



2 Assembly Speaker meets Qatari Amir, counterpart



5 Libya mired in chaos 10 years after Arab Spring



9 WhatsApp flap shows importance of message platform to Facebook



15 Djokovic passes Tiafoe test, Serena sublime at Aussie Open



REGISTER TODAY
for the COVID-19 vaccine [See Page 16](#)

E-learning to continue; MP proposes cut in school fees

Fish auctions halted • Govt insists on closures, panel demands compensation

Hotel booking on return must before departure

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: A new condition will be added to travel requirements starting from Feb 21. According to an official at the General Directorate for Civil Aviation, who spoke to Kuwait Times on the condition of anonymity, all departing passengers - citizens and expats - should have a hotel booking for seven days to remain under institutional quarantine after their return.

"This rule will be applied on all passengers leaving Kuwait, whether they have a round-trip ticket or even a one-way ticket. Even if the passenger is not sure about their exact return date, they should still have a hotel booking. The booking can later be modified according to their return date," the official told Kuwait Times. According to him, this rule will not apply to those who have canceled their residency in Kuwait and are leaving the country for good.

Continued on Page 2

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Education Minister Ali Al-Mudhaf yesterday issued a ministerial resolution stipulating continuation of studies online for all educational levels for the 2020-2021 academic year's second semester. The ministry said in a press statement that the decision will be revised according to health conditions in the country, adding the ministry coordinates with the health ministry via a joint committee.

The decision is applicable on public schools, religious educational institutes, teaching centers for the elderly and private schools. Kuwait is adhering to internationally-accredited precautions against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), holding classes online and barring gatherings. MP Osama Al-Munawer submitted a proposal yesterday calling on the education ministry to reduce fees at private schools, universities and institutions after the adoption of distance learning.

Meanwhile, a decision was issued by the health ministry and the Municipality to stop auctions at fish markets and return to selling fish by quota to vendors, supermarkets and cooperatives, as part of preventive measures to fight the spread of COVID-19. A statement issued by the Kuwait Fishermen Union said the commerce ministry held a meeting with the union's board to inform it about the

Continued on Page 2



KUWAIT: Commerce ministry officials, supported by the police, stop fish auctions at the Souq Sharq fish market yesterday. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

News in brief

Saudi frees jailed activist

RIYADH: Saudi authorities yesterday released prominent women's rights activist Loujain Al-Hathloul, her siblings said, after nearly three years in detention. "Loujain is at home!!!!!!" her sister Lina al-Hathloul wrote on Twitter. Loujain was "at home after 1001 days in prison," she added along with a picture of the freed activist. — AFP



China probe enters Mars orbit

BEIJING: China's Tianwen-1 probe entered the orbit of the planet Mars yesterday, state media said, the latest step in the country's ambitious space program. "China's probe Tianwen-1 successfully entered the orbit around Mars on Wednesday after a nearly seven-month voyage from Earth," Xinhua said, after it launched from southern China last July. — AFP

Qatar minister meets Saudi envoy

DOHA: A Qatari minister met the newly-arrived Saudi envoy to Doha yesterday, as the neighbors continue to restore ties. "Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad Al-Muraikhi met Wednesday with Acting Charge d'affaires of the Embassy of the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ali Saad Ali Al-Qahtani in Qatar," Doha said. — AFP

PepsiCo renames 'Aunt Jemima'

WASHINGTON: PepsiCo has renamed the Aunt Jemima brand of pancake syrup and batter, fulfilling a promise made last year amid widespread protests in the US against racism. The new brand will be called Pearl Milling Company - after the business founded in 1888 which created the mix that became Aunt Jemima - and will hit store shelves in June. — AFP



KUWAIT: The Kuwait Times building is lit up in the colors of the national flag on the occasion of the national days. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Houthi attack leaves Saudi plane ablaze

RIYADH: A drone strike launched by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis yesterday left a civilian plane ablaze at a Saudi airport, days after the US moved to delist the rebels as terrorists. Saudi authorities did not immediately report any casualties from the attack, claimed by the Houthis, the latest in a series of rebel assaults on the kingdom despite a renewed American push to de-escalate Yemen's six-year conflict.

