

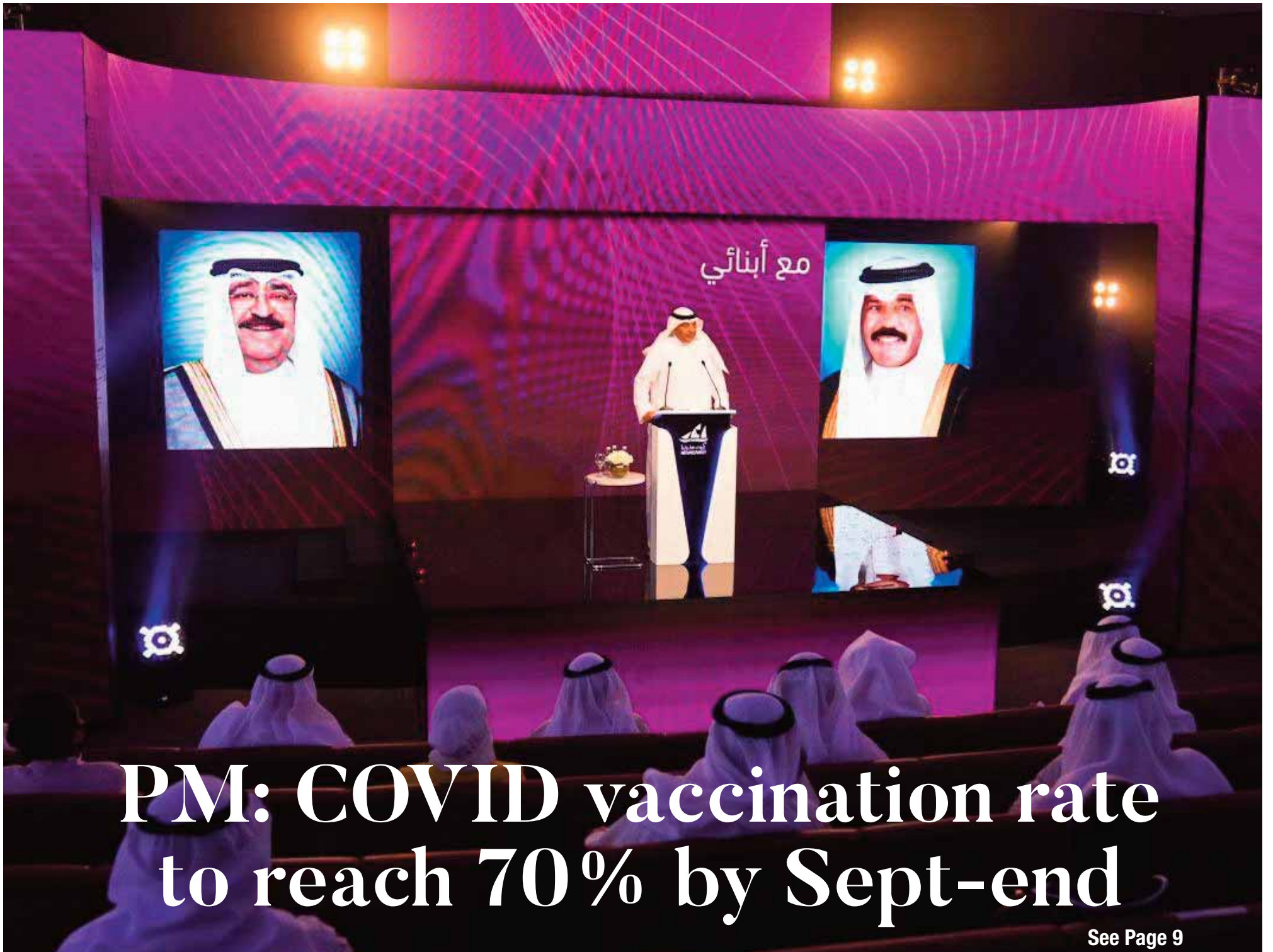
Friday Times

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V O L V O



PM: COVID vaccination rate to reach 70% by Sept-end

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Local



SHISHA CAFES REOPEN AMID BUSINESS, STAFFING CHALLENGES

By Ben Garcia

After a ban of more than a year due to the coronavirus pandemic, shisha cafés can reopen and welcome customers. Some health precautions are still in place, of course, but the popular pastime is finally back. This is good news for shisha smokers, many of whom have gone months and months without visiting their favorite cafés. But for shisha café owners, the good times aren't back yet.

Before the pandemic, there were hundreds of dedicated shisha cafés in Kuwait and hundreds more restaurants that served shisha along with food. But shisha places that have been closed for months have lost staff, who've either left the country or found other jobs. The shisha cafés have lost so much business that many may stay closed permanently.

"Other shisha houses have reopened but in my case I am still searching for new people to work with me so we can reopen," said Abu Ahmad, an Egyptian

entrepreneur who did not want his café or full name to be mentioned. "I allowed many of my workers to work somewhere else during the pandemic. Now we cannot easily pull them out from their new companies where they are currently working. It's a challenge to recruit new people now. We also cannot hire new workers from abroad. Workers in Kuwait are getting fewer and fewer as no additional recruits are added to the workforce," Abu Ahmad said.

Apart from manpower shortages, there are more pressing concerns on the back of 17 months of closure. "Do you think property owners will easily allow us to reopen without payment for their property rentals? They won't allow us to reopen until we pay the rent due. As for me, I didn't pay rent for five months. The rest of the months I paid because I was anticipating reopening way back in March or April of this year. But there are shisha cafés I know that haven't paid anything, and the shops are empty and closed. They want us to pay the past dues. Non-payment

would mean no reopening," Abu Ahmad said.

Shisha providers are required to sterilize the waterpipe before and after each individual use and serve it along with a disposable smoking hose. Even as they open, they are also required to observe social distancing and a capacity limit of not more than 50 percent. In May, the government agreed to the reopening of cafés and restaurants in the country as part of a plan for a gradual return to normal life, but kept a ban on shisha imposed since March 2020.

Yolly, a Filipina shisha server, is happy to be back at her old job, since it means a return to full-time employment. "My boss told me to come back. Since I was just a part-timer in my job since last year as a cleaner, I am happy to be working again at my old job," she said. "My boss is very understanding; he allowed me to work from July last year as a part-timer. My visa was not cancelled and I was earning the same money I earned at the shisha café. From March 2020 until July 2020, my

boss paid my salary regularly. But towards the end of July, he told me to look for a part-time job. So I searched and got a cleaning job. Now my boss has told me to prepare the café because we are opening on Thursday (yesterday)," she said.

Earlier, the Kuwaiti Union of Shisha cafés welcomed the decision of the health authorities to allow the reopening of shisha cafés. The union promised to use disposable hoses and ensure all workers adhere to wearing masks and gloves, serve drinks in disposable paper and plastic cups and wash and sterilize the shisha after every use.

Shisha is a widely popular activity among Kuwait youth, with more than 57 percent of adult males participating in shisha smoking at least occasionally. Shisha (also referred to as hookah, waterpipe or hubbly-bubbly) is a traditional method of smoking in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.

Local

Small businesses fight for survival

Thousands of small and medium businesses in Kuwait are in the doldrums after being pummeled by the pandemic, potentially torpedoing a private sector central to efforts to remake the oil-dependent economy. The government, which spends more than half of its annual budget on the salaries of citizens who mostly work in public sector jobs, has encouraged them to set up their own businesses over the past decade.

The aim has been to ease state finances, reduce reliance on foreign residents who make up most of the population, and also help Kuwait diversify away from oil, which brings in 90 percent of state revenues but is looking increasingly precarious as the world moves away from fossil fuels. Yet much of that decade of work to foster small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which involved about \$500 million of state financing, has been undone by the COVID-19 outbreak, according to many industry experts.

According to a Reuters report, most of the 25,000 to 30,000 SMEs in Kuwait were operating with limited cash reserves even before the pandemic struck and were unable to weather a halt in operations due to lockdowns, investment management firm Markaz said. In an indication of the scale of the problem, Abdulaziz Al-Mubarak, head of the Kuwait Federation for Small and Medium Enterprises, said that about 8,600 entrepreneurs were currently switching from working in the private sector to the government.

He warned that the cash crunch could "end the whole sector". That's a major problem for Kuwait, where SMEs generate 11.9 percent of GDP by gross value added, employ tens of thousands of people and play an important role in sectors like wholesale and retail trade, food and drinks, hospitality and construction.

Take Mohammed Al-Blushi. His factory making trucks and smart homes from light steel suffered heavy losses due to COVID-19 restrictions. He has been forced to shrink his staff to just three employees from about 60. He came up with half of the KD 800,000 financ-

ing to start his business four years ago, with the rest coming from a loan from a state fund. The 36-year-old now fears he could default on the loan, and is holding out for further support from the government such as compensation for its pandemic losses or exemptions from certain debts. "I will not give up," he told Reuters. "The crisis will subside, God willing."

Law comes too late

Expatriates, mostly from Arab and Asian nations, make up about 70 percent of the 4.6 million-strong population of Kuwait. Kuwait, like other oil exporters, was slammed by the double shock of low crude prices and the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the economy shrinking by 8 percent last year. On March 30 this year, the National Assembly passed a law on financing for SMEs, but for some business owners it will prove too late.

The law gives those affected by the pandemic access to funding of up to KD 250,000, of which the government guarantees 80 percent. Many SME owners say banks impose onerous financing conditions under the scheme, like proving the operational efficiency of projects. The repayment period is five years with a possible additional two years of grace.

A senior government source, who declined to be named, told Reuters some SMEs were reluctant to make use of the law because it offered loans rather than compensation, the state didn't fully guarantee the financing and the limit on the repayment time. However, the official said the legislation could be amended to provide more support business owners, if necessary. "All solutions are available to the government to support owners of SMEs," he added, without elaborating.

An amendment to Kuwait's bankruptcy law, which began to be implemented last month and freed SME owners from the threat of imprisonment from debt defaults, has offered some relief. Yet entrepreneurs are still exposed to risks such as seizure of assets or insolvency if they can't settle their debts, said Fawaz Khaled Alkhateeb, an academic at the Kuwait International Law School.



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Welcoming the **date** **season** in Kuwait

Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait's dates are famous the world over for their juicy, lush sweetness. Summer time and especially August is prime date season, when the luscious fruit ripens to its full, bursting best. Dates come in an array of varieties including: Ajwa, Birhi, Ikhlass, Khudary, Makboosh and Sukari.

Known in Arabic as tamr (dried date), dates have been popular in the Arabian Peninsula since the earliest recorded history and are referenced in the Holy

Quran more than 20 times. In Kuwait, date palms provide the majority of fruit produced in the country. The Kuwaiti people often plant palm trees in their gardens. Fruit bearing palm trees can also be found in local parks, along streets and on the seaside.

The moderate warm and hot weather in most of the Arab region is the most appropriate environment for palm trees making the Arab world the first in growing palm trees in the world.

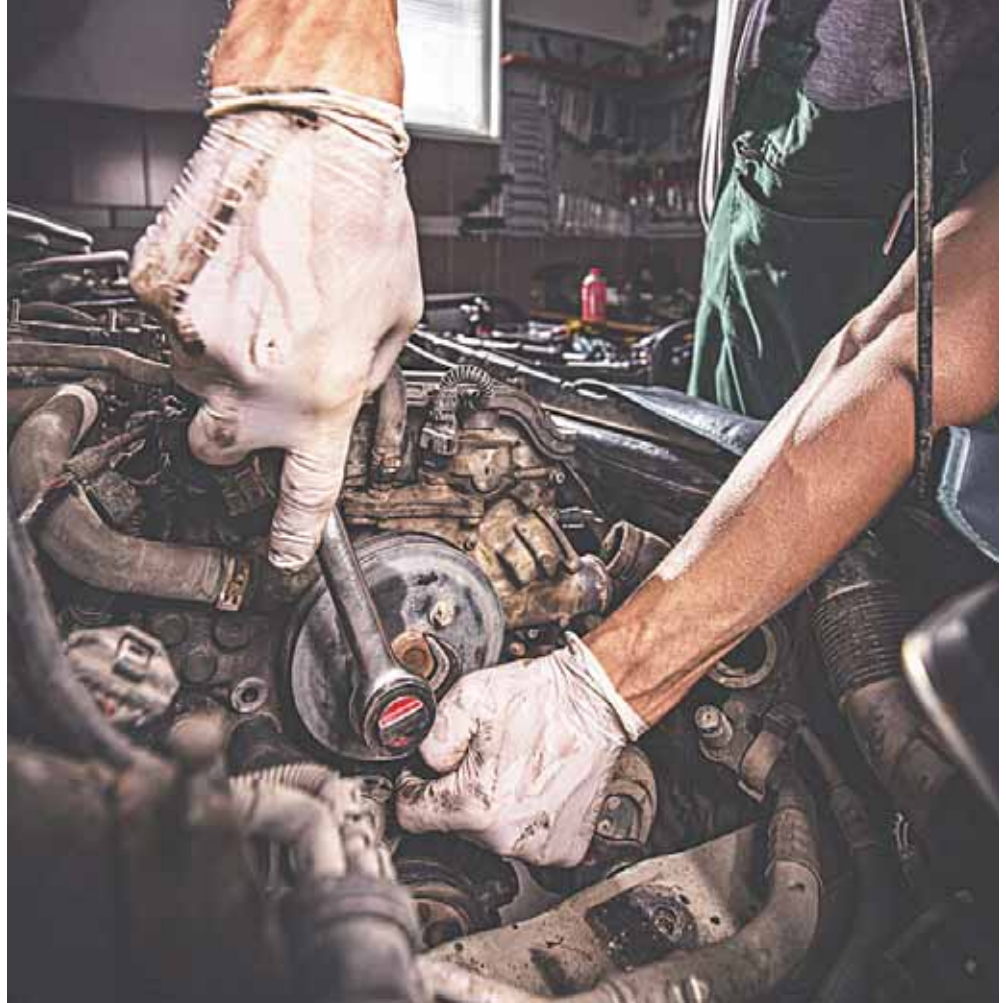


Local



Local

Tips for repairing your car



By Nawara Fattahova

Getting a car fixed is a hassle. For those who have bought a brand new vehicle from the agency, they will enjoy peace of mind for a few years, and will have all checks and service done at the agency, usually free of charge, depending on the offer they got when buying the car.

With used vehicles, especially those over five years old, most people prefer to repair their vehicles at various garages and not at the agency. Usually people take word of mouth as recommendation for a good or honest garage. This recommendation is not always reliable, and some people just go to any nearby garage.

Some customers have been cheated by the garage, either over the service or the spare parts. Most customers don't bother to complain at the consumer protection department of the ministry of commerce, and they don't even know about the warranty they should receive by law. Some reputable garages agree to redo their repair work free of charge.

The most important thing to do when you take your car to any garage is to get a receipt of your payment with the description of the service done. The ministry of commerce has issued a list of car repair services that have a warranty,

whose period differs according to the service.

If you got service done on your vehicle and you were not satisfied, then you should go back to the garage and ask them to fix it. If they refuse, you can go to the consumer protection department with the invoice, and an inspector will go with you to the garage and force them to

correct their work or refund you the money if the problem was caused by the garage's negligence.

If you don't have any particular garage to go to, then it's always better to check with two or three different garages to compare the price estimate. For instance, if the air conditioning has stopped working, it can be a simple case of antifreeze leak-

age which can be refilled after fixing the leak. If the belt is cut, it can be replaced easily. The worst and most expensive repair is of the compressor.

But a dishonest garage will always try to convince you that it's the compressor that's gone to make money from you. If you are told this, always check with at least two other

garages. If you have to change the compressor, you can always get a used one. If the technical problem is not clear and you didn't get a logical answer from the garage, it's better to get a computer check done, which is also recommended if you are buying a used vehicle, as this advanced check should show all the malfunctions and faults in the vehicle.

Some mechanical parts are also very expensive at the agency, which you can find for less than half the price at the scrap yard, but this place is very far away. It used to be in Amghara, but shifted to Salmi a few years back. For many, especially women, it's almost impossible to go there. But most of the garages go there to bring parts. There are also drivers who bring parts from there twice a week and only charge KD 2 for delivery.

Some parts can be found outside the agency and are called commercial parts. They cost maybe less than half the price of genuine parts, but their quality is not as good. If you change a part at the garage, you can ask for the old part that was changed and the invoice of the new part, or you can buy the part yourself and give it to the garage to replace.



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Local

Kuwait voices deep concerns on threats to maritime navigation

Cabinet warns against COVID complacency, names new Amiri Diwan minister

KUWAIT: The Cabinet on Wednesday expressed deep concerns about the dangerous consequences of the threats to security and safety of maritime navigation in the waters leading to the Arabian Gulf and waters surrounding the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

The Cabinet, in a meeting held at Seif Palace under the chairmanship of the HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, also voiced backing to the presidential statement issued by the UN Security Council on Aug 9 on the importance of ensuring maritime safety and safeguarding oceans' legitimate use, according to a statement read out following the meeting by Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah.

It noted the UNSC statement has outlined the international references and laws related to the protection of the maritime routes, which are lifelines for the global economy. The Cabinet reiterated Kuwait's call for all parties to adhere to relevant international conventions and treaties, mainly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the 2000 United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The government also expressed Kuwait's readiness to work with the international community to retain the security and safety of maritime routes and ensure the unhindered movement of ships along global trade routes.

The Cabinet also warned the public against complacency when it comes to compliance with COVID-19 health measures as ministers said they are satisfied with the latest drop in cases, deaths and hospitalizations. This came as Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah briefed ministers on developments regarding the virus as the country prepares for a gradual, safe post-pandemic transition.

The minister said that the COVID-19 recovery-to-infection ratio has risen to 97.3 percent as the nationwide vaccination campaign continues to witness a huge turnout of nationals and expatriates alike at centers across the country. On this, ministers expressed their appreciation and gratitude for the public's commitment to health measures and the efforts of frontliners in responding to the pandemic.

The Education Ministry's plans for the upcoming 2021-22 academic year for both public and private schools across the country were also discussed. Education Minister Ali Al-Mudhaf briefed the Cabinet on the ministry's coordination with the health ministry and the precautionary measures in place as pupils prepare for a return to in-person learning.

The Cabinet also approved a draft decree to appoint a new Minister of State for Amiri Diwan Affairs, naming Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Al-Sabah to the role, the government said. The draft proposal has been referred to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, pending his approval, the Cabinet said on its official Twitter account.

On Yemen, the Cabinet strongly condemned the continued attempts of the Yemeni Houthi militias to threaten the security of the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The continuity and escalation of these hostile actions which target the security of the kingdom and the stability of the whole region and ignore the international community's efforts to end the conflict in Yemen are blatant violations of the international law and the international humanitarian law, it said.

The international community should take a swift action to stop these acts and hold perpetrators accountable to their actions, the Cabinet added. It voiced Kuwait's full support for Saudi Arabia in all the measures it takes to maintain its



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs a Cabinet meeting at Seif Palace on Wednesday. —KUNA

security, stability and sovereignty. It welcomed the appointment of Hans Grundberg as the new UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to Yemen.

The Cabinet wished him all success in his mission to help find a solution to the Yemeni conflict based on the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative and its executive mechanisms, outcome of the Intra-Yemeni dialogue, and the UN Security Council resolution no. 2216. The Cabinet renewed Kuwait's backing to all international endeavors to find a political solution to the Yemeni crisis with the main goal of putting an end to the sufferings of the Yemeni people and boosting security and stability in the region.

Meanwhile, the government expressed sympathy and solidarity with Algeria, Turkey and Greece which are witnessing huge wildfires that left material and human losses. The Cabinet extended condolences to the three countries for their human losses and wished speedy recovery for those injured by the fire. It also

wished success for the local authorities in controlling the fire soon.

In this regard, the Cabinet expressed appreciation of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf's directives to offer a helping hand to the three friendly countries and to contribute to their efforts to extinguish the wildfires. The Cabinet also instructed all the relevant Kuwaiti government bodies to offer all kinds of support to these countries to bring fire under control, through dispatching fire-fighting and rescue equipment and teams.

At the onset of the meeting, Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad briefed the Cabinet about his recent visit to Tehran to represent HH the Amir at the inauguration ceremony of new Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. He pointed out that he also handed the Iranian leader a letter from HH the Amir. The Cabinet congratulated the Iranian president on the post and wished success in his missions in a way that enhances the region's security and stability. —KUNA

Kuwaiti import funding rose to \$1.8bn in June

KUWAIT: Financing of Kuwaiti imports jumped in June to KD 570 million (\$1.8 billion), rising by 92.9 percent compared to May, according to statistics released by the Central Bank of Kuwait yesterday. The CBK's department of economic research said in the report that money supply (M2) rose one percent in June, reaching KD 40.7 billion (\$134 billion). Deposits of the private sector in the local banks in Kuwaiti dinars climbed one percent in June, reaching KD 34.9 billion (\$115 billion), while the private sector's

deposits in foreign currencies jumped by 15 percent, reaching KD 2.3 billion (\$7.5 billion).

