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Kuwait gets 200,000 doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine

Minister inspects health measures at Kuwait airport



KUWAIT: Minister of State for Services Affairs Abdullah Marafi, accompanied by President of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Hmoud Al-Sabah, inspects health measures at Kuwait airport yesterday. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The health ministry announced yesterday that 200,000 doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine against COVID-19 will arrive at dawn today. In a press statement, Assistant Undersecretary for Drug and Food Control Affairs Dr Abdullah Al-Bader said the ministry authorized the vaccine for emergency use based on a decision by the joint technical committee of the pharmaceutical and herbal medicines registration and control department and the public health department for the evaluation and registration of vaccines.

The first batch will arrive at dawn today in order to ensure that the ministry does not delay its vaccination program after verifying quality reports, evaluating the data of the product and ensuring that the principles of good manufacturing are applied at the factories producing the vaccine - according to international standards - to ensure quality in all manufacturing stages,

Bader added.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine requires storage at a temperature between 2 to 8 degrees Celsius. The vaccine has been approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the UK Medicines and Health Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) for use in people aged 18 and above.

Meanwhile, Minister of State for Housing Affairs and Minister of State for Services Affairs Abdullah Marafi inspected at Kuwait International Airport the latest regulatory and health measures following the Cabinet's decision that airlines should conduct polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests on all passengers arriving to the country.

In a statement to KUNA yesterday, Marafi said the task of checking passengers arriving at Kuwait International Airport will be assigned to airlines to ease the burden on health teams from Kuwait's ministry of health, which have exerted great efforts since the start of

the COVID-19 pandemic. The airlines, in cooperation with the country's ground services companies and local laboratories, will conduct PCR examinations of travelers arriving to the country, he added, underlining the health ministry will only monitor and supervise these swabs.

During Marafi's tour, he commended the great efforts by the health ministry and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) during this phase, which played a vital and clear role to confront the COVID-19 pandemic in various fields and sectors. He appreciated the efforts of officials at the airport, including members of the interior ministry and customs, as well as all workers at the airport to serve passengers, facilitate arrival procedures and ensure utmost health security. All travelers and workers in the airport buildings should abide by health controls and guidelines issued by MoH or DGCA, he pointed out. — KUNA

Dubai announces alliance to speed vaccine delivery

DUBAI: Key transport hub Dubai yesterday announced an initiative to accelerate the delivery of coronavirus vaccines, particularly to developing nations, after the WHO warned against abandoning the world's poor. The Vaccine Logistics Alliance, which includes Dubai-based Emirates airline and global logistics giant DP World, is designed to "speed up distribution of COVID-19 vaccines around the world through the emirate".

The alliance will "support" the World Health Organization's Covax initiative to distribute two billion vaccine doses, the Dubai Media Office said in a statement, without specifying how many doses it would deliver. "The distribution will particularly focus on emerging markets, where populations have been hard-hit by the pandemic, and pharmaceutical transport and logistics are challenging," it said.

The United Arab Emirates, which includes Dubai and six other emirates, has administered vaccines to more than a quarter of its population, second only to Israel in the global race. The WHO has urged wealthy countries to avoid repeating past mistakes of hoarding medicines and vaccines, saying such behavior would only drag out the pandemic.

"We are all too aware of the challenges facing us globally in this pandemic and necessity to work together," the UAE's minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, said in a tweet. "Vaccine nationalism should not be tolerated in our common battle to defeat COVID," he said. Covax, the globally-pooled vaccine procurement and distribution effort, has struck agreements with manufacturers for two billion vaccine doses, and secured options on a billion more.

Dubai said the alliance will work with pharmaceutical manufacturers, forwarders, and government agencies to transport vaccines, some of which have to be kept at very cold temperatures. "Together, we are able to store a large volume of vaccine doses at a time and bring in and distribute vaccines to any point around the world within 48 hours," said Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al-Maktoum, Chairman of Dubai Airports and Emirates Airline. The UAE itself has suffered a spike in cases after the holiday period, after aggressively opening up to tourism. But it reported 2,948 new virus cases yesterday, the lowest number since Jan 11. — AFP

WHO team visits Wuhan market at heart of outbreak

WUHAN, China: A team of WHO experts investigating the origins of COVID-19 yesterday went to a market in Wuhan where one of the first reported clusters of infections emerged over a year ago, with one member tweeting the visit was "critical" to understanding the virus. Members of the group arrived at Huanan seafood market - which has been sealed since January last year - driving into its barricaded premises as guards quickly blocked others from entering, according to AFP journalists at the scene.

The mission, delayed by China and

weighed down by political baggage, has a remit to explore how the virus jumped from animal to human. But with the fieldwork element of the trip in its early stages, World Health Organization officials have already played down expectations of finding the source of a virus which has killed over two million people and devastated the global economy.

Yesterday, the WHO team visited Huanan market and another wholesale one, as part of a long-planned trip closely monitored by the Chinese

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Modi vows to pursue reforms after farmer riot

NEW DELHI: India will push on with sweeping agriculture reforms, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said yesterday, as he criticized last week's deadly riot in the capital following a long-running protest campaign by farmers. Thousands flooded New Delhi on Tuesday, driving tractors from border camps where they have been holding sit-ins since

Nov 26; but the rally turned into a rampage which left one person dead and hundreds of police injured.

Modi called the farmers' assault on a historic fort an "insult" to the national flag. His government has insisted that the agriculture sector needs to be modernized, but farmers fear the deregulation laws will place them at the mercy of big corporations that already dominate other industries.

In his first public comments on Tuesday's events, Modi stressed that the government remained "committed to modernizing agriculture". "The efforts of the government shall also continue in the future," the Indian leader said in his regular monthly radio address yesterday.

Continued on Page 2

Car bombs kill 11 in north Syria

AZAZ, Syria: Car bombs killed 11 people including six civilians in two separate incidents in Turkish-held northern Syria yesterday, a monitoring group said. The first attack near a cultural center in the town of Azaz killed six civilians including a young girl, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. An AFP reporter at the scene saw a mangled car ablaze, black smoke billowing into the sky. A man rushed away from the site of the blast, carrying what appeared to be a child wrapped in a bloodied cloth.

In the second incident, a car bomb targeted a checkpoint of pro-Ankara rebels near the town of Al-Bab, killing five fighters, the Observatory added. Areas of northern Syria held by Turkish forces and

Continued on Page 2



WUHAN: Members of a World Health Organization team, investigating the origins of the COVID-19 coronavirus, visit the closed Huanan Seafood wholesale market yesterday. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the media upon arriving for the budget session at the parliament yesterday. — AFP



AZAZ, Syria: Civilians carry young victims at the scene of an explosion in this town in the rebel-controlled northern countryside of Aleppo province yesterday. — AFP

Local

Amir receives Crown Prince, state officials

Sheikh Nawaf condoles with Saudi King on death of Prince Turki bin Nasser



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



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



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



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



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Deputy Premier and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Seif Palace yesterday. His Highness the Amir also received National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, and Deputy Premier and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received Ghanem, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Khaled, Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali and Saleh

at Seif Palace. His Highness Sheikh Mishal also received Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah.

In other news, His Highness the Amir yesterday expressed heartfelt condolences to Custodian of the two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud on Prince Turki bin Nasser bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud's demise. His Highness the Amir, in a cable to King Salman, prayed to Allah the Almighty to bestow blessing upon the deceased, and solace for the royal family. His Highness the Crown Prince and His Highness the Prime Minister sent similar cables. — KUNA



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets a number of Cabinet ministers.

Modi vows to pursue reforms...

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"On January 26, seeing the insult of our tricolor, the country was very sad," he added.

The demonstrators swarmed the 400-year-old World Heritage-listed Red Fort on Tuesday, raising religious and farm union flags, though they did not remove the national flag from the top of the monument. Modi's comments came as police arrested at least one journalist and filed complaints against others, stoking fears of a media crackdown over the reporting of the protests.

Mandeep Punia, who writes for the English-language Caravan magazine, was detained on Saturday at Singhu, one of the main protest

sites. He was photographed being taken to court yesterday, where he is expected to be charged on unknown offences, local media reported. Since Tuesday, at least five complaints have been registered against Indian journalists and an opposition Congress member of parliament on several allegations, including sedition and criminal conspiracy.

Global media watchdog the Committee to Protect Journalists called for Punia and another journalist who was reportedly also detained to be released immediately. "Indian authorities should allow journalists to do their work without interference," the CPJ tweeted late Saturday. On Saturday, police tightened security around the camps after cutting Internet connections in the local areas, as thousands more farmers arrived at the sites to join the protests. Farming has long been a political minefield, with nearly 70 percent of the 1.3-billion-strong population drawing their livelihood from agriculture. — AFP

avirus was passed on from cold-chain products into Wuhan, or more specifically, to the Huanan wet market... cannot be ruled out".

Chinese officials identified wild animals sold in the market as a likely source of the outbreak in initial stages of the pandemic, clamping down on the exotic animal trade in response. A price list issued by a merchant at the emporium, which circulated online, showed an array of exotic wildlife available including civets, snakes and even live wolf pups.

But, more recently, state media have thrown support behind suggestions that the virus may have originated elsewhere, with a resurgence of local infections blamed instead on imports. Chinese authorities have relentlessly pushed a positive narrative of heroism and decisive action in their fight against the coronavirus that has spurred an economic recovery and kept deaths down to 4,636.

On Saturday, the WHO experts' itinerary included a propaganda exhibition in Wuhan lauding the emergency response of the city's health authorities in the outbreak and the marshaling of the crisis by China's leader Xi Jinping. China has faced criticism at home and abroad for playing down the initial outbreak and concealing information when it first emerged in Wuhan in Dec 2019.

Details of the WHO team's itinerary have remained thin, with international media kept firmly at arm's length - the only glimpses of the trip have come through broadly positive tweets by some members of the expert team. China continues to take a firm line against a recent surge in infections, with 12 officials in northeastern Harbin city recently punished for dereliction of duty after a cluster of cases in a food processing company. — AFP

Republican Party future in balance as Trump trial looms

WASHINGTON: US Republicans yesterday braced for a battle over the future of their party after Donald Trump changed lawyers days before his impeachment trial in an apparent sign he is determined to maintain the 2020 election was fraudulent. Trump's Senate trial is due to start on Feb 9, but he parted ways with his legal team after they reportedly refused to focus their defense on his baseless claims of election fraud, rather than on constitutional issues.

The trial of the former president for alleged "incitement of insurrection" over the storming of the Capitol by his supporters has exposed a rift between Trump loyalists who dominate the Republican Party, and its moderate wing. "The Senate trial... is going to call all Republicans to take a position more clearly," Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson told ABC's "This Week".

"President Trump has helped build the party in the last four years: I hope he does not help to destroy the party in the coming four years," Hutchinson added: "We've got to have a regard for those people that supported Donald Trump... But at the same time, we don't want to gloss over the terrible actions that happened at the Capitol."

Trump looks increasingly likely to avoid conviction due to party support in the Senate - where all but five Republicans already backed an attempt to throw out

the case on constitutional grounds. But the trial is still sure to see battle lines drawn over who controls the party following Trump's first-term defeat. On Jan 6, Trump gave a fiery speech outside the White House exhorting his supporters to march on the US Capitol to overturn the election results. The protesters then violently stormed the Capitol building in scenes that shocked the world.

"The president's comments that day were partly responsible for what happened, for the horrible violence," Republican Senator Rob Portman told CNN's "State of the Union." "What he did was wrong and inexcusable. "I am a juror. I'm going to keep an open mind as we go through this (trial). But I do think that this constitutionality issue has to be addressed. We would be convicting a private citizen, someone who's out of office. That sets up a precedent."

Adam Kinzinger, one of 10 Republicans in the House of Representatives to vote for impeachment earlier this month, said Sunday that Trump was "desperate to continue to look like he's leading the party." "We need to quit being the party that even an iota defends an insurrection, a dead police officer and other dead Americans on the Capitol," Kinzinger told NBC's "Meet the Press".

Kinzinger has launched a new political action committee seeking to raise funds to challenge the Trump wing of the party. While signaling opposition to Trump's trial, Republican senators are instead fueling efforts to censure him over his role in the Capitol assault. But, while a conviction would lead to a simple-majority vote on whether to bar Trump from holding future public office, a censure resolution carries no such trigger. — AFP

WHO team visits Wuhan market...

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authorities. Team member Peter Daszak described the tours on Twitter as "very important site visits", adding that the team had "met with key staff at both markets and asked questions to help better understand the factors involved in the emergence of COVID".

Despite the fact that over a year has elapsed since the outbreak there, Daszak said speaking to staff and seeing the layout of the Huanan market was "very informative". The visits were "critical for our joint teams to understand the epidemiology of COVID as it started to spread at the end of 2019", he said in another tweet.

The experts did not take questions, and a member of the team shrugged and rolled up the car window when asked about his expectations for the visit. Security staff told reporters outside to leave and shook a tall ladder on which a photographer was sitting for a better view. Later, in response to a shouted question on whether the experts were satisfied with access, a member of the mission gave a thumbs-up.

Earlier this week, state media outlet Global Times published a report downplaying the importance of Huanan as an early epicenter of the virus, claiming "subsequent investigations" have suggested the market was not the source of the outbreak. Yesterday, the tabloid argued that "the possibility that the coron-

Kuwait gets 200,000 doses...

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COVID-19 pandemic in various fields and sec-

Car bombs kill 11 in north...

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their Syrian proxies are regularly rocked by such bombings. There is usually no claim for them, although Turkey routinely blames Kurdish fighters it accuses of being "terrorists" linked to its outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

tors. He appreciated the efforts of officials at the airport, including members of the interior ministry and customs, as well as all workers at the airport to serve passengers, facilitate arrival procedures and ensure utmost health security. All travelers and workers in the airport buildings should abide by health controls and guidelines issued by MoH or DGCA, he pointed out. — KUNA

On Saturday, explosives planted in another vehicle took the lives of eight civilians including four children in the city of Afrin, which Turkish forces and their proxies seized from Kurdish forces in 2018. Syria's war has killed more than 387,000 people and displaced millions since starting in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests.

It has since evolved into a complex conflict involving jihadists and foreign powers. Northern neighbor Turkey has seized control of several regions inside Syria in military campaigns against the Islamic State group and Kurdish fighters since 2016. — AFP

Local

Travel restrictions complicate situation of deportees in Kuwait

Inmates threaten to commit suicide due to prolonged incarceration

KUWAIT: The deportation center is experiencing unprecedented overcrowding due to unavailability of flights to take inmates back to their countries, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported yesterday. The number of those awaiting deportation is around 800 violators from five Asian and African countries. Some of them are in police station holding cells, the deportation prison, residency violators' holding cell, criminal detectives' holding cell and the Drugs Control General Department for nine months.

Security officials attribute this to the air travel ban to 35 countries, adding it has negatively affected the deportation of nationals of these countries due to exorbitant ticket prices. They said that most of the detainees are from Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Madagascar, including entire families with women and children. There are no direct or transit flights to deport them, so they are looking for flights with multiple stops, which require more money than they are able to pay. The interior ministry was able to obtain tickets for some of them through NGOs and charity societies.

Security sources also said they decided to sus-

pend security campaigns until further notice so as not to cause overcrowding and spread infectious diseases among the detainees. Meanwhile, informed sources said the interior ministry invited the Sri Lankan ambassador several times and arranged a meeting with inmates at the deportation center so

conveyed to their embassies, which are being held responsible for not accepting them.

Digital platform

In other news, Al-Anbaa Arabic daily yesterday quoted an informed source at Kuwait International Airport who said a unified health digital platform will be launched at the airport, most likely next week. He said preparations are being made to carry out PCR tests as per the Cabinet decision, which calls for taking swabs of all arriving passengers by private healthcare providers at T1, T3, T4 and T5, which are also expected to start working next week. The source said that work is ongoing to restart commercial operations at 30 percent capacity after deciding to reduce the number of arriving passengers.

Meanwhile, Kuwait Airways categorically denied social media reports about suspending flights to London and New York, adding that the current halt is due to the coronavirus pandemic and its effect on supply and demand, and in compliance with instructions by health authorities. It added the New York-London route has been suspended for years due to



commercial reasons, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported yesterday. Reports on social media claimed that Kuwait Airways cancelled its New York and London routes after Israeli passengers won a court ruling to force Kuwait Airways to accept them on its flights to London.

Exorbitant ticket prices delay release

he can convey their suffering to his country's officials. Many inmates, particularly Sri Lankans and Vietnamese, have threatened to commit suicide due to being held for a long time at the center. This was



Kuwait lists 635 new COVID cases

KUWAIT: Kuwait Health Ministry yesterday listed 635 new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases and no deaths registered during the past 24 hours, raising the caseload of contaminations with the virus to 165,257 while fatalities' overall count steadied at 959. The ministry had earlier announced that 527 patients recovered from the novel coronavirus during the same period, increasing total recoveries to 157,931. The ministry's spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said in a statement that number of people who are receiving treatment at intensive care units stood yesterday at 58, while the whole count of the confirmed infection cases that remained under medical care stood at 6,367. He pointed out that 8,994 swab tests were conducted in the same period, bringing the total of such examinations to 1,529,581. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Force announced launching its 'Shamel' comprehensive training program, which includes training courses in rescue, backup, emergency, and other fields.

