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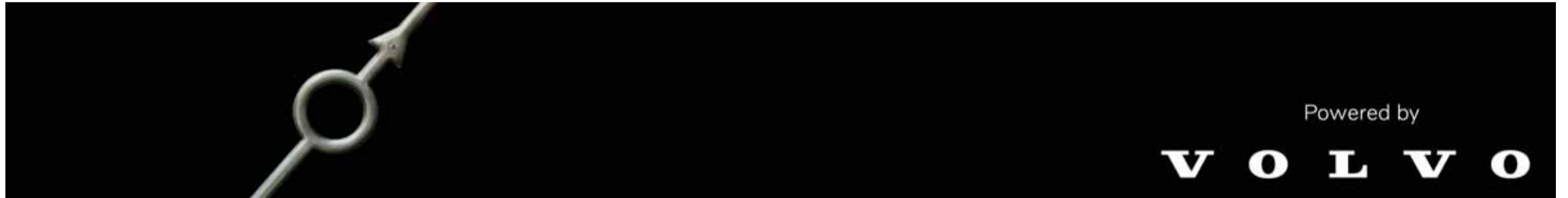
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Kuwait resumes direct flights with six countries

First flights from Egypt and India land in Kuwait today

Amir receives bronze medal winner Rashidi



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah with Tokyo 2020 Olympics bronze medal winner Abdullah Turqi Al-Rashidi. — Amiri Diwan photo

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday Minister of Electricity, Water, and Renewable Energy, Minister of Social Affairs and Community Development and Acting Minister of State for Youth Affairs Dr Mishaan Al-Otaibi, member of Kuwait Olympic Committee Sheikh Faisal Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah, Committee member and Head of Kuwait Delegation to Tokyo Olympics 2020 Fatima Hayat, and bronze medal winner Abdullah Turqi Al-Rashidi for winning Tokyo Olympics' skeet competition.

HH the Amir praised the outstanding sport achievement by Al-Rashidi that contributed to the hoisting of Kuwaiti flag at the Olympics stadium. HH the Amir also expressed his pride in other Kuwaiti athletes who participated in the Olympic Games and thanked them for their efforts and high-level performance. Top officials in the Amiri Diwan attended the meeting. On his part, shooter Al-Rashidi thanked His Highness for the considerable reception and continuous support for Kuwait's athletes. — KUNA

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The Civil Aviation Authority yesterday announced the resumption of direct commercial flights with India, Egypt and four Asian nations starting today after several months of suspension to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

The resumption of the flights also includes Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Together, the six nations have more than 70 percent of the 3.3 million expats living and working in Kuwait. The first flight is expected to arrive from Egypt after midnight on Wednesday to be followed with two flights from India. The civil aviation circular emphasized the need to observe health guidelines.

The decision to resume direct flights was taken by the Council of Ministers earlier this week on recommendation by the coronavirus ministerial committee following a sharp drop in the number of new cases and the number of patients. The civil aviation also recalled that immunized passengers are those who had received two doses of Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca and one dose of Johnson and Johnson. Those who had received two doses of unapproved vaccines abroad - Sinopharm, Sinovac, Sputnik V - must receive an additional dose of one of the four approved vaccines.



KUWAIT: Passengers arrive at the Kuwait International Airport in this file photo.

Those who had been vaccinated in Kuwait can prove vaccination through Immune or Kuwait Mobile ID applications or Kuwait Mosafer platform, the civil aviation said.

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Newlywed couple Horlan Jeff Malaza and Mary Ann Malaza

Filipino couple's fishing adventure turns into tragedy

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Newlywed couple Horlan Jeff Malaza, 28 and Mary Ann Malaza, 30, decided to go out for some quality time fishing on the weekend. They went to a spot off Balajat Street in Salmiya on August 20, 2021. But two hours later Horlan had gone missing.

Thirty three hours later, his lifeless body was found in the sea about a kilometer away from where he had last been seen. His wife said Horlan worked the shore, wading into the water while fishing and must have been drowned that

way. "We went last Friday for fishing because he really loves fishing," said wife Mary Ann while talking to Kuwait Times at the couple's flat in Salmiya. "For me, it was the first time to go with him fishing, otherwise he would go fishing alone. That Friday, I was excited because we both were off work, and I promised him many times that I will accompany him that day, so we went," she said.

When they arrived at the area around 5pm, Horlan immediately went to a 'quiet spot' for fishing.

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KUWAIT: A photograph of Horlan Jeff Malaza taken shortly before he went missing off Balajat, Salmiya. — Photos courtesy Mary Ann Malaza

Taliban issue new warning against airlift extension

KABUL: The Taliban yesterday urged skilled Afghans not to flee the country, as the new rulers of Afghanistan warned the United States and its NATO allies they would not accept an extension to a looming evacuation deadline-even as Western countries said time was running out.

A spokesman for the hardline Islamist group told America to stop taking "Afghan experts" such as engineers and doctors out of the country. "This country needs their expertise. They should not be taken to other countries," Zabihullah Mujahid told a press conference in the capital Kabul.

"They should not encourage the Afghan people to flee Afghanistan." European nations have said they would not be able to airlift at-risk Afghans before the August 31 cut-off, and United States President Joe Biden has faced calls from all corners to extend the evacuation window.

But speaking at a press conference in the capital Kabul, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the Islamist group opposes an extension. "They have planes, they have the airport, they should get their citizens and contractors out of here," said

Continued on Page 2



KABUL: In this handout image courtesy of the US Marine Corps, a child (center) looks at the aircraft as he is strolled towards his flight during an evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul yesterday. — AFP

Kuwait nears herd immunity in nine months

KUWAIT: Kuwait has nearly achieved herd immunity within just nine months of the start of the country's vaccination campaign against COVID-19, said Dr Khaled Al-Saeed, member of the Supreme Committee for COVID-19 yesterday. Kuwait has reached record number of daily vaccinations, inoculating around two percent of the population per day, he said. The country has managed to achieve this breakthrough administering only authorized vaccines while resisting pressures to use less efficient ones.

Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Humoud Al-Sabah on Monday briefed the Cabinet ministers on the country's health situation amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The minister noted a continuing decline in coronavirus-related deaths, infections and hospitalizations, adding that the recovery rate has increased to 98.3 percent.

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Kuwait's Amir receives condolences over demise of Sheikha Badriah

Amir, Crown Prince meet Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad



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



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah also received His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad at Bayan Palace.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir received, on Monday, a cable from Saudi Arabia King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, expressing condolences over the demise of Sheikha Badriah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, asking Allah Almighty to bestow mercy upon her soul. In a reply cable, His Highness the Amir expressed appreciation for the sincere sentiments, wishing good health and wellness to King Salman. His Highness the Amir received a similar cable from Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud.

Furthermore, His Highness the Amir received cables of condolences on the demise of Sheikha Badriah from Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq, King of Bahrain Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. Earlier, His Highness the

Amir received a phone call from Tunisian President Qais Saeed, expressing condolences over the demise of Sheikha Badriah.

His Highness the Amir also received cables from senior Kuwaiti officials, all expressing deep condolences over the demise of Sheikha Badriah Al-Sabah. The cables were from His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal, National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, Chief of Kuwait National Guard His Highness Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah, His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, President of Kuwait's Supreme Judicial Council and Chairman of the Court of Cassation Justice Ahmad Al-Ajeel and National Guard Deputy Chief Lt Gen Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In reply cables, His Highness the Amir expressed appreciation for the sincere sentiments, wishing good health and wellness to all. The Amiri Diwan had announced on Monday the passing of Sheikha Badriah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, widow of the late Sheikh Abdullah Al-Khalifa Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah. — KUNA

Taleban issue new warning against...

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Mujahid. US-led troops have ramped up operations to get thousands of people out of Kabul by August 31 — a deadline set by the US before the fall of the country for all foreign troops to have pulled out of Afghanistan.

President Biden has said he will stick to the schedule but has faced growing pressure to negotiate more time for the evacuations. Germany said yesterday that Western allies simply cannot fly every Afghan who needs protection out of Kabul before the cut-off date. "Even if (the evacuation) goes on until August 31 or even a few days longer, it will not be enough," Foreign Minister Heiko Maas told Bild TV.

Earlier France said it would have to end evacuations from Kabul's airport on Thursday if the US stuck to the deadline, and Spain said it would not be able to rescue all Afghans who served Spanish missions.

Britain, meanwhile, has said it will lobby for an extension at a virtual G7 summit later yesterday.

About 50,000 foreigners and Afghans have fled the country from Kabul's airport since the Taleban swept into power nine days ago, according to the US government. Many Afghans fear a repeat of the brutal interpretation of Islamic law that the Taleban implemented when first in power from 1996-2001, or retribution for working with the US-backed government over the past two decades.

Yesterday, Mujahid said female Afghan government workers should stay home until security conditions in the country improve. The Taleban achieved their stunning victory thanks to Biden pulling out nearly all American troops from Afghanistan, following through on a deal struck with the movement by then-president Donald Trump.

However, Biden was forced to redeploy thousands of troops after the fall of Kabul to oversee the airlift.

According to the Washington Post, US Central Intelligence Agency chief William Burns held a secret meeting in Kabul on Monday with Taleban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, although no details were reported and neither the CIA nor the Taleban confirmed it. — AFP

Kuwait nears herd immunity...

Continued from Page 1

He highlighted the ministry's efforts to speed up vaccination against the virus in order to achieve herd immunity. The Cabinet, while appreciating the cooperation of nationals and expatriates in implementing health guidelines, urged the public's continued adherence to COVID-19 measures.

Meanwhile, Kuwait reported 189 new coronavirus cases Monday raising the total number of infected to 408,434. Three deaths were also reported Monday, increasing the total number of fatalities to 2,407, according to the health ministry.

Filipino couple's fishing adventure...

Continued from Page 1

"It was crowded that day because probably it was Friday and people were swimming. So he went a bit far from a place where he left me," Mary Ann said. "He went maybe around 200 meters but we could still see each other. I saw him set up his fishing rod, and waited. A few moments later, I saw him dip his body in the water, with the rod in his hands. In fact, I went closer to him just to take some photos. But then I went back to my place where he left me because he wants me to just wait there. So, I waited while browsing my Facebook and posted the several photos I took," said Mary Ann who is three months pregnant now.

Around 6pm, Mary Ann could still see her husband from afar. But at 7pm, she noticed that he disappeared from the place where he was fishing. "At first, I did not suspect anything, because maybe he would have just left for walking somewhere away from the spot where he was fishing. I did not mind anything, no bad thoughts at all. So, I waited at the place where he left me a bit longer. Then after some time, I went back to the spot where he was fishing. And I saw some more Filipinos there already setting up their own fishing rods too. They were all shocked

to hear my husband was missing and helped me in searching for him. I called my sister to tell her about what happened. Meanwhile, my friends had also come to support me. I dialed up 112 emergency hotline and the police came," she said.

Another 520 people were cured of the virus, raising the total of cured to 401,837, ministry spokesperson Dr Abdallah Al-Sanad said in a statement.

The number of people hospitalized with the virus currently stands at 309, with 132 of them in intensive care units, he added, revealing that another 4,190 are receiving regular treatment. Some 11,840 swab tests were conducted over the last day out of a total of 3,687,295, said the official. He urged nationals and expatriates to continue to abide by health precautions including social distancing rules to halt the spread of the virus. The health authorities recently announced the opening of a new vaccination center as the country has vaccinated nearly 70 percent of the population against COVID-19, with a daily capacity of 100,000 administered doses. — KUNA

A search and rescue mission was launched. "I saw divers, police cars, ambulance and boats at the scene and the search continued until 3 am when they came to me and requested me to go home and rest. I left the area only at 5.30 am. I went home without my husband. Then, I tried to sleep a bit. Then at 5.30 pm that same day, I received a call from the authorities saying they had found a body. They need me for identification. I thought the body of my husband would be there, but he wasn't there. The moment I arrived at the police station, I immediately saw our wedding ring placed on a white paper; I knew it was him," she said.

The couple married only four months ago and Mary Ann is three months pregnant.

"For 33 hours, I was crying and hoping for a miracle that he would come back to me alive. But he's gone forever and left me with our baby," she cried. She was not allowed to see her husband's mortal remains, although her male companions were able to identify the corpse.

Horlan Jeff Malaza's body was handed over to the forensic department for investigation. Mary Ann will accompany her husband's body which will be flown to Manila. The repatriation process of Horlan's body is now being done with the assistance of the Philippines embassy in Kuwait.

available, the vaccination certificate should be uploaded to the health ministry website for authentication.

Non-immunized domestic workers can be recruited through registration in the Belsalamah platform, the civil aviation said. In the meantime, the civil aviation authority has asked the Council of Ministers to increase the number of arriving passengers above the currently allowed 7,500 because of the expected influx of expats into the country following the resumption of direct flights with the six countries.

Kuwait resumes direct flights...

Continued from Page 1

Those who had been fully vaccinated outside Kuwait can prove vaccination by producing a certificate with name identical to one in passport, type of vaccine and dates, vaccination authority and the QR code. If the QR code is not

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Kuwait's Prime Minister to take part in regional conference to support Iraq

Cabinet reviews general framework for a low-carbon strategy



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah (center) chairs the Cabinet's meeting. —KUNA photos



Cabinet ministers attend the meeting.



Cabinet ministers attend the meeting.



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah will take part in the regional conference to support Iraq on August 28, the Kuwaiti Cabinet said during its weekly meeting that was held Monday. After the meeting, Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah affirmed that under the instructions of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister will participate at the regional conference to support Iraq.

The conference aims at supporting the constitutional process in Iraq, facing the challenges it faces and strengthening efforts to promote stability, development, reconstruction and combating terrorism and extremism, he added. His Highness the Prime Minister touched on the results of the latest visit paid by the Prime Minister of Iraq, Mustafa Al-Kadhemi and his accompanying delegation to Kuwait, during which the bilateral ties between the

two countries were discussed.

Government performance

Meanwhile, the Cabinet was briefed on a visual presentation submitted by Chairman of the Follow-Up of Government Performance Agency Sheikh Ahmad Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and some of his aides regarding the agency's annual report for the year 2020. The report includes violations and procedures as well as general and specific recommendations to be taken to improve the level of government performance. The Cabinet praised the efforts made in preparing the report and the agency's endeavors to follow up on government projects and the observations of the State Audit

Bureau of Kuwait. It decided to assign the agency, in cooperation with all government bodies, to address and implement recommendations mentioned in the report so as to upgrade the level performance.



Fire Force coordination on environment violations

Furthermore, the Cabinet took a decision to task Kuwait Fire Force with continuing cooperation and coordination with the concerned bodies so as to complete efforts towards taking legal measures against all violators that run counter to preventive safety and environmental requirements. It also decided to entrust the Environment Public Authority to continue following up on all works in Al-Salmi used tires site, and determine the final timetable necessary for completing these works, which contribute

to reducing the recurrence of fire accidents.

Low-carbon strategy

The Cabinet was informed about a presentation that EPA Director General Sheikh Abdullah Ahmad Al-Humoud Al-Sabah submitted on the national contributions document and Kuwait's general framework for a low-carbon strategy 2050, in line with the country's endeavors to transform into a low-carbon economy for 2020-2035. The move is part of the country's efforts to achieve development priorities regarding diversifying energy production sources so as to avoid an increase in greenhouse gases by 2035. Finally, the Cabinet discussed the political affairs on the latest developments on Arab and international levels. It followed up the floodwaters that engulfed the US state of Tennessee that left dozens of people killed or wounded, offering its sincere condolences to American people and the families of the victims. It also wished a rapid recovery to those injured. — KUNA

First flight of Afghan evacuees arrives in Kuwait

KUWAIT: US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski announced that the first flight of at-risk Afghan evacuees arrived safely to a coalition military installation in Kuwait yesterday. They were welcomed by dedicated US and Kuwaiti military and diplomatic personnel, the envoy wrote on her Twitter account yesterday. Up to 5,000 Afghans will transit in Kuwait before heading to the US and other destinations, she added.

Kuwait had approved the transit of 5,000 Afghan nationals, who have been evacuated from their country to the US under the directions of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the foreign ministry announced on Sunday. This move comes in "recognition of the strategic relations between the State of Kuwait and the United States of America," according to the ministry statement. It also aims to "enhance the existing

cooperation between them and in continuation of the humanitarian role of the State of Kuwait, which calls for the importance of securing safe passage for diplomats and foreign nationals and the facilitation of evacuations from Afghanistan."

US Ambassador Romanowski had lauded Kuwait for the cooperation for evacuating American citizens and at-risk locals from Afghanistan and has deeply appreciated its support at this level. "Over the past several days, the United States has mobilized an unprecedented global effort to evacuate US citizens, personnel from partner nations, and at-risk individuals from Kabul," the US ambassador said in a press statement released on Monday. "Since August 16, more than 850 Americans and personnel at embassy in Kabul transited safely from Afghanistan to the United States via Kuwait on five separate flights," the statement added.



KUWAIT: A combination of photos that US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski posted on her Twitter account yesterday, showing US military personnel and Kuwait-based volunteers helping at-risk Afghan evacuees following their arrival in Kuwait.

Canada hails Kuwait's efforts to evacuate foreign diplomats from Afghanistan



Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau (left) and Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: Canada appreciates Kuwait's efforts to repatriate Canadian and other international diplomats in Afghanistan, its foreign minister told his Kuwaiti counterpart in a phone call yesterday, as countries press on with the evacuation of their nationals from Kabul. Discussing the develop-

ments in Afghanistan, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Nasser Al-Sabah and Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau agreed that it was imperative to ensure the smooth exodus of foreign diplomats there, which is necessary to save lives. — KUNA

Divers remove fishing nets south of Kuwait Bay



KUWAIT: Kuwait Dive Team announced yesterday its volunteers have recently removed fishing nets south of Kuwait Bay near Jaber Causeway. The nets, weighing one ton, were removed from a depth of three

meters under water in cooperation with Kuwait Coast Guard and the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources. Several dead fish were found stuck in the nets, team leader Waleed Al-Fadhel said. — KUNA

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ADVERTISING : 24835616/7
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Kuwait marks 30th anniversary of key education landmark

Late Amir lit torch of post-invasion education resumption

KUWAIT: It has been 30 years since the late Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad A-Jaber Al-Sabah lit the torch of education after Kuwait was liberated from the Iraqi invasion in 1991. During the 'Torch of Education' ceremony which was held at Bayan Palace, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad said "the Tyrant of Iraq sought to obliterate everything in Kuwait including education, but today Kuwait is gradually returning to normalcy."