Pictures released by state media showed a blackened gash on the side of a passenger jet after the attack,

which occurred on the same day the new US special envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking met Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan in Riyadh for talks. "A cowardly criminal terrorist attack launched against Abha International Airport in Saudi Arabia by the Houthi militia," state-run Al-Ekhbariya television quoted the Riyadh-led military coalition battling the rebels as saying.

"A fire that engulfed a passenger plane due to the Houthi attack on Abha Airport is under control," it added. The coalition did not say how the attack was carried out, but earlier in the day reported that it had intercepted two "booby trapped" drones in the south. The Shiite Houthis, who control much of northern Yemen, said they had struck Abha airport with four drones.

Continued on Page 2



ABHA, Saudi Arabia: This handout image shows a view of the damaged hull of a Flyadeal Airbus A320-214 aircraft on the tarmac at Abha International Airport. — AFP

Local

Kuwait Amir congratulates UAE on Mars probe mission success

Sheikh Nawaf meets Crown Prince, Prime Minister at Bayan Palace



KUWAIT: 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. — Amiri Diwan and KUNA photos

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent cables of congratulations to UAE's President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahayan, Vice President and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahayan. In the cables, His Highness the Amir expressed his sincere congratulations on the fruitful mission of the

Hope Probe which successfully entered its orbit on Mars on Tuesday. His Highness the Amir lauded this historic and scientific achievement made by the UAE that embodies its space, technical and scientific progress, thanks to the ambitious vision of the country's leadership and unremitting efforts of its children.

This enhances the UAE's status in the international community on all levels, according to the Amir's cables. His Highness the Amir said this



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

Emirati and Arab achievement is a source of pride for all, wishing everlasting health to Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid and Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed. His Highness the Amir also wished the UAE and its brotherly people further prosperity and progress under the wise leadership of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad

Al-Sabah sent similar cables. In other news, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince received His Highness the Prime Minister at Bayan Palace. — KUNA

Kuwait's Assembly Speaker meets Qatari Amir, counterpart

DOHA: Kuwait's National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem met yesterday with Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani and Chairman of the Qatari Shura Council Ahmad Al-Mahmoud during an official visit to the Gulf country. Ghanem conveyed to the Qatari Amir a verbal message from Kuwait's Amir His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, in which His Highness underscored the strong brotherly ties between Kuwait and Qatar, and

recent regional developments. Ghanem also conveyed His Highness's best wishes for Qatar and prayers for more evolution and prosperity. In reply, the Qatari Amir expressed his appreciation for His Highness the Amir of Kuwait's sincere sentiments wishing him a life filled with health and happiness. Later on, Speaker Ghanem held talks with his Qatari counterpart, Chairman of the Consultative Assembly of Qatar Ahmad bin Abdullah Al-Mahmoud, in which they discussed ways of bolstering parliamentary cooperation between the two countries and raising the level of coordination in the upcoming international parliamentary events. Furthermore, the two sides also mentioned topics to be discussed in the next Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting and the importance of finding an Arab-Islamic agreement on those matters. — KUNA



DOHA: Kuwait's National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem meets Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. — KUNA

Hotel booking on return must ...

Continued from Page 1

DGCA Spokesman Saad Al-Otaibi told Al-Qabas Arabic daily that meetings are being held with concerned authorities to implement institu-

tional quarantine at local hotels for all arrivals for seven days at their own expense through registration on the Kuwait Mosafer app. Another seven days will be spent in home quarantine.

Otaibi said any citizen or expat cannot travel until after selecting and booking the place of quarantine at a Kuwait hotel and paying the cost in full, which is non-refundable and should be paid before traveling. Otaibi said exempting elderly passengers from institutional quarantine is still under discussion.

Houthi attack leaves Saudi...

