



3 Kuwait churches eager to return to normal activities



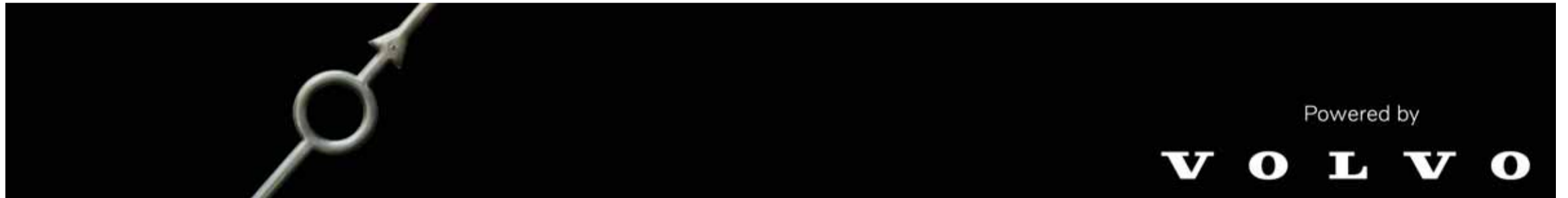
7 Gold rush ends for smugglers as foreign troops leave Afghanistan



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MPs blame mismanagement by govt for record budget deficit

Lawmaker wants answers for sharp drop in Kuwait's per capita income



KUWAIT: Friends look at the Milky Way galaxy rising in the night sky in the Salmi desert late Monday. - Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Lawmakers yesterday blamed what they charged as government mismanagement for a record budget deficit posted in the past fiscal year, while an opposition MP claimed the deficit was not real. The finance ministry announced at the weekend that Kuwait had posted a record budget deficit of KD 10.8 billion - the highest ever actual shortfall in Kuwait's history - in the 2020/2021 fiscal year which ended March 31.

The ministry said in a statement that revenues dropped to KD 10.5 billion, while expenditures increased to KD 21.3 billion. Kuwait has been posting budget deficits since the 2015/2016 fiscal year due to a sharp fall in oil prices and as a result of a cut in production to boost prices.

Oil revenue slumped 42.8 percent in 2020-21 to KD 8.8 billion, while other revenue fell 6.5 percent to KD 1.7 billion, the ministry said. Wages and subsidies accounted for 73 percent of total expenditure, while capital and infrastructure expenditure accounted for 9 percent. The average Kuwaiti crude selling price for the fiscal year reached \$42.36 per barrel,

with average oil production of 2.5 million barrels per day, the ministry said.

MP Ahmad Al-Azemi said posting the largest budget deficit is not strange if the government's mismanagement is taken into account. "There is nothing strange in Kuwait posting the biggest budget deficit in its history under the government's mismanagement and escaping from accountability," Azemi said on Twitter. He said the country has been posting deficits for years and no real measures had been taken to contain this trend, adding that the simplest solutions are "to stop foreign aid, reduce astronomical spending by ministries and reclaim public funds from thieves and corrupt people".

MP Osama Al-Munawer however insisted that the deficit is not real and only on paper, because the government does not include all of the country's revenues. He said if the government includes all state revenues and not only those from oil, there will be no shortfall. As per law, Kuwait does not include returns from its foreign assets in the annual budget, instead adding them to the original assets, currently estimated at \$700 billion.

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News in brief

7 dead in Algeria wildfires

ALGIERS: Wildfires fanned by blistering temperatures and tinder-dry conditions have killed at least seven people in Algeria, the interior minister said yesterday, adding the fires had criminal origins. Fires were reported in multiple locations in 14 districts, 10 of them around Tizi Ouzou, one of the most populous cities in the Kabylie region. — AFP

Sydney hits new COVID record

SYDNEY: Sydney posted a new record of COVID-19 infections yesterday as the city struggles to control an outbreak that is sending other Australian regions into lockdown. New South Wales state announced 356 new cases, a fresh record for a Delta-variant outbreak that began in mid-June and continues to grow. — AFP

New Google safety features

WASHINGTON: Google yesterday unveiled a series of online safety measures for children including a private setting for videos uploaded by teens and safeguard for ads shown to users under 18. Google's "safe search" will now be the default setting for users under 18. On YouTube, content from 13- to 17-year-olds will be private by default. Google will also turn off location history for all users under 18 globally. — AFP

Moroccan sets himself alight

CASABLANCA: A young Moroccan has died after setting himself on fire in protest after officials seized his cart in a town near Casablanca, his brother told AFP on Monday. Yassine Lekhmedi, 25, an unlicensed taxi driver, died of his injuries in hospital in the North African country's economic capital on Saturday after self-immolating on July 28, Ahmed Lekhmedi said. — AFP

Messi arrives in Paris to complete move to PSG

PARIS: Lionel Messi landed in Paris yesterday with the 34-year-old Argentinian superstar set to sign a deal with Paris Saint-Germain following his departure from boyhood club Barcelona. Messi arrived at Le Bourget airport to the north of the French capital around 3:30 pm and was greeted by hundreds of PSG supporters who had gathered hoping to catch a glimpse of their new signing.

Messi, who waved to the crowds while sporting a Paris t-shirt, was then expected to undergo a medical before his signing could be made official by the

Qatar-backed club. Messi's father Jorge, who is also his agent, earlier confirmed the inevitable as he arrived at Barcelona's El Prat airport to board a flight to France. Asked by reporters if his son would sign for the French club, he replied: "Yes".

PSG are set to unveil Messi at a press conference at their Parc des Princes stadium today. He is expected to sign an initial two-year deal, and the completion of his move will close a whirlwind few days following the announcement last Thursday that he would leave Barcelona, the club he has represented for the entirety of his 17-year professional career.

PSG's move for Messi had been an open secret for days, although reports in Spain on Monday night talked of a "final offer" by Barcelona to try to keep the player. Instead, the six-time Ballon d'Or winner will join a PSG attack already featuring Neymar

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PARIS: Argentinian football player Lionel Messi waves to supporters after he landed yesterday at Le Bourget airport. — AFP

Lebanese now queue up for cooking gas

BEIRUT: Lebanese lined up in long queues yesterday to stock up on cooking gas following warnings of imminent shortages, as an economic crisis eats away at supplies of basic imports. Lebanon, grappling with an economic crisis branded by the World Bank as one of the planet's worse since the mid-19th century, has been hit in recent months by a wave of shortages of basic items from medicine to fuel.

Liquefied petroleum gas, usually sold in canisters and used widely in homes and businesses for cooking and heating, had been readily available in the market. But importers warned it would soon join the list of scarce goods, prompting a nationwide panic. "Our current stock will last one week," said Farid Zeynoun, who heads a syndicate of petroleum gas distributors. "After which, if no solution is found, gas used in homes will be sold on the black market."

Zeynoun blamed the crisis on a delay by the central bank in opening credit lines to fund imports. Gas is subsidized by the government with a set price, but



SIDON: Lebanese wait to fill their gas cylinders in this southern city yesterday amidst a deepening economic crisis. — AFP

dealers warn that if official supplies run dry, prices could shoot up by more than a third. Foreign currency reserves are rapidly depleting, forcing the country to scale-down imports to shore up the little money it has left.

Zeynoun said that a vessel carrying 5,000 tons of liquefied petroleum docked in Lebanese waters 17 days ago, but is awaiting approval by the authorities to unload its cargo.

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Cuomo resigns after claims of harassment

NEW YORK: New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, facing possible impeachment over sexual harassment claims from 11 women and mounting pressure to quit from fellow Democrats, announced his resignation yesterday. It was a stunning reversal of fortune for the 63-year-old Cuomo, who just a year ago earned praise for his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic before being engulfed in the harassment allegations and claims that he covered up the scale of deaths in nursing homes.

"I think that given the circumstances, the best way I can help now is if I step aside and let



Andrew Cuomo

Continued on Page 2

Amir receives Crown Prince, senior officials



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



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



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



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha Enhancement Abdullah Yousef Al-Roumi.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets ministers of defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah and foreign affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received at Bayan Palace National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem. He also hosted His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-

Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, as well as Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Nazaha (Integrity) Enhancement Abdullah Yousef Al-Roumi.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received at Bayan Palace yesterday Speaker Ghanem, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled,

and ministers Sheikh Hamad and Roumi. Furthermore, His Highness Sheikh Mishal received Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah.

In other news, His Highness the Amir also sent a cable of condolences yesterday to Algerian

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune over forest fire victims. In the cable, His Highness the Amir prayed to Almighty Allah to bestow mercy upon the dead and wished speedy recovery for the injured, hoping for the friendly country to overcome such a natural disaster. His Highness the Crown Prince and His Highness the Prime Minister sent similar cables. — KUNA



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Lebanese now queue up for...

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The official National News Agency reported "unprecedented" demand for gas in the northern Akkar district. "Importing companies have stopped

meeting our gas needs," said Walid Al-Hayek, the head of a gas distribution company, according to NNA. Hayek also blamed the crisis on a central bank delay in opening credit lines.

In the southern city of Sidon, people flocked to a local gas supplier to refill their canisters. "Is there anything more humiliating than this?" asked Mohammad Ali Hasan, one of those in the queue, waiting for hours under the scorching sun. "We use gas... to cook for our children... we will soon wait in line for water". — AFP

Cuomo resigns after claims of...

Continued from Page 1

government get back to government," Cuomo said in a live televised address. "My resignation will be effective in 14 days." Cuomo, who will hand over the reins to Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul, a fellow Democrat, denied the accusations of sexual harassment outlined in a report released last week by the office of New York Attorney General Letitia James.

"The report said I sexually harassed 11 women," Cuomo said. "That was the headline people heard and saw. The reaction was outrage. It should have been. However, it was also false." But he said he wanted to "deeply, deeply" apologize to any women who may have

been offended by his actions. "I have been too familiar with people," said Cuomo, who was once touted as a potential Democratic presidential candidate.

"I do hug and kiss people casually, women and men. I have done it all my life. In my mind I've never crossed the line with anyone," he said. "But I didn't realize the extent to which the line has been redrawn. There are generational and cultural shifts that I just didn't fully appreciate. And I should have. No excuses. I thought a hug and putting my arm around a staff person while taking a picture was friendly, but she found it to be too forward," Cuomo said. "I kissed a woman on the cheek at a wedding and thought I was being nice, but she felt that it was too aggressive."

Cuomo, whose father Mario also served as governor of New York, was elected governor in 2010 and easily won reelection in the heavily Democratic state in 2014 and 2018. Cuomo described himself as a "New Yorker, born and bred" and a "fighter" and said his "instinct is to fight through this controversy because I truly believe it is politically motivated." — AFP

Messi arrives in Paris to complete...

Continued from Page 1

and Kylian Mbappe. PSG see Messi as the missing piece in their jigsaw as they chase the Champions League, the trophy they want more than anything else. "Back together," Neymar, who played with Messi at Barcelona before moving to PSG in 2017, posted on Twitter.

Barcelona are still coming to terms with the departure of their greatest ever player, who said goodbye to his club of two decades at a tearful news conference on Sunday. Despite offering to cut his salary by half to seal a new five-year contract with Barcelona, the deal foundered on Spanish league salary cap rules. Barcelona, carrying debts of 1.2 billion (\$1.41 billion), are unable to register new signings because of their financial predicament.

With Abu Dhabi-owned Manchester City having ruled themselves out, PSG were about the only club who could

afford what is expected to be a deal worth 35 million (\$41 million) a year. "It will be difficult to see him in another shirt than that of Barca," Messi's old Barcelona teammate Andres Iniesta, now playing in Japan, told AFP in an interview yesterday. "As a player he just transcended everything. I've not seen a player like him - and I don't think I ever will. You look at what he did and for so long..."

Messi, who flew in to Paris with his wife and three children, is now preparing for a new life in Paris and in Ligue 1. His arrival makes PSG even more obvious favorites to reclaim a French title they missed out on last season to Lille. Some in Ligue 1 have mixed feelings about the impending arrival of arguably the greatest player of all time. "It's extraordinary for Ligue 1," said Metz coach Frederic Antonetti. "But for a purist like me, Messi should have finished his career at Barcelona."

This summer PSG have already added veteran Spanish defender Sergio Ramos from Real Madrid and Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma, the star of Euro 2020. They have also signed Liverpool midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum, snatching the Dutchman from under the noses of Barcelona, and spent 60 million euros on Inter Milan right-back Achraf Hakimi. — AFP

MPs blame mismanagement...

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Meanwhile, MP Muhalhal Al-Mudhaf asked Finance Minister Khalifa Hamada why Kuwait's per capita income dropped sharply in the past decade. He said according to international reports, including a report by the World Bank, Kuwait's per capita

income dropped from \$49,578 in 2007 to \$32,702 in 2019, a decline of 34 percent. He asked the minister if the reports were true and demanded to know the reasons for such a slide in personal income.

Local media reported yesterday that the economic committee of the Cabinet is considering a number of measures to reduce spending to reduce the budget deficit. Al-Rai Arabic daily quoted informed sources as saying the committee is considering raising the prices of petrol and electricity and reducing other subsidies in a bid to save around KD 2 billion.

Local

Kuwait churches, like mosques, eager to return to normal activities

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs has officially requested the Ministry of Health to allow a return to normal activities in mosques, including allowing worshippers to be at closer proximity to each other while performing prayers. Mosques have been allowed to resume sermons and lessons, but are still adhering to social distancing guidelines during congregation prayers.

Churches in Kuwait are also eager to resume normal worship services. There are approximately 3.1 million foreign residents living in Kuwait, and according to the Public Authority for Civil Information, around 26 percent of them are Christians. There are eight officially registered and licensed churches in the country: National Evangelical Church of Kuwait, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Anglican and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"We have not changed the protocols because we haven't received any new memo as yet from the

Ministry of Awqaf regarding changes," said Mariam Abdullah, Executive Secretary of the National Evangelical Church in Kuwait. "Until the new memo is issued, we will continue following the old rules," said Abdullah. "We are operating with the permission and license of the Ministry of Awqaf, so any changes in our operations must come from them," she said.

Churches reopened to worshippers in July 2020 after several months of closure due to the pandemic. "Since last year, we are operating at 30 percent capacity and chairs are arranged more than a meter apart. We continue to strictly implement this distancing. Worshippers under 15 years of age are not allowed to come to the church. They can worship at home since we have virtual worship services," Abdullah said.

"We are waiting for new instructions promulgated by the Ministry of Awqaf. We will strictly submit to their wise decision," she added. Abdullah said hand sanitizing and wearing masks is still a must, and those exposed to COVID-19 can only attend after 14 days of quarantine.



KUWAIT: The National Evangelical Church of Kuwait.

Kuwait Dive Team cooperates with UNEP for cleaner waters

KUWAIT: Kuwait Dive Team of the Environmental Voluntary Foundation continuing cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme - Regional Office for West Asia, as part of the International Clean Seas Campaign. The cooperation is aimed, at the local level, at protecting and rehabilitating the marine environment, lifting waste from coastal areas, coral reefs and improving status of the sea creatures' habitat, affirmed Walid Al-Fadhel, the head of Kuwait Dive Team, an affiliate of the foundation.

Fadhel said that the dive team has recently submitted a full report about its accomplished tasks since 2020 to the UN environmental program bureau in Bahrain. The team delivered the report in line with an accord worked out between the two parties in 2018 that stipulates safeguarding and restoring the Kuwaiti marine environmental, coastal regions and promoting voluntary work to achieve these objectives. Officials at the UN office have praised the Kuwaiti divers' commitment to implementing the agreement, their efforts for safeguarding the Kuwaiti shores, cleaning the beaches, the island and installing buoys, Fadhel said, also noting that the team had carried out up to 100 environmental and voluntary missions since start of 2021.

The Kuwait Divers Team, since inking the coordination accord with the UN bureau, has carried out a chain of diverse missions for clearing plastic waste, abandoned nets, sunken boats and other environmentally harmful objects. The divers have lifted and removed 16 abandoned boats and ships, weighing



KUWAIT: Members of the Kuwait Dive Team lift fishing nets during a cleaning campaign in this archive photo.

177 tons, from various locations at the sea, in addition to removing 100 tons of neglected fishing nets and other harmful materials from more than 20 locations in the waters. Moreover, they have installed 76 buoys marking locations of underwater coral reefs. Kuwait largely depends on the sea for economic, living and tourist purposes, Fadhel has affirmed, underscoring the great need to preserve the marine environment and the natural biodiversity.