Total local banks' claims on the CBK in dinar in the form of the central bank bonds, settled at KD 2.9 billion (\$9.6 billion) while interest rate on one-year treasury bonds settled at 1.375 percent. Meanwhile, local banks' total assets rose by 1.1 percent recording KD 74.9 billion (\$247 billion), according to the CBK statistical report, which also noted that net foreign assets rose by 3.1 percent, reaching KD 5.8 billion (\$19 billion).

Time deposits with the CBK jumped by 12.5 percent in June, reaching KD 2.1 billion (\$6.9 billion), while cash credit facilities rose by one percent reaching KD 40.7 billion (\$134 billion). Average USD rate against the KWD settled in June at the level recorded in May, amounting to 300 fils. —KUNA

Kuwaiti official: Arab states have concern for youth

CAIRO: A Kuwaiti official yesterday affirmed that Arab states dedicate significant concern for the young citizens. Walid Al-Ansari, director of voluntary work at the Public Authority for Youth and representative of the Kuwaiti Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, made the assertion during a gathering celebrating International Youth Day.

"Arab youth have proven day after day that they are the hard number in the international youth equation," he said, noting that young Arabs



CAIRO: Walid Al-Ansari, director of voluntary work at the Public Authority for Youth, speaks during an event celebrating International Youth Day. —KUNA

have made some noticeable and successful projects at various levels. He conveyed to the conferees greetings from minister Mutairi. —KUNA

Local

Kuwait expects community immunity by Sept-end: PM

Mega projects like Silk City to provide job opportunities to graduates

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah said yesterday that the government expects to achieve what is called “herd immunity” against the coronavirus pandemic by the end of September, when 70 percent of the population will be vaccinated. Speaking to university graduates at Sabah Al-Salem University City, the prime minister said so far some 2.6 million people have been vaccinated, which represents around 66 percent of the country’s population.

By the end of next month, the vaccination rate is expected to hit 70 percent, “which is sufficient to achieve community immunity” against the pandemic. Over the past few weeks, Kuwait has seen a sharp decrease in the number of new coronavirus cases, the number of patients and those in intensive care units.

HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled also affirmed that the New Kuwait 2035 vision (the national development strategy) can only be attained with employment of Kuwaiti youth capacities. In the dialogue he held yesterday with the outstanding university graduates, coinciding with International Youth Day on Aug 12, the prime minister declared that 10 of the top students will be enrolled at the government-affiliated entrepreneurs’ center to be involved in new development enterprises. Advanced nations search for distinguished students to employ them in key projects, as they consider young citizens as a significant investment, he added.

Sheikh Sabah urged the graduates “not to worry” over “stiffness” in the relationship between the government and the National Assembly. Addressing the current political atmosphere in the country, the premier told the crowd that “all matters can be handled according to political discourse practices”.

“We had a major challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, with our children missing out on (in-person) education,” he noted. “Now is the time for you to know what you will face behind university walls. There are mega government projects like Silk City, Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port and Entertainment City, as well as investment opportunities on the man-made islands of Sheikh Jaber Causeway, in addition to the biofuel and new airport projects. All

these will provide job opportunities to our graduates,” Sheikh Sabah added, conveying greetings, congratulations, and wishes of further success and progress from HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to the graduates.

Fund posts unprecedented profits

Sheikh Sabah also announced that the future generations fund has achieved unprecedented profits. “Your country is rich, as we enjoy excellent financial solvency. However, we have some shortfalls in the economy. It is insensible to have a single source of income for the Kuwaiti economy,” he said. Much has been achieved to transform Kuwait into a commercial-financial hub, however strains between the executive and legislative authorities “have placed a host of issues backwards”, the prime minister revealed.

In response to a question on how to employ the public debt law for executing mega projects and pave way for diversifying the income, the prime minister re-affirmed that “the state’s financial solvency is excellent and flaws exist in the undiversified economy”. He indicated that Kuwait is following the example of other nations to resort to borrowing for coping with financial or economic burdens.

HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled confirmed the importance of involving companies contracting with government projects to employ Kuwaiti youth in their projects. In his speech, he stressed that Kuwaiti youth are the foundation of all developments plans, expressing his optimism in their abilities to build the future of their country. He stated that 42 Kuwaiti male and female engineers are currently working on the new Kuwait airport project with the international company investing in the airport to gain experience and undertake project management and maintenance in the future.

The PM referred to the health crisis during the last period that caused delays in many projects, saying, “it’s time to give these projects more attention and focus; youths can be a major part of these projects”. Regarding Kuwait’s development plan for 2035, the prime minister expressed hope that the National Assembly will speed up the approval of amendments to the law



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah addresses graduates at Sabah Al-Salem University City yesterday. —KUNA

on the Silk City project.

The project, which extends over 1,800 sq km, can provide more than 100,000 job opportunities for citizens, in addition to diversifying income sources. Sheikh Sabah also stressed the importance of Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port project that is expected to reach an estimated capacity of 1,800,000 containers a year, and would provide great job opportunities for citizens, in addition to its financial benefits to the state. The Entertainment City, Jaber Causeway, Clean Fuels Project and Failaka Island are all mega projects that would provide great job opportunities for Kuwaiti youths and citizens.

He pointed out that the Cabinet holds continuous meetings to follow up on projects divided into short, medium and long-term. “Despite the health crisis due to COVID-19, we will continue our lives according to health requirements until the pandemic ends gradually,” he concluded.

UN official hails Kuwaiti youth

KUWAIT: Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and Resident Coordinator to Kuwait Tariq Al-Sheikh praised the role of Kuwaiti youth, their initiatives and effective participation in their society, and their vital role in facing challenges and crises in various fields. On the occasion of the United Nations celebrating International Youth Day, Sheikh explained in a press statement yesterday that Kuwaiti youth are always looking forward to change, learn and contribute to improving life.

He said that there are youth groups that have provided environmental friendly products such as recycled food waste to be used as fertilizer and greening neighborhoods. These small businesses have a great impact on the world. He pointed out that many young people in Kuwait expressed their desire for greening empty spaces as one of the most effective ways to reduce car-

bon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Sheikh praised the efforts of Kuwait through the national dialogues held by the UN in cooperation with the public and private sectors and youth groups that invested in improving the food supply chain. He pointed out that the youth group, which constitutes the vast majority of the population density in Kuwait, exceeded all expectations during the COVID crisis by providing support to their government and society in several areas such as health, environment, food systems and others.

He praised the statement of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on this occasion, in which he stressed that young people are on the frontlines of the struggle to build a better future for all, noting that the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for them. He also praised the statement of UN Development Program Resident Representative Heidko Hadzialek, in which he said “young people make up the majority of Kuwaiti volunteers who worked day and night during the pandemic to provide support and food to migrant workers and families in need”. —KUNA

150 kg of hashish found in air coolers



KUWAIT: Shuwaikh Port customs officers discovered 150 kg of hashish hidden in air coolers that arrived from a neighboring country. The discovery was made when an officer had doubts and decided to search the container thoroughly.



Greece facing 'ecological disaster' from wildfires

Fake news and mistrust leave Bulgaria lagging in COVID jab race

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GHAZNI, Afghanistan: Taliban fighters stand along the roadside in Ghazni yesterday, as Taliban move closer to Afghan capital after taking Ghazni city. —AFP

Taliban inch closer to Afghan capital

Militants take Ghazni city after overrunning 10 provincial capitals

KABUL: The Taliban seized the strategic Afghan city of Ghazni yesterday, just 150 kilometers (95 miles) from Kabul, their most important gain in a lightning offensive that has seen them overrun 10 provincial capitals in a week. The interior ministry confirmed the fall of the city, which lies along the major Kabul-Kandahar highway and serves as a gateway between the capital and militant strongholds in the south. "The enemy took control," spokesman Mirwais Stanikzai said in a message to media, adding later the city's governor had been arrested by Afghan security forces. Pro-Taliban Twitter feeds showed video of him being escorted out of Ghazni by Taliban fighters and sent on his way in a convoy, prompting speculation in the capital that the government was angered with how easily the provincial administration capitulated.

As security forces retreated across the country, Kabul handed a proposal to Taliban negotiators in Qatar offering a power-sharing deal in return for an end to fighting, according to a member of the government's team in Doha who asked not to be named. A second negotiator,

Ghulam Farooq Majroh, said the Taliban had been given an offer about a "government of peace" without providing more specifics. Authorities in Kabul have now effectively lost most of northern and western Afghanistan and are left holding a scattered archipelago of contested cities also dangerously at risk.

'No leverage'

The conflict has escalated dramatically since May, when US-led forces began the final stage of a troop withdrawal due to end later this month following a 20-year occupation. The loss of Ghazni pile more pressure on the country's already overstretched airforce, needed to bolster Afghanistan's dispersed security forces who have increasingly been cut off from reinforcements by road. Pro-Taliban social media accounts also boasted of the vast spoils of war their fighters had recovered in recent days, posting photos of armoured vehicles, heavy weapons, and even a drone seized by the insurgents at abandoned Afghan military bases.

In less than a week the insurgents have taken

10 provincial capitals and encircled the biggest city in the north, the traditional anti-Taliban bastion of Mazar-i-Sharif. Fighting was also raging in Kandahar and Lashkar Gar-pro-Taliban heartlands in the south—as well as Herat in the west. There were also reports that hundreds of troops at Herat's Shindand Air Base—one of the country's largest military facilities—had deployed to the city to boost its defenses. An official in Lashkar Gah said Taliban fighters were inching closer to government positions after a massive car bomb badly damaged the city's police headquarters Wednesday evening.

Prison raids

The blast forced local police to retreat to the governor's office, while around 40 of their colleagues and one senior commander surrendered to the Taliban. And in Kandahar, the Taliban said they had overrun the heavily fortified jail, saying "hundreds of prisoners were released and taken to safety". The Taliban frequently target prisons to release incarcerated fighters and replenish their ranks.

The loss of the prison is a further ominous sign for the country's second city, which has been besieged for weeks by the Taliban. Kandahar was once the stronghold of the Taliban—whose forces coalesced in the eponymously named province in the early 1990s—and its capture would serve as both a tactical and psychological victory for the militants. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced by the fighting that has enveloped the country.

In recent days, Kabul has been swamped by the displaced, who have begun camping out in parks and other public spaces, sparking a fresh humanitarian crisis in the already overtaxed capital. In Washington, defense officials appeared to be grappling with the spiraling situation but insisted that Afghan security forces were still holding their ground. "What we're seeing, a deteriorating security situation, we've been nothing but candid about that," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters Wednesday. "But there are places and there are times, including today, where Afghan forces in the field are putting up a fight." —AFP

International

Dozens detained after Syrian shops attacked in Turkey

Polls show anti-migrant sentiments riding high among many Turks

ANKARA, Turkey: Turkish police yesterday detained dozens of people after a mob of angry men smashed up shops and cars believed to belong to Syrian migrants in the capital Ankara. The unrest broke out late Wednesday in response to a fight between locals and migrants in which one Turkish national was stabbed to death. Images on social media showed dozens of shouting men breaking through police cordons and then attacking cars and shops believed to be owned by Syrian families. They smashed windows with stones and crowbars and tore down the metal grill of one store before breaking in and ransacking its shelves.

Turkish Red Crescent chief Kerem Kinik tweeted an image of a child with streams of blood running down their face who he said had been hurt in the unrest. "When did stoning houses at night become part of our tradition," Kinik demanded. "Many refugees contacted us. They are worried for the safety of their children. They are scared." The Ankara police said they had detained 76 people who were either suspected of involvement in the violence or of disseminating incendiary social media posts. The Anadolu state news agency said two "foreign nationals" also have been arrested and charged with homicide over the deadly fight.

Anti-migrant sentiment

The unrest in Ankara comes with polls showing anti-migrant sentiments riding high among many Turks. Turkey has become home to 3.6 million Syrians under a deal it struck with the European Union in 2016 to help avert the continent's migrant crisis. The sides are currently working on updating the terms. Ankara has received billions of dollars in exchange for setting up camps in the southeast that are now home to more than four million people. Turkey's main opposition party last month made waves by vowing to send Syrians "back home" if it came to power in a general election scheduled for 2023.

Analysts link some of the resentment to economic instability that accelerated in Turkey with the coronavirus pandemic. The Teyit fact-checking platform has been debunking numerous negative social media posts about migrants—many of them Afghan—this week. The issue is gaining added attention because of sweeping gains being made by Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, with some fearing a mass exodus from the war-torn country. Turkey is on one of the main transit routes for Afghans seeking shelter in Europe. — AFP



ANKARA: Men smash up shops and homes believed to be owned by Syrian families during an unrest, which broke out in response to a fight between locals and migrants in Ankara, yesterday. — AFP

Algeria sentences journalist to eight months in jail

ALGIERS: Algerian journalist Rabah Kareche, who reported on a protest movement by the Tuareg minority, was sentenced yesterday to serve eight months behind bars, his newspaper Liberte said. It said a court in the southern town of Tamanrasset handed Kareche, who was arrested in April, a one-year term with four months suspended. Taking into account time served, he has four months left in prison. He had been charged with "spreading false information liable to damage public order" and accused of posting reports that could trigger "segregation and hatred within society". Kareche was arrested after reporting that the Tuareg, a Berber minority who have long complained of economic and social marginalization, had protested over "expropriation" of their historical lands.

His detention triggered protests from fellow journalists, especially after President Abdelmadjid Tebboune described Kareche as an "arsonist" in an interview before his sentencing. To the dismay of rights and media freedom groups, the gov-



Rabah Kareche

ernment last year criminalized the dissemination of "false news" that "harms national unity". Human Rights Watch has repeatedly accused Algerian authorities of resorting to criminal prosecutions against journalists and others using vaguely worded offenses in the penal code. Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Algeria 146th out of 180 countries and territories in its 2021 World Press Freedom Index. —AFP

Sudan VP Machar's ex-deputy joins rival as infighting grows

JUBA, South Sudan: South Sudanese Vice President Riek Machar's movement suffered a fresh blow yesterday as his deputy quit to join a rival military faction, following deadly clashes between the two sides. At least 32 people were reported dead when violence broke out on Saturday, just days after Machar's foes in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) said they had ousted him as party leader and head of its armed forces. The infighting has raised fears for South Sudan's fragile peace process. The East African bloc IGAD warned this week that the splintering of the SPLM/A-IO "is beyond an intra-party crisis and bears significant immediate and long-term implications" for the world's youngest nation.

Yesterday, Henry Odwar, the movement's deputy chairman and South Sudan's former mining minister, announced that following his resignation from the government a day earlier, he was switching loyalties to General Simon Gatwech Dual, who has led the push to oust Machar. In a signed document seen by AFP, Odwar accused Machar of sidelining other members in a bid to "single-handedly" direct the party's affairs and said the new faction hoped "to steer the movement and chart (a) more democratic and people's centered path."

The two men, who did not share a close personal relationship despite years working together, were reportedly at loggerheads for some time. Odwar's decision to walk away will likely weaken Machar's influence in the Equatoria region, his former deputy's base. Analysts say

the bickering leaves Machar in an increasingly precarious position as he attempts to work alongside his former foe President Salva Kiir to implement a peace process which is already behind schedule.

'A weak partner'

The 2018 agreement ended South Sudan's five-year civil war between forces loyal to Machar and Kiir that cost almost 400,000 lives, as the two men hammered out a power-sharing deal. But the latest fighting within Machar's movement diminishes his negotiating power and in doing so, threatens the peace process, said James Okuk, a South Sudanese policy analyst. "By splitting itself... (the SPLM/A-IO) becomes a weak partner and a weak partner is not good in the implementation of the peace agreement," Okuk told AFP.

"This will give President Kiir an upper hand now to be in control of politics in the country," Nicholas Haysom, the head of the UN mission in South Sudan, yesterday joined calls by IGAD and Kiir's office this week to halt the violence. He urged the "factions, and indeed all signatory parties to work together to overcome their differences peacefully." The warring parties have announced a temporary ceasefire for now, with each blaming the other for launching the early-morning attacks Saturday on rival forces in Upper Nile State which borders Sudan.

South Sudan has struggled with war, famine and chronic political and economic crisis since celebrating its hard-fought independence from Sudan in July 2011. Since he signed the power-sharing deal with Kiir, the 68-year-old Machar has faced growing opposition within his own ranks, with top cadres complaining they had lost out to the ruling party. Machar has said the recent squabbles are aimed at derailing the formation of a unified armed forces command, a key component of the peace deal. — AFP

International

Greece facing 'ecological disaster' from wildfires

More than 100,000 hectares of forests and farmland destroyed

ATHENS, Greece: Hundreds of firefighters battled yesterday to contain new flare-ups in wildfire-ravaged areas of Greece, where summer infernos have caused what the prime minister described as the country's "greatest ecological disaster in decades". However, rain overnight in some areas and falling temperatures appeared to have eased the situation after two weeks of devastating blazes, and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said "we can be more optimistic today" than previous days. Greece's most severe heatwave in decades has fanned blazes that have destroyed more than 100,000 hectares of forests and farmland, the country's worst wildfire damage since 2007, the European Forest Fire Information System said yesterday.

The fires have left three dead, hundreds homeless, forced thousands to flee, and caused economic and environmental devastation. Greece is just one of a number of countries in the Mediterranean region that have been hit by a savage fire season which authorities have blamed on climate change. Mitsotakis yesterday described the "mega fires" as Greece's "greatest ecological disaster in decades". "Climate crisis is here... and it tells us that everything must change," he told reporters, pointing to other devastating fires in Turkey, Italy and Algeria. The prime minister said firefighters, volunteers and locals had saved "countless" homes and busi-

nesses, but dozens of properties had been lost nonetheless. Mitsotakis said that 150 homes have been lost in greater Athens over the last week, while the count is ongoing on the island of Evia, which accounts for more than half of the area burned nationwide.

'Can't take it anymore'

A fire service official told AFP yesterday that "the fire fronts are still active" on Evia and in the Arcadia region of the Peloponnese peninsula and "fires are constantly flaring up" in both areas. In the north of Evia, where hundreds have been evacuated by boat, 858 firefighters including reinforcements from Ukraine, Romania and Serbia, were battling the flames. And there was fresh concern in Athens after a new fire broke out yesterday morning in the industrial zone of Aspropyrgos, 20 kilometers (12 miles) northwest of the capital. At the height of the fires in early August, the flames had reached the gates of Athens, filling the sky of the city of four million inhabitants with grey smoke.

But after weeks of punishing temperatures often well over 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), a lower 33 degrees Celsius was forecasted for yesterday. The falling temperatures and overnight rain in Evia, the Peloponnese and central Greece had helped improve the situation, said Stathis Koulis, the mayor of Gortynia. The



GOUVES, Greece: This file picture taken near the village of Gouves, on Euboea Island, second largest Greek island, shows a raging fire. —AFP

village of Gortynia in a mountainous area of Arcadia 200 kilometers (120 miles) west of Athens has become the primary focus in the Peloponnese, with deep ravines posing a challenge to firefighters. Twenty villages have been evacuated in the area over the past few days and 680 firefighters, including more than a hundred sent to help from France, and five water-dropping air-

craft have been relentlessly battling the flames.

"I can't take it anymore," said farmer Kostis Angelou as he wandered between the corpses of his goats, all 372 of them burnt by a fire that devoured forests on Evia. The 44-year-old managed to survive by spending hours under an irrigation water pipe, surrounded by flames. "A saint saved me," he said. —AFP

Death toll from Turkey's flash floods rises to five

TIZI OUZOU, Algeria: Turkish rescuers distributed food and relocated thousands of people into student dormitories yesterday as the death toll from flash floods that swept across several Black Sea regions rose to five. Heavy storms descended on Turkey's northern stretches just as rescuers reported bringing hundreds of wildfires that have killed eight people since late July under near total control in the south. Turkey has been grappling with drought and a rapid succession of natural disasters that world scientists believe are becoming more frequent and violent because of climate change.

Heavy rains late Tuesday produced flash floods that turned streets into running rivers and sparked mudslides that buckled roads in three northern regions. Rescuers were forced to evacuate a regional hospital holding 45 patients—four of them in intensive care—in the region around the coastal city of Sinop on Wednesday. Images on television and social media showed water rising to the level of street signs in some towns. Turkey's disaster response authority said five people had lost their lives while the search for one person who disappeared in the northern city of Bartin continued. It said more than 1,000 rescuers were working in the region while Turkish Red Crescent teams were distributing food packages and hot meals. —AFP

Wildfires rage as Algeria observes day of mourning

TIZI OUZOU, Algeria: Blazes raged across northern Algeria yesterday as the country observed a national day of mourning for dozens of people killed in the latest wildfires to sweep the Mediterranean. The North African country has been in the grip of devastating fires since Monday that have claimed 69 lives — 41 civilians and 28 soldiers. Soldiers and civilian volunteers have joined firefighters on multiple fronts in the effort to extinguish the blazes that have been fanned by windy and tinder-dry conditions. In Tizi Ouzou district, the area with the highest casualty toll, an AFP journalist reported entire sectors of forest going up in smoke as far as the eye can see.

Villagers forced to evacuate in order to escape the flames began trickling back to their homes, overwhelmed by the scale of the damage. "I have nothing left. My workshop, my car, my flat. Even the tiles were destroyed," one of them told AFP. But he said he had "managed to save his family", while adding that "neighbours died or lost their relatives".