Kuwait issues regulations for citizens' access to personal data

KUWAIT: Minister of Justice Dr Nawaf Al-Yassin yesterday announced issuance of executive regulations of the Law 12/2020, whereby affirming citizens' right to retrieve information and documents of personal concern. The decision will be effective in March, the minister said in a press statement, explaining that



Minister of Justice Dr Nawaf Al-Yassin

the law and regulations grant the right to nationals to have access to information, decisions and documents concerning their rights. A citizen applying for data collection should pay a KD5 for each document. Minister Yassin noted that the regulations boost transparency and integrity in government and administrative transactions. The law, minister Yassin, elaborated, is warranted by the UN from the member states. Moreover, it is stipulated in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) (2020). Furthermore, its enactment boosts Kuwait's international status with respect of indices concerning freedoms and combating corruption. The CPI is an index published annually by Berlin-based Transparency International since 1995 which ranks countries "by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, as determined by expert assessments and opinion surveys." —KUNA

In my view

A new role for translators

By Azzah Al-Ghamdi

In this article we will focus on the most important challenge facing anyone who falls sick while traveling abroad. If they are visiting a country where they do not speak the language and maybe also don't speak a common third language, like English, how can they communicate easily with doctors?

This is an opinion and not medical research. I suffered from such an experience. I got ill while abroad and could not explain to the doctors the reasons for the pain I suffered. The doctors could not speak Arabic or English and I could not speak their language.

This may sound silly, but in some circumstances such a situation could be life-threatening, especially for elderly patients who travel abroad. It is possible through x-rays and blood analyses for doctors to diagnose a sick patient, but these won't always be 100 percent accurate and may not reveal the true reasons or severity of an illness.

So what's the solution?

What if we encourage hospitals to hire translators? This would make the work of doctors and nurses in hospitals that deal with many foreign patients much easier. In every country, there are colleges of literature and languages with a ready supply of students studying other tongues. These colleges could be a source of translators for hospitals.

Some people may argue but the costs will be high and add to the budget of the hospital. But I say this is an important issue and we can't ignore it. We can ask governments to assign translators of major languages and they can conduct research to find out which languages are most common among the expatriate communities in their countries as well as among tourists. This will provide reliable healthcare for everyone - no matter their language background - when they need it.

- Al-Ghamdi is a law graduate from Kuwait International Law School

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Falcons attack a domestic guineafowl (pintades) and a turkey during a training session at the Mutla Ridge hilly desert terrain, about 60 kms north of Kuwait City, on Saturday. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

News in brief

NCCAL discusses joint GCC work

KUWAIT: The National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL) discussed the cultural programs plan and joint GCC cultural work, during a meeting of the General Cultural Committee of the GCC yesterday. The online meeting, chaired by Bahrain, discussed implementing a decision of GCC culture ministers related to the Gulf states' cultural strategy 2020-30, supervisor of NCCAL foreign cultural relations Mohammad bin Redha said. Bin Redha, also member of NCCAL's Cultural Committee, added that they also discussed Bahrain's suggestion on celebrating the international Islamic art day, as well as discussing the final statement of the 41st session of the GCC Supreme Council. —KUNA

Accreditation renewal

KUWAIT: The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) has recommended a five-year renewal of accreditation of Kuwait University's Faculty of Administrative Sciences, a scholar said yesterday. Dr Mohammad Zainal, Acting Dean of the Faculty, said in a statement the renewal would help maintain the Faculty as one of the world's best departments offering administrative science studies. He said a delegation from AACSB was scheduled to visit Kuwait in March 2020 to the accreditation assessment, but the pandemic forced cancellation of the visit. But the Faculty succeeded in providing virtual assessment for the AACSB including attending lectures online, he said. AACSB is an American professional organization that was founded in 1916 to provide accreditation to schools of business. —KUNA

Constitutional Court to examine pleas against election legality Feb 24

KUWAIT: The Constitutional Court yesterday decided to adjourn hearing in the cases of appealing legality of the parliamentary elections until February 24. The rules concern pleas that had been forwarded from the first and fourth constituencies. Moreover, the tribunal also decided to examine the case of challenging election of the parliament speaker; also on February 24. Furthermore, the court decided to adjourn cross examination into other constitutional pleadings concerning votes' tallies in the elections, held on December 5, until February 9.

The court in a hearing held on January 20 decided to delay cross examination into the electoral

pleas until today, pending detailed statements that must be presented by the Ministry of Interior, containing names of the candidates for the 2020 elections in the first constituency, in addition to the number of the electorate. It had also requested proportions of the eligible voters who had actually cast their ballots—as compared to the whole electorate, in addition to the number of votes garnered by each nominee, number of valid ballots, invalidated votes and names of the winners in the said constituency.

The tribunal had also decided to delay the hearing until February 1, pending filing a report by the MoI containing names of the nominees in the fifth constituency, number of the registered eligible voters, proportion of the voters who cast their ballots as compared to the whole count of the electorate, number of votes garnered by each candidate, count of the valid and invalid ballots. It had also asked for names of the winners in the said constituency and count of the whole ballots. The tribunal on January 10 set January 20 as the date for cross examining all the appeals in the five constituencies. —KUNA

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KUWAIT: A portrait by Mahmoud Al-Qattan, a renowned Kuwaiti artist, was presented to the Embassy of India on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's death anniversary. Floral tributes were paid to Gandhi by Indian Ambassador Sibi George and friends of India in Kuwait.



Britain opens visa scheme for millions of Hong Kongers

Macron gambles by saying 'non' to a third lockdown

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MOSCOW: Police detain a man during a rally in support of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Moscow yesterday. —AFP

Massive clampdown on Navalny protesters

US condemns Russia's 'harsh' tactics against protesters

MOSCOW: Police detained hundreds of people across Russia and blocked off the center of Moscow yesterday in a massive clampdown on protests demanding the release of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. From Vladivostok in the Far East to Saint Petersburg on the Baltic Sea, thousands of police in riot gear were deployed to prevent a second weekend of mass demonstrations over the arrest of President Vladimir Putin's most prominent opponent. Navalny was detained at a Moscow airport in mid-January after flying back to Russia from Germany where he was recovering from an August poisoning he blames on the Kremlin.

The 44-year-old anti-corruption campaigner is being held in a Moscow detention centre and facing years of potential jail time in several different criminal cases, despite calls from Western governments for his release. In moves not seen in years in Moscow, police locked down the center of the capital on Sunday, with hundreds lining the streets, central Metro stations closed and the movements of pedestrians restricted.

Protesters who had hoped to gather outside the headquarters of the FSB

security service were instead scattered to various parts of the city as organizers made last-minute changes in locations.

AFP journalists saw dozens of protesters detained and forced into police vans. It was unclear amid the chaos how many people were taking part.

'People are outraged'

Independent monitor OVD-Info said more than 1,500 people had so far been detained across the country, including more than 300 in Moscow. It reported more than 4,000 detentions during last weekend's protests. Hundreds were marching through the city centre chanting "Freedom!" and "Putin is a thief!" as they headed towards the Matrosskaya Tishina prison where Navalny was being held.

Police followed the protesters, breaking up the crowds and playing pre-recorded messages on loudspeakers warning that the gathering was illegal because of coronavirus restrictions.

"The people in power don't want to listen to anything or to anybody," 34-year-old vet Darya said at the Moscow rally. In the second city of Saint Petersburg police closed off the main thoroughfare Nevsky Prospekt, closed Metro stations and police cars were

parked all across the center, an AFP journalist reported.

"The whole center is cordoned off," said Natalya Grigoryeva, who came to the Saint Petersburg rally with her daughter. "And who is this all against, against their own people?" Earlier protesters had rallied in cities including the Pacific port of Vladivostok, where several dozen gathered in a central square despite police closing it off ahead of the rally.

Several thousand were also reported to have protested in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk despite temperatures dropping to -20 degrees Celsius (-4 degrees Fahrenheit).

This week several Navalny associates, including lawyer Lyubov Sobol and his brother Oleg, were placed under house arrest until late March pending charges for violating coronavirus restrictions by calling people to join protests. Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh was detained late Saturday also over violating virus measures, the same day she was due to walk free after a nine-day jail term for violating protest laws.

In a continued effort to clamp down on online platforms used to coordinate the rallies, Russia's media watchdog yesterday ordered social

networks to block posts with "false" information about the protests, including those "over-estimating" numbers of participants.

US condemns clampdown

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday condemned Russian authorities for their "harsh" response to protests across the country that called for the release of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

"The US condemns the persistent use of harsh tactics against peaceful protesters and journalists by Russian authorities for a second week straight," Blinken said on his official Twitter account. "We renew our call for Russia to release those detained for exercising their human rights," he added, after Russian police detained more than 1,000 people, including 142 in Moscow.

Authorities have ramped up pressure on the opposition with arrests and criminal probes, including several Navalny aides. A second weekend of protests began in several cities Sunday including Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Vladivostok in the Far East, where several dozen gathered in a central square despite police closing it off ahead of the rally. —AFP

Toilet brushes, blue pants: Symbol of Russia's protests

MOSCOW: Blue underwear and toilet brushes, snowball barrages and snow graffiti—Russia's protest movement in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny has seen demonstrators get creative. Here's a rundown of the unusual memes and symbols from recent anti-government rallies and what they mean.

Blue underwear

Since December Russian protesters have hung blue boxer shorts on street signs, posted pictures clad in just blue underwear and held them at protests to show how the country's best-known opposition figure claims he was poisoned. Navalny, who suffered an attack with the Novichok nerve agent in August, says agents from the Federal Security Service (FSB) placed the toxin in the lining of his blue underwear.

When President Vladimir Putin marked the Orthodox ritual celebrating the baptism of Jesus Christ this month by dunking himself in ice-cold water wearing blue swimming trunks, Navalny's allies joked that Putin was sporting his top opponent's undergarments.

Toilet brushes

After spending five months in Germany recovering from the poisoning, Navalny returned to Russia this month and was immediately detained. The 44-year-old anti-corruption campaigner called for mass rallies, spurring on the protests by releasing an investigation into a lavish property on Russia's Black Sea coast that he alleged is owned by Putin. The complex, which Navalny says cost more than \$1.35 billion, allegedly features everything from an underground ice rink to a casino. But what stuck out to the Russian opposition was the reported cost of a high-end toilet brush: 700 euros (\$619). Several protesters brought what appeared to be considerably cheaper versions to last weekend's rallies.

Snow tools

At the demonstrations in Moscow, protesters pelted riot police and even a car that reportedly belonged to the FSB with snowballs. They also wrote their demands, including "Free Navalny", on a snow-covered wall, which a police officer was filmed immediately wiping away. But the action at times grew violent, with protesters cracking a window of the reported FSB car and the TASS news agency reporting that snowball throwers damaged the driver's eyesight. —AFP

Palestinian killed in attempted West Bank knife attack

JERUSALEM: The Israeli army said it killed a Palestinian who carried out an attempted knife attack yesterday in the Gush Etzion area of the occupied West Bank. "A knife attack was reported at the Gush Etzion junction, south of Bethlehem," the army said in a statement. "The attacker was neutralized." The attacker "is dead", the army told AFP, confirming that the military had killed the assailant. The military later said the incident took place at a bus station, where soldiers were providing security to Israelis, with the suspect "running" at the forces while brandishing a stick with three knives fastened to it. —AFP

Israel says to send 5,000 vaccines to Palestinians

JERUSALEM: Israel's defense ministry said yesterday that it would send 5,000 coronavirus vaccine doses to the Palestinian Authority to inoculate medical personnel, following global calls for Israel to ensure Palestinians are vaccinated. "I confirm we are going to send 5,000 vaccines to medical teams in the Palestinian Authority," a spokesperson for Defense Minister Benny Gantz told AFP.

The Jewish state has launched an aggressive coronavirus vaccine campaign on Israeli territory, an effort widely regarded as the world's fastest per capita. More than three million of the country's nine million people have received the first of two required jabs of the Pfizer vaccine. —AFP



JERUSALEM: A Palestinian woman receives the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at the Clalit Health Services in the Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem. —AFP

Iran's Zarif calls for 'all-inclusive' Afghan government

TEHRAN: Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif yesterday called for the formation of an "all-inclusive" Afghan government during a meeting with a Taliban delegation in Tehran, the ministry said. A delegation from the movement headed by its co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar arrived in Iran on Tuesday to exchange "views on the peace process in Afghanistan" at the invitation of the ministry. The visit comes as peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban resumed in early January in the Qatari capital Doha, meant to end a conflict spanning two decades.

"Political decisions cannot be made in a vacuum," Zarif told the delegation, according to a ministry state-

ment. "The formation of an all-inclusive government must take place in a participatory process and by taking into account the fundamental structures, institutions and laws, such as the constitution," he added. He also welcomed the idea of forming an "all-inclusive government with the participation of all ethnic and political groups". Zarif expressed hope the Taliban would "focus efforts on an immediate end to the pains of Afghan people, so that the establishment of peace in Afghanistan would strip the outsiders of a pretext for occupation". Iran has previously called for the forces of its arch rival the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan, its eastern neighbor.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Friday urged the new US President Joe Biden to put pressure on the Taliban and not rush to withdraw more troops from Afghanistan. His appeal came days after the Biden administration said it intends to reconsider a February 2020 agreement between former president Donald Trump and the Taliban. The agreement includes the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by May

2021 in exchange for the Taliban halting attacks on US forces, sharply decreasing the level of violence in the country and advancing peace talks with the government in Kabul. The Afghan government blames the Taliban for the lack of progress in negotiations that started in September last year and resumed this month.

"Since January 6, our delegation is in Doha ready to start the talks based on the agendas. But the other side is busy travelling abroad," government negotiator Muhammad Rasul Talib told reporters in Doha. "The negotiation is not in a stalemate yet, but there is a pause and the reason for that is the Taliban," he added. "The Afghan delegation is calling on them to come back, we believe the current opportunity to solve the problems should not be wasted." Kabul is pushing for a permanent ceasefire and to protect governance arrangements in place since the ouster of the Taliban by a US-led invasion following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in New York. But violence has escalated across Afghanistan, with the Taliban refusing to make concessions. —AFP

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International

Macron gambles by saying 'non' to a third lockdown

Move keeps France on a different path to Britain and Germany

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron has gambled by not imposing a third national lockdown to contain COVID-19 — against expectations and the advice of his most senior scientific advisers. The 43-year-old leader opted to tighten existing restrictions on travel and shopping at a cabinet meeting on Friday after a week in which his government appeared to be preparing the public for new stay-at-home orders.

The move keeps France on a different path to its biggest neighbors Britain and Germany at a time when the more contagious UK variant of the disease is spreading rapidly across Europe.

"Everything suggests that a new wave could occur because of the variant, but perhaps we can avoid it thanks to the measures that we decided early and that the French people are respecting," Health Minister Olivier Veran told the *Journal du Dimanche* (JDD) newspaper yesterday. He said that, unlike in other countries, the number of new coronavirus cases had barely increased last week, while other indicators — such as traces of the virus detected in waste water — were also reassuring.

The French government put in place a strict nighttime curfew after a second lockdown ended in December, while deaths of around 250 a day are currently less than a quarter of the number in Britain or Germany.

Macron was reported to have been concerned about the impact of another lockdown on a country struggling with the mental health consequences of nearly a year of restrictions, as well as a deep recession. "Even when the path is narrow, you need to take it," the JDD reported Macron as telling ministers at the meeting on Friday.

"When you're French, you have everything you need to succeed providing you dare to try." Images of anti-lockdown riots in the Netherlands last week are also said to have weighed on his thinking.

But by going against the instincts of health minister Veran and others on his coronavirus scientific council, Macron is taking personal responsibility for a decision with potential to backfire. "Why Macron Said No" read the front-page headline of the JDD, making it clear who should be credited — or blamed — in the future.

Election campaign

Many experts, citing studies since the start of the



French President Emmanuel Macron arrives to welcome Transition Mali President for a working lunch at the Elysee presidential Palace on January 27, 2021 in Paris. — AFP

coronavirus pandemic, argue that early lockdowns are the most effective because they tend to be shorter and reduce the overall economic damage. "The situation is serious, but we think that we have the means to beat what's going to happen. It's worth a try," an unnamed presidential adviser told *Le Monde* newspaper. Another made clear to the same newspaper that another lockdown had not been ruled out, meaning a change in approach was possible.

"If, in the coming days, we witness an incredible increase in the epidemic, then we'll act," the adviser said. At stake, however, is the government's credibility and the clarity of its messaging, just 15 months from a presidential election in which Macron is expected to face off against resurgent far-right leader, Marine Le Pen. As he bids for a second term, the French leader's record on managing the coronavirus crisis — including the lockdowns, economic

support packages and the vaccination campaign — will come under fierce scrutiny.

A poll published yesterday in the JDD showed only 36 percent had confidence in the government's handling, while 64 percent did not. Using an expression first used during the tumultuous inter-war years of France's Third Republic, Le Pen has accused the government of acting "like a dead dog floating along in the water." "We have the feeling of being knocked around without ever anticipating, without ever looking ahead, without ever taking the decisions that allow us to avoid, when it's possible, lockdown number 1, number 2 or number 3," she said last week. But in arguing against lockdowns, it may be that both Macron and Le Pen are out of step with public opinion. A poll yesterday in the JDD, showed that 60 percent would be in favor of a lockdown, but most want schools and non-essential shops to stay open. — AFP

criminology specialists has been formed to identify the victims. Residents of the Guatemalan town of Comitancillo suspect at least a dozen of the victims are their relatives, according to authorities in the Central American country.

Authorities in Tamaulipas, who worked with the neighboring state of Nuevo Leon, established that 113 bullets were fired into a vehicle where the bodies were found. Tamaulipas, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, is the shortest route to the United States from Guatemala, but it is dangerous because of the presence of gangs that kidnap, extort, and murder migrants. The region is regularly the scene of clashes between the North West cartel, which controls part of Nuevo Leon, and the Gulf cartel, which has been present in Tamaulipas for decades. Mexico is experiencing a wave of violence linked to organized crime, especially drug cartels that vie for control of the routes to the US.