Furthermore, the Kuwaiti divers team has cooper-

ated with international organizations for conserving the beaches, has engaged in a special course with personnel of the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) training on the Coralwatch Program of the Austrian University Queensland for regular inspection of the coral reefs. Fadhel added that the divers had been involved for the eighth consecutive year in the mobile campaign for beaches' clean-up however he noted that it had been partially snagged due to outbreak of the coronavirus. —KUNA

One out of three COVID survivors suffers mental health problems

KUWAIT: After the World Health Organization (WHO) said the effect of the coronavirus on psychological and mental health will be long-term, specialists spoke about the effects the pandemic caused on those who suffered from lockdowns, curfews and isolation of areas. The specialists who were quoted in an Al-Qabas Arabic daily report yesterday said one out of three among those who recovered faced various psychological problems, and some had deformities of the central nervous system (CNS), adding that psychological consultations online doubled during the pandemic.

Psychologist and clinical psychology professor at Kuwait University Dr Nayef Al-Mutawa said during the curfews last year, one out of five persons around the world were affected by mental problems, while one out of three persons who recovered from the coronavirus faced continued nervous and psychological problems.

Psychology consultant, founder and medical director of MindWell Center, and associate professor at the College of Medicine at University of Toronto Dr Mohammad Al-Swaidan said recovered patients suffer from memory difficulties and loss of concentration for one to three months. Kuwait's Dr Kazem Abul said psychological shocks affect mental health and may cause depression, apprehension and insomnia. He said the individual may become isolated from the family or society, which might increase the risk of psychological symptoms such as obsession.

Kuwait races to vaccinate population against COVID-19



KUWAIT: Health Ministry members pose for a group photo at the Kuwait Vaccination Center in Mishref. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Civil Defense members pose for a group photo at the Kuwait Vaccination Center in Mishref.

KUWAIT: Kuwait races to vaccinate its population against COVID-19 as the health ministry revved up its inoculation capacity to reach around 100,000 a day. The ministry had announced that vaccination witnessed a high turnout from both citizens and residents during the Hijri New Year holiday in all centers across the country. "The continuation of the vaccination pace has positive impacts on the indicators of the pandemic situation evaluation," Ministry of Health's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said in a press statement. This helps achieving the desired goals in order to reach herd immunity and return to normal life, he added.

The centers providing vaccination are Kuwait Vaccination Center in Mishref, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Causeway's center and others in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Tadhamon Sports Club, in addition to several hospitals, Dr Sanad noted. He commended the public's cooperation and their continued abidance by precautionary measures, thanking medical teams and staff, and volunteers for their efforts during the holiday. Kuwait's daily coronavirus cases had increased by 519 to 403,868 on Monday as deaths increased by three to 2,372, the health ministry announced. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood at 620 by Monday, including 236 in intensive care units, Dr Sanad said, revealing that another 8,312 were receiving regular treatment. Total recoveries reached 393,184 as of Monday as 834 fresh recoveries were announced on that day. —KUNA

Filipina maid in Kuwait saved after posting Facebook appeal

KUWAIT: It did not take the Public Authority for Manpower (PAM) long to act in coordination with the interior ministry after a Filipina domestic helper appealed on Facebook to rescue her from her employer, who allegedly mistreated her. The helper claimed the work she was forced to do violated rules and regulations.

Concerned officials of the labor protection sector went to the location and arrested the sponsor, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported yesterday, quoting official sources. They also transferred the maid to the domestic helper shelter in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh. The sources said the interior ministry started interrogating the bedoon sponsor, in addition to questioning the helper over her claims, to get all details.

Concerned authorities will continue investigations and will give the helper all her rights, the source said. She will then be given the option to leave the country. They said Kuwait is keen on safeguarding workers' rights and prevent their abuse.

Meanwhile, the Philippine labor counselor at the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait Nasser Mustafa lauded the quick response by Kuwait authorities over the helper's appeal. He said the police response was rapid, thanking them for their action. He said the embassy is following up the case and plans to visit the helper at the shelter.



KUWAIT: Firemen put out a fire that gutted three yachts in Messilah yesterday, Kuwait Fire Force said, noting that no injuries were reported.

Local

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: This picture taken on August 9, 2021 shows dates prepared for harvest on a palm tree in Kuwait. The date harvest season began earlier this week in the country. —Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

News in brief

Shamal Al-Zour earns \$19m

KUWAIT: Shamal Al-Zour Al-Oula Power and Water Company has reaped KD 6.4 million (\$19.2 million) worth of net profits in H1 2021 compared to KD 5.9 million (\$17.7) earnings in the first half of 2020. The company said in a statement posted on Bursa Kuwait yesterday that the dividend per share stood at 5.84 fils in the first half of 2021 against 5.44 fils in the first half of 2020. It attributed the rise of profits largely to decline of the financing costs. The company, established in 2013, was listed at the local bourse in 2020. Its capital amounts to KD 110 million (\$330 million). The company has built, operated and maintained the northern Al-Zour power station (the first phase). —KUNA

Resolving Yemen's crisis

RIYADH: Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf stressed on the importance of maintaining the international community's efforts to continue resolving the Yemeni crisis as commenced by the Saudi ceasefire initiative. The Council's statement on Monday noted the remarks came during a telephone conversation between Hajraf and UN Security Council's Special Envoy Hans Grunberg, where he assured this crisis should reach a political solution as advised by the GCC, National Dialogue Conference, and UN Resolution 2216. On Friday, the UN appointed Swedish diplomat Hans Grunberg as the new UN Special Envoy for Yemen. —KUNA

UNICEF praises Kuwait's role in improving children conditions on all levels

KUWAIT: Representative of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Al-Tayyib Adam praised yesterday the role of Kuwait in improving the condition of children within the humanitarian and development fields. This came during a meeting held with Secretary General of the Board of Directors of Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) Maha Al-Barjas.

Both sides discussed a number of mutual projects in Yemen and the Gulf region, and ways to enhance them, referring to the importance of the educational, medical, and health support for the Yemeni children. They also reviewed cooperation between the UNICEF and KRCS, in the humanitarian and rescue fields in all countries, Adam said in a

statement to the press. In a similar statement, Barjas said that KRCS carries out a number of activities aimed at helping children affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts, referring to Yemen.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Rohingya children and other countries. KRCS organizes many activities for refugees, displaced children that supports and provide education, health and housing, Barjas added. She reviewed KRCS humanitarian projects and work plans inside and outside Kuwait on all levels, expressing her happiness of the visit of the UN representative to KRCS's headquarters. —KUNA

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KUWAIT: Members of the Shiite community in Kuwait began this week attending sermons at Hussainiyas around the country marking Ashura day, which falls on the tenth day of the lunar month of Muharram. —Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh





China cases rise as Delta variant challenges Beijing

Ethiopia PM urges civilians to join armed forces as war rages



KUNDUZ, Afghanistan: In this picture taken on Monday, Taliban fighters stand along a road in this northern city that was captured by the Taliban over the weekend. —AFP

Taliban eye full control of north Afghanistan

Another city falls to insurgents as thousands of residents flee

KABUL: The Taliban seized another Afghan provincial capital yesterday - the seventh in less than a week - as tens of thousands of people fled their homes in the north for the relative safety of Kabul and other centers. A provincial lawmaker told AFP the insurgents had taken Farah city, capital of the same-named province in western Afghanistan, while a Taliban spokesman posted pictures of fighters walking casually past the gates of the police headquarters and governor's office.

Shahla Abubar, a member of Farah's provincial council, said local security forces retreated towards an army base outside the city. Five of the other provincial capitals to have fallen since Friday are in the country's north with the insurgents setting their sights on Mazar-i-Sharif, the region's biggest city. Its fall would signal the total collapse of government control in the traditionally anti-Taliban north.

Government forces are also battling the hardline Islamists in Kandahar and Helmand, the southern Pashto-speaking provinces from where the Taliban draw their strength. The United States - due to complete a troop withdrawal at the end of the month and end its longest war - has all but left the battlefield. However, Washington's special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad

is now in Qatar to try and convince the Taliban to accept a ceasefire. Envoys from hosts Qatar, Britain, China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, the United Nations, and European Union were also due to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, a source told AFP. But even with a new round of talks in the works, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said it was down to the Afghan government and its forces to turn the tide, and there was "not much" the United States could do to help.

Brutal treatment

The Taliban have appeared largely indifferent to peace overtures, and seem intent on a military victory to crown a return to power after their ouster 20 years ago in the wake of the September 11 attacks. As fighting raged, thousands of people were on the move inside the country, with families fleeing newly captured Taliban cities with tales of brutal treatment at the hands of the insurgents.

"The Taliban are beating and looting," said Rahima, now camped out with hundreds of families at a park in the capital, Kabul, after fleeing Sheberghan province. "If there is a young girl or a widow in a family, they forcibly take them. We fled to protect our honor." "We

are so exhausted," added Farid, an evacuee from Kunduz who did not want to be further identified.

The UN's International Organization for Migration said yesterday that more than 359,000 people have been displaced by fighting this year alone. "We urge all parties to the conflict and neighboring countries to do everything they can to ensure that border crossing-points remain open, and humanitarian workers are able to access vulnerable populations in the border areas," the agency said in a statement.

'Atrocious situation'

In the northern city of Kunduz that was captured by the Taliban over the weekend, residents said shops had begun to reopen in the center as the insurgents focused their attention on government forces who had retreated to the airport. "People are opening their shops and businesses, but you can still see fear in their eyes," said shopkeeper Habibullah. Another resident, living close to the airport, reported days of heavy fighting. "The Taliban are hiding in people's houses in the area and government forces are bombing them," said Haseeb, who only gave his first name.

The Taliban earned notoriety during their stint

in power from 1996-2001 for introducing a harsh interpretation of Islamic rule that barred girls from education and women from work. Crimes were punished by public floggings or executions, while a host of activities - from playing music to non-religious TV - were also banned. Following the capture of Aibak on Monday, the insurgents have now overrun five provincial capitals in the north. They have also taken Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz province, in the southwest.

Yesterday, the Taliban reiterated they were closing in on Mazar-i-Sharif - a linchpin for the government's control of the north - after capturing Sheberghan to its west, and Kunduz and Taloqan to its east. But Fawad Aman, spokesman for the ministry of defense, said Afghan forces had the upper hand there.

The Indian consulate in Mazar, however, called on its nationals to board a "special flight" scheduled for later in the day. From Geneva, the UN warned the war was unleashing another humanitarian crisis. "Unless all parties return to the negotiating table and reach a peaceful settlement, the already atrocious situation for so many Afghans will become much worse," said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet. —AFP

Greeks battle to protect town from ferocious blaze

AVGARIA, Greece: Volunteers and firefighters worked round-the-clock yesterday, often without masks or helmets, in a desperate bid to stop a violent blaze from reaching a town on Greece's Evia island, one of hundreds of fires that have raged through the country. Nearly 900 firefighters, reinforced overnight with fresh arrivals from abroad, were deployed on the country's second largest island as major towns and resorts remained under threat from a fire that has been burning for eight days.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis apologized to the nation, saying more than 580 fires had broken out in recent days around the country, exposing Greece to a "natural fury without precedent". Unprecedented weather disasters bulked up by climate change have swept the world this summer, with a landmark UN assessment published Monday warning the world is warming even faster than forecasted. Hundreds of homes have been lost in Evia, greater Athens, the Peloponnese and other parts of Greece in wildfires that have been raging almost without pause since late July, as the region suffers through an intense heatwave. The fires have claimed three lives in Greece, while blazes in neighboring Turkey have killed eight. Several people have been injured, some critically.

'Where to go?'

Yesterday, much of the attention was focused on keeping the fire out of Evia's northern hub of Istiaia, which has 7,000 residents who had yet to evacuate. Firefighters and volunteers had been engaged overnight in "hand-to-hand combat, fighting heart and soul" to erect fire breaks outside villages neighboring Istiaia, Mayor Yiannis Kontzias said.



Local youths and volunteers gather in an open field and wait to support firefighters during a wildfire near the village of Kamatriades near Istiaia on Evia island on Monday. —AFP

Often wearing just a t-shirt, the locals battled the flames on several fronts, one of which raged out of control. The Evia force includes hundreds of firefighters from Romania, Serbia and Ukraine. They were reinforced on Tuesday with units from Cyprus, Slovakia and Poland, the civil protection authority said. The rugged island is popular with holidaymakers and many Greeks have summer homes in Evia. Some 3,000 people were evacuated by sea this past week as the flames neared.

Authorities ordered the evacuation of Asiminio, a coastal village near Istiaia also threatened by flames yesterday. "Where do you want us to go?" a woman

geographically diverse country risks fighting rolling disasters if it does not forcefully confront climate change, which is warming sea temperatures in regions such as the Mediterranean. A landmark UN report this week warned that global warming is occurring far faster than forecast.

The issue is turning increasingly political, with polls showing it registering highly with up to seven million members of Generation Z who will be able to vote in the next election, slated for 2023. Experts and environmentally-conscious politicians put ratifying the 2015 Paris Agreement adopted by 196 countries on top of Turkey's to-do list.

Turkey is one of only six nations, including Iraq and Libya, yet to formally approve the accord. "This is the first step. We must become a part of the global fight against climate change," said Greens of Turkey Party spokeswoman Emine Ozkan. "There is no time to lose."

'No comprehensive policy'
Climate Action Tracker, a think tank that evaluates national emissions reduction plans, said Turkey's effort

towards the accord's goals was "critically insufficient". Ankara argues the agreement unfairly classes Turkey as "developed" rather than "developing", which would give it access to funding. But experts say Turkey is making the mistake of failing to see critical issues such as food security and intensifying drought as linked.

"I don't see Turkey having any comprehensive and holistic climate change policy that addresses everything in an interconnected way," said water and climate policy researcher Gokce Sencan. "You cannot separate food security issues from energy security issues, and food prices from the issue of drought."

Fossil fuels made up 83 percent of Turkey's energy supply in 2019. The International Energy Agency this year praised Ankara's efforts to diversify its energy mix, with "impressive" renewable energy growth. But environmentalists raise concern over Turkey's reliance on polluting coal, since Ankara has plans to expand domestic coal power capacity despite targeting a greenhouse gas emissions cut of up to 21 percent by 2030. —AFP

Prince Andrew sued in NY court

NEW YORK: Queen Elizabeth II's second son, Prince Andrew, was sued in a New York court on Monday for alleged sexual abuse of a woman who says she was "lent out" for underage sex by late US financier Jeffrey Epstein. The filing at the US district court in Manhattan said Virginia Giuffre was the plaintiff in the case against the defendant, named as "Prince Andrew, Duke of York".



Prince Andrew

Giuffre alleged in the filing that she "was regularly abused by Epstein and was lent out by Epstein to other powerful men for sexual purposes." "One such powerful man... was the Defendant, Prince Andrew." According to the complaint, Giuffre said Andrew sexually abused her at the London home of socialite Ghislaine Maxwell more than 20 years ago, when she was under 18. Andrew, 61, has vehemently denied claims he had sex with Giuffre, and said he has no recollection of meeting her, but the allegations threaten to damage the British royal family. A spokesman for Buckingham Palace declined to comment on the lawsuit and a public relations company representing Andrew e-mailed a "no comment" response to AFP yesterday. The allegations have dogged the British monarchy for years.

The centuries-old institution was also rocked in March by a US television interview in March involving the 95-year-old Queen's grandson, Prince Harry, and his wife, Meghan. The couple, who moved to California last year, raised allegations of racism and bullying in Britain's most famous family, prompting denials from the palace and promises of an inquiry.

Andrew, a divorced father of two and former Royal Navy helicopter pilot who flew in the 1982 Falklands War against Argentina, was forced to step back from frontline royal duties in late 2019. That followed a furor at a rare television interview he gave to the BBC, in which he defended his friendship with Epstein, a multi-million-dollar hedge fund manager. Andrew - who as a young man was considered one of Britain's most eligible bachelors and was dubbed "Randy Andy" in the tabloid press - later issued a statement in which he said he "unequivocally" regretted his "ill-judged association" with Epstein. But he has made few public appearances since, although joined other senior royals for the funeral of his father, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, at Windsor Castle in April. —AFP

Disaster-struck Turkey faces toll of climate change

ANKARA: From flash floods to forest fires, drought to "sea snot", Turkey is bearing the brunt of increasingly frequent disasters blamed on climate change, putting pressure on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to act. Wildfires that have killed eight people since late July across southern coastal regions, ravaging forests and turning villages to ash, followed the growth of a slimy mucus in the Sea of Marmara that destroyed marine life.