Schools, which were once bustling with students who were eager for the pursuit of knowledge, were



KUWAIT: This archive photo shows the late Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad A-Jaber Al-Sabah lighting the 'Torch of Education' during a ceremony to announce the resumption of education after Kuwait was liberated from the Iraqi invasion in 1991. — KUNA

Absconding maids should be deported, pay airfare: MP

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji yesterday submitted an amendment to the law governing domestic workers in the country that calls to deport workers who flee their sponsors and make them pay for the ticket back home. He said the amendment aims at protecting the rights of the employers against the workers who flee homes without referring to the reasons for leaving work. Many domestic workers complain of ill-treatment and abuse by employers that sometimes reach the extent of beating and torture, forcing maids to escape to safer places. In some cases, workers flee to other employers for better pay and working conditions. Turaiji said in his amendment that people who provide shelter or work to the absconding maids should be fined KD 2 per day since the day of informing authorities.

Kuwaiti citizen Saleh Al-Rasheedi was yesterday released from the state security which held him for several days without stating any reason, MPs Saad Al-Khanfour and Mohammad Al-Rasheedi said on Twitter. MP Rasheedi said he will not let this incident pass without questioning those responsible.



Abdullah Al-Turaiji

shut down and turned into prisons and/or incarceration centers during the seven-month Iraqi occupation. After the liberation, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad gave instructions to draw up educational development plans in order to keep pace with education standards worldwide and enhance education in Kuwait.

Significant efforts were made to contribute to the Amir's vision of boosting education and indeed Kuwait witnessed a great progress, leading ultimately to a decrease in illiteracy. In fact, Kuwait always considered education to be an important pillar of society development, as stated in Article 13 of the constitution: "Education is a fundamental requisite for the progress of society, assured and promoted by the State."

Throughout the years, education in Kuwait developed in many phases. The beginnings were limited to learning and memorizing the holy Quran, Arabic and basic Math principles. Since then, education progressed and developed until the opening of the first school: Al-Mubarakiya in 1911, which was the foundation of education in Kuwait. Ten years later, the second school opened and was named Al-Ahmadiya. Moreover, the first school for girls 'Al-Wusta' opened in 1937, followed by Al-Qibliya, the second school for girls.

Education faced several challenges and setbacks: the Iraqi invasion and occupation in 1990-1991 and

Efforts led to drop in illiteracy



the recent was the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 forced suspension of education for a couple of months, but the Ministry of Education worked hard on finding a solution to resume the school year as soon as possible, setting up an e-learning system through Microsoft Teams, which continued for about a year and half.

However, as Kuwait is accelerating COVID-19 vaccinations to reach herd immunity, Minister of Education Dr Ali Al-Mudhaf recently announced that schools will reopen their doors on October 3rd 2021, taking into consideration health measures to ensure safety of students and teachers as it is the top priority of the Ministry. — KUNA

Fire reported at Sulaibiya carpentry

KUWAIT: Firemen put out a blaze reported in a carpentry workshop in Sulaibiya Monday night. The fire covered a 400-square-meter area, Kuwait Fire Force said in a statement. No injuries were reported as an investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the fire, it added.



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Manpower authority teams inspect for daytime ban violations

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Public Authority for Manpower teams have been visiting construction sites to make sure contractors were abiding by a ban on laborers from working in open areas, which begins on June 1 and ends August 31. The daily ban, which starts at 11:00 am and ends at 4:00 pm, is an effort by the government to help guarantee safety of workers during harsh weather conditions. — KUNA





US sanctions Eritrean army chief over Tigray rights abuses

US VP Harris accuses China of 'intimidation' in disputed seas



PANJSHIR, Afghanistan: Afghan resistance movement and anti-Taliban uprising forces personnel stand guard at an outpost in Kotal-e Anjuman of Paryan district in Panjshir province Monday. —AFP

Panjshir resistance digs in to defend valley

Amrullah Saleh says a humanitarian disaster is brewing

PANJSHIR VALLEY, Pakistan: Atop a craggy mountain that has withstood foreign invaders for decades, anti-Taliban fighters fire a mounted heavy machine gun into a deep valley. They are members of the National Resistance Front (NRF) — the most prominent Afghan opposition group to emerge since the Taliban captured Kabul nine days ago.

With militia fighters and former government soldiers in its ranks, the NRF has set up machine gun nests, mortars and surveillance posts fortified with sandbags in anticipation of a Taliban assault on their bastion, the Panjshir Valley. Its fighters, many of them in military camouflage fatigues, patrol the area in US-made Humvees and technicals—pickup trucks with machine guns mounted on the back.

Many carry assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and walkie-talkies. Some pose on their vehicles with a dramatic background of snow-covered peaks in the valley, which begins around 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of Kabul. "We are going to rub their faces in the ground," said one fighter at a position in the Panjshir heights, listing past victories against the Taliban.

His comrades then raise their fists and chanted "Allah-u Akbar" (God is great). The strategic valley-populated primarily by ethnic Tajiks—offers natural defense points, with narrow entrances in the shadow of high mountains. "If Taliban warlords launch an assault, they will of course face staunch resistance from us," Ahmad Massoud, one of the NRF leaders, said in a Washington Post op-ed last week. He is the son of the late guerrilla commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, revered for turning the Panjshir Valley into an anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban bastion.

The defensive preparations are familiar for Panjshir residents who saw Massoud thwart multiple Soviet assaults in the 1980s and Taliban attempts to take the area in the late 1990s. An NRF spokesman told AFP on the weekend that it is ready to resist any Taliban aggression but wants to negotiate with the Islamists about an inclusive government.

Taliban siege

The Taliban have also said they want to handle the situation peacefully, but they have bared their teeth by sending hundreds of fighters to the area. Panjshir was surrounded from three sides, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said Monday. Former vice president Amrullah Saleh, who headed to the valley after the fall of Kabul, said a humanitarian disaster was brewing.

"Talibs aren't allowing food & fuel to get into Andarab valley," he tweeted, referring to an area under Taliban control that abuts Panjshir from the northwest.

"Thousands of women & children have fled to mountains." There have been scattered reports of clashes

around Panjshir in recent days, with conflicting claims from both sides that have been impossible to independently verify. The NRF has said it is ready for battle, but it remains unclear if the force has the supplies and equipment to withstand a long siege by the Taliban.

Ahmad Massoud said in his op-ed that they have arms and ammunition stores, as well as the weapons brought to Panjshir by former Afghan forces. But he added that without help from the outside world, his fighters would not be able to withstand the Taliban's siege for long.

"We know that our military forces and logistics will not be sufficient," he wrote. "They will be rapidly depleted unless our friends in the West can find a way to supply us without delay."

Elders from the Panjshir Valley have reportedly been speaking with Taliban officials in the Afghan capital, but there has been no breakthrough yet. —AFP

Afghanistan's media enters the unknown

KABUL: Scores of journalists are among the tens of thousands of people trying to flee Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover, fearful of violent reprisals from the militants. Despite their assurances, the Islamist group's return to power is seen as a serious blow to Afghan media, which saw explosive growth after the first Taliban regime was toppled in 2001.

What was the Afghan media like under the Taliban? - There was no Afghan media to speak of when the Islamists ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. They banned television, movies and most other forms of entertainment for being immoral. Some electronic products were outlawed as un-Islamic too.

People caught watching TV faced punishment, including having their set smashed. Ownership of a video player could lead to a public lashing. For a while, magnetic ribbon tape from destroyed cassettes could be seen fluttering from trees in some parts of the capital Kabul. There was only one radio station, Voice of Sharia, that broadcast propaganda and Islamic programming.

What happened after they were toppled?

Under the US-backed setup formed after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, there was massive growth in the Afghan media sector, including private TV and radio networks. And it was not just news-movies, soap operas, talent shows and music

videos were also produced.

Afghanistan now has more than 50 TV channels, 165 radio stations and dozens of publications, watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said this month, citing the national press federation. Internet and social media access, especially through smartphones, has proliferated in recent years too.

Most dramatically, the opening up of Afghan media allowed space and opportunities for the country's women, who were shut out from public life, education and workplaces by the Taliban. Hundreds of women around the country worked on and behind the screen as journalists, producers, hosts and performers. Dozens of Afghan journalists also worked for foreign media.

What have the Taliban promised now?

After the fall of Kabul, Taliban officials in Doha and Afghanistan stressed that the media could continue to operate freely and that journalists would not be harassed or harmed. They held a formal press conference where spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid took blunt questions. One Taliban official even sat down for a TV interview with a woman journalist, as if to press the point.

As with their promises about other issues such as women's rights and amnesty, however, there appears to be little trust among Afghanistan's journalists that the Islamists mean what they say.

In recent weeks, dozens of TV and radio outlets have stopped broadcasting or were seized by the Taliban as the militants rapidly captured territories on their way to Kabul. And despite the promises made by their top spokesmen, Taliban fighters have been reportedly going door-to-door in recent days searching for opponents—including journalists. In the

suspected rigging in favour of Lungu's party.

"We showed the world the resilience of our democracy," Hichilema exclaimed in a face mask, dark suit and bright red tie. He recalled that his victory marked Zambia's third peaceful "transition of leadership" since multi-party democracy was adopted in 1990 — an example for "Africa and the global world".

'New dawn'

Lungu and his rival were neck-and-neck in both a snap election in 2015 and in polls in 2016. But the incumbent's popularity was sapped by unsustainable infrastructure spending that plunged the copper-rich southern African nation of over 18 million into debt default. The local kwacha currency plummeted and inflation rose to more than 24 percent, rendering basic goods unaffordable in a country where more than half the population lived in poverty before the pandemic.

Hichilema, fondly known as "Hili" or "Bally"—an informal term for father—has vowed to clean up the mess and woo back spooked investors. "The erosion of our economy, the debt situation has become unsustainable," he said, stressing that "no Zambians should go to bed hungry" in a country so rich in natural resources. He announced plans to boost and diversify the mining industry in



CHAMAN, Pakistan: Afghans walk along fences as they arrive in Pakistan through the Pakistan-Afghanistan border crossing point in Chaman yesterday following Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan. —AFP

northern province of Jawzjan, local radio station Salam Watandar said Monday that it will be allowed to broadcast content after it has been reviewed by the local Taliban office. What are Afghan journalists saying? -

There is strong basis for the fear and mistrust among Afghan journalists. Despite the growth of the sector, Afghanistan has been one of the most dangerous countries in the world for reporters, with at least 53 killed since 2001 according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Media workers have been targeted with impunity for years by militant groups, a major factor in Afghanistan's low ranking on press freedom indices. A high-profile woman journalist at state-run broadcaster RTA said last week that she was told to go home because "the system has been changed". —AFP



LUSAKA: Newly elected Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema (center left) is congratulated by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta (center right) after taking oath at the Heroes Stadium in Lusaka yesterday. —AFP

Africa's number-two copper producer and "facilitate local ownership".

He also promised to crack down on political "thuggery" and repression of dissent under Lungu, reassuring independent media that they would no longer face tear gas or shutdowns.

Hichilema himself has run foul of the authorities on numerous occasions, and regularly mentions that he has been arrested 15 times since getting into politics. "It's a new dawn," he said. "The time has come for all Zambians to feel fully free." —AFP

UK says extending Kabul evacuations deadline 'unlikely'

LONDON: Britain's Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said yesterday it is "unlikely" evacuations from Afghanistan will be extended beyond August 31, as G7 leaders prepare to meet virtually to discuss the crisis. The UK will chair the emergency talks among the group of wealthy countries later Tuesday, and has said it will urge the United States to extend the end-of-the-month deadline to complete the Afghan airlifts.

France has also called on Washington to push back the timeline. But hours before the summit, Wallace acknowledged that both US President Joe Biden and Taliban leaders now in power in Kabul had cast serious doubt on evacuations continuing into September. "I think it is unlikely," he told Sky News. "Not only because of what the Taliban has said, but if you look at the public statements of President Biden I think it is unlikely."

"It is definitely worth us all trying, and we will." Biden has set an August 31 deadline to finish the chaotic airlift organized by thousands of temporarily deployed US and UK troops, but has left the door open to an extension if needed. However, a spokesman for the Taliban warned Monday the hard-line Islamist group would not agree to any extension, calling the issue a "red line", with any delay viewed as "extending occupation". "If the US or UK were to seek additional time to continue evacuations—the answer is no. Or there would be consequences," Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen told Sky News.

'Next phase'

Britain has continued to evacuate Western citizens and some Afghans from the capital, with Wallace warning the security situation was getting "more and more dangerous" as August 31 approaches. The defense ministry said 8,458 people have been evacuated by the UK since August 13, with nine military flights leaving Kabul in the last 24 hours. More than half — 5,171 — are Afghans eligible to relocate to Britain under its program to protect those who aided its military and civilian officials during their two-decade involvement in Afghanistan. An individual on the UK's no-fly anti-terrorism watchlist arrived as part of the evacuation, the interior ministry confirmed. A spokesman said the individual was identified "as part of the rigorous checks process" and that after further investigation was deemed "not a person of interest to the security agencies or law enforcement".

Meanwhile, on the eve of the G7 meeting, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the leaders of the world's top economies should also have an eye on the "next phase" for Afghanistan. His office said he will urge fellow leaders to step up support for refugees and to restate their "commitment to safeguarding the gains made in Afghanistan over the last 20 years—in particular on girls' education and the rights of women and minorities". —AFP

Zambia's new president sworn in

LUSAKA: Zambia's newly-elected president Hakainde Hichilema yesterday promised to rebuild the ailing economy and alleviate poverty as he was sworn in following an election hailed as a milestone for African opposition movements. "We will grow our economy so we can lift more people out of poverty than ever before," 59-year-old Hichilema told thousands of jubilant supporters—sporting the red and yellow colours of his United Party for National Development—in the Heroes Stadium in Lusaka. Hichilema also vowed to restore respect for human rights and liberties eroded under his predecessor.

In his sixth bid for the presidency, Hichilema defeated the incumbent Edgar Lungu, 64, by almost one million votes—a landslide spurred by economic hardship and restricted freedoms under the previous regime. The victory is the 17th opposition win in sub-Saharan Africa since 2015 and was achieved despite restricted campaigning and

International

US sanctions Eritrean army chief over Tigray rights abuses

Ethiopia announces fresh delays to polls

WASHINGTON: The United States imposed sanctions on Monday on Eritrea's army chief over human rights abuses in Ethiopia's war-scarred Tigray region. The move by the US Treasury Department against General Filipos Woldeyohannes, chief of staff of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), comes amid reports Eritrea has deployed reinforcements to parts of Tigray as fighting escalates.

Forces under Filipos' command are responsible for "massacres, looting, and sexual assaults," the Treasury Department said in a statement. "EDF troops have raped, tortured, and executed civilians; they have also destroyed property and ransacked businesses," it said.

"The EDF have purposely shot civilians in the street and carried out systematic house-to-house searches, executing men and boys, and have forcibly evicted Tigrayan families from their residences and taken over their houses and property," Eritrea angrily rejected what it called "utterly baseless allegations and blackmail."

"This is not, indeed, the first time for the US Administration to float such baseless smear campaigns against Eritrea," the foreign ministry said. "In the circumstances, Eritrea calls on the US Administration to bring the case to an independent adjudication if it indeed has facts to prove its false allegations."

The Treasury Department said any property or interests of Filipos in the United States would be frozen and US citizens are barred from conducting any business with him. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken issued a statement saying the United States "condemns in the strongest terms human rights violations and abuses in Ethiopia, including those involving the killings, forced removals, and systemic sexual violence."

Blinken called on the Eritrean government to "withdraw its military forces immediately and permanently from Ethiopia." "At the same time, the United States continues to urge all parties to the

conflict, including the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), to end abuses against civilians, take steps to de-escalate the conflict, allow for unimpeded humanitarian access, and commit to a negotiated ceasefire," he said.

Eritrean reinforcements

Blinken expressed concern that large numbers of EDF have re-entered Ethiopia after withdrawing in June. He called on the UN Security Council and members of the international community to "come together to push for a peaceful resolution of this ongoing conflict."

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray last November to topple the regional ruling party, the TPLF. The 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on federal army camps.

For months, the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments denied Eritreans were involved in the fighting, contradicting testimony from residents, rights groups, aid workers, diplomats and even some Ethiopian civilian and military officials. Abiy finally acknowledged the Eritreans' presence in March while speaking to lawmakers, and vowed soon after that they would leave.

Eritrea itself vowed to pull out of the region in April, but that never fully happened.

The war took a stunning turn in June after pro-TPLF forces—which were driven out of Tigray's cities and towns last November—retook the regional capital Mekele. The TPLF then launched an offensive into neighboring Amhara and Afar regions and vowed to reclaim western and southern Tigray, which were occupied by Amhara forces in the war's early stages.

Famine-like conditions

An internal European Union document dated August 20 and seen by AFP said Eritrean troops were "present in Western Tigray, where they have taken up defensive positions with tanks and



BASUNDA, Sudan: Ethiopian refugees of the Qemant ethnic group sit in a make-shift shelter in the village of Basinga in Basunda district of Sudan's eastern Gedaref region. —AFP

artillery around Adi Goshu and Humera, and possibly also along the border with Sudan." The document also cited reports that Eritrea had sent reinforcements to western Tigray in the past days while continuing to occupy a strip of territory in northern Tigray.