The rate of violence has grown steadily in the country since the end of 2006, when the government handed the anti-narcotics file to the army. More than 300,000 murders have taken place since that date, according to official figures. Mexico recorded 34,523 murders in 2020, down slightly from 2019, which was a record year since the government began tracking them in 1997. — AFP

Mexico identifies four of 19 bodies found near US border

CIUDAD VICTORIA, Mexico: Mexico has identified at least four of the 19 bodies found shot and burnt near the US border, prosecutors said Saturday. Two Guatemalans-believed to be migrants-and two Mexicans were identified by their DNA after authorities discovered the bodies on January 22, the prosecutor's office in the northern state of Tamaulipas said in a statement.

It said members of the Interior Ministry's national search commission had been added to the investigation for "greater transparency", in collaboration with the foreign ministry and the Guatemalan embassy in Mexico. "It was determined that 16 correspond to the male sex, one to the female sex, and two are pending clarification" due to the severity of the burning, the prosecutors said.

A team of forensics experts, dentists, geneticists and

Pentagon pauses plan to give COVID vaccine to Gitmo detainees

WASHINGTON: The Pentagon said Saturday it was putting on hold a plan to give COVID vaccines to terror detainees at Guantanamo, following an outcry as the United States struggles to deliver jobs to frontline workers and vulnerable elderly Americans. "No Guantanamo detainees have been vaccinated," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby tweeted. "We're pausing the plan to move forward, as we review force protection protocols. We remain committed to our obligations to keep our troops safe."

The Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba houses detainees in the US "war on terror," including top Al-Qaeda figure and alleged 9/11 attack planner Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. The Department of Defense told US media earlier in the week that it would offer vaccines to its detainees and prisoners, to be administered "on a voluntary basis."

Backlash came from Republican lawmakers including the party's top congressman, Kevin McCarthy.

"President Biden told us he would have a plan to defeat the virus on day 1. He just never told us that it would be to give the vaccine to terrorists before most Americans," he said on Twitter. Added New York congresswoman Elise Stefanik: "It is inexcusable and un-American that President Biden is choosing to prioritize vaccinations for convicted terrorists in Gitmo over vulnerable American seniors or veterans."

The United States has been the world's hardest-hit country by the coronavirus pandemic, in absolute terms, with 436,000 deaths and nearly 26 million cases. President Joe Biden has pledged to vaccinate 100 million Americans in his first 100 days in office, but so far the country's mass inoculation drive has been beset by stumbles, including a shortfall in vaccines and widespread technical difficulties for eligible Americans trying to make appointments. According to health officials, the US has so far administered just under 30 million of the nearly 50 million doses distributed in the country. — AFP

Biden talks the talk in first 10 days, but can he deliver?

WASHINGTON: Normal is the new extraordinary under President Joe Biden. "It's been a busy week," he said in the Oval Office. Biden was referring to the cascade of executive orders he has signed since taking power on January 20, overturning rules enacted by Donald Trump on everything from immigration to health care. But Biden's most dramatic achievement in 10 days has simply been to remind Americans of a White House where nothing unexpected happens.

- No Twitter rages. No branding journalists enemies of the people. No demonizing the opposition party.
- Daily, detailed, fact-filled, even dull briefings by experts on Covid-19, the economy and more.
- A president appealing for unity and appearing often in public—but always carefully stage managed and never for too long.
- A secretary of state, Antony Blinken, reassuring the world's diplomats that the United States they

News in brief

Germany threatens legal action

BERLIN: Germany's government yesterday threatened legal action against laboratories failing to deliver coronavirus vaccines to the European Union on schedule, amid tension over delays to deliveries from AstraZeneca. "If it turns out that companies have not respected their obligations, we will have to decide the legal consequences," Economy Minister Peter Altmaier told German daily *Die Welt*. "No company can favor another country over the EU after the fact," he added. There has been growing tension in recent weeks between European leaders and the British-Swedish pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca, which has fallen behind on promised deliveries of its COVID-19 vaccine. — AFP

Mexico tycoon Slim leaves hospital

MEXICO CITY: Mexican telecoms billionaire Carlos Slim, one of the world's richest men, has been discharged from hospital and is doing well after a bout with Covid-19, a source close to his family said Saturday. The 81-year-old tycoon "has been at home since January 28 and is in very good health," the source with the Slim family's Grupo Carso told AFP. On Monday Slim's son, Carlos Slim Domit, announced on Twitter that his father was being treated for Covid-19 and had only mild symptoms. "He's very well. He is making very good progress with Covid-19 after more than a week of minor symptoms," Slim Domit wrote at the time. — AFP

Caution on AstraZeneca jab for over 55s

ROME: Italy's medicines agency on Saturday approved the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine for all adults but recommended alternatives be given to people aged over 55. AIFA's decision comes a day after the European Union gave the green light for the jab, but Germany's vaccine commission recommended against using it on older people amid questions over its effectiveness that have been rejected by the company. "AIFA authorizes the AstraZeneca vaccine for the prevention of Covid-19 disease in individuals over the age of 18, as per European Medicines Agency guidance," it said. — AFP

Tunisians protest against 'police state'

TUNIS: Hundreds of young people took to the streets of the Tunisian capital on Saturday to protest against police repression and demand the release of demonstrators detained in recent days. The protesters marched from Tunis's central Human Rights Square to Habib Bourguiba Avenue, trying to make their way to the interior ministry, an AFP reporter said, but security forces blocked their path. Denouncing what they say is police repression and government corruption, some demonstrators held signs that read, "Police everywhere, justice nowhere". — AFP

thought was gone is back.

It adds up to major change. Yet none of it is remarkable. As late night show host Stephen Colbert quipped about the main difference between Biden's coronavirus plan and Trump's version: "There is one."

It's the virus, stupid

What will happen when Biden's slickly run messaging operation hits harsh reality? To misquote a famous line about the economy from Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, everything now boils down to "the virus, stupid."

COVID-19 is on track to kill half a million Americans. And data Thursday showing the sharpest economic contraction since 1946, with GDP shrinking 3.5 percent in 2020, illustrated the financial impact of all those shuttered restaurants, empty airliners and laid-off workers.

So Biden's presidency could hinge on what happens next. Get Americans vaccinated, then ride the economic revival and Biden could turn disaster into triumph. Fail and he may carry that to the end of his term. "The success of everything else really hinges on that," said Mark Carl Rom, who teaches politics at Georgetown University. With Biden predicting mass vaccinations by summer, Rom says the president will soon face a simple, visible test. Can ordinary people "go to the beach and not worry about getting sick and dying?" Rom asked. "That would be an enormous step." — AFP



An audio statement reportedly from Debretson Gebremichael, president of Tigray, was aired Saturday night via US-based Tigray Media House. — AFP

Ousted Tigray leader breaks long silence

ADDIS ABABA: A Tigrayan media outlet has released a recording of what it said is the ousted leader of Ethiopia's conflict-hit region, in which he issues a fresh call to arms in what would be his first public statement in nearly two months. AFP could not independently verify the authenticity of the audio statement from Debretson Gebremichael which aired Saturday night via US-based Tigray Media House. In November Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered military operations targeting leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the regional ruling party, a move he said came in response to TPLF-orchestrated attacks on federal army camps.

Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, declared victory in late November when federal forces took the Tigray capital Mekele, but Debretson, president of Tigray when the fighting started, has remained on the run. In the Tigray Media House recording of around 20 minutes, Debretson said he was speaking "from Tigrayan land" where "core resistance against invasion is taking place".

"I call upon you, wherever you are... to organize and fight and to strive to make all who have reached fighting age take up the fight, and through this to shorten the lifespan of the enemy," Debretson said.

TPLF leaders were not immediately available for comment, and it was not clear when the recording was made or from where Debretson was speaking. But Kjetil Tronvoll, an expert on the TPLF with deep contacts in the party, said he believed the recording was genuine.

"Though I have not spoken to [Debretson] personally, he has spoken to other contacts of mine in recent days," said Tronvoll, of Bjorknes University College in Norway. Thousands have died in the conflict in Tigray, according to the International Crisis Group, and tens of thousands of refugees have streamed across the border into Sudan. A Mekele-based regional caretaker administration claims life is returning to normal. Yet aid workers and some officials in Tigray have warned of a humanitarian disaster marked by widespread starvation. Media access remains tightly restricted, complicating efforts to confirm conditions on the ground. Abiy's government has dismissed the possibility of the TPLF regrouping to mount an insurgency within Tigray.

In the recording, Debretson acknowledged federal forces' "temporary military dominance" but said this was because of an alliance with outside forces including Eritrean soldiers—something the government denies despite abundant witness accounts to the contrary. Debretson also noted that some TPLF leaders "have paid and are continuing to pay the ultimate sacrifice." — AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Joe Biden spends the weekend at the White House Saturday in Washington, DC. Biden met with advisors for the next steps on COVID response measures and an economic relief package. — AFP

International

Britain opens visa scheme for millions of Hong Kongers

Website for visa applications goes online at 5pm in Hong Kong

HONG KONG: A new visa scheme offering millions of Hong Kongers a pathway to British citizenship went live yesterday as the city's former colonial master opens its doors to those wanting to escape China's crackdown on dissent. Anyone with a British National (Overseas) passport and their dependents can now apply online for a visa allowing them to live and work in the United Kingdom. After five years, they can apply for citizenship. The immigration scheme is a response to Beijing's decision last year to impose a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong to snuff out the huge and often violent democracy protests.

Britain has accused China of tearing up its promise ahead of Hong Kong's 1997 handover that the financial hub would maintain key liberties and autonomy for 50 years, and has argued it has a moral duty to protect its former subjects. "We have honored our profound ties of history and friendship with the people of Hong Kong, and we have stood up for freedom and autonomy," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said of the scheme this week.

The website for visa applications went online at 5pm in Hong Kong. China has reacted with fury to the visa offer, announcing that it would no longer recognize the passports as a legitimate travel or ID document. The move was largely symbolic as Hong Kongers tend to use their own passports or ID cards to leave the city. But Beijing said it was prepared to take "further measures", raising fears

authorities might try to stop Hong Kongers from leaving for Britain.

Yesterday, the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of China's State Council said it strongly condemned the British for violating its promise not to give BN(O) passport holders right of residence. "This is a flagrant offense of China's sovereignty, and we firmly oppose it," it said. The office claimed the UK was beautifying its colonial history and called this "a shameless logic of bandits", seriously hurting the feelings of the Chinese". In a commentary on Sunday, China's state-run Xinhua news agency accused Britain of having a "colonial mentality".

Applications soar

It is not clear how many Hong Kongers will take up the offer—especially as the coronavirus restricts international flights and mires much of the world, including Britain, in a painful economic malaise. But the visa offer is available to a huge number of people—about 70 percent of Hong Kong's 7.5 million population. Applications for BN(O) passports have skyrocketed more than 300 percent since the national security law was imposed last July, with 733,000 registered holders as of mid-January.

Britain predicts up to 154,000 Hong Kongers could arrive over the next year and as many as 322,000 over five years, bringing an estimated "net benefit" of up to £2.9 billion (\$4 billion). The BN(O)



HONG KONG: This file photo shows people queuing to apply for British National (Overseas) passport, or "BNO", outside Hong Kong's Immigration Department building in the Wanchai district of Hong Kong. — AFP

passport is a legacy of Hong Kong's return to authoritarian China. Many Hong Kongers at the time wanted Britain to grant them full citizenship but China was opposed to the move.

The BN(O) was a compromise, allowing Hong Kongers born before 1997 the right to stay in

Britain for six months at a time, but with no working or settling rights. Now it has become one of the few ways out for Hong Kongers hoping to start a new life overseas as authorities conduct mass arrests of democracy supporters and move to purge the city of dissent. —AFP

Vietnam re-elects party leader Trong after congress

HANOI, Vietnam: Vietnam's ruling Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong was re-elected yesterday—a victory that makes him the most powerful leader in decades—but his win was overshadowed by a serious coronavirus outbreak in the country. Trong, a 76-year-old pro-China conservative who is rumored to be in poor health, was given the nod after a week of closed-door talks at the twice-a-decade Communist Party congress. It will be his third term in office—a feat unprecedented in Vietnam's modern era.

"On yesterday morning, comrade Nguyen Phu Trong was elected the General Secretary of the 13th Communist Party Central Committee," the Vietnam News Agency reported. China's President Xi Jinping sent a message of congratulations to Trong, Chinese state media said yesterday. Another stint in the top job for Trong is seen as a boost for his high-profile anti-corruption campaign, officially dubbed a "blazing furnace", that has swept through the party, police and armed forces. "We can expect Trong to continue to push" his campaign, which

has claimed high-level party officials, including three Politburo members, said Carl Thayer, an emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales and an expert on Vietnam.

With graft widespread across all state sectors, Trong's anti-corruption drive has largely proved popular with the Vietnamese public and many party members. "We admired him for his determination and efforts to cleanse and purify the party," said Nguyen Tran Trung, a long-time Communist Party member. "Though not in good health, his presence in the leading position still scares bad cadres in the apparatus. He plays a major role in preserving the Communist Party," the 78-year-old state official told AFP.

But for opponents of the regime, the last five years have been marked by escalating repression, according to rights groups and analysts, who warned Trong is likely to push forward with the crackdown during his third stint in power. "We can expect a continuing crackdown on dissenting voices in the online social media," Thayer told AFP. Prisoners of conscience have



HANOI, Vietnam: This picture shows Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (second right) congratulating the new Communist Party general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (center) after his re-election during the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) 13th National Congress in Hanoi, as other nominated top party leaders Vuong Dinh Hue (right), Pham Minh Chinh (second left) and Vo Van Thuong (left) applaud. — AFP

doubled from 84 to 170 since the previous congress in 2016, according to Amnesty International, which says a large and growing proportion are jailed based on their expression online.

Trong, the first party general secretary to serve a third term since the "doi moi" era of economic reform began in 1986, has also served as president

since 2018. For the moment he remains so, but will step down later this year when the National Assembly appoints a replacement. This is expected to be Nguyen Xuan Phuc, currently prime minister, who has focused on the country's economic growth and integration, securing a number of international trade deals. —AFP

Pearl's family to challenge Pakistan murder acquittals

ISLAMABAD: The family of American journalist Daniel Pearl will challenge an order by Pakistan's top court to release a British-born militant acquitted of masterminding his kidnapping and brutal murder in 2002. The Supreme Court on Thursday upheld the acquittal of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and three other men last year, triggering outrage from the United States. Pearl was the South Asia bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal when he was abducted and beheaded by jihadists in Karachi in January 2002 while researching a story about Islamist militants.

"The Pearl family intends to file a review petition against the illegal and unjust majority decision," parents Ruth and Judea Pearl said in a statement that was tweeted by the murdered journalist's friend and former Wall Street Journal colleague Asra Nomani. They join both the federal government and Sindh provincial government—of which the city of

Karachi is the capital—in launching a plea for the latest verdict to be reviewed.

Lawyers for Pearl's family have argued that Sheikh played a crucial role in organizing the abduction and detention of the journalist before ordering his captors to kill him. Defense lawyers, however, say he was a scapegoat and sentenced on insufficient evidence. "It is beyond belief that Ahmad Omar Sheikh—who after 18 years of lies, had finally admitted in a handwritten letter to the court his role in the kidnapping for ransom of Daniel Pearl—has been given a clean slate and let loose once again upon the world to continue his international terrorist activities," Pearl's family said in the statement.

The four men—who have been detained under the emergency orders of Sindh government since their acquittal last year—still have multiple court challenges linked to their case. Sheikh, a British-born jihadist who once studied at the London School of Economics and had been involved in previous kidnappings of foreigners, was arrested days after Pearl's abduction. He was later sentenced to death.

US President Joe Biden's administration was "outraged by the Pakistani Supreme Court's decision", White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters last week. The new US Secretary of



KARACHI: Sheikh Aslam, brother of Sheikh Adil, one of the accused of murdering US journalist Daniel Pearl, gestures as he walks out from the central prison. —AFP

State, Antony J. Blinken, on Friday spoke with Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, pressing his "concern about the potential release of these prisoners", a spokesman for the US Department of State said. —AFP

New protests in France over security law

PARIS: Tens of thousands of protesters turned out in dozens of French cities Saturday against a security bill they say will restrict the filming and publicizing of images of police brutality, but also to protest the restrictions imposed against the coronavirus.

Those joining the demonstrations included activists from the "yellow vests" movement that gripped France for more than a year before the pandemic restricted large-scale protests. Others were there to stand up for the cultural sector, hit hard by the restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Also among the protesters were young people calling for the right to hold rave parties such as the one in Brittany that attracted 2,400 at the start of the year.

"I have two reasons for coming today—the comprehensive security law and also to support cul-

ture," said Kim, a 24-year-old civil service intern. "Lots of stores are open, the metro is packed, yet cultural sites are closed, even though we can apply protective measures" against the coronavirus, she said.

The demonstrators are protesting draft legislation that would ban filming police activities, which the ruling LREM party of President Emmanuel Macron has said it would rewrite. But people are also protesting the use of surveillance tools such as drones and pedestrian cameras. Footage of white police beating up a black music producer in his Paris studio on November 21 has fuelled anger over the legislation, condemned by many as signaling a swing to the right by Macron.