Continued from Page 1

Yahya Sarie, spokesman for the Houthis' armed wing, claimed the airport was used to launch attacks on Yemen. But Yemen's information minister, Moammar Al-Eryani, denounced the attack as a "full-fledged war crime" as it endangered the lives of "thousands of civilian travellers of various nationalities". Abha's international airport, which has been struck by the rebels before, is just over 100 km from Saudi Arabia's southern border with Yemen.

The rebels appear to be stepping up attacks on the kingdom and on Riyadh-backed Yemeni forces after the United States moved last week to lift a short-lived designation of the Houthis as a terrorist group. The Houthis have resumed an offensive to seize the Yemeni government's last northern stronghold of Marib, according to a government source, with dozens of

casualties on both sides.

The US State Department on Friday said it had formally notified Congress of its intention to revoke a terrorism designation against the rebels, which had been announced in the final days of the previous administration of Donald Trump. The delisting move came a day after US President Joe Biden announced an end to American support for Saudi-led offensive operations in Yemen.

Biden's decisions last week mark a reversal of policies by the Trump administration, which staunchly backed Saudi Arabia and a fierce opponent of Houthi supporter Iran. Humanitarian groups were deeply opposed to the blacklisting, saying it jeopardized their operations in a country where the majority of people rely on aid and where they have no choice but to deal with the Houthis. Biden, who has also halted some weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, called Yemen's war a "catastrophe" which "has to end". Last week he appointed a US special envoy for Yemen, veteran diplomat Lenderking, who is expected to boost efforts to end the war. In his meeting with Prince Faisal yesterday, Lenderking discussed "developments concerning Yemen" as well as efforts to support a "comprehensive political solution" to the conflict. — AFP

the coronavirus pandemic, but the health ministry insisted that the closures will continue.

Rapporteur of the panel MP Saadoun Hammad said the committee discussed with health ministry representatives the latest developments and called on them to cancel the closures and focus on controlling arrivals from the airport and other borders. He said the ministry insisted it will continue with the closures and "we stressed that if the closures continue, the government should compensate businesses" affected by the measures.

He said that if the government does not end the closures, MPs will submit a draft law for compensation. Hammad said that MPs told the health ministry to test all people arriving through the airport and no one should be allowed to leave before learning the result. The government last week decided to close all shops from 8 pm to 5 am and completely shut health clubs, salons and barbershops. Kuwait also banned the entry of all foreigners for two weeks starting Feb 7.

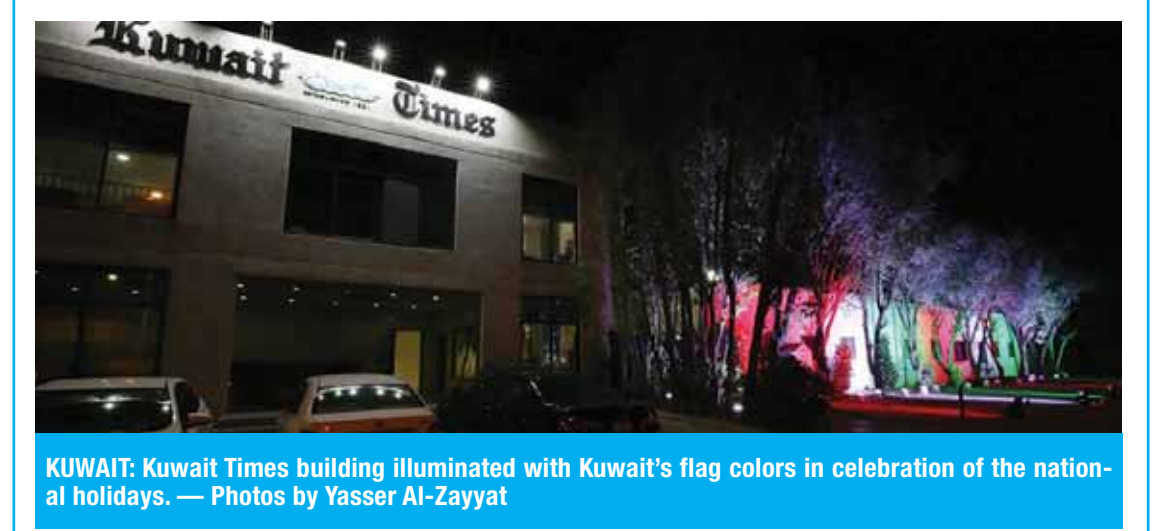
E-learning to continue; MP...