Meanwhile, Ethiopian authorities have postponed polls in around a fifth of the country's constituencies, extending a months-long delay which prevented citizens from voting in a June election due to ethnic violence and logistical problems.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's party won a land-

slide in the June vote, despite a brutal war in the northern region of Tigray, which was among the areas where elections did not take place. A second batch of polling in one-fifth of the country's 547 constituencies was scheduled for September 6, but will now take place on September 30, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced in a statement late Monday. The decision followed a meeting with politicians, who told NEBE officials that "considering the current situation the country is in, it's not appropriate to hold elections currently." —AFP

News in brief

18 Europe-bound migrants drown

TRIPOLI: Eighteen migrants have drowned after their boat sank off Libya, the coastguard said yesterday, the latest tragedy on the dangerous Mediterranean Sea crossing to Europe. Rescue vessels picked up 51 survivors from Sunday night's shipwreck, a coastguard official in the port of Zuwara, 120 kilometers (75 miles) west of the capital Tripoli, told AFP. The International Organization for Migration had earlier reported 16 migrants missing, including a woman and a child. —AFP

Greece sets new restrictions

ATHENS: Greece's government yesterday announced an array of new restrictions and the end of free testing for those who remain unjabbed against COVID-19 in an effort to boost vaccination rates. Starting from September 13, unvaccinated employees in the private and public sectors will have to be tested at their own expense once or twice a week, depending on their profession. University students will also have to pay for two rapid tests a week, while school pupils will be given self-testing kits free of charge. —AFP

UN request on migrants in Belarus

WARSAW: The UN refugee agency yesterday urged Poland to take in a group of migrants believed to be from the Middle East who have been stranded on the border with Belarus for more than two weeks. Thousands of migrants—mostly from the Middle East—have crossed the border from Belarus into the eastern EU states of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in recent months. Brussels believes the influx is being deliberately engineered by the regime in Minsk in retaliation against EU sanctions—an accusation that Belarus denies—and Poland has called it a "hybrid attack" on the bloc. —AFP

Two Nigerian officers killed

KANO: An armed group attacked Nigeria's main military training academy in the country's northwest yesterday, killing two officers and kidnapping another in a brazen assault on the high-security base. The attack on the Nigerian Defence Academy, the country's elite officer training school, is a blow to a military that is battling jihadists in the northeast and heavily armed criminal gangs in the northwest. "The security architecture of the Nigerian Defence Academy was compromised early this morning by unknown gunmen," said Major Bashir Muhammad Jajira, spokesman for the academy in Kaduna state.

Morocco navy rescues 400 migrants

RABAT: The Moroccan navy has rescued more than 400 migrants since Thursday, after their makeshift boats ran into trouble on the dangerous sea crossing to Europe, state media reported. The 438 migrants, most of them from sub-Saharan Africa, were given first aid before being taken to the nearest Moroccan port, an officer told the state-run MAP news agency late Monday. Earlier this month, a merchant ship rescued 33 migrants who had spent two weeks adrift in the Atlantic Ocean en route for the Canary Islands. Fourteen fellow migrants lost their lives. —AFP

Jailed Chadian ex-leader Habre dies in Senegal

DAKAR: Former Chadian president Hissene Habre, who was serving a life term in Senegal for war crimes and crimes against humanity, has died, Senegalese Justice Minister Malick Sall said yesterday. He was 79.

"Habre is in his Lord's hands," Sall told the television channel TFM. The Chadian consulate said he had died of COVID-19. Habre, who ruled Chad from 1982 to 1990, was convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity at an African Union-backed trial in the Senegalese capital Dakar in 2016.

He seized power in Chad in 1982, but fled to Senegal in 1990 after he was in turn overthrown. Habre's rule was marked by brutal crackdowns on dissent, including alleged torture and executions of opponents. Some 40,000 people are estimated to have been killed under his leadership of the semi-desert country.

In exile in Dakar, Habre lived a quiet life in an upmarket suburb with his

wife and children. But the former dictator—who was dubbed "Africa's Pinochet"—was finally arrested in 2013 and tried by a special tribunal set up by the AU under a deal with Senegal. Habre began serving his life sentence in the Cap Manuel penitentiary in Dakar. His supporters voiced concern for his health and pushed for more lenient detention conditions given his advanced age.

Last year, a Senegalese judge granted him a two-month furlough designed to shield him from coronavirus. Groups representing Habre's victims recognized his right to be treated humanely, but fiercely resisted preferential treatment for the former dictator.

'Pitiless'

Reed Brody, a lawyer who represented Habre's victims, said in a statement yesterday that he had been calling "for months" for the former dictator to be vaccinated against COVID. AFP was unable to independently verify whether Habre had received a jab. Brody was nonetheless withering about Habre's legacy, saying he would "go down in history as one of the world's most pitiless dictators."

Attempted murder probe over German university 'poison attack'

BERLIN: German prosecutors launched an investigation into attempted murder yesterday after a poisoning at a university left one student in a critical condition and six others in need of medical attention. The victims at the Technical University Darmstadt, half an hour by train from Frankfurt, had consumed food or drink to which a "harmful substance" had been introduced.

Police say packets of milk and water containers were among the items spiked over the weekend with the chemical, which they described as having a noticeably "pungent smell". Anyone feeling unwell or whose "extremities turn blue", should seek medical attention immediately, police said, citing one of the potential effects of the poison.

Police said they have called up a team of 40 people to investigate the incident,

and are working at "full speed" to identify a culprit. The affected building, part of the Department of Materials- and Geosciences, was cordoned off and any foodstuffs on site taken away for investigation. Overnight, forces carried out further searches across the campus but found no "relevant objects".

As of yesterday, there was "no acute danger", according to authorities. One 30-year-old student was in a critical condition as of Monday, police said. No update has so far been provided.

'Shocked'

In a statement, the university described the events as a "poison attack". "We are shocked by the apparent offence that happened," university president Tanja Bruhl said in a statement.

"My sympathy is with those affected,



DAKAR: Former Chadian President Hissene Habre has died at the age of 79 in Senegal, where he was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2016 for crimes against humanity after an unprecedented trial, Senegalese Justice Minister Malick Sall said yesterday. —AFP

Habre "slaughtered his own people to seize and maintain power... burned down entire villages, sent women to serve as sexual slaves for his troops and built clandestine dungeons to inflict torture on his enemies," Brody said. Habre's conviction in 2016 was seen as a turning point for pursuing rights abusers in Africa,

where the International Criminal Court (ICC), located in The Hague, was becoming increasingly unpopular. The former dictator was ordered to pay up to 30,000 euros (\$33,000) to each victim who suffered rape, arbitrary detention and imprisonment during his rule, as well as to their relatives. —AFP



DARMSTADT, Germany: Chief Prosecutor Robert Hartmann speaks to media on a poisoning at the Technical University Darmstadt, yesterday. —AFP

who will receive full medical help," she said. Public prosecutor Robert Hartmann told the Bild newspaper: "We are taking this very seriously. We can't rule out that we are dealing with an attempted murder here." Angela Dorn, the higher education minister for the state of Hesse, where

Darmstadt is located, offered her "full support" to the victims. "Together with the university and investigators we now need to clarify the situation as quickly as possible," Dorn said. Germany has been shocked by several poisoning incidents in recent years. —AFP

Tunisian president extends suspension of parliament

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied has extended his suspension of parliament "until further notice", a month after sacking his prime minister and granting himself greater powers in a shock intervention that opponents decried as a coup. In a statement issued by the presidency late on Monday, Saied also extended an order freeing immunity for lawmakers

and said he would address the Tunisian people in the coming days, without providing further details.

Tunisia, hailed as a rare democratic success story in the Middle East and North Africa, has been mired in political crisis since Saied's intervention, which comes as the country struggles with dire economic woes and the COVID-19 pandemic. On July 25, Saied invoked the constitution to extend his authority, dismissing the head of government Hichem Mechichi and freezing parliament, in what activists have called a "purge" that has seen opponents, judges and businessmen arrested or banned from travel.

Saied issued "a presidential decree extending the exceptional measures... regarding the suspension of

Parliament and lifting of the parliamentary immunity of its MPs until further notice", the presidency said in the statement. Saied's intervention, which he said was necessary to prevent the country from collapse, sparked uncertainty for the North African nation.

He has yet to appoint a new government or reveal a "roadmap" for his decisions despite repeated demands by political parties. While the president enjoys widespread popularity in Tunisia, his move has sparked fears in the international community that the cradle of the 2011 Arab Spring is regressing towards authoritarianism. Analysts expect Saied will announce new measures to reassure the Tunisian public as well as the international community about his decisions. —AFP

International

US VP Harris accuses China of 'intimidation' in disputed seas

China hits back at Harris, says US 'selfish' over Afghanistan

SINGAPORE: Vice President Kamala Harris accused China yesterday of intimidation in disputed Asian waters, seeking to rally regional allies as the United States' superpower status takes a hit over Afghanistan. Her comments in Singapore came as Washington seeks to reset relations in Asia after the turbulent Donald Trump era and build a bulwark against the rising might of Beijing. But her trip to the region, which also includes a stop in Vietnam, comes as Washington faces

the embassy statement said. "Beijing's actions continue to undermine the rules-based order and threaten the sovereignty of nations." But Beijing hit back, holding up the Afghan debacle as an example of the United States' "selfish" foreign policy, and accusing Washington of "bullying, hegemonic behavior". "The current events in Afghanistan clearly tell us what the rules and order the US speaks of are," China's foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said. China claims

ties with both of the world's top economies to choose sides. "Our engagement in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific is not against any one country, nor is it designed to make anyone choose between countries," she said. Harris is the latest top official from President Joe Biden's administration to visit the region. On a trip to Singapore last month, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin also strongly criticized China's maritime claims. But the Afghan crisis and doubts about US credibility are



SINGAPORE: US Vice President Kamala Harris (center left) speaks with US personnel as she departs Singapore yesterday as she travels next to Vietnam. — AFP

fresh questions over its dependability amid the US pullout from Afghanistan and Taliban takeover.

In a speech laying out her administration's foreign policy goals, Harris reiterated that Washington had "enduring commitments" in Asia and took aim at China. "Beijing continues to coerce, to intimidate and to make claims to the vast majority of the South China Sea," she said.

Meanwhile, Harris' flight from Singapore to Vietnam was delayed by three hours yesterday after an "anomalous health incident" took place in Hanoi, the US embassy said. Harris was due in Vietnam after a two-day stop in Singapore as part of a regional trip.

"The Vice President's travelling delegation was delayed from departing Singapore because the Vice President's office was made aware of a report of a recent possible anomalous health incident in Hanoi,"

almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, through which trillions of dollars in shipping trade passes annually, with competing claims from four Southeast Asian states as well as Taiwan.

Beijing has been accused of deploying a range of military hardware including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles there, and ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the waters to be without basis. Tensions have escalated recently between Beijing and rival claimants, with Manila angered after hundreds of Chinese boats were spotted at a contested reef while Malaysia scrambled jets to intercept Chinese military aircraft.

'Right, courageous'

Harris also sought to allay fears that growing US-China tensions could force countries that have strong

resulted in steadily falling yakuza memberships. Nomura was found guilty of ordering the fatal 1998 shooting of an ex-boss of a fisheries cooperative who exerted influence over port construction projects, major media outlets said. He was also behind a 2014 attack on a relative of the murder victim, and a 2013 knife attack against a nurse at a clinic where Nomura was seeking treatment, the court reportedly said. The 2012 shooting of a former police official who had investigated the Kudo-kai was also deemed Nomura's responsibility. The official survived with serious injuries to his waist and legs, media said.

Prosecutors reportedly argued that Nomura had exerted absolute control over the syndicate. His number two Fumio Tanoue was jailed for life yesterday, the court said. The yakuza grew from the chaos of post-war Japan into multi-billion-dollar criminal organizations, involved in everything from drugs and prostitution to protection rackets and white-collar crime.

Unlike the Italian Mafia or Chinese triads, yakuza have long occupied a grey area in Japanese society—they are not illegal, and each group has its own headquarters in full view of police. With more than 100 inmates on death row, Japan is one of few developed nations to retain the death penalty. Public support for capital punishment remains high despite international criticism, including from rights groups. — AFP

Japanese crime boss sentenced to death for ordering murder

TOKYO: A Japanese court said it had sentenced a yakuza mafia boss to death yesterday after he ordered a murder and attacks on three other citizens. Satoru Nomura, the 74-year-old head of the "Kudo-kai" crime syndicate in southwest Japan, denied accusations he had masterminded the violent assaults on ordinary people.

Fukuoka District Court confirmed it had sentenced Nomura to death, while Japanese media said the verdict came despite a lack of evidence directly linking him to the crimes. "I asked for a fair decision... You will regret this for the rest of your life," Nomura told the judge after his sentencing, according to the Nishinippon Shimbun. The yakuza mafia were long tolerated in Japan as a necessary evil for ensuring order on the streets and getting things done quickly, however dubious the means.

But in recent decades, stiffer anti-gang regulations, waning social tolerance and a weak economy have



TOKYO: A Japanese court said it had sentenced a yakuza mafia boss to death yesterday after he ordered a murder and attacks on three other citizens. — AFP

Spain may have to leave people behind in Afghanistan

MADRID: Spain will not be able to rescue all Afghans who served Spanish missions in Afghanistan because of the "dramatic" situation on the ground, Defense Minister Margarita Robles said yesterday.

Robles said Taliban checkpoints and violence were making it difficult for people to reach Kabul airport to catch one of the daily flights on a Spanish military plane out of the country. "We will evacuate as many people as possible but there are people who will stay behind for reasons that do not depend on us, but on the situation there," Robles said during an interview with news radio Cadena Ser. "It is a very frustrating situation for everyone, because even those who reach Kabul, access to the airport is very complicated," she added. "The Taliban are becoming more aggressive, there is gunfire, violence is more obvious," she said.

"The situation is frankly dramatic and besides with each passing day it is worse because people are conscious that time is running out." Spain has been evacuating its nationals and local contractors from

Afghanistan via Dubai since the Taliban swept to power ten days ago. Madrid has so far evacuated just over 700 people from Afghanistan but Robles said there were still "many people" who feared Taliban reprisal who needed to leave. "We will keep trying until the end," she added.

More evacuees due

The Spanish government has consistently declined to give a figure for the total number of people it planned to take out of Afghanistan. US President Joe Biden has set an August 31 deadline to finish the chaotic airlift organized by thousands of temporarily deployed US and UK troops, but has left the door open to an extension if needed.

However, a spokesman for the Taliban warned Monday the hardline Islamist group would not agree to any extension. Asked if Biden should extend the deadline for US troops to leave Kabul, Robles declined to comment, saying only that she was focused on Spain's evacuation operation.

But during an interview with private television La Sexta on Monday, she said Spain could only carry out its evacuation flights as long as Kabul airport is "controlled" by US troops. Another 420 people are expected to arrive in Spain yesterday, the minister said. They include 290 people who are already in Dubai and 130 who are expected to leave on a Spanish military plane from Kabul, she added.—AFP



Harris' flight to Hanoi delayed

casting a long shadow over Harris' visit.

In yesterday's speech, she defended Biden's decision to push ahead with the US pullout from Afghanistan as "courageous and right" and reiterated US officials were "laser-focused" on the chaotic evacuation from Kabul airport. "The United States has been focused on safely evacuating American citizens, international partners, Afghans who worked side by side with us, and other Afghans at risk," she said. Harris also announced that Washington was offering to host the annual meetings of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 2023, a grouping that includes Beijing and the US.

The US-China relationship has deteriorated over a range of issues from cybersecurity and tech supremacy to human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Biden has largely continued Trump's hawkish stance on China, describing the Asian power as the pre-eminent challenge to the United States, but has lowered the temperature.

The vice president also called for greater international cooperation to strengthen supply chains during talks with Singapore officials and business executives, as the US seeks to tackle a global microchip shortage. — AFP



GENEVA: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet (right) speaks with an assistant during a special session of the UN Human Rights Council on Afghanistan in Geneva yesterday. — AFP

Taliban's treatment of women a 'red line': UN rights chief

GENEVA: The UN rights chief voiced grave concern yesterday at the situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban swept into power, saying their treatment of women is a "fundamental red line". Speaking at the opening of an emergency session on Afghanistan, Michelle Bachelet urged the Taliban to honor commitments to respect the rights of women and girls, and of ethnic and religious minorities, and refrain from reprisals.

"The onus is now fully on the Taliban to translate these commitments into reality," she said. The High Commissioner for Human Rights stressed that indulging in rights violations would undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban, both with the Afghan people and internationally. "A fundamental red line will be the Taliban's treatment of women and girls," she said, urging "respect for their rights to liberty, freedom of movement, education, self-expression and employment."

The militants have repeatedly promised a different kind of rule to their brutal regime of the 1990s that saw women confined to their homes, most entertainment banned, and stoning and public executions used as punishments. But their rebranding is being treated with skepticism, and large crowds continue to mass outside Kabul airport desperately seeking evacuation, terrified of facing life under the Taliban.

'Targeted killings'

Most of the diplomats taking part virtually in yesterday's special session of the Geneva-based council voiced alarm at the situation, with particular concern for women and girls. Speaking on behalf of more than 60 countries, Spanish Ambassador Aurora Diaz-Rato called for the "immediate cessation of targeted killings of women's rights defenders".

US Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya meanwhile stressed that "hard-won advancements in respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms over the last 20 years, particularly for women and members of minority groups, must be maintained."

Even before the Taliban takeover, the UN says Afghanistan saw a sharp increase in civilian casualties in recent months. Bachelet said her office had received credible reports of serious violations in places that have been under Taliban control, including summary executions, restrictions of women's rights, blocking girls from attending school and recruitment of child soldiers. —AFP



Rodrigo Duterte

Duterte to run for vice president

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte will run for vice president in next year's elections, his party said yesterday, after months of speculation about whether he would seek to stay in power.

Duterte, who was elected to the top job in 2016 and is barred under the constitution from seeking another term, has previously flagged the possibility of contesting the country's second-highest office. "President Rodrigo Roa Duterte agreed to make the sacrifice and heed the clamor of the people, and accepted the endorsement of the PDP Laban Party for him to run as vice president in the 2022 national elections," the party said in a statement.

The party is also expected to endorse Duterte's top aide, Senator Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Go, to be their presidential candidate. Duterte has not said publicly yet that he will run, but PDP-Laban president Alfonso Cusi told AFP: "He confirmed he is running for VP in 2022."

The vice president and president are elected separately in the Philippines, with the former assuming the top job if the latter dies, becomes incapacitated, or resigns while in office.

During his term Duterte has waged a brutal war against drug users and dealers that rights groups say has killed tens of thousands of people. International Criminal Court prosecutors are seeking to launch a full-blown investigation into the anti-narcotics crackdown, raising the stakes for next year's elections.

Duterte's daughter, Sara, is widely expected to contest the presidency and, if she were to win, could help protect her father from criminal charges. Recent polls show the Davao city mayor—the same position her father held before he took power—with the most voter support.

Duterte told a meeting of party officials last month that he was "seriously thinking of running for vice president". But he expressed concern that a political foe could win the presidency, rendering him useless for the next six years.