Numbers down

According to interior ministry figures, 32,077 people turned out to protest across France, significantly down on the 133,000 they said attended the largest protest against the measures, back in November—although organizers put the true turnout then at more than half a million people. Organizers put the fall in numbers down to the coronavirus restrictions, poor weather and the fact that this was

just the latest in a long series of such protests.

France has recorded 75,000 deaths from coronavirus since the outbreak began and the country is bracing for another possible lockdown. In Paris, the large Place de la Republique was half full, AFP journalists reported, while around 3,000 people gathered in Montpellier, southern France. At around 5 pm, an hour before the start of the overnight 6-6 curfew now in place as a measure against the coronavirus, clashes broke out between a group of around 50 youths and police.

After being pelted with projectiles, the police used water cannon to clear the square. The Paris prosecutors office said 26 people had been detained. Hundreds turned out for similar rallies in other cities. The government argues that the proposed law is needed because police officers have become the targets of attacks and calls for violence against them on social media. But French media say a "new national plan of law enforcement" is being used to limit media coverage of demonstrations. The proposed security law, which has already been approved by the National Assembly, is to be examined by the Senate, France's upper parliamentary chamber, in March. —AFP

News in brief

S Africa orders Pfizer vaccines

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa has secured 20 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, the health minister told a Sunday newspaper. Africa's worst virus-hit country has yet to begin vaccinating its population against COVID-19, stirring criticism over slow procurement and lack of strategy. A first shipment of AstraZeneca/Oxford jabs produced in India is due to arrive today, with injections expected to start two weeks later. Health Minister Zweli Mkhize told The Sunday Times that 20 million additional vaccines had been ordered from US drugmaker Pfizer. —AFP

Protesters disrupt vaccination site

LOS ANGELES: Protesters briefly disrupted a coronavirus vaccination distribution center at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, US media reported Saturday. Several dozen people carrying signs demanding the end of lockdowns and promoting anti-vaccination conspiracy theories gathered at the entrance to the site, one of the largest in the US, social media posts showed. "There appears to be only about 30 protestors total. It's not clear why they've shut off the whole facility," tweeted social media user Mikel Jollet. —AFP

One dead, 5 missing in Fiji

SUVA, Fiji: At least one person was dead and five were missing yesterday as Fiji was battered by a tropical cyclone for the second time in a month. Cyclone Ana, a Category Two storm, slammed into the South Pacific island nation with winds up to 140 kilometers an hour (87 mph) and heavy rain, causing widespread flooding. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) said a 49-year-old man drowned while four fishermen and a three-year-old boy were missing. More than 7,600 people, many of them rescued from flooded villages, were taking shelter in evacuation centers. —AFP

Trump lawyers leave team

WASHINGTON: Several of former US president Donald Trump's impeachment lawyers have left his team a little over a week before his trial, US media reported Saturday. CNN cited unnamed sources as saying that five lawyers—including two who were thought to be leading the team—had parted ways with the Republican billionaire after disagreeing over his legal strategy. Trump had wanted the lawyers to continue his baseless claims of mass election fraud rather than focus on the legality of convicting a president after he has left office, CNN said, adding that he was "not receptive" to discussion. —AFP

Congo oppn to boycott elections

BRAZZAVILLE, Congo: The Republic of Congo's main opposition party will boycott the March 21 elections in which President Denis Sassou Nguesso, in power for decades, is running for re-election. The 77-year-old has held office for a total of 36 years, making him one of the longest-serving leaders in the world and head of a deeply poor nation. The holding of the presidential election "must not divide us as it has done in the past", said Pascal Tsaty Mabiala, first secretary of the opposition group Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (UPADS). —AFP

Business

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2021

Biden, Democrats seek huge increase in US minimum wage

New measure to more than double federal minimum wage to \$15

NEW YORK: When President Joe Biden unveiled a \$1.9 trillion stimulus proposal earlier this month, few were surprised by the plan's hefty price tag or sweeping scope. More striking was Biden's inclusion of a measure to more than double the federal minimum wage to \$15.

The move, backed by leading Democrats including left-wing Senator Bernie Sanders, establishes the fight for higher wages as a top priority for the new administration, potentially leading to one of Washington's boldest adjustments in US social and labor policy in decades.

The fate of the initiative—which so far lacks support from Republicans—will help determine whether Biden delivers on a core pocketbook issue as US income inequality widens during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sanders, a former presidential candidate, called the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour a “starvation wage” as he unveiled the proposal for an increase in Congress. The senator said he hopes Republicans “will understand the severity of the crisis,” but added that Democrats should be prepared to enact the policy on a narrow party-line vote.

Such an increase would boost wages for more than 32 million US workers, according to the Economic Policy Institute, a progressive think tank. The Sanders bill proposes “a significant increase in the minimum wage,” Ben Zipperer, an economist at the institute, told AFP. “Unfortunately, we have quite a big hole to dig out of in terms of providing what low-income workers need.”

Popular support

The bill would put the United States on par with

a growing number of states and cities that have already enacted the hike at the urging of the “Fight for \$15” movement launched by fast-food workers in the early 2010s. “The bump up made it a little bit easier,” said Maggie Breshears, who works at grocery store and retailer Fred Meyer in Seattle and has gone from making about \$10 per hour in 2013 to \$17.59 after Seattle lifted its minimum wage in 2014.

The US minimum wage was first enacted in 1938 as part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal reforms. The measure has been periodically increased since then, most recently in 2007, when Congress lifted it gradually from \$5.15 to \$7.25 an hour, which would equal a \$15,000 annual salary.

Barack Obama was unable to win a boost during his eight-year presidency from 2009 to 2017. In 2019, the House of Representatives approved an increase, but the bill died in the Republican-led Senate.

Compromise ahead?

Supporters of an increase draw hope from rising public support apparent in 2020, when Florida voters backed a hike to \$15 per hour at the same time the state voted for Republican President Donald Trump, who ended up losing re-election. In Arkansas, another Republican state, 68 percent of voters in 2018 backed gradually increasing the wage to \$11 an hour.

“If we had left it to the legislature, it would have stayed at \$6.25,” where it was before the most recent federal increase, said Kristin Foster, an Arkansas political consultant who directed the 2018



WASHINGTON, DC: Service industry worker John Wenger speaks in support of today's introduction of the Raise the Wage Act, which includes a \$15 minimum wage for tipped workers and is also included in President Biden's American Rescue Plan at the National Mall in Washington, DC. —AFP

campaign. “The only way it was able to pass was through the ballot.”

Several large companies, including Amazon, Target and Starbucks, have set \$15 as their minimum wage for US workers. Others that once fought the measure have given ground. These include McDonald's, which said the discussion on the minimum wage represents an “important one that McDonald's looks to advance, not impede.”

Supporters of the wage increase welcome large companies' endorsements, but say it is too soon to know whether they will shift the politics of the issue.

The Business Roundtable, which represents the biggest US companies, said the Sanders bill was a starting point. “We agree that the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 is too low, and we are in favor of an increase at the federal level,” said a spokeswoman. —AFP (See Page 9)

China's factory activity slows on new COVID wave

BEIJING: Factory activity in China slowed slightly in January, official data showed yesterday, as the country rushed to stamp out a recent coronavirus wave in northern China. The purchasing managers' index (PMI), a key gauge of manufacturing activity, came in at 51.3 this month, as the world's second-largest economy tightened COVID-19 precautions ahead of the Lunar New Year.

The figure was slightly below December's reading of 51.9, although still above the 50-point mark separating growth from contraction. “Recently, local clusters of the epidemic emerged successively in many places across the country, and the production and operations of some enterprises were temporarily affected,” said National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) senior statistician Zhao Qinghe.

Zhao added that the period

around the Lunar New Year is traditionally an “off-peak season” for the manufacturing industry. The latest data indicated that the business climate remains weak for small firms, although domestic consumption picked up ahead of the festive period.

Export demand slowed after Christmas as the pandemic continued spreading worldwide, the NBS added. China's non-manufacturing PMI saw a larger drop to 52.4, from 55.7 last month, taking a bigger hit from the domestic virus resurgence.

Industries including accommodation and catering saw a “more significant” drop in activity, while the construction industry went into an off-season. The fall in the PMI reflects weakening growth momentum due to government measures to contain the new COVID-19 wave, including tightening social distancing rules, re-



A worker checking protective suits at a workshop of a company which produces medical protective equipment in Jishou, in central China's Hunan province. —AFP

imposing lockdowns and travel bans in some parts of China. Nomura's chief China economist Lu Ting said. “The inevitable, seasonal rise in population mobility and family gatherings in coming weeks, albeit likely much smaller than their pre-pandemic levels, may keep these COVID-19 prevention measures in place for a

longer time,” he added.

Accordingly, non-manufacturing activity could dip further in February, he said. But with migrant workers encouraged to stay in the cities where they work this year instead of returning home, manufacturing PMI might rebound slightly in the coming month, said Lu. —AFP

Britain to apply to join Asia-Pacific free trade bloc

LONDON: Britain will apply to join a massive 11-nation free-trade bloc of Asia-Pacific countries, it announced Saturday, weeks after leaving the European single market with its departure from the EU.

International Trade Secretary Liz Truss will formally request Monday for Britain to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a market representing half a billion people and roughly 13.5 percent of the global economy. The CPTPP application will come one year after Britain left the European Union following more than forty years of membership—and after five years of complex trade discussions.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the potential new partnership would “bring enormous economic benefits for the people of Britain”. “Applying to be the first new country to join the CPTPP demonstrates our ambition to do business on the best terms with our friends and partners all over the world and be an enthusiastic champion of global free trade,” he said.

Negotiations between the UK and the partnership—which represents 11 Pacific Rim nations including Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan, Mexico and Vietnam—are expected to start this year, the trade department said. But opposition Labour party shadow international trade secretary Emily Thornberry questioned the lack of transparency surrounding the pact.

After five years of debate over Brexit trade



Freight lorries and HGVs disembark from the Stena Line ferry 'Kerry', after arriving at the port of Rosslare Harbor in Rosslare, southeast Ireland. —AFP

agreements, she said people would question the British government's decision “to rush into joining another one on the other side of the world without any meaningful public consultation at all.” “At present, Liz Truss cannot even guarantee whether we would have the right to veto China's proposed accession if we join the bloc first,” she said.

'Enormous opportunities'

Truss said joining the CPTPP would offer “enormous opportunities”. She has touted joining as Britain made agreements with members such as Japan and Canada in the wake of Brexit, with British media reporting that CPTPP nations accounted for around eight percent of UK exports in 2019. Truss said the deal will mean lower tariffs for car manufacturers and whisky producers, as well as “delivering quality jobs and greater prosperity for people here at home”.

Karan Bilimoria, president of the UK's largest business lobby group the Confederation of British

Industry (CBI), said the move marked a “new chapter for our independent trade policy”.

“Membership of the bloc has the potential to deliver new opportunities for UK business across different sectors,” he said. The CPTPP was launched in 2019 to remove trade barriers among the 11 nations representing nearly 500 million consumers in the Asia-Pacific region in a bid to counter China's growing economic influence.

The partnership is an updated version of a giant deal originally backed by former US president Barack Obama. The United States pulled out of the agreement under Donald Trump's presidency—turning away from what he viewed as unfavorable multilateral deals—but 11 countries eventually agreed to sign the new version. Following Britain's definitive departure from the European Union after a one year transition period out of the European single market at the end of 2020, the UK has sought to advance the brand of “Global Britain” in 2021. —AFP

With Amazon billions, MacKenzie Scott shakes up philanthropy

WASHINGTON: Food banks, immigrant rights groups, and struggling colleges across the US discovered a surprise benefactor last year as billions of dollars flowed into organizations hurting during the pandemic from MacKenzie Scott, the ex-wife of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

Scott unlocked a staggering sum of nearly \$6 billion in charitable gifts last year, and unlike many other large donors did not attach any restrictions or even naming rights requirements.

The approach has shaken up the philanthropic world, not only with the size of her gifts, but without the limits and accounting requirements of many large foundations or donors. Laura MacDonald, board chair of the Giving USA Foundation, a nonprofit which conducts research on philanthropic giving, said Scott's approach is part of a movement of “trust-based philanthropy” which does away with some of the red tape imposed by many donors.

MacDonald said Scott's approach moved beyond the “Big Brother” approach of some donors and the venture capital mindset which permeates much of the business world. “Trust-based philanthropy has catapulted to the top of the list of taking points” in the philanthropic world as a result of Scott's initiative, MacDonald said. “This may embolden other donors to try something and take more risks.”

In December, Scott's latest funding round included 384 organizations ranging from Blackfeet Community College in Montana to the Arkansas Food Bank to the Immigrant Families Fund.

“This pandemic has been a wrecking ball in the lives of Americans already struggling,” Scott wrote in a blog post. “Economic losses and health outcomes alike have been worse for women, for people of color, and for people living in poverty. Meanwhile, it has substantially increased the wealth of billionaires.” —AFP



In this file photo, CEO of Amazon Jeff Bezos (left) and MacKenzie Bezos attend the 7th Annual Sean Penn & Friends HAITI RISING Gala benefiting J/P Haitian Relief Organization in Hollywood, California. —AFP

Business

Chemikuwait signs strategic agreement with Halliburton

Companies to manufacture specialty chemicals for oil and gas upstream industry

KUWAIT: Eng Alaa Hassan, CEO of Chemikuwait for Chemical Industries (CKCI), has expressed her satisfaction at announcing a major achievement by the company. A strategic agreement was signed with Halliburton Overseas Ltd, one of the major companies in oil and gas service sector.

This agreement signals a strategic relationship between the two companies to manufacture specialty chemicals that are essential in the oil and gas upstream industry. Using the latest Halliburton technologies, CKCI has already established the special units necessary to produce some of these chemical components and materials.

For its part, CKCI sees this welcomed relationship as a new important development for the advancement of the oil sector and general industries. Eng. Hassan



Eng Alaa Hassan



Eng Ahmad Dashti

believes that this agreement is a step in the right direction to building a successful industrial base for Kuwait. It will advance the local economy and help improve the

chances of diversifying the economy of Kuwait, as per the national plan.

This agreement between the two parties was developed in order to safeguard the availability of these materials throughout the process of manufacturing, and to mitigate difficulties that may arise because of shipping or any other problems. Eng Hassan believes that this association between Kuwaiti factories and international establishments can only lead to the mutual success of both parties, and the state of Kuwait in particular. Senior Executive Vice president of Chemikuwait for chemical Industries Eng Ahmad Dashti added that the decision to align with one of the major companies in the energy domain like Halliburton came in order to use the best technologies and materials available.

Eng Dashti noted that this comes from our duty in

the industrial sector to support the oil sector, as it forms the basis of the economy in the state of Kuwait, and permanence and continuity of the supply of these materials without interruption. This effort will lead to the enhancement and stability of the national products supply for businesses and projects being provided at the right time.

By reference to the vision of His Highness the Amir 'May God bless and protect him', and with His Highness's directions to continue to participate in economic development towards future prospects. Knowing the importance of this vision we are hoping to look to the future with all its hopes and aspirations. We at CKCI are keen to develop this special field of chemical industries and hope to grow and expand the interest of the country, industrial sector and oil sector alike.

KFH launches instant cross-border payments to KFH-Turkey

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has successfully launched instant cross-border payments service to at KFH-Turkey using Ripple's technology, the enterprise blockchain solution for global payments. This confirms KFH's ongoing keenness to adopt the latest financial technology while delivering superior customer's banking experience.

Group General Manager Retail Banking at KFH, Khaled Yousif Alshamlan said that that instant cross-border payments service comes to serve customers who want to perform instant transfers to Turkey for personal expenses or investments, indicating Instant Transfer to KFH-Turkey is presented to KFH customers with zero-fees and the service is available 24/7 in a secure and fast manner through KFHonline service on the website and the mobile App (IOS and Android).

"Financial institutions can send payments anywhere instantly, reliably and cost-effectively by joining Ripple's growing, global network RippleNet", he added in a statement, indicating the service improves and facilitates customers' cross-border payment methods through trusted global banks network, maximizing the role of blockchain instant payment in providing best service as per highest quality standards".

Alshamlan boasted that KFH was among the first Kuwaiti banks to join RippleNet, reiterating this move enhances customer experience and comes in line with KFH digital transformation strategy.

He pointed out that KFH succeeded in making significant strides with its digital transformation journey, drawing attention to its advanced and innovative financial services and products, indicating the bank successfully launched the digital service "opening bank



Khaled Alshamlan

account online" for new customers, citizens and residents within minutes without having to visit the branch.

Alshamlan listed some of the innovative financial solutions provided by KFH which are: The free of charge "SWIFT GPI" service to track local and international banking transfers electronically for individuals and corporate via KFHonline, Kuwait Clearing Company KCC dividend subscription, transfer to KFH Trade, Baiti online, deposit of cheques via mobile, Cardless cash withdrawal by (QR Code, Civil ID & Mobile Number), and a complete update of KYC request "Know your customer".

He also mentioned the digital services of opening a gold account with options of selling, buying and trading online, Skiplino to book appointments electronically in the banking branches, KFHpay electronic payment service through which the customer can pay through the KFHonline mobile application or via the K-Net page, Chatbot, Push Notification service, Instant Cheque Printing and receiving gold biscuits instantly through XTM's available at the smart branches; KFH Go, in addition to many other highly efficient digital services.

Alshamlan reiterated KFH's keenness on constantly innovating unique digital banking solutions, confirming the ongoing efforts in utilizing AI and teaming up with Fintech for the best interest of customers, while moving forward in its digital transformation strategy.

What happened where the minimum wage was raised to \$15?

