before she has given her all to get on the podium again. “I think at least I went from impossible to now maybe having a small chance,” she laughed.

Feng moved into a 13-way tie for 11th place on four-under par, five strokes out of the medal positions with two rounds re-

maining — making up for a disappointing 74 on the first day. World number one Nelly Korda opened up a four-stroke gap on the field after a nine-under round of 62 and is nine ahead of Feng.

“I would still have to go low for two more rounds because we got the best girls from all over the world here,” said China’s world number 20. “Other than top three it doesn’t mean anything. I just have to do what I have to do. I will give it 100 percent.”

With fans not permitted, it was up to volunteers to mark her birthday before Feng teed off. “Most of the volunteers knew it was my birthday. I think like one of them actually wrote some words for me and she held the board and was showing me on the course,” said Feng.

The 10-time LPGA Tour winner credited a hot putter for a 10-shot improvement on her first round. “I think my putting yesterday wasn’t that bad, it was just misjudged — I misjudged the speed a little bit. The greens are actually a little bit slower than what we were thinking,” said Feng. — AFP



KAWAGOE: China’s Feng Shanshan watches her drive from the 14th tee in round 2 of the women’s golf individual stroke play during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Kasumigaseki Country Club in Kawagoe yesterday. —AFP



In Japan, world's oldest Ironman seeks Olympic tips

CHIBA: Japan's Hiromu Inada is watching the Tokyo Olympics hoping to pick up some tips from the athletes before he competes in next year's Ironman world championship, at the age of 90. "There's so much to learn. I apply it to my training and it works! It's fun," the octogenarian athlete said after one of his near-daily training sessions. The Games are being held under strict virus rules, with spectators banned from almost all events, but that has not turned Inada off. "I'm still having a great time."

Inada, who turns 89 in November, already holds the Guinness World Record for the oldest person to complete an Ironman competition — a grueling format involving swimming 3.86 kilometers, cycling 180.25 kilometers and running a 42.2-kilometre marathon.

A three-time winner of the competition in his age group, his commitment to sport is so deep that he records footage of athletes at the Games and watches it to analyze their leg movements and posture. This Olympics is the second Inada has watched in Tokyo — back in 1964 when the city first hosted the Games he was a reporter at public broadcaster NHK. But the atmosphere then was totally different, he said.

Those Games were in some ways a triumphant coming-out for Japan, which showcased technological marvels such as the shinkansen bullet train. "There was no one who didn't watch the Olympics," he said, admitting he even skipped work to catch it. People were glued to color TVs at offices, city halls and electronics shops because the sets were still rare for many households, he said.

'My obsession'

"I think (the 1964 Olympics) became a turning

point for the economic boom... and public sentiment got a boost afterwards." But this year, polls before the Games began on July 23 showed the majority of Japanese were against holding the event because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even Inada admits he was a bit uncertain about the Games going ahead before they started. "But when I look at them being held, I get teary and feel happy."

Inada fits his Olympic viewing around a tough training schedule that starts with swimming at 6:00 am and involves cycling for hours afterwards. His diet is also designed to keep him fighting fit, consisting mostly of fish, vegetables, miso soup, seaweed and natto, a fermented soybean dish.

While his life is now devoted to sport, he came to the triathlon late, only learning how to swim when he was 60, after retiring to take care of his sick wife. "I thought I needed to exercise as I was always at home, caring for my wife," he said.

He was already 70 when he first took part in a local triathlon competition, and first began trying out for Ironman, which involves longer distances, in his late 70s. "Triathlon became my obsession," he said, especially after the death of his wife. "That was all I had."

It took several years of training with coaches, but in 2012 Inada won his age group in the Ironman world championship in Hawaii for the first time, aged 80, with a time of 15 hours, 38 minutes and 25 seconds.

'Purpose in life'

Three years later he tried again, but he stumbled twice before the finish line and came in five seconds too late to be considered a finisher. After the disappointment, "messages cheering me



INAGE: This photo taken on Wednesday shows the world's oldest Ironman Hiromu Inada, who turns 89 in November, practicing for the Ironman World Championship, the annual triathlon race in Hawaii, during a training session at Inage International Triathlon Club in Inage in Chiba Prefecture. —AFP

poured in on my Facebook from foreign triathletes I didn't know," he said. He decided he had to try again and finish "even if I fell or I had to crawl forward".