'Surge of solidarity'

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune declared three days of national mourning starting from yesterday, and authorities say they suspect widespread arson after so many fires erupted in such a short space of time. On the fourth day of the wildfires, efforts to overcome the blazes are continuing in many regions where civilians and soldiers often with limited means joined the fight. Images of trapped villagers, terrified



TIZI-OUZOU, Algeria: Burned houses stand amidst charred trees, following a wildfire in the forested hills of the Kabylie region, east of the Algerian capital Algiers. —AFP

livestock and forested hillsides reduced to blackened stumps have been shared on social media. Algeria is also chartering two firefighting planes from the European Union, aircraft recently used to stop fires in Greece. France announced on Wednesday that it was sending three more aircraft.

Neighboring Morocco, with whom Algeria has long had strained ties over the Western Sahara, also expressed a readiness to help by providing two planes. Faced with the scale of the disaster, pleas for help are multiplying in Algeria and beyond. "Individuals and associations are mobilizing... by organizing collections of clothes, foodstuffs, medicines and hygiene products," said the TSA news website, calling it a "surge of solidarity". —AFP

International

France suspends expulsions of migrants to Afghanistan

8,886 asylum applications was applied by Afghans in 2020

PARIS: France last month suspended expelling Afghan migrants whose asylum applications had been rejected, due to the deteriorating security situation in the country as the Taliban presses an offensive, the government said yesterday. The French interior ministry told AFP in a statement that the policy had been in place since early July, after similar announcements of the suspension of such expulsions by Germany and the Netherlands.

"We are watching the situation closely alongside our European partners," the French interior ministry said. Afghans in 2020 accounted for the most asylum requests in France, with 8,886 applications. Germany and the Netherlands said Wednesday they have stopped forced repatriations of Afghan migrants because of deteriorating security in Afghanistan, a sharp change from their previous position. Officials had said as late as Tuesday that both governments had joined their counterparts in Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Greece to write to the EU's executive arm saying they should be allowed to press on with expulsions of Afghan migrants if their asylum bids fail.

Afghanistan urged the EU in July to cease forced deportations of Afghan migrants for three months as security forces battle the Taliban offensive ahead of the full US military pullout from Afghanistan on August 31. The Taliban have overrun 10 provincial capitals in a week in a lightning offensive, the latest the strategic Afghan city of Ghazni, just 150 kilometers (95 miles) from Kabul.

The government has now effectively lost most of northern and western Afghanistan and is left holding a scattered collection of contested cities also dangerously at risk of falling to the Taliban. The conflict has escalated dramatically since May, when US-led

forces began the final stage of a troop withdrawal due to end later this month following a 20-year occupation. Nordic countries to offer asylum for Afghan staff

Roughly 45 Afghans employed by Denmark in the conflict-hit country will be offered temporary asylum as international troops withdraw, with other Nordic countries set to follow suit. "We have a joint responsibility to help those Afghans who are now under threat because of their ties and contribution to Denmark's engagement in Afghanistan," the Danish foreign ministry said in a statement late on Wednesday, noting that the country's security situation was "grave".

Afghans who worked for the Danish armed forces or embassy will be offered evacuation to Denmark and a two-year residence permit, the ministry said. Finland's Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto said the government was exploring ways of evacuating "at least dozens" of Afghans who have worked for the Nordic nation, echoing a similar promise from neighboring Sweden.

International coalition forces are due to complete their withdrawal from Afghanistan next month against a backdrop of swelling violence as cities previously under government control continue to fall to the Taliban. Last month the first group of Afghans employed by the United States were evacuated, with Germany and the UK also relocating their local staff. The Taliban is thought to have killed hundreds of Afghans who have worked for overseas forces, and their families. Denmark and several other EU countries last week urged the European Commission to continue to allow deportations of rejected Afghan asylum seekers, despite a call from Kabul to halt the returns. —AFP

"l'Électorat", rather than "les Électeurs et les Électrices"—the masculine and feminine forms of the word "voters". But formats like "les Electeur.rice.s" have now started appearing. France's education ministry has recently banned the use of such formulations, and in neighbouring Switzerland, a string of politicians, mainly from the right, are also campaigning for them to be wiped off the page. Benjamin Roduit of The Centre party brought forward a motion in parliament in March which has yet to be debated—asking the Swiss federal administration to adhere to the established rules of the French language.

How would you like your 'buerger'?

In June, the Swiss Federal Chancellery banned the use in German of asterisks and other signs that include the masculine, feminine and non-binary forms of words, believing they do not achieve their aim—and instead "cause a whole host of linguistic problems". It gave as an example this sentence: "Der*die Leiter*in bezeichnet eine*n geeignete*n Mitarbeiter*in, die*der ihn*sie bei Abwesenheit vertritt", which means "the director shall designate a suitable member of staff to replace him/her in his/her absence." For the word "citizens" in its plural form—"Buerger" for men and "Buergerinnen" for women, which turns into "Buerger" if both men and women are involved—the federal administration will now simply use both in succession.

In French, though, some have been using the formulation "citoyen-nete" for citizens, with the "ne" denoting women and the "x" for those uncomfortable with either the masculine or feminine spelling. In recent months, Switzerland's French-language public television service RTS has also fanned the flames by replacing "Bonsoir tous" ("good evening, everyone", using the masculine plural "tous") with "Bonsoir et bienvenue"—a neutral "good evening and welcome". The Swiss branch of Defend the French Language wrote an open letter asking RTS to reverse the change. Branch president Aurele Challet is also attempting to gather enough signatures to trigger a public vote on the issue. The initiative "aims to ban so-called inclusive writing throughout Switzerland". —AFP



GHAZNI, Afghanistan: A Taliban fighter stands guard at the entrance of the police headquarters in Ghazni yesterday as Taliban move closer to Afghan capital after taking Ghazni city. —AFP

Germany to end Afghanistan aid if Taliban take power

BERLIN, Germany: Germany said yesterday that it would stop sending financial support to Afghanistan in the event that the Taliban succeeded in seizing power in the country. Speaking to the German broadcaster ZDF, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the Taliban know that Afghanistan cannot survive without international aid. "We will not send another cent to this country if the Taliban take complete control, introduce Sharia law and turn it into a caliphate," Maas said. Germany sends Afghanistan 430 million euros (\$504 million) in aid a year, making it one of the biggest donors to the strife-hit nation. Since international troops began their withdrawal from Afghanistan in May, the Taliban have taken control of large swathes of territory. Most recently, the Taliban seized the provincial capital Ghazni, 150 kilometers (90 miles) from the capital Kabul. German soldiers were deployed as part of a NATO force in Afghanistan for nearly 20 years until June.

Speaking to radio station Deutschlandfunk, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer confirmed that Afghans who had worked with German forces locally would be brought to Germany to protect them from Taliban retaliation. "There's a clear commitment to get them out of there," Kramp-Karrenbauer said, but added that there was a "bottleneck" in Afghanistan, limiting exits. Local officials will only allow Afghan citizens to leave the country if they have a passport, which many do not. "Without these travel documents, people can't get to the airport or on the plane," Kramp-Karrenbauer said. "The foreign ministry is seeking to dissuade the Afghan government from using this practice." When asked about the gains made by Taliban insurgents in the country in his interview with ZDF, Maas referred back to the decision of the United States to withdraw from the country. "This meant that all NATO forces had to leave the country as well, because without American capabilities... no one country can send their soldiers there safely," Maas said. —AFP

Swiss voters may get last word on 'inclusive' writing

GENEVA, Switzerland: Ensuring gender neutrality in writing is a tricky business, and nowhere more so than in Switzerland which uses four languages and may soon put the issue to the popular vote. Furious over inclusive writing making its way into officialdom, the media and schools, the Swiss branch of the Defend the French Language association is hoping to gather enough signatures to trigger a vote, as is possible under the country's direct democracy system. Wrestling with language is part of the national identity in Switzerland, where German, French and Italian are used—plus a fourth official language: Romansh. French and Italian nouns have either a masculine or feminine gender, while German nouns have a masculine, feminine or neutral gender.

In French, Italian and German grammar, the masculine takes precedence over the feminine in situations describing both men and women—a rule that activists for gender equality say instills the idea that men are superior to women.

As a result, there has been a rapidly spreading trend of filling words up with dots and stars to include their masculine, feminine and sometimes non-binary forms all in one go. But critics say this is going too far, butchering the written language and creating an unreadable mess.

Since the 1990s, the Swiss government has tried to avoid the problem by leaning towards neutral terminology, where possible, in the three main languages. For example, communications in French referring voters get around the issue by referring to the electorate,

International

Eight feared dead as Russia tourist copter crashes into lake

Horrible weather conditions mar rescue operation

MOSCOW: A helicopter carrying 16 tourists and crew on a sightseeing trip in Russia's far east crashed into a lake yesterday, leaving eight people including a child feared dead and two others in serious condition. The Mi-8 helicopter crash-landed into the icy waters of Kuril Lake in the mountainous Kamchatka peninsula in poor visibility and sank, local authorities said. Staff of the Kronotsky Nature Reserve dispatched boats to the crash site and saved eight people, two of whom are now in intensive care with various injuries. Survivors praised wildlife inspectors for coming to their rescue in a matter of minutes.

"This situation is close to a miracle," said governor Vladimir Solodov. The other eight—including the only child on board and the crew commander—were missing and feared dead.

"We don't have any information about the rest," the governor's spokeswoman, Alla Golovan, told AFP. The wreckage of the helicopter was now lying at a depth of more than 130 meters (420 feet) some 700 meters from the shore, the emergencies ministry said. Rescuers and divers were dispatched to the scene but they did not have the necessary equipment to begin work at that depth. Solodov said the authorities turned to the defense ministry, which sent the necessary underwater equipment. "Robots will be studying the bottom of Kuril Lake at the site of the crash," the governor said.

Rescued from icy water

Recounting the crash and subsequent rescue operation, wildlife inspectors said that the visibility at the lake was no greater than 100 meters, adding that they heard the helicopter but could not see it. When staff of the reserve heard a loud "boom", they said they dispatched two mo-

torboats with four inspectors, who reached the scene in about three to four minutes. "Eight people were on the surface, who we immediately lifted onboard," inspector Yevgeny Denges said in a statement. The inspectors looked for other survivors but could not find anyone, Denges added. Citing the survivors, the nature reserve said that the chopper began to sink nose first and the passengers managed to swim up to the surface from a depth of eight to nine meters.

"The water temperature in the lake is no more than 5-6 degrees (Celsius, 41-43 degrees Fahrenheit), it is impossible to remain in it for a long time," the reserve said. The tourists were from Russia's second city Saint Petersburg. One of the survivors, Viktor Strelkin, said that at the time of the accident he was sleeping and woke up when a stream of water hit him in the face.

"My friend's son was sitting next to me. He was fastened with a security belt and I did not have time to yank him out because I woke up too late," Strelkin said in remarks released by authorities.

'Horrible weather conditions'

Strelkin, who practices free-diving, managed to unfasten himself, breathe in some air before the cabin filled with water, get out of the aircraft and swim up to the surface. Another survivor, state TV presenter Nikolai Korzhenevsky, appeared to blame the crew for the accident. "For some reason we flew there even though we knew about the horrible weather conditions there," he said. Kamchatka is a vast peninsula popular with adventure tourists for its abundant wildlife, live volcanoes and black sand beaches. The aircraft belongs to a firm called Vityaz-Aero, co-owned by local lawmaker Igor Redkin. Earlier this



PETROPAVLOVSK-KAMCHATSKIY, Russia: This handout photograph taken and released by the Kamchatka regional government yesterday shows Emergency Situations Ministry workers taking part in the rescue operation at the spot where a Mi-8 helicopter crash-landed into Kuril Lake in the Kronotsky nature reserve on the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia outside Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. —AFP

week, Redkin made headlines in Russia when he admitted to killing a man he mistook for a bear.

Officials said the helicopter had been in operation since 1984 but was in good condition. The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said it was looking into a potential violation of air safety rules. The regional prosecutor's office launched a probe to study "the implementation of the legislation on the provision of tourist services".

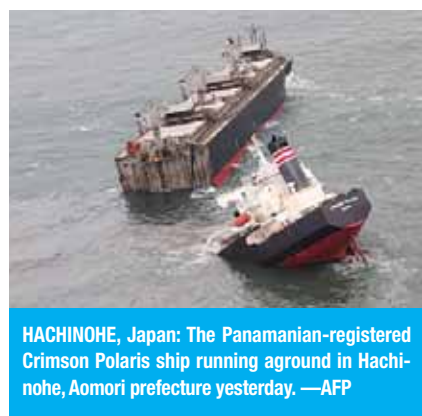
In July, a small plane crashed on the peninsula, killing 19 people when it flew into a cliff. Airplane crashes are fairly common in Russia due to poor maintenance and lax compliance with safety rules. —AFP

Ship snaps in two off Japan coast, crew safe

TOKYO: A cargo ship ran aground and broke into two off northern Japan, the coastguard said yesterday, with the crew of the Panama-flagged vessel taken to safety. Aerial images showed the separated stern of the Crimson Polaris tipped upwards and the other part of the stricken boat listing into the sea.

A fuel leak from the ship has spread around 24 kilometers (15 miles), a coastguard spokesman told AFP, but the extent of any environmental impact was unclear. "Crimson Polaris ran aground in Hachinohe port in Aomori," said the spokesman, who declined to be named.

"All the 21 crew members — Chinese and Filipino — were rescued safely," he said. Three patrol boats and three air-



HACHINOHE, Japan: The Panamanian-registered Crimson Polaris ship running aground in Hachinohe, Aomori prefecture yesterday. —AFP

craft were dispatched after the ship ran aground on Wednesday in the port off Japan's northeastern coast.

Authorities were trying to contain the oil leak but had not yet been able to erect an oil fence around the boat, the spokesman said. "The patrol boats will operate overnight" to avoid collisions, he said, adding that no other ship was known to be involved in the accident. —AFP

Russia arrests hypersonics scientist suspected of treason

MOSCOW: Russia yesterday arrested the head of a research institute specializing in hypersonics technologies on charges of treason, Russian news agencies reported. The latest arrest of a scientist suspected of treason comes as Russia has jumped out in front of other major world powers in the race to develop a range of new hypersonic weapons that President Vladimir Putin has dubbed "invincible".

Citing sources in security services, the Interfax and TASS news agencies reported that hypersonics scientist Alexander Kuranov was arrested during a special operation by the FSB domestic intelligence agency. The press service of Moscow's Lefortovsky district court confirmed the arrest to the news agencies.

Kuranov, 73, is accused of passing "secret information" related to his research to a "foreign citizen", but the state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported that beyond that the details of the case will not be made public.

Treason cases in Russia, which carry charges of 12 to

20 years behind bars, are typically classified. Kuranov heads the Research and Development Enterprise of Hypersonic Systems based in Russia's second city of Saint Petersburg. According to a biography posted on the company's website, Kuranov is the author of more than 120 scientific papers and leads research on hypersonic technologies. It adds that he "takes part in international associations" and "conducts works on the purchase orders of many countries around the world". Last month Russia successfully tested the Zircon, a ship-launched hypersonic missile travelling at seven times the speed of sound.

If more tests are successful, the missile will join Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles and the air-launched Kinzhal (Dagger) missiles in Russia's arsenal of hypersonic weapons. There is no evidence, however, that Kuranov took part in the development of the missiles.

His case is the latest in a wide range of Russians including scientists who have been accused of high treason or disclosing state secrets in recent years.

In April, Russia arrested a physics professor, Valery Golubkin, on suspicion of treason, who was mainly employed by the Zhukovsky Central Aerohydrodynamic Institute (TsAGI). Another employee of TsAGI, Anatoly Gubanov, was arrested in December on suspicion of treason for having allegedly handed over classified information to the West. The physicist specialized in hypersonic aircraft. —AFP

International

Fake news and mistrust leave Bulgaria lagging in COVID jab race

Only 15% of the population of 6.9 million people has been fully vaccinated

SOFIA: It's getting close to lunchtime and a COVID-19 vaccination center in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, is almost empty, a vivid example of the way the country's immunization effort is hamstrung by fake news and widespread mistrust. As a fourth coronavirus wave threatens, official data show that only 15 percent of the population of 6.9 million people has been fully vaccinated, far below the EU average of 53.3 percent.

"Ever since the start of vaccinations we have been lagging last," Health Minister Stoycho Katsarov said in a recent interview. On the streets of Sofia, it's easy to spot the attitudes that have led to the low uptake.

"Absolutely not!" replies 45-year-old construction worker Georgy Dragoev, when asked by AFP if he would get vaccinated. "I think that they're just spreading panic," he says, while taking his lunch break on a bench outside the vaccination center. "If this coronavirus exists and I catch it, I will somehow manage to beat it," he adds.

'Not an easy decision'

A recent Gallup poll showed that a total of 41.8 percent of Bulgarians said they didn't plan to get jabbed. Even some of those who came to get vaccinated have had their reservations.

Accountant Katerina Nikolova, 39, told AFP that it "was not an easy decision" for her, saying the expedited clinical trial procedure for the COVID-19 vaccines worried her. Outright fake news about the virus has also played a role. Since

mid-March, AFP has been running a fact-checking service in Bulgarian, and in that period, half the articles published have been related to coronavirus disinformation.

The theories range from the claim that the vaccine leaves magnetic chips implanted in people's arms—shared thousands of times on Facebook—to pictures of French football fans' victory celebrations after the 2018 World Cup being falsely presented as being from protests against France's "health pass".

Health Minister Katsarov has partly blamed Bulgarians' "susceptibility to conspiracy theories" for the low vaccine uptake but Nikolova said she was also confused by the conflicting views of experts invited on TV.

Such guests are often asked to comment on areas outside their expertise or are allowed to present scientifically dubious opinions. One of the voices invited to contribute to television debates, Atanas Mangarov, is infectious diseases associate professor and the head of the COVID-19 care unit at a Sofia hospital but has spread discredited theories on the virus, insisting mask-wearing and vaccines aren't necessary and promoting herbal teas as a treatment. Media expert Nelly Ognyanova says that the media have contributed to the poor standard of information.

"The media, the social networks, the public appearances of experts and other sources carry shared responsibility for anti-vaxxer sentiment and for mistrust about the role and safety of vaccines,"



SOFIA: A healthcare worker vaccinating a patient at a COVID-19 vaccination center at The Military Medical Academy in Sofia, where a variety of vaccines are available: AstraZeneca, Pfizer Biotech, Moders and Jansen. — AFP

she said. "It is not a secret that this is also part of a hybrid war led by the Kremlin," she added, referring to the role of Russian troll factories in spreading disinformation—in a country which has long enjoyed close cultural links to Russia.

Renewed fear

According to Parvan Simeonov from Gallup International, the scepticism towards vaccines also reflects Bulgarians' "resentment towards elites" and broader mistrust of authorities and of-

icial information. According to official data, Bulgaria has registered just under 430,000 cases of coronavirus infection but experts and health authorities agree that this is definitely an undercount as access to free tests is limited and many sick people simply did not pay to get a test. Simeonov says vaccine uptake has further been slowed by the sheer number of people who have already been infected—or believe they have—and who have therefore delayed their jabs in accordance with medical advice. —AFP

How Spain took the lead on vaccinations

BARCELONA: Spain has become a leader of Europe's virus vaccination drive against COVID-19, due to a deep trust in the public health system and close-knit family ties that encourage people to get the jab to protect relatives.

More than 61 percent of Spain's population of 47 million is fully vaccinated, one of the highest rates among large European Union nations—ahead of Italy's 57.8 percent, 56 percent in France and 55.2 percent in Germany. The figure in the United States is 50.3 percent. One of the cornerstones of Spain's successful vaccine drive is trust in the health system, Josep Lobera, a sociology professor at the Autonomous University of Madrid, told AFP. And that means there is little vaccine hesitancy.

"We have an advantage with respect to other nations, because confidence in vaccines in general, especially childhood vaccines, is traditionally higher than in other European nations," said Lobera, who sits on the government's vaccine strategy committee. A study by the Imperial College London published in June found that 79 percent of people in Spain trusted COVID-19 vaccines, compared to 62 percent in the US, 56 percent in France and 47 percent in Japan.

Spain has been spared the large protests seen in France and Italy against mandatory vaccines for health care workers, and the creation of a health pass giving them access to routine activities such as dining indoors. The country did not need to make vaccination mandatory for teachers or other key workers, because



BARCELONA: People queue to receive a dose of J&J/Janssen COVID-19 vaccine in an itinerant vaccination truck sponsored by Spanish carmaker Seat in collaboration with the Catalan regional health service at the Triumphal Arch in Barcelona. — AFP

"practically everyone gets vaccinated voluntarily", Education Minister Pilar Alegria told news radio Cadena Ser on Monday.

One recent morning, a long line of people, mainly in their 30s, waited in the scorching sun to get into a mass vaccination center in Wizink sports arena in Madrid, which operates round-the-clock. One of those waiting was Ines Gomez Calvo, a 28-year-old graphic designer. She trusted Spain's public health system "100 percent, 200 percent", she said. Set up after Spain returned to democracy following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, the country's public health care system offers free universal coverage as a constitutionally guaranteed right. — AFP

17 jihadists, five volunteers killed in Burkina attacks

OUAGADOUGOU: Seventeen suspected jihadists and five members of a civil defense militia have been killed in an attack in northern Burkina Faso, security and government sources said yesterday. "Armed men arriving on about 20 motorbikes attacked the VDP (defense militia) camp in Bilakoka," located in Burkina's northern region of Sahel bordering Mali and Niger, on Wednesday, a government official told AFP. "The volunteers repelled the attack, neutralizing 17 terrorists. Five VDP members also lost their lives during the attack."