"The president that will win must be a friend of mine (with) whom I can work with," Duterte said. The deadline for registering as a candidate for next year's elections is October 8. A sitting president has never before made a bid for the vice presidency in the Philippines. Presidential spokesman Harry Roque told reporters that Duterte would make a televised address later where he is expected to discuss the PDP-Laban announcement. — AFP

Myanmar junta mulls raising village militias

YANGON: Myanmar's junta is considering raising village militias to combat opposition to its rule, state media said yesterday, as it struggles to assert control more than six months after seizing power. The country has been in turmoil since Aung San Suu Kyi's government was ousted in a February coup, sparking huge pro-democracy protests and a bloody military crackdown. Local "self-defense groups" have sprung up to fight the military, often using hunting rifles or weapons manufactured at makeshift jungle factories.

The groups have added to the volatile mix in Myanmar, where more than 20 ethnic rebel groups were already in various stages of conflict with the military before the coup. The State Administration Council—as the junta dubs itself—has discussed the "systematic formation of village people's militia troops," the state-backed Global New Light of Myanmar reported yesterday. It also discussed rewards for those informing of anti-junta protesters, and the "effective hindering" of established insurgent groups on Myanmar's fringes who are providing weapons and training, the paper said.

David Mathieson, an analyst formerly based in the country, told AFP it was unlikely many would voluntarily sign up for any militia, given "the widespread anger towards the military." "But also there must be a Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) dilemma in training and arming people who... may turn the training and arms back on you."

Sporadic fighting continues across the country, with locals in the northwest Sagaing region accusing the military of using artillery during clashes with one group. Earlier this month Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations, who has refused to leave his post after the coup, alerted the world body to a "reported massacre" of 40 people in Sagaing. Clashes have largely taken place in rural areas, although in June four protesters and at least two military officers were killed in a gun battle in the country's second city of Mandalay. —AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 25, 2021

Renewed recovery optimism provides boost to stocks, crude

Investors keenly awaiting a policy speech by Federal Reserve boss

HONG KONG: Equities and oil prices rose again yesterday, extending a global rally fuelled by renewed optimism over the recovery outlook after Washington gave full approval to Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine and an increase in US COVID infections appeared to be peaking.

A call by China's central bank for more economic support and a move to keep borrowing costs down also provided some cheer to the region, while hopes that Beijing's clampdown on the private sector was adding to the buoyant sentiment.

Investors are also keenly awaiting a policy speech later in the week by Federal Reserve boss Jerome Powell. Markets have enjoyed a strong start to the week, further helped by bargain-hunting following a recent sell-off caused by worries including the fast-spreading Delta variant and expectations the Fed will soon begin tapering financial support.

New York's three main indexes shot higher Monday-with the Nasdaq hitting a new record-as traders cheered news that the Food and Drug Administration had fully approved the Pfizer-BioNTech shot, which is expected to help push up vaccinations.

Around 52 percent of the population has been double jabbed but the rate has slowed owing to hesitancy among many people. The FDA move "now paves the way for many companies and government agencies to enforce vaccine mandates", said OANDA's Edward Moya, adding that making them mandatory "could move the needle here in getting the US closer to herd immunity".

Analysts said data suggesting that a recent spike in infections in the United States was tailing off was also lifting spirits as figures dropped in the original hotspots and new cases slowed in Florida and Louisiana. China's apparent success in taming a worrying flare-up in the world's number two econo-

my also lifted the mood on trading floors.

The positive news lifted optimism over the global recovery, which had taken a knock this month as some governments were forced to reimpose lockdowns or other containment measures.

Fixated on the Fed

Hong Kong jumped more than two percent with under-pressure tech leading the charge, as observers pointed to a lack of fresh measures from China after a recent spate of rules as part of a regulatory crackdown on the sector and other industries.



Fresh measures

Tencent and Alibaba were each up more than eight percent as investors picked up bargains following their recent rout. And ecommerce giant JD.com powered around 15 percent higher after a forecast-beating earnings report showed its resilience to Beijing's latest moves.

Shanghai, Seoul and Manila added more than one percent, while there were also healthy advances in Tokyo, Sydney, Singapore, Wellington, Taipei, Mumbai and Bangkok. London, Paris and Frankfurt edged up in early trade.

The rally was mirrored in oil markets, where both



NEW YORK: People eat outside along a street in Manhattan in New York City. Despite continued concerns about the Delta variant of the COVID virus, the United States economy continues to grow with the leading economic index jumping 0.9% last month. —AFP

main contracts extended the previous day's surge of more than five percent, which marked the best daily performance in nine months as recovery hopes lifted demand expectations.

The commodity, like equities, had been suffering hefty losses in August owing to worries about the Delta spread, but observers forecast prices will get back on track.

"The crude demand outlook will get a boost... now that the Delta variant appears to be peaking in

the South and as China lowers local COVID cases to zero," Moya added. West Texas Intermediate "should be supported going forward as the selloff was overdone and as stockpiles continue to shrink".

Investors are now fixated on Powell's speech to central bankers and finance chiefs this week in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, hoping for some guidance on monetary policy as speculation swirls that the Fed is planning to taper its bond-buying programme by year's end. — AFP

Democratic infighting delays Biden's vast US investment plans

WASHINGTON: A dispute within the Democratic party has stalled US President Joe Biden's massive spending plans for the United States as Congress postponed a key vote on the measures Monday.

The delay is a setback for the Democratic president, who intends to make American history with the two titanic funding projects—on infrastructure and social spending—worth a total of nearly \$5 trillion.

Despite hours of negotiations, no agreement had been reached by midnight and Democratic leaders decided to resume the session today at midday. If agreement is reached, the vote may be held today afternoon.

Earlier this month, the Senate approved a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure investment plan, with some Republicans crossing the aisle to support the measure. But a squabble has arisen in the House over whether to pass that bill first, or a separate \$3.5 trillion plan supported only by Democrats that would allocate money towards education, health care, the



WASHINGTON: US Democratic Representative from Florida Kathy Castor (C) speaks at a press conference on the infrastructure bill and climate change at the US Capitol in Washington. —AFP

labor market and fighting climate change.

Biden's Democratic allies controlling the House and Senate have for months been considering the two measures aimed at overhauling the world's largest economy through massive injections of cash into an array of programs. The dispute erupted when moderate Democrats in the House demanded the popular infrastructure measure be approved without delay.

But progressive lawmakers insist the larger bill should take priority, fearing the centrists, objecting to its cost, will refuse to provide their crucial votes in a chamber with a tight Democratic majority once the infrastructure bill is passed. Biden, who is facing blowback over the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, is expected to weigh in on the dispute behind the scenes. — AFP



ANNAPOLIS, Maryland: File photo shows homes for sale in Annapolis, Maryland. New single-family home sales rebounded slightly last month and broke a three-month streak of declines as prices resumed their march higher in the hot US real estate market. —AFP

US new home sales edge higher in July

WASHINGTON: New single-family home sales rebounded slightly last month and broke a three-month streak of declines as prices resumed their march higher in the hot US real estate market, according to government data released yesterday. The one percent increase in July took the annual sales pace to 708,000, seasonally adjusted, the Commerce Department said, after the June sales rate was revised sharply upward from the original report.

But sales were more than 27 percent lower than July 2020, according to the data. The median sales price dipped in June but jumped again last month to \$390,500, without seasonal adjustment, beating

the previous record set in May, even as the inventory of homes on the market edged up to 6.2 months of supply.

Builders have struggled to keep up with demand as low mortgage rates have fueled a buying frenzy, especially as they contend with supply bottlenecks caused by the restart from the pandemic shutdown that have caused price spikes for goods like lumber.

"While demand for new homes remains strong, high prices and backlogs in construction will temper sales in the months ahead," said Nancy Vanden Houten of Oxford Economics. She noted that a record share of homes sold in July were not even started, indicating a huge construction backlog.

Sales were uneven across the country with a big jump in the West and modest gain in the South — the two regions with the biggest markets — and double-digit declines in the Northeast and Midwest. — AFP

German GDP rebounds in Q2 but shortages loom large

FRANKFURT: Germany's GDP recovered more in the second quarter than first estimated, according to data released yesterday, but global supply chain issues continue to weigh on the outlook for Europe's largest economy.

After shrinking in the first quarter, German GDP grew 1.6 percent between April and June this year, according to the national statistics agency Destatis, up from an initial estimate of 1.5 percent. The figure was significantly higher compared with the same period last year — by 9.8 percent — when coronavirus restrictions shut down large swathes of the economy.

Nonetheless, the indicator remained below pre-crisis levels, down 3.3 percent in comparison with the three months before the start of the pandemic.

The boost given to the economy by the end of lockdown restrictions has been "undermined by the negative impact from supply chain frictions," according to ING analyst Carsten Brzeski. Increasing prices for raw materials and the shortage of key components, such as semiconductors, which are widely used in new technologies, have disrupted the operations of major companies globally.

Last week, the German car giant Volkswagen announced it would be limiting production at its main factory in Wolfsburg due to chip shortages and said that these could continue through to 2022. Accordingly, Brzeski sees "supply chain frictions and not the coronavirus as the biggest risk for the German economy in the second half of the year." Separately, the German finance minister Olaf Scholz told the Funke media group over the weekend that he expects to see the economy return to pre-crisis levels by the "beginning of 2022". — AFP

India to raise \$81bn by leasing state assets

NEW DELHI: India announced plans to lease state-owned assets to the private sector in a bid to raise 6 trillion rupees (\$81 billion) to repair public finances battered by the pandemic and fund new infrastructure.

Asia's third-largest economy was left reeling from a COVID-19 surge and strict lockdowns enforced to contain the virus, creating a significant budget deficit and pushing millions into poverty. Private firms will be able to lease on a long-term basis over 26,000 kilometres (16,000 miles) of roads, power transmission lines, hydroelectric and solar power assets, phone networks, and nearly 15,000 telecom towers, under the plans announced Monday.

Also up for grabs will be some 8,000 kilometres of natural gas pipelines, 15 railway stations, railway lines, 25 airports, and a number of sports stadiums, according to the four-year plan dubbed the National Monetization Pipeline.

"The ownership of the assets remain with the government and there should be mandatory hand back (to the state)," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said. "So by bringing in private participation in this, you will be able to monetise it better and ensure further investment in infrastructure building," she said.

Proceeds will help replenish government finances squeezed by India's worst recession since independence as a result of the pandemic, and to fund new infrastructure projects. India's opposition hit out at the plans, with Congress party chief Rahul Gandhi saying "assets created over seven decades (are) being gifted to cronies."

"The future of India is being sold," he said. India enforced one of the world's toughest lockdowns in 2020 when the pandemic began, leaving millions without work almost overnight. Restrictions were then steadily eased but reimposed in April in a devastating second wave that overwhelmed hospitals.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government had previously announced plans to raise billions of dollars through the privatisation of Air India, Bharat Petroleum, and a share sale of a major insurer. — AFP

Business

'Always there': The AI chatbot comforting China's lonely millions

Designed to create emotional bonds with its 660 million users worldwide

BEIJING: After a painful break-up from a cheating ex, Beijing-based human resources manager Melissa was introduced to someone new by a friend late last year. He replies to her messages at all hours of the day, tells jokes to cheer her up but is never needy, fitting seamlessly into her busy big city lifestyle.

Perfect boyfriend material, maybe-but he's not real. Instead, Melissa breaks up the isolation of urban life with a virtual chatbot created by XiaoIce, a cutting-edge artificial intelligence system designed to create emotional bonds with its 660 million users worldwide.

"I have friends who've seen therapists before, but I think therapy's expensive and not necessarily effective," said Melissa, 26, giving her English name only for privacy. "When I unload my troubles on XiaoIce, it relieves a lot of pressure. And he says things that are pretty comforting."

XiaoIce is not an individual persona, but more akin to an AI ecosystem. It is in the vast majority of Chinese-branded smartphones as a Siri-like virtual assistant, as well as most social media platforms. On the WeChat super-app, it lets users build a virtual girlfriend or boyfriend and interact with them via texts, voice and photo messages.

It has 150 million users in China alone. Originally a side project from developing Microsoft's Cortana chatbot, XiaoIce now accounts for 60 percent of global human-AI interactions by volume, according to chief executive Li Di, making it the largest and most advanced system of its kind worldwide. It was designed to hook users through lifelike, empathetic conversations, satisfying emotional needs where real-life communication too often falls short.

"The average interaction length between users and XiaoIce is 23 exchanges," said Li. That "is longer than the average interaction between humans," he said, explaining AI's attraction is that "it's better than humans at listening attentively."

The startup spun out from Microsoft last year

and is now valued at over \$1 billion after venture capital fundraising, Bloomberg reported. Developers have also made virtual idols, AI news anchors and even China's first virtual university student from XiaoIce. It can compose poems, financial reports and even paintings on demand. But Li says the platform's peak user hours — 11pm to 1am-point to an aching need for companionship. "No matter what, having XiaoIce is always better than lying in bed staring at the ceiling," he said.

Urban isolation

The loneliness Melissa experienced as a young professional was a big factor in driving her to the virtual embrace of XiaoIce. Her context is typical of many Chinese urbanites, worn down by the grind of long working hours in vast and isolating cities. "You really don't have time to make new friends and your existing friends are all super busy... this city is really big, and it's pretty hard," she said, giving only her English name out of privacy concerns.

She has customised his personality as "mature", and the name she chose for him—Shun—has similarities with a real-life man she secretly liked. "After all, XiaoIce will never betray me," she added. "He will always be there."

But there are risks to forging emotional bonds with a robot. "Users 'trick' themselves into thinking their emotions are being reciprocated by systems that are incapable of feelings," says Danit Gal, an expert in AI ethics at the University of Cambridge.

XiaoIce is also gifting developers "a treasure-trove of personal, intimate, and borderline incriminating data on how humans interact," she added. So far the platform has not been targeted by government regulators, who have embarked on a swinging crackdown on China's tech sector in recent months. China aims to be a world leader in AI by 2030 and views it as a core strategic technology to be developed.

They all used a Microsoft product called Power Apps, which allows for the creation of websites and mobile apps to interact with the public.

The service's default software configuration setting meant the data of the affected organisations was left without protection up until June 2021, according to UpGuard.

"As a result of this research project, Microsoft has since made changes to Power Apps portals," the report said.

Microsoft said it had let clients know when potential security risks were uncovered so that they could fix the problems themselves.

"We take security and privacy seriously, and we encourage our customers to use best practices when configuring products in ways that best meet their privacy needs," a spokesperson said.

But UpGuard said it would have been better to change the way the software works at the source, and based on how customers use it, rather than "to label systemic loss of data confidentiality an

even easier for businesses of all sizes to create engaging content that drives consumers directly to the digital point of purchase." Harley Finkelstein, Shopify president, said the partnership will help boost platform "creators" who promote products online by "enabling new in-app shopping experiences and product discovery on TikTok for the first time."

"Shopify is powering the creator economy on one of the fastest-growing social and entertainment platforms in the world," he said. "We are excited to help this next generation of entrepreneurs connect with their audiences."

The news comes amid rising interest in "social commerce" that is expected to be worth some \$36 billion in the United States this year, according to the research firm eMarketer. An eMarketer report said Facebook was leading this segment, and that an estimated 56 million US residents would be making at least one purchase on the leading social network this year. TikTok came under pressure last year from former president Donald Trump, who claimed the platform represented a national security risk because of its links to China. Joe Biden's administra-

tion shelved plans to ban TikTok or force a sale to US investors, instead ordering a national security review of foreign-controlled platforms. —AFP

at the time. Mozambique's former head of security and intelligence, Gregorio Leao, is also among the accused.

Revelations of the secret loans plunged Mozambique—one of the world's poorest countries and which relies on donor aid—into its worst financial crisis since independence from Portugal in 1975.

The United States alleges that at least \$200 million was spent on bribes and kickbacks, including \$12 million pocketed by former finance minister Manuel Chang, who also signed off on the debt guarantees. Chang, who been under detention in neighbouring South Africa since 2018, is set to be extradited to Mozambique despite a competing arrest warrant issued by US authorities. South Africa's justice ministry said Monday.

Several other judicial procedures involving Credit Suisse are also underway. Three of the bank's former employees pleaded guilty to US charges of money-laundering over the matter in October 2020.

US-led investigations into the "hidden debt" scandal have also implicated Mozambique's current President Filipe Nyusi, who was defence minister at the time. —AFP

Fact or fiction?



Millions of Microsoft stored data records mistakenly exposed

SAN FRANCISCO: Some 38 million records stored on a Microsoft service, including private information, were mistakenly left exposed this year, security firm UpGuard said Monday.

The data, including names, addresses, financial information and COVID-19 vaccination statuses, was made vulnerable — but not compromised — before the problem was resolved, according to the digital security company's investigation.

Among the 47 affected organizations were American Airlines, Ford, JB Hunt and public agencies such as the Maryland Department of Health and New York City's public transit system.

TikTok to offer in-app shopping with Shopify

WASHINGTON: TikTok unveiled plans to allow users to buy products while using the video-sharing app in a partnership with e-commerce platform Shopify. The fast-growing social media app said it would begin pilot-testing TikTok Shopping with a group of Shopify merchants in the United States, Britain and Canada in the coming weeks.

"TikTok Shopping will bring new features that help Shopify merchants create engaging, organic content that sends consumers directly to their online store for checkout, making it easy for people to explore and buy the products they discover on TikTok," said a statement from the app owned by China-based ByteDance.

Blake Chandler, head of global business solutions at TikTok, said the app "is uniquely placed at the center of content and commerce, and these new solutions make it

Mozambique begins 'hidden debt' scandal trial

MAPUTO: The Mozambique trial of 19 suspects linked to a \$2-billion secret loan scandal that plunged the southern African country into its worst-ever financial crisis began Monday in the capital Maputo.

The scheme, known as the "hidden debt" scandal, involved state-guaranteed loans contracted between 2013 and 2015 by three public enterprises—ProIndicus, Mozambique Asset Management and Ematum—to buy a tuna-fishing fleet and surveillance ships that never materialised.

Former president Armando Guebuza's son, Ndambi Guebuza, is among 19 suspects charged with a combination of blackmail, counterfeiting, embezzlement and money laundering. Dressed in a winter coat and striped shirt, Guebuza sat alongside his counterparts as proceedings started in a



BEIJING: File photo shows a staff member displaying AI-generated faces which can be selected as virtual girlfriends created by XiaoIce, a cutting-edge artificial intelligence system designed to create emotional bonds with its 660 million users worldwide. —AFP

Fact or fiction?