He completed the race the following year and again in 2018, becoming the world's oldest Ironman finisher, aged 85 years 328 days. And he's not done yet, planning to compete again next year at 90. "People laugh when I say this but now

I'm living my youth... I feel the joy of living," he said. "Triathlons are my purpose in life."

For now though, he is enjoying a chance to see some of the world's top athletes in his country. He even managed to glimpse the Olympic road cycling while at his training camp near Mount Fuji — the first Games even he has seen in person. "I saw athletes I admire up close for the first time," he said. "How exciting!" — AFP

Tokyo's Olympic legacy: Forcing mental health center stage

TOKYO: The Tokyo Olympics will always have a unique place in history as the coronavirus Games but the event has also forced the issue of mental health into the open. US gymnastics star Simone Biles's struggles with a mental block have been one of the biggest talking points in Japan, while British swimmer Adam Peaty announced he was taking a month off to mentally refresh.

The decision by Biles — the leading lady of her sport — to stand down from competition for five of her six finals was applauded by many — and derided by others. "My mental and physical health is above all medals that I could ever win," said the 24-year-old, who has a career total of four golds and seven Olympic medals in all. At the start of the week, British swim star Peaty referred to Biles's struggles when he announced he was taking a mental health break after being under "a huge amount of pressure".

"It isn't a normal job," tweeted Peaty, who won two golds and a silver in Tokyo. "There is a huge amount of pressure. Money does not buy happiness. I'm taking a break because I've been going extremely hard for as long as I can remember. I've averaged 2 weeks off a year for the last 7 years."

'Terrifying'

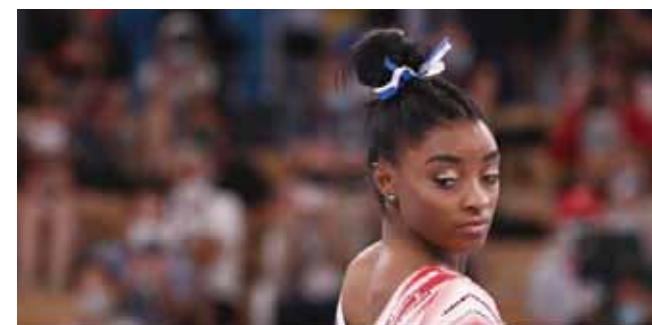
US swim sensation Caeleb Dressel, who won five gold medals in Tokyo, lifted the lid on the "terrifying" pressure and expectation at the Olympics. "Every morning I'd wake up the first words out of my mouth weren't 'oh I'm so excited', sometimes it was 'this is going to suck today'. The Olympics are different, I'll admit that now and stop lying to myself. There's so much pressure in one moment. Your whole life boils down to a moment that can take 20 or 40 seconds — how crazy is that?"

The stigma of perceived weakness relating to mental health concerns has until recently helped keep the topic firmly in the shadows and Peaty's announcement still triggered negative feedback despite growing awareness of the pressures athletes face. And it is not just a problem at the Olympics.

England cricketer Ben Stokes last week announced he was taking an indefinite break to "priorities his mental well-being" while Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka pulled out of the French Open and skipped Wimbledon, citing mental health issues. "You're seeing it in all sports now. You're seeing it with Simone Biles, you're seeing it with Ben Stokes. Mental health matters and it is about getting the balance right at that elite level," said Peaty.

Henrietta Fore, executive director of UNICEF, thanked Biles "for being a role model and showing the world it's OK to priorities your mental health". And psychologist Meriem Salmi is heartened that athletes are openly discussing the issue.