A security source confirmed the toll and said the armed forces were carrying out a "sweep" and securing the area. Burkina Faso, a landlocked and arid Sahel nation, has been battling attacks since 2015 from forces that include the Group to Support Islam and Muslims, which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Raids and ambushes have been concentrated in the north and east close to the borders with Mali and Niger, both of which have also faced deadly violence by jihadists. More than 1,500 people in Burkina have died and more than 1.3 million have fled their homes, in a population of around 20 million. In December 2019, the government set up the VDP — the French initials for Volunteers for the Defense of the Motherland — to provide support for the beleaguered armed forces. — AFP

International

Debt-ridden Zambia votes in closely contested polls

Economic woes, debt crisis dominated election campaign

LUSAKA: Zambians were voting in a general election yesterday after a tense campaign dominated by economic woes, a debt crisis and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Sixteen presidential candidates are vying for the top job, but the frontrunners are incumbent Edgar Lungu, 64, and his long-time rival Hakainde Hichilema, a business tycoon, who are facing off at the polls for the third time. Hichilema, 59, who is running for a sixth time, is backed by an alliance of 10 parties.

After voting shortly after polls opened at 6am (0400 GMT) Lungu exuded confidence he would retain the job he had held for the past six years. "We are winning, otherwise I wouldn't have been in the race if we were not winning, we are a winning team," the upbeat Lungu told reporters outside a nursery school in Chawama, a poor neighborhood of Lusaka.

But a flagging economy and rising living costs have eroded his support base in recent years, surveys suggest, and the election could be seen tighter than 2016 polls when he narrowly scraped a victory over Hichilema. Lungu, a lawyer by training, is accused of borrowing unsustainably, particularly from Chinese creditors, to finance a spree of infrastructure projects.

Under him, Zambia became the first African country to default on its sovereign debt since the

coronavirus pandemic began, while inflation soared to 24.6 percent in June, the highest rate in more than a decade. Africa's second biggest producer of copper after the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the eighth producer in the world, missed another debt repayment this year.

Winding queues of hundreds of people formed before dawn outside polling stations, hours before voting was due to open around densely-populated and working class neighborhoods of Lusaka.

Almost mid-way through the voting day in central Lusaka's popular Mtendere township, hundreds of voters patiently waited for their turn to cast ballots, chatting away or sucking on ice lollies, or popsicles, sold by a roving vendor. The atmosphere was relaxed and festive, with nearby taverns serving beer while music blasted from cars driving in heavy traffic on bumpy roads.

Copper miner Thomas Wandu, 41, had been queuing for seven hours to vote for Lungu.

"Underground, things are not how they are supposed to be," he told AFP, referring to what he described as low and delayed wages by his Chinese employers.

'Hoping for change'

Lungu's critics point to the high cost of living, poverty and joblessness. In Chamawa town-



LUSAKA: Voters wait at noon in long queues to cast their ballots outside the Post Office in central Lusaka, yesterday. — AFP

ship unemployed school teacher Ernest Chimba, 35, was "hoping for change... because the cost of living in Zambia has gone really high". Tensions flared in the run-up to polling in this southern African country of 17 million people.

Supporters of Lungu's Patriotic Front (PF) and Hichilema's United Party for National Development (UPND) clashed in the runup to voting, prompting Lungu to order an unprecedented deployment of the army. —AFP

US frustration mounts over Afghan failure to halt Taliban

WASHINGTON: The failure of Afghan security forces to blunt the advance of the Taliban has left US officials deeply frustrated after spending billions to train and equip the country's military for two decades. President Joe Biden and other officials have repeatedly called for Afghan leaders to unite and fashion a clear strategy amid mounting worries that the insurgents could besiege Kabul within months.

"We spent over a trillion dollars over 20 years. We trained and equipped with modern equipment over 300,000 Afghan forces," Biden said Tuesday after the Taliban captured several more provincial capitals with little resistance. "Afghan leaders have to come together," Biden said. "They've got to fight for themselves, fight for their nation."

Ahead of the completion of the US withdrawal on August 31, the Pentagon and the State Department closely echoed Biden's words, expressing concerns over the Taliban's gains in the absence of US and NATO troops for the first time since the 2001 invasion. "The Afghan forces have the capability, they have the capacity, they have numerical advantage, they have an air force," said Defense Department spokesman John Kirby on Tuesday. "It's really going to come down to the leadership and the will to use those capabilities." Privately US officials express surprise at the speed of the Taliban's advance. —AFP

Hong Kong saw net outflow of 90,000 residents over last year

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's population declined by 1.2 percent in the last year, including nearly 90,000 more residents departing than moving to the city, figures released yesterday showed, as Beijing cracked down on dissent and the pandemic kept the finance hub sealed off.

The population decrease continues the largest decline since the city began keeping comparable records in 1961 and comes during a period of intense political turmoil. Mid-year population estimates for 2021 showed Hong Kong's population stands at 7,394,700 — a decrease of 87,100 (1.2 percent) from the same time last year.

End of year figures for Hong Kong in 2020 also showed a 1.2 percent decline, and yesterday's numbers suggest there has been no respite in the drop-off. Hong Kong had only once before recorded a year of population decline, by 0.2 percent after the SARS epidemic in 2003.

The city houses a rapidly ageing society with deaths over the last year outstripping births by 11,800. But the government data also revealed a new cause for population decline—more residents leaving than arriving. The figures showed a net outflow of 89,200 Hong Kong residents for the period. That is over four times higher than the 20,900 outflow recorded for the same mid-year period in 2020.

In 2018 and 2019, Hong Kong recorded an inflow of 8,500 and 23,000 respectively. Hong Kong has kept coronavirus infections low by closing itself off to non-residents for most of the pandemic.

The move has kept people safe but crippled the travel industry



HONG KONG: Hong Kong's mid-year population estimates for 2021 showed Hong Kong's population stands at 7,394,700 — a decrease of 87,100 (1.2 percent) from the same time last year.

and made it difficult for both residents and expats to see loved ones overseas. Thousands of Hong Kongers have also packed their bags to escape a broad crackdown on dissent in response to huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago. Over the spring and summer, the airport witnessed frequent tearful farewells as residents boarded flights, mostly to Britain, which has said it will offer a pathway to citizenship for many Hong Kongers in response to Beijing's crackdown.

The Hong Kong government does not keep official statistics for how many have left the city for good, but figures point to some sort of exodus taking place. Around 1,500 Hong Kongers on average were leaving via the airport each day in July, up from around 800 in the first half of the year and despite the pandemic throttling international travel. — AFP

International

Scars and trauma but no regret for Afghan campaign veterans

Veterans share complex range of sentiments about a two-decade-long conflict

PARIS: As international forces complete a pullout from Afghanistan against the background of a rampant Taliban offensive, campaign veterans remember with emotions veering from trauma to pride a deployment that has marked a generation of Western soldiers. American, Australian, French, German and Spanish serving and ex-soldiers who talked to AFP shared a complex range of sentiments about a conflict that has raged for two decades and from which no-one has returned untouched.

But remembering extraordinary comradeship and Afghanistan's landscapes and people, they often far from regret their deployment in one of the most dangerous military missions in the world. Their feelings as foreign troops pull out are even more acute, as the Taliban takes control of swathes of the country, including provincial capitals, that international troops were supposed to have secured for the Afghan army.

The withdrawal is due to be complete at the end of this month, in line with President Joe Biden's orders that US soldiers pull out ahead of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The Al-Qaeda plane hijackings of September 11, 2001 sparked the invasion that toppled the Taliban, whose current offensive has reawakened doubts among some over what the deployment was worth. However, several soldiers emphasized that their own personal experience and the political outcome were two very different things.

'Always those images'

The cosy hamlet of Quentel in central Germany with just 500 inhabitants feels as remote from the mountains of Afghanistan as could be possibly imagined. But it is here on an old farm that Andreas Braeutigam, 58, tends to his four horses, lives with his partner and her child, cooks and reflects on the still burning memories of an eight-month deployment in Afghanistan from 2003-2004.

Braeutigam, who retired this year, came close to death when a shot pierced his ear.

He suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and needs to take pills in order to sleep.

"The horses help me when I'm pushed to the edge, when I'm restless, nervous or aggressive, sometimes just seeing the horses or being near them is enough to calm me down," he said. A battle-hardened serviceman in Germany's Bundeswehr, Braeutigam also saw action in the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo.

But the memories of Afghanistan still loom so large. Every day brought mortal danger. "You don't know where to put your feet, because there might be homemade bombs, especially in the places where you least expect them.

"And there are the ambushes. You do not see anyone, then all of a sudden people surge out and disappear again without a trace." "It's no fun to think about this and I am always happy when there are days when I do not think about it," he said.

He reflected that personally "the experience was worth it, I got to know other countries, other peoples, other customs. We also received a relatively warm welcome from the population, we could feel that." But Braeutigam also wonders whether the NATO mission made any difference to Afghanistan, which remains mired in such instability that locals who helped foreign forces are now seeking refuge in the West.

"NATO was not designed to do a lot of things—we cannot make a state bend. "No one can do it, not even us, and as long as the Taliban are more numerous and supported by other countries. No matter which army comes in, there will be no chance of bringing peace to the country."

'A soldier's job'

French lieutenant colonel Jean Michelin, who remains in active service, has less time or occasion to reflect on his 2012 deployment to Afghanistan, as he prepares for a mission in September to join France's Barkhane force in the Sahel region of Africa. "We always carry the missions which we experienced deep within our-



QUENTEL, Germany: Andreas Braeutigam, veteran of the German army Bundeswehr who served in Afghanistan for eight months in 2003-2004 and whose last name was Roehrig before his marriage, shows a certificate he was given during his deployment, at his home in Quentel (Hessisch-Lichtenau), central Germany. —AFP

selves. But we also cannot live with the weight of Afghanistan forever. A soldier's job is also to be ready to go again. I cannot take Afghanistan in my suitcase when I join Barkhane."

He also insisted that it is not the job of the soldier to ask whether it was right for international troops to be deployed to Afghanistan. "The 'why?' is not a military question, it is a political issue." —AFP

Young Afghan general takes fight against Taliban to social media

KABUL: As a string of Taliban victories show Afghan government forces in disarray, a young general is advancing his reputation on the battlefield and on social media. Provincial cities in the north have fallen like dominoes this week—in some cases after government forces retreated or surrendered without a fight—but in Lashkar Gah, a Taliban heartland, the army appears to be providing stiffer resistance.

Leading them is Sami Sadat, 36, the highest-ranking army officer in southern Afghanistan, in an intense fight in defence of a provincial capital the Taliban are desperate to seize. And as the insurgents flood social media with images of surrendering Afghan soldiers and snap selfies with locals, the young general is also using Twitter and Facebook as a slick PR tool in the fight against the hardline islamists.

He and the 20,000 men under his command in the 215th Corps have garnered thousands of followers, with their Twitter accounts awash with images of the general among the troops, posing for selfies with young civilians, and meeting local shopkeepers. On Wednesday the defence ministry tweeted he had been promoted to lead the country's special forces, an announcement widely applauded on the platform.



ZARANJ, Afghanistan: Sami Sadat (right), commander of the 215 Maiwand Afghan Army Corps, shakes hands with a local man in the city of Zaranj in Nimruz province. — AFP

Sadat remains optimistic despite the Taliban's advances. "Because I know we are going to win," he told AFP in a phone interview from the frontlines of Lashkar Gah. "I know this is our country, that the Taliban are failing, that they will fail sooner or later."

Confident, and ruthless

But there is more to him than meets the eye, say fellow officers and friends. "He is anything but naive," said a security official who asked not to be named. "He has a very strategic vision and a very deep analysis of what is happening," said a general who was Sadat's colleague at the spy agency.

A graduate of the prestigious King's College in London, Sadat began his military career at the Afghan interior ministry. He received military training in Germany, Britain, Poland and the United States, and also served in the National Directorate of Security—Afghanistan's spy agency. Sadat prefers to talk about his men rather than himself and family—senior officers and their relatives are particular targets for Taliban hit squads—and declines even to say where he was born. But he is also keen to talk about the war, which he does confidently—and ruthlessly. "Any Taliban who comes to Lashkar Gah will die or leave disabled for life," he told AFP. Still, he admits it will take time to fully secure the city.

'Do anything for his soldiers'

On August 4, Sadat called on residents to leave Lashkar Gah so the military could launch an all-out counteroffensive. But he has still held back, saying he is fearful of hurting those who chose to stay behind. Sadat described how his forces were going house-to-house to secure neighborhoods that the Taliban had infiltrated in Lashkar Gah. "We still find civilians—especially the elderly and trapped women—who we take to safer places," he said.

NGOs and the United Nations have repeatedly expressed concern about the violence and the risks incurred by civilians—threats that include aerial bombardment of suspected Taliban positions in Lashkar Gah by the Afghan military. The loyalty and respect Sadat appears to command among the troops have been a key factor in the resistance to the Taliban in the city, despite their morale-damaging advances elsewhere in Afghanistan. "He is not someone who gives orders from the rear while hiding in the humvee," an Afghan security source said. "He will do anything for his soldiers". —AFP

International

Anti-feminism backlash on the rise in South Korea

Young women organizing a widespread #MeToo and anti-spycam movement

SEOUL: Condemnation of quotas for women, vilification of a short-haired Olympic gold medalist, and calls to abolish the gender ministry itself: A backlash against feminism is on the rise in South Korea—with even presidential candidates joining in. While South Korea is the world's 12th-largest economy and a leading technological power, it remains a male-dominated society with a poor record on women's rights.

That has been challenged in recent years, with young women fighting to legalize abortion and organizing a widespread #MeToo and anti-spycam movement that led to the largest women's rights demonstrations in Korean history. At their most militant some campaigners have vowed to never marry, have children, or even have sex with men, while others have gone viral smashing up their make-up products on video in protest against the country's demanding beauty standards.

Ferocious online campaigns

Now a fierce reaction is spreading online. Members of anti-feminist groups, often right-wing, have even bullied triple Olympic champion An San during the Tokyo Games for having short hair, and demanded she hand back her medals and apologize. One such group's YouTube channel has drawn more than 300,000 subscribers since its foundation in February, and their online campaigns can be ferocious.

They have extracted apologies from compa-

nies—and even a government ministry—for using images of pinching fingers in advertising, which they claim “extreme, misandrist feminists”. And leading mainstream conservative politicians—including two presidential contenders—have seized on the wider anti-feminist sentiment with pledges to abolish the gender ministry.

Critics accuse the department of “deepening” the country's social tensions, with young men claiming equality policies fail to address issues that affect men. They say it is especially unreasonable that only South Korean men have to perform near two-year compulsory military service, delaying their career starts in a highly competitive society, while women are exempt.

Lawmaker Ha Tae-keung, who is seeking presidential nomination by the conservative opposition People's Power Party (PPP), says the ministry is obsolete and told AFP that it needed to be disbanded to reduce the “enormous social cost caused by conflict over gender issues”. In an earlier television appearance, he told broadcaster MBC: “It's like a zombie—the ministry's still around although it's already dead, and that's why it's only creating adverse effects.”

'Backlash to progress'

Sharon Yoon, a Korean studies professor at University of Notre Dame in the US, said: “What we are seeing now is a very powerful backlash to all of the progress that feminist movements in Korea have made in the past few



SEOUL: This file photo taken on August 20, 2020 shows people wearing face masks as they prepare to cross a street in Seoul. South Korea has the highest gender wage gap in the OECD club of developed countries. — AFP

years.” Lee Jun-seok, the PPP's 36-year-old leader, has established himself as one of the most popular politicians among the country's young men.

He has repeatedly said he is against gender quotas and “radical feminism”, and that the gen-

der equality and family ministry needs to be scrapped. Lee, who has been compared by some to former US president Donald Trump for his at times divisive rhetoric, insists the country's young women no longer face discrimination in education, nor in the early career job market. — AFP

Thousands rescued as Ganges floods in India

ALLAHABAD: Thousands of stranded Indians were rescued yesterday from flooded villages along the Ganges after the river rose above its danger level in the country's most populous state.

The waterway surged to two meters (6.5 feet) above normal in the city of Allahabad, which has experienced its worst flooding in decades after days of torrential rain. Across Uttar Pradesh state more than 600 villages were reportedly cut off by the rising waters, prompting a major rescue effort by authorities. M.P. Singh, a district magistrate in Allahabad, told AFP that 225 boats had been sent out to help people trapped on rooftops and the upper floors of their homes. He estimated 4,500 people had been rescued in and around the city.

About 100 kilometers (60 miles) downriver in the holy city of Varanasi, the ghats—ceremonial piers used for Hindu cremations on the river—were flooded and closed. Varanasi magistrate Sanjay Kumar said the river was one meter (3.3 feet) above its danger mark in the area and thousands of people had been rescued. Normally the ghats operate 24 hours and handle hundreds of cremations each day. — AFP

Car 'graveyard' a monument to the power of China's record floods

BEIJING: Endless rows of mud-caked vehicles damaged by deadly floods last month sit abandoned in a parking lot in Zhengzhou, an unwitting memorial to the power of the disaster that hit Henan province. The region is rebuilding after the deadliest floods in a decade wreaked havoc across the province mid-July, killing over 300 people and damaging thousands of cars and buildings.

“We were forced to abandon our vehicles and leave when the waters rose,” a Zhengzhou resident surnamed Wang said. At least 238,000 damaged vehicles have been sent to ‘graveyards’ like the one in the outskirts of Zhengzhou, head of Henan's insurance regulator Ma Chao told state broadcaster CCTV on Tuesday. Record downpours dumped a year's worth of rain on Zhengzhou—the capital of Henan province and the epicentre of the flooding—in just three days, with over 290 people killed.

Dozens of people died while trapped in flooded subway carriages, underground car parks and tunnels.

The floods also triggered record insurance claims worth \$1.7 billion after thousands of cars and buildings were damaged, insurer Goldman Sachs said in a July report. The local government last week said economic losses due to the floods have ballooned to over \$20.65 billion and promised swift compensation. But crit-



ics say the process has been painfully slow.

Resident Wang, who lost his car, added: “Now getting compensation has become a real headache with dozens of forms to fill in.” A landmark UN study released Monday warned that northern China was prone to more freak weather events, including heavy floods and punishing droughts, due to climate change. — AFP

Friday Times

LIFESTYLE

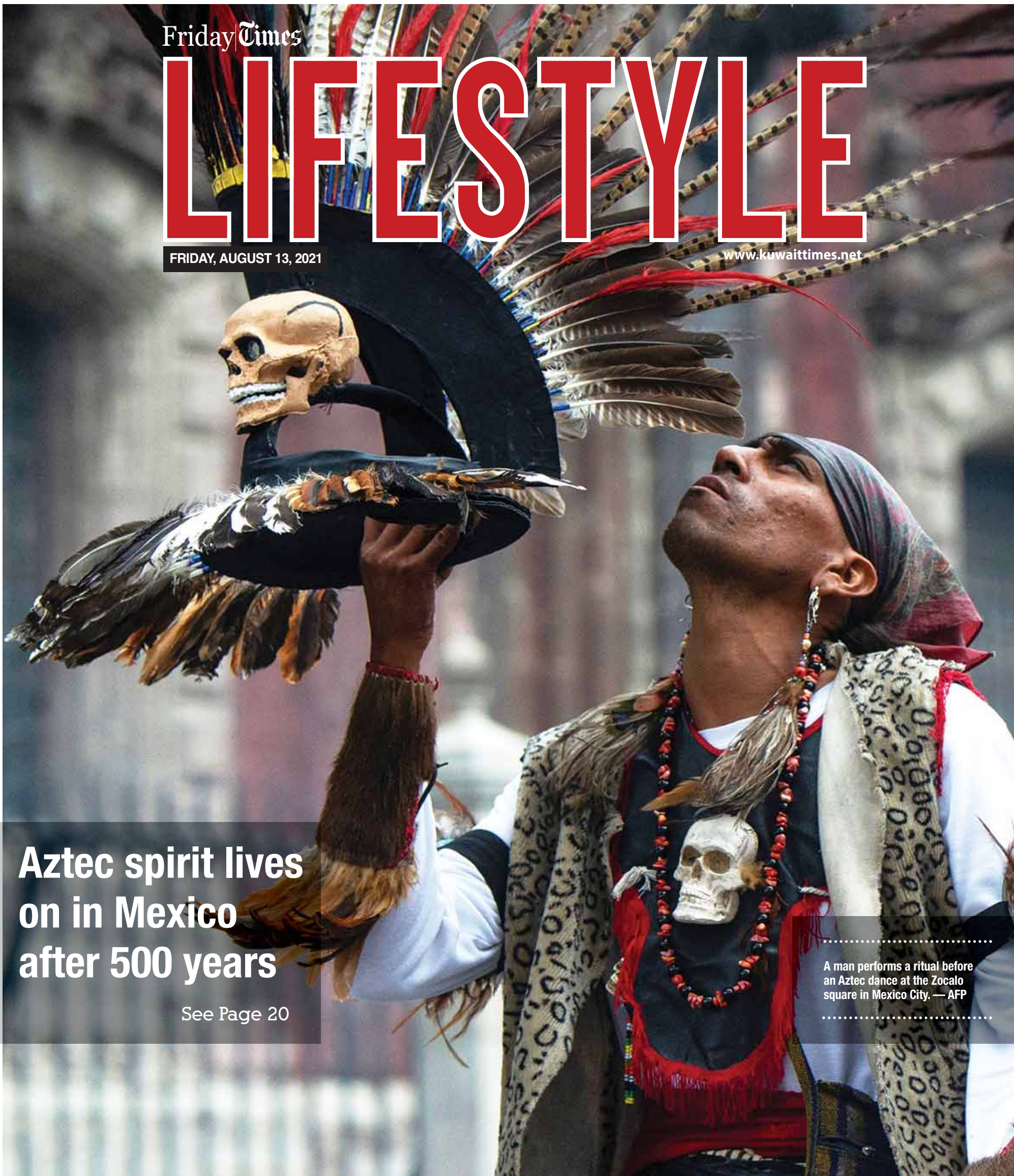
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**Aztec spirit lives
on in Mexico
after 500 years**

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A man performs a ritual before
an Aztec dance at the Zocalo
square in Mexico City. — AFP
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AZTEC SPIRIT LIVES ON IN MEXICO AFTER 500 YEARS



People perform an Aztec dance at the historical Center in Mexico City.— AFP photos

Traditional healers and dancers resplendent in feather headdresses and body paint perform ancient rites in the heart of Mexico City, keeping the Aztec spirit alive five centuries after the Spanish conquest. Today, the Mexican authorities will commemorate the 500th anniversary of the “fall” of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan to the conquistadors and their indigenous allies. But Sergio Segura Octocayohua and others like him who strive to preserve Aztec culture plan their own celebrations the day before in honor of the “heroic defense” of the city.