There is no consensus regarding the effects, as shown in Seattle, which in 2014 became the first major US city to adopt a \$15 minimum wage. A 2018 study from the University of Washington said the policy reduced total payroll in low-income jobs, with wages rising by three percent but hours dropping by six to seven percent. But a 2017 study by the University of California, Berkeley found the policy increased wages in the food services industry with no employment loss.

Howard Wright, the chief executive of the Seattle Hospitality Group and the co-author of the 2014 measure, said he largely discounts the conflicting appraisals of the Seattle policy. "Our economy has been booming so strongly until COVID," said Wright. —AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: Service industry workers listen to remarks and hold up signs during a rally in support of today's introduction of the Raise the Wage Act, which includes a \$15 minimum wage for tipped workers and is also included in President Biden's American Rescue Plan at the National Mall. — AFP

What happens when the US increases its minimum wage?

NEW YORK: Progressive lawmakers this week formally launched an effort to hike the US minimum wage, introducing legislation to gradually raise it from \$7.25 to \$15 an hour. The proposed increase is much larger than those in the recent past, but supporters argue it is warranted because it has been more than a decade since the wage was lifted, and the current minimum wage is too little for life in the United States.

When did the United States get a minimum wage?

First enacted by Congress in 1938 as part of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the wage has been amended several times, most recently in 2007, when Congress voted to lift it gradually from \$5.15 to \$7.25 an hour. Since that time, several states and local governments have raised the minimum wage to \$15 an hour or to other levels both higher and lower.

Of the 50 states, 21 currently honor the federal level of \$7.25, while the remaining states have a higher minimum. Twenty-five states currently prohibit cities and counties from setting a higher local wage than the state level, according to Resourceful Compliance, which tracks labor law.

How would the proposed increase work?

Under legislation introduced by Democrats in the House and Senate, the minimum wage would rise to \$9.50 an hour three months after the law is enacted, and then to \$15 in four intervals over a five-year period. The proposal also raises base pay for waiters and other employees who rely on tips, and directs the US labor secretary to annually calculate the median hourly wage of all employees. In years where the median increases, the federal minimum wage would be raised by the same percentage.

Would it hurt the economy?

Economists have long debated whether the economic lift from boosting workers' purchasing power more than offsets the added wage burden on businesses. There is no consensus on the matter.

"There has been a debate for years," said Gregory Daco, Oxford Economics' chief US economist, noting that some studies have shown it can cause job losses, while others have not.

Even the same study can be interpreted differently. Critics of the higher wage point to a finding in a 2019 Congressional Budget Office report that said lifting the level to \$15 an hour would result in 1.3 million workers losing their jobs. But defenders of the measure noted that the same report said the proposal would lift 1.3 million people out of poverty and boost wages for as many as 27 million more workers, arguing these benefits more than counter the lost jobs.



WASHINGTON, DC: Founder and President of Patriotic Millionaires Erica Payne speaks in support of yesterday's introduction of the Raise the Wage Act, which includes a \$15 minimum wage for tipped workers and is also included in President Biden's American Rescue Plan at the National Mall. — AFP

Minimum wage: How it works in Japan, Germany, UK and France

PARIS: The minimum wage, which US President Joe Biden aims to raise to \$15 per hour in the United States, can take different forms in different countries. Here is how it works in Japan, Germany, Britain and France.

Regionalization in Japan

Japan has a range of different minimum wages. Each of the country's 47 prefectures sets its own, taking into account the results of annual national negotiations between representatives of employers, employees and the labor ministry. There are also specific minimum wages for certain sectors in each prefecture, such as the manufacture of auto parts. The minimum wages are higher in urbanized areas. The highest is in Tokyo at 1,013 yen (\$9.68, 7.98 euros) per hour. The lowest is 792 yen in rural areas such as the northern prefecture of Akita or Okinawa in the southeast.

According to the labor ministry, 1.9 percent of employees are paid the minimum wage or less (there are exceptions) in companies with at least five employees. The minimum wage was raised by just 1 yen at the start of the current fiscal year on April 1, the smallest hike in 16 years. The previous four years it was increased by more than 20 yen as governments tried to boost domestic consumption and, indirectly, chronically low inflation.

Germany: No increase in joblessness

Following intense debate, Germany introduced a national minimum wage on January 1, 2015. A special commission, the Mindestlohnkommission, made up of representatives of employers and trade unions and headed by an independent president, is responsible for reviewing it. At 9.50 euros (\$11.50) per hour before taxes, it is relatively low compared to other European countries, and the commission has recommended it be hiked gradually to 10.45 euros (\$12.70) by July 1, 2022.

Much of the debate about the introduction of the minimum wage focused on whether it would lead employers to cut jobs. A study published in January 2021 by the Research Institute for the Future of Work found that the minimum wage had not led to an increase in unemployment. It found that that small and medium-sized companies had actually transformed temporary jobs into permanent ones. The IW think-tank, which is close to employers, found last year that the minimum wage had little effect on the risk of falling into poverty (defined as income less than 60 percent of the median), mostly because most minimum wage workers have other sources of income, such as that of a partner. On the contrary, part-time work, which is common in Germany, was linked to a higher risk of poverty.

British minimum wage to rise despite crisis

In Britain, the minimum wage, or National Living Wage, was created in its current form in 2016. Any increases are decided by the government on the recommendation of the independent Low Pay Commission. The objective in creating the new system was to increase the minimum wage to the level of 60 percent of the median wage by 2020, a goal which has been achieved according to a government commission. The hourly minimum wage for employees over the age of 25 was hiked by 6.2 percent on April 1, 2020 to £8.72 (\$11.98, 9.86 euros). Depending on the employee's age, it can fall as low as £4.15 (\$5.69, 4.69 euros) for apprentices under 16. About two million Britons are expected to benefit from an increase in the minimum wage to £8.91 (\$12.21, 10.06 euros) coming into effect in April, and the age of people receiving it has been lowered from 25 to 23. While there is currently no pub-

lic debate on the minimum wage, there is much discussion about a minimum income for those on unemployment benefits or others with low incomes.

France, a different 'helping hand'

France's minimum wage, or Smic, celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2020. Since 2008 it has been recalculated automatically each year based on inflation and purchasing power. In January, it was increased by just under one percent to 10.25 euros (\$12.45) per hour before taxes.

Some 2.25 million workers, or 13 percent of the private-sector workforce, benefitted from a 1.2-percent increase in the Smic at the beginning of 2020. The proportion of people receiving the minimum wage is three times higher for those in part-time work or employed in small companies, compared to the average of nine percent for employees on full-time contracts. Every year, a number of trade unions call on the government to raise the minimum wage by a greater amount than the automatic increase in order to give a "helping hand" to low-income workers.—AFP

Electric cars, fewer cows in NZ's climate plan

WELLINGTON: New Zealand unveiled a blueprint yesterday to phase out petrol-powered cars while its dairy industry, a key pillar of the economy, must slash cow numbers under the ambitious plan to be carbon neutral by 2050.

The changes are among a raft of recommendations presented to the government by the Climate Change Commission on steps New Zealand must take to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address climate change. Commission chairman Rod Carr acknowledged the advice was ambitious but said it was realistic and made a clear case for "immediate and decisive" action. "As a country, we need transformational and lasting change to meet our targets," he said.

"There are a few actions that are critical to meeting our targets: electric vehicles, accelerated renewable energy generation, climate-friendly farming practices and more permanent forests, predominantly natives." Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said the document, which will now go out for public consultation, showed the impact of the reforms would not be an economic burden.

"The cost of action on the economy is not as great as many have previously thought. In fact, action on climate change is an economic opportunity for New Zealand," she said. "Action on climate change is critical to our ongoing economic success. New Zealand exporters rely on our clean, green brand and there will be new opportunities for Kiwi businesses as we adapt to a zero-carbon economy." The commission found New Zealand's current climate commitments were not compatible with global efforts to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, but said change was achievable at little cost.—AFP

Business

Kamco Invest hosts webinar on managing downside risk to achieve long-term goals

Investment managers rely on alternative asset classes, most notably hedge funds

KUWAIT: Kamco Invest, a regional non-banking independent financial powerhouse with one of the largest AUMs in the region, hosted a webinar discussing the management of downside risk to achieve long-term outperformance in capital markets. The webinar touched on some of the necessary actions to consider through the eyes of accomplished managers who possess a history of managing client portfolios with same objective in mind.

Faisal Al-Othman, Director of Third-Party Solutions at Kamco Invest, moderated the discussion with Cedric Kohler, Head of Advisory at Fundana, a Geneva-based independent boutique specialized in Alternative Investments, and Hedge Funds managing around \$1.3 billion. Cedric provided valuable insights on the benefits of managing portfolio drawdowns to achieve long-term performance objectives, achieving downside limitation with solid upside participation in a portfolio, how investors should position themselves for some of the key events anticipated in 2021, as well as the tools, strategies and exposure investors should look for or consider to achieve their investment objectives.

Al-Othman commenced by briefly highlighting the exceptional year financial markets witnessed in 2020 despite the challenging global economic environment triggered by the pandemic. The emergence of the novel coronavirus triggered the sharpest quarterly drop in global GDP and the highest unemployment rate since the Great

Depression. He emphasized that regardless of the circumstances, it is essential for money managers to constantly assess the landscape and develop innovative strategies to navigate such tumultuous markets in favor of each client's investment objectives.

Managing a portfolio's downside, while ensuring proper diversification to mitigate the violent shifts in market trajectories is always paramount to achieving positive results for clients. To achieve such objectives, money managers rely on their exposure to alternative asset classes, most notably hedge funds, to outperform during these violent shifts. Consequently, the mitigatory techniques implemented by asset managers aid in delivering risk adjusted returns in the long-term to clients irrespective of market conditions.

2020 reminded investors that protecting capital during market drawdowns is key to performing over time. Kohler emphasized that well-chosen long/short equity managers can structure an excellent defensive equity allocation when it comes to that. These managers can provide equity-like returns but with significantly reduced risk. The lower volatility of these investments enables investors to stay invested over the long run, a key requirement for generating top tier performance.

Kohler added that finding a long/short equity manager is a no-brainer but finding one who will generate outstanding performance over an investment cycle is much more complicated. In fact, the



difference between the outperformers and laggards - the return dispersion - is double that of their long-only peers. So even if a client selects two long/short equity managers, one could be up 20 percent while the other down 20 percent in the same year. Therefore, hedge fund manager selection requires experience, discipline, and the time to undertake deep-dive analysis, which are generally only possible with a dedicated specialist advisor.

The managers who navigated 2020 well, Kohler explained, will be in a very strong position to continue that success in 2021. The outperformers tend to know when to focus on fundamentals and when to focus on portfolio management. They know when to participate in the euphoria and when to have disdain for the irrationality. They are able to identify vantage points in market rotations such as growth vs value, by analyzing stocks through a

prism that combines COVID impact, secular trends (e.g. "Access Anywhere Anytime to All Things") and cyclical ones (e.g. higher interest rates due to inflation).

Al-Othman concluded by emphasizing that Kamco Invest aims to not only provide clients with access to global opportunities, but also offering valuable insights that can assist clients in making better informed investment decisions with regards to their portfolios. The Company will be hosting its next webinar in collaboration with M7 Group, a leading specialist in the pan-European, regional, and multi-tenanted real estate market, to provide Middle East investors with deep insights into opportunities and risks facing investors in the market. For every challenge lies an opportunity and Kamco Invest positions itself to guide its clients through the multitude of challenges ahead.

Al-Tijari announces winners of Al-Najma account campaign

KUWAIT: Commercial Bank of Kuwait conducted the weekly draws on Al Najma Account and Salary Transfer Campaign yesterday. The draws were conducted in the presence of Ministry of Commerce and Industry representative Ahmad Al-Basman.

The results of the draws were as follows:

1- Al-Najma weekly account - the prize of KD 5,000 went to the winner Diyaa Abdullah Al-Harere

2- Salary account campaign - the prize of up to KD 1,000 went to the winner Khaznah Khaled Al-Khalid

The bank stated that the salary campaign is aimed at customers who transfer their salaries of KD 500 or more to the Bank, especially Kuwaiti employees and residents working in the government, oil sectors and companies listed with the Bank as well as retirees, and take advantage of the benefits of this campaign and get an instant cash gift from KD 250 to KD 500 Kuwaiti Dinars or an interest-free loan of 5 times the salary and a maximum of KD 10,000, Kuwaiti pensioner, along with expatriate customers who transfer their debt amounting to KD 10,000 or above to the bank will receive an instant cash gift of 1 percent from their transferred debt.

The Bank stated that Al-Najma Account prizes are distinguished by the highest cash prize and diversity of prizes throughout the year clarifying that the account offers weekly prize of KD 5,000, monthly prize of KD 20,000 and a semi-annual prize of KD 500,000 in addition to the largest prize - linked bank account payout of KD 1,500,000.

Al-Najma Account can be opened by depositing KD 100, and customer should maintain a minimum amount of KD 500 to be eligible to enter all draws on Al-Najma Account prizes. As for the chances of winning, the more balance a customer maintains in Al-Najma Account, the more chances the account holder will get to win, the account also offers additional benefits like the ATM card, a credit card against customer's account and all CBK banking services that customer can enjoy.

The bank revealed that Al-Najma account is available to everyone, and anyone can open Al-Najma account through CBK mobile application in simple steps from anywhere and at any time.

KIPCO launches Generation Alpha in partnership with Eighty Percent and Al-Rai Group

KUWAIT: Kuwait Projects Holding Company launched Generation Alpha program in cooperation with Eighty Percent, a socially-driven sports management company. The program sponsors athletic champions between the ages of seven and 12, who have won international medals and championships, and it is considered to be a new initiative that KIPCO worked on within the framework of the group's social responsibility, in addition to the pillars that the group works on, such as education, developing youth, supporting and empowering women and health.

Generation Alpha was launched last October, after a work process that lasted nearly three consecutive months, which included photo sessions for fifteen young athletes under challenging conditions in light of the outbreak of (COVID-19), taking into account all necessary precautions and following health instructions.

These episodes were uploaded on "ALAAN" application launched by "KIPCO" last summer, which is a modern Kuwaiti digital platform, designed for the Kuwaiti community during the pandemic, when it became necessary to move to the digital and social media world. ALAAN application allows Kuwaitis and residents to play an important role in developing the community in various fields and interacting with different issues in the society.

Six episodes were filmed to be broadcasted in the first season of Generation Alpha on Al-Rai TV channel that showcase success stories of these heroes and their talents, through which they demonstrate their discipline, enthusiasm and energy by practicing various types of fun sports from horseback riding to gymnastics, which are considered a source of inspiration for those with a passion for sports at this age.

On this occasion, Abeer Al-Omar - Executive Director of Social Responsibility at Kuwait Projects Holding Group (KIPCO) - said about this joint coop-

eration: "This is KIPCO's first experience in supporting multiple sports for the young generation. We believe that investing in those energies and sports innovations at an early age would create golden opportunities to create a distinguished generation of champions in the future."

Al-Omar added: "The cooperation came with Eighty Percent, as it is a community-based institution that focuses on sports, especially women and youth sports." It is noteworthy that Rabaa Al-Hajri - General Manager of Eighty Percent, and Rawya Al-Hajri - CEO of Eighty Percent - are members of Munjiza platform launched by KIPCO in 2019, in cooperation with Burgan Bank, which is a prominent member of KIPCO. This project achieves the goals of Munjiza that creates partnerships between institutions and organizations of public benefit and non-profit companies with the private sector that sheds light on women's issues, as there are six female players in the first season of Generation Alpha."

Al-Omar also praised the strategic partnership of KIPCO with Al-Rai Media Group: "Al-Rai Group has been the media partner of KIPCO for six years, and the partnership continues as a successful model for partnerships between private sector institutions to contribute to the development of society."

Al-Omar concluded: "We are pleased to launch Generation Alpha in cooperation with private and civil local sectors, which reflects the company's principles in achieving social responsibility and creating partnerships for a better society. I also salute all parents who collaborated together to work on presenting this program in an honorable manner that carries the collective work of the society to raise the name of Kuwait."

Rabaa and Rawya Al-Hajri - co-founders of Eighty Percent Community, said: "One of the main goals of Eighty Percent is to empower society through sporting programs and events, and Generation Alpha is one of



Abeer Al-Omar



Rawya Al-Hajri

the most important programs that we have worked on, as it sheds light on athletes at young ages and provides them with an important platform to share their success stories and preparations to achieve their sports dreams with the community."

Ziyad Majzoub - General Manager of Sales and Marketing and Vice President of Al-Rai Media Group - stated that Al-Rai Group is always pleased to support the leading companies in Kuwait, especially KIPCO, in their efforts to serve the Kuwaiti community, and based on the social responsibility it bears towards its readers and viewers. He also declared that working with KIPCO is a distinguished strategic partnership that always aims to enrich the Kuwaiti society and benefit it with distinct and new content that keeps pace with its aspirations and orientations.

Majzoub noted that this cooperation is not the first between Al-Rai Media Group and KIPCO, as it was preceded by more than one cooperation, including, for example, the partnership that took place in 2017 in the "From Heart to Heart" campaign to raise awareness on heart disease, and the continuous cooperation on ALAAN application, where Al-Rai provides the news content in the "What is Happening?" section of the app. He also stated that the cooperation between the two institutions in Generation Alpha will not be the last and will be followed by more than one cooperation in various projects.

NBK extends validity of NBK Miles

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen to preserve the rights of its customers and to meet all their needs in an easy and convenient way, while keeping them safe under the prevailing exceptional circumstances. To this end, the bank has extended the validity of NBK Miles Points available for NBK Credit Cardholders expiring in January 2021 until June 2021.