Continued from Page 1

cancellation of the auction, adding the ministry will decide the price for vendors and supermarkets.

The decision went into effect yesterday, after large crowds were observed daily at the auction at the main Souq Sharq fish market. Sources at the commerce ministry said the barcode system that was used to organize appointments for consumers last year is ready for use again any time concerned authorities require it, after the drawbacks it faced earlier were removed.

In a related development, the National Assembly's health and labor committee yesterday called on the government to withdraw its latest decisions to close shops to contain the spread of



KUWAIT: Kuwait Times building illuminated with Kuwait's flag colors in celebration of the national holidays. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Local

Kuwait announces 987 new COVID-19 cases, five deaths

Five more clinics opened to administer coronavirus vaccine

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MoH) yesterday listed 987 new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases, bringing the caseload of contaminations to 173,983. MoH official spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said that there also were five new fatalities due to infection with the contagious virus registered during the same period, thus mortalities' toll rose to 980. Dr Sanad also revealed that the number of people who were receiving treatment at intensive care units reached 108 as of yesterday, while the whole count of confirmed infection cases and remained under medical care stood at 9,739. The ministry had earlier reported that 553 patients had recovered during the same period, putting the whole count of recoveries at 163,264. In the meantime, Dr Sanad pointed out that 10,812 swab tests were conducted in the same period, bringing the total number of such examinations to 1,629,388.

COVID-19 vaccines

Meanwhile, the Health Ministry announced yesterday that five more health clinics were opened to administer the coronavirus vaccine. Dr Sanad said that the centers were opened in several health districts including North Ardiyah clinic,

Salwa specialized clinic, Musaad Hamad Al-Saleh clinic, East Al-Ahmadi clinic, and Jaber Al-Ahmad clinic 1. Dr Sanad had affirmed on Tuesday the necessity of cooperation in the society to fight the rise in coronavirus cases. "What we are facing in the State of Kuwait comes within the framework of the global and regional epidemiological sequence," he said.

He noted the ministry has taken proactive measures and doubled precautions to control the pandemic, indicating there are several factors through which the assessment of the epidemiological situation of any community is determined. Of these factors are the number of daily positive infections, the ratio of occupation of ICU beds and the proportion between the infected cases and the medical swabs conducted, he explained. He made clear that the ratio between the cases and medical swabs hit two percent last December, 8.9 percent last Tuesday and 11.2 per-

cent last Monday. The active cases still receiving treatment reached 3,361 last December compared to 9,310 on Monday, he said. The occupation at hospitals' wards hit seven percent last December, nine percent last January and 11 percent in the first week of February, he stated.

ICUs occupation

Intensive care units (ICUs) occupation reached nine percent last December, 11 percent in second half of January and 15 percent in the first week of February, Dr Sanad added. The total infected cases last January hit 17,653, including 10,787 nationals, he said, noting the percentage of Kuwaitis' infections hit 61.1 percent. Those who are aged 16-44 are highly infected, registering a percentage of 67, 12 out of the total infections, following by those who aged 45-59 with 18.8 percent, he revealed. The infection of those aged one day-6 months is



61.1% of cases are Kuwaitis



Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad

0.06 percent, 1.9 percent for those aged 1-4, 4.28 percent for those aged 5-15, three percent for those 60-65 and 3.7 percent for those who are above 65 years, he elaborated. The ministry received 87,552 inquiries from people on vaccination, medical consultation, the new strain of coronavirus and others, he said. Regarding the global pandemic situation, he stressed that in light of the rise in the coronavirus cases all over the world the pandemic must be combated collectively. —KUNA