Deadly floods in the northeast followed an arid spell that dried up dams, endangering water supplies. Sinkholes caused by water mismanagement are encroaching on farmers' homes. Experts warn the vast,

International

Ethiopia PM urges civilians to join armed forces as war rages

12 killed in attack in Afar region • UN regains access to Tigray refugee camps

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed issued a call yesterday for all eligible civilians to join the armed forces as fighting raged in multiple regions of Africa's second most populous nation. "Now is the right time for all capable Ethiopians who are of age to join the Defense Forces, Special Forces and militias and show your patriotism," Abiy's office said in a statement released less than two months after he declared a unilateral ceasefire against Tigrayan rebels.

Abiy sent troops into Ethiopia's northernmost Tigray region last November to topple the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the regional ruling party which dominated national politics for nearly three decades until 2018. The move came in response to TPLF attacks on federal army camps, said Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

Although Abiy promised a swift victory, the war took a stunning turn in June when Tigrayan forces recaptured the regional capital Mekele and the Ethiopian army largely withdrew. Abiy also declared a unilateral ceasefire, saying it would facilitate aid access to a region where 400,000 people are facing famine-like conditions, according to the UN. Since then the TPLF has pushed east into neighboring Afar and south into the Amhara region.

Last week its forces seized the Amhara town of Lalibela, home to 12th-century rock-hewn churches that are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Yesterday, the government's patience appeared to have run out, with its statement ordering security forces "to halt the destruction of the treasonous and terrorist TPLF organization and the machinations of foreign hands once and for all".

Civilians shot, killed

Earlier yesterday, a medical official in Afar told AFP that 12 people were killed and dozens wounded in a recent attack on displaced civilians.

The incident occurred on August 5 in Galicoma town, said Dr Abubeker Mahammad, medical director of the Dubti Referral Hospital, where victims were being treated. "Twelve dead bodies arrived at the hospital," Abubeker told AFP. "The total number of injured victims is more than 46, almost around 50. Almost 75 percent of them had bullet injuries."

Survivors told hospital officials they were shot by fighters from the TPLF, Abubeker said. Two officials with Afar's regional government put the death toll in Galicoma at more than 200, but that figure could not be independently verified. Ayish Yasin, head of Afar's bureau for women and children, told AFP yesterday that "200 bodies of civilians have been recovered so far, while more than 48 are still missing."

Ayish, who visited Galicoma Monday, said many of the victims were killed by artillery fire and buried immediately. "Out of the 200 bodies recovered, 107 are children - 48 girls and 59 boys," she said. "The victims are civilians who had no role in the conflict."

The head of the UN children's agency UNICEF, Henrietta Fore, said Monday she was "extremely alarmed by the reported killing of over 200 people, including more than 100 children, in attacks on displaced families" in Afar. UNICEF officials in New York and in Addis Ababa said they could not provide more information than what was in Fore's statement.

UNHCR regains access

Ethiopian officials have seized on the deaths in Galicoma as proof of the TPLF's disregard for the worsening humanitarian situation in Tigray. But TPLF spokesman Getachew Reda said on Twitter late Monday that government troops "launched an offensive on August 5 against our forces in Galicoma". He said the TPLF would "work with relevant bodies to investigate any incident that



ADDIS ABABA: A protestor waves the Ethiopian flag during a rally against pro-TPLF forces and to support Ethiopia's armed forces on Aug 8, 2021. —AFP

may have occurred."

Aid agencies have struggled to get urgently needed humanitarian supplies to cut-off populations in Tigray as the violence has worsened. Yesterday, the UN refugee agency UNHCR said it had regained access to two Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray for the first time since July 13, warning of the dire conditions facing the 23,000 people living there.

Although aid deliveries resumed on August 5, UNHCR spokesman Boris Cheshirkov told

reporters in Geneva that access to the Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps continues to be "limited by a complex and fluid security situation". "Basic services such as healthcare remain unavailable, and clean drinking water is running out," he added, reiterating a call to ease the passage of humanitarian convoys. The TPLF has repeatedly said that it does not have designs on holding territory in Amhara and Afar and is instead focused on facilitating aid access and preventing pro-government forces from regrouping. —AFP

News in brief

Marburg virus detected in W Africa

GENEVA: Guinea confirmed a case of Marburg disease, the World Health Organization said on Monday, the first recorded in West Africa of the lethal virus that's related to Ebola and, like COVID-19, passed from animal hosts to humans. The virus, which is carried by bats and has a fatality rate of up to 88 percent, was found in samples taken from a patient who died on Aug 2 in southern Gueckedou prefecture, the WHO said. After being initially treated at a local clinic and tested for malaria, the patient died "in the community", the WHO said. —AFP

Putin sends reinforcements

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered officials yesterday to send in reinforcements to fight forest fires that continue to tear through Siberia. Putin ordered Russia's emergency ministry to "increase the group for extinguishing fires" and "raise the intensity of the work of aviation" in one of Siberia's hardest-hit regions of Yakutia. The emergency ministry branch in Yakutia said yesterday that more than 4,200 people were currently fighting the fires. More than 9,500 tons of water had been dropped from the air onto the blazes, it added. —AFP

Navalny allies face fresh charges

MOSCOW: Two exiled aides of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny were slapped with new criminal charges for helping to finance organizations that have recently been labelled "extremist", Russian investigators said yesterday. Russia's Investigative Committee said yesterday it had launched a criminal case against Navalny allies Leonid Volkov and Ivan Zhdanov over the "collection of funds and provision of financial services deliberately intended to finance an extremist organization". The charges carry a maximum penalty of eight years in jail. —AFP

ICC prosecutor arrives in Sudan

KHARTOUM: The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor Karim Khan has arrived in Sudan for a week of talks including on outstanding arrest warrants for genocide in Darfur, state media reported yesterday. Khan will hold talks on "ways to boost cooperation" on investigations into the crimes committed during the devastating civil war in Darfur, the official SUNA news agency said. The United Nations says 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million displaced in the conflict, which erupted in the vast western region in 2003. —AFP

9 die at Russia COVID hospital

MOSCOW: Nine coronavirus patients died Monday in Russia's republic of North Ossetia after an oxygen pipe ruptured at a hospital in the capital Vladikavkaz, authorities said. "Nine patients with coronavirus died due to the lack of oxygen at the Republic Clinical Hospital of Vladikavkaz," Russian news agencies cited the ministry as saying. They also quoted the republic's acting head Sergei Minyaylo as saying "there was a rupture of the oxygen pipe" and "the oxygen supply was interrupted". —AFP

Iranian ex-official denies part in 1988 executions

STOCKHOLM: Lawyers for a former Iranian prison official denied his involvement in the 1988 execution of thousands of political dissidents yesterday on the first day of a landmark case in Sweden likely to stoke tensions in the Islamic republic. Hamid Noury, 60, appeared relaxed and smiling in Stockholm District Court while his defense counsel Daniel Marcus refuted the charges including "murder" and "war crimes" dating from between July 30 and August 16, 1988, when Noury was assistant to the deputy prosecutor of Gohardasht prison in Karaj, near Tehran.

Earlier Kristina Lindhoff Carleson, for the prosecution, read out the indictment which accused Noury of "intentionally taking the life of a very large number of prisoners sympathetic to or belonging to the People's Mujahedin" (MEK). MEK supporters were among several hundred protesters who gathered outside the court carrying photos of the dead and called for justice for the estimated 5,000 prisoners killed across Iran, allegedly under the orders of supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini in reprisal for attacks carried out by the MEK at the end of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88.

The demonstrators urged Swedish and international justice to condemn Iran's newly inaugurated president Ebrahim Raisi, also accused by rights groups of involvement in the extra-judicial killings. Swedish court officials believe yesterday's case is the first of its kind against someone accused over the killings. A verdict in

German Greens holding onto hope for change

HILDESHEIM, Germany: Rattled by a shaky start to their campaign, Germany's Greens are trying to regroup ahead of next month's general election with a renewed focus on climate protection as floods and fires ravage Europe. The ecologist party's bid to crown their candidate Annalena Baerbock as Angela Merkel's successor as chancellor seemed to falter this summer over a series of gaffes.

Now hoping to seize on the urgency of the climate issue in many voters' minds, the Greens chose the central city of Hildesheim to launch the "hot phase" on the hustings, as it is known in Germany, ahead of the Sept 26 poll. "A lot is at stake with this election" after 16 years of Merkel at the helm, Baerbock told a crowd assembled on the historic town square. "It's about our future," said Baerbock, stressing that the Greens were ready "to shape it".

Western Germany last month experienced devastating floods that left at least 190 people dead and washed away billions of euros in housing, businesses and public infra-

Zambians to vote in tense polls as economy struggles

LUSAKA: Zambians will decide tomorrow whether to re-elect President Edgar Lungu after the country's worst economic performance in decades and a crack-down on dissent that has raised fears of unrest in the southern African country. His main rival, in what polls suggest is a close election race, is 59-year-old Hakainde



STOCKHOLM: Supporters of the People's Mojahedin of Iran Organization protest outside the district court yesterday on the first day of the trial of an Iranian man for "war crimes and murder". —AFP

the three-day case is expected in April 2022.

The allegations were brought to the attention of the Swedish authorities by a group of 30 complainants, as well as justice campaigner and former political prisoner Iraj Mesdaghi. After compiling an evidence dossier of "several thousand pages" on Noury, Mesdaghi set about luring the former prison official to the Nordic country - where he has family members - with the promise of a luxury cruise. Noury was arrested as he stepped onto Swedish soil.

Sweden's principle of universal jurisdiction means that its courts can try a person on serious charges such as murder or war crimes regardless of where the alleged offences took place. "This is the first time that one of the persecutors has been held accountable in another country," Mesdaghi told AFP.

Meanwhile thousands of German holidaymakers recently returned from Greece after witnessing first-hand raging forest fires. An alarming UN report said this week that such catastrophes would grow more frequent as global warming is occurring far more quickly than previously forecast.

The Greens, who have been warning of the dangerous impact of fossil fuel emissions since their founding four decades ago, have laid out a "climate protection now" plan as part of their platform. It includes a proposal to create a "super ministry" for the environment with the power to veto government policies deemed potentially harmful. This year is the first time the Green party, in opposition since 2005, has fielded a candidate to lead the country. In April, its ambition seemed realistic when it tapped Baerbock, an energetic 40-year-old MP, as their standard bearer. For weeks the party was leading the polls ahead of Merkel's conservative CDU-CSU alliance, which was hobbled by infighting. But a failure by Baerbock to declare a pay bonus, inaccuracies on her CV and plagiarism allegations did lasting damage to her credibility and shaved several points off their support. Currently the CDU-CSU is leading the Greens by around a 10-point margin, putting their candidate Armin Laschet in pole position to become Germany's next chancellor after Merkel retires this year. —AFP

Hichilema, making his sixth run for the presidency.

Hichilema has already narrowly lost to Lungu twice: In a 2015 by-election after the death of ex-president Michael Sata and then in general polls the following year. Lungu deployed the army following clashes between the rival supporters in the run-up to presidential and parliamentary polls, a move critics denounced as a tactic to intimidate opposition voters.

Analysts say the result of the closely fought election will set the tone for investment in the copper-rich southern African nation, where more than half of its 17 million people live in poverty. Surveys suggest economic hardship has eroded support for Lungu, accused of borrowing unsustainably to finance flashy infrastructure proj-

'Extremely serious' COVID crisis in French overseas territories

PARIS: France's government yesterday warned of an "extremely serious" COVID-19 crisis in the country's overseas territories, especially in the Caribbean, saying that infection rates had climbed to levels unprecedented on the mainland. Martinique tightened a lockdown and told tourists to leave while similar measures were also expected on the nearby French overseas territory of Guadeloupe, a huge blow to the Caribbean islands at the height of the summer season.

While well over half of people in mainland France have now received two vaccination doses, rates in its overseas territories, from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, have lagged well behind. "The situation is extremely serious," French Overseas Territories Minister Sebastien Lecornu told AFP before heading on a crisis visit to the French Caribbean, where he was due to be joined by Health Minister Olivier Veran.

"There are infection rates that have never been seen not just in these territories but all of France," he said. "The Delta variant is more contagious and is hitting a population that is not well-protected" by vaccinations, he added. Authorities on Martinique late Monday announced that all non-essential shops would now be closed, as well as hotels and holiday rentals, adding that tourists should leave. Beaches would also be closed and people can only go within a one-kilometer radius of their homes.

There are now 1,200 cases per 100,000 inhabitants on Martinique, while only 22 percent of the population have received even a first vaccine dose. "These rules are strict and they will be lifted as soon as the health situation allows it," the top official of Martinique, Stanislas Cazelles, told reporters in its main city of Fort-de-France.

Guadeloupe is under less rigid restrictions than Martinique, but Lecornu indicated that he would discuss the need to put the island into a fuller lockdown. "We will need to apply braking measures, there is an urgency," he said, adding that the island now had 1,700 cases per 100,000 inhabitants. Veran had earlier this week made a video plea on social media for medical workers in mainland France to show "national solidarity" and volunteer to help stretched medical teams on the islands. Some 240 volunteers were due to leave yesterday.

In the Pacific territory of French Polynesia, authorities meanwhile announced a curfew from 9:00 pm to deal with rising cases. Tensions have been raised after a wedding party at a restaurant was attended by hundreds of people - including top local figures - in defiance of existing rules and without wearing masks. —AFP

ects, as living costs soared.

In the capital Lusaka, Lungu's green Patriotic Front (PF) party manifestos have dominated billboards lining newly built freeways and overpass bridges. They trumpet "achievements" in construction, agriculture and youth employment. Opposition voters, whose party color is red, are keeping a low profile in Lusaka, traditionally a PF stronghold.

Some of them even wear green, the ruling party's color, to avoid trouble - known as the "watermelon tactic". "We do not feel that safe...there is so much intimidation," said UPND supporter William Njombo, a 42-year-old pastor volunteering at the party's headquarters. —AFP

International

Gold rush ends for smugglers as foreign troops leave Afghanistan

Markets now stuffed with cheap goods from China and Southeast Asia

PESHAWAR: Once brimming with combat boots, flak jackets and other war paraphernalia, the smugglers' markets in Pakistan are being forced to rethink their business model as foreign troops exit Afghanistan and contraband dries up. The United States is set to wrap up its military presence in Afghanistan by the end of this month, the end of a campaign that saw hundreds of billions spent - often with little accounting.

Along the Afghan border after 2001, smugglers' markets mushroomed in Pakistan, offering military gadgets, clothing and luxury goods meant for American bases and compounds. It was the latest chapter in a long history of smuggling - and foreign invasions - in the area. For centuries, the mountain passes along the present-day Pakistan-Afghanistan border were a lifeline for armies, traders and smugglers moving between central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

But in recent years, vendors at the bazaars say they have suffered successive blows that have severed the pipeline of smuggled goods that flowed freely into Pakistan for years. "This market was

famous for American and NATO goods and was crowded with customers," said Mehboob Khan, a shopkeeper at Sitara market in the northwestern frontier city of Peshawar. "Now the border is strictly closed and those goods can't reach here, which has badly affected business."

Pakistan's fencing and sealing of hundreds of kilometers of the border in recent years, and the rapid departure of foreign troops has led to dwindling supplies. Instead of night-vision goggles and high-quality ammo vests, the markets are now stuffed with cheap goods from China and Southeast Asia. "Those were good days, extremely good days," said Khan as he reminisced about the post-9/11 bonanza for smugglers after US-led forces invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban. "This market used to be crowded... Now it's empty. No public and no customers."

War on the border

For years, Pakistan served as one of the logistical nerve centers for the war in Afghanistan. Countless containers filled with supplies arrived at the Arabian Sea

port of Karachi to be trucked across the country to Afghanistan. Along the way, it was common for the occasional shipment to go missing or arrive in Afghanistan a bit lighter. On the other side of the border, goods were similarly looted or lifted from the battlefield and taken across to Pakistan.

Thanks to the porous border with Afghanistan, Pakistan has long been a magnet for smuggled products - from luxury vehicles to household goods. They have helped black market businesses thrive in a country with some of the lowest tax collection rates in the world. With little interference from Pakistani law enforcement, the border markets flourished, but not all were happy.

In the fiercely conservative northwest - where most women wear burqas and hardline Islamist groups have long held sway over society - the markets gained notoriety for also selling pornography and knock-off Viagra, drawing fire from groups such as the Taliban. But that did little to discourage shoppers - including those who drove for hours to peruse the selection in the bazaars.



PESHAWAR: In this picture taken on July 14, 2021, people visit the Sitara market in the Karkhano area. — AFP

"Last time, we found NATO stuff here... US Army bags and shoes were available here. But now that stuff is not here, just local stuff," said Muhammad Afan, who travelled six hours by road to visit Sitara market. He complained that prices had increased tenfold at most shops.