This extension gives NBK Customers the opportunity to use NBK Miles at a later time to allow them get the utmost benefits when life returns back to normal. Customers earn NBK Miles Points when using the following NBK Credit Cards: Visa Infinite Credit Cards, World Elite Mastercard, NBK Miles World

Mastercard and Visa Signature.

On this occasion, Surajit Banerjee, Head of Credit Cards Product, National Bank of Kuwait said: "NBK is keen on the safety of its customers and is committed to preserve their rights and give them the utmost benefit from the reward programs provided to them, in view of the prevailing exceptional circumstances." Banerjee pointed out that the extension of the validity of NBK Miles Points comes as part of the bank's endeavors to provide the required support to customers by all means, so that they benefit from their points in an easy and convenient way once these exceptional circumstances come to an end. Banerjee noted that NBK Credit Cards give customers the opportunity to take part in the campaigns launched all year round. Customers also enjoy a unique lifestyle thanks to the many benefits offered by these cards to their holders, ensuring they enrich their banking experience at all times.

Customers earn NBK Miles Points every time they shop in stores or online, withdraw cash, or make any

other payment transaction inside or outside Kuwait as well as when using their cards while traveling. They can redeem their points online to book flights with 800 airlines, or an accommodation with 150,000 hotels or rent a car at leading car rentals from around the world. Customers can also exchange their points with any other airline rewards program participating in the NBK Miles Program.

NBK Credit Cards are the best and convenient method to make payments and give customers access to many benefits, especially when using their credit card for shopping, including the NBK Rewards Program, NBK Miles Program, NBK Secure Shopping, and warranty extension service.



Surajit Banerjee

NBK Money Markets Report

Fed holds key rate steady amid weak US economic data

KUWAIT: In its first monetary policy meeting of the year, the US Federal Reserve delivered a slightly dovish tone as it held its main interest rate close to zero and kept its asset purchases steady. The central bank described a waning in the recovery evident by weakness in economic data. In its statement, the FOMC said: "The pace of the recovery in economic activity and employment has moderated in recent months, with weakness concentrated in the sectors most adversely affected by the pandemic." The moderation in activity led Powell to state it is now "too early to focus on tapering dates" as the economy is still far from its inflation and employment goals.

Markets are expecting interest rates to be

stagnant near the 0 percent levels until 2023. If we took a look into the Fed Funds Futures it is pricing 0 hikes and/or cuts until January of next year. Nevertheless, economic recovery especially when it comes to the labor market and inflation targets will be main catalysts for changes in monetary policy, as Fed Chairman Powell keeps reiterating in his remarks.

The US dollar rose as a "short squeeze" led to an unwinding of risky positions as investors worry massive losses by hedge funds could force liquidation of other investments. The retreat in stocks and rise in US dollar saw the Dow Jones drop to a 3-month low while the S&P 500 index lost 2.24 percent of its value. Looking at Treasuries, the yield on the US 10-year note declined though remained above the 1 percent mark as its safe-haven appeal attracted investors after the growing concerns of retail-traders speculations in the equity market in certain stocks.

IMF report

The IMF released its updated projections for

real GDP growth last week. From the last release in October, there has been a substantial upward revision to the US GDP forecast with most of Europe downgraded. The US is now forecast to grow by 5.1 percent in 2021 with the \$900 billion fiscal stimulus package agreed in December explaining much of that revision. President Biden's latest package that is being negotiated in Congress (\$1.9 trillion) is not at all incorporated into the IMF projections implying a further substantial upward revision is possible. The IMF estimates that package if passed in full could add a further 1.25 percent to US GDP growth this year and 5.0 percent over the next three years.

The IMF does make some very crucial assumptions - one that is widely shared amongst market participants and one that is much more debatable. The first is that the vaccination roll-outs accelerate and importantly is quicker than any further developments of mutated variants that could cause the COVID crisis to worsen again. This is certainly what is currently priced into asset prices.

US GDP rebound

Despite increased restrictions and lockdowns and hence significant drop in economic activity, real GDP grew at a solid pace in the fourth quarter of 2020 in the United States. Real GDP rose 4.0 percent on quarterly annualized basis in Q4 2020, a touch below consensus expectations. The recovery still didn't make up for a bad first quarter and a historically awful second quarter. For 2020 as a whole, GDP decreased by 3.5 percent from the prior year. That was the worst decline since 1946. It was the first time US GDP declined since 2009, when it fell 2.5 percent during the financial crisis.

US consumer confidence

Consumer confidence in the US rose slightly in January to a reading of 89.3 from 87.1 in December. The gain reflects optimism following the release of vaccines as well as the \$900 billion in additional pandemic relief provided by the government. So far in the US, more than 25 million people have been infected with COVID-19 while about 6 percent have been vaccinated.

President Joe Biden has vowed to conclude 100 million doses during his first 100 days in office

Lagarde's speech

ECB president Christine Lagarde said last Monday that 2021 could be a year of recovery, but that would most likely be accompanied by a "very high level of uncertainty" before achieving the transition to a "new economy". In an online panel discussion for the World Economic Forum, Lagarde said that data from the fourth quarter of 2020 indicated that the "journey to recovery" in the Eurozone has been "somewhat delayed but not derailed" as a series of lockdown measures and restrictions have had to be rolled out despite the positive progress in vaccinations.

The euro showed no immediate reaction to the comments as it kept trading in a narrow range throughout the week from 1.2060 to 1.2180.

Kuwait

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Lisa Enroth, 41, an emergency nurse and film fan from Skovde, arrives to Hamneskar island, near Marstrand island, north west of Gothenburg, Sweden. — AFP photos



Swedish Sandra Fogel watches a movie alone among empty seats in a cinema hall during the Gothenburg Film Festival.



Passers-by walk in front of the entrance of the cinema Draken, where the Gothenburg Film Festival takes place.

Online Sundance opens to virtual ovation for deaf drama

The Sundance Film Festival, forced online this year by the pandemic, quietly opened to a virtual "standing ovation" for deaf family drama "CODA" Thursday. Taking its title from an acronym for child of deaf adult, "CODA" follows high-school teen Ruby (Emilia Jones) as she juggles her musical ambitions with her family's dependence on her to communicate with the "hearing" world. The first in-competition film to stream for remote attendees of the prestigious indie festival, it drew immediate rave reviews, with Variety calling it "tender, lively, funny, and beautifully stirring," and Deadline praising a "breakout performance" from Jones ("Locke & Key.")

"I would say it's the equivalent of a standing ovation," Sundance programming director Kim Yutani told the cast as she hosted an online Q&A immediately after its streaming premiere end-



In this file photo Emilia Jones attends Netflix's "Locke & Key" series premiere photo call at the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

ed. The unusual debut is a world away from the flashy, red-carpet screenings and after-parties Sundance typically holds each January high in the Utah mountains, where Hollywood migrates to watch and cut deals for the coming year's hottest indie titles.

Sundance organizers have this year invited industry types to "trade in your snow boots for slippers," and created networking events for filmmakers to mingle with audiences in "avatar" based chat rooms and virtual-reality cinemas. "We had a choice to make—we could cancel or move the festival," said director Tabitha Jackson, opening the festival Thursday. "Or we could take a risk

Bernie's Mitten Maker Finds Manufacturer To Fill Order Deluge

A Vermont schoolteacher whose homemade mittens went viral after Senator Bernie Sanders wore them at President Joe Biden's inauguration has found a manufacturer to fulfill the resulting thousands of orders for her cozy gloves. "I have amazing news! I'm partnering with Vermont Teddy Bear to make Bernie's Mittens for EVERYONE!!" Jennifer Ellis tweeted Saturday, adding that some of the proceeds would benefit the Make a Wish Vermont charity. "I knew there had to be a way to get them to you—and I found it!!" the second-grade teacher said.

The 42-year-old had sent Sanders a pair of her mittens, made from repurposed wool sweaters and lined with fleece made from recycled plastic bottles, after he lost to Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary, as a consolation gift. Last year, as Sanders was running again for president, Ellis learned that he was wearing the mittens—"people were calling them his oven mitts"—but had lent them to someone



Artist Jonas Never (@never1959) paints a mural of Senator Bernie Sanders in Culver City, California. — AFP

else. Ellis said she was so touched that she sent Sanders another 10 pairs.

The senator's homely brown and beige mittens featured prominently in a photo from the January 20 inauguration showing Sanders sitting alone in a folding chair, bundled up and seemingly unimpressed with the pomp and circumstance. The image by AFP photographer Brendan Smialowski became the first viral meme of the Biden era, with the apparently aloof Sanders superimposed on everything from "Star Wars" scenes to Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper." "Many, many of you have

SWEDISH FILM FESTIVAL OFFERS NURSE AN ISOLATED, ISLAND CINEMA FOR A WEEK

A front-line Swedish nurse is getting some COVID downtime with a week of private screenings of the Gothenburg film festival, in a former lighthouse off the country's west coast. More than 12,000 candidates from 45 countries applied to watch the festival's films in almost near isolation on an island 400 kilometers (250 miles) from Stockholm. The prize is a week viewing as many of the festival's 70 premieres as they like in a hotel in the former Pater Noster Lighthouse. But they will be in isolation and will have no access to their own computer or laptop.

The bright-red lighthouse, built on a tiny island off Sweden's west coast in 1868, is surrounded by a scattering of squat, red buildings originally built to house the lighthouse keeper's family. It can only be reached by boat or helicopter, depending on the weather. After a series of interviews and tests, festival organizers chose emergency nurse and film buff Lisa Enroth for the prize, in keeping with the 2021 festival's theme, Social Distances. Before boarding a small speedboat out to the island on the clear, chill winter's morning, Enroth said she had applied not only out of her love for the cinema, but also to seek respite from her hectic work as an emergency nurse during the pandemic. "It has been hectic, so it's a nice opportunity just to be able to land and to reflect over the year," she said.

Months working amid COVID crisis

Sweden, which has taken a light-touch approach to the pandemic compared to its neighbors, has been facing a stronger than expected second wave of the virus. So far, more than 11,500 people have died from COVID-19 across the country. Enroth works in the emergency ward of a hospital in Skovde in central Sweden. Since the start of the pandemic, her hospital's work caring for virus patients on top of their regular workload has been intense.

"We had a lot of COVID cases during this year and every patient that has

been admitted to the hospital has been passing through the emergency ward," she told journalists.

The organizers said they were surprised by the numbers of applicants for the prize but were confident they had chosen the right candidate—not only for her love of cinema. "She has also dedicated this past year in the frontline against the COVID-19 pandemic," the festival's creative director Jonas Holmberg said to AFP. "That's also one of the reasons we chose her".

Enroth will also have a tablet and headphones if she wants to watch films elsewhere on the island, which measures just 250 meters by 150 meters. With only one other person staying permanently on the island—a safety precaution—Enroth's only contact with the outside world will be through her video diary about the films she has viewed. The festival's films will be shown online and two venues in Gothenburg itself will allow screenings for just one person at a time. Holmberg, the festival's creative



Swedish Sandra Fogel awaits to watch a movie alone among empty seats in a cinema hall during the Gothenburg Film Festival.

Isolated screenings

Boarding the boat dressed in a thick survival suit, Enroth sped over the calm, icy waters, jumping off in the island's tiny harbor and disappearing into her lodgings. A screen has been set up in the lantern room at the top of the windswept island's lighthouse, offering a 360-degree view of the sea and coastline around. Another wide screen has been set up in one of the island's buildings.

Rebecca Hall explores biracial identity in personal debut 'Passing'

British actress Rebecca Hall on Saturday described how she drew on her own biracial identity to direct her first film "Passing", as it premiered at this year's online Sundance Film Festival. Adapted from Nella Larsen's seminal novel, the movie explores "racial passing," as two childhood friends of mixed racial heritage have a chance encounter in 1920s New York while both pretending to be white. "Vicky Cristina Barcelona" star Hall is the daughter of celebrated British director Sir Peter Hall and Detroit-born opera singer Maria Ewing, whose own father was Black.

"It was something in my family that was always known and not known—that my grandfather passed for white, and probably his parents were both African-American and passed for white also," said Hall. After several "evasive" conversations within the family about race, "I started to think about... how I present as this white-passing person, who has all of the privileges and am afforded that because of how I look," she added.

The movie is shot in black-and-white, which Hall said was a "conceptual choice to make a film about colorism... that drains the color out of it." It swaps the usual widescreen format for a tight 4:3 ratio, reflecting the repression both characters contended with from society and from within, as they try to find their place in the world. While Irene (Tessa Thompson) is embarrassed by her attempt to "pass," Clare (Ruth Negga) has disguised herself for years, with a wealthy and oblivious white husband but a yearning for her old community.

"I was so crushed by the psychological cost of feeling you have to make a decision to sever yourself from your community, and essentially from one's self, in order to survive," said Negga. "It's a paradox." The Hollywood Reporter praised Hall's "thoughtful, provocative and emotionally resonant" debut, while others criticized its slow pace, with the Guardian dubbing the film "elegant but inert."

'Grotesque ways'

Also tackling the motif of racial bias from a deeply personal perspective Saturday was the premiere of "Wild

director, said he hoped events like these would maintain interest in the industry at a time when many screens are closed because of pandemic restrictions. "We are longing so much to come back to the cinemas and in the meantime we have to be creative and do the things that we can to create discussion," he told journalists. — AFP

Indian." The film explores the violence and trauma that has stalked generations of Native Americans, through the tale of two young Ojibwe boys who murder a classmate and must confront the truth decades later. Directed by Lyle Mitchell Corbine Jr., who is Native American, the film depicts violence and alcoholism among its lead characters, but places those behaviors within the context of the childhood abuse and racism they also face.



In this file photo taken Rebecca Hall attends the final season premiere event for Showtime's "Homeland" at MoMA in New York City. — AFP

"For a long time Hollywood has portrayed us in grotesque ways," said Michael Greyeyes, one of the film's many indigenous stars. "I felt safe to reclaim that kind of portrayal... in our terms." Also starring are Kate Bosworth and Jesse Eisenberg, who said playing a "metaphor... of the upwardly mobile white guy" as glimpsed by Greyeyes' character was a "vital kind of education that Americans should have." Top US indie film festival Sundance, co-founded by Robert Redford, typically takes place each winter in the Utah mountains, where multi-million-dollar deals are struck for many of the year's most coveted arthouse titles.

Due to the pandemic, all of this year's 72 feature films are making their premieres via online streaming, with the festival ending Wednesday. On Saturday, Apple announced it had won an intense bidding war for global rights to this year's festival opener "CODA." The movie, about a high-school teen who is torn between pursuing a music career and staying home to support her deaf parents and brother, drew a rapturous response from critics at Thursday's premiere. It reportedly sold for a Sundance-record \$25 million. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



People inspect palm wicker products on display, made by Halima Mohamad.



Halima Mohamad sits making palm wicker products at a home in Tawergha.



A man inspects palm wicker products on display, made by Halima Mohamad.

PEACE IN TROUBLED LIBYA BRINGS BACK TRADITIONAL WEAVERS

In front of a bundle of palm fronds, Halima Mohamad squats down to weave in an abandoned school in Tawergha, a town once a flashpoint in Libya's decade-long war. Mohamad makes baskets from date palm leaves, using traditional skills handed down over the generations and reconnecting her to a way of life nearly destroyed by the chaos of conflict. "We must preserve this heritage inherited from our ancestors," said 55-year-old Mohamad. "It's our identity." The mother of two spends an average of 16 hours a day in the room that serves as her workshop, plaiting the fronds into baskets, trays, floor mats and wall decorations.

The town has suffered; when Libyan dictator Moamer Kadhafi was toppled in 2011 in a NATO-backed uprising, people took revenge on those seen as his supporters—including the entire town of Tawergha. Its 40,000 residents, many the descendants of slaves, were forced to flee, with militia forces torching homes and destroying buildings.

Scars of war

Residents like Mohamad ran for their



A man and boy pose for a picture next to palm wicker products on display, made by Halima Mohamad.

lives—barely surviving for seven years in hard-scrabble dusty camps scattered across the country, and forbidden to return home. The oil-rich North African nation has been riven by civil war ever

since the fall of Kadhafi, but rival sides finally agreed a fragile ceasefire last October. Under a separate deal struck in June 2018 with the backing of the UN-recognized Government of National

Accord (GNA), residents of Tawergha began to slowly come back. Around a third of the original population of the town have returned, though the scars of war remain, with houses riddled with bullet holes and craters left by artillery fire.

For some, the town's ancient tradition of weaving offers a way to earn an income—as well as resuming a way of life that the war had stopped. For Mohamad, her primary motivation is money. "I work long hours because the income is decent," she said. As she sits knotting the long thin leaves together, the fresh scent brings back memories of her childhood.

Keeping traditions alive

She follows the repetitive handwork in moves learnt from her elders, and colors the strands with three traditional dyes—blue, green and purple—to add splashes of design. "We use special dyes," she said. "We fill large barrels in which we boil the palm leaves until they soak up the colors." As her fingers twist and tie the thin stems, she explained how her relatives had taught her to

select supple strands and to then "dry them in the sun for several days."

Then the leaves are "soaked in water to soften them" before the weaving work can even begin, she added. "My father and my sisters have been working in basketry for almost 50 years, and I started doing it 20 years ago," she said. A workshop run by a local group and supported by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) brought in experts to help perfect the weaving techniques. There is no shortage of raw material, with thousands of date trees dotted all around.