Kuwait's Defense Minister lauds medical personnel



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Al-Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah visits the headquarters of the ministry's medical personnel. —Defense Ministry photos



KUWAIT: The minister of defense yesterday expressed deep gratitude to the services given by the medical personnel attached to the Ministry of Defense. The army said in a statement the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, Sheikh Hamad Al-Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, manifested admiration of the medical teams' work during an inspection visit to their headquarters. Labelling them, "the white army," the minister heaped praise upon the staff for working diligently round the clock for serving the military personnel and their families. He conveyed to the personnel greetings from His Highness the Amir, who is also the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, His Highness the Crown Prince and His Highness the Prime Minister. He lauded their noticeable role amid the extraordinary conditions brought about by the novel coronavirus. —KUNA



MPs propose bill to allow sessions without ministers

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Five opposition MPs yesterday submitted a draft law stipulating amendments to the Assembly's internal charter to allow the Assembly to convene sessions without the need for Cabinet ministers' attendance. Although MPs Musaed Al-Mutairi, Thamer Al-Suwait, Khaled Al-Otaibi, Bader Al-Dahoum and Shuaib Al-Muwaizri said that the constitution and the law do not state that the government's presence is a precondition for convening Assembly sessions, they proposed to add a new article to the law clearly stating and clarifying this issue.

The amendment states that Assembly sessions can be held only after the attendance of more than half the members, without stating that the presence of ministers is essential. The Assembly has not held sessions for the past several weeks after the government resigned, and as the prime minister is taking time to form the new Cabinet. MP Ahmad Al-Hamad submitted a draft law yesterday calling to force foreign companies that have contracts with the government to employ Kuwaiti graduates.

News in brief

280 expats to lose jobs?

KUWAIT: Minister of Oil and Minister of Electricity and Water Mohammad Al-Fares said 433 expats have been terminated at the Ministry of Electricity and Water (MEW) and the Ministry of Oil so far. He said the current number of expat employees in the said ministries is 915 in various capacities - most of them at MEW. Fares, who responded to a parliamentary question from MP Mohammad Al-Huwailah, said Kuwaitis are appointed according to need, with the replacement policy being observed. He insisted that no expats have been appointed at both ministries since the Civil Service Commission decision number 11/2017 was issued. —Al-Anbaa

Kuwait oil at \$61.13 pb

KUWAIT: Kuwait oil gained 74 cents during Tuesday's transactions to close at \$61.13 per barrel (pb) compared with \$60.39 pb the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Benchmark Brent also rose by 53 cents to \$61.06 pb and West Texas Intermediate increased by 39 cents to \$58.36 pb. —KUNA

Kuwait's successful diplomacy

ANKARA: Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu congratulated the State of Kuwait on its successful diplomacy for resolving the "Gulf crisis." The minister expressed the felicitations in tweeted remarks after meeting His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince and His Highness the Prime Minister in the Gulf country. "Owing to the State of Kuwait mediation, there is currently positive atmosphere in the Gulf region," said the minister, whose remarks were carried by the official Turkish news agency 'Anadolu'. Turkey will continue to work with the GCC countries for expanding cooperation in the health and economic sectors, he added. Ankara has maintained volume of trade exchanges with the State of Kuwait despite spread of the coronavirus, he added. —KUNA

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KUFPEC confirms 'largest ever' gas discovery

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Petroleum Exploration Company (KUFPEC), on behalf of its wholly owned subsidiary KUFPEC Malaysia (SK-410B) Limited, confirmed yesterday its largest-ever hydrocarbons discovery. According to a KUFPEC press release, obtained by KUNA, the company said that this discovery was proven by the Lang Lebah-2 appraisal well in the SK-410B Block located approximately 90 kilometers offshore Sarawak, Malaysia. The appraisal drilling campaign followed the successful drilling of the first exploration well, Lang Lebah-1RDR2, in the SK 410B Block in 2019, indicated KUFPEC. "KUFPEC Malaysia (SK-410B) Limited holds a 42.5 percent working interest under the PSC, with PETRONAS Carigali Sdn. Bhd. and PTTEP HK Offshore Limited (as operator) holding 15 percent and 42.5 percent working interests, respectively," KUFPEC said. It went on to say that, "The appraisal drilling in Lang Lebah-2 was completed at a total depth of 4320 meters, with over 600 meters of proven net gas pay."