The Taliban's sweeping offensives across Afghanistan in recent months have

also not helped, leading to frequent border closures that choked off what little products were still able to make it to Pakistan. "(Customers) aren't visiting us anymore," said Zabihullah, an Afghan shopkeeper born in Peshawar. "Earlier, NATO supply lines were ongoing... container after container. Now, all that has stopped." — AFP

HK union disbands as city set to adopt anti-sanctions law

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's largest union announced it decided to disband yesterday citing "huge pressure" as authorities stamp out the city's democracy movement and impose political orthodoxy on the finance hub. Founded in 1973, the Professional Teachers' Union (PTU) was the city's single largest union with some 95,000 members and was a prominent player in the democracy movement.

"After discussions, the executive committee unanimously decided to disband the union," Fung Wai-wah, PTU president, told reporters, describing the decision as "heart-wrenching". "The social and political environment has quickly changed in recent years, we are under huge pressure. We can't find a way to resolve the crisis we are now facing," he added.

China has cracked down on its opponents since huge and often violent democracy protests convulsed the

city two years ago. A sweeping security law has criminalized much dissent while an official campaign has been launched to purge the city of those deemed unpatriotic. The PTU was one of the more moderate voices within the democracy movement - often shunned by more radical forces who felt it was too soft on the government.

But it still came under sustained attack by local and Chinese authorities who believe teachers played a key role in motivating Hong Kong's youth to hit the streets in huge numbers two years ago. Last month, multiple Chinese state media outlets ran articles criticizing the union as "a malignant tumor that must be removed". Hours later, Hong Kong's education bureau said it was severing ties with the union, saying it had become "no different from a political body".

City leader Carrie Lam later accused the union of allowing "anti-government and anti-Beijing senti-



HONG KONG: Representatives of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union hold a press conference yesterday to announce it has decided to disband. — AFP

ments" into classrooms and campuses. Since Beijing imposed its national security law just over a year ago more than 30 political and professional groups have disbanded to avoid legal risks according to an AFP tally. More than 120 opposition leaders and activists have been arrested by a new national security police unit. Some 60 have been charged, most of them denied bail.

Meanwhile, China's anti-sanctions law will be implemented in some form in Hong Kong, the city's leader confirmed yesterday, a move that will add fresh regulatory pressure on international companies in the finance hub. Beijing's rubberstamp legislature passed the law in June in response to Western penalties that were imposed following crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. — AFP

China cases rise as Delta variant challenges Beijing

BEIJING: China's coronavirus cases hit a seven-month high yesterday, after a cluster at a test site helped drive up numbers as the Delta variant challenges Beijing's grip on the pandemic. State media has described the current outbreak - which has sparked local lockdowns, mass testing and travel restrictions - as the most severe since the virus emerged in the central city of Wuhan.

Authorities had brought domestic infections down to virtually zero, allowing economic activity to rebound albeit with tight border restrictions. But now, cases are rising. Yesterday, Chinese health authorities reported 143 new coronavirus infections - 108 of

them locally transmitted. Dozens of cases in recent days have been linked to a COVID-19 testing site in eastern Yangzhou city.

In a sign of the anxiety over even relatively minor outbreaks, several officials have been issued warnings for mishandling mass testing, which city authorities said allowed the virus to spread. Yangzhou city authorities said "a small number of party members and cadres have yet to perform their duties properly".

The city of about 4.6 million people has so far conducted five rounds of widespread testing, collecting 1.6 million samples in an attempt to stamp out the spread. The latest surge started after infections among airport cleaners in neighboring Nanjing city sparked a chain of cases across the country.

Yesterday's numbers are the highest since January, when the country logged 144 new cases and 126 domestic infections, mostly in the northern regions. Authorities are now working to shore up confidence that the latest resurgence is controllable. "We have successfully contained the epidemic in Guangzhou, and the



NANTONG, China: This photo taken on Aug 8, 2021 shows a medical worker taking a swab sample for COVID-19 from an elderly resident at her home in the eastern Jiangsu province. — AFP

epidemic in Nanjing is gradually being put under control," the official Xinhua news agency cited infectious diseases specialist Zhang Wenhong as saying. — AFP

Bangladesh begins COVID jabs for Rohingya refugees

KUTUPALONG, Bangladesh: Bangladesh began vaccinating yesterday Rohingya refugees living in congested camps as the impoverished South Asian nation battles a record surge in coronavirus cases. Health officials say 2,600 COVID-19 cases and 29 deaths have been recorded in the camps housing 850,000 Rohingya but many experts say this is likely a gross underestimate. The initial inoculation phase will see around 48,000 refugees aged over 55 get Chinese-made Sinopharm shots in the coming three days, local health chief Mahabur Rahman told AFP.

At Kutupalong, the largest refugee settlement home to more than 600,000 people, Rohingyas including many elderly people queued up to get their shots from health workers in protective suits. "We are scared of corona. We heard it would be good for us if we get vaccinated, that's why I came here today," said 60-year-old grandmother Rahima Khatun. "We need the vaccine to live through the current crisis. It will save us from the disease everyone is worried about," said Mohammad Zafar, an elderly man.

Officials said they conducted a massive awareness campaign in the camps with volunteers going door to door among the flimsy shacks where the refugees live. Shamsud Douza, Bangladesh's deputy refugee commissioner, told AFP that a vaccination drive would also begin this week for 18,000 Rohingya controversially relocated to an island in the Bay of Bengal. — AFP



BANGKOK: Pro-democracy protesters salute during a car mob protest yesterday calling for the resignation of Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha over the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis. — AFP

Police fire rubber bullets, tear gas at Bangkok protest

BANGKOK: Riot police fired rubber bullets and tear gas at protesters in Bangkok yesterday as hundreds rallied for democratic reform and against the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Demonstrators defied a ban on public gatherings as Thailand tries to quash its worst virus outbreak so far, with new cases hovering around the 20,000 mark daily. The slow start to the coronavirus vaccination program in Thailand and economic pain from restrictions and business closures has heaped pressure on Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha's government.

Hundreds of protesters wove their way through Bangkok streets on motorbikes and in cars and by early evening there were clashes. A police traffic booth was set ablaze and some demonstrators threw firecrackers and fireworks at police, who responded by firing water cannon, rubber bullets and tear gas. Protesters defaced a logo of Sino-Thai Engineering and Construction - a company with links to Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul - with pig's blood.

They also targeted the logo of King Power, a major duty free company, over its perceived support for the government. "The authoritarian Prayut Chan-O-Cha government continues to seek, allocate, and distribute benefits for the ruling class, allowing people to get sick and die on their own fate," student activist Benja Apan told the rally. Ahead of the protest, police warned demonstrators not to jeopardize public health by violating coronavirus restrictions. — AFP

News in brief

Kim's sis slams 'perfidious' Seoul

SEOUL: The influential sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called Seoul authorities "perfidious" yesterday over the South's joint military exercises with the United States, and demanded Washington withdraw its forces from the peninsula. Kim Yo Jong - a key adviser to her brother - condemned South Korea for holding "dangerous" joint military drills with the United States this month, which the North has long considered rehearsals for invasion. In an unusually explicit comment from a North Korean official - Pyongyang usually restricts itself to ambiguous calls for the US to abandon its "hostile policy" - she demanded Washington pull out its forces from the peninsula. — AFP

China wants Lithuanian envoy out

BEIJING: China yesterday demanded Lithuania recall its envoy to Beijing, after Vilnius allowed Taiwan to set up an office under its own name in a move seen as provocative by the Chinese government. The self-ruled island, which China considers part of its territory, last month said it was setting up a representative office in Vilnius under the name "Taiwan" as opposed to "Taipei", an act interpreted by Beijing as a diplomatic insult. An outraged Chinese foreign ministry yesterday said it had "demanded the Lithuanian Government recall its ambassador to China" and would also withdraw the Chinese envoy to Lithuania. — AFP

Japan apologizes over death

TOKYO: Japan yesterday apologized for the death of a Sri Lankan woman in immigration detention and pledged to reform conditions in the system. Justice Minister Yoko Kamikawa said a report on the March death of 33-year-old Wishma Sandamali concluded she received inadequate treatment as her health deteriorated. Sandamali was detained for overstaying her visa after seeking police protection, reportedly to escape an abusive relationship. Sandamali's family has been in Japan campaigning for information about her death, and said the government's announcements were not enough. — AFP

Canadian's death sentence upheld

BEIJING: A Chinese court yesterday upheld the death sentence passed on a Canadian citizen for drug smuggling - one of a number of legal cases to severely damage relations between Ottawa and Beijing. Robert Lloyd Schellenberg was originally sentenced to 15 years in prison in late 2018, but that was changed to the death penalty just months after a diplomatic rift exploded between Ottawa and Beijing over the detention of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou. A ruling was also expected today in the case of Michael Spavor, the Canadian ambassador said, one of two Canadians detained by China for espionage in the wake of Meng's arrest in Canada. — AFP

Cambodia dam destroyed livelihoods

PHNOM PENH: A massive Chinese-financed dam in Cambodia has "washed away the livelihoods" of tens of thousands of villagers while falling short of promised energy production, Human Rights Watch said yesterday. The 400-megawatt Lower Sesan 2 dam in the kingdom's northeast has sparked controversy since long before its Dec 2018 launch. Fisheries experts had warned that damming the confluence of the Sesan and Srepok rivers - two major tributaries of the resource-rich Mekong river - would threaten fish stocks crucial to millions living along the Mekong's floodplains. — AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2021

US Democrats unveil massive \$3.5 trillion spending blueprint

'Most consequential' US social spending plan since the 1930s

WASHINGTON: US lawmakers laid out a \$3.5 trillion budget framework, calling it the "most consequential" social spending plan since the 1930s, and launching what are expected to be tough congressional negotiations over the programs it covers. The 10-year budget blueprint pushes Congress towards the next step in President Joe Biden's ambitious vision for his first term in office, following on the heels of the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure plan, which the Senate was expected to approve later in a vote before the measure is sent to the House of Representatives.

The dollar amount is staggering, almost matching the size of Germany's economy in 2020. The budget resolution "will be the most consequential piece of legislation for working people, the elderly, the children, the sick and the poor since FDR (President Franklin Delano Roosevelt) and the New Deal of the 1930s," said independent Senator Bernie Sanders, chair of the Budget Committee.

"It will also put the US in a global leadership position to combat climate change and make our planet healthy and habitable for future generations," he wrote. The spending plan published

Monday includes funding for climate measures, new investments in infrastructure including items left out of the targeted Senate package, residency status for millions of migrant workers, and two years paid tuition at public universities.

Senators have until September 15 to submit their amendments. The Democratic majority in Congress plans to pass the package through a mechanism known as "reconciliation" which will allow them to adopt the final text by a simple majority in the Senate, without votes from Republicans who are fiercely opposed to it. Congress must approve the final spending bills by September 30 to prevent a government shutdown, or extend the current year's budget into the new fiscal year while debate continues.

But while Senate Democrats are ready to give the green light to the budget resolution in a procedural vote as early as this week, moderates in the party have expressed strong reservations about the total price tag, which means tough negotiations are likely.

Hitting the debt limit

Crucially, the resolution does not include an increase in the US federal

debt ceiling. This could mean another big battle in Congress to avoid default, as the Democrats will need Republicans to raise the borrowing limit, but opposition leaders have so far said they are against it. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Monday issued yet another appeal to lawmakers to take action, noting that "The vast majority of the debt subject to the debt limit was accrued prior to the Administration taking office."

Congress suspended the debt limit in 2019, but the two-year suspension lapsed July 31, resetting the cap at \$28 trillion, and forcing Treasury to begin taking "extraordinary measures" to remain under the ceiling and continue funding government operations. But those measures only buy Treasury a few weeks before it runs out of cash.

The US national debt and deficit have soared during the COVID-19 pandemic after Washington approved three massive spending bills aimed at lessening the damage from its economic impacts.

In recent years, including three times during the presidency of Donald Trump, "Democrats and Republicans came together to do their duty," Yellen said in a statement. "Congress should do so



WASHINGTON: Senator Cynthia Lummis listens while Senator Patrick J. Toomey speaks during a press conference on crypto currency legislation on Capitol Hill as the Senate moves toward a vote on infrastructure funding Monday in Washington, DC. — AFP

again now by increasing or suspending the debt limit on a bipartisan basis."

She noted that raising the ceiling on borrowing does not authorize new spending, but simply allows Treasury to finance actions already approved by the legislature. Raising the debt ceiling has

been a contentious issue in Congress for the past several years, and a 2011 standoff caused the United States to lose the coveted AAA debt rating. Yellen warned that failing to make debt payments "would cause irreparable harm to the US economy." —AFP

CBK launches two economic awards for 2021

KUWAIT: Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel, Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Institute of Banking Studies, announced the launch of the third round of the "Kuwaiti Economic Researcher Award," addressed to Kuwaiti researchers, and the second round of the "Kuwaiti Economic Student Award," addressed to undergraduate and graduate students. The awards promote scientific research in the economic and banking fields through motivating and encouraging national cadres to enhance their research competence according to high scientific standards in banking and finance fields. The governor noted that these annual awards offered by the CBK and Kuwaiti banks and managed by the Kuwait Institute for Banking Studies (KIBS) is part of CBK's and Kuwaiti banks' strategic pursuit to uphold their social responsibility and entrench scientific methodology for



Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel

addressing banking and finance issues. Ultimately, this would cultivate specialized and highly qualified national cadres in all aspects of the Kuwaiti banking and financial sector.

Dr Al-Hashel added that the success of the Kuwaiti Economic Researcher Award in its first and second rounds, as well as the success of the Kuwaiti Economic Student Award in its first round, is nothing but a reflection of the importance of instilling a culture of scientific research among researchers and students, highlighting the distinguished among them and motivating them to develop solutions to improve the status of banking and financial work in Kuwait.

Dr Al-Hashel explained that a judges panel comprising local and



international experts will review and select the best research according to academic and scientific criteria. The winner of the Kuwaiti Economic Researcher Award will receive an award of KD10,000, while an award of KD5,000 will be allocated to the Kuwaiti Economic Student Award.

A certificate of merit and a commemorative gift will be presented to the winners, and their research papers would be printed, published and distributed to serve as a reference for those wishing to benefit from sound research. The Institute of Banking Studies will manage the award procedures, including receiving the

research papers, ensuring that they comply with criteria, appointing judging panel, documenting the panel's decisions, and announcing the results.

The governor concluded by noting that the details of the awards, conditions for applying, details on means of submission of research work, and dates for receipt of applications are published on the website of Kafa's programs. Those wishing to apply, as well as others interested, may find the details regarding the 2021 awards and submit their application forms starting from August 10, 2021 until October 31, 2021 through the website www.kafaakw.org

Lee Jae-yong: Paroled leader of S Korea's biggest business

SEOUL: The life of soon-to-be-released Samsung chief and South Korean billionaire Lee Jae-yong epitomizes the privileges, power and perils of the super-rich in the world's 12th-largest economy, a country sometimes dubbed the "Republic of Samsung". Best known internationally as one of the world's largest smartphone and chipmakers via flagship subsidiary Samsung Electronics, at home the wider group pervades every facet of life—and even death—from homebuilding to funeral parlors via health care and theme parks.

Samsung is by far the largest of the chaebols, the sprawling family-controlled conglomerates that drove the South's transformation from war-ravaged ruin to a leading world economy. But chaebols are criticized for stifling innovation and competition, while family feuds and criminal charges—often related to tax evasion or bribery—regularly make headlines.

Lee, 53, is serving a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence for embezzlement, bribery and other offences in the corruption scandal that brought down former president Park Geun-hye.

The justice ministry announced Monday he had been paroled and would be released later this week, citing concerns over the coronavirus

pandemic's impact on the economy. But Lee's separate trial continues over alleged stock manipulation that effectively eased his path to take control of the family conglomerate.

"Lee Jae-yong, more than anyone else, symbolizes the inequality of Korean society," Song Won-keun, an economics professor at Gyeongsang National University, told AFP. "We are seeing someone whose capabilities are yet to be proven taking control over the country's biggest company, using criminal tactics, just because his father was the chairman of the firm."

'Crown prince'

Lee was born in 1968, the eldest son of Lee Kun-hee, the Samsung Electronics chairman who died in October 2020 after being hospitalized for years. The chaebols have long been accused of murky political connections, and analysts say the father's arranged marriage to Hong Ra-hee—a daughter of a former justice minister, who has since assembled a world-class art collection—cemented Samsung's rise to behemoth status.