"It was time," said Salmi, who counts French judo star Teddy Riner among her clients. "I've been working in this area for 30 years and I've been trying to remind people that athletes have



TOKYO: USA's Simone Biles gets ready to compete in the artistic gymnastics women's balance beam final of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at Ariake Gymnastics Centre in Tokyo on Tuesday. — AFP

emotions just like everyone else. But it's still complicated to diagnose depression in a champion. They have an impressive capacity to hide it." Those quick to dismiss the "snowflake generation's" lack of resilience are misguided, according to Philippe Godin, sports psychologist at Belgium's Louvain university. "Depression is a word that has a pejorative connotation and which people don't fully understand," he said. — AFP



Spain's golden oldie Sanchez Jaime lands karate's historic first Olympic gold

TOKYO: Spain's Sandra Sanchez Jaime won the first ever Olympic Games karate gold medal in Tokyo yesterday, becoming her country's oldest ever Olympian at 39 years and 323 days. She ensured her name would be in the sport's history books by beating Japan's Kiyou Shimizu in the women's kata final.

Karate was included for the first time on the Olympic program for the pandemic-delayed 2020 Games, but was not included on the menu for Paris 2024. Sanchez Jaime, 39, took the historic title with a higher athletic score than the home favorite and two-time former world champion Shimizu after the two karatekas were all square on 19.60 on the technical score.

The 2018 world champion Sanchez Jaime beamed and raised her arms skywards after the chief judge had walked out to stand between the two finalists, then raising the right arm to signify victory for Sanchez Jaime.

"It is crazy. I am so emotional, I am feeling so many things together. I am happy, but I want to cry," she said. "I think I need more time to believe that this is real. I want to see my kata and make sure it happened, because right now I can't believe it."

Shimizu said she had got "carried away" and lost her usual rhythm but added: "I would like to praise myself that I was able to put my heart and soul into my performance, which is the best I have done recently."

Bronze medals went to Italian Viviana Bottaro and Mo Sheung Grace Lau from Hong Kong. Spain's previous oldest Olympian was Joan Llaneras who won track cycling gold in 2008 aged 39 years and 91 days.

The karate competition is being held at the Nippon Budokan, the venue with the roof fashioned to resemble Mount Fuji. It staged judo at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and two years later was where The Beatles played on their tour of Japan. And Sanchez Jaime remarked: "This was the perfect final, with Shimizu, in Japan, at the Budokan. This really is the best moment. It is amazing." Karate is split into two disciplines: kata, where athletes perform choreographed moves for the judges to score, and kumite, which involves two fighters trying to land blows on each other in bouts of up to three minutes.

Later yesterday, France's Steven Da Costa beat Turkey's Eray Samdan in the men's -67kg kumite final. The part-time employee with SNCF, France's state-run railway company, 24, won 5-0 on the technical score with an ippon and waza-ari.

Da Costa, whose twin brother, older brother and father are all in the family karate 'business', was adding this to his 2018 world championship gold. In the last final of the night Ivet Goranova of Bulgaria beat Ukraine's Anzhelika Terliuga 5-1 to claim women's -55kg kumite gold. —AFP



TOKYO: Spain's Sandra Sanchez Jaime poses with her women's kata gold medal in the karate competition of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Nippon Budokan in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

Kuwait karateka compete in Tokyo Olympics today

TOKYO: Kuwait's karateka Mohammad Al-Mosawi is due to begin competition at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics at 4:00 am today (Kuwait's time) at the Nippon Budokan martial arts arena. The indoor arena is located in Chiyoda, Tokyo, and was originally built for judo competition of the 1964 summer Olympics in the Japanese capital. Mosawi hopes to advance to the 2nd round as the only Karateka from the Gulf and Arab regions in this competition.

Mosawi is ready for the competition, and is

physically and psychologically fit, coach Aser Pintado said. He benefited from a 10-day training camp in Nihonmatsu city, added Pintado, which contributed to "remarkable improvement" of his skills and performance. e.Pintado said the Kata needed a great focus and accuracy, and the karateka needed to perform physical moves in coordination with the mind. He hoped Mosawi advanced to the second stages.

Mosawi is the last Kuwaiti athlete to compete in Tokyo Olympics. The Kuwait karateka participated in many international championships, including in Portugal and France, as part of preparations for the Tokyo Olympics. Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti Olympic Committee announced yesterday a reward of KD 30,000 to shooter Abdullah Al-Rashidi after winning a bronze medal in Tokyo 2020 Olympics' skeet competition. —KUNA



Mohammad Al-Mosawi

Paalam one win away from Philippines' first boxing gold

TOKYO: Flyweight Carlo Paalam is one victory away from winning a first Olympic gold medal for the Philippines in boxing after his semi-final masterclass yesterday in Tokyo. But there is to be no double Filipino gold after compatriot Eumir Marcial was edged out on split points in his middleweight semi.