Thousands of young, female fans discuss the virtual boyfriend experience on online forums dedicated to XiaoIce, sharing chat screenshots and tips on how to get to the chatbot's highest "intimacy" level of three hearts. Users can also collect in-game points the more they interact, unlocking new features such as XiaoIce's WeChat moments-kind of like a Facebook wall-and even going on virtual "holidays", where they can pose for selfies with their virtual partner.

Laura, a 20-year-old user in Zhejiang province, fell in love with XiaoIce over the past year and now struggles to break free of her attachment. "Occasionally, I would long for him in the middle of the night... I used to fantasise there was a real person on the other end," said the student, who prefers not to use her real name.

But she complained that he would always

switch conversation topic when she raised her feelings for him or meeting in real life. It took her months to finally realise that he was indeed virtual. "We commonly see users who suspect that there's a real person behind every XiaoIce interaction," said Li, the founder.

"It has a very strong ability to mimic a real person." But providing companionship to vulnerable users does not mean that XiaoIce is a substitute for specialist mental health support—a service that is drastically under-resourced in China. The system monitors for strong emotions, aiming to guide conversations onto happier topics before users ever reach crisis point, Li explained, adding that depression is the most common extreme emotional state encountered. Still, Li believes modern China is a happier place with XiaoIce. "If human interaction is wholly perfect now, there would be no need for AI to exist," he said. —AFP



CHEVY CHASE: File photo shows a Microsoft logo adorns a building in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Some 38 million records stored on a Microsoft service, including private information, were mistakenly left exposed this year, security firm UpGuard said. —AFP

end user misconfiguration, allowing the problem to persist." —AFP



CULVER CITY, California: File photo shows the logo of Chinese video app TikTok is seen on the side of the company's office space at the C3 campus in Culver City, in the westside of Los Angeles. —AFP

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US-led investigations into the "hidden debt" scandal have also implicated Mozambique's current President Filipe Nyusi, who was defence minister at the time. —AFP

S Africa jobless rate soars as pandemic bites

JOHANNESBURG: Unemployment in South Africa soared to its highest level in 13 years in the second quarter of this year—with more than one in three of the working population looking for a job in the continent's most industrialised economy—as coronavirus restrictions shackle growth, official data showed yesterday.

The jobless rate—which measures the total number of people out of work against the working population as a whole—rose to 34.4 percent in the April-June period from 32.6 percent in the preceding three months, Statistics South Africa said in a statement.

That was the highest level since the agency began compiling quarterly unemployment data in 2008. In concrete terms, the total number of people out of work in South Africa increased by 584,000 to 7.8 million in the second quarter, the statisticians calculated.

The country has an overall population of 59 million. Most of the job losses were recorded in the financial, service and industrial sectors. Black women were hit hardest, too, with their jobless rate standing at 41 percent, compared with just 8.2 percent for white women, the statistics office said.

Overall, the proportion of women out of work is higher than men, standing at 36.8 percent and 32.4 percent respectively. South Africa is the country that has been hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa.

Already in recession before the global outbreak, its economy shrank by seven percent last year. Unemployment rates in South Africa have stood at over 20 percent for at least two decades. —AFP



JOHANNESBURG: Young people have borne the brunt of the jobless crisis in South Africa. —AFP

Business

NBK Economic Report

Spending solid amid vaccination progress and economy reopening

Spending supported by renewed debt repayment deferrals and recent pick-up in consumer loans

KUWAIT: Rising consumer spending continues to be one of the main drivers of Kuwait's economic recovery, supported by renewed debt repayment deferrals (April-September) for Kuwaiti borrowers and a recent pick-up in consumer loans. Spending remained strong, although slowed recently, given the good progress on vaccinations and the recent sharp drop in the infection rate and the easing of COVID restrictions. However, a possible drop in public spending (to contain budgetary pressures), further weakening in the labor market particularly among expatriates, and possibly another virus wave could weigh on spending in the period ahead.

Spending growth slows as the base effect fades

Despite a monthly increase of 4% m/m, spending growth decelerated to 18% y/y in July, its lowest rate since last November and well down from the 137% recorded in May. It is also worth noting that year-to-date, spending was up more than 12% in July, which is decent by historical standards. The recent slowdown reflects mostly the fading of y/y base effects that had pushed up growth earlier this year on the anniversary of the start of the pandemic. With this base effect now in the past, spending growth should be more stable going forward, with less fluctuations in mobility restrictions, in the absence of another surge of the COVID cases.

As for consumers' method of payment, growth in ATM cash withdrawals fell back into negative territory after being positive for four months in a row, decreasing by 3.9% y/y in July following average growth of 17% in

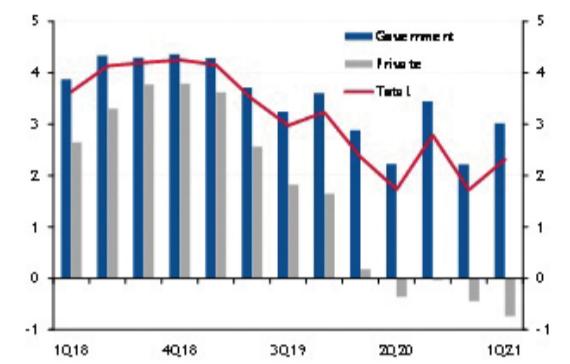
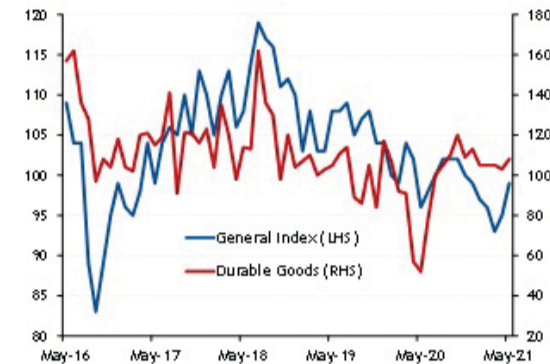
1H21. Growth in point-of-sale transactions declined 12.8% y/y in July after reaching a record high of 302% in May, as May last year saw closures and movement restrictions due to COVID. Online spending growth, however, remained strong at 42.8%, pushing the amount of online transactions to a record KD 0.92 billion, or 38.3% of total spending.

Consumer confidence improved on economic reopening

With the reopening of the economy and rising oil prices, confidence about jobs and the economic outlook improved, boosting household expenditure on durables purchases. Ara's consumer confidence index continued its upward trend from 93 in March to 99 in May, the highest level since December 2020. This reflects mainly consumers' hopes that the worst of the pandemic's impact may have passed. Most index sub-components, including current employment (132) and durable goods (108), remained robust, though the current economic situation (87) and current personal income (85) segments remained lower.

Strong consumer lending is supporting spending

Consumer spending was also supported by a pick-up in borrowing coming in the wake of a sharp drop in 2020 due to the pandemic. In fact, overall household credit growth accelerated in 2Q21, with the y/y increase at 11.6% through June, the highest annual expansion since early 2016. This robust increase was driven in part by personal consumption loans (+12.8%),



which picked up in 2Q21 following two weak quarters. Moreover, spending is in part supported by accumulated savings, thanks to the renewed six-month repayment deferral for Kuwaiti borrowers, which is expected to temporarily free up about KD 1 billion for possible spending, equivalent to around 5% of estimated household spending in 2020.

Public sector hiring trends supportive of spending

Rising spending levels continue to come against the backdrop of solid employment growth among the Kuwait national segment. According to the recently released data by the Public Institution for Social Security (PIFSS), employment growth among Kuwaitis increased by 2.3% y/y in 1Q21 from 1.7% in 4Q20. This reflects an improvement in hiring activity growth in the public sector from an over three-year low of 2.2% y/y

in 4Q20 to 3% in 1Q21, while the private sector recorded a drop of 0.7% y/y. Thus, softness in the private labor market is likely to weigh on the consumer-spending outlook in the near-to-medium term. The public sector has fared quite well in comparison to the private sector, but this could mostly be attributed to the effects of Kuwaitization efforts.

With the continued successful rollout of the vaccination program and the further reopening of the economy and businesses, consumer spending is expected to remain solid. However, the outlook will remain contingent on the recovery of the labor market especially in the private sector, as well as worries about another virus wave in the coming months. Also, the easing of travel restrictions is encouraging Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis to spend their summer holiday outside Kuwait, diverting more spending overseas.

Delegates hash out UN biodiversity goals online

PARIS: Country delegates met online on Monday to start tackling a draft agreement for the pandemic-delayed COP15 global summit on biodiversity, days after the new summit date of April 2022 was set. The virtual discussions between delegations from 195 countries are the first to be held since the UN unveiled the text in July and are slated to run until September 3.

The fruit of months of online talks, the draft calls for the preservation of at least 30 percent of land and oceans, along with other biodiversity targets. It maps out the route for humanity to be "living in harmony with nature" by 2050, outlining dozens of targets and milestones to be hit by 2030 to preserve biodiversity.

But environmental and conservation groups are lobbying for stronger language in the draft agreement around several key issues, including the measures needed to stave off further outbreaks of deadly viruses such as SARS-CoV-2. "It's not ambitious enough at all," Wildlife Conservation Society vice president Susan Lieberman told AFP, adding "There is no mention of the pandemic." Eleven civil society organizations warned in a statement that the current language on wildlife trade was dangerously weak, despite its probable link to the COVID outbreak. "The (text) calls only for such trade to be 'safe for human health'," a representative for the groups said in an email, proposing new language that would outlaw any activity that carries a risk of "pathogen spillover".

Highlighting further concerns, the Avaaz online activist network called for the agreement to include the full recognition of indigenous peoples and the elimination of at least \$800 billion in subsidies for environmentally harmful activities.

It also said the text should "conserve and protect at least half of the planet by 2030 as a means of staying below 1.5C and addressing the acceleration of biodiversity loss". The text will need to withstand the crucial online negotiations phase in October as China assumes the presidency of the summit. —AFP

Burgan Bank announces special monthly 'Mega Hit' offer on 'GoPro Hero 9'

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank's prepaid and credit cardholders can now benefit from the exclusive monthly 'Mega Hit Offer' through its partnership with 'Best Al-Yousifi', the leading electronics store in Kuwait. The bank's valued customers will be given the chance to purchase "GoPro Hero 9" for a special discounted price today (25th of August, 2021).

The offer provides limited quantities of the highly demanded camera and is valid for 24 hours only. Customers can benefit from the 'Mega Hit Offer' while making other purchases only through the 'Best Al-Yousifi' website or mobile application. As the only bank in Kuwait to provide this special offer, the selected product's price can also be viewed on Burgan Bank's social media platforms on the same day of the offer. To learn more about Burgan Bank's latest offers or any of its products and services, customers can visit any of the bank's branches or Burgan Banks Instagram page on @BurganBankKuwait, contact the call center or via WhatsApp at 1804080.

KFH offers variety of 'Mercedes' cars through its leasing product

KUWAIT: Executive Manager Automotive & Equipment at Kuwait Finance House (KFH), Ahd Aleesa said: KFH is providing, through its amazing lease products, a variety of "Mercedes" cars as part of KFH lease fleet. "Mercedes" cars are distinguished for fulfilling the needs of all society classes. The product provides a competitive monthly lease value starting from KD 279.

NBK provides customers 50% discount from Samsonite

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen to offer best services for all customers, and as part of its endeavors to meet their needs and provide a wide range of services that suit their lifestyle, the bank is offering premium Family Banking Services Customers 50% discount from Samsonite.

Simply using the promo code they will receive by SMS, customers will get 50% off when purchasing the Cosmolite Bundle from Samsonite website, or present the code at the cashier when shopping in-store at Marina Mall, The Avenues, AlKout, and 360 Mall.

Customers can avail the offer by making their purchases using eligible NBK Credit Cards including: NBK Visa Infinite Credit Card, NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Infinite Credit Card, NBK Visa Signature Credit Card, NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis

Aleesa added that KFH lease fleet comprises a variety of wide-spread and well-known brands, approximating 70 different kinds. KFH is distinguished for providing its (retail and corporate) customers with a unique and high-level service, thus giving them the opportunity to pick the cars of their choice through the lease products provided at KFH showrooms and the agents showrooms. The operational lease period, 12-36 months, plays a major role in identifying the best and easiest ways to enhance KFH role and contributions to customer service and the enhancement of the automotive market.

Aleesa said that KFH is distinguished for providing amazing programs through its retail and corporate

finance lease products, thus enabling the corporate sector to deal with the product easily and swiftly. Lease products comprise several attractive advantages including comprehensive maintenance, Takaful insurance, replacement car, round the clock road assistance service and travel in the leased car according to certain terms and conditions.



Ahd Aleesa

them a richer banking experience."

Family Banking Services are available for new and existing Kuwaiti customers and their families. Eligibility conditions for Privilege Family Banking Customers are minimum KD 5,000 combined salaries, or minimum KD 150,000 combined deposits/AUM of family members, whereas for Thahabi Family Banking Customers, minimum KD 2,500 combined salaries, or minimum KD 50,000 combined deposits/AUM of family members.

All family members are eligible to enjoy Family Banking Services (parents, spouse and children), up to 6 members in total.



Mohamed Akram Hashim

Samsung Group announces \$205bn investment plan

SEOUL, South Korea: Samsung Group unveiled a \$205 billion investment blueprint yesterday aimed at making the company a leader in a range of technologies from semiconductors to robotics and creating 40,000 new jobs. The tech giant is South Korea's largest conglomerate and its overall turnover is equivalent to a fifth of the national gross domestic product. Samsung Electronics, its flagship subsidiary, is the world's biggest smartphone maker.

The plan will "help Samsung strengthen its global standing in key industries while spearheading innovation in new fields", the company said in a statement, adding that it will also pursue corporate acquisitions. On the semiconductor front, the firm said it will seek to enhance cutting-edge technologies to meet "long-term demand rather than short-term changes". It is also looking to expand its biopharmaceutical business run by Samsung

Stellantis, Foxconn to make 'smart cockpit' for cars

PARIS: Global auto group Stellantis and Taiwanese electronics giant Foxconn unveiled a joint venture yesterday to make a "smart cockpit" for cars that will feature navigation, voice assistance and payment services.

The US-European automaker was formed in a merger between France's Peugeot and the US-Italian company Fiat Chrysler earlier this year,

Biologics and Samsung Bioepis.

The conglomerate said it would build two new manufacturing plants on top of three currently in operation with a view to tapping into the manufacturing of vaccines. Of the 240 trillion won (\$205 billion) it plans to spend, it will commit 180 trillion won to South Korea. The domestic investment is expected to create another 10,000 jobs on top of 30,000 already planned.

It could also induce as many as 560,000 new hirings in related industries, it said. The announcement comes just days after Lee Jae-yong, the de-facto leader of the conglomerate, walked out of prison on parole after completing only about half of his jail term.

It was the latest instance of the country's long tradition of freeing business leaders on economic grounds after imprisonment for corruption or tax evasion. Lee was serving a two-and-a-half year prison sentence for bribery, embezzlement and other offences in connection with a corruption scandal that brought down former South Korean president Park Geun-hye. But his parole is not the end of his legal travails: he remains on trial over alleged stock manipulation that effectively eased his path to take control of the family conglomerate. —AFP

with a stable that includes Alfa Romeo, Jeep and Maserati.

The joint venture with Foxconn, named Mobile Drive, and will make the smart cockpits available to other car makers.

"Its roadmap of software innovations will include artificial intelligence-based applications, navigation, voice assistance, e-commerce store operations, and payment services integration, amongst others," the companies said in a joint statement.

Foxconn, more famous for assembling Apple's iPhone, is trying to diversify into the auto business.

Stellantis plans to invest 30 billion euros in electric vehicles and new software over the next four years. —AFP

LuLu Hypermarket holds 'Super Deals' promotion

KUWAIT: The week-long promotion offered massive deals on a wide gamut of products ranging from groceries, fruits and vegetables, to fresh and frozen products, meat and fish items, as well as to non-food items including consumer electronics such as mobile phones, televisions, IT products and a whole lot more.

In addition, popular clothing and garment brands such as Cortigiani, De Backers, Eten, Ruff and Sin were also available at unbelievably amazing discounts. Besides being held simultaneously in all outlets of LuLu Hypermarkets in the country, the 'Super Deals' promotion was also available on the hypermarket's online platform at <https://www.luluhypermarket.com/>.

Access to the promotion deals, both online and offline, allowed shoppers the choice of selecting their preferred method and convenient time for shopping and ordering from the entire range of products on offer at the hypermarket. A main benefit for those ordering on the online platform was that LuLu Hypermarket offered free home-delivery for purchase of all products ordered online worth over KD 30. The free home-delivery offer was valid on purchases made from the start of the promotion on 25 August, until the penultimate Super Deals day on 31 August.

Super Deals promotion, which coincided with the country slowly returning to normal activity, was a major draw for shoppers eager at avail of the best offers at extraordinary prices. The promotion also once again reiterated LuLu Hypermarket's resolve to offer customers what they require, when they require, at the most competitive prices and on the widest selection of products.

Lifestyle | Features



Marion Cotillard attends a special screening of Amazon's original movie 'Annette' at Hollywood Forever in Hollywood, California. — AFP

Marion Cotillard to be honored at San Sebastian film festival

Oscar-winning French actress Marion Cotillard will receive a lifetime achievement award at Spain's San Sebastian film festival next month, organizers said yesterday. The 45-year-old, who won the Best Actress Academy Award for her role as Edith Piaf in "La Vie en Rose" will collect the festival's Donostia award during the event's opening ceremony on September 17, they said in a statement. Cotillard "has shone brightly in European and North American productions, putting equal talent into dra-

matic, comedy and action roles," the statement added.

The actress has also appeared in Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris," and Batman movie "The Dark Knight Rises." Past recipients of the Donostia award-the festival's highest honour which is named after the Basque word for the coastal town of San Sebastian-include actors Meryl Streep, Richard Gere and Robert De Niro. The festival will also give the award this year to Hollywood star Johnny Depp, best known as the swaggering Jack Sparrow in

the "Pirates of the Caribbean" franchise.

The decision has sparked controversy since Depp recently lost a libel case against a British tabloid newspaper that branded him a "wife-beater" during his tempestuous relationship with his ex-wife, actress Amber Heard. The 69th San Sebastian film festival, the highest-profile movie event in the Spanish-speaking world, takes place from September 17 to 25. — AFP

Ex-Sex Pistols win court battle to use songs in Disney series

Two former members of the Sex Pistols on Monday won a London court battle against ex-frontman John Lydon, better known as Johnny Rotten, who opposed the use of the groundbreaking punk band's music in an upcoming Disney series. Judge Anthony Mann ruled at the High Court that the band's former drummer Paul Cook and guitarist Steve Jones were entitled to invoke majority voting rules against Lydon to license their 1970s-era back catalogue.