“Despite being distorted, our identity, philosophy and history live on,” Octocayohua said during a break from overseeing healing rituals in the heart of the capital’s historic district. “We no longer fight with weapons. Now we fight with words, identity and dance,” the 58-year-old said. All around, people of all ages performed choreographies that alternate twists, stomps and energetic movements of their limbs, accentuated by their colorful plumes and the rattling of seeds tied on legs.



A woman prepares to perform an Aztec dance at the Zocalo square in Mexico City.



A young woman holds a dish of maguey worms at a store of the San Juan market.



People perform an Aztec dance.



Edible scorpions are seen at a store of the San Juan market at the historic center in Mexico City.



A woman prepares a Tlacoyo to sell on the Zocalo square in Mexico City.



A woman prepares tortillas to sell on the street in Mexico City.



A man removes the leaves from a corn for sale at the La Merced market.

'Still alive?'

Crowds of tourists stopped to watch-some exclaiming "This is Mexico!"-as the rhythm of the huehuetl, a traditional drum, mixed with the aromas of incense and corn from street food. "Suddenly they see us and say 'oh, wow, are they still alive? How weird!'" veteran dancer and tour guide Tezcatlipoca, who only gave one name, said wryly. "Seeing it as a show is good because this has not died," the 70-year-old added. Dance and purification ritu-

als on the site of the ancient Aztec capital resonate deeply for those seeking to safeguard the traditions for future generations.

"It's one of the places with the most cosmic energy, but it must be cleaned because it has also seen a lot of blood," said Octocayohua. He views the conquest by the Spanish, with its battles and massacres, as a "humiliation." Dance, based on the movements of the moon and the sun, is the most visual manifestation of a thriving spiritual and philosophical move-

ment that aspires to restore the splendor of the Aztec legacy. "Dance is a way to understand their values and view of the cosmos," said Ocelocoatl Ramirez, whose foundation Zemanauak Tlamachtliyan seeks to preserve the indigenous culture. "The purpose is to share it with people, to do something in communion," added Ramirez, who for decades has instructed enthusiasts who dance amid the aroma of medicinal plants.



Grasshoppers are seen at a store of the San Juan market.



People perform an Aztec dance at the historical Center in Mexico City.



A man shells a corn at the La Merced market.

Lifestyle | Feature



A woman prepares a Tlacoyo to sell on the Zocalo square in Mexico City.



A dancer performs a purification ritual on a man at the Zocalo square in Mexico City.



A man wears a Penacho before performing an Aztec dance.



An edible scorpion is seen at a store of the San Juan market at the historic center.



Edible worms are seen at a store of the San Juan market.

'My being shines'
 The rhythm of the huehuetl drum and the deep sound of the atecocolli, a seashell used as a kind of trumpet, seem to appeal to young people in particular. "If I dance some of my culture, my being shines-I shine-I feel at one with the universe," said Maria Cervantes, 22, who has been a student of Ramirez since she was 15. Another ancient custom that has endured since Tenochtitlan times is the city's renowned street food. The smell of corn wafts through the streets of the historic center. Minerva Martinez, 40, sells tlayudas, a type of corn tortilla that dates back to pre-Hispanic times. "The Mexica (Aztecs) also cultivated it and we farmers also plant the corn," said Martinez, an indigenous Otomi who believes that the Tenochtitlan legacy "still exists."

Scholars trace the roots of street food back to the laborious preparation of ingredients and dishes such as tortillas or tamales—a type of corn dumpling-whose consumption also had a ritual nature. "This complexity means street food has always been a traditional reference point—totally Mexican and pre-Hispanic," said chef and historian Rodrigo Llanes. — AFP



Corns are displayed for sale at the La Merced market.



A young woman serves maguey worms at a store.



A dancer performs a purification ritual on a woman at the Zocalo square.



People perform an Aztec dance at the historical Center in Mexico City.



Royal piano restorer David Winston poses for a photograph with a 1929 Pleyel double grand piano.



Pianist Xiaowen Shang plays a Rippen cast aluminum Grand Piano, made in the Netherlands, dated 1965.

Royal piano restorer David Winston poses for a photograph with an exceptionally rare Pleyel grand piano, made in Paris, dated 1925, at his workshop in Biddenden in southeast England. — AFP photos

Final chord: **Royal piano** **restorer** sells lifetime's collection

There's little to distinguish the farm building in Kent, southeast England, from others nearby, except for one thing: the royal warrant over the door. "By appointment to Her Majesty the Queen, conservators and restorers of pianos," it reads. Inside the building in Biddenden, near Ashford, is a treasure trove of 26 quirky and rare pianos, amassed over a lifetime by Californian David Winston. Winston's entire collection is now being sold off at auction, with estimates that some individual instruments could go for up to £60,000 (\$83,000, 71,000 euros) each. "I'm nearly 71 now, it's kind of time," Winston, who initially trained as a violin maker before specializing in pianos, told AFP. Some of his work has included on pianos belonging to Queen Elizabeth II herself but he is cagey about the work he did on the Royal Collection's keyboards.

And with good reason: other than saying he worked on "quite a few of their instruments", he is mindful of the story of a woman who once spilled the beans on royal bra fittings. She lost her warrant not long after. What he does say is that other major commissions have included restoring the French Pleyel piano belonging to his "great hero" Frederic Chopin. He also worked on Ludwig van Beethoven's Broadwood piano at the Hungarian National Museum. "When I first

walked into that room, and that piano was sitting there with Beethoven's name on it, the hair on the back of my neck just stood up," he recalled.

Pedal power

Winston shows off his collection of pianos dating from the 18th to 20th century. Chinese pianist Xiaowen Shang, a student at the Royal Academy of Music in London, plays a Schubert sonata to demonstrate a piano Winston built himself as an exact replica of a 19th-century Viennese instrument. The most



Royal piano restorer David Winston poses for a photograph with an anonymous square piano attributed to the piano maker musician Muzio Clementi.

striking feature is that it has five pedals, while most modern pianos have three. The extra ones produces a drum and bell sound effect or a bassoon-like rasp-perfect for the martial music fashionable at the time. "Compared to the modern piano... this is more gentle and has a very sensitive sound," says Shang, calling it her favorite.

She says she also enjoys playing the French Pleyel Duoclave: a piano with keyboards at either end, allowing pianists to sit face-to-face with the sound rising up between them. "They're really rare: they only made about 50 of them," says Winston. This instrument belonged to Madeleine Lioux, a renowned French concert pianist, whose husband was the Resistance hero, novelist and later culture minister Andre Malraux. The collection does not just focus on antique period instruments but includes instruments designed for 20th-century lifestyles.

Up in the air

Winston gets out sheet music to "The Way We Were", a 1970s ballad recorded by Barbra Streisand, and asks Shang to play it on a futuristic grand piano with a sparkly silver aluminum frame. "This is from the 60s. It's really stable and it sounds quite good," he says of the piano made by now-defunct Dutch compa-

ny Rippen. "They had quite a few of them on ships and there was even one on a blimp (airship) at one time." Equally eye-catching is a walnut "butterfly grand" from Wurlitzer—a company better known for organs and jukeboxes. The lid opens from the center in two wings, creating a stereo effect.

A gorgeous piano decorated with red and gold chinoiserie from 1925 plays piano rolls, a once-popular technology that allows a piano to play music automatically. Potential buyers could be "amassing a collection of rare instruments" or "just looking for something really unusual and rare that will just completely make a room," Winston says. Some might attract rock 'n' roll clients, suggests Will Richards, deputy chairman of auction house Dreweatts, which is organizing the online sale from September 1. After the sale, Winston plans to spend more time at his flat in Venice, where he is a member of a rowing club, as well as focusing on photography. Restoring pianos is becoming tough physically, he says. "It's getting harder on my body: bending over all the time and lifting stuff and crawling underneath pianos. Sometimes I just feel like a car mechanic." — AFP



Guests wearing dirndl dresses sit at the Zauner coffee house in Bad Ischl, Upper Austria.



A woman in a traditional dirndl dress sits on a horse carriage.— AFP photos

THE DIRNDL: A DRESS FOR PAST AND PRESENT



A dirndl dress with the stitched lettering 'Never let the fascists have the DIRNDL' is on display at the exhibition 'Dirndl - Tradition goes fashion'.



A dirndl dress is on display at the exhibition 'Dirndl - Tradition goes fashion' at the Mamorschloessl palace.

The humble Alpine "dirndl" dress, with its distinctive white blouse, full skirt and apron, has won new fans among Austrians and foreign fashionistas alike in recent years. Its folksy appeal has now made the historic dirndl and other traditional outfits a key part of Austria's clothing industry, about 70 percent of which is exported, according to the Chamber of Commerce. Even British style icon Vivienne Westwood, better known for her provocative punk designs, has been charmed by the dirndl, which also features a close-fitting bodice.

Now the enduring garment is the star of a new exhibition

which traces its journey through the years from the countryside to the catwalk. The show is being held in the Austrian spa town of Bad Ischl, the former summer residence of Emperor Franz Josef and his wife Elisabeth, known popularly as Sissi. It lies in the Salzkammergut, a spectacular region of mountains and lakes which was one of the original homes of the dirndl, along with neighboring Tyrol and Bavaria in southern Germany. Thekla Weissengruber, the exhibition's curator, says the dirndl "is to Austria what the kilt is to Scotland or the kimono is to Japan".



Sewing threads in different colors for the production of dirndl dresses are on display at the Schauer Atelier dirndl shop.



Short lederhosen leather trousers and traditional costumes are on display at the Schauer Atelier dirndl shop.



A dirndl dress is on display at the exhibition “Dirndl - Tradition goes fashion” at the Mamorschloessl palace.

Prestigious patrons

It was women living on the land who initially adopted the cheap, practical dress, whose name derives from a dialect term that can also mean “girl”. But by the end of the 19th century, it was also being worn by women at the imperial court when they flocked to the countryside in summer. “Everything was very corseted in Vienna,” Weissengruber told AFP. “On holiday they were able to free themselves, with these lighter, brighter styles,” she added. Hosted in the Marmorschloessl, the “cottage” given to Sissi by her husband, the exhibition shows how the dirndl has evolved through some 50 examples.

The early, no-frills versions quickly give way to more elaborate outfits fit for those seeking an audience at the imperial villa. Angelika Schauer runs a family dirndl-makers in Bad Ischl that traces its history back to 1895. She recalls that her grandfather counted visitors at court among his clients. “When he was taking measurements he was under close watch” from the bodyguards who came with the well-heeled clients, she said. “He had to refrain from making certain movements”.

‘No more ugliness’

During the Nazi period, while women were encouraged to wear similar traditional dress, the word “dirndl” itself was banned, the regime finding it too redolent of the “Jewish-run”

clothing industry. But the dirndl never disappeared, with the patrons of the prestigious Salzburg Festival having sported it from the 1920s onwards. Abroad it was popularized by “White Horse Inn”, a musical set in the Salzammergut that reached Broadway in 1936. It also had a fan in screen icon Marlene Dietrich, according to Weissengruber. Along with other traditional Austrian clothing, the dirndl has experienced a revival in recent years, especially at beer festivals. Women today “wear the dirndl at any occasion”, said Schauer, with men donning the famous “lederhosen” leather breeches.

Despite often cheaper dirndl being produced in Asia, Schauer’s husband Johannes Topizopoulos says that many dirndl fans prefer to buy local, especially in an age where people want long-lasting, environmentally sustainable clothing. “The fact that it’s hard-wearing fits in with the times very well,” he said. High-end versions are certainly a pricey investment: a made-to-measure dirndl can cost between 650 and 1,000 euros (\$767 and \$1,180), not to mention the versions turned out by fashion houses like Westwood’s. But, as the exhibition proudly cites the designer as having said during one visit to Austria, “if every woman wore a dirndl, there would be no more ugliness in the world”. — AFP



Thekla Weissengruber, curator of the exhibition “Dirndl - Tradition goes fashion” on display at the Mamorschloessl palace.



Dirndl dresses are on display at the exhibition “Dirndl - Tradition goes fashion”.



Angelika Schauer (left), owner of the Schauer Atelier dirndl shop, and her partner Johannes Topizopoulos (center) pose in front of the studio in Bad Ischl.



Dirndl dresses are on display at the exhibition “Dirndl - Tradition goes fashion”.



Bikers ride along the road to Mt Rushmore near Keystone, South Dakota. — AFP photos

Bikers flock to giant South Dakota rally despite COVID surge

Tens of thousands of leather-clad bikers roared into a small town in South Dakota this week for a mass motorcycle rally, despite a renewed surge in coronavirus cases across the United States. Health officials have warned that the annual rally—set to draw as many as half a million people—could turn into a COVID-19 “superspreader” event, as was the case last year, with the more infectious Delta variant heightening concerns. But organizers said the 10-day event, held in Sturgis for the 81st time, was too important for the local community and economy to pass up. Asked about health concerns, town spokeswoman Christina Steele emphasized the ready availability of vaccines and the fact most events are being held outdoors—with the city letting bikers consume alcohol outside to avoid crowding in bars.

“This year people are just happy to be out

and to be traveling again and having fun and meeting up with their friends they haven’t seen in a while,” Steele told AFP. “People are not concerned about COVID right now,” she said. The rally has no vaccine, testing or masking requirements—but it is providing visitors with free tests and vaccines, even though it takes several weeks for immunity to kick in. Sanitizer and face masks were available on request, though most participants were choosing to stay mask-free. “There are free masks available, but I don’t think anybody is coming to get one,” Steele said. Last year, the rally drew 445,000 visitors from around the country and was blamed for a large outbreak of the virus.

According to a study published in the Southern Economic Journal in December, the event may have been responsible for more than 260,000 new COVID cases in the United States. While South Dakota has stabilized



infections in recent weeks, there are fears that attendees coming from out-of-state will bring the virus with them. This year, authorities expect even more visitors and Steele said the crowd already looks bigger than in 2020. As motorcycles hummed through the streets of Sturgis, Kristi Noem, South Dakota’s Republican governor donned a black leather

jacket, got on a bike and joined the rally. In the Midwestern state’s Meade County, where Sturgis, a town of 6,600 people, is located, only 37 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, compared to some 50 percent nationwide.

President Joe Biden’s top infectious disease advisor Anthony Fauci warned last week that holding the rally was too risky given the surge in COVID cases. “This could be a superspreader. We don’t want it to be but that’s the reality,” Dr Shankar Kurra, vice president of medical affairs at Monument Health Rapid City Hospital, told CBS News. Kurra said his entire hospital team would be staying in place through the rally, with vacations put on hold and extra staff hired in anticipation of a rise in COVID cases. — AFP



A slice of history: Charles and Diana cake sells for £1,850

A slice of cake from the 1981 wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer sold for £1,850 (\$2,558) at auction in Britain on Wednesday—with a warning not to eat it. The 40-year-old slab of marzipan and thick white icing decorated with the royal coat of arms fetched more than three times its asking price of £300 to £500. “We were amazed at the numbers of people wanting to bid on this large and unique piece of royal cake icing,” said auctioneer Chris Albury, a royal memorabilia specialist at Dominic Winter Auctioneers in Cirencester, western England. “There were lots of enquiries from bidders, mostly in the UK, the USA and several countries in the Middle East,” he added in an email.

The successful bidder comes from Leeds in the north of England, Albury said. The cake was originally given to Moyra Smith, who worked for Queen Elizabeth II’s mother at her Clarence House residence in central London. Following Smith’s death, her family sold it at the same auction house in 2008 for £1,000 to a private collector, who has now sold it at a profit. “It appears to be in exactly the same good condition as when originally sold, but we advise against eating it,” the auctioneers said.



This file photo shows former BIGBANG boyband member Seungri (center), real name Lee Seung-hyun, taken into custody as he leaves the High Court in Seoul. — AFP photos

Ex K-pop star **Seungri** jailed for 3 years for arranging prostitution

Disgraced former K-pop star Seungri was convicted of arranging prostitution and other charges stemming from a sex and drugs scandal and jailed for three years yesterday by a military court, officials said. The 30-year-old singer from popular boyband BIGBANG, who retired from showbusiness as the scandal mounted and later enlisted in the military, was found guilty on all nine counts against him, a defence ministry official told AFP. BIGBANG enjoyed widespread fame following their 2006 debut and Seungri—real name Lee Seung-hyun—went on to become a successful businessman. He was convicted of arranging sex services for potential investors in his business, as well as overseas gambling at luxurious casinos in Las Vegas involving illicit foreign exchange transactions.

“It is hard to see the defendant was not aware of financial payments paid to the women for sex,” media reports quoted judge Hwang Min-je as saying. “It appears that he carried out systematic sexual prostitution.” Seungri had changed his testimony under police questioning and in court, he added, and “lacked credibility”. His illegal gambling was “serious” given his status as a celebrity and it went on over a long period. The singer was also ordered to forfeit 1.15 billion won (around \$1 million). According to the charges he arranged prostitutes for foreign investors on 24 occasions over five months from

September 2015. The investigation into the scandal surrounding him uncovered a spate of allegations against other musicians and personnel at YG Entertainment—Seungri’s former agency and one of the biggest K-pop management firms.

It prompted the agency’s CEO Yang Hyun-suk to step down, facing probes of his own into illicit gambling. Seungri was a member of a mobile chat room where K-pop singer-songwriter Jung Joon-young—now serving a five-

year sentence for gang rape and other offences—distributed videos of sexual assaults and other encounters. The revelations rocked the K-pop industry and became the highest-profile crime involving hidden cameras secretly filming women, known as “molka” in South Korea. Jung appeared as a witness in Seungri’s trial and testified he was aware that an adult entertainment manager who Seungri knew had provided the women. Reaction to the verdict was swift yesterday, with many users online saying Seungri’s punishment was too light for the offences.

“While it is fortunate he is finally being jailed, the term is too short,” a user on Naver, the country’s largest portal, posted. Another added: “It should’ve been 30 years, not three.” The verdict came a month before he was due to be discharged from his mandatory military service. All able-bodied South Korean men are obliged to fulfil around two years of military service to defend the country from nuclear-armed North Korea, with which it remains technically at war. — AFP



This file photo shows Seungri, a member of the K-pop boy group BIGBANG, arriving for questioning over criminal allegations.