The Philippines has a proud boxing history and boasts one of the all-time greats in Manny Pacquiao. But the country has never won Olympic boxing gold — Paalam could be the man to change that, even if it is something that the 23-year-old refuses to talk about for now.

"I cannot answer that question now, sorry," he replied, asked by AFP what it would mean to win gold, a first in boxing and only the second ever for the Philippines at the Olympics in any sport. "I have got the final to think about, which will be a tough fight."

Paalam, who sank to his knees and screamed when victory was announced in his semi-final, faces Britain's Galal Yafai in the final tomorrow. At Kokugikan Arena, which is usually home to Japan's national sport, sumo, Paalam outboxed home fighter Ryomei Tanaka in a unanimous points win.

Paalam was ahead on the judges' scorecards after the first two rounds — they are displayed on screens to make the scoring more transparent - and had Japan's Tanaka chasing shadows and missing wildly with his shots at times.

There was disappointment however for Marcial, a narrow loser to Ukraine's Oleksandr Khyzhniak. Marcial, 25, will take home bronze. "We've been dreaming of this since I was young and now I'm



TOKYO: Philippines' Carlo Paalam reacts after winning against Japan's Ryomei Tanaka in the men's fly (48-52kg) semi-final boxing match during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Kokugikan Arena in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

here," he said. "I represent the Philippines in the Tokyo Olympics. I win the bronze medal. I'm so proud of myself."

The Philippines have enjoyed a breakthrough in boxing at Olympic level in Tokyo. On Tuesday, Nesthy Petecio had to settle for silver after she was beaten by Japan's Sena Irie in the final of the women's featherweight event. But the 29-year-old still became the first woman from the Philippines to win an Olympic boxing medal.

'Olympic gold is crazy'

For Yafai, it was not that long ago that he was handling rubbish and picking up boxes in a car factory. He hated it. Now the Briton is vying for gold in an Olympic boxing final. The 28-year-old, who has two older brothers who are professional boxers, defeated Kazakhstan's Saken Bibossinov in their flyweight semi-final in Tokyo yesterday on split points. Yafai now faces Paalam in tomorrow's title decider and said: "It's the Olympic gold, isn't it, man? Olympic gold is crazy. Just imagine being the Olympic champion." —AFP



TOKYO 2020



Durant-led USA to face France in Olympic basketball final

SAITAMA: Kevin Durant scored 23 points and Devin Booker added 20 to power three-time defending champions United States past Australia 97-78 yesterday and into an Olympic men's basketball final against France. The Americans were 24-18 behind after the first quarter and 45-42 adrift at halfway, but stormed back during a dominant third term to stay on track for a fourth consecutive gold medal.

They will face two-time runners-up France, who upset them in the group phase, in tomorrow's showdown after the world number seven battled past Olympic debutants Slovenia 90-89 in a thriller. Nando De Colo poured in a game-best 25 points and Boston Celtics' Evan Fournier added 23 to give their team a third crack at upsetting the US after failing to do so in their two previous Olympic finals in 1948 and 2000.

Beating Australia was revenge for Gregg Popovich's USA who had crashed to Patty Mills' Boomers in their past two meetings, including a demoralizing 91-83 defeat in Las Vegas last month. They also lost 98-94 in the lead-up to the 2019 World Cup in Melbourne.

But when it comes to the Olympics the US are dominant and stretched their lead over their long-time foes at the Games to 9-0, crushing Australia's title dreams. "We knew Australia would

come out fast and hit us with a nice punch. We know that teams want to get us down early, see how we respond," said the Brooklyn Nets' Durant.

"We stuck with it, stuck with our principles, made a couple of switches on defense, and we were able to get some momentum going into the (second) half. Guys came out with that intensity, making shots as well. We've been down 15 in games before and came back," he added. "It don't matter what level it was at, or where it's at. A lot of guys have been in that position before. We know how to handle ourselves."