Their son, often dubbed the firm's "crown prince", studied Asian history at South Korea's top Seoul National University before studying business at Japan's elite Keio University and later



SEOUL: This file photo taken on January 21, 2017 shows a protester carrying a placard showing an image of Samsung's then-heir Lee Jae-yong during an anti-government protest in Seoul. —AFP

Harvard. His youngest sister, Yoon-hyung, took her own life in her New York apartment in 2005, at the age of 26. Lee's late father is credited with transforming a once-obscure manufacturer of low-quality consumer electronics into a global powerhouse and one of the world's top smartphone makers.

He left assets worth an estimated 22 trillion won (\$19.2 billion) when he died last year, and one of the world's largest inheritance tax bills, but is generally not seen as having passed on his management prowess. Lee Jae-yong is now ranked 188th among the world's richest by Forbes, worth \$12.3 billion, but his so-called e-Samsung venture of the

early 2000s—a group of e-commerce businesses—was shut down after racking up around 20 billion won in losses.

Nonetheless he was made vice-chairman of Samsung Electronics in 2012. And his imprisonment has been no barrier to the firm's performance—it announced a surge of more than 70 percent in second-quarter profits last month, with coronavirus-driven working from home boosting demand for devices using its memory chips. "So far, he is basically an heir," said Vladimir Tikhonov, a professor of Korean Studies at the University of Oslo. "He inherited South Korea's biggest corporation without having done much to improve it." —AFP

Philippine economy rebounds in Q2 but faces 'speed bumps'

MANILA: The Philippine economy grew in the second quarter at its fastest pace in more than three decades, but an official warned yesterday of "speed bumps" as coronavirus restrictions were tightened to combat surging infections. Gross domestic product expanded 11.8 percent on-year, the statistics agency said, after five straight quarters of contraction.

The increase—the best since the last three months of 1988 — was driven by a rebound in construction activity and consumer spending. But it came off a 17 percent slump in the same period last year when the country endured its first crippling lockdown that wiped out millions of jobs.



MANILA, Philippines: File photo taken on August 6, 2021 shows a policeman checking motorists' documents as they cross near Rizal province into Metro Manila. —AFP

"The robust performance is driven by more than just base effects—it is the result of a better balance between addressing COVID-19 and the need to restore jobs and incomes of the people," Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Chua told a briefing. But Chua warned hopes for "continuous positive growth" could be erased by the current two-week lockdown in the national capital region—which accounts for a third of the economy—and other areas aimed at slowing the spread of the hyper-contagious Delta variant.

"There are speed bumps given the ECQ (enhanced community quarantine) in Metro Manila and other parts of the country," Chua said. "The longer we have ECQ then the higher the risk that we may not achieve our target." The tightened restrictions, which include a ban on restaurant dining and an eight-hour nighttime curfew, are expected to cost the Philippine economy about \$3 billion a week in lost output.

The second quarter—which overlapped another lockdown in April—contracted 1.3 percent from the first three months of the year, the data showed. ING senior economist Nicholas Mapa predicted "a similar setback" in the third quarter because of reduced mobility. The number of coronavirus infections in the Philippines has exceeded 1.6 million—the second-highest caseload in Southeast Asia. —AFP

Business

Pharmaceutical firms rake in billions with COVID jabs

Pfizer earns more than its competitors, raking in \$10.8bn in H1



PARIS: This combination of file pictures shows vials of the AstraZeneca vaccine, Johnson & Johnson vaccine, Moderna vials and Pfizer BioNTech vaccine.

PARIS: COVID vaccines have brought billions of dollars to the coffers of pharmaceutical companies. Germany's BioNTech, maker with partner Pfizer of the pioneering mRNA jab, raised its vaccine revenue forecast for 2021 in its latest earnings report on Monday.

Here are the numbers for the companies that publish financial results:

Biggest winners: Pfizer and BioNTech

US firm Pfizer and BioNTech got a headstart over rivals as they were the first in the western world to announce positive results from clinical trials of their vaccine last year. They were also first to get authorization from US and European Union regulators to sell their shot.

Pfizer has earned more than its competitors, raking in \$10.8 billion (9.2 billion euros) in the first half of this year. The US company has raised its outlook for 2021, expecting to make \$33.5 billion in sales for the full year. BioNTech reported yesterday revenues of \$7.3 billion euros in the first half. Unlike its larger partner, the company's only product on sale is the coronavirus vaccine.

BioNTech expects vaccine revenues to reach 15.9 billion euros for the full year, up from a previous estimate of 9.8 billion euros.

Moderna the other mRNA champion

US startup Moderna is the only other firm to have produced an authorized mRNA vaccine so far. Messenger RNA technology works by providing human cells with the genetic instructions to make a surface protein of the coronavirus, which trains the immune system to recognize the real virus.

Like BioNTech, the company's only product in the market is the COVID vaccine. The vaccine requires two shots taken weeks apart. Moderna reported turnover of \$5.9 billion in the first six months of the year. It expects to make \$20 billion in revenues thanks to the vaccine this year.

AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson trail

British pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca and US firm Johnson & Johnson had their vaccines approved by the EU later than their rivals. AstraZeneca's vaccine is

one of the world's leading vaccines and has been vital in the UK's speedy vaccination drive-which enabled England's economy to fully reopen this month. But it has not been approved by US drug regulators.

Johnson & Johnson's vaccine-made by Janssen, its Belgian subsidiary-has the advantage of being administered with one shot instead of two like those of its rivals. AstraZeneca and J&J do not use mRNA technology.

They both made more traditional viral vector vaccines, which use genetically-engineered version of a common-cold causing adenovirus as a "vector" to shuttle genetic instructions into human cells. The two companies also vowed to sell their vaccines at cost during the pandemic, meaning they would not earn profits from them. They are cheaper than the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna jabs, which reflects in their revenues. AstraZeneca's COVID jab generated \$1.2 billion in sales in the first six months of the year. J&J reported \$264 million in sales and expects to make \$2.5 billion for the full year. AstraZeneca has not provided a detailed full-year estimate. — AFP

Enjoy smoother videos with 120Hz Huawei FullView display

KUWAIT: Huawei is known for having innovative products and that includes some of the best tablets to consumers and professionals. With the Huawei MatePad series, it brought a new level of flagship products that help bring productivity and entertainment into focus. Enter the new Huawei MatePad 11, a tablet that brings all of Huawei's efforts in bringing a top-of-the-line consumer tablet fit for students and those wanting a portable workplace device that can handle daily tasks. With a gorgeous 120Hz Huawei FullView Display, a Super Device experience and multiple connectivity options, it's a tablet that's both form and function perfected.

See smoother visual with the 120Hz Huawei FullView Display

The Huawei MatePad 11 is the first Huawei tablet to feature a 120Hz high refresh rate display. This doesn't just translate to smoother viewing, but also a more responsive touch control along with low-latency handwriting input. Along with that, users can now play games that support high FPS mode that means improved visuals and even better feedback when using the touch controls.



It comes with a 10.95-inch FullView Display that has a 16:10 aspect ratio with an 86% screen-to-body ratio as well as 7mm slim bezels that provides a more balanced look. What's more, the HUAWEI MatePad 11 has the TÜV Rheinland Low Blue Light and Flicker Free certifications, which attest to its ability to minimize the screen's impact on the eyes, delivering all-around eye protection for users.

The Huawei MatePad 11 is also an integral part of the Super Device - Smart Office experience as it can provide a seamless connection between compatible devices like the Huawei MateView and the Huawei MateBook D15. Connecting multiple devices is easier and more intuitive than ever on the Huawei MatePad 11. The Control Panel allows users to simply drag an icon representing a device to another to establish a connection.

Users are able to switch between work and personal through these three devices. Connect the Huawei MatePad 11 to the Huawei MateView and watch favorite movies and then connect the Huawei MateBook D15 to the monitor via a wired connection to see the PC's desktop on a larger perspective. A connected keyboard and mouse on the Huawei MateView will also allow users to control both the tablet and keyboard without the need to manually turn on a switch. The Huawei MatePad 11 supports the new tablet-PC Multi-screen Collaboration. Not only does it break down barriers between different devices, but it allows for an interconnected experience and create a Super Device for themselves.

It brings three modes that users can utilize for improved productivity: Mirror mode allows content

from the laptop to be mirrored on the tablet and can function as an input device for signing documents and creating illustrations. Extend mode lets the tablet function as an external secondary display and lastly Collaboration mode lets users transfer information between tablet and PC wirelessly using a simple drag-and-drop gesture. Top tier wireless connectivity with the independent Bluetooth antenna and Wi-Fi 6. Of course, a reliable connection is needed for users to stay productive. The Huawei MatePad 11 comes with an independent Bluetooth antenna to ensure that accessories paired to the tablet stay connected. Along with that, the Huawei MatePad 11 brings support for Wi-Fi 6 that brings 80 MHz of bandwidth plus a maximum theoretical throughput speed of 1.2Gbps.

Write and draw with ease using the M-Pencil (2nd Generation)

Featuring a new hexagonal design inspired by wooden pencils, the 2nd generation Huawei M-Pencil beautifully designed, weighing just 16g and measuring 160mm long to deliver a more comfortable grip and pleasant writing experience. Additionally, the new stylus also features a new high-precision pressure strain gauge that is resistant to temperature changes that may cause the stylus to drift. This pressure strain gauge also makes the stylus more reliable than ever, capable of responding to 0.4g of force within 1ms. With system-level free scribble, users can use the M-Pencil to write on text boxes, notes, and any other text on the Huawei MatePad 11. Using advanced algorithms, handwriting is converted into readable text that can be recognized by the system and lets users use the tablet much like a real notebook. The Huawei M-Pencil also features a redesigned touch experience. Touch IC and a wrap-around sensor provide 360° invisible touch control where users can double-tap the barrel to switch between brushes. The 'double tap to switch' function is also customizable to be used on other functions.

A distinctive ID design

Much like its other devices, the Huawei MatePad 11 embodies the beauty of symmetry, order and modern aesthetics. The tablet perfectly symmetrical starting from its sides to its speaker grille and all the way to its camera module. There's also a micro-curved frame that make the device look thinner, making it easy to hold on the hand that also provides a comfortable grip.

Hear more with four speakers

Despite the thin and light design, the Huawei MatePad 11 is able to utilize four huge amplitude speakers that enable the tablet to output sounds as loud as 78.6dB. The two speakers on either side of the tablet are augmented by virtualization algorithms to create a wide soundstage, allowing users to perceive the difference in distance. Huawei has also been working closely with Harman Kardon, commissioning the famed audio brand's veteran Golden Ears acoustic engineers to calibrate and optimize the audio output of the Huawei MatePad 11.

Final verdict

In a nutshell, the Huawei MatePad 11 ticks all the boxes when looking for the best 11-inch tablet: some of the best visuals on its 120Hz display, a superb Smart Office - Super Device experience, excellent connectivity with Wi-Fi 6 and Harman Kardon-tuned speakers. This easily makes it one of the best tablets that users can buy at the moment.

Meta Description: The Huawei MatePad 11 brings super smooth visual with the 120Hz Huawei FullView Display and an innovative Super Device experience.

The top US diplomat's speech reflects what President Joe Biden's administration calls a "foreign policy for the middle class" with a focus on competitiveness at home and abroad and a winding down of costly military commitments. Blinken toured an engineering laboratory at the University of Maryland on the outskirts of Washington where noisy 3D printers churned out prototypes for new products.

"The Chinese and Russian governments, among others, are making the argument in public and in private that the United States is in decline so it's better to cast your lot with their authoritarian visions for the world than with our democratic one," Blinken said at the university's



DUBAI: Joy Alukkas receives the award from Laila Mohammed Suhail in the presence of John Paul Alukkas at a function.

Joyalukkas wins coveted RetailME ICONS award

DUBAI: Joyalukkas, the world's favorite jeweler, was recently awarded the coveted RetailME ICONS award as an acknowledgement of their pioneering leadership in the business of retail in MENA. Joy Alukkas, Chairman, of Joyalukkas Group, received the award from Laila Mohammed Suhail, CEO - Alliance and Partnership, Dubai Department of Tourism & Commerce Marketing in the presence of John Paul Alukkas, Managing Director, Joyalukkas Jewellery - International Operations in a glittering function in Dubai.

According to Joy Alukkas, this is yet another recognition for the world's favorite honor from the region's leading media that is exclusively dedicated for the retail industry. "Awards are a recognition for the efforts we put in our business and I am happy to note that we have

been bestowed with this great honor. As I understand, there were stringent guidelines in the selection process and the awardees were selected based on nominations received, jury scoring and editorial selection," said Joy Alukkas. According to a note from the award organizers, the retailers who have won have demonstrated great leadership with clear examples of innovation, proven their legacy and expanded their operations. The aim behind the award function is to let the world know who the top retailers in the region are. It is also noted, by the organizers, that a Pioneer is someone who sees potential builds the courage to lay out the foundation with the grit to explore and push boundaries and Joyalukkas has been recognized in this category.

"We always strive to provide an unmatched retail experience to our valued customers and this award reinforces our commitment. All our retail showrooms are equipped to provide a distinct experience that makes our customers experience our wide range of exquisite gold and diamond jewelry leading to an experience that transcends normal customer satisfaction. We owe this recognition to our valued customers, our business associates and the entire team," Joy pointed out after receiving the award.



NEW YORK: People walk past a Nike store in Midtown New York Monday. Stock markets were mostly higher yesterday as hopes for the long-term global outlook offset concern about the fast-spreading Delta variant. — AFP

Stocks mostly higher as recovery hopes offset virus, Fed woes

NEW YORK: European and Asian stock markets mostly rose yesterday as hopes for the long-term global outlook offset concern about the fast-spreading Delta variant and expectations that the Federal Reserve will soon begin withdrawing its vast financial support. Oil prices recovered from heavy losses on Monday that had been attributed to fears about the impact on demand of new coronavirus lockdowns.

The dollar hit a four-month high against the euro on expectations of tighter monetary policy from the Fed. "A stronger dollar theme is starting to emerge given the recovery story in the US and that might be a short-term drag for crude prices," said Edward Moya, market ana-

lyst at OANDA trading group. While vaccinations are being rolled out, infection rates continue to climb around the world, forcing some governments-particularly China and Australia-to impose fresh lockdowns and other containment measures. That has led some observers to re-evaluate the outlook for growth. However, at the same time, the US recovery appears to be on track, with the economy adding more than 1.8 million jobs in June and July and some of the world's top companies reporting healthy earnings.

With inflation hitting multi-year highs, the Fed is coming under pressure to rein in prices by tapering the ultra-loose monetary policies put in place at the start of the pandemic, with observers betting on a rise in interest rates in late 2022. "Investors should understand that a potential strength in inflation may force the Fed to speed up its timeline for tapering its massive bond purchases, which have helped stimulate the US economy since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic," said Naem Aslam, market analyst at Avatrade. "These unprecedented stimulus measures aided in the uptick of liquidity, allowing stock markets to reach new highs." —AFP

States remained "the most powerful country and economy in the world," pointing to its long history of inventions and how international students remain drawn to US universities.

"We want always to be the place that represents opportunity, possibility, achievement. Investing in our domestic renewal now means that we can continue to be that beacon to the world," Blinken said.

Blinken's remarks come before the US Senate is expected to approve a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill, a major priority for Biden that will build bridges, roads and an electric car network while improving drinking water and high-speed internet across the country. —AFP

Blinken urges investment at home to compete with China

WASHINGTON: Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Monday that the United States needed to invest more at home to compete with rivals led by China, casting "domestic renewal" as key to foreign policy.

Lifestyle | Features

Break-in to 'Al-Shifra': An OSN original star-studded Escape Room challenge

OSN keeps the mystery alive as some of the region's biggest stars descend on - and break-out from - 'Al-Shifra', the celebrity Escape Room challenge, on the OSN Streaming App on September 5th. Get ready to stay on the edge of your seat as your star-team decipher clues and solve mysteries, and collaborate and build alliances, racing to make it out of the room before the time is up. In six star-studded episodes, the 24 stars will be assigned the escape challenge in pairs, and will face unique challenges and puzzles to test their mettle, planning, and creativity.



Participants include Palestinian super star Mohamad Assaf, Lebanese beauty empress and TV presenter Joelle Mardinian, Iraqi singer Shatha Hassoun, Lebanese TV host Wissam Breidy, Tunisian top model and actress Rym Saidi, Lebanese model, actor and TV presenter Wissam Hanna, Emirati anchor and actress Mahira Abdel Aziz, Emirati Actor, Producer and TV presenter Saoud Al-Kaabi, Lebanese model and media personality Zoya Sakr, Tunisian actress Leila Bin Khalifa and other A-list guests such as Lojain Omran, Yacoub Shaheen,

Dalida Khalil, Khaled Mansour, Nada Al-Shaibani, Ayman Kaissouni, Nesrine Zreik, Aline Watfa, Haifa Bseisso, Hala Abdallah, Maram Zbaeda, Mayssa Moghrabi, Amina Moghrabi, and Ghaida Sulaiman Al-Saeedi.