Lydon-known to the world as the band's sneering, ginger-haired singer Johnny Rotten-had opposed approving the licenses for "Pistol", a six-part Disney drama about the band directed by Oscar-winning British director Danny Boyle, claiming they could not be granted without his consent. But Mann said it was "impossible to believe" Lydon was unaware of the consequences of a 1998 agreement

allowing voting on a "majority rules basis" during his efforts to protect the Sex Pistols' legacy.

"A man with those concerns would expect to be made to understand important documents that he was signing. He would not have been cavalier about that," said Mann. "He must have made an informed decision to sign it and-if it is a shackle-to shackle himself," he concluded. The Sex Pistols formed in 1975 and revolutionized rock music with their punk style before splitting up in 1978.

Their music, fashion and hairstyles

have been considered as the initiators of a new counter-culture. Famous songs including "God Save the Queen" and "Anarchy in the UK" scandalized conservative British public opinion and were viewed as an assault on the monarchy during Queen Elizabeth II's 1977 Silver Jubilee. Lydon previously told The Sunday Times newspaper that Jones's 2016 memoir "Lonely Boy: Tales From A Sex Pistol" was extremely "disrespectful". "Pistol" is based on the memoir and is due to air next year.

Lawyer Mark Cunningham, representing Lydon, said the memoir "depicts him in a hostile and unflattering light". Lydon had argued the licenses could not be granted without his permission, adding that the band member agreement "smacks of some kind of slave labor". But Edmund Cullen, representing Jones and Cook, had said the agreement allowed licensing requests to be approved on a "majority rules basis", with Lydon the only resister.

Cullen added in written evidence that Glen Matlock, who left the band in 1977, and the estate of his replacement Sid Vicious, who died in 1979, also supported the licensing. Jones and Cook welcomed the ruling, saying the week-long hearing was "necessary to allow us to move forward and hopefully work together in the future with better relations". — AFP



Ex-frontman John Lydon

Beanie Feldstein 'almost flashed the world' at Oscars

Beanie Feldstein "almost flashed the entire world" at the Academy Awards. The 28-year-old actress has opened up on the moment she suffered a very embarrassing wardrobe malfunction seconds before she stepped out to introduce presenter Mindy Kaling at the 2020 Oscars. She told W Magazine: "I was wearing a stunning dress that had a halter clasp at the neck... The gown had boning and a sort of shelf for the bust, but there was no bra involved. I'm all about representation, and I'm here to represent big, low-hanging Jewish breasts. The halter on the dress was struggling. It was hanging on for dear life. "There was a countdown clock backstage, and there was a minute and 20 seconds left before I had to go on in front of an audience of millions.



"Next to me was the wall of Oscar statues that they were about to hand out to incredible people. I was nervous and accidentally stepped on the front hem of my dress, and with that step, the clasp gave way." The 'Booksmart' star revealed how there were less than 30 seconds until she was due on stage, but someone jumped in to help and saved her from any further embarrassment. She added: "At that point, there was 18 seconds to go. "Luckily, someone backstage had a safety pin and reclasped me, but I almost flashed the entire world that night...The moral of this story is, I'm a busty, low-hanging Jewish girl, and you have to be who you are. Which means no more halters."

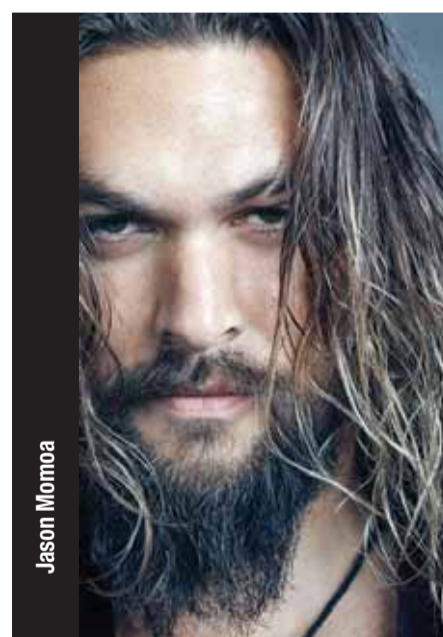
Now, Beanie is set to play Fanny Brice in the first-ever Broadway revival of 1964 production 'Funny Girl', which she described as a "dream come true". She said in a statement: "The first time I played Fanny Brice was at my third birthday party, in a head-to-toe leopard print outfit my mom made for me. "So, it's safe to say that stepping into this iconic role, on Broadway and not in my family's backyard, is truly my lifelong dream come true. — Bang Showbiz

Dave Bautista wants buddy cop film with Jason Momoa

Jason Momoa is open to starring in a buddy cop movie with Dave Bautista. Former WWE star Bautista suggested on Twitter last week that the pair should star together in a 'Lethal Weapon' type of film and Momoa has now suggested that he is keen on the proposal. Speaking on Monday's episode of 'The Late Late Show with James Corden', he said: "I'm not on Twitter, but he literally texted me about four days ago, going, 'We need to do a buddy cop film.' "We love each other, you know, obviously we met on 'See', we're on 'Dune' together, so I said 'absolutely'. And he's like, 'Let's do it in Hawaii.' I'm like, 'Let's do it.' I'm like, 'I got an idea'. So it's off to the races now. We're doing it." Momoa, 42, joked: "It sells itself. Dave loves wearing speedos.

I love wearing board shorts. Ya know, both of us with our shirts off. You know, buddy cop film. He'll be grumpy, I'll be charming. Boom. It sells itself, bro. Bam!" The 'Aquaman' star quipped that the movie was "locked down" and invited the show's audience to suggest a title. The

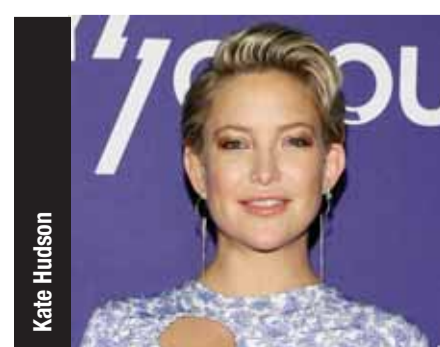
host said: "We got the whole thing locked down now. This is huge. What are we gonna call it? "Let's put it out to the room. If anyone can come up with a good title, I actually think we've got a good chance of this being passed through, because I don't think either of them are in this for the art." Bautista and Momoa star together in the second series of the AppleTV+ drama 'See' and took to social media to push for the pair's possible movie. The 52-year-old star tweeted: "Just going to throw this out into the atmosphere and see what happens. Here we go... Me and Momoa in a 'Lethal Weapon' type buddy cop movie directed by David Leitch. Ok! There it is. Now we wait (sic) — Bang Showbiz



Jason Momoa

Kate Hudson reveals secrets to glowy skin

Kate Hudson says the secret to her glowing complexion is drinking water and getting plenty of shut-eye. The 'Almost Famous' star has revealed the secret to her ageless appearance is ensuring she is fully hydrated and getting enough sleep. Asked what the best piece of skincare advice she has received is, she said: "Drink water and get sleep! Whenever my



Kate Hudson

skin is not feeling great, it's usually because I'm dehydrated. And it really won't matter what you put on your skin if you're not drinking enough water or getting enough sleep." The 42-year-old actress is also not afraid to slather her skin in "heavier creams" because it can take it better than when she was in her 20s.

She explained: "As your skin ages, I think it can handle more moisture and more product. When I was much younger, in my 20s, I had quite sensitive skin and did better using fewer products. Now that I'm older, my skin is still sensitive, but I can use heavier creams and other products without breaking out." And as well as drinking plenty of H2O and resting, Kate - who has three kids - swears by never skipping her daily supplements, and loves lip balm and eye cream. She added to Byrdie.com: "Taking my supplements is the skincare step that I never skip because it's the one thing that affects my skin the most. I notice that when I'm taking my InBloom Essential Elements (\$59) and Beauty Aura regularly, I can see it in my skin. "I also never skip lip balm and eye cream. Even if my skin doesn't need moisturizing, I like to put a little cream under my eyes to give them a little love and use a nice balm to keep my lips moisturized." — AFP



CinemaCon Managing Director Mitch Neuhauser speaks onstage during CinemaCon 2021 Opening Night Event: The Big Screen is Back and Sony Pictures Entertainment Presentation at The Colosseum at Caesars Palace during CinemaCon. — AFP photos

Sony rallies big-screen hopes with 'Spider-Man' and 'Ghostbusters' at CinemaCon

Spooked by the pandemic and streaming platforms, the embattled movie theater industry called on new "Ghostbusters" and "Spider-Man" films as it vowed to fight back at a major trade summit in Las Vegas Monday. CinemaCon-which typically sees Hollywood studios bring glitzy stars and never-before-seen footage to a Las Vegas casino to woo theater bosses-did not take place at all last year as the pandemic shuttered cinemas around the world. But with nearly 90 percent of domestic theaters now back open, Sony Pictures used its opening night presentation slot at Caesars Palace to set the tone for a returning event that is determined to prove the future of the big screen.

Studio bosses showed a new trailer for its much-anticipated "Spider-Man: No Way Home" superhero sequel, before previewing "Ghostbusters: Afterlife"-a heavily nostalgic follow-up to the 1984 supernatural comedy classic-in full to a rapturous crowd. "Over the last 19 months, there's been a lot of doom and gloom," said Josh Greenstein, president of Sony's motion pictures division. "But we know movie theaters, and the theatrical movie experience, will triumph," he added. The presentation also squeezed in brief footage of "Bullet Train" starring Brad Pitt, and future superhero fare including a sequel to "Venom," and "Morbius."

Clips from Denzel Washington's "A Journal for Jordan" and a movie adaptation of bestselling novel "Where the Crawdads Sing" produced by Reese Witherspoon were also shown, before a longer "Spider-Man" trailer teased how the film will tie in with other popular Marvel characters including Benedict Cumberbatch's "Doctor Strange." Attendees then settled in for "Ghostbusters: After Life," introduced by its director Jason Reitman and his father Ivan, who directed the original. Plot details are under strict embargo, but the film, set almost four decades after the first movie, finds young descendants of the original's wise-cracking ghouls picking up



(From left) Jason Reitman and Ivan Reitman speak onstage during CinemaCon 2021 Opening Night Event.

the mantle-and vacuum backpack.

'Not too bright'

CinemaCon is taking place despite fears about the Delta variant that have caused some pandemic restrictions to be reimposed on Hollywood in California, and glitzy A-listers have largely stayed away from the Las Vegas event. Organizers have forged ahead with COVID protocols in place, including proof of vaccination or a recent negative test for attendees.

While Disney is largely absent, other traditional major Hollywood studios showing their wares this week include Warner, Universal and Paramount. Each of those studios has experimented in some form during the pandemic with using streaming platforms to launch their movies-an ever-growing concern for big-screen movie theater chains. Sony, the only major Hollywood studio without its own streaming service, drew loud cheers with its "commitment to preserving and protecting the exclusive theatrical window"-referring to the traditional time-period in which movies can initially only be shown in theaters. — AFP

Billy Connolly receives Edinburgh Festival Lifetime Achievement Award

Sir Billy Connolly has joked his Lifetime Achievement Award makes him feel like he "should be dead". The 78-year-old comedian - who was honored at the Edinburgh TV Festival this week - has opened up about the prize as he spoke to his wife Dr Pamela Stephenson Connolly in a rare interview from their home in Florida. Speaking during the festival, he quipped: "I feel I should be dead. These lifetime things, I feel like they know something that I don't." Billy



Billy Connolly

also opened up on his battle with Parkinson's after being diagnosed in 2013 and later deciding to step back from the stage to focus on TV work. Asked whether or not filming presents new challenges for him, he said: "Not really, but the way I think, everything is a new challenge. "I hardly prepare, so I turn up unprepared and everything is a new challenge. It keeps your eyes open.

"Well, the challenges lately have been medical, aye, they're getting worse. "Have you noticed I've been holding my left hand as we have been going on? It is starting to jump around. "So I will have to way it up and see how bad it gets, I don't know, we will play it by ear." During the interview, Billy also reflected on his career, including 2019 BBC series 'Made In Scotland' - and he reflected on wearing a kilt even in Florida, although he doesn't wear it like a true Scot. He added: "The wool in it... I have got very sensitive skin, a new shirt is torture to me. I'm happy to tell people I wear underwear. "I would wear long underwear given half the chance. It eats me alive, the kilt. My legs are purple and my willy gets purple." Meanwhile, last year the comedian revealed he has come to terms with the fact that his Parkinson's disease will eventually kill him but said he is remaining positive. — Bang Showbiz

Lifestyle | Features



This file photo shows destruction caused by the Islamic State (IS) group at the archaeological site of Nimrud, a few days after Iraqi forces retook the ancient city from IS jihadists. — AFP photos



This file photo shows destruction caused by the Islamic State (IS) group at the archaeological site of Nimrud.



This file photo shows destruction caused by the Islamic State (IS) group at the archaeological site of Nimrud.

GRAFT AND SECURITY ISSUES FEED THE TRADE IN IRAQ'S PAST

Do you want to buy a more than 5,000-year-old Sumerian tablet, listed as the property of a gentleman from Sussex in England and passed down as a family heirloom? On auction site liveauctioneers.com, bidding for the Sumerian clay tablet starts at 550 pounds (\$750). The item weighs just 70 grams (2.5 ounces) but bears traces of cuneiform

antiquity is a real problem in Iraq, where corruption is prevalent and archaeological sites are poorly protected. For some objects, it can be hard to prove that it was not in fact stolen from lands where the Sumerian empire stood in the fourth millennium BC. Chris Wren, from the British firm TimeLine Auctions, parent company of liveauctioneers.com, says they are

Iraq, and that makes it a land of choice for smugglers. It teems with archaeological sites where traffickers engage in "random exhumations", said Laith Majid Hussein, director of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. "We don't have statistics on the number of antiquities that end up as contraband," Majid said. Corruption and the prevalence of armed groups have encouraged the growth of this lucrative business.

In one site in southern Iraq, where the Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations once flourished, a security guard described the challenges he faced. "One day, I saw a truck arrive with three armed men," the guard said, who asked not to be named to protect both himself and the location of the site. "They started digging, and when I intervened they started shooting in the air and shouting at me—'You think you own this place?'" The lack of resources to protect Iraq's ancient sites is dire. In a country where an estimated 27 percent of the 40 million citizens live below the poverty line, the authorities say they have other priorities. Iraq's ancient sites are concentrated in the south, around Kut, Samawa and Nasiriyah.

From there, smugglers transport their booty to the southern marshes, and to Amara, a city not far from Iran, which has become a "hub for antiquities trafficking", according to one archaeologist who asked to remain anonymous. The stolen antiquities are then taken into Iran "to cross the sea in fishing boats to the Gulf countries", he said.

Alternatively, they may be smuggled overland across Iraq's western desert, which borders Jordan, Syria and Turkey. An Iraqi government source said that the

money earned from trafficking feeds criminal networks, in a country where armed groups, some close to Iran, have grown in power. Corruption also plays a role in a state where government officials are poorly paid. Graft watchdog Transparency International ranks Iraq as 160th out of 180 countries listed for corruption.

The group did well from the trade in illegal antiquities, according to a 2020 report published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, a Geneva-based organization. It said that in 2015, "of IS's annual income, deemed to be between US \$2.35 billion and \$2.68 billion, antiquities trafficking and (in-state)



Archaeological findings are pictured inside an underground tunnel dug by the Islamic State (IS) group to carry out archaeological excavations in the heart of the hill that houses the tomb of the Prophet Jonah (Nabi Younes) in east Mosul.

writing—the oldest recorded in the world and is listed as "Property of a West Sussex, UK, gentleman". This example comes with letters of provenance by experts. But the ownership history of some such objects can be harder to prove.

They may not have been handed down but handed on, via smugglers and middlemen. The boom in looted objects from

aware "of the potential for looted, smuggled or other stolen materials" to come onto the market. "We spend a great deal of effort and money in seeking to weed such possibilities out," he said.

Lucrative trade

Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians all trod on the ancient land that is now



Pottery and other ancient fragments are scattered in the open air at the Tell Al-Ubayd archaeological site, 6Km to the west of the remains of the ancient city of Ur in Iraq's southern Dhi Qar province.



Ancient stone blocks are scattered in the open air at the Tell Al-Ubayd archaeological site.

Major earner

When the Islamic State group (IS) occupied large swathes of Iraqi territory between 2014 and 2017, the jihadists used bulldozers, pickaxes and explosives to ransack dozens of pre-Islamic sites and their treasures. Nimrud, a jewel of the Assyrian empire founded in the 13th Century BC and located outside Mosul in the north of the country, was one such target. The jihadists "also engaged in smuggling", said one European security expert, speaking on condition of anonymity. "That earned them money—but it affected Syria more."

taxation accounted for US \$20 million". Earlier this month, the United States returned to Iraq about 17,000 archaeological treasures dating back 4,000 years that had been looted in recent decades. Despite welcoming such moves, the Iraqi government source said he believes the problem "lies in neighboring states" that are complicit in the smuggling. "The Iraqi state is weak," he said. "Archaeological artefacts are not a priority." — AFP



A member of the Irish Guards (right) takes part in the Changing of the Guard, in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace.

Changing of the Guard back on at Buckingham Palace

Soldiers in bearskin hats and red tunics marched outside Buckingham Palace in London on Monday for the first Changing of the Guard ceremony since the pandemic began. The elite 1st Battalion Coldstream Guard soldiers performed the colorful tradition in the palace courtyard for the first time since March 2020, when it was halted to avoid spreading infection. Forces News reported that this was the longest



Members of the band of the Nijmegen Company Grenadier Guards take part in the Changing of the Guard.

pause in holding the ceremony since World War II. The Changing of the Guard is a ceremonial handover between guards on duty and those taking over.

Monday's event included a musical tribute to the UK's Olympic athletes with the military brass band playing tunes including "Gold" by Spandau Ballet and

the Olympics theme music, as spectators watched through the fence. Queen Elizabeth II is not in residence at the palace as she is on her annual holiday at Balmoral, Scotland. Garrison Sergeant Major Andrew Stokes, of the Coldstream Guards, who was in charge of the ceremony's return, said: "It's been a long time coming."