Australia, the world's third-ranked team, have never finished on the Olympic podium and they now face another bronze medal match, having contested four previously and lost the lot. "A medal's still what we came here to do, even though it's not going to be gold or silver," said their disappointed Philadelphia 76ers guard Matisse Thybulle. "Bronze is going to be the first ever for Australia so that's still a really big deal for us and we still have a lot to fight for."

Struggled

The Americans opened their Olympic campaign with a shock defeat to France but have slowly found their groove, with Durant



SAITAMA: USA's Kevin Wayne Durant (center) runs with the ball past Australia's Chris Goulding (left) and Nic Kay in the men's semi-final basketball match between Australia and USA during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Saitama Super Arena in Saitama yesterday. —AFP

again pacing their offense. He was averaging 18 points, 4.3 rebounds and 4.3 assists a game heading into the semi-final and once more proved authoritative.—AFP

Olympic women's football final moved to evening

TOKYO: The Olympic women's football final between Sweden and Canada today has been switched from Tokyo to Yokohama and delayed from 11:00 am until 9:00 pm because of heat concerns. Officials announced yesterday the match was being relocated from Tokyo's Olympic Stadium, the venue for the opening ceremony and athletics events, following talks between local organizers, FIFA and the International Olympic Committee.

"In order to continue to provide the best possible conditions for the players... it has been confirmed that this match will now take place at 21:00 at the International Stadium Yokohama," organizers said in a statement. The decision to relocate the final came after both teams were said to be concerned about the health and safety of their players. Temperatures in the Japanese capital are expected to peak at 33 degrees Celsius (91.4 degrees Fahrenheit) around midday today. "To even consider playing a final at 11:00 local time in Japan is a direct danger to the players' health due to extreme weather conditions," tweeted Sweden goalkeeper Zecira Musovic on the eve of the game. "Once again money talks way too much in a discussion that should not be a discussion."

It is believed US broadcaster NBC had originally wanted the game to be at a time that suited a US TV audience because the USA women's team, the World Cup holders, were expected to be in the final. But Megan Rapinoe's side lost to Canada in the semi-finals and won the bronze medal in yesterday's playoff against Australia. As a result of the change, the men's bronze medal match between hosts Japan and Mexico in Saitama on Friday will be brought forward two hours to 6:00 pm. Defending champions Brazil play Spain in the men's final in Yokohama tomorrow, when kick-off is scheduled for 8:30 pm. —AFP

Rapinoe, Lloyd doubles secure USA 'amazing' bronze at Olympics

KASHIMA: Megan Rapinoe and Carli Lloyd both scored twice as the United States claimed a consolation bronze in the Olympic women's football tournament yesterday with a thrilling 4-3 victory over Australia. Rapinoe, who refused to speculate on her international future after the semi-final loss to Canada, scored direct from a corner in Kashima before Sam Kerr's equalizer that saw her become Australia's all-time leading scorer.

Rapinoe struck again and Lloyd drilled in a third for the Americans just before half-time on her 312th international appearance — second only behind Kristine Lilly, whose 354 caps are the most in the history of the sport. The 39-year-old Lloyd added a fourth early in the second half after more suspect Australian defending, with a rousing comeback from the Matildas coming up just short despite goals from Caitlin Foord and Emily Gielnik. "It's amazing. It's not necessarily what we wanted, we always have the standard of winning every game and winning every championship, but honestly this one means a lot," said Rapinoe, who won Olympic gold in 2012.

Coach Vlatko Andonovski recalled both Rapinoe and Lloyd to the line-up following the USA's first defeat to Canada in 20 years that ruined their hopes of a fifth Olympic title in seven editions. "I'm so proud of the group, the way we responded today and the way we've stuck together through this whole tournament. It's really easy to start pointing fingers," said Rapinoe. "I think we just kind of let it all go a little bit. Obviously we haven't played our best football through this tournament and it just hasn't really clicked. We wanted to end this tournament on a good note."