An undated handout picture shows a slice of cake from the 1981 wedding of Prince Charles and Diana that is up for auction today. — AFP

The cake remains as Smith kept it, wrapped in cling film in a cake tin that she labeled “Handle with care” and dated 29 July 1981, the day of the wedding. The auctioneers said the slice came from a multi-tier cake served to staff at Clarence House, where Smith worked in the kitchen. Apart from the main wedding cake, there were around 22 other cakes supplied by manufacturers for the royal occasion, the auctioneers said. Wednesday’s lot included order of service and ceremonial programs for the wedding, a royal wedding breakfast menu and a table seating program from Buckingham Palace. — AFP

Kids Page

Word Search

Under the Sea Word Search

ALGAE
BARRACUDA
BASS
BIVALVE
CLAM
COD
CONCH
CORAL
CRAB
DIATOMS
DOLPHIN

EEL
KELP
KRILL
MACKEREL
MANATEE
OCEAN
OCTOPUS
ORCA
OTTER
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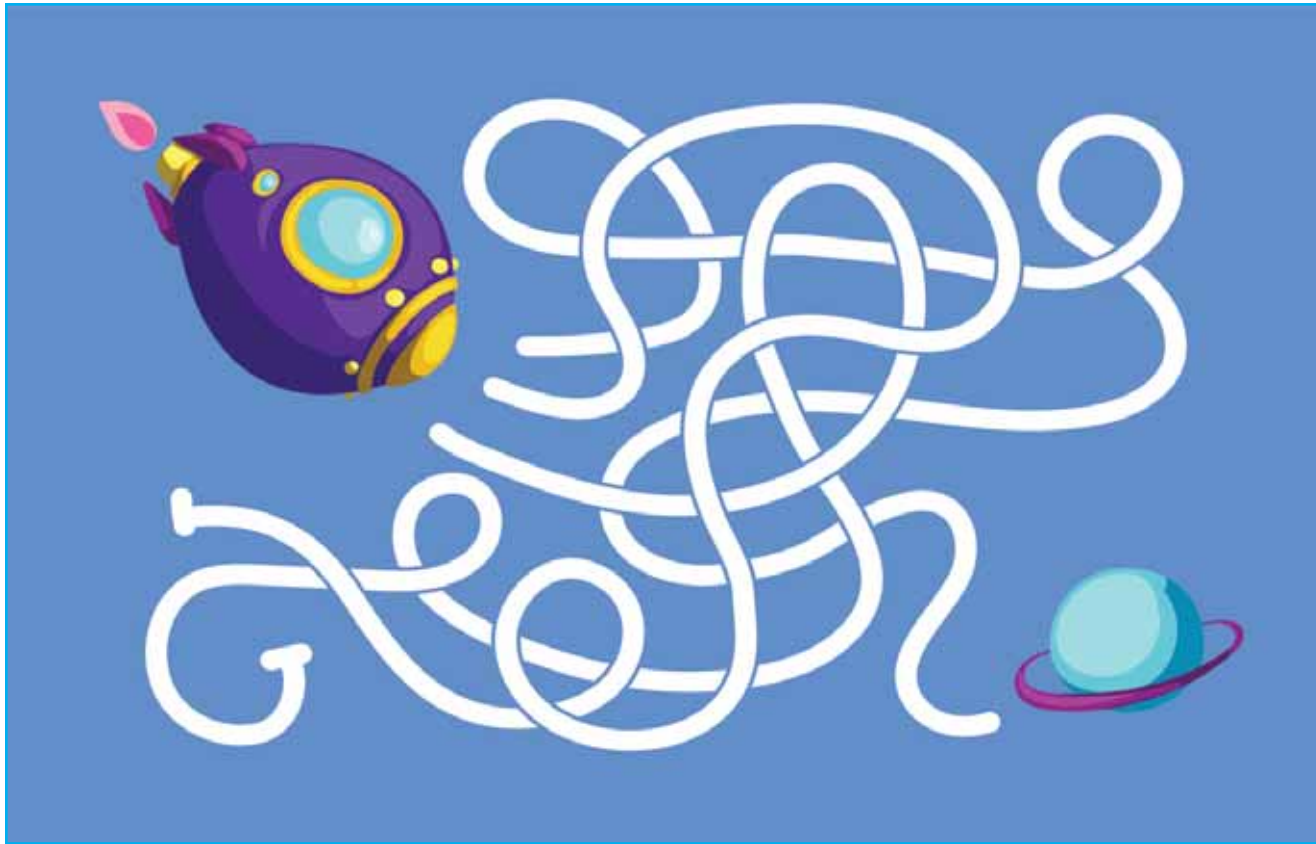
SEA CUCUMBER
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SHARK
SHRIMP
SNAIL
SQUID
TUNA
URCHIN

Kids Mazes

Color It



Find the way



Word Scramble

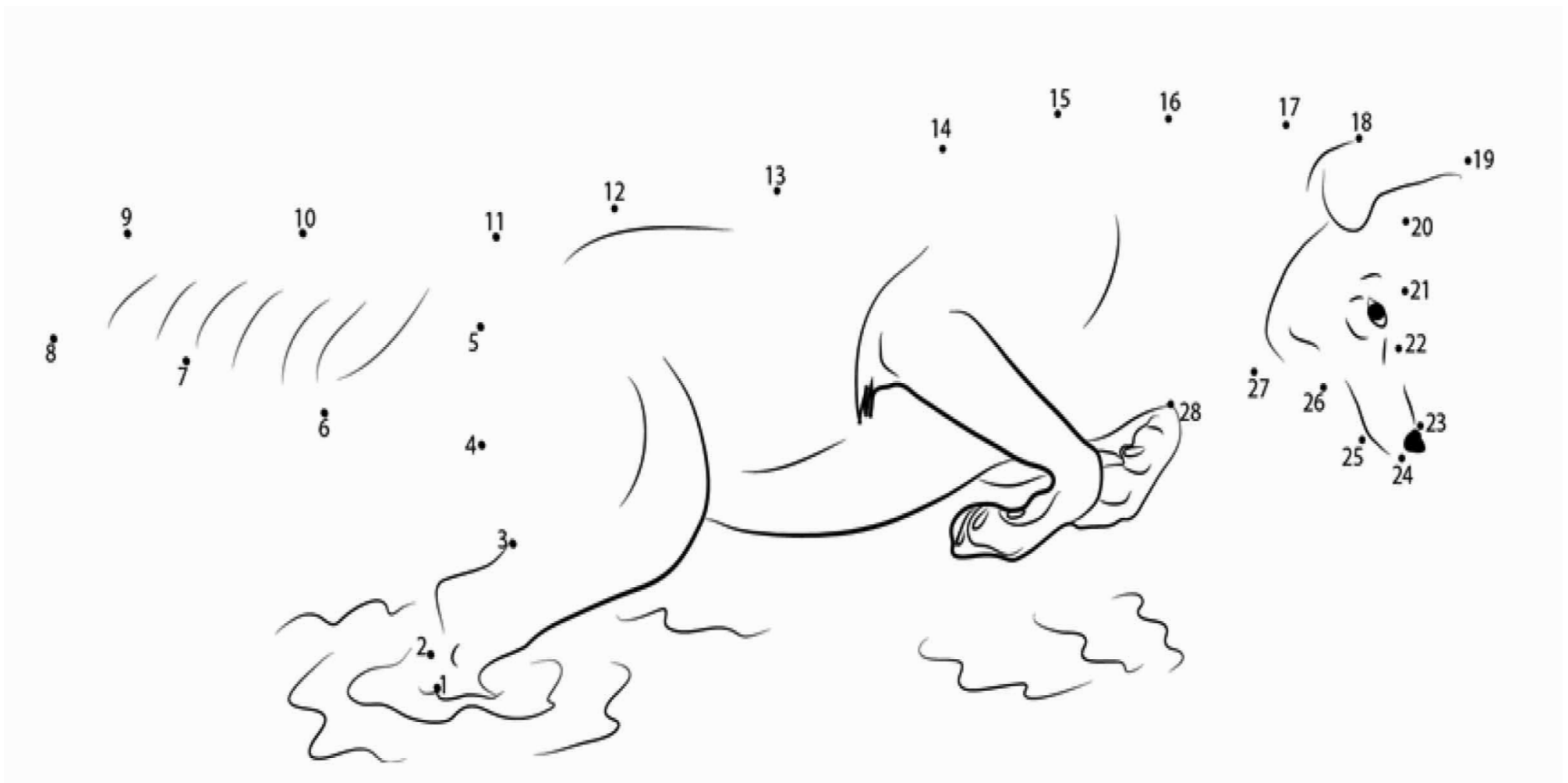
Baseball Word Scamble

Unscramble the words, then use the highlighted letters to form the phrase below. Watch out: the phrase is scrambled too!

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(Sung during the seventh inning.)

Join the dots



Business

FRIDAY, AUGUST 13, 2021

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33 China's Tesla rival Li Auto makes HK debut after \$1.5 billion IPO



LONDON: Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak gestures as he takes a pancake from a stall at the London Wonderground comedy and music festival venue in London. —AFP

UK economy rebounds in second quarter

Britain's largest business lobby group warns of a bumpy road ahead

LONDON: Britain's economy rebounded 4.8 percent in the second quarter as the government began relaxing lockdown restrictions, official data showed yesterday. The strong growth recovery was fuelled by consumer spending, while the government continued to provide massive financial support by for example paying the bulk of private sector wages. But the rebound faces challenges as a jobs protection program is set to end in September and global supply chain bottlenecks persist.

Gross domestic product had fallen 1.6 percent in the first three months of the year, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) added in a statement. "Today's figures show that our economy is on the mend showing strong signs of recovery," finance

minister Rishi Sunak said in a separate statement.

Total UK output however remains 4.4 percent lower compared with before the coronavirus pandemic, or final quarter of 2019. The ONS, providing also its latest monthly data, said the UK economy grew 1.0 percent in June, before England lifted nearly all lockdown restrictions from July.

Markets are looking closely at both growth and inflation data as nations emerge from lockdowns following vaccine rollouts. Analysts warn that strong price rises could force central banks to hike interest rates sooner than expected, hindering the recovery.

'Challenges emerging'

Pressure eased Wednesday however after official

data showed US inflation had cooled slightly.

The outlook could be bumpy, analysts warn, as the government next month ends its furlough scheme that has kept millions of Britons in work during the pandemic. And while the Bank of England last week maintained its forecast for the UK economy to rebound 7.5 percent this year, returning to its pre-pandemic level, it had forecast a 5.0-percent rebound in the second quarter. Britain's largest business lobby group, the CBI, warned of a bumpy road ahead following yesterday positive data. "Growth bounced back over the second quarter as restrictions on activity were gradually lifted, underscoring that tackling the pandemic goes hand-in-hand with supporting economic growth," noted CBI economist Alpesh Paleja. "Yet

challenges to the recovery are emerging. Several supply bottlenecks have likely taken the edge off growth over the summer: a shortage of raw materials and semiconductors, continuing global supply chain disruption and staffing shortages." Britain's recovery comes amid its fast-paced vaccination program that has seen nearly 89 percent of adults given at least one dose, while close to two-thirds are now fully jabbed.

The UK government on Wednesday said it will offer coronavirus vaccinations to all 16 and 17 year olds, but not to younger healthy teenagers as in many other Western countries.

It comes amid worries about the fast-spreading Delta variant of the coronavirus that has forced some nations to reimpose lockdowns. —AFP

Business

NBK honors its employees' children for their educational excellence

Annual ceremony attended by the executive management

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) celebrated the educational excellence of its employees' children in different educational stages for the academic year 2020/2021, in a ceremony held at its headquarters in the presence of the bank's executive management. In the ceremony, NBK's executive management honored the outstanding students from employees' children, in recognition of their efforts in the academic study, in the presence of Shaikha Al-Bahar, NBK Deputy Group CEO, Sulaiman Al-Marzouq, Deputy CEO, NBK-Kuwait, along with a group of NBK executives.

It has been the tradition of NBK to honor employees' outstanding children in an annual ceremony that aims to support and encourage those students, and recognize their efforts made for academic excellence, as well as to motivate them to continue working hard to achieve their goals. Additionally, it aims to recognize the parents who save no effort in meeting all the needs of their children and providing them with the due care to ensure their success. NBK is keen to continue its supportive approach to education, believing in its importance as one of its top social responsibility priorities and an integral part of its social strategy for sustainable development. The bank also supports the youth segment

through educational and training activities aiming to raise their educational level and enhance their practical experience by providing all means to continue their endeavors towards excellence and realizing their ambitions, thus driving the country's development and progress.

NBK has a rich track record in providing all sorts of support to the educational sector with a wide variety of initiatives including the annual honoring ceremony for high school students, in line with its social responsibility towards the educational sector. This stems from the fact that investment in this sector is instrumental to the development and progress of societies, as the outstanding students are of the most valuable national resources that should be given paramount care to serve as a key pillar of a promising future for Kuwait.

In line with its social responsibility, NBK hosts various groups of school and university students, all year round, in a variety of professional training programs aiming to help them meet future graduation requirements, in preparation for navigating the labor market. This is key to ensure a sustainable future for the society, a national and social duty, and a tangible investment for the future.

NBK is also committed to provide training



programs for fresh graduates and students from young national cadres, to provide them with expertise, professional knowledge and on-job training, in an effort to prepare them professionally to navigate the labor market, as NBK is one of the top private sector entities in Kuwait in terms of supporting the youth.

Furthermore, NBK gives special attention to the Kuwaiti youth by supporting educational ac-

tivities aimed at developing national talents, and equipping them with academic qualifications and knowledge, being one of the priorities of its social responsibility. To this end, the bank provides various sorts of support to students of both genders through its regular educational and training initiatives, including specialized training courses that are custom-made for the fresh graduate national cadres.

Huawei brings studio quality sound with new FreeBuds 4

KUWAIT: Huawei recently announced its all-new studio quality open-fit ANC earphone with air-like comfort - the Huawei FreeBuds 4 - in Kuwait. The latest iteration to the Huawei FreeBuds series offers its users studio-quality sound, open-fit active noise cancellation, air-like comfort when wearing the earphones in addition to an array of other cool features. The Huawei FreeBuds 4 are available in two colourways including Ceramic White, Silver Frost and consumers will be able to get them to Kuwait on 12th August 2021 from Huawei's online platforms as well as certified retailers at a price of KD 44.900.

Huawei FreeBuds 4

The Huawei FreeBuds 4 boasts a 14.3mm dynamic driver for generating studio-quality sound to uncover the rich details of every melody as well as producing greater and more impressive bass sounds. The diaphragm of the Huawei FreeBuds 4 can produce sound with a frequency range of up to 40 kHz. The Huawei FreeBuds 4 comes with a high-sensitivity microphone, which can record high-fidelity sound with a sample rate of up to 48 kHz, retaining the rich audio details.

The Huawei FreeBuds 4 continues to impress with an open-fit active noise cancellation (ANC) 2.0 technology. They feature a dual-microphone noise cancellation technology to deliver upgraded noise cancellation performance: They use a dual-microphone noise cancellation technology, which ensures that the



microphones pick up ambient noise with far greater accuracy, reaching industry-leading levels.

To enhance noise cancellation effectively across different wearing scenarios, the Huawei FreeBuds 4 uses Adaptive Ear Matching (AEM) noise cancellation technology and are the first open-fit earbuds in to do so. With noise cancellation switched on, the earphones automatically detect the user's ear shape and determine the optimum noise cancellation setup for each user, resulting in the most optimum noise cancellation experience.

The Huawei FreeBuds 4 provides air-like comfort which means that they are so comfortable to use for long periods and do not put pressure on the ear whilst being used. The curvature and size of the earphones are optimized and polished at the micro level, which fits the ears better, providing better comfort and noise cancellation thanks to an airtight seal.

The Huawei FreeBuds 4 also come with an array of cool features that users are going to love such as the ability to connect to dual devices with seamless switching from one to another. Customized smart controls including Swipe/Double tap/Long press on the earphone stems to control music and calls.

Fewer American workers applying for jobless benefits

NEW YORK: The number of US workers filing applications for unemployment benefits continues to trend downward, with another sharp drop last week, according to government data released yesterday.

While the early end of special federal pandemic benefits in many states was expected to impact the data, applications for that type of aid actually rose in the week ended August 7, the Labor Department said. Initial jobless claims fell by 12,000 last week to 375,000 seasonally adjusted, the third consecutive week of declines, according to the report.

The reopening of the world's largest economy amid widespread COVID-19 vaccinations has led to strong job growth and a steady downward trend in the need for unemployment aid since May. But economists fear the explosion of infections caused by the Delta variant could lead to more business shutdowns and job losses. The federal government expanded unemployment benefits during the pandemic, but some states have ended those programs early, arguing that they kept jobless people from returning to work. —AFP

Business

Lebanese block roads after de facto end to fuel subsidies

Central bank refuses to prop up fuel imports except at black market rate

BEIRUT: Angry residents blocked roads across Lebanon yesterday, a day after the central bank said it could no longer afford to prop up fuel imports except at the black market rate.

As Lebanon's economy crumbles and its foreign reserves dwindle, the decision has been considered a de facto lifting of fuel subsidies. The national news agency said people blocked roads in the north, south and east of the country. AFP correspondents saw motorists in long queues outside petrol stations still open, after they rushed to fill up before the energy ministry officially announced the new prices.

The cost of petrol is expected to at least triple, according to projections by the Information International think tank. In front of one petrol station in Beirut, Hussein Majed asked how everyone was expected to cope.

"You're going to force us to steal just to fill up a moped," he raged. "When the judge asks, we'll say it was to buy petrol,

eat and drink." The Lebanese pound has lost more than 90 percent of its value against the dollar on the black market in less than two years.

Officially, however, the currency has remained pegged at 1,507 to the greenback. Until recently, hydrocarbon importers were given access to dollars at the advantageous official rate. But authorities last month increased it to 3,900, sparking a sharp rise in prices at the petrol pump. On Wednesday, the central bank said it would further increase to the "market rate", which is currently hovering at around 20,000.

The bank said it had spent \$800 million on fuel imports in July. The outgoing premier, Hassan Diab, has protested against the bank's unilateral decision. Foreign reserves have plummeted by more than half since the economic crisis started in the autumn of 2019, from \$32 billion to around \$15 billion today, according to central bank figures. —AFP



BEIRUT: A demonstrator poses next to a sign of "wanted posters" showing the faces of government officials including Prime Minister Hassan Diab in the Gemmayze neighborhood as protesters head towards the port of Lebanon's capital. —AFP

Stocks mixed tracking data, China regulation

NEW YORK: Stocks markets were little changed yesterday as traders reacted to data on both sides of the Atlantic and China's plans to tighten regulation across more sectors.

Europe's main indices varied by small amounts in midday trade following news that Britain's economy rebounded 4.8 percent in the second quarter as it started to emerge from lockdown. Asian equities closed mostly lower as China signaled additional anti-monopoly rules and penalties over the next five years. The dollar held firm as news of cooling US inflation eased concerns about the prospect of higher interest rates in the short term, in turn helping Wall Street to reach new record highs Wednesday.

Oil prices flattened as the International Energy Agency said global crude demand was expected to grow slower than previously forecast this year with the spread of COVID's Delta variant prompting fresh lockdowns.

Stocks have had a largely positive week after a recent run of pressure caused by concerns about the fast-spreading Delta variant. But Asian stocks took a slight hit yesterday after guidelines published by the Chinese Communist Party's top decision-making body called for "centralized special rectification" — propaganda speak for further government intervention.

Sectors including finance, public health, education and food and drug manufacturing would be targeted, the guidelines said. A regulatory crackdown on Chinese sectors ranging from tech to education had already roiled markets in recent months. OANDA's Jeffrey Halley said the reason that Asian stock market losses yesterday had not been so steep might be because "investors are being more accepting of the 'new normal'".

On Wall Street, the Dow and S&P 500 finished at all-time highs Wednesday, buoyed by data showing US inflation cooling. "For now, the movement in stock markets shows that investors are considering the improvement, or at the very least a stoppage, in the rapid rise of consumer prices," noted Naem Aslam, chief market analyst at Avatrade. —AFP

The curious case of the \$600m crypto heist

PARIS: Cryptocurrency investors have been transfixed over the past few days by the antics of a mysterious hacker who stole more than \$600 million—before giving some of it back. But is the thief a good samaritan who stole the money to expose a dangerous security flaw, or did they simply realize they were about to be caught? The hacker struck Poly Network, a company that handles cryptocurrency transfers, on Tuesday in one of the biggest thefts of digital monies in history. By yesterday they had returned some \$342 million—still far short of the total, but enough to raise furious speculation over their motives. In messages embedded in the transactions, the thief insisted they stole with good intentions. "I am not very interested in money!" they wrote, adding it was "always the plan" to return the stolen funds.

Digital sleuths

Despite their volatility and concerns over the huge waste of electricity they generate, cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Ethereum have soared in popularity in recent years. Their combined market value currently stands at nearly \$2 trillion, creating alluring prospects for hackers.

Most notoriously, thieves stole 850,000 Bitcoins from Japanese exchange Mt. Gox in 2014. Worth around \$470 million at the time, the coins would today be worth a staggering \$38 billion.

Another Japanese exchange, Coincheck, was hacked for nearly \$500 million in 2018. But in both cases, the technology that cryptocurrency uses allowed some of the funds to be traced—even though for Mt. Gox, it came too late to save the company.

Cryptocurrencies use blockchains, digital ledgers that record every transaction made. Pawel Aleksander, an expert in tracking stolen cryptocurrency, said thieves typically try to cover their tracks by splitting the money up and moving it around—"sometimes using hundreds of thousands of consecutive transactions".

But his company Coinfirm is among a growing number that specialize in following dizzyingly complicated blockchain transactions, helping law enforcement agencies and investors to trace stolen assets. While some crypto-aficionados are hailing the Poly



WASHINGTON: In this file photo a man types on a computer keyboard in this photo illustration taken in Washington, DC. —AFP

hacker as a hero, others suspect they began handing the money back because sleuths were on their trail. The returns began after SlowMist, another investigative firm, claimed to have identified some of the hacker's personal details, including their email.