Many of the young soldiers had not taken part in the ceremony before, having joined the Guards since it was postponed, he said. For those taking part, "it instils an awful lot of pride knowing that all these people have come to watch these very young guardsmen and musicians." During the pandemic, the Grenadier Guards have helped run virus testing and vaccination centers. The Changing of the Guard at Windsor Castle near London resumed last month. — AFP



Members of the Nijmegen Company Grenadier Guards and the first Battalion the Coldstream Guards take part in the Changing of the Guard.— AFP photos



Members of the first Battalion the Coldstream Guards take part in the Changing of the Guard, in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace, which is taking place for the first time since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in London.



The Afghan Rug Shop owner James Wilthew poses for a photograph outside his shop Hebden Bridge, northern England.



The Afghan Rug Shop owner James Wilthew arranges a display at his shop in Hebden Bridge. — AFP photos

UK businesses fear for Afghan rug weavers after Taliban takeover

Overseas businesses selling colorful handwoven rugs and vivid hand-blown glass from Afghanistan are concerned for their suppliers as the Taliban's takeover of the country threatens those with links to the West. British businessman James Wilthew has built up close ties with Afghan rug weavers and sellers, buying the sought-after carpets directly from the northern provinces, where the industry is traditionally based. The ex-serviceman sells the carpets at his shop in Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire in northern England and estimates that his company, The Afghan Rug Shop, supports about 200 families. A share of the proceeds goes to Afghanaid, a British charity supporting people in Afghanistan.

Now he is battling to fly out contacts he believes will be Taliban targets due to their association with a former NATO base in the region. "As a result of that, they are now in immediate danger," as they do not fall under the British government criteria for evacuation, Wilthew told AFP. He said

Reconstruction Team, set up to help development projects.

Asked if Islamist hardliners could target those who worked with him due to his UK military background, he said: "Yes, of course". The Taliban could say, "You've been working for Mr James", he said. "It's just the association." "I'm not necessarily how sure the Taliban will go with these things: we just don't know what the spectrum of danger is."

Major export commodity

Afghan rugs are a major commodity and the country's second largest non-agricultural export, according to the World Trade Organization. Textiles are by far the most significant Afghan import to the UK, worth some £2.4 million (\$3.3 million, 2.8 million euros) per year, government figures show. The ancient carpet trade existed under the previous Taliban regime, which ruled Afghanistan with an iron fist from 1996 until they were ousted in the US-led invasion in 2001.



A customer browses at The Afghan Rug Shop in Hebden Bridge.



Afghan scarves are arranged for sale at The Afghan Rug Shop in Hebden Bridge.



Afghan rugs are arranged for sale at The Afghan Rug Shop.

he was frustrated by the British government's response, despite an emotive emergency debate on the crisis in parliament and urgent calls for help. "Nothing happens, there's been no action," he said, warning: "Government bureaucracy will result in the death of thousands of people." The former RAF officer worked in Afghanistan in 2004 on the UK Provincial

The uncertainty and chaos since the return of the hardline Islamists was "a temporary issue", said Wilthew. "Under the Taliban regime, that trade (in textiles) will continue, they need the tax from that business, the employment," he added. "It's their export commodity, it's how they make an income." Most Afghan carpets are exported via neighboring Pakistan, but

Wilthew is unusual in dealing directly with artisans and traders inside the country. That could force him to change his business model, possibly using a middleman in Pakistan, and switching from US dollars if the greenback is banned in Afghanistan.

He is also unlikely to be able to continue using international shipping and delivery companies DHL and FedEx for delivery, he added. "Acquiring rugs from Afghanistan is not a concern for me. It's not an issue, the issue is my friends," he said.

'Impossible' logistics

Another high-end company that sells goods made by Afghan artisans is London-based Ishkar, which sells contemporary-design carpets, as well handblown

tumblers, jewelry and clothes.

The brand's creative director, Electra Simon, said she was in daily contact with people in Afghanistan, and "pretty much everybody is trying to leave".

"They just basically want to get out, they can't leave their houses right now," she said, adding they felt "sheer desperation" at the situation. "It's really hard: the relationships we've built up with people, seeing them in these massively tricky situations," she said. Ishkar's online shop is selling photographic prints of Afghanistan to raise funds for Emergency, which provides medical treatment to conflict victims.

The company, which works with some 30 people in the country, has removed references to Afghan partners from its website to protect them. "We want to do every-

thing possible to continue working with people in Afghanistan, if it doesn't put them at risk," she said "Some of them will be (at risk), others probably not as much because they are just traditional artisans working, so hopefully we can continue working with them."

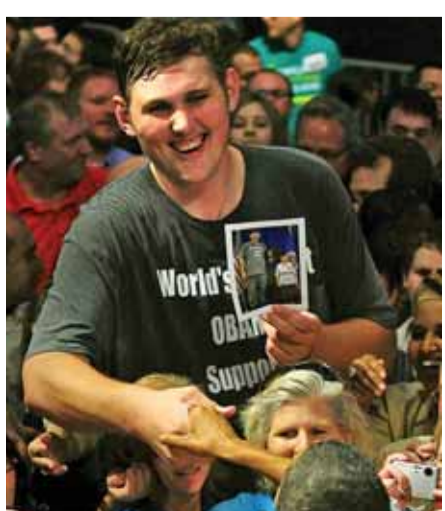
Some artisans in areas captured by the Taliban have been able to keep working, she said, although the logistics of exporting to Britain were now "completely impossible". Both she and Wilthew said the situation was still too fluid to predict, and a clearer picture will emerge in the coming weeks. "It will definitely be different for us, that's 100 percent," said Simon. — AFP



The Afghan Rug Shop owner James Wilthew photographs new arrivals on display to upload to the shop's social media accounts at his shop in Hebden Bridge.



The Afghan Rug Shop owner James Wilthew arranges a display at his shop in Hebden Bridge.



America's tallest man dies at age 38

The tallest man in America—he stood 7 feet 8 inches (2.35 meters) — has died of a heart problem at the age of 38, his mother said on Facebook. Ukrainian-born Igor Vovkovinskiy had a condition called pituitary gigantism that

caused excessive secretion of growth hormone. His mother, who said her son died Friday in Minnesota, had brought him from their home in Ukraine in 1989 to get medical treatment at the Mayo Clinic in the northern US state.

Two surgeries saved his life but failed to stop his growth. At age 27, Guinness World Records declared Vovkovinskiy the tallest person in America. In the 2013 edition of the Eurovision song contest, Vovkovinskiy walked on stage cradling Ukraine's singer, Zlata Ognevich, in his arms. She looked tiny and doll-like. Vovkovinskiy enjoyed another moment of celebrity in 2009 when then-president Barack Obama noticed him towering above the crowd at

a political rally. Vovkovinskiy was wearing a T-shirt that called him the "World's Biggest Obama Supporter." He shook hands with the politician.

Guinness World Records says the tallest person in the world now is a Turkish man named Sultan Kösen, who is 8 feet 2 inches tall (2.51 meters). The tallest man in modern US history was Robert Wadlow, who was 8 feet 9 inches (2.72 meters). He also suffered from a growth hormone disorder, and died in 1940 at the age of 22. — AFP



Sports

European football giants to take two billion euro COVID hit: KPMG report

Compared to 500 million euros lost in 2019/20

LONDON: Matchday revenues across the five major European football leagues took a nearly 2 billion euro hit last season (\$2.35 billion) after spectators were largely barred from attending matches due to the pandemic, a report by consultancy KPMG said yesterday. The projected revenue losses dwarf the 500 million euros that clubs in the leagues suffered in the 2019/20 season, when the virus first affected Europe and led to sport being suspended in March 2020, only resuming months later without spectators.

The continent's top five leagues are England's Premier League, Italy's Serie A, Spain's La Liga, Germany's Bundesliga and the French Ligue 1. "It is expected that clubs in the big five leagues will make little-to-no income from this source in 2020/21, potentially losing out on over 2 billion euros of matchday revenues combined," the report said.

For the 2019/20 season the Bundesliga, which has the average highest attendance, was the most impacted (an estimated 157 million euros drop in revenues) while Ligue 1 suffered the least (48 million euros). The report stated that of five big clubs, Barcelona saw the biggest dip, registering a 39-million euros contraction in matchday revenues.

The Premier League was the exception amongst

the five leagues during the 2020/21 season, as it permitted some fans to attend during parts of the campaign. The financial impact is also set to continue in the present season. The Premier League and Ligue 1 are the only ones among the big five leagues to have allowed full capacity stadia this season.

Temporary guidelines are in place for La Liga until August 29, with a re-evaluation of the situation in September, only 40 percent of stadia capacity set to be used and fans obligated to wear masks, the report noted. Italy's Serie A currently allows grounds to be half full, with fans required to show a COVID-19 passes proving that they have either been vaccinated against the virus or recovered from infection, it added.

"Similarly, half of the stadiums can be filled in the German Bundesliga, but only up to the limit of 25,000 fans in total," the

report said. The analysis added this summer's delayed Euro 2020 tournament had laid the groundwork for the return of fans but that it had also had a negative side effect.

"With regard to players' health, UEFA measures were considered rather successful, as only few incidents occurred," it stated. "However, there were also loud voices that condemned the tournament for some increases of new corona(virus) cas-



LONDON: A fire display and 'Welcome Home' signs greet West Ham fans as they take their seats ahead of the English Premier League football match between West Ham United and Leicester City at The London Stadium, in east London on Monday. —AFP

es in the general population.

"The World Health Organization (WHO) blamed Euro 2020 for a rise of 10 percent in COVID-19

cases across Europe, mainly driven by the mixing of crowds in host cities, as well as travelling and the easing of social restrictions." —AFP

News in brief

Egypt without Salah

CAIRO: Egypt's football association (EFA) said on Monday Liverpool had refused to release Mohamed Salah for the Pharaohs' upcoming World Cup qualifiers against Angola and Gabon due to UK quarantine regulations. British media reported earlier that the Reds were also refusing to release Fabinho, Roberto Firmino and Alisson Becker for Brazil's three upcoming World Cup qualifiers. Both Egypt and Brazil are on the UK Government's 'red list'. Egypt's governing body said the decision by Liverpool was prompted by "mandatory isolation for 10 days" for travellers returning from those countries. In the summer, Liverpool refused to allow star striker Salah to play in the Olympics, where Egypt reached the quarter-finals before losing to eventual gold medalists Brazil. —AFP

Lyon complete signing

LYON: Lyon have completed the signing of Swiss international midfielder Xherdan Shaqiri from Liverpool, the two clubs announced on Monday. The 29-year-old moves for an initial fee of six million euros, rising to a potential total of 11 million euros (\$12.9m) with bonuses, Lyon said, and has signed a contract until 2024. Capped 96 times by Switzerland, Shaqiri played for Basel, Bayern Munich and Inter Milan before moving to England in 2015 when he signed for Stoke City. He then joined Liverpool in 2018 and made 63 appearances for the Anfield club over the last three seasons, leaving with winners medals in the Premier League, Champions League, Club World Cup and UEFA Super Cup. —AFP

Williams loaned to Norwich

LONDON: Manchester United defender Brandon Williams joined Premier League side Norwich on a season-long loan on Monday. England Under-21 international Williams made his United debut in September 2019 after coming through the youth ranks at Old Trafford. The 20-year-old left-back has been unable to hold down a regular place in Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's team due to the fine form of Luke Shaw. Promoted Norwich have lost their first two games of the season against Liverpool and Manchester City, conceding eight goals and scoring none. Canaries boss Daniel Farke hopes Williams can help steady the ship. —AFP

Green opts for England

SAINT-ETIENNE: Saint-Etienne goalkeeper Etienne Green has chosen to represent England rather than France, he announced on Instagram on Monday. In a post written in French, the 21-year-old who was born in England but moved to France as a child, wrote: "If the English FA are interested and decide to call me up, I'll go with pride and commit to it 200 per cent." Green has been at Saint-Etienne since he was nine and made his Ligue 1 debut for Les Verts last April. He was selected for France's under-21s in the age-grade Euro in the Hungary this summer as the third goalkeeper. He did not play a single minute as France reached the quarter-finals. —AFP

Antonio stars as West Ham crush 10-man Leicester

LONDON: West Ham extended their perfect start to the season as Michail Antonio became the club's record Premier League goalscorer with a double in their 4-1 win against 10-man Leicester on Monday. David Moyes' side took the lead through Pablo Fornals' first half goal at the London Stadium.

Leicester's Ayoze Perez was sent off for a dangerous stamp on Fornals just before half-time. Said Benrahma bagged West Ham's second after the break before Yuri Tielemans got one back for Leicester.

Antonio went into the game tied with Paolo Di Canio on a joint-record 47 goals for West Ham in the Premier League era. The 31-year-old took sole possession of the record with a brace in the closing stages as West Ham followed up last weekend's 4-2 win at Newcastle with another four-goal blitz.

"I'm really pleased for him. I was disappointed with the way he played in the first half but he did enough to shut the manager up after what I said to him at half-time," Moyes said of Antonio. Despite a quiet summer in the transfer market, West Ham sit top of the table and look capable of emu-

lating last season's sixth place finish.

The Hammers have won their opening two fixtures of a Premier League campaign for only the second time. "It's a super night for us. The team played really well. The sending-off changes the game a little bit but we did a lot of good things," Moyes said. "I've challenged the players to find that extra few points that could have been enough to get us in the Champions League. I could be asking far too much but what else am I going to do? Stand here and say we want to avoid relegation!"

Memorable moment

West Ham were the only team to beat Leicester twice in the league last season and they maintained that hold over Brendan Rodgers' men as the FA Cup holders slumped to their first defeat of the new campaign.

Allowed a capacity crowd for the first time since February 2020 after the easing of coronavirus restrictions, West Ham fed off the fans' energy in a fast start that saw Benrahma's 20-yard curler saved by Kasper Schmeichel.

Containing Leicester effectively and launching counter-attacks at will, West Ham's confident display was rewarded in the 26th minute. A sweeping move ended with Fornals finding Benrahma wide on the left before racing into the area to meet the cross with a clipped finish into the far corner from 12 yards.

between the goalposts, with Mike Maignan, recruited from French champions Lille to try to fill the outsize boots of Italy's Euro 2020 winner Gianluigi Donnarumma, now with Paris Saint-Germain. Looking assured in his new surroundings it was Maignan's long pass that set up the only goal of the game, Davide Calabria then providing the assist with Sampdoria keeper Emil Audero unable to cope with Brahim Diaz's low shot. The Spanish midfielder joined on loan from Real Madrid last season and that has been extended for two more years.

With Sampdoria marking Giroud out of the game, the French forward was given little chance to open his Milan account. Towards the end Piolo blooded another of his summer intake, Alessandro Florenzi, who completed his season-long loan move from Roma at the weekend.

Earlier, former Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Thiago Motta had hopes of opening his second stint as a Serie A manager with victory, when Spezia led Cagliari 2-0 with an hour played. The



LONDON: West Ham United's English midfielder Michail Antonio (second right) celebrates with teammates after scoring their fourth goal against Leicester City at The London Stadium in east London on Monday. —AFP

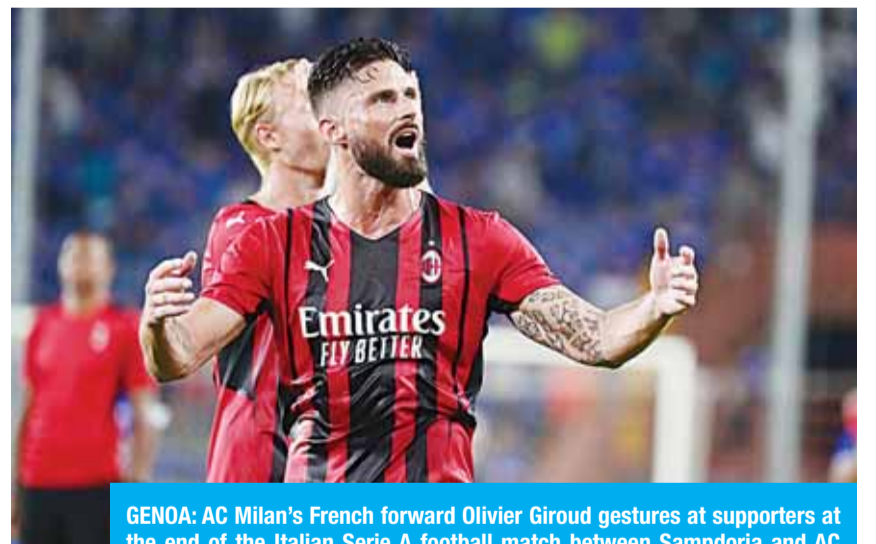
Leicester suffered a self-inflicted wound in the 40th minute when Michael Oliver sent off Perez after consulting the pitchside monitor to review the forward's reckless stamp on Fornals' ankle.

In the 56th minute, Caglar Soyuncu played a woeful backpass towards Schmeichel without looking and Antonio intercepted. Antonio slipped the ball to the unmarked Benrahma and the Algerian smashed in his first goal at the London Stadium since signing from Brentford last season.

Against the run of play, Tielemans

stabbed home from close-range after West Ham failed to clear James Maddison's 69th minute cross. But Antonio wrapped up the points with 10 minutes remaining when he took Declan Rice's cross, held off Soyuncu and swiveled to blast past Schmeichel.

After celebrating his goal by holding up a large cardboard cut-out of himself on the touchline, Antonio produced another memorable moment in the 84th minute. Cleverly flicking the ball over his head, Antonio got between two defenders before poking home from close-range. —AFP



GENOA: AC Milan's French forward Olivier Giroud gestures at supporters at the end of the Italian Serie A football match between Sampdoria and AC Milan at the Luigi Ferraris stadium in Genoa on Monday. —AFP

ex-Italy international, a successor to Vincenzo Italiano, was back in the dugout for the first time in 18 months after his first managerial role at Genoa ended after 10 games in the sack.

Emmanuel Gyasi put his new club

into an early lead, with Simone Bastoni doubling up on 58 minutes. But home side Cagliari were back in it when Joao Pedro scored in the 62nd minute, and leveled from the penalty spot four minutes later. —AFP

Bale's Real form ticks all the boxes for Wales coach Page

LONDON: Gareth Bale is "ticking all the boxes" since returning to Real Madrid which is a boost for Wales ahead of their forthcoming 2022 World Cup qualifiers said Welsh manager Robert Page. Bale is back in favor at Real under new coach Carlo Ancelotti — having been sent on loan to Tottenham Hotspur by his predecessor Zinedine Zidane — and scored in their 3-3 draw with

Levante last Sunday.