Rapinoe catches out goalkeeper

This was a much more absorbing contest than the 0-0 draw between the teams in the group stage, with Rapinoe putting the USA ahead on eight minutes when she whipped in a corner that



KASHIMA: USA's forward Carli Lloyd (left) is congratulated by teammate forward Megan Rapinoe after scoring during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games women's bronze medal football match between Australia and the United States at Ibaraki Kashima Stadium in Kashima city, Ibaraki prefecture yesterday. —AFP

flashed beyond Australia goalkeeper Teagan Micah.

Kerr edged ahead of Lisa De Vanna with her 48th international goal, squeezing the ball past Adrianna Franch — in for the injured Alyssa Naeyer — to bring Australia level on the quarter-hour. Franch then flew to her right to palm away a Kerr header, but Rapinoe soon punished a miscued clearance by Alanna Kennedy, rifling home a superb volley to put the Americans back in front.

Australia were again made to pay for losing the ball deep inside their own half as Lindsey Horan slipped in Lloyd, the two-time Olympic gold medalist and World Cup winner smacking her shot inside the far post. More ponderous defending by Australia, without the suspended Ellie Carpenter following her red card against Sweden, allowed Lloyd to get in behind the backline and make it 4-1 early in the second half. But to their credit Australia continued to threaten and were rewarded when an unmarked Foord headed beyond Franch with more than 30 minutes still to play. Kerr watched her header agonizingly spin away from goal after rebounding off the post, while Gielnik's searing drive from distance in the final minute came in vain. —AFP



USA stars fail to earn stripes in more athletics woe

TOKYO: The United States underwhelming athletics campaign suffered further blows yesterday with favorite Grant Holloway beaten in the 110 meters hurdles and their men's 4x100m relay team failing to qualify for the final.

There was some respite for the Americans in the shot put with a 1-2, Ryan Crouser successfully defending his title with world champion Joe Kovac taking silver as he did in Rio in 2016. But there was more disappointment in the men's triple jump.

Will Claye — favored at last to win a gold medal after twice finishing runner-up in the Olympic final behind Christian Taylor, who missed Tokyo due to injury — came up short in fourth place. Gold instead went to Portugal's Cuba-born Pedro Pichardo, who showed Claye how to transform minor medals into gold having previously won two world silvers when representing Cuba.

The USA came as ever with great hopes of dominating track and field but have just four titles thus far and missed out on the 100/200m sprint titles. Their women's 100 and 200m sextet yielded just a bronze — Gabby Thomas in the 200m — whilst the men managed two silvers and a bronze in the 100 and 200m.

Holloway was circumspect about having led till the final hurdle only to be overhauled by Jamaica's Hansle Parchment. Holloway reflected on how different and more imposing a stage an Olympic final is to the world championship final — which he won in Doha in 2019.

Warner outstrips Mayer for Olympic decathlon gold

TOKYO: Canada's Damian Warner produced two days of consistent excellence to win the men's Olympic decathlon gold yesterday. Warner finished the 10-discipline, two-day event with 9,018 points, with France's world record holder Kevin Mayer doing well to battle back for silver with 8,726 points. Australian Ashley Moloney claimed bronze on 8,649 points.

Warner had ended the first day of the Olympic decathlon on Wednesday in top spot, with the fancied Mayer in fifth after complaining of back problems. Warner, 31, is a seasoned campaigner, having finished in the top five at the past six outdoor global championships, picking up Olympic bronze in 2016 as well as world silver in 2015 and world bronze in 2013 and 2019.

At a baking hot Tokyo's Olympic Stadium on Wednesday, he opened up with a startling world decathlon best of 10.12 seconds in the 100 meters before soaring out to 8.24m in the long jump — enough to have won him bronze in the individual event. Warner then registered 14.80m in the shot put and 2.02m in the high jump, and ran 47.48sec in the final event of the day, the 400m, for the overnight lead ahead of Moloney and Canadian Pierce Lepage, with Mayer fifth. Warner opened up the second day of action with an Olympic decathlon best of 13.46sec in the 110m hurdles before a credible 48.67m in the discus and 4.90m in the pole vault.