"Al-Shifra is a fantastically clever, engaging show that spreads excitement among viewers and fans as they watch and cheer their favorite celebrities in action", said Darine EIKhatib, Senior Vice President -Arabic Services & Original Production at OSN. "In just one year, the response to OSN Originals - a major milestone for us -has been phenomenal and inspiring. This unscripted game series perfectly fits what we are aiming to achieve through our originals. Al-Shifra is testament to our commitment to double OSN's investment in original content this year, and joins the hugely popular A'adet Regala and Yalla Neta'asha (Come Dine With Me) under the umbrella of unscripted Arabic content."

With a focus on quick responses, creativity, and agility, and surrounded by richly-designed sets, each episode is placed in a unique setting, which adds to the story and the challenge itself. Challengers set-out to escape from a hospital, a haunted house, a grim zoo, or a disaster-stricken resort. These settings, and an all-new participant list, make each episode a unique experience.

Presenting Al-Shifra are Dubai-based influencer Sherif Al-Fayed and TV and radio host Mohamed Kais, who are also joined by Nancy Eskander. And your favorite stars will not always be on the right side of the law. Which of the star-duets do you think are best equipped to be successful bandits? "Audience will get a chance to get closer with the stars we know and love and we may come away with a greater understanding and appreciation of their real selves and their art. We are honored to feature such an enviable galaxy of stars in one title, and we have not compromised on the ideation, sets, and production value, which are all worthy of this celebrity cohort", El-Khatib added.

On 5th of September, Al-Shifra will be available on the OSN Streaming App and will air on 5th of September at 19:45 KSA on OSN Ya Hala Al-Oula and OSN Ya Hala at 20:35 KSA OSN Originals is also set to reveal the details of another brand-new comedy production, 'No Activity', coming soon to viewers' screens across the region.



Once famed for its exceptional wildlife, Libya's Farwa island risks becoming just another victim of lawlessness in the war-ravaged North African nation, activists struggling to save it warn. An uninhabited 13-kilometre-long (eight mile) sandbar cut off at high tide in far western Libya, Farwa appears picture-postcard idyllic, with scattered date palms on white sandy beaches and ringed by the sparkling Mediterranean Sea. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has said Farwa is potentially the "most important coastal and marine site in western Libya, in terms of its high marine and coastal biodiversity". But it faces a long list of threats, said Fawzi Dhane from local environmental group Bado, identifying illegal fishing and pollution as key worries. Climate change is also exacerbating the situation, making Farwa more vulnerable to the pressures already heaped on its fragile environment. For decades there were few visitors, apart from occasional school trips to the island. Libya's former dictator Muammar Gadhafi dreamt of building a luxury seaside resort there, complete with "floating" villas and a golf course. But Gadhafi was ousted and killed in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising, and Libya has struggled to contain violence and political turmoil ever since.

Explosive fishing

In a country awash with weapons, some find lobbing grenades into the water an easy way to fish-a destructive method killing everything in the blast zone. "The fishermen do not respect anything," Dhane said, blaming boats from the port of Zuwara, some 40 kilometers (25 miles) to the east. "They fish at all times, in an unregulated way-and they practice fishing with explosives."

Endangered loggerhead turtles are also being harmed, according to the activist. "The turtles are sometimes caught in fishing nets, when they are not killed by fishermen who fear their bites," said Dhane. The Bado association works to protect turtle clutches laid on the beach from predators and from people who come to dig up the eggs. The island, which lies close to the border with Tunisia, is made up of sand dunes stretching over 4.7 square kilometers (1.81 square miles). Its lagoon and salt marshes are also home to flamingos. One of the only buildings is a crumbling lighthouse built in the 1920s under Italian colonial rule.

Farwa is among the most important areas in Libya for many migratory birds, according to Tarek Jdeidi from the University of Tripoli. It is a key staging post for those travelling over Africa to rest before flying across the Mediterranean to



In this picture Students warm up during a group class to learn break-dancing or 'b-boying' at a training session on the rooftop of a building in Dharavi slums in Mumbai. — AFP photos



In this picture coach Vikram Godakiya (center, red cap) watches students during a group class to learn breaking or 'b-boying' at a training session.

Hip-hop dream thrives in India's largest slum

After India's largest slum defeated the pandemic, some of its young residents pulled out their phones to write, shoot and release a triumphant rap video. "At first we were afraid, what would happen to us? But we stood with the doctors... now it's your turn", rapped the young men in the video. "We Did It!" "Kar Dikhaya" in Hindi-showcased new talent and won acclaim from celebrities, but its creators' abiding goal was to fight the stigma dogging this densely-populated corner of Mumbai. The Dharavi slum is home to around one million people, many of whom live in single-room shanties and share communal toilets.

Its labyrinthine alleys have long been associated with filth and disease despite its remarkable success in the battle against COVID-19, and its residents battle constant discrimination. But Ayush Tegar Renuka, one of the star students of the Dharavi Dream Project hip-hop academy, told AFP he feels "so proud" of belonging to the community. "The Dharavi shown on TV channels and the real Dharavi are very different places," the 16-year-old said. Ayush began breakdancing three years ago, brushing off his widowed mother's pleas to give up a pursuit she feared would result in a trip to the hospital. She was not alone. Many parents were initially reluctant to enroll their children in the school's free classes, dismissing hip-hop as dangerous, a distraction from homework or simply a waste of time.

The Dharavi Dream Project's co-founder Dolly Rateshwar was determined to change their minds. The daughter of a Hindu priest, Rateshwar was nervous about venturing into the neighborhood, but the teenagers she met struck a chord with her. "I was raised in a very conservative family... I never knew there was a bigger world out there," the 38-year-old told AFP. "And I was worried that these kids might lose out on life because they didn't know the possibilities open to them."

'My confidence level was zero'

The school opened its doors in 2015, offering free classes in breakdancing, beatboxing and rapping to around 20 students, with digital media start-up Qyuki-Rateshwar's employer-and US entertainment titan Universal Music Group footing the bill. As the project won praise from musical icons such as Oscar-winning composer A.R. Rahman it rapidly expanded, with young students like Joshua Joseph-now better known as MC Josh-using hip-hop to tell their stories. If black rappers in the United States could shine a light on racism, he reasoned, hip-hop could do the same for India's glaring inequality and mistreatment of marginalised communities.



Coach Vikram Godakiya (right, red cap) warm up along with the students during a group class.

"My confidence level was zero before I started to rap," the 21-year-old told AFP. "The school changed my life." When COVID-19 arrived, the rapper's income collapsed overnight as Dharavi was put under a stringent months-long lockdown. Mumbai authorities quickly realized that the slum held the key to defeating the pandemic and launched "Mission Dharavi"-aggressively sanitizing communal toilets, running daily "fever camps" to check for symptoms, repurposing wed-

ding halls as quarantine facilities, and asking residents to stay home.

By the end of June 2020, Dharavi had recorded just 82 deaths-a fraction of Mumbai's over 4,500 fatalities. Like the slum, the school staff also refused to be cowed by the virus, switching to online classes soon after the first wave of infections hit last year. As the pandemic ground on, Rateshwar realized that the academy could expand its reach even further, and broadcast an invitation on Instagram for anyone, anywhere, to join their classes. They received 800 responses in the first 24 hours. A year on, the school hosts 100 students who attend every online session-half from Dharavi itself-and 300 others who pop in occasionally, including from overseas.

'Everyone wants to become a superstar'

But Rateshwar's focus remains firmly on students from the Mumbai slum, on making sure their voices are heard and their future prospects secured. "Obviously everyone wants to become a superstar but... I also try to tell them about alternative careers in the music industry, as artists' managers, or jobs in social media," she said. "Most of all, I want them to stand tall." For 21-year-old teacher Vikram Gaja Godakiya, who learned breakdancing from YouTube videos, the school means much more than a steady paycheck.

"People have always been unfair to Dharavi," he told AFP, describing how the pandemic had made employers increasingly reluctant to hire slum-dwellers. When Godakiya started breakdancing in secret nine years ago, he never imagined he would be able to do it for a living. "Breaking has given my life purpose," he said. "I want my students to know that they can do anything if they give it their 100 percent." — AFP



LIBYA'S WILDLIFE TREASURE ISLAND AT RISK OF RUIN

Europe. Today, Farwa has become a popular spot for Libyan holidaymakers, with dozens visiting every weekend. "They leave their rubbish behind," sighed Dhane.

Chemical pollution

Another threat comes from the nearby Abu Kammash petrochemical factory, which has for years "leaked heavy metals" into the soil and sea, according to Dhane. While the complex has been abandoned, the impact of the dangerous pollution "is still felt", he added. Shawkyy Muammar, an archaeolo-

gist who has conducted digs on the island, discovering Roman-era tools and tombs, calls the pollution from the dilapidated plant an "environmental disaster".

He also expressed worry that rising sea levels due to climate change could swamp the low-lying island. "It risks being swallowed up if measures are not taken to try to contain the sea," he said. In recent years, oil-rich Libya was split between two rival administrations backed by foreign powers and myriad militias. After a peace deal last year, an interim unity government was agreed in March ahead of elec-

tions set for December. But it has not changed anything for the island. In the meantime, environmental groups have taken on the task of protecting Farwa, while hoping for a return to stability and the rule of law. Dhane said he has "organized conferences and awareness campaigns in schools" to try and explain the threats the island faces. And in partnership with international organizations like the World Wildlife Fund, "we are trying to educate fishermen", he added. — AFP



These pictures show an aerial view of Libya's Farwa Island, about 170 kilometers west of the capital and close to the border with Tunisia. — AFP photos

Lifestyle | Features

BILLIE EILISH, ED SHEERAN JOIN
GLOBAL CLIMATE, VACCINE CONCERTS

Billie Eilish and Ed Sheeran

Coldplay, Billie Eilish and Ed Sheeran are among the stars announced yesterday for a day of concerts across multiple cities on September 25 to raise awareness about climate change, poverty and vaccine distribution. New York, Paris and Lagos are the first cities to be announced for Global Citizen Live, which will run for 24 hours and be screened around the world via TV stations and social media. Joining Eilish and Coldplay in New York's Central Park are Jennifer Lopez, Camila Cabello, Shawn Mendes and Burna Boy, among others.

Sheeran headlines the French gig, with Doja Cat, HER and Black Eyed Peas supporting, while Fema Kuti will top the bill in

Nigeria. More locations and artists are due to be announced in the coming weeks. "Across six continents, artists will help rally citizens in demanding that governments, major corporations, and philanthropists work together to defend the planet and defeat poverty," NGO Global Citizen said in a statement. It said it was focusing "on the most urgent, interrelated threats hitting those in poverty the hardest—climate change, vaccine equity, and famine".

A slew of other artists—including BTS, Lorde, Metallica and The Weeknd—are also lending their star power, either through live or filmed performances. The event is designed to coincide with the UN General Assembly in September, and

push for action at the G20 the following month and COP26 climate meeting in November. Global Citizen said it urgently wants one billion trees planted, one billion vaccines delivered to the poorest countries and meals for the 41 million on the brink of famine. WHO director-general Tedros Ghebreyesus lent his support to the campaign, saying in a statement: "We now face a two-track pandemic of haves and have-nots. Over 75 percent of the more than 4 billion doses administered to date have occurred in just 10 countries. "We cannot disregard this gross inequity or become complacent." — AFP

Czech film
festival to honor
Michael Caine

English actor Michael Caine will receive the top prize at the postponed Czech film festival in the city of Karlovy Vary starting later this month, organizers said yesterday. The prolific 88-year-old Oscar winner known for his roles in "Alfie" (1966), "Sleuth" (1972) and "The Cider House Rules" (1998) will get the Crystal Globe award for his "outstanding contribution to world cinema". Hollywood star Johnny Depp, best known for the "Pirates of the Caribbean" series, will be among the stars attending the festival.

Czech film director Jan Sverak, who won an Oscar for the best international feature film with "Kolya" in 1996, will get the festival president's award. The 55th edition of the Karlovy Vary Film Festival will take place on August 20-28 after being postponed from July because of the COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

Jury selection begins in
R. Kelly sex abuse trial

R. Kelly, the disgraced R&B superstar who faces a battery of sex abuse charges in several US states, appeared in court Monday as jury selection began in his federal New York trial. The 54-year-old appeared stoic in a navy blue suit as the questioning of jurors began in the Brooklyn court, where he faces charges of racketeering, sexual exploitation of a child, kidnapping, bribery and forced labor, spanning from 1994 to 2018. Deveraux Cannick, one of Kelly's lawyers, was reticent when asked by AFP how he was feeling, smiling and saying: "Just another Monday."

The musician born Robert Sylvester Kelly, currently incarcerated at a Brooklyn federal prison, has denied all charges. All prospective jurors will remain anonymous and be partially sequestered throughout the process. Those selected for the trial will be escorted to and from court by US marshals, which is not abnormal in such high-profile trials. Following jury selection, opening statements and testimony are due to begin August 18. It is expected the trial will last at least four weeks. New York is the first state to see Kelly stand trial in connection with a raft of state and federal indictments in four different jurisdictions.



In this file photo R&B singer R. Kelly leaves the Leighton Criminal Courts Building following a hearing in Chicago, Illinois.

'Women don't lie'

On the opening day of jury selection the court questioned dozens prospective jurors, dismissing 18. One woman was excused because in her pre-selection questionnaire she said "women don't lie" about suffering rape or abuse. When the judge probed her stance, the woman clarified that she thought it was rare that a woman would come forward with a false abuse allegation. Another woman said that as a child she experienced similar abuse to that detailed in the charges against Kelly, also leading the judge to dismiss her from jury duty.

One man was excused because he said he would find it difficult to remain impartial when faced with evidence of sexual activity between members of the same sex, which the judge said would be exhibited. Twelve jurors and six alternates

will be selected—and those chosen will be the only members of the public to view the trial in person, a decision the court made due to the spread of COVID-19. Potential jurors, all of them masked, were not questioned about their vaccination status. Lawyers on both sides along with Judge Ann Donnelly did not wear masks, though Kelly at one point did.

In an unusual step for such a high-profile case, reporters and other members of the public must watch from several "overflow" rooms, on relatively small, grainy screens. When evidence is presented it is unlikely to be viewable by observers from those rooms.

Sex crime ring

The New York indictment details lurid claims that Kelly operated a crime ring that systematically recruited and groomed young girls to have sex with him, locking them in their rooms at hotels when he was on tour, instructing them to wear baggy clothing when not with him, "to keep their heads down" and to call the singer "daddy." Many of the "recruits" were under 18 years old, say prosecutors, who among other disturbing allegations say Kelly's "enterprise" facilitated sex without disclosing a sexually transmitted infection the singer had contracted.

The indictment also says part of the ring's job was to isolate girls and women, and make them "dependent on Kelly for their financial well-being." Among the alleged victims listed in the indictment is "Jane Doe #1," widely believed to be the R&B singer Aaliyah, who died in a plane crash at age 22 in 2001. The prosecution alleges that Kelly paid an Illinois government employee in 1994 to obtain a fake ID to marry an underage girl. Kelly notoriously married Aaliyah when she was 15 and he was 27, a union that was later annulled.

Federal judges in New York and Chicago, where Kelly also faces charges, have denied him bail, citing a flight risk, danger to the community and the prospect of witness tampering. Kelly has faced accusations involving child pornography, sex with minors, operating a sex cult and sexual battery for decades. Despite the slew of unsettling claims and several out-of-court settlements, the singer known for hits like "I Believe I Can Fly," "Bump 'N Grind" and "Ignition (Remix)" maintained a staunch fan base, continuing to tour worldwide. The accusations only gained ground in the post-#MeToo era in 2019, when a new docuseries "Surviving R. Kelly" renewed focus on the claims. — AFP



Attorney Nicole Blank Becker (left) arrives to attend a hearing in the racketeering and sex trafficking case of R. Kelly at Brooklyn federal court in Brooklyn, New York. — AFP photos

Final curtain for
musical 'West
Side Story' on
Broadway

The re-imagined version of the popular musical "West Side Story" will not reopen on Broadway, its producer said Monday, an indirect victim of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on New York's theater industry. The revived production opened in February last year but was forced to shutter just one month later as the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the city. "It is with great regret that we are announcing today that the 2020 Broadway revival of West Side Story will not reopen," producer Kate Horton said in a statement.