"It's hard to say what the hacker's initial intention was," said Aleksander's colleague Roman Bieda. "The hacker could be simply afraid of action taken against him," he suggested, although he added that "white hat" ethical hackers do often seek to publicly shame companies for their security flaws. Some investors would also consider it a "fair bargain" for the hacker to keep some of the money, as a reward for finding the security flaw, Bieda said.

End of the Wild West?

Crimes involving cryptocurrencies are on a downward trend, despite spectacular thefts like this one and concerns about their use by criminal gangs. A report this month by security firm CipherTrace estimated global crypto-crime losses at \$1.9 billion last year, down from \$4.5 billion in 2019. It did, however, warn of an alarming rise in hacking and fraud linked to decentralized finance, or "defi"—a form of crypto-financing, including loans, designed to cut out intermediaries like banks. The Poly heist is part of that trend, with the company calling it the biggest hack "in defi history". "The imagination of fraudsters in this industry is constantly developing," said Syedur Rahman, a British lawyer who specialises in cases involving cryptocurrencies. —AFP

Business

China's Tesla rival Li Auto makes HK debut after \$1.5 billion IPO

Firms already trade in New York seek exposure in Asian financial hub

HONG KONG: Chinese electric car maker Li Auto began trading in Hong Kong yesterday after a \$1.5 billion initial public offering it hopes will help it break out from its mainland market. The listing of the company regarded as a possible rival to Elon Musk's Tesla comes as firms already traded in New York—such as Li—seek exposure in the Asian financial hub as a hedge against China-US tensions that could see them removed from US exchanges.

Shares in Li Auto were trading at HK\$116.90 (\$15) at 0730 GMT yesterday, against an IPO price of HK\$118, having fallen around two percent earlier in the day. “We want to be a winner, not just a mere participant, in the global market,” Li Auto co-founder and president Shen Yanan told Hong Kong's South China Morning Post in an interview published yesterday.

“To win market share overseas, a car company has to develop the right product to attract customers with tastes” that are different from those in China. “We have set up a team dedicated to the overseas markets and we are meticulously working on the plans to find a winning formula.”

The listing—just a month after rival XPeng's Hong Kong IPO—is “an opportunity for Li to cash in while their valuation is higher”, Tu Le, founder of consultancy Sino Auto Insights, told AFP.

It will allow the company to add to its \$1.1 billion war chest, assembled when it went public in

New York in July 2020. Li Auto plans to dedicate almost half of its net proceeds to research and development including in “ultra-fast charging technologies”, according to its prospectus.

Part of the funds will also go towards developing “intelligent vehicle and autonomous driving technologies”. China is the world's largest car market with electric cars accounting for 10 percent of all car sales from January to July, the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers said Wednesday.

The industry group expects new-energy vehicles to make up 25 percent of car sales by 2025. Drivers have been flocking to local auto brands in recent months as Chinese regulators question Tesla over safety concerns. “Many domestic brands are newer, more recognized for their smart capabilities,” Tu said.

“They... really target their consumers more precisely through their digital marketing campaigns.” However, the listing comes at a turbulent time for stocks in Hong Kong, as investor jitters grow over Beijing's tightening grip there, following the imposition of a sweeping national security law last year.

Chinese authorities have also been busy reining in the influence of mainland tech giants, and more recently its lucrative private education sector. And on Wednesday they signalled plans to continue a sweeping regulatory drive across the economy that would last for



BEIJING: An employee of Chinese electric car company Li Auto works at its retail store at a shopping mall in Beijing yesterday. — AFP

the next five years.

Hong Kong has seen a bumper crop of Chinese firms choose to list closer to home in the last two years as tensions with the United States have worsened, though China's latest tech clampdown has dulled some of that enthusiasm. Still,

a key reason Hong Kong may well remain attractive for Chinese firms are new rules Beijing is planning to implement that will mean local tech firms must obtain cybersecurity clearance if they list overseas. Those listing in Hong Kong will probably be exempt. — AFP

China's anti-sanctions law a new headache for banks in Hong Kong

HONG KONG: China's plan to expand its anti-sanctions law into Hong Kong is a fresh compliance headache for international banks already caught up in deteriorating relations between Beijing and major western powers, analysts and insiders say.

As a finance hub with an internationally respected legal system, Hong Kong has long marketed itself as a reliable business gateway to authoritarian China. But swirling geopolitical tensions—and China's crackdown on dissent in the city—have made that business environment less smooth the last two years.

And things could be about to get even more complicated. In June, China passed a broad anti-sanctions law in response to US and European punishments sparked by Beijing's treatment of Hong Kong and its Uighur Muslim minority in Xinjiang. Its powers include denying visas, deportation, or seizing assets of those who formulate or comply with sanctions against Chinese businesses or officials. Foreign companies can be sued in Chinese courts for applying sanctions and the law can also be wielded against family members. Then earlier this week Hong Kong's chief executive Carrie Lam confirmed the anti-sanctions law would soon be applied in the financial hub in some form.

International businesses—in particular banks—are now scrambling to work out what that could mean for them, fearful that they could be caught between competing sanction regimes.

“If the law is to be taken seriously, it could be a huge problem

if banks in Hong Kong have to enforce US sanctions, and then face prosecution in Hong Kong for enforcing those sanctions,” Julian Ku, an expert in international law at Hofstra University told AFP.

‘Bite the bullet’

Question marks surround what the law might look like. Chinese state media has said Beijing's top law-making body is planning to unveil unspecified new measures for Hong Kong and Macau when it meets next week. Some Hong Kong officials have suggested Beijing could impose the law on the city as it did with sweeping national security powers last year that criminalized much dissent.

“I know some of us may be very concerned,” Secretary for Justice Teresa Cheng told reporters earlier this month. “But I think we shouldn't be too worried for now.” Lam, one of the dozens Chinese officials sanctioned by the United States, has said she would rather the law be passed locally to cater for the city's own legal and business environment. Such assurances are of limited comfort for people like John, a senior manager working for an international bank in Hong Kong, who fear being caught between an American rock and a Chinese hard place.

“We have no choice, either we shut the whole bank, which many people don't want to do, or we have to just bite the bullet and continue our businesses,” he told AFP, asking to remain anonymous to speak freely. China may be wary of forcing foreign banks out of Hong Kong.

The national security law already makes it illegal for companies based there to adhere to foreign sanctions—something the United States highlighted last month in a rare business advisory warning. So far China has not gone after any major international bank using that power, even after Lam complained she has no bank account because of the sanctions. — AFP

Turkey eyes inflation as bank holds key rate at 19%

ISTANBUL: Turkey's central bank said yesterday it was keeping a close eye on rising inflation as it left its key interest rate unchanged at 19 percent for the fifth month. The bank said “high levels of inflation expectations continue to pose risks to the pricing behavior and inflation outlook” and reaffirmed its promise to keep its policy rate above that of inflation.

Consumer price increases accelerated to a two-year high of 18.95 percent in annual terms last month.

The lira was trading at around 8.54 to the dollar 30 minutes after the rate decision was announced. The bank's decision came despite nagging pressure from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to lower borrowing costs as quickly as possible to improve Turkey's growth prospects.

Erdogan reaffirmed his unorthodox belief that high interest rates cause inflation instead of tamping it down last week. “There will be no high interest rates high interest rates will bring us high inflation,” Erdogan said in a television interview. “The month of August is a breaking point. With August, God willing, we will switch to low inflation.” — AFP

Stars

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

You may look at your orderly closet, well-organized desk, and clean bathroom and be proud, Aries. Other people may fret about suddenly having to get their lives in order, but you're already there. Perhaps you don't realize it because you're such a perfectionist. Perhaps you don't give yourself enough credit for all the work you do. Give yourself a pat on the back today.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

You could feel blocked, Taurus, like you're in a trap. Perhaps your friends are influencing you into believing one thing, while your family has you trained to believe another. You wear different masks in different situations so you may have forgotten the real person underneath. Things are in conflict, and you may be forced to make important decisions. The truth is the only way to escape the trap.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Remember that it takes energy to repress and bottle up your feelings, Gemini. Without realizing it you may be stuffing a great deal of emotion inside while trying to ignore it. The truth is that expressing these feelings - anger, happiness, fear, self-doubt - will energize and free you. The atmosphere around you will lighten up and you'll be able to interact more openly with others.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

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



Leo (July 23-August 22)

Your mastery of your mind and ability to stay disciplined about your goals is impressive, Leo. Others recognize and appreciate your efforts much more than usual. You may be called upon to assist in some other project or someone else's emotional drama because you have the stability required to remedy the situation. Don't downplay your talent in this area.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

You may feel as if someone or something has just reformatted your hard drive, Virgo. Suddenly things are running much more smoothly. The key now is to find the discipline and organization to understand this new system fully. Streamline your thoughts and be more efficient about how you use your energy. You'll be more effective overall if you can keep from scattering your resources.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

You may be forced to put your thoughts into neat little boxes that can be easily understood and processed, Libra. Your ideas are abstract and don't always make reasonable sense. It's OK to have a bit of mystery about things that rational minds can't explain. Although you may feel like the goal is to arrange things in an orderly way, don't feel like you have to do it.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

This may be a difficult day in which you feel pressured to get things done, Scorpio, yet there's indecisiveness and hesitation lingering in your mind. Between a rock and hard place is no easy spot, but you'll find your way out. Perhaps the thing you should do is make a move - any move. Once you get the energy flowing, the direction you need to take will be clear.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

There's tremendous discipline in your way of thinking, Sagittarius, which is helping you advance toward your goals. Don't expect that you will solve every problem right away. Keep in mind that you will be able to sort through issues more efficiently. Once you have things sufficiently fleshed out, it will be easier to put the pieces back together. Stay detached instead of getting emotionally involved.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Your thoughts may be strained, Capricorn, and you could find it difficult to process things that are normally no problem. Try not to force answers that don't seem to want to come. If the information flows easily and smoothly, you will know that it's meant for you. If you have to pull teeth in order to get at the truth, you may need to back off.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

Your thinking may have emotional overtones that prevent you from seeing the truth clearly, Aquarius. Do your best to tame your feelings in order to let more rational thoughts rise to the surface. There's a stability that comes when you honor your emotions from a detached perspective instead of immediately taking action in response to how you feel. Think about this as you engage with others.



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

The thing you dread the most could be the very thing you need the most in your life, Pisces. You're at a point right now when the lessons that come might be hard to swallow, but they're necessary. Don't try to resist what you know you must face. Approach things with courage instead of fear and you can conquer anything. Once you climb the mountain, the rest is downhill.

Country Codes

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

Paralympic flame ceremonies begin as virus surges in Japan

TOKYO: Japan held its first Paralympic flame-lighting ceremonies yesterday, with athletes waiting to learn whether spectators will be in the stands as the country battles a spike in virus cases. Fans were banned from almost all venues at the pandemic-postponed Tokyo Olympics, which ended Sunday, while athletes faced restrictions on movement and were tested daily.

The Paralympics are expected to take place under similar conditions when they begin on Aug 24, Japanese media said, with an official decision on spectators expected early next week. Although Japan has seen a comparatively small COVID-19 outbreak overall, with around 15,300 deaths, the latest wave driven by the more infectious Delta variant is pushing daily case numbers to new records.

Tokyo and five other regions are currently under a virus state of emergency, which bans bars and restaurants from serving alcohol and asks them to close by 8 pm. Instead of a traditional relay on public roads, "torch-kiss" Paralympic flame-lighting events will be held in towns and cities across Japan over the next week, with the flame transferred from torch to torch.

The flames will be brought to Tokyo and combined, but plans to have spectators line the route of a relay in the capital have been scrapped, a city government official told AFP. "We had planned to hold the Paralympic torch relay in Tokyo with some 700 torchbearers," said Tokyo Metropolitan Government official Koichi Osaka. "But because of the state of emergency, we decided not to do the relay on public roads."

The emergency measures are scheduled to last until the end of August. Similar "quasi-emergency" measures are in place in other regions where cases are rising. The remote city of Tono in Japan's northern Iwate region decided to open its Paralympic flame ceremony to the public, and was expecting a small crowd of around 50 people including officials. "We wanted to have a diverse group of people, young and old, non-Japanese nationals and those with disabilities, to take part in the event," the city official in charge of the ceremony told AFP. "We did not advertise the ceremony. We



RIKUZENTAKATA: Torchbearer Miu Takahashi lights a lantern during a flame-lighting ceremony for the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games in Iwate prefecture yesterday. —AFP

will take thorough anti-infection measures, of course."

Around 4,000 Paralympians and 12,000 officials, staff and media from overseas will be in Japan for the Games. At the Tokyo Olympics, organizers reported 511 positive cases, mostly among residents, with one so-called "cluster", in the Greek artistic swim-

ming team. Olympics organizers have denied any connection to rising virus cases in Tokyo, although some experts argue that holding the Games undermined the government's messaging on virus risks. Around 35 percent of Japan's population are fully vaccinated, including more than 80 percent of the over 65s. — AFP

Swiss prosecutor wraps up grilling of ex-FIFA boss Blatter

GENEVA: A Swiss prosecutor yesterday concluded four days of final interviews with former FIFA president Sepp Blatter in a long-running probe into a suspected fraudulent payment in 2011. Former world football chief Blatter, 85, has met with a federal prosecutor every day since Monday for final hearings in a case that shook the sport. Blatter is being investigated over a two million Swiss franc (\$2.2 million) payment to Michel Platini, who was then in charge of European football's governing body UEFA.

The final hearings with a federal prosecutor from the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) of Switzerland took place in Zurich, where FIFA has its headquarters. Blatter was accompanied by his lawyer Lorenz Erni. "It's over. It was the last day," Blatter's spokesman Thomas Renggli told AFP after yesterday's fourth straight day of interviews. "At the end of the hearing, Mr Erni said now is the time to stop harassing Mr. Blatter. Now Mr Blatter is relieved. He's glad it's over. It was hard for him this week, mentally and physically."

'Disloyal payment'

Due to Blatter's fragile health, he could only stay at the hearing venue for a couple of hours maximum at a time. While 66-year-old Platini's final interview with the prosecutor was in March, Blatter's hearing was postponed to August due to the retired Swiss

football administrator's health. He spent two months in hospital in December and January after undergoing heart surgery.

Under the Swiss Code of Criminal Procedure, in lengthy and complex proceedings, suspects "are questioned one last time before the investigation is concluded", the OAG said in a statement ahead of the final hearings. Joseph "Sepp" Blatter joined FIFA in 1975, became its general secretary in 1981 and the president of world football's governing body in 1998.

He was forced to stand down in 2015 and was banned by FIFA for eight years, later reduced to six, over ethics breaches for authorizing what prosecutors termed a "disloyal payment" to Platini - in other words, one made in his own interests rather than FIFA's. "The criminal proceedings against Joseph Blatter are now being conducted on suspicion of fraud, breach of trust and unfaithful business management," the OAG statement said. "The criminal proceedings against Michel Platini are being conducted on suspicion of fraud, participation in breach of trust, participation in unfaithful management and false documents."

Decision time

The OAG said the presumption of innocence applied to all parties and it could not put a time frame on concluding the investigation. "Conducting final interviews does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about the outcome of criminal proceedings (discontinuation, penalty order or indictment)," it added. Renggli said a decision on an indictment or a dismissal could come within the next few weeks.

In a statement before this week's final hearings, Blatter insisted the payment to former France and Juventus attacking midfielder Platini, considered among world football's greatest-ever players,



ZURICH: Former president of world football's governing body FIFA Sepp Blatter leaves the building of the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland to attend a hearing in Zurich on Aug 9, 2021. — AFP

was above board. "It was based on an oral contract that regulated Platini's advisory activities for FIFA between 1998 and 2002," he said. "The payment was delayed because FIFA was initially unable to pay out the entire amount - and Platini only made the claim in 2010. The process was correctly declared as a late payment of wages, the social insurance was accounted for accordingly and finally approved by all responsible FIFA bodies." — AFP

Sports

All change as top Bundesliga clubs hunt champions Bayern

BERLIN: It's all change for the new Bundesliga campaign - which starts today - with new coaches at each of last season's top six clubs now joining the hunt to deny Bayern Munich a tenth straight league title. In a rare coincidence, all clubs who finished in the top six league places in 2020/21 have a new head coach. The pressure is on incoming Bayern boss Julian Nagelsmann, 34, who is tasked with landing the defending champions' tenth straight league title in his first season.

They reportedly paid league rivals Leipzig a hefty €25 million (\$29 million) to sign Nagelsmann, who has already been warned what to expect. "The hunt is on," warned Bayern's new chief executive officer Oliver Kahn ahead of today's opening game when Borussia Moenchengladbach host the Bavarians. Kahn, a former club captain, expects the competition will "try everything" to knock Bayern off top spot.

Bayern spent €42.5 million on signing France center-back Dayot Upamecano from RB Leipzig. However, no other new recruits are expected this summer with Bayern predicting a shortfall of 150 million euros in lost revenue due to the pandemic.

Dortmund sign Malen

Leading the charge to stop Bayern are Borussia Dortmund, whose star striker Erling Braut Haaland hit a hat-trick last weekend in the first round of the German Cup. "We have the squad to become German champions, win the cup and progress in the Champions League," insisted Dortmund captain Marco Reus. "Of course, you also need luck. But we can work for that with passion and heart." After two years at league rivals Moenchengladbach, Marco Reus, 44, takes charge of Dortmund with last season's caretaker coach Edin Terzic now helping with player recruitment. Dortmund, who host Eintracht Frankfurt tomorrow, have plenty of fire power up front. Haaland has now scored 60 goals in as many games since joining in Jan 2020.

Dutch star Donyell Malen has been signed from PSV Eindhoven,

Who can stop Bayern winning a 10th straight Bundesliga title?

BERLIN: The new Bundesliga season kicks off today when defending champions Bayern Munich play at Borussia Moenchengladbach. Bayern's new head coach Julian Nagelsmann, 34, is under pressure to deliver a tenth straight German league title at the end of his first season in charge. AFP sports looks at which clubs can prevent Bayern completing a decade of Bundesliga domination:

Borussia Dortmund

England winger Jadon Sancho may have left to join Manchester United, but Dortmund will be a force to be reckoned with under new head coach Marco Rose. Dutch forward Donyell Malen has been signed from PSV Eindhoven, to play alongside Erling Braut Haaland, Marco Reus and Giovanni Reyna. Haaland claimed a hat-trick last weekend in the German Cup, picking up where he left off after scoring 41 goals in as many games last season.

Dortmund have the forward fire-power to challenge Bayern, but they must tighten their defense. Goalkeeper George Kobel, 23, has joined from Stuttgart, determined to keep out fellow Swiss shot-stoppers Roman Buerki and Marwin Hitz. Dortmund start their season with a bang. They host Eintracht Frankfurt tomorrow in their opening league game of the season, then face Bayern four days later for the German Super Cup.

RB Leipzig

After struggling for goals last season after Timo Werner left

at a cost of €30 million, to replace Jadon Sancho. Dortmund's challenge to Bayern has support within the Bundesliga. "My money is on Dortmund," Cologne head coach Steffen Baumgart told Kicker. "It's about time someone else won it." Last season's runners-up Leipzig has American Jesse Marsch now in charge after Nagelsmann left for Munich.

Leipzig, founded in 2009 by energy drinks giants Red Bull, struggled last season to find a reliable goal-scorer after Timo Werner left for Chelsea. As a result, Portugal striker Andre Silva has been signed after scoring 32 goals for Eintracht Frankfurt last season in Germany's top flight. Marsch refuses to set a target, but defender Willi Orban says Leipzig are hungry for a first Bundesliga title in the club's fledgling history. "We're hungry and don't want to hide from any big opponents," insisted Orban.

There are also new faces in charge of the other clubs hoping to threaten Bayern. Austrian Adi Huetter quit Eintracht Frankfurt last season to join Moenchengladbach and has a crack at Bayern first up. Bayern lost 3-2 when the sides last met at Borussia Park in January, thanks to two stunning goals by Gladbach midfielder Jonas Hofmann. Wolfsburg, who have qualified for the Champions League after a five-year hiatus, have former Bayern midfield enforcer Mark van Bommel as their new head coach.

Van Bommel's blunder

The 44-year-old lost five of his six pre-season friendlies and tomorrow, Wolfsburg needed extra time to beat minnows Munster in the cup. The result could still have repercussions for Van Bommel as the German FA is investigating after he used six substitutes, when only five are allowed. The Dutchman replaced Austrian Oliver Glasner, now in charge of Frankfurt, who were knocked out of the cup by third division Waldhof Mannheim on Sunday.

There was no such banana skin for Bayer Leverkusen, whose new head coach Gerardo Seoane led Bern to the Swiss league title for the last three seasons. Leverkusen brushed aside fourth-tier side



MUNICH: In this file photo taken on Jan 3, 2021, Bayern Munich's German midfielder Joshua Kimmich runs with the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match FC Bayern Munich v Mainz 05. —AFP

Lokomotive Leipzig 3-0 tomorrow in the cup with Kerem Demirebay netting twice. However, Karim Bellarabi, who also scored, picked up an injury to rule him out of their opening league match at Union Berlin tomorrow. —AFP



WIESBADEN: Wiesbaden's German defender Ahmet Guerleyen (right) vies with Dortmund's Norwegian forward Erling Braut Haaland during the German Cup first round match on Aug 7, 2021. — AFP

for Chelsea, Leipzig have boosted their attack by signing Portugal striker Andre Silva under new head coach Jesse Marsch. Alongside Silva, who bagged 32 goals in the Bundesliga for Eintracht Frankfurt last season, Leipzig have also signed center-forward Brian Brobbey, 19, from Ajax. Leipzig are away to COVID-19 hit Mainz on Saturday and have a chance to throw down an early marker in the league when they host Bayern in the league on September 11.