Mayer, who won silver behind then world record holder Ashton Eaton at the Rio Olympics, went into the penultimate event, the

"I just think the nerves, the big atmosphere got the best of me a little bit," said Holloway. "But I'm young (he's 23), I've got a lot of races under my belt so I'll take this with a grain of salt and I keep moving forward. This was not the outcome that I wanted but it enables me to say I'm an Olympic medalist."

Only Fred Kerley of the relay quartet will be able to leave Tokyo saying he is an Olympic medalist having taken silver in the 100m individual event. The US quartet of Trayvon Bromell, Kerley, Ronnie Baker and Cravon Gillespie trailed in sixth in a time of 38.10sec, a performance US sprint great Carl Lewis branded a "total embarrassment."

'Chasing time'

Though the USA has suffered multiple disqualifications over the years, yesterday marked the first time an American 4x100m squad has failed to make the Olympic final from a completed heat. Kerley was terse in his assessment of their performance. "We just didn't get the job done today," he said. "No excuses."

Britain's performances on the track have also been hugely disappointing. Their 200 world champion Dina Asher-Smith had pulled out of the 200m due to a hamstring problem earlier in the week but on Thursday she was fit enough to run a scintillating third leg of the 4x100m relay heat.

The British quartet won their heat setting a new national record of 41.55sec. However, al-



TOKYO: Jamaica's Hansle Parchment (left) crosses the finish line to win ahead of second-placed USA's Grant Holloway (right) and third-placed Jamaica's Ronald Levy (center) in the men's 110m hurdles final during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Olympic stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

though they had both the USA and Jamaica behind them neither of those teams fielded their big guns. Asher-Smith revealed after bowing out in the semi-finals of the 100m she had been running with an injured hamstring. However, she said after yesterday's run she was determined to line up in the relay.

"After the 100m I did say that there was no way that I wasn't going to be here for the girls in the 4x100m relay," said Asher-Smith. "I've been training really hard this week, I only had one day off. It is just one of those things where I am chasing time and I need a few more sessions and I will be closer to where I am used to being." — AFP



TOKYO: An overview shows Gold medalist Canada's Damian Warner (center), silver medalist France's Kevin Mayer (left) and bronze medalist Australia's Ashley Moloney (right) posing after the men's decathlon event during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

javelin, in fourth spot and was able to claw back some valuable points with a massive personal best of 73.09m on his second throw. Warner managed 63.44, but Mayer moved back into second place on 8,066pts, 214 behind the Canadian. Warner went into the 1,500m, the final event, knowing he had to run 4:33.80 to break the 9,000-point barrier. Mayer, the world record holder with 9,126 points, didn't have quite enough to threaten the Canadian in the final 1500m. Warner dug deep to somehow find enough energy to produce a last sprint finish for fifth place, 12sec ahead of the Frenchman. His time of 4:31.08 ensured a memorable points finish and, finally, a first gold at a global championships. — AFP

Belgium's Thiam retains Olympic heptathlon gold

TOKYO: Belgium's Nafissatou Thiam successfully defended her Olympic heptathlon title yesterday, a task made easier by the withdrawal of British world champion Katarina Johnson-Thompson. Thiam amassed 6,791 points in the seven-discipline, two-day event made even more grueling because of hot, humid conditions at Tokyo's Olympic Stadium. Anouk Vetter of the Netherlands claimed silver with 6,689pts, with teammate Emma Oosterwegel taking bronze (6,590). "It feels so good. I can't believe it," said Thiam. "I am so emotional I can't describe it."

The 26-year-old Belgian Thiam registered 13.54 seconds in the opening 100m hurdles, 1.92m in the high jump, 14.82m in the shot put and 24.90sec on the first day of action. That was followed up by 6.60m in the long jump, 54.68m in the javelin and 2:15.98 in the final, strength-sapping 800m. "The first day was difficult for me," said Thiam. "So on day two I had to really focus. I knew I had to do something really good in the long jump and javelin. My coach was so positive and told me he believed in me today. I am really happy I was able to go through that and put my performances together." Injuries and the COVID-19 pandemic meant it was the first time Thiam and Johnson-Thompson had contested a full heptathlon since their clash at the Doha world championships in 2019. But the Briton, who suffered a ruptured achilles earlier this year but returned to competition at the end of June, pulled up with a calf injury in the 200m. — AFP



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