The well was tested and flowed at 50 million cubic feet of gas per day with a significant amount of gas in place, indicating a substantially larger reservoir than the initial estimate. This result will accelerate the development plan for the project. "This successful world-class gas discovery is a testament to our steadfast efforts to maximize the value to our shareholder by exploring for hydrocarbons in highly prolific basins," said KUFPEC CEO Shaikh Nawaf Saud Al-Sabah. "KUFPEC played a strong and active role in maturing the prospect that led to a giant discovery. I am proud of our team," he added. KUFPEC is an international upstream company engaged in exploration, development and production of crude oil and natural gas outside the State of Kuwait and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC). — KUNA

Editors-in-chief discuss proposed amendments to Kuwait media laws

'Current laws are restrictive towards the media'



KUWAIT: Editors-in-chief of daily newspapers and their representatives meet at Al-Anbaa newspaper.

KUWAIT: Editors-in-chief of daily newspapers and their representatives held a meeting at Al-Anbaa newspaper in the presence of Kuwait Journalists Association to discuss the proposed amendments to media laws, as requested by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah during their meeting with him lately.

The editors-in-chief presented the ideas they see necessary to improve performance in the field of media. They said some of the current

laws have many flaws, such as strictness in referral to courts, in addition to contradiction in some items, particularly over the issue of fines. The attendees said current laws are criticized by the media over many aspects, as some of them refer suspects to other stricter laws, or settlements are not allowed.

They also discussed the issue of obsolescence in implementing cases and differences of periods mentioned in some laws, in addition to texts that restrict courts from reducing punish-

ments. The existence of loose legal texts incriminates media institutions and their employees without clarity, as mentioned in national unity laws and other legislations.

The editors-in-chief insisted that current laws are restrictive towards the media, especially in the field of electronic media, which has become of great interest to the public, adding that it is necessary to carry out amendments that contribute to the enhancement of the media sector and not restrict it.



Editors-in-chief of daily newspapers pose for a group picture following their meeting.

Limak hosts Turkish Minister at new airport terminal site

KUWAIT: The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu, accompanied by the Ambassador of Turkey in the State of Kuwait, Ayse Hilal Sayan Koytak, visited the New Kuwait Airport Terminal 2 (T2) construction site on Tuesday to monitor the progress carried out by the Turkish company Limak. The minister and the ambassador were welcomed by key representatives from the Turkish company including Limak CEO and Board Member Feyiz Genc and Limak Insaat Kuwait SPC Country Manager Kayihan Bagdatli, before undergoing a briefing session of the \$4.3 billion terminal project and \$559 million car park.



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KUWAIT: SME owners, supporters, and advocates meet with First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Al-Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah.

SME recovery plans on the officials' table

KUWAIT: Kuwait's SME owners have been invited to various meetings with officials in response to the recent protest that took place by Kuwaiti entrepreneurs and owners of small enterprises against the decision made by the government to close various sectors of businesses during the partial lockdown. A series of meetings were conducted between various SME owners, supporters, and advocates with state officials including Marzouq Al-Ghanem, Speaker of National Assembly, Sheikh Hamad Al-Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, and Mohammad Al-Saqer, President of Kuwait's Chamber of Commerce and Industry in addition to other officials discussing various solutions for the SME crisis in Kuwait.