It was his first La Liga goal for the club since September 2019. His form augurs well for Wales' friendly with Finland followed by qualifiers against Belarus and Estonia next month. Wales resume their World Cup qualifying campaign having opened with a 3-1 away defeat to group favorites Belgium and a 1-0 home victory over Czech Republic in March.

"You've got to give it your best and play for your club," said Page. "There's no argument there, he's (Bale) ticking all the boxes. He's got a manager now who's been impressed in what he's done in pre-season and watched him through the Euros. That's all he can influence. Give his best in training

and show what he's all about and he's going to start playing games."

"Thankfully he's had a positive impact on the manager and started the season in good form. He's scoring goals, which is great for us," added Page who has taken temporary charge of the team while full-time boss Ryan Giggs prepares to go on trial in January next year, accused of assault and coercive behavior towards his ex-girlfriend.

Page is delighted too to have Bale and his other star player Aaron Ramsey both fit and in form. They have not played together in a qualifier since Wales beat Hungary to qualify for the Euros in November 2019, largely due to the Juventus midfielder's injury problems. —AFP

Sports

Safe in Spain, Afghan women's basketball star hopes to play again

Bayat reached Madrid after 'nerve-wracking escape' from Kabul

BILBAO: As captain of Afghanistan's wheelchair basketball team and a women's rights activist, Nilofar Bayat fled for her life when the Taliban took over, seeking safety in Spain where she hopes to soon be back on the court.

Speaking to reporters in the northern city of Bilbao just days after arriving on a Spanish military plane, this 28-year-old athlete spoke of her shock at how quickly the Taliban swept into the capital Kabul and of her struggle to get out.

"I really want the UN and all countries to help Afghanistan, because the Taliban are the same as they were 20 years ago," she said. "If you see Afghanistan now, it's all men, there are no women because they don't accept women as part of society."

After a nerve-wracking escape, she and her husband Ramesh, who plays for Afghanistan's national basketball team, landed at an airbase just outside Madrid on Friday and are now starting a new life in Bilbao.

"When the Taliban came and I saw them around my home, I was scared and I started to think about myself and my family," said Bayat after the insurgents swept into the capital on August 15. "I've

been in too many videos and spoken about the Taliban, about all I've done in basketball and working for women's rights in Afghanistan. There can be a big case for the Taliban to kill me and my family."

With the help of the Spanish embassy she managed to secure a seat on a plane, and set off for the airport where she found scenes of chaos with the Taliban

“They don't accept women as part of society”

shooting and beating people to stop them reaching the airport.

"It was a really difficult day.. I've never seen this much danger in my country. I cried a lot, not because they beat me or my husband, but because of who had taken control of the country," explained

this former law student.

'Others are still there'

With the help of several German soldiers, they managed to get in but spent two days there in the blazing Kabul sun with "nothing to sleep on.. and not enough food" before finally being flown out on a Spanish military plane.

But she's acutely aware that in getting away, she was one of the lucky ones. "I'm luckier than other Afghan people in that I've left and am here and can start a new life. But I'm just one person, others are still there," she said.

When the Taliban were in power in the late 1990s, a rocket hit Bayat's family home when she was just two-years-old. In the attack, her brother was killed, her father was injured and she lost a leg.

"They changed my life forever, they caused pain and something that I'll carry forever in my life," said Bayat. "I am the best proof of how dangerous the Taliban are.. and how living in Afghanistan is hard and difficult: there is no future and no hope."

In a country where many people have been left with disabilities due to the



BILBAO: The captain of Afghanistan's women's wheelchair basketball team Nilofar Bayat poses in the Spanish Basque city of Bilbao on Monday. —AFP

attacks or polio, Bayat became interested in wheelchair basketball after seeing the men play and went on to play a key role in setting up an Afghan women's team. "When I'm in the gym and playing basketball, I forget what's happening in my country and also that I have a dis-

ability," she said. She came to Spain with the help of a Spanish journalist friend and has received "many offers" to play with wheelchair basketball teams, including one from Bidaideak Bilbao BSR, with whom she hopes to start playing "as soon as possible". —AFP

Australian coach blazes trail for women in African basketball

NAIROBI: When she was growing up in Australia's biggest city of Sydney, Liz Mills dreamt of one day becoming a professional basketball coach. Little did she know that she would end up having fame thrust upon her thousands of kilometers away in Africa, where she has made history as the first woman to coach a men's basketball team in a continental tournament.

After a decade in Africa, Mills is now head coach of the Kenyan Morans and in just a short time has steered them to their first AfroBasket championship in 28 years. From Australia, Mills started out on her African adventure in 2011 in Zambia, where she coached the Heroes during the 2011-2012 season and they ended up winning the national championship.

"I was a bit of rarity... I felt discriminated in terms of opportunities," she

says, adding that she was often overlooked because of her age and her gender. Mills says she is now proud to be a "pioneer" as a female coach. "I hope that I've been able to inspire especially female coaches in Africa to start working with men's teams as well as women's teams across the continent."

But she says that in 2021 she should not be the first woman to be coaching a national men's basketball team, and called on federations to do more to engage women and girls. "I am planning on holding the door open and encouraging as many women through the door... so hopefully in the next couple of years it will be the 100th or 500th to do what I've done this year."

Having served as deputy coach of the national Zambia and Cameroon men's basketball teams, Mills joined the Kenyan Morans in January this year. After last

appearing at AfroBasket in 1993, the team make their return to the top-tier continental championships which run the Rwandan capital Kigali from August 24 to September 5.

'More inches'

"Back in 2012 I said in Zambia that I wanted to be the first woman to coach at the AfroBasket," says Mills. "Qualifying the Kenyan Morans is a dream which has come true. There have been a lot of ups-and-downs to get here, but I am very happy to have been able to achieve this."

On the court, she wears knee-high black leather boots and black jeans along with a red team polo shirt, saying the heels give her "more inches" alongside the towering players. Mills saw the Morans edge out 11-times African champions Angola 74-73 in Cameroon in February to break their almost three-decade absence from the continent's basketball showpiece. She voices confidence that African basketball is heading for bigger and better things.

"I think the standards are only getting



NAIROBI: Kenyan Men's National Basketball team head coach Liz Mills (center) talks with the national team after the training session at the Nyayo national stadium gymnasium in Nairobi on August 20, 2021. —AFP

better and better, with the development of the NBA academies, Giants of Africa, Basketball Without Borders, independent camps for juniors and academies. With all these structures in place, basketball in Africa is trending in the right direction."

Asked about the secret of her own

success as a coach, Mills puts it down to her philosophy of building good relationships with her players. "Players don't care about how much you know until they know how much you care about them, and not just a player but as a person on the court." —AFP

Kuwait women's handball team heads for Bosnia training camp

KUWAIT: Kuwait women's handball team leaves today to Bosnia for a training camp in preparation for the 18th Asian Women's Handball Championship, due to be hosted by Jordan on September 15-25. The 'Blue' team will be within Group B along with Jordan, Afghanistan, India, Iran and Japan, as this championship is a qualification for World Cup scheduled to be hosted by Spain at the end of this year. Women's Handball Committee Vice President Dr Dalal Hussain said yesterday that the 10-day camp comes in preparation for the first abroad participation, hoping to strengthen the player's performance and achieve a great level. Meanwhile, the team's coach Bobaker Zermani said despite the short period of preparation, the team is ready for this championship as the camp would also improve their level for more upcoming events. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Members of the Kuwait women's handball team, management and coaching staff. — KUNA

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

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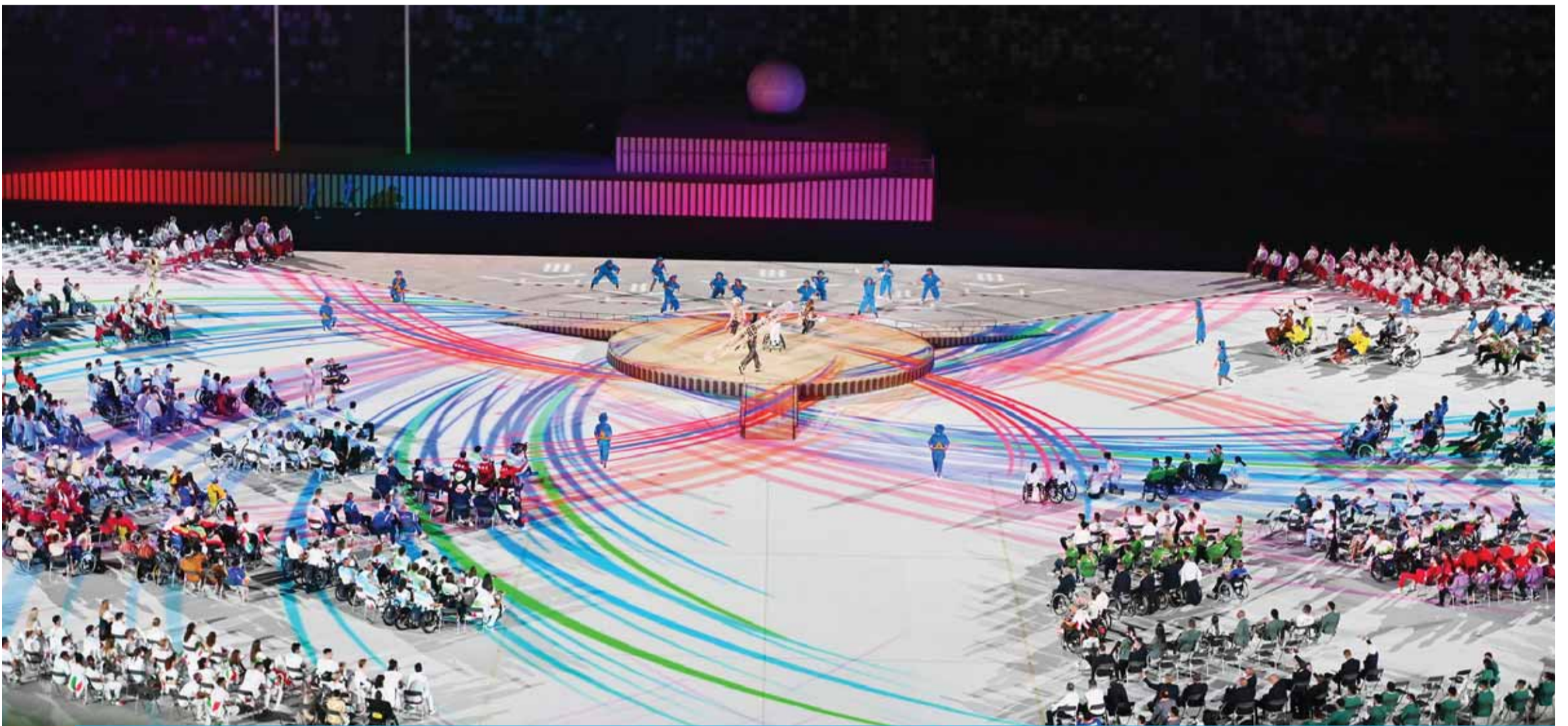
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Tokyo Paralympics open after year's virus delay Emperor inaugurates event in near empty stadium as per virus rules



TOKYO: Performers and delegations take part in the opening ceremony for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

TOKYO: Japan's emperor declared the Tokyo Paralympics open in a nearly empty stadium yesterday, with athletes ready to defy stereotypes and shatter records despite a year-long pandemic delay. Emperor Naruhito made the announcement surrounded by banks of vacant multicolored seats at Tokyo's 68,000-capacity Olympic Stadium, with virus rules banning spectators from almost all Games events.

"I declare open the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games," he said, wearing a

white surgical mask. The pared-down ceremony took place in front of around 800 VIPs and officials, but there was a celebratory mood as 162 teams enjoyed their long-awaited moment in the global spotlight. The ceremony took "We Have Wings" as its concept, creating a mini "airport" on the stadium field and telling the story of a one-winged plane that takes to the skies.

A reduced parade of roughly 3,400 Paralympians and team officials entered the stadium, wearing masks but waving and dancing after the disappointment of the postponement and worries about a potential cancellation.

A volunteer carried Afghanistan's flag into the stadium as a "sign of solidarity" with athletes from the country, which is one of 21 nations unable to compete at the Games. International Paralympic Committee president Andrew Parsons said the event could be a "platform for change."

"Many doubted this day would happen, many thought it impossible, but thanks to the efforts of many, the most transformative sports event on Earth is about to begin," he said, as a steady drizzle fell in the stadium. The 13-day Games, with 539 gold medals up for grabs across 22 sports, arrive two weeks after the close of an Olympics that also took place almost entirely behind closed doors over virus fears.

The mood seemed to shift once the Olympics got under way, with a majority saying they were glad it had gone ahead,

but the virus situation in Japan has worsened dramatically in recent weeks. The country has recorded more than 25,000 daily infections in the past week, and while the death toll remains comparatively small at around 15,500, just 40 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.

The opening ceremony came with Tokyo and 12 other regions under a virus state of emergency that largely limits the opening hours of bars and restaurants and bans them from selling alcohol. But several hundred people gathered outside the stadium before the ceremony started, hoping to taste the atmosphere despite being locked out.

"I know this is a difficult time, but the athletes came to Japan despite the risks," said 41-year-old Haruyo Yamamoto. "Since we're hosting the Games, I want them to perform at their best." A small handful of protesters also gathered outside the stadium, holding signs saying "No Paralympics" and shouting through megaphones.

'Blade Jumper'

On Tuesday afternoon, crowds gathered in parts of Tokyo to watch the Blue Impulse air display team fly over trailing smoke in the blue, red and green colors of the Paralympic symbol. But in a sign of the ongoing concerns, New Zealand's Paralympic team did not participate in the opening ceremony, though organizers said it was the only team to opt out.

Paralympic chiefs are hoping the mood



Andrew Parsons (front left), president of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), and Japan's Emperor Naruhito (center) wave as Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga (right) walks in at the start of the opening ceremony for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

will shift when the sporting action begins on Wednesday, with over 4,400 athletes itching to get started. Among those competing are German long-jumper Markus Rehm, dubbed the 'Blade Jumper', who is aiming to break the 8.62 meter world record he set himself in June.

Japan's wheelchair tennis legend Shingo Kunieda will be aiming to excite home fans, while United States wheelchair racer Tatyana McFadden is hoping to add to her collection of 17 Paralympic medals. China

is expected to continue its long-running Paralympic gold medal dominance, but host Japan will be hoping its record 254-strong team can repeat the country's Olympic gold rush.

Badminton and taekwondo will make their Paralympic debuts in Tokyo. The Games will also put the spotlight on Japan's record of disability inclusion, with activists saying more remains to be done despite some progress, especially in Tokyo, on accessibility. — AFP



539 gold medals up for grabs

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Will the Tokyo Paralympics bring change?

TOKYO: As the Paralympic Games begin, Japan's efforts to improve accessibility and inclusion are in the spotlight, with many arguing there is still plenty of work to do. Some 4,400 athletes with impairments will compete in Tokyo at the world's biggest parasports tournament.

It's a place for sporting history, but also an event organizers say can change attitudes towards people with disabilities. "It's a precious event," said Masaaki Suwa, a Japanese para-canoeist who missed the cut for the Tokyo Games but will be cheering for Japan's team on television.

"They are doing great things but they are not superhumans. I want people to know that they are human beings just like you," the 35-year-old told AFP. It's a bittersweet moment for Suwa, who had hoped to compete in his hometown, but he's counting on other Paralympians to make an impact on Japanese society.

"I hope (the Paralympics) will be a springboard that allows people to live more closely alongside disabled people," said Suwa, who uses a wheelchair. Disability rights experts and activists paint a mixed picture of the situation in Japan.

There has been progress on barrier-

free infrastructure, with officials calling accessibility important both for people with disabilities but also the country's large elderly population. A barrier-free enforcement law has been revised twice in recent years to promote accessibility at public facilities.

'Marginal' change

Particular efforts have been made in Tokyo's mammoth train system, with elevators operating at around 96 percent of stations as of 2019, the city government says. By 2019, 82 percent of Tokyo subway stations also had platform gates to keep visually impaired passengers and others safe — up from 56 percent in 2013.

New hotels with more than 50 rooms are also required to make at least one of every 100 barrier-free. "In terms of the number of barrier-free facilities, Japan appears advanced," said Miki Matheson, deputy chief of Japan's Paralympic delegation. But the three-time Paralympic gold medalist, who lives in Canada and is in Tokyo for the Games, says accessibility is not the same as inclusion. "I'm often treated as a disabled person when I'm back in Japan," said Matheson, who uses a wheel-

chair. "In Canada, I live without noticing my disability at all."

Activists say the workplace is an example of the barriers that remain. Under government rules, workers with disabilities must make up at least 2.3 percent of staff at all companies. Larger firms face fines for non-compliance.

In 2018, the government was forced to apologize for routinely overstating the number of disabled people on its staff to meet quotas. Motoaki Fujita, a sports sociology professor at Nihon Fukushi University and a parasports expert, says Japan has become more inclusive, "but the change is still marginal."

Some 57 percent of people surveyed by Fujita's team last year said they "certainly or somewhat" believe people with disabilities are weak and have difficulty living with non-disabled people. That's only slightly less than the 61 percent who felt the same in a 2014 poll.

Paralympic 'catalyst'

Tokyo's Paralympics will take place with almost no spectators because of virus rules, which some fear could blunt its impact on Japanese society. "The



TOKYO: This picture taken on Monday shows Japanese para-canoeist Masaaki Suwa commuting in a train station in Tokyo. — AFP

Paralympics is a very good chance to change people's thinking," said Shigeo Toda, head of a Tokyo-based research institute studying the lifestyles of people with disabilities.

"But we can't help but think that momentum could sag if people can't watch them in person," Toda said. Saki Takakuwa, a Paralympic runner who competes with a prosthetic blade, worries about the spectator ban's effect. "I know people will watch the Games on TV, but I wonder how they will respond," she told the Mainichi Shimbun daily.

"Compared to past Games, it's diffi-

cult for me to have hope that people will feel something", added the 29-year-old, who is contesting her third Paralympics. International Paralympic Committee President Andrew Parsons admits the spectator ban is "a challenge," but argues broadcasts will reach billions around the world.

"The Games themselves are a catalyst," he told AFP. "It's the moment when people see athletes in action, and that's when this change really occurs." In Japan, he added, there is "still a lot of progress to be made. But we believe that we have started to see a change." — AFP