"For a variety of reasons, reopening is not a practical proposition," she added, thanking the "brilliant, creative artists" in

the production who brought the story "to life at the Broadway Theatre, even for so brief a time." Directed by Belgian Ivo Hove, who gave the 1957 musical an unprecedented makeover, with a more diverse cast and dealing with current themes such as police violence and rape. The pandemic was not the show's only obstacle: its original producer, Scott Rudin, stepped aside for Horton to take the job following allegations of workplace harassment.

And one of the main actors, Amar Ramasar, was embroiled in allegations of inappropriate behavior dating back to his years in the New York Ballet Troupe. Theaters on Broadway, which are set to reopen in September, have announced that they will require the audience and all production members to be vaccinated. The public will still have a chance to see a new version of "West Side Story" in the cinema in December, directed by Steven Spielberg. — AFP

FORTNITE, SURFING AND VIRTUAL
BURNING MAN: DIPLO'S PANDEMIC YEAR

He's had hits with the likes of Madonna, Beyonce and MIA, and spent 20 years relentlessly touring the world, but American DJ Diplo says the pandemic-enforced break was a blessing. "It was probably the best year I've had in a long time. I did a lot of surfing, spent time with my kids, bought a house—I never had time before," the 42-year-old DJ told AFP from his home in Malibu, California. Diplo-real name Thomas Wesley Pentz—was often on the road for 300 days of the year before COVID-19 put an end to live shows. "I felt like I was dating my tour manager. Every night, we would eat dinner together and go to shows. It got so boring," he said.

Coming to a sudden stop—just as he was about to release a new album with his DJ collective Major Lazer—was not easy, however. "In the beginning, I tried to keep the energy up like I was still on the road. I was doing three or four live-stream shows a week. It kept me sane. "But then I started doing things on my own—hiking, travelling—and I was able to be calm, content in the silence." The pandemic was also a chance to experiment, including appearances within video game Fortnite and as part of the virtual reality version of Burning Man last summer.

"Fortnite was cool, but the audience is so much younger. You realise how quickly the generations change. Maybe one or two million people saw it, but they only know games, not music. It was a giant production but I didn't really feel a connection. "(Burning Man) was more interesting. There were around 10,000 people with VR headsets. I could make them do things with their hands. That could be something that grows a lot."

'The queen' Nakamura

For now, though, the more traditional world of music drops and touring is back, and last week saw the release of the video for Major Lazer's "C'est cuit", featuring French-Malian star Aya Nakamura. "She's very unique," said Diplo. "The French part of Africa is doing this Caribbean dancehall style that works very well in America at the moment, and she's the queen of that

sound." He hopes for some more francophone collaborations in the future, having already worked with Parisian DJ Snake and looking to produce something with Belgian rapper Stromae.

"C'est cuit" is the latest hit from this year's album "Music Is The Weapon (Reloaded)", that also sees Sia, J Balvin, Nicki Minaj and Khalid contribute to the group's Trinidadian vibes. Following 2015's "Peace Is The Mission", there's a clear message to the music that became all the more relevant during the last chaotic year in the United States. "It was probably the craziest year since 9/11. It was so bad that I think it made people wake up a bit," Diplo said.



"The president took up so much space in the last couple years. Now with Joe Biden, we're back in a normal place." However he said there was one positive thing to come from Donald Trump's administration: the Music Modernisation Act that promises a fairer distribution of money from digital streaming. "It was actually very progressive and is going to ensure that streaming revenues spread out more," said Diplo. "I'm lucky. I've always owned the masters so I've been able to get the highest revenue streams. Mostly, artists don't have that power. They're at the mercy of the labels and the publishers." Next up—despite his reluctance to leave his newly sedate lifestyle—Diplo has a few shows booked around the US and more on the way. "Right now, I don't want to leave my house anymore!" he said, laughing. "We'll see if I get inspired to get back on the road." — AFP

In summer
blockbuster 'Free
Guy', life is but
a video game

In the face of relentless headlines about war, disease and apocalyptic climate change, "Stranger Things" maestro Shawn Levy is offering an "antidote" to the misery with a story about hope, kindness and the very human tendency to transcend the sometimes grim realities of everyday life. Due for release on Friday, sci-fi action comedy "Free Guy"—about a man who realizes he is a character in a video game—eschews some of the heavier philosophical themes around free will seen in the likes of "The Matrix" and "Blade Runner" in favor of a simple message: you are in control of your own destiny.



Ryan Reynolds takes a left turn from his more cynical, wiseguy persona in "Deadpool" to star as a wholesome everyman-type bank teller who discovers he is actually a background player in a video game and decides to take charge of his own story. The film feels "like an antidote to much of what we've been living through, in that the movie is about hopefulness and the preservation of some innocence in the midst of a very cynical world," Levy, directing his 14th feature, said at the recent world premiere in New York. Echoing 1998's "The Truman Show", in which Jim Carrey played the unwitting star of a reality TV show, Reynolds similarly inhabits a staged world.

Every morning, his character Guy gets up, greets his goldfish, burns his mouth with scorching coffee, unperturbed by the explosions and the fights taking place around him. His world is a video game and he is one of the minor, disposable characters that would be familiar to players of games like Grand Theft Auto. But when Guy finally takes his destiny into his own hands, the well-oiled mechanics thought up by the creators of the game goes off the rails. With a playful tone honed in his "Night at the Museum" trilogy, where skeletons and stuffed animals come alive at night, Levy deploys a gallery of familiar characters from hit games like Fortnite.

Against a backdrop of a love story, the narrative also unfolds on the other side of the screen, in the video game publisher's studio. Alongside Reynolds, the cast includes Joe Keery or "Stranger Things" fame, Jodie Comer, best known for her role in spy thriller Killing Eve, and Taika Waititi as a boss greedy for profits.—AFP

Sports

Star of Italy's medal-winning Olympic squad returns to hero's welcome

ROME: The star of Italy's Olympic team, Lamont Marcell Jacobs, returned home as a national hero on Monday after the country's best performance in the Games' history capped an unforgettable summer of sport for the Mediterranean nation. Dozens of fans, family and friends were on hand inside Rome's Fiumicino airport to greet Jacobs — undoubtedly Italy's man of the past two weeks after racing to a surprise win in the men's 100 meters.

Coming hot on the heels of the football team's memorable triumph at Euro 2020, Italy won 40 medals in Tokyo, a new national record which comfortably beats the previous best hauls of 36 in 1960 and 1932. Italians have delighted in the exploits of their athletes in Japan, who have provided some of the iconic moments of this year's Games and won gold in events in which they are traditionally also-rans.

"I would never have imagined such an amazing Olympics even in my dreams, to win two gold medals and to be flag bearer at the closing was incredible," Jacobs told reporters, after hugging his mother and friends awaiting his arrival.

Also on the return flight to Rome from Tokyo were the five members of Italy's rhythmic gymnastics team who won bronze, handing Italy her 40th medal. Italy broke their medal record with one of the most dramatic moments of the track-and-field portion of the Olympics. Their sprinters produced an incredible performance to win the 4x100 meter relay for the first time in Italy's history with a national record time of 37.50sec.

They snatched that race in the final moments as unheralded Filippo Tortu managed to reel in Nethaneel Mitchell-Blake and dip ahead of the Briton at the line. For many Italians that win was another one in the eye for the UK after their footballers beat England in the Euro 2020 final at Wembley.

Gold Galore

That win also gave a second gold to Jacobs, the Texas-born sprinter who performed one of the biggest shocks in Olympic history when he stormed out of athletics obscurity to take gold in a time of 9.80sec. It was an incredible win for the 26-year-old, whose previous career highlight was this year's



FIUMICINO: Italy's 100m and 4x100m relay gold medal winner Lamont Marcell Jacobs poses with his medals as he arrives from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics at Rome's Fiumicino Airport on Monday. — AFP

European indoor 60m title.

Jacobs' triumph thrilled Italy and came almost straight after Gianmarco Tamberi shared gold in the

men's high jump with Qatari Mutaz Barshim. Tamberi waited for Jacobs to run into his arms before the pair bounced around in joy and disbelief at what they had just achieved — possibly the greatest 10 minutes in the history of Italian sport.

Tamberi's own success was impressive enough as it came five years after an ankle ligament tear ruled him out of the Rio Olympics when he was in the form of his life. It was Barshim who helped Tamberi pull his life and career back together, and whose 2019 World Championship victory inspired him to Olympic glory.

The pair arrived at 2.37m having not hit the bar on the way and when they were told they could share the gold the two friends took one look at each other before launching themselves into a huge embrace, Tamberi then collapsing to the ground and writhing around in joy.

Italy's track cyclists also provided a moment of high drama when they broke their own world record to win the men's team pursuit. Their blistering time of 3min 42.032sec was just enough to hold off Denmark, who crossed the line in 3:42.198, in an incredible neck-and-neck battle. — AFP



TOKYO: (From left) Italy's Lamont Marcell Jacobs, Lorenzo Patta, Eseosa Desalu and Filippo Tortu celebrate with the national flag after winning the gold medal in the men's 4x100m relay final during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo on August 6, 2021. — AFP

Italy's citizenship law back in focus after Olympics wins

ROME: Italy's enthusiasm over its Olympics success, driven in part by multicultural athletes, has once again reignited debate over its citizenship law and the bureaucratic hurdles faced by thousands of young people. The debate comes on the heels of Italy's best performance in history at the Olympic Games, with 40 gold medals from a diverse band of athletes from a variety of backgrounds, including the country's new star, Texas-born sprinter Lamont Marcell Jacobs.

The debate was sparked anew after the head of Italy's National Olympic Committee, Giovanni Malago, complained of the bureaucratic headaches confronting Italian-born athletes who want to compete for their country, but lack citizenship. Under its current path to citizenship, Italy is an outlier in Europe, providing rights based on blood ties rather than based on where children are born — an idea known as "ius soli", or "right of the soil".

Children born in Italy to foreign parents must await their 18th birthdays before applying for citizenship, beginning an arduous process that can take four

years, one that Malago described as "a Dante-esque circle". After Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese said Malago's criticism was valid, far-right leader Matteo Salvini, head of the populist Lega party, retorted that the minister would be better served controlling the countries' borders than rekindling "ius soli". In Italy, the far-right has linked the debate over citizenship with the ongoing migrant crisis, which this year has seen 31,777 migrants land on the country's coasts, more than double that in the same period in 2020, according to interior ministry figures.

"I think the important thing is that for these kids we have to think of social inclusion," Lamorgese told La Stampa daily yesterday, noting that the issue went beyond Italy's young athletes. "They have to feel an integral part of society," she said.

There are various paths to citizenship in Italy — Jacobs' citizenship was accorded through his Italian mother despite being born in the United States to an American father — but that involving children of two foreign-born parents is the most complicated. Case in point is 17-year-old pole vaulter Great Nnachi, who was born in Turin to Nigerian parents, and is already a champion. Having broken records throughout her teens, she most recently won a junior title with her personal best of 4.01 meters in February. But her records are not recognized by the state, as she is not technically Italian, and she cannot compete for Italy in international competitions. "Despite being a full-fledged Italian, —AFP



KUWAIT: (From left) Duaij Al-Otaibi, Abdullah Al-Rashidi, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah and Ali Al-Masoudi.

Sheikh Mubarak Al-Abdullah honors Kuwaiti Olympic medalist

KUWAIT: Sheikh Mubarak Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah said Kuwait's Abdullah Al-Rashidi's skeet bronze medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics is an honor for Kuwait and Kuwaitis, and a clear testimony of Kuwaiti youth's insistence on having Kuwait's flag hoisted high in various arenas. Sheikh Mubarak honored Rashidi at the White Palace in the presence of President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Duaij Al-Otaibi and Director of Suad Al-Sabah Publishing House Ali Al-Masoudi.

Sheikh Mubarak said Rashidi's achievement under the Kuwait flag is the best evidence of the Kuwaiti citizen's ability and perseverance to instill their country's name around the world. He said this Olympic win in front of the entire world made Rashidi an example to

be followed by Kuwait's youth and a motivation for them.

Rashidi thanked Sheikh Mubarak for honoring him at the White Palace. He also thanked his late father, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, who was known for supporting sports and helping athletes. He again thanked Sheikh Mubarak for backing him throughout the Games, adding that what he did is only a small part of what Kuwait is presenting to its youth in all aspects of life, adding that he will continue to keep Kuwait's name prominent around the world. Otaibi said Rashidi's achievement is highly important, appreciating the role of Sheikh Mubarak in supporting sports and motivating Kuwait athletes, like his late father Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mubarak.

Cricket bids to return to Olympics in 2028

PARIS: Cricket's world governing body said on Monday that it intends to push for the sport's return to the Olympics at the 2028 Games in Los Angeles. The International Cricket Council said it would start preparations on an Olympic campaign to point out "the sport's inclusion in 2028 would mark the end of a 128-year absence."

Cricket has appeared once in the Olympics, at Paris in 1900, where the Devon and Somerset Wanderers, representing Great Britain, beat the only other entrants, a team of British embassy staff appearing as France, by 158 runs in a one-innings match. ICC chair Greg Barclay said the Tokyo Games, which ended on Sunday, had been an inspiration and that cricket's large fanbase meant it should be invited to the party.

"I would like to congratulate the IOC, Tokyo 2020, and the people of Japan for staging such an incredible Games in such difficult circumstances," Barclay said in an ICC statement. "It truly was fantastic to watch and captured the imagination of the world and we would love for cricket to be a part of future Games."

"We see the Olympics as a part of cricket's long-term future. We have more than a billion fans globally and almost 90 percent of them want to see cricket at the Olympics," said Barclay. "Clearly cricket has a strong and passionate fanbase, particularly in South Asia where 92 per cent of our fans come from, whilst there are also 30 million cricket fans in the USA," Barclay said. "The opportunity for those fans to see their heroes competing for an Olympic medal is tantalizing." Barclay pointed out that cricket will be returning to the Commonwealth Games in 2022 in Birmingham which will include a women's T20 competition. The sport previously appeared in the Commonwealth Games in 1998 in Malaysia, when South Africa won a 50-over competition.

"The sport will feature in the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games next year, which shapes as a perfect showcase for what the sport can bring to the Olympics, as well as being a momentous occasion on its own," the ICC statement said. "We know it won't be easy to secure our inclusion as there are so many other great sports out there wanting to do the same. But we feel now is the time to put our best foot forward and show what a great partnership cricket and the Olympics are," Barclay said. — AFP

NBC touts Olympics viewership amid declines

WASHINGTON: US broadcaster NBC said Monday its Olympics coverage garnered strong ratings on television and streaming despite declines from viewership in prior years. The NBCUniversal unit said the average television audience for the Tokyo games was 15.1 million. The figure was below that of the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics and the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro.

The media group said the Tokyo event was "the most streamed Olympics ever" with some six billion streaming minutes and 2.9 billion impressions on NBC's Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. An estimated 150 million Americans watched NBC's closing ceremony presentation, according to the company's citing of ratings.

"There is nothing more powerful in media than the 17 straight days of Olympics dominance," said



NEW DELHI: Gold medalist India's Neeraj Chopra (center) poses for pictures along with his parents at a press conference in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

India to mark Chopra's Olympic feat with special day

NEW DELHI: Neeraj Chopra's historic feat in winning India's first-ever track-and-field gold at the Olympics will be commemorated every year, officials said yesterday, as the javelin star spoke of his desire to inspire future athletes. A medal-starved India revealed in Chopra's stunning achievement in Tokyo, which ended a more than century-long wait for an athletics gold, with politicians, celebrities and the general public heaping praise on the 23-year-old. The Athletics Federation of India said August 7 — the date of Chopra's triumph — would be dubbed "Javelin Throw Day", with annual state meets for the sport held across the nation of 1.3 billion people.

"I feel honored that I could become an inspiration for Indian athletics and javelin in particular," the farmer's son from Khandra village just outside capital New Delhi told reporters yesterday. "I am happy kids will get an opportunity to compete in javelin events and hope that we get more medals in athletics."

The new poster boy of Indian sports, with his boyish charm and tousled hair, has come a long way from being teased as an overweight child to throwing 87.58 meters for the gold in the javelin final. Hundreds of fans had gathered at Delhi's international airport on Monday to give Chopra a hero's welcome.

Chopra said the enormity of the achievement only sunk in when he saw people banging drums and playing music as his car left the airport and headed for a party welcoming him back home. "It is a dream of any athlete of the world to win an Olympic medal and there is nothing bigger than gold, so the feeling was surreal. "When I arrived in India the mood was different and when I landed, I realized I had done something big for the nation that I am getting this honor."