In an official statement, Dawood Marafie, former Chairman of the Association of SMEs in Kuwait, and one of the protestors who supported the calls of SME owners, stated that a list of requests and proposals were provided in the meetings with the officials including:

- 1- Reopening all closed commercial activities while ensuring the implementation of the state's health guidelines. Businesses that violate the health restrictions are to be closed.
- 2- Compensate suspended businesses by:

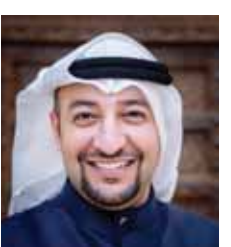
- Paying the salaries registered in the system of the Public Authority for Manpower in Kuwait.

- Paying the businesses' rents that are registered under the Public Authority of Manpower or Civil Information.

- Exempt the businesses from electricity, water, telecommunication, membership fees of the Ashal program of the workforce, Kuwaiti allowance, residence fees, stamp fees, license renewal fees, municipality fees (billboards, health cards for workers, and any other fees related to activities), and from all state fees related to closed activities.

- 3- Postpone the installments of the Industrial Bank and the National Fund for a period of one to two years without carrying over the interest, and this support will continue throughout the closing period and for a year after reopening the activities.

Marafie praised the efforts of the SME owners in Kuwait who are currently exploring various solutions with the officials to the crisis. He also explained that the recovery and survival of this sector cannot be sustained through the government only. Other entities such as the private sector, international grantees and organizations, and civil societies must be involved. Accordingly, a recovery plan is being drafted and will be presented to the government, private sector entities, and international grantees for support.



Dawood Marafie

Kuwait, New Zealand discuss bilateral cooperation

KUWAIT: Kuwait and New Zealand yesterday held the first online meeting of the joint-cooperation committee, where a number of regional and international issues of common interest were discussed. The two sides also focused on ways to enhance cooperation in various fields, most notably food security, economy and digital trade, in addition to the environment, higher education, sustainable development, health and community investigation to limit the spread of the COVID-19. In a statement to the press, Assistant Foreign Minister for Americas Affairs Ambassador Hamad Al-Mashaan noted that the meeting constituted a valuable opportunity for the foreign ministries of the two countries to exchange

views and discuss ways to develop bilateral relations.

Mashaan said that the meeting comes in line with the directives of the Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, and with the close follow-up of the Deputy Foreign Minister, to strengthen bilateral relations with brotherly and friendly countries. Moreover, he expressed his satisfaction with the meeting results, which he described as fruitful, indicating that this meeting laid foundations that constitute a new start to strengthen bilateral relations and allowed senior officials of the two countries to communicate despite the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic.

Mashaan praised the active participation of 15 Kuwaiti government agencies in the meeting and the submission of a number of draft memoranda of understanding for signature in areas such as environment and development. The meeting was held in activation of the memorandum of understanding signed between the two countries in July 2018 regarding the establishment of a joint committee for cooperation, which is held once every two years. —KUNA



Anger as hopes fade for Indian workers after glacier disaster

WHO expert slams US pandemic intel as curbs tightened in Europe Page 6



TRIPOLI: In this file photo taken on September 27, 2011, young Libyan Berber girls attend an Amazigh festival in the capital Tripoli. Ten years after Libya's NATO-backed uprising ousted and killed dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the country remains wracked by conflict and chaos. —AFP

Libya mired in chaos 10 years after Arab Spring

Country split in two by rival camps with militias, mercenaries and foreign backers

TRIPOLI: Ten years after Libya's NATO-backed uprising ousted and killed dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the country remains wracked by conflict and chaos, its population bled dry despite the nation's vast oil wealth. A UN-led process has raised cautious hopes that a fragile ceasefire, agreed in October, will bring lasting peace, but for now, Libya is split in two by rival camps with their own militias, mercenaries and foreign backers. The country's descent into anarchy has also turned it into North Africa's main migrant trafficking hub, from where tens of thousands have attempted dangerous boat crossings to Europe.

The horror of their many a drowning in the Mediterranean Sea has only been matched by gruesome reports of abuse and torture in militia-run migrant detention camps and the discovery of mass graves of Libyan civilians in the sands of recent battlefields.