"In the past there was a famous Monday market, where artisans traded handicrafts, crockery and woven textiles," said Faraj Abdallah, head of a handicrafts association in Tawergha. But the weavers still struggle, competing against modern goods and cheaper imports from neighboring Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, while weavers say there is no export strategy. "The authorities must allow exports to allow this craft to prosper," said Mahmud Khairi, owner of a basket shop in Tawergha. — AFP



Scottish electronic pop producer Sophie.

GRAMMY-NOMINATED SCOTTISH POP PRODUCER SOPHIE DIES AGED 34

Scottish electronic pop producer Sophie has died at the age of 34 in a "terrible accident", the artist's record label said in a statement on Saturday. The Glasgow-born producer was nominated for a Grammy for her debut studio album in 2019 and collaborated with Madonna and the British singer Charli XCX. "Tragically our beautiful Sophie passed away this morning after a terrible accident," the statement from UK music label Transgressive read. "True to her spirituality she had climbed up to watch the full moon and accidentally slipped and fell.

"She will always be here with us. The family thank everyone for their love and support and request privacy at this devastating time," the statement on Twitter added. The producer, also known as Sophie Xeon, released her debut single, Nothing More to Say in 2013. Her debut Album Oil of Every Pearly's Un-Insides, released in 2018, was met with widespread critical success and nominated for a Grammy for best dance/electronic album. The transgender artist spoke about gender identity in a 2018 interview with the US magazine Paper. "For me, transness is taking control to bring your body more in line with your soul and spirit so the two aren't fighting against each other and struggling to survive," she said. Sophie co-wrote Madonna's 2015 single B*ch I'm Madonna and worked Charli XCX on the EP Vroom Vroom and the single After The Afterparty. The French singer and songwriter Christine and the Queens paid tribute to the Sophie on Twitter calling her a "visionary". "She rebelled against the narrow, normative society by being an absolute triumph, both as an artist and as a woman," the singer said. "I can't believe she is gone. We need to honor and respect her memory and legacy. Cherish the pioneers." — AFP

The Animals guitarist Hilton Valentine dies at 77

Hilton Valentine, a founding member and original guitarist for the British 60s pop group The Animals, has died at the age of 77, the band's record label said. "Our deepest sympathies go out to @HiltonValentine's family and friends on his passing ... at the age of 77," the label ABKCO Music, posted on Twitter. "Valentine was a pioneering guitar player influencing the sound of rock and roll for decades to come," it added in a statement Friday.

The band was best known for its 1964 hit House of the Rising Sun, which rose to the top of the charts in both Britain and the United States. Born in

North Shields, northeast England, Valentine formed The Animals with singer Eric Burdon, bass player Chas Chandler, organist Alan Price and drummer John Steel in 1963. The band went on to have a number of other hits including Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood and We Gotta Get Out Of This Place.

The original members drifted apart towards the end of the 1960s and Valentine later produced the solo album All In Your Head. Burdon paid tribute to the guitarist who wrote the the iconic opening riff of House of the Rising Sun. "The opening opus of Rising Sun will never sound the same," Burdon wrote on Instagram. "You didn't just play it, you lived it! Heartbroken by the sudden news of Hilton's passing. "We had great times together, Georgie lad. From the North Shields to the entire world...Rock In Peace." — AFP



Hilton Valentine

An Art Nouveau gem unmasked in COVID-hit Brussels

An emblematic Art Nouveau mansion designed by Belgian architect Victor Horta has opened its doors to the public in Brussels, revealing a long hidden jewel of the city's Belle Epoque glory. "It is perhaps even more important in the time of COVID to be able to spend a relaxing moment in the midst of this complete beauty," said Pascal Smet, heritage minister for the Brussels Region. Smet acted as a guide for a handful of journalists around the Hotel Solvay, a three-storey mansion with a majestic staircase where natural light shines through a multi-coloured stained glass window.

The mansion was built between 1895 and 1903 on the once glitzy Avenue Louise for the son of Belgian industrialist Ernest Solvay, and its architecture is

impressively preserved. Horta paid attention in his work to the whole interior, from the design of the building's exposed structure, to the living room furniture, right down to the door handles. "It gives the feeling of the perfect building, everything has been thought out, down to the smallest detail," said Smet, gazing at a decor of yellow, orange and beige, where the armchairs match the woodwork.

UNESCO included the Hotel Solvay on its World Heritage List in the early 2000s. According to the UN agency, it is "the most ambitious and spectacular

work by Horta to have come down to us from the Art Nouveau period". At the end of the 19th century, the style revolutionized architecture with its aesthetic of curves applied to glass and steel, materials that were new at the time. The private mansion went on to have an eventful history after the death of its first owner in 1930. Damaged by a German bomb during World War II—the main stained glass window had to be rebuilt—it was saved from a wrecking ball at the end of the 1950s, when a couple, running a fashion house, decided to make it their workshop.



The show, with its outlandish costumes and racy sex scenes, has been lauded for casting Black actors in period drama roles that are traditionally played by white actors.

Bridgerton sets new Netflix record with 82 million viewers

Bridgerton has become Netflix's most popular new series, with more than 82 million households tuning in to watch the period drama, the streaming service has announced. The show reached number one in 83 countries including the United States, Britain, Brazil, France, India and South Africa, Netflix said in a statement Wednesday. "I'm SO proud of the incredible team behind this show! And thank you guys for loving it," 25-year-old actor, Phoebe Dynevor, who plays Daphne Bridgerton, wrote on Instagram. Netflix said a record 82 million households watched the show in its first 28 days online, describing it as its "biggest series ever."

The previous record was 76 million views over a four-week period for "The Witcher." The figures are not subject to third party verification, unlike audience measurements for broadcast television. Bridgerton has made the top 10 in every country except Japan, the company added. The drama, set in early 1800s London, centers on the well-to-do Bridgerton family as it tries to navigate Regency-era high society in England.



"It's designed to be more lavish, sexier and funnier than the standard period drama—and that's what so surprised and delighted our members," said Netflix vice president of original series, Jinny Howe. Bridgerton is produced by acclaimed American producer Shonda Rhimes and is based on a series of romance novels by Julia Quinn. It has been commissioned for a second series. — AFP

Saved from demolition

At the time, real-estate developers had free rein in Brussels and the Avenue Louise was engulfed by large office buildings. Even the most awe-inspiring Art Nouveau edifices were threatened by developers, according to the current owner, Alexandre Wittamer, grandson of the fashion house couple. "It's hard to imagine, but in the 1950s and 1960s in Brussels everything was allowed, and it happened that Art Nouveau buildings were demolished, whether they were by Horta or other architects," said the 43-year-old finance executive, who now organizes visits with the help of his wife.

For the time being, the architectural gem will only be accessible on Thursdays and Saturdays, provided that a time slot has been reserved in advance online. That rule applies to all Belgian museums, which have remained open despite the pandemic unlike in Paris or London. Since the 1980s, after the end of the fashion business, the mansion had been used for private events and was only visited on rare occasions and city heritage days. — AFP

The Hotel Solvay, an Art Nouveau gem in Brussels, is now open for public visits.

Sports

Marseille match postponed after 'savage' fans attack training ground

Angry supporters demonstrate against team's leadership, poor results

MARSEILLE: Marseille hit out at a "frenzy of violence" as their game against Rennes in France's Ligue 1 on Saturday was postponed after hundreds of angry supporters broke into the club's training ground and caused widespread damage in a protest.

The hardcore Ultras, who were demonstrating against the club leadership and the team's poor recent run of results, assembled in the afternoon in front of Marseille's La Commanderie training ground, throwing smoke bombs and firecrackers.

"Several hundred Ultras used force and violence to get into the training ground, including the first team's building," the club said in a statement. "A frenzy of unjustifiable violence put the lives of those present in danger. Thefts were committed and vehicles damaged. Five trees were burnt down...several hundred thousand euros worth of damage was caused."

Local police in France's Bouches-du-Rhone department earlier said 25 arrests were made and seven police officers were injured after "300 OM supporters violently attacked police officers present to secure La Commanderie". Sports daily L'Equipe reported that Marseille's Spanish defender Alvaro Gonzalez was struck on the back by a projectile as he went to confront the supporters.

"We are all astonished: staff, coaching staff and players. We were not expecting a savage horde to turn up and destroy everything," Marseille president Jacques-Henri Eyraud told Canal Plus. "I think we avoided an even worse situation. It could

have been a tragedy. Everyone is shocked, players and staff. These are not real supporters, they are hooligans, delinquents, people who have no respect for anything."

The French league reacted to the incidents by postponing Marseille's home game against Rennes, that was scheduled for Saturday evening, "to a later date", even though it was due to go ahead behind closed doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marseille were second in Ligue 1 when last season ended early because of the pandemic. However, they have lost their last three league matches and have slid 14 points behind leaders Lyon, albeit with two games in hand.

A 2-1 win for Lens at Montpellier on Saturday saw Marseille slip to seventh place. They have won just one of their last nine games in all competitions and are due to visit Lens in midweek before hosting fierce enemies Paris Saint-Germain next weekend.

On Friday coach Andre Villas-Boas admitted he expected to leave at the end of the season. "The place needs a clear-out... I'm responsible for the results and right now they're awful," the Portuguese former Porto, Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur coach said.

For several weeks supporters have organized protests before home matches, which are all being played behind closed doors. On Saturday an increased number of banners attacking club leadership, including Eyraud, were hung around the city on motorway bridges, roundabouts and even the Corniche overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.



MARSEILLE: A security agent walks at the entrance of Olympique de Marseille's Robert-Louis-Dreyfus training centre (formerly known as La Commanderie) in Marseille, southeastern France yesterday, the morning after angry fans broke in. —AFP

"Follow AVB, get out of here", "Parisians, get out of here", "Give us back OM", read some of them. Eyraud, who was born in Paris, was a frequent target after he angered fans during a conference on management when he talked about the "danger" of having too many Marseille residents or club sup-

porters working at the club.

"JHE: No Marseille fans at OM? Get out of here", said one banner unfurled above a motorway, and "JHE, Marseille vomits you out" said another at the Prado roundabout, a few meters from the Stade Velodrome. — AFP

Ooredoo sponsors Int'l Show Jumping Championship

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, sponsored the International Show Jumping Championship organized by Kuwait Riding Club. The three day event, commenced on January 28, 2021, Ooredoo Kuwait was the platinum sponsor to the championship, which happened for the first time in the State of Kuwait, and held at Kuwait Riding Center in Sabhan Industrial Area. It was a well-deserved victory for Ali Al-Kharafi, when he won the Showjumping championship cup. Mijbil Alayoub, Senior Director, Corporate Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "Kuwait International Show Jumping Championship is the ultimate opportunity to bring the true Arabian culture to the world, in which it gathered elite riders from the entire world. Indeed, we, at Ooredoo Kuwait looks to future with sponsoring such unique events that allow us to support the community, improve unity and cooperation among countries, and promote healthy competition."

Khalifa Al-Kharafi, Member of the Board of Directors of the Kuwait Riding Club, said: "Our vision symbolized by building a place where



everyone feels welcomed to be educated about the equestrian world, ignites us to continue delivering a forward-thinking championships that meet the needs of this contemporary and innovative generation. Through its sponsorship, Ooredoo Kuwait with its pioneering role in supporting communities, contributes to honoring the Arabic culture and

positioning the State of Kuwait as a sports tourism destination that hosts major sports events." Kuwait Riding Center was established in 1996 as the first private riding center in the country. It trains more than 500 riders and 120 horses, and competes locally and internationally, hence, the majority of the horses are showjumping horses.

Kuwait bags three medals at Asian shooting tourney

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait's shooting team on Saturday won three silver medals at the Asian Online Shooting Championship organized by the Kuwait Shooting Federation. The event featured more than 400 shooters from 22 countries. Kuwait's shooter Saud Habib came second winning the silver at Men's Skeet competition. Habib's compatriot Nasser Al-Maqlad also ranked second with the silver at Trap game and Iman Al-Shammaa won silver at Women's Skeet contest. President of the Arab and Kuwait Shooting Federations, and Secretary General of Asian Shooting Confederation (ASC) Duajj Al-Otaibi congratulated the Kuwaiti athletes on their splendid performance and remarkable outcomes during the championship, which featured the most outstanding shooters in the continent. He expressed pride for "good results" made by the Kuwaiti shooters.



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti shooters participate in the Asian Online Shooting Championship.

Otaibi dedicated this achievement to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and the Kuwait people.

He also thanked those who were involved in organizing the tournament, as well as all participating federations. Duajj thanked President of ASC Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah for his efforts to enhance the game in Asia.

Real Madrid beaten to hand Atletico title boost

MADRID: Real Madrid had Eder Militao sent off in a 2-1 defeat by Levante on Saturday, handing Atletico Madrid the chance to move 10 points clear at the top of La Liga. Zinedine Zidane's defending champions sit second in the table, seven points behind Atletico.

Militao was shown a red card in the ninth minute at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium, with his team already without their injured captain Sergio Ramos and COVID-stricken coach Zidane. Marco Asensio gave Madrid the lead four minutes later but Jose Luis Morales equalized close to half-time before Roger Marti made up for missing a penalty by scoring the winner.

Barcelona coach Ronald Koeman had admitted earlier on Saturday his team "have to be realistic"

about their chances of overturning Atletico's considerable lead in the table. And with Real Madrid slipping up again, it may now take a seismic collapse for Atletico to miss out on repeating their incredible La Liga triumph in 2014. "The team were sad in the dressing room," said Zidane's assistant David Beltoni, who took charge of the side. "But they still have the will to fight to the end."

"You always have to fight, the season ends in May," added goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois. "It is true that Atletico continue to win and are up there. We have to win and hope that the others lose." It also leaves the Champions League as Real Madrid's only obvious chance of a trophy this season after they lost in the Spanish Super Cup semi-finals and went out to Alcoyano in the Copa del Rey.

Madrid face Atalanta next month in the Champions League's last 16. Militao was sent off for bringing down Levante's Sergio Leon, who was darting towards goal when Militao cut across him on the edge of the penalty area.

But Madrid gave themselves a lead to hang onto shortly after when Asensio continued his recent resurgence by sprinting onto Toni Kroos' brilliant through ball and finishing into the corner. Levante

were dangerous, though, and drew level before the interval as Jorge Miramon's cross to the back post was expertly caught on the half-volley by Morales.

Vinicius Junior came on for Madrid in the second half but made the worst possible start by kicking away the leg of Carlos Clerc, who was shown by VAR to have had his right foot inside the area. Courtois pushed away the penalty by Roger and with 11 men, Madrid might have seized the momentum.

Instead, their tired legs gave way and a well-worked short corner by Levante gave a clear sight of goal to Roger, who made amends by firing into the corner. Sevilla moved up to third in the table, a point behind Real Madrid, by winning 2-0 away at Eibar.

Lucas Ocampos put Sevilla in front with a penalty after the in-form Youssef En-Nesyri took a tumble in the box, before Jordan Moreno slid in at the front post in the second half to seal victory. Villarreal and Real Sociedad had to settle for a point each in their bids for the top four after drawing 1-1 but Valencia moved five points clear of the relegation zone with a 1-0 win over Elche. — AFP

Bayern stay 7 points clear in Bundesliga

BERLIN: Bayern Munich remained seven points clear at the top of the Bundesliga following a 4-1 victory over Hoffenheim on Saturday as Robert Lewandowski continued his incredible scoring run with his 24th league goal this season.

Lewandowski scored for the ninth straight Bundesliga game, while Jerome Boateng, Thomas Mueller and Serge Gnabry also hit the net at the Allianz Arena. "4-1 is a very good result for us. We have won our last four games - that is our yardstick," said head coach Hansi Flick, whose side have regained form after back-to-back league and cup defeats earlier this month.

The European champions exacted perfect revenge for their only defeat of 2020 after losing by the same 4-1 scoreline at Hoffenheim last September. Bayern were all business in Munich as Boateng headed the hosts into an early lead. Mueller then added a second having earlier struck the post.

It was 2-1 at the break as Hoffenheim striker Andrej Kramaric, who netted twice in the reverse meeting with Bayern, volleyed home a cross for his fifth goal in three games. However, Bayern moved up a gear in the second half.

Lewandowski tapped home having typically been in the right place at the right time after a Kingsley Coman shot was parried. It became a rout when Coman won the ball back and chipped over the defense for Gnabry to fire between the legs of Hoffenheim goalkeeper Oliver Baumann with an hour gone.

A fifth Bayern goal was disallowed following a VAR review with Leroy Sane offside in the build-up before Benjamin Pavard turned home. However, Mueller still saw room for improvement. "Because it was relatively easy for us to get into the danger zone up front, we missed a trick or two at the back" said Mueller, who praised the assured performance of goalkeeper Manuel Neuer.

Second-placed RB Leipzig kept pace with Bayern in the table after Christopher Nkunku scored in a hard-fought 1-0 home win over Bayer Leverkusen. Peter Bosz's Leverkusen dropped to fourth after a third defeat in the last fortnight. Eintracht Frankfurt replaced them in third as Portugal striker Andre Silva scored twice, taking his tally this season to 16 league goals, in a 3-1 home win over Hertha Berlin.

Sancho shines

After three matches without a win, Borussia Dortmund climbed to fifth with a 3-1 home victory over Augsburg as England winger Jadon Sancho notched his third goal of the new year. Dreadful Dortmund defending afforded Andre Hahn too much time and space in the area to fire Augsburg into an early lead.

Erling Braut Haaland blasted a penalty attempt against the crossbar on 21 minutes, the third spot-kick missed by Dortmund this season. However, Thomas Delaney calmed their nerves with a headed goal from a corner before Sancho put Dortmund ahead.