Chopra's gold on the final day took India's medal tally to seven, their best-ever Olympic showing. Six podium spots at the 2012 London Games was the country's previous best finish but Indian athletes only managed two medals at Rio in 2016. The best athletics showings before Chopra's triumph in the modern Games was two silver medals won in Paris in 1900 when India was a British colony. "Slowly but surely our sports is improving," Chopra said, adding that the newfound "self-belief" in athletes would lead to more success for his country at future Olympics. —AFP

Pete Bevacqua, chairman of NBC Sports. "The pandemic fundamentally altered virtually every aspect of these Games, but our team pivoted, and reimagined, in the midst of showcasing history-making performances across 41 sports. Once again, we have seen the unparalleled power that these Games have on media and our culture."

The website Sports Media Watch meanwhile said viewership as of last week was down 42 percent from comparable days of the Rio Olympics five years ago and among the least-watched at any Olympics. Poynter media columnist Tom Jones said the figures were expected to show a decline of as many as 10 million US viewers compared with Rio.

"Several factors may have influenced the numbers, including a half-day's time difference between Tokyo and the United States," Jones said. "There's also just a general somber vibe because of Covid-19 and the lack of fans."

Jones said viewers were drawn to "important stories, such as American gymnast Simone Biles bringing more attention to the mental wellness of athletes by withdrawing from several events." NBC said it delivered some 120 billion minutes of content over its broadcast, cable and digital platforms including its Peacock streaming service. — AFP

Sports

Champions League 'not enough' for Chelsea under Tuchel's transformation

BELFAST: Chelsea will aim to start the new season as they ended the last with more silverware when the European champions face Europa League winners Villarreal in the UEFA Super Cup in Belfast tonight. Thomas Tuchel's stunning impact since taking charge of the Blues in January has raised expectations for Chelsea to challenge in all competitions this season, particularly with Romelu Lukaku on the verge of returning to Stamford Bridge for a club record fee of £97 million (\$135 million).

Tuchel's men beat Manchester City to lift the Champions League in May, just five months after he replaced the sacked Frank Lampard with Chelsea languishing in ninth in the Premier League. Victory in Porto was Chelsea's third over City in six weeks towards the end of the season. Now they have the longer term goal of dethroning Pep Guardiola's side as English champions.

"We want to win, we want to compete and of course we want to be successful," said Tuchel ahead of his side's return to competitive action in Northern Ireland. "This is in Chelsea's nature and of course we are up for the challenge. We will try to compete for every title in every competition we enter but I also think it will be a huge step forward if we can maintain the same quality, attitude and effort that we showed last season."

No COVID cash crisis

As many of Europe's traditional giants have been squeezed by the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, the backing of billionaire Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich has again allowed Chelsea to strengthen at a time of crisis. A £220 million spending spree on Edouard Mendy, Ben Chilwell, Hakim Ziyech, Kai Havertz and Timo

Werner last summer was rewarded with Champions League glory.

Now Lukaku looks set to return for nearly four times the amount he was sold seven years ago to provide the missing piece of a proven goalscorer. The Belgium forward's move should be completed before Chelsea's Premier League opener against Crystal Palace on Saturday, but will not be registered in time to face Villarreal.

Instead, Werner and Havertz will be tasked with starting their second season in England better than they did their first. After a slow start, Havertz came good on his £71 million price tag with the winning goal in the Champions League final. The 22-year-old was also one of few star performers for Germany at a disappointing Euro 2020.

"I think we have all a lot of goals this season. The Champions League title is not enough for us, we want to win more and that's our aim for the season," said Havertz, who attributed the turnaround in his form to the return of fans to stadiums. "With the fans now in the stadium, they give you a lot of support. I feel very comfortable. I like it here, I like the city and I like the club, so all good." A crowd of 13,000 will fill 70 percent of Windsor Park this week.

While Chelsea have become accustomed to lifting trophies on an annual basis in nearly two decades since Abramovich took charge, Villarreal are aiming to back up their first ever piece of silverware when they beat Manchester United on penalties in Gdansk. Unai Emery has now won the Europa League four times, but never won the Super Cup after his three previous successes with Sevilla.

The former Arsenal and Paris Saint-Germain boss believes Chelsea will become "the best team



LONDON: In this file photo taken on August 21, 2013, Chelsea's Belgian striker Romelu Lukaku (right) vies with Aston Villa's Dutch defender Ron Vlaar (left) during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Aston Villa at Stamford Bridge in London. —AFP

in the world" this season, but is hopeful they suffer a European Championship hangover with a number of key players only just back into pre-season training. "Chelsea have Italian and English interna-

tionals who haven't arrived back until this week. Their starting line-up will not be the same as the Champions League final," said Emery. "Hopefully they misfire from the start." —AFP

Premier League fans to be subject to COVID spot-checks

LONDON: The Premier League has announced fans will be subject to random spot-checks of their COVID-19 status in the opening weeks of the new season. The 2021-22 campaign kicks off on Friday when newly-promoted Brentford host Arsenal with national government restrictions on crowd capacity now eased.

Any limits on attendances and the Premier League clubs hope their protocols will ensure a return to full stadiums across the country.

In a statement, the Premier League said fans going to games should be prepared to show they have been fully vaccinated or have received a negative lateral flow test in the previous 48 hours.

The UK government has so far refused to introduce a mandatory vaccine passport system, but the English top-flight clubs are preparing in case that changes in the coming months.

"Initially, in the first few matchdays of the season, supporters can expect the introduction of random spot-checks for ticket holders at some grounds as we establish the required processes so clubs and fans are prepared for all match attendees to have their COVID-19 status checked upon arrival, should it become mandatory," the Premier League statement added.

Fans must also comply with a supporter code of conduct, which stresses the importance of wearing masks in indoor areas, avoiding close contact with people they do not know and following one-way signs around stadiums.

Meanwhile, nine Premier League players or members of staff were positive for coronavirus in the latest round of testing. —AFP

Grealish relishing £100 million tag as he targets glory

MANCHESTER: Jack Grealish said on Monday he is enjoying the tag of becoming England's first ever £100 million (\$139 million) player after joining Premier League champions Manchester City from Aston Villa. Grealish left his boyhood club last week in a transfer that saw him become the most expensive player in Premier League history, surpassing Paul Pogba's move to Manchester United in 2016.

"I actually like it, I think it is a good tag to have," said the 25-year-old as he was unveiled at the Etihad Stadium. "It means so much to me that the club were willing to spend that much on me, it fills me with confidence. It just shows me how much the club and the manager value me. I just hope now I can repay this football club by winning as many titles as possible and that trophy we all want."

That trophy is the Champions League with City still to conquer Europe despite winning five Premier League titles in the past 10 years. Grealish said the

lure of playing at the highest level in Europe, allied to the chance to learn from City boss Pep Guardiola was too good an opportunity to turn down.

"It was one of the toughest (decisions) I've ever had to make," he added on leaving Villa, who he joined at the age of six. "It came down to something I felt I couldn't turn down. To play Champions League football, challenge for trophies, play next to people like Kevin de Bruyne and play for the best manager in the world."

Grealish played a bit-part role as England reached their first major tournament final for 55 years at Euro 2020 last month, only to lose on penalties to Italy. The 2022 World Cup is just over a year away and Grealish admitted his ambitions at international level also played a part in his decision to move.

"We have so much talent at the national team," he added. "If I'm performing for Man City week in, week out, I feel like it could set me up to have a brilliant future for the national team and start in these (World Cup) games and the qualifiers."

Grealish will team up with his international colleagues Raheem Sterling, Phil Foden, John Stones and Kyle Walker at City and could end up supplying the ammunition for England captain Harry Kane at club level. Kane issued a statement on Friday deny-



MANCHESTER: Jack Grealish waves to Manchester City fans outside the Etihad Stadium during his unveiling in Manchester, north-west England on Monday. —AFP

ing he refused to return to pre-season training with Tottenham last week as he tries to force his way out of Spurs.

City are keen for Kane to be Sergio Aguero's long-term successor at the Etihad, but the striker still has three years left on his Tottenham contract and the clubs, who face each other on the opening weekend of the Premier League on Sunday, are not yet close to agreeing a fee. —AFP

NBA Mavericks agree with Doncic on five-year deal

WASHINGTON: Slovenian NBA All-Star guard Luka Doncic and the Dallas Mavericks have agreed to terms on a five-year contract extension worth \$207 million, according to multiple US media reports Monday. The 22-year-old playmaker is set to ink a supermax extension, according to the Dallas Morning News and ESPN.

"Today is a dream come true," Doncic told ESPN. "The game of basketball has given me so much and has taken me to so many amazing places. I am humbled and excited to remain in Dallas as part of the Mavericks. I am committed to the organization and appreciate the support of my fans."

Doncic, who led Slovenia into the medal games at the Tokyo Olympics before a fourth-place finish, had been playing on the deal he signed after being the third overall pick of the 2018 NBA Draft. Doncic became the youngest MVP in Euro League history in 2017-18, when he led Real Madrid to a title before being selected in the NBA draft by the Atlanta Hawks. He was immediately traded from the Hawks to the Mavericks for Trae Young and a future



Luka Doncic

first-round pick.

Doncic averaged 27.7 points, 8.0 rebounds and 8.6 assists a game last season shooting 47.9 percent overall from the floor, 35 percent from 3-point range. After winning the 2019 NBA Rookie of the Year for a 33-49 Mavericks squad, Doncic has sparked Dallas into the playoffs the past two seasons, only to lose to the Los Angeles Clippers in the first round both times. The Mavericks have not won a playoff series since capturing the 2011 NBA Finals, falling six times in the first round and failing to qualify four times over the past 10 seasons. —AFP

CONCACAF confirms early World Cup 2022 qualifiers schedule

WASHINGTON: Gold Cup champion United States will open final-round North American qualifying for the 2022 World Cup on September 2 at El Salvador under a match schedule released on Monday. The Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) unveiled matches for September and October in the "Octagonal" round-robin tournament to decide 2022 Qatar World Cup berths.

The Americans and Salvadorans are joined in the eight-team showdown by Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Panama and Honduras. The top three finishers advance to Qatar while the fourth-place squad has a playoff next June to decide another berth. Each team will play 14 matches, seven home and seven away, over windows in September, October and November 2021 and January and March 2022.

The US squad, which defeated Mexico 1-0 at Las Vegas for the regional Gold Cup crown August 1, will open at San Salvador, then return home to face Canada at Nashville on September 5 and then travel to Honduras on September 8. —AFP

(also) considerable dissent amongst conservatives within the Qatari government and society that the country has already been forced to change too much."

Rights and wrongs

In February, Qatar fiercely denied reports in Britain's Guardian newspaper of excessive worker fatalities, insisting the figure was unreliable but refusing to publish the actual number. Some fans and commentators fear that Doha may not offer visitors the same experience as past tournaments.

"I've been to many DJs on beaches with thousands of people in Doha already in 2005 and 2006," said 2022 ambassador and former Netherlands international Ronald De Boer, who lived in Doha for five years. "Doha will be ready for this amount of fans, they can really hold big events. And don't worry that you can't drink a beer."

While beer will be available in fan zones, restaurants and hotels, it is likely that ordinary ticket-holders will be unable to drink inside stadiums, with alcohol confined to outside areas. A decision has yet to be made officially. Those in premium hospitality suites will however be able to access fully-stocked bars within sight of the pitch. —AFP

Post-Olympics, spotlight shifts to Qatar 2022 World Cup

DOHA: The focus of the sporting world shifts to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar following the Tokyo Olympics, with lingering questions over COVID safety and human rights. Unlike the Games, which played out to a backdrop of surging case numbers in Tokyo and without spectators to limit viral transmission, organizers of the November 18-December 21, 2022, football tournament insist it will be played in full stadiums.

Qatar 2022 might be the first truly global sporting event with fans since coronavirus emerged at the start of 2020, if the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics goes ahead behind closed doors as an International Olympic Committee official has suggested.

Such is the commitment of the tiny, super-wealthy host emirate to stage a "normal" tournament that Doha has pledged to vaccinate travelling fans from countries where the rollout of jabs has been slower. "Whatever happens I expect we'll have fans, including foreigners,

in the stadiums," said Danyel Reiche, an associate professor at Georgetown University in Qatar. "Qatar was a pioneer in developing concepts for sports during the pandemic and has staged many events."

Qatar, the first Middle Eastern host of the World Cup, was, along with Rwanda, an Olympics vaccine hub for athletes heading to Tokyo. It also hosted the refugee team.

Vaccines for fans

Qatar has pledged to obtain one million doses of COVID vaccine for unvaccinated fans travelling to the Arabian desert peninsula country. Details of its tournament job program have yet to be published, though 2022 organizers went to Tokyo to observe the precautions taken during the Games.

"Tokyo has been a qualified success with... little overall dissent amongst those present about the restrictions in place," said Simon Chadwick, director of the Eurasian sports center at France's Emlon Business School. "Qatar would do well to follow and fine-tune the processes and procedures that have been in place during the Olympics. The big difference of course is the presence of spectators."

With less than 16 months left, the Gulf state is speckled with construction sites and roadworks. The

Money no obstacle for PSG as they reunite Messi with Neymar

PARIS: The prospect of seeing Lionel Messi team up again with Neymar will have many football fans around the world salivating. Not all of fans will rejoice. Many will struggle to come to terms with Messi leaving Barcelona. Others would have preferred to see him go to a club where he really could have a transformative impact, like Diego Maradona at Napoli.

But modern football is now dominated by a narrow elite financed by mega-rich owners, state wealth in the case of Qatar-backed Paris Saint-Germain and Abu Dhabi's Manchester City. Add in Roman Abramovich's Champions League winners Chelsea and even the likes of Barcelona and Real Madrid can't keep up.

It is another bitter blow for Barca, who in 2017 were powerless to stop Neymar going to Paris for a world record 222 million euros (\$264m), setting off the chain of events that led to Messi heading the same way. Barca ruined themselves in the transfer market trying to replace Neymar to the extent they could not keep their greatest ever player due to La Liga's financial fair play rules.

Relaxing of FFP rules

PSG are not immune from the financial difficulties caused by the pandemic, but they are better placed to survive the economic downturn. PSG lost 124.9 million euros before tax in the 2019/20 season which was curtailed by the pandemic.

Last season's figures are likely to be far worse, reportedly around 230 million euros, with PSG almost entirely deprived of gate receipts as games were played behind closed doors while French TV revenue went off a cliff after the collapse of a record deal with Mediapro.

Yet they have splashed out in the transfer market, spending 60 million euros (\$71 million) on Inter Milan right-back Achraf Hakimi and signing several big-name players who were out of contract in

Sergio Ramos, Georginio Wijnaldum and Gianluigi Donnarumma.

Wijnaldum was snatched from under the noses of...Barcelona. PSG can do it because their Qatari owners are there to cover the losses and because, for now at least, French league rules do not stop clubs having a wages to income ratio of almost 100 percent, as it was in 2019/20.

They have also been helped by UEFA's decision to soften its financial fair play rules to compensate for revenue shortfalls caused by the pandemic, meaning assessments of the 2020 and 2021 financial years would be done together rather than separately. Clubs are expected to be able to register losses over the 30 million-euro limit provided they can show they were caused by the pandemic.

Critics say that FFP is no longer fit for purpose, and PSG's rivals would claim signing Messi, allied to their other summer spending and the fact they already have Neymar and Kylian Mbappe on their books, means the French club are showing a blatant disregard for the rules.

The dream front line

Nevertheless, signing Messi certainly improves their chances of winning the prize they want more than anything, that their Qatari owners have been chasing ever since buying the club. In May 2011 Messi inspired Pep Guardiola's Barcelona to a 3-1 win over Manchester United in the Champions League final. A few weeks later Qatar Sports Investments bought a controlling stake in PSG.

In August 2017 PSG made Neymar and Mbappe the two most expensive signings in history. Now they have Messi. "Every coach in the world would like to have the best player in the world in their team," admitted manager Mauricio Pochettino.

PSG's summer recruitment already looked impressive. They were especially crying out for a new midfielder and a right-back, needs that were



LE BOURGET: Argentinian football player Lionel Messi waves to supporters from a window after he landed yesterday at Le Bourget airport, north of Paris, as Paris Saint-Germain looked to complete the 34-year-old signing following his departure from Barcelona. — AFP

addressed with the arrivals of Wijnaldum and Hakimi. A team that missed out on the Ligue 1 title last season but who in the last two campaigns reached a Champions League final and semi-final, now appear well set to land a first European Cup.

The model is the Barcelona team of 2014/15 which won the treble with Messi scoring 58 goals

and Neymar 39. The third man, then, was Luis Suarez who added 25 goals. Now the third man is Mbappe. It is over to Pochettino, Messi's compatriot, to accommodate them all, and Angel di Maria, and find the right balance to make his a team of champions as well as a modern-footballing version of the Harlem Globetrotters.— AFP



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