Marsch has identified matches against Bayern and Dortmund as the "peak" games Leipzig must "conquer" in their bid to win the Bundesliga for the first time. After eight months out with in-

juries, Hungarian midfielder Dominik Szoboszlai, 20, capped his club debut off the bench with a goal last weekend. Marsch needs to restructure his defense after losing center-backs Ibrahima Konate, to Liverpool, and Dayot Upamecano to Bayern.

VfL Wolfsburg

Wolfsburg are back in the Champions League after a five-year hiatus and have appointed ex-Bayern Munich midfielder Mark van Bommel as head coach. The Dutchman has kept most of the squad which finished fourth in the Bundesliga last season. They host newly-promoted Bochum on Saturday but Wolfsburg, who last won the Bundesliga title in 2009, need to gel quickly after losing five pre-season friendlies.

Dutch striker Wout Weghorst leads the attack having scored 20 league goals last season while Germany forward Maximilian Philipp has made his loan move from Dynamo Moscow permanent. One to watch is Germany Under-21 forward Lukas Nmecha, who has joined from Manchester City on a four-year deal. Nmecha was born in Germany, but played for England at youth level after moving there as a child. He later opted for Germany, scoring the winner in the final of June's Under-21 European championship.

Borussia Moenchengladbach

"The Foals" dropped off badly towards the end of last season as results suffered once it was confirmed Marco Rose was leaving to coach Dortmund. His replacement Adi Huetter inherits an impressive squad, boasting Germany midfielders Lars Stindl and Jonas Hofmann alongside forwards Brael Embolo, Alassane Plea and Marcus Thuram. On their day, Gladbach can beat any German club, but need consistency. Gladbach host Bayern today hoping to repeat January's shock 3-2 victory when Hofmann scored twice before Florian Neuhaus hit the winning goal.—AFP

Sports

Premier League braced for four-way title race

LONDON: The Premier League's giants have again brushed off the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic ahead of the start of the new season today with a four-team battle expected for the title. Reigning champions Manchester City have broken the English top flight transfer record by splashing £100 million (\$138 million) on Jack Grealish. However, European champions Chelsea showed they were capable of beating City three times towards the end of last season and are not alone in harboring ambitions of snatching the Premier League title away from Pep Guardiola's men.

Manchester United have also spent over £100 million on Jadon Sancho and Raphael Varane, while Liverpool look refreshed after an injury-ravaged 2020/2021 season. AFP Sport looks at the four leading contenders for the title:

Manchester City

Winning a third Premier League title in four seasons and lifting yet another League Cup was not enough to sate Guardiola's appetite for success. Fuelled by the frustration of City's limp Champions League final defeat against Chelsea, Guardiola has no intention of resting on his laurels. The City boss added another weapon to his already lethal attacking arsenal with a British record £100 million (\$139 million) swoop for Aston Villa playmaker Grealish. Another British transfer record could still be to come with Tottenham striker Harry Kane in City's sights. Having finished 12 points clear of second-placed Manchester United last term, City start as favorites for the title. But with Tottenham, Leicester, Arsenal, Chelsea and Liverpool among their opening seven games of the season, the champions' title defence could be quickly knocked off course.

Manchester United

Without a major trophy since 2017, United have loaded up for a sustained assault to end an eight-year wait to win the title. There was no repeat of last summer's transfer saga over Sancho as a £73 million fee was quickly agreed with Borussia Dortmund before Varane's arrival solved a problem position at center-back. Sancho joins a swash-buckling attack also featuring Marcus Rashford, Mason Greenwood, Edinson Cavani and Anthony Martial with Bruno Fernandes and Paul Pogba pulling the strings behind them in midfield. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men have proved to be more than a match for City on their day over the past two seasons, but need to find the consistency of their local rivals over the long haul.

Liverpool

Ravaged by long-term injuries to Virgil van Dijk, Jordan Henderson, Joe Gomez and Joel Matip, Liverpool surrendered their first English title in 30 years without a fight. Yet, from the ashes of that turbulent campaign, Jurgen Klopp's side believe they will be stronger this season. Liverpool shrugged off their woes with a late surge that saw them qualify for the Champions League with a third-place finish.

Dutch midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum left for Paris Saint-Germain at the end of the season, but Klopp has bolstered his squad with the £36 million signing of Leipzig defender Ibrahima Konate. Mohamed Salah, Sadio Mane and Trent Alexander-Arnold have been refreshed by a summer off from international duties, while Diogo Jota's fine form in his first season at the club has put Roberto Firmino's place up front under threat. Most impor-



MANCHESTER: Jack Grealish waves to Manchester City fans outside the Etihad Stadium during his unveiling on Aug 9, 2021. —AFP

tantly, the returns of Van Dijk and Henderson will be like new signings for Klopp as the Reds boss aims to bounce back from a first trophyless season in three years.

Chelsea

Thomas Tuchel's remarkable impact at Chelsea culminated in Champions League final glory just five months after taking charge. The German revitalized the previously lethargic Blues with his tactical nous, in-game strategy and motivational expertise. It was fitting that Kai Havertz, one of previous coach Frank Lampard's expensively signed underachievers, should un-

derline his improvement in the Tuchel era with the goal that clinched Chelsea's second Champions League crown.

Tuchel must now build on that triumph and has been backed by Roman Abramovich with Romelu Lukaku set to return to Stamford Bridge for a club record £97 million from Inter Milan. While Chelsea were rock solid at the back after Tuchel's appointment, they were less impressive in attack where Timo Werner, Hakim Ziyech and Christian Pulisic all struggled for consistency. Lukaku's goalscoring prowess could be the final piece of the puzzle in Tuchel's transformation of the Londoners. —AFP

La Liga returns under financial cloud and without Messi

MADRID: La Liga, just three years ago the undisputed monarch of European football, returns for a new season today after a traumatic summer that ended with its crown jewel being given away. The free transfer of Lionel Messi to Paris Saint-Germain on Tuesday drove home the financial turmoil that is eroding the power of Spanish football. While Messi is the biggest star to leave, and his former club Barcelona have been particularly cavalier in racking up debts estimated at 1.2bn euros, Spanish football has money worries

The pandemic has cost the top-flight clubs some €2 billion (\$1.4 billion) and the desperation is showing. The league is trying to enforce a tough salary cap, while searching for funds. Its assembly yesterday was to vote on the sale of 10 percent of commercial rights for 50 years to private equity firm CVC in exchange for €2.7 billion. Real Madrid and Barcelona are fighting the deal saying it is selling their futures.

Yet the same two clubs are refusing to give up hope of a giant, and potentially toxic, carrot of their own, even though nine of the other Super League clubs have withdrawn and the source of the \$4 billion loot, bankers JP Morgan Chase, have apologized to fans. The Euros and Olympics again displayed the depth of talent in Spanish football and this may be the season for youngsters to break out because, with 20 days left in the transfer window, Spanish clubs are not buying players.

Real and Barcelona, who between them won every Champions League

final from 2014-18, are living, and dying, by free transfers. Like Barcelona, Real Madrid decided they could not afford a new contract for their talismanic captain. Like Messi, Sergio Ramos departed for a late-career jackpot at Paris Saint-Germain. Such is the cachet of Real and Barca that they can still attract a high class of free agent. Barcelona have picked up Memphis Depay, Eric Garcia and Sergio Aguero. While Real are, once again, being linked to Kylian Mbappe of PSG, the biggest fee either club has spent is the €9 million Barcelona gave Betis for Brazilian fullback Emerson Royal. Real have replaced the hard edge of Ramos with the all-round defensive quality of another trophy magnet David Alaba. Real are under new management, with Carlo Ancelotti returning to replace Zinedine Zidane who, for a second time, quit in frustration. The Italian must cope with the consequences of the club's long shopping addiction and work out what to do with returning loan stars such as Gareth Bale, Martin Odegaard and Dani Ceballos.

Sensing weakness

In the financial gale, simply standing still might be an achievement. Champions Atletico kick off with last season's stars and coach, Diego Simeone, still in place. They have also made by far the biggest outlay of the Spanish summer, buying Argentine midfielder Rodrigo de Paul from Udinese for a reported €35 million. Real and Barcelona followed Atletico home last season, but other clubs could be sniffing weakness.

Sevilla, under Real reject Julen Lopetegui, finished just behind Barcelona. They have turned local winger Suso's loan into a permanent move by paying AC Milan a pre-agreed €20 million. They also acquired spikey Argentine midfielder Erik Lamela from Tottenham on a free transfer. The club's wheeler-dealer director of football Monchi is dangling his most saleable asset, defender Jules Kounde, in front of English clubs. But if Monchi sells, he will then probably buy Real Sociedad who have shown potential but not top-four



KLAGENFURT, Austria: Real Madrid's Austrian defender David Alaba kicks the ball during an international friendly football match between Real Madrid and AC Milan at the Worthersee-Stadion on Aug 8, 2021. —AFP

consistency, have been involved in a total of €500,000 of deals. That's the sum they paid Bournemouth for Spanish fullback Diego Rico. If stability builds teams, then, after three-and-half years under coach Imanol Alguacil, the San Sebastian club could be ready to challenge the troubled giants.

Villarreal, fresh from another European exploit as they brought a trophy back to Spain by winning the Europa League, have seemed the most buoyant of Liga clubs this summer, making two of the four set eight-figure signings so far. They paid €15 million for Juan Foyth, a price set the previous year when the Argentine defender joined on loan from Tottenham, and €12 million for center forward Boulaye Dia from Reims. —AFP

Sports

'Welcome Leo' - Messi meets PSG teammates at first training session

PARIS: After a rapturous reception and raucous unveiling from the fans on Wednesday Lionel Messi got to know his new teammates at Paris Saint-Germain's Camp des Loges training facility yesterday. Much has been made of Messi lining up with Brazil's Neymar and France striker Kylian Mbappe in what will be a fearsome attack for PSG in their quest to win a maiden Champions League. World Cup winner Mbappe was one of the first to extend his welcome to Messi after his official arrival and the 22-year-old posted his best wishes to the newcomer on social media.

Mbappe has been linked with a move to Real Madrid with only a year left of his PSG contract. "Welcome to Paris, Leo," Mbappe wrote alongside photos with the pair hugging. The 34-year-old former Barcelona player has been on downtime since winning the Copa America with Argentina in July, and started his first PSG run-out with simple physical exercises.

"I've been out of action for around month and I need to get physically ready. I hope to be ready as soon as possible, because I can't wait to play," Messi said at his unveiling at the Parc des Princes on Wednesday. He is unlikely to make his debut for PSG soon, and certainly not

this weekend when Mauricio Pochettino's team play Strasbourg in Ligue 1. "I can't tell you when my first game will be but I can tell you I'm dying to get started," he said. "I want it to be soon."

Messi only arrived in the French capital on Tuesday before penning a two-year contract with the option of a third season. The club also revealed yesterday it had paid a signing on bonus to the player in PSG's own virtual currency which it calls \$PSG Fan Tokens, originally sold at €2 each and currently trading over €30 each. "The coins are there to create a link between the fans and the club, and it's the first time we have used them in this way," the Parisians said in a statement without saying how many they had given to Messi.

PSG quickly emerged as the favorites to sign Messi following the shock of his departure last week from Barcelona and he arrives eyeing a fifth Champions League, with the most recent of his four victories with his old club coming in 2015. PSG are reportedly paying €35 million (\$41 million) a year to Messi, who will wear the number 30 jersey - with fans continuing to line up outside the club's different shops in the capital to buy the shirt with his name and number on the back. —AFP



PARIS: A man poses wearing a jersey of PSG's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi in front of a large banner reading "Welcome Leo Messi" on a wall of the Paris Saint-Germain's Parc des Princes stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

What does Messi arrival mean for Mbappe's future?

PARIS: Lionel Messi has been reunited with his old Barcelona teammate Neymar in an all-star attack at Paris Saint-Germain, but the question now is whether the arrival of the Argentinian superstar could actually push Kylian Mbappe out of the French giants. PSG's plan is to have the three forwards playing together in an all-star attack that they hope can finally win them the Champions League, yet Mbappe's long-term future remains a source of doubt.

Messi has just penned a two-year contract worth a reported €35 million (\$41 million) a year with the option of a third season. In May, Neymar, who is 29, extended his deal with the club to 2025. Mbappe, in contrast, is out of contract at the end of this season and is a long-time target for Real Madrid. "Mbappe is possible," said the headline on the front of Madrid-based sports daily AS on Tuesday. "The arrival of Messi at PSG pushes Mbappe aside and paves the way for his arrival in Madrid."

Mbappe has refused to rush into a decision over his future, leaving PSG in something of an awkward situation. They are not considering selling him but nor do they want to see a player who cost €180 million (\$211 million), the second-highest transfer fee in history, leave for free when his contract expires next June. "Everyone knows that I am deeply attached to this club," Mbappe said in an interview with broadcaster Canal Plus in May. But I want to feel that I am in a place where I really can win, where there is a project in place to do that."

When asked about Mbappe's future at Messi's unveiling on Wednesday, PSG's Qatari president Nasser Al-Khelaifi insisted that the France striker was now in the best possible

place to fulfil his Champions League ambitions. "Kylian is a Paris player. He is very competitive, he has a winning mentality. He has said publicly that he wanted a competitive team and there is no more competitive team than this," Khelaifi said. "He has no excuse for doing anything other than staying."

Real need new talisman

As well as Messi, PSG have also signed Gianluigi Donnarumma, Sergio Ramos, Georginio Wijnaldum and Achraf Hakimi this summer. They look stronger than ever in all areas of the pitch, but might Mbappe feel that he will have to give up too much of the limelight by staying in Paris now Messi has arrived? Mbappe wants to be the number one. After all, he is the only member of PSG's frontline to have won the World Cup.

The former Monaco player has been the top scorer in Ligue 1 in each of the last three seasons, with 27 in the last campaign. That may not mean anything, but for PSG it is true that, given his age, Mbappe represents the future and is seen as the natural heir to an ageing Messi as the prominent player in world football.

Messi's arrival in Paris is further confirmation of the changing balance of power in the European game, away from the traditional elite like Madrid and Barcelona to PSG, Manchester City and Chelsea, clubs with the wealth of Gulf states or oligarchs behind them. But Madrid see Mbappe as the man to lead them back to the summit of European football, three years on from the departure of Cristiano Ronaldo.

Mbappe, while a native Parisian, has always been drawn to the Spanish giants, who already showed interest in signing him when he was a fresh-faced teenager. Real need a new talisman too. Ronaldo has long since gone while this summer has seen center-backs Ramos and Raphael Varane depart. Their remaining superstar up front, Karim Benzema, will be 34 in December. They are hoping that PSG will be open to offers now, or that Mbappe will run down his contract and join them next season. —AFP



TROYES, France: Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe runs with the ball during the French L1 football match between PSG and ES Troyes at the Stade de l'Aube on Aug 7, 2021. —AFP

Sports

Kepa the hero as Chelsea edge out Villarreal to win Super Cup

BELFAST: Kepa Arrizabalaga was the unlikely hero as Chelsea started the new season as they ended the last with a European trophy by beating Villarreal 6-5 on penalties after a 1-1 draw to win the UEFA Super Cup in Belfast. The Spaniard, who has lost his place as number one since joining the club for a world record fee for a goalkeeper in 2018, was introduced late in extra-time as a substitute for the shootout by Thomas Tuchel.

Kepa famously refused to be replaced by former Chelsea boss Maurizio Sarri in a League Cup final defeat to Manchester City two years ago. But this time he rewarded his manager's faith with saves from Aissa Mandi and Raul Albiol. "It was not spontaneous," said Tuchel who explained the plan had been hatched in the FA Cup last season.

"We talked about it with the goalkeepers after the first cup game against Barnsley. Kepa has the best percentage at saving penalties, the analysing guys and goalkeeping coaches showed me the data. We spoke to the players that this could happen when we play in knockout games. It's fantastic how Edouard (Mendy) accepted it. There is proof that Kepa is better in this discipline. They're team players. Edouard does not show the pride to not step off the field. He was happy to do it for the team and take this for the team."

Chelsea's win over Manchester City in Porto to lift the Champions League for a second time in May was the culmination of a meteoric rise in Tuchel's first five months in charge. The German has bemoaned having to manage a 42-man squad during pre-season and could soon have even

more firepower to call on with Romelu Lukaku expected to complete a return to Stamford Bridge later this week for a club record £97 million (\$135 million).

But the depth of resources available to Tuchel was on show early on. Euro 2020 finalists Mason Mount, Ben Chilwell, Reece James and Jorginho all had to settle for a place on the bench after their late return to pre-season training, but Chelsea still had far too much for the Europa League winners in the opening half hour.

Bittersweet for Ziyech

Hakim Ziyech had a bittersweet evening as he continued his fine pre-season form into competitive action with the opening goal. Marcos Alonso fed Kai Havertz down the right and from the German's low cross, Ziyech swept home. However, the Moroccan was forced off before half-time in a sling by a shoulder injury. In stark contrast to Chelsea's haul of now 20 trophies in the nearly 20 years since Roman Abramovich's takeover transformed the club, Villarreal's Europa League final victory over Manchester United in May secured their first ever silverware.

After an overly cautious start from Unai Emery's men, going behind forced the Yellow Submarine out of their shell and they were unfortunate not to be level by half-time. "I am proud to represent Villarreal, our project and the Spanish league," said Emery. "We knew how to compete." Mendy scampered from his line to deny Boulaye Dia a debut goal before Villarreal twice hit the woodwork either side of the break



BELFAST: Chelsea's Spanish defender Cesar Azpilicueta raises the trophy during the presentation ceremony after Chelsea won the UEFA Super Cup football match between Chelsea and Villarreal at Windsor Park on Wednesday. — AFP

through Alberto Moreno and Gerard Moreno.

Villarreal were the dominant force in the second-half as Chelsea physically faded after their flying start. Tuchel turned to his bench to stem the tide as Mount, Jorginho and Andreas Christensen were introduced. But the Spaniards finally got their deserved equaliser when Moreno played a clever one-two with Dia before firing high past Mendy.

Neither manager would have welcomed an extra 30 minutes just days before their respective league campaigns kick-off. Chelsea had the better of extra-time as Christian Pulisic fired inches wide before Sergio Asenjo produced a fine save to deny Mount. Asenjo also gave Villarreal a dream start to the shootout by saving from Havertz. But Chelsea were flawless with their next six spot-kicks to allow Kepa to take center stage. — AFP

No backdown on 4-week quarantine for Aussie athletes

SYDNEY: Australian state officials defended their decision yesterday to force some Olympic athletes to quarantine for four weeks, as one high-profile sports star branded the move "disgusting" and another "embarrassing". All overseas travelers, including the nearly 500-strong Australian team, must spend 14 days in isolation at a designated hotel or special outback camp on arrival in the country, under strict coronavirus rules. The South Australian government is also insisting that those heading back to the state from Sydney must repeat the two-week quarantine.

The Australian Olympic Committee slammed the move as "cruel", but South Australia Premier Steven Marshall said it was necessary. "It is tough, we feel for these athletes, but every person coming in from Sydney is required to do 14 days," he told reporters. "We've got to be prudent in South Australia. It's tough but the Delta variant is a killer."

He pointed out that the state's most recent seven-day lockdown - which ended on July 27 - was prompted by a resident returning from New South Wales. There are 56 athletes ex-



TOKYO: Australia's athletes celebrate during the closing ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Olympic Stadium on Aug 8, 2021. — AFP

pected back in South Australia with 16 already undergoing quarantine in Sydney, which is currently in a lockdown to try and stem a Delta variant outbreak. The entire Australian team,

who won 17 gold medals and 46 in total, are fully vaccinated and were tested for COVID-19 almost daily in Japan.

Adelaide's Belinda White, a member of Aus-

tralia's Olympic softball team, will be one of the first impacted after completing her Sydney stint this week. Softball Australia chief David Pryles said he was worried about her mental health, noting that she had already been away from friends and family since June 1. "To force Belinda to undergo an extra 14 days by herself upon returning to her hometown of Adelaide frankly gives us concern for the mental well-being of our returning Olympian," he said.

'Embarrassed'

Several notable Australian sportspeople weighed in on the controversy with cricket star Glenn Maxwell tweeting: "This is actually disgusting," while tennis' Luke Saville, who played singles and doubles in Tokyo, said he was "embarrassed to be a South Aussie". Adelaide rower Molly Goodman claimed she was only informed about the extra quarantine requirement "probably two days ago at the most". "I'm not sure I've actually come to terms with it, to be honest," she told broadcaster ABC from her Sydney hotel room. "It's quite a lot to ask of the athletes."

Australia dodged the worst ravages of the pandemic through a strategy of closed borders, lockdowns, travel quarantine, and aggressive testing and tracing. But those tools now appear blunted in the face of the highly transmissible Delta variant, with several regions struggling to control case numbers. — AFP



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