Augsburg defender Felix Uduokhai then scored an own goal as Dortmund bounced back from consecutive defeats. "A win like that is much nicer than the results we have had in recent weeks," admitted Dortmund winger Julian Brandt. Borussia Moenchengladbach became the latest big name to struggle at Union Berlin after being held to a 1-1 draw. — AFP

Sports

Breno heads late winner as Palmeiras sink Santos to win Copa Libertadores

Palmeiras earn spot in Club World Cup in Qatar

RIO DE JANEIRO: Breno Lopes scored in the ninth minute of injury time as Palmeiras won their second Copa Libertadores title on Saturday with a 1-0 victory over Brazilian rivals Santos at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana stadium.

Traditionally decided over two legs, for the second edition running the final — delayed two months by the COVID-19 pandemic — was played as a one-off contest, kicking off in sweltering heat and inside a largely empty ground.

Breno came on as a late substitute and planted a magnificent header beyond Santos goalkeeper John Deep into stoppage time to settle a scrappy encounter and earn Palmeiras a spot in this month's Club World Cup in Qatar.

"I can't describe the emotion," said Breno, calling it an "unforgettable day" as Palmeiras added to their 1999 triumph, when they overcame Colombia's Deportivo Cali on penalties. "We wanted this title, I was rewarded with the goal and we're the Libertadores champions."

Palmeiras coach Abel Ferreira, 42, became just the third European manager to win the tournament, emulating Portuguese countryman Jorge Jesus who masterminded Flamengo's 2019 triumph. Croatia's Mirko Zocic also won with Colo Colo in 1991.

Palmeiras will pocket \$15 million (12.4 million euros) in prize money after winning South America's top club competition, with cash-strapped Santos earning \$6 million as runners-up in what was just the third all-Brazilian final. Palmeiras now face a Club World Cup semi-final on February 7 against either Tigres of Mexico or Asian champions Ulsan

Hyundai before a potential final against European champions Bayern Munich.

Santos left with 'no answer'

Santos, who last won the tournament a decade ago when a teenaged Neymar scored in the final, missed out on the opportunity to become the first Brazilian club to lift the trophy for a fourth time. "We had no answer. It was the last shot," said despondent Santos forward Marinho. "I'm sad not to bring this title home, but we fought until the end."

Despite the ban on supporters from the iconic 80,000-capacity Maracana stadium, the site of one of the city's coronavirus field hospitals, local authorities agreed to grant entry to a few thousand invitees. Palmeiras, who held on to overcome River Plate in the semi-finals, were without the injured Gabriel Veron, the highly-rated 18-year-old linked to a number of Europe's top clubs.

As for Sao Paulo rivals Santos, who won two of their three Libertadores titles with Pele in the side in the early 1960s, in Kaio Jorge, 19, they have one of the country's most exciting young strikers. With attacking flair in limited display in the first half, it wasn't until Santos midfielder Diego Pituca's speculative drive on 76 minutes that either team genuinely threatened.

Palmeiras keeper Weverton shoved the strike away and a fizzing follow-up shot from Felipe Jonatan flashed narrowly wide. Kaio Jorge then sent a tame overhead kick straight at Weverton, but with the game seemingly destined for extra time there was late drama after Santos coach Cuca was sent



RIO DE JANEIRO: Players of Palmeiras celebrate with the trophy on the podium after winning the Copa Libertadores football tournament by defeating Santos 1-0 in the all-Brazilian final match at Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Saturday. —AFP

off for a touchline tussle with Marcos Rocha.

Santos briefly lost focus as the eight minutes of stoppage time initially allotted elapsed, and Breno

peeled off his marker, hanging in the air to head in a deep right-wing cross from Rony to spark jubilant Palmeiras celebrations. —AFP

Lakers end losing streak with win over Celtics

LOS ANGELES: Anthony Davis scored 27 points to fuel the Los Angeles Lakers, who ended their two-game NBA losing streak in dramatic style Saturday with a 96-95 victory over the Celtics in Boston. A well-rested Davis, who sat out the Lakers' loss to the Pistons in Detroit on Thursday with a bruised thigh, added 14 rebounds for the reigning NBA champions.

LeBron James finished with 21 points, seven rebounds and seven assists for the reigning NBA champions, who bounced back after defeats in Philadelphia and Detroit. "We're a team that takes pride in not losing two in a row and we lost two in a row," Davis said. "For damn sure we weren't losing three in a row."

It was a close-run game, however. Jayson Tatum scored 30 points and pulled down nine rebounds for the Celtics and Jaylen Brown added 28 points. It was a one-point game when Boston's Marcus Smart departed with 10:28 remaining after a fall that left him with what the Celtics said was a calf strain.

James drained a three-pointer to put the Lakers up 88-85 with 5:25 remaining and the Lakers pushed the lead to as many as seven points before the Celtics again narrowed the gap. Tatum cut the deficit to 96-95

with 32.8 seconds remaining. Boston's Kemba Walker blocked a Davis shot but missed at the other end. Teammate Daniel Theis grabbed the rebound but couldn't get his follow-up effort to fall.

The victory was especially satisfying, Davis said, not necessarily for the long history between two clubs that own 17 NBA titles apiece but because of what happened the last time the Lakers played in Boston in March. "We got a little revenge," Davis said. "This team beat us by 30 the last time we were in this building."

Lillard lifts Blazers

It came down to the buzzer in Chicago, where Portland's Damian Lillard drained a three-pointer as time expired to give the Trail Blazers a 123-122 victory over the Bulls. Lillard finished with 44 points on eight 3-pointers. Chicago appeared headed for victory when Coby White made a pair of free throws to put the Bulls up 122-117 with 11.5 seconds remaining.

But Lillard, whose 44 points included eight three-pointers, closed the deficit to 122-120 with a strike from beyond the arc with 8.2 seconds left. The Blazers then forced a jump ball with 6.2 seconds left and Lillard was able to snag a loose ball and make the winner. It was a narrow escape for a Blazers team that led by 19 in the third quarter. Forward Lauri Markkanen scored 31 points and guard Zach LaVine added 26 for the Bulls.

And it was close in Miami, where Jimmy Butler returned from a 10-game absence due to the league's



BOSTON: Anthony Davis #3 of the Los Angeles Lakers handles the ball against the Boston Celtics on Saturday at the TD Garden in Boston, Massachusetts. —AFP

coronavirus protocols to score 30 points in the Heat's 105-104 victory over the Sacramento Kings. "You simply cannot put a modern-day analytic to Jimmy's will to win," said Heat coach Erik Spoelstra, who still had to make do without injured Goran Dragic, Avery Bradley and others.

Butler scored 20 points in the first half, but Miami couldn't get ahead by more than one and trailed by two at the break. The Heat led by 11 early in the fourth, before the Kings mounted a rally that would fall just short.

The Charlotte Hornets, with a career-high 27 points from rookie point guard LaMelo Ball, out-last two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Giannis Antetokounmpo and the

Milwaukee Bucks 126-114. Antetokounmpo scored 34 points with 18 rebounds and nine assists. But with Ball's effort off the bench, and 27 points from Gordon Hayward, the Hornets followed up their victory over the Indiana Pacers on Friday with another win over a top-five Eastern Conference team.

And the Memphis Grizzlies, back after having five games postponed because of coronavirus issues, picked up right where they left off with a 129-112 victory over the Spurs in San Antonio. De'Anthony Melton led the Grizzlies with 20 points off the bench and point guard Ja Morant added 19 points and 11 assists as Memphis posted a sixth straight win. —AFP

Ovechkin returns from virus with OT goal for NHL milestone

WASHINGTON: Washington's Alex Ovechkin scored 28 seconds into overtime in his return from a four-game COVID-19 absence to reach an NHL milestone Saturday in the Capitals' 4-3 victory over Boston. The 35-year-old Russian star netted the game-winning marker on a wrist shot for his 708th career NHL goal, matching Mike Gartner for seventh on the league's all-time scoring list.

Gartner, a Canadian, spent most of his 19-year career with the Capitals in the 1980s. The next player beyond him in NHL goals is former 1970s Boston star Phil Esposito on 717. Ovechkin, the Capitals captain, was playing in his first game after missing Washington's past four contests due

to NHL COVID-19 health and safety protocols. "For me it was my first game after a 10-day break, so it was kind of weird," Ovechkin said. "But it's nice to get a win."

Ovechkin and three Russian teammates were sent onto the COVID-19 list and the Capitals were fined \$100,000 by the NHL for "social interactions among team members who were in close contact and who were not wearing face coverings" after players reportedly gathered without masks in a hotel room.

The Capitals played their fifth game without forward Evgeny Kuznetsov and goaltender Ilya Samsonov, who remain in the COVID-19 protocol. Defenseman Dmitry Orlov was cleared to return but not in the lineup. Washington improved to 6-0 with three overtime losses for 15 points, matching Toronto for the league best in the early season.

Vitek Vanecek made 40 saves for the Capitals. It was Washington defenseman Zdeno Chara's first game against his former team. The Bruins,



WASHINGTON: Alex Ovechkin #8 of the Washington Capitals scores the game winning goal in overtime in front of David Pastrnak #88 of the Boston Bruins at Capital One Arena on Saturday in Washington, DC. —AFP

5-2-2, saw their four-game win streak ended but welcomed back forward David Pastrnak, who had an assist and played more than 20 minutes in his

season debut after having hip surgery in September. Ovechkin and Pastrnak shared last season's NHL goal scoring title with 48 each. —AFP

Lukaku double helps Inter keep pressure on leaders AC Milan

MILAN: Romelu Lukaku scored a second-half double as Inter Milan kept the pressure on Serie A leaders AC Milan with a 4-0 win over Benevento on Saturday. Antonio Conte's Inter sit two points behind their city rivals, who beat Bologna 2-1 ear-

lier. A Riccardo Imbrota own goal put the hosts ahead early on against 11th-placed Benevento at the San Siro. Lautaro Martinez scored 12 minutes after the break before Lukaku added two more.

Champions Juventus moved into third, seven points off top spot with a game in hand, after a 2-0 win over Sampdoria. Milan bounced back after losses to Atalanta in the league and to Inter in the Italian Cup on Tuesday, a game in which Zlatan Ibrahimovic was sent off.

"It was a strong response from the team. A victory that gives us confidence at the end of a difficult week," said Milan coach Stefano Pioli. The

midweek Milan derby was overshadowed by a clash between Ibrahimovic and former Manchester United teammate Lukaku.

Ibrahimovic on Saturday drew a blank for a second straight league game for the first time this season. Bologna goalkeeper Lukasz Skorupski made a brilliant double save from the Swede early on. The visitors were awarded a penalty when Mitchell Dijks brought down Rafael Leao, with Ibrahimovic stepping up to take it. But the 39-year-old's poor record from the spot continued with his fourth penalty miss in all competitions this season. —AFP

News in brief

Ganguly discharged from hospital

KOLKATA: Indian cricket great Sourav Ganguly was discharged from hospital yesterday after undergoing a second heart operation in a month, with doctors optimistic that he will make a full recovery. The 48-year-old, who now heads the country's powerful cricket board, was admitted to hospital in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal state, on Wednesday after complaining of chest pains. It was the second time this year that the former batsman had to be hospitalized, after being admitted in early January when he suffered a heart attack while exercising. He underwent an angioplasty and had a stent inserted to open up his clogged arteries. —AFP

Garcia wants Pacquiao

LOS ANGELES: Up and coming US lightweight Ryan Garcia said on Instagram Saturday that he wants to get in the ring with Philippine icon Manny Pacquiao in an official bout. With Yahoo among the outlets reporting such a fight is in the works, Garcia said he wanted to make it absolutely clear that it wouldn't be an exhibition. "Hey everybody, I just want to make it real clear: My fight with Pacquiao would not be an exhibition," Garcia said in a video posted on his Instagram story. "It will be a real fight, shooting for 12 rounds, all on the line. Our records will be on the line. I just want to make that very clear for everybody." —AFP

Plant retains title

LOS ANGELES: Undefeated Caleb Plant retained his International Boxing Federation super middleweight crown with a unanimous 12-round decision over former champion Caleb Truax in an all-American showdown on Saturday. Plant dominated every round, winning by perfect totals of 120-108 on the scorecards of all three judges in the matchup at Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, staged without spectators due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the third time Plant defended the title he took from Venezuela's Jose Uzcategui in January 2019, the 28-year-old improving to 21-0 but disappointed he suffered a hand injury in the fourth or fifth round. —AFP

Rams trade Goff

LOS ANGELES: The Detroit Lions are trading quarterback Matthew Stafford to the Los Angeles Rams in exchange for quarterback Jared Goff, according to multiple reports on Saturday. The Los Angeles Times, NFL Network and ESPN, all citing unnamed sources, said the Rams also sent Detroit a third-round NFL Draft selection this year and two future first-round selections. The Rams made Goff, 26, the top draft pick five years ago. He has led the Rams to three playoff appearances in four seasons, reaching the Super Bowl in 2018. Before the 2019 season, he inked a \$134 million contract extension. But in 2020, he passed for a career-low 20 touchdowns, with 13 interceptions and the Rams finished 10-6. —AFP

Hertha eyes Khedira

BERLIN: Bundesliga strugglers Hertha Berlin have confirmed they are in talks with Sami Khedira and could sign the former Germany midfielder before the transfer window closes today. "We are talking to him, there are a few things to clear up and a few questions to answer before Monday at 1800 (1700GMT)," when the transfer window closes, Hertha CEO Carsten Schmidt told Sky yesterday. According to magazine Kicker, Khedira arrived in Berlin on Saturday and was due to undergo a medical check yesterday. The 33-year-old is under contract at Juventus until the end of the season, but head coach Andrea Pirlo has yet to play him in 2020/21. —AFP

Liverpool back in business with win

Tuchel celebrates first Chelsea win • Brilliant Bamford helps Leeds sink Leicester

LONDON: Mohamed Salah scored twice as Liverpool muscled their way back into the Premier League title race with a 3-1 win at West Ham yesterday after Thomas Tuchel celebrated his first victory as Chelsea boss. Jurgen Klopp's injury-hit champions appeared to have lost their way after a five-game winless spell but are back on track after beating Tottenham and West Ham in the space of 72 hours.

Earlier, defenders Cesar Azpilicueta and Marcos Alonso produced stunning finishes as Chelsea beat toothless Burnley 2-0 at Stamford Bridge. Leicester, looking to close to within two points of leaders Manchester City, took the lead against Leeds but Patrick Bamford played a part in all three goals as Marcelo Bielsa's men stormed back to win 3-1.

Liverpool came into their match against high-flying West Ham with no fit senior center-backs and missing forward Sadio Mane. But two goals from Egypt international Salah lifted them to 40 points after 21 games, a single point behind Manchester United and four behind leaders Manchester City.

Salah put the visitors ahead in the 57th minute with a fine curling lob over Lukasz Fabianski and added the second after a swift break following a West Ham corner. Liverpool grabbed a third when substitutes Roberto Firmino and Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain combined to set up Georginio Wijnaldum for a tap-in before a late consolation for West Ham's Craig Dawson.

Earlier, Tuchel celebrated victory at Stamford Bridge in his second match in charge of Chelsea. The former Paris Saint-Germain boss was brought in to replace Frank Lampard last week with a brief to haul stuttering Chelsea back into the race for Champions League spots. He oversaw a frustrating goalless draw against Wolves in midweek but two moments of magic from Azpilicueta and forgotten man Alonso mean the German has four points from six.

Tuchel said the victory would infuse his side with confidence but said they needed to sharpen up their finishing after both goals came from defenders. "It should be a signal to our guys up front that we needed defensive players to score," he told BT Sport. "We lacked precision in the last pass and touch, but in the finishing we will work on this absolutely. We had a lot of touches, half-chances and deliveries in the box, but in the end I could not care less."

Chelsea earned the breakthrough their football deserved five minutes before half-time when Azpilicueta lashed home after a neat assist from the lively Callum Hudson-Odoi. The home side created a succession of chances after the break and Alonso made the three points safe six minutes from time when he controlled a Christian Pulisic cross on his chest and thigh before firing past Nick Pope. The Spaniard, who had been frozen out by Lampard since September, kissed his Chelsea badge as the players celebrated a vital win.

Leicester slip up

Leicester, unbeaten in seven Premier League games heading into their match against Leeds at the King Power Stadium, had a chance to put real pressure on Manchester City. Harvey Barnes gave the home side the lead in the 13th minute but Leeds were level just 127 seconds later when Bamford set up Stuart Dallas, who beat Kasper Schmeichel with a low finish.

The visitors went ahead in the 70th minute when Bamford beat Schmeichel with a left-footed strike into the far top corner of the net and the Leeds forward teed up Jack Harrison for a tap-in six minutes from time. "We have to go away and learn from that and then look to get back to winning ways on Wednesday," said Rodgers, who is missing leading scorer Jamie Vardy. "We had a lot of really good



LONDON: Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah shoots past West Ham United's English defender Aaron Cresswell to score the opening goal at The London Stadium yesterday. — AFP

moments in the game where we played through their marking and pressure, but we just couldn't quite find that bit of quality in the final third."

Late Saturday, Manchester United's Premier League title challenge suffered a second setback in four days as they failed to breakdown an under-strength Arsenal in a 0-0 draw at the Emirates. United threw away top spot with a shock 2-1 defeat

to bottom-of-the-table Sheffield United in midweek and are now three points adrift of league leaders Manchester City having played a game more than their local rivals. A point edges eighth-placed Arsenal to within six points of the top four and it was the Gunners who came closest to scoring when Granit Xhaka's free-kick struck the bar in the second half. — AFP



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