"Ten years after the revolution, Libya is even more disfigured a state than it was under Gaddafi," said Emadeddin Badi, senior analyst at the Geneva-based non-government group Global Initiative. A decade on, it is clear that the so-called Arab Spring revolts in Libya brought carnage rather than the longed-for freedom and progress, a fate rivaled only by the suffering in war-torn Syria and Yemen.

"The situation is catastrophic for the ordinary citizen because of the repeated conflicts and divisions," said Mazen Kheirallah, 43, who lives and works in Zaouia, west of the capital Tripoli. "The

coronavirus crisis has made things worse," said the Libyan Electricity Company employee, who says his family is struggling with runaway inflation and other painful effects of an economy in tatters. "With prices continuing to rise, we can no longer live with dignity."

Decade of war

Majdi, a 36-year-old dentist, recalls the "spark" for the uprising that began in Benghazi in eastern Libya in February 2011, as a wave of pro-democracy revolts which began in neighboring Tunisia quickly swept the region. It was only then "I realized we were living in terror without knowing it," he said, requesting that his full name not be published.

Libya's popular uprising-backed by a NATO air campaign led by the United States, Britain and France-ended later that year with the death of Gaddafi, who was hunted down in a drainage tunnel and killed on the spot. The end of his 42-year dictatorship sparked chaos that destabilized the wider region by flooding it with arms and fighters and, for years, left Libya, a country of seven million, under the control of dozens of trigger-happy militias with shifting allegiances.

Jihadists also took advantage of the security vacuum, with the Islamic State group at its peak orchestrating attacks from a stronghold in the central coastal city of Sirte, killing scores of foreign tourists in Tunisia in 2015 and 2016.

Salima Younis, a 57-year-old divorcee who scrapes by as a part-time secretary at a Tripoli school, says the past decade has been spent "trying to get by day by day, literally dodging bullets". A small house she built was badly damaged by fighting three times since 2011 and, without the means to rebuild it again, she eventually sold the land and moved to an apartment.

She said that before 2011, "I worked for over 20 years, earning a decent salary, with foreign oil companies that have all left the country and never came back".

Rival power bases

Libya is now divided between two rival camps based in the key regions of Tripolitania in the west and Cyrenaica in the east, power centers long before the colonial-era creation of the Libyan state.

In the west, the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) was set up in Tripoli in 2016. It is backed militarily by Turkey, and by the small, gas-rich Gulf nation of Qatar. The east is controlled by an administration declared by the elected parliament, which does not recognize the GNA, and is backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar, with the support of the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia.

Haftar's forces besieged Tripoli for 14 months but were beaten back early last year after Turkey significantly stepped up its support for the GNA. In just one of the grisly legacies of the war, more than 120 bodies have since been exhumed from mass graves

in Tarhuna, southeast of Tripoli, formerly Haftar's main staging point. US President Joe Biden's administration has called for the immediate withdrawal of Russian, Turkish and other foreign forces from Libya, in line with the ceasefire deal.

But some 20,000 mercenaries and foreign fighters remain, in breach of a January 23 deadline to pull out. Russian military contractors of the Wagner Group backing Haftar's forces have dug in, quite literally, by bulldozing extensive trenches running south from Sirte. CNN has reported, showing satellite images.

Progress?

After years of deadlock, recent months have brought what the UN calls "tangible progress"—a flurry of intra-Libyan talks and a slow rebound in crucial oil production. Last week, Libyan delegates in Switzerland agreed on a temporary new governing executive. But huge challenges remain for the process to lead to scheduled national elections on December 24.

While the UN wants Libyans to decide their own future, no settlement appears feasible without the agreement of the foreign powers that have joined the fight by sending soldiers, drones and petro-dollars. "The situation has stabilized on the surface," said Badi, speaking before the new executive was announced, cautioning however against excessive optimism in a country that has seen multiple international peace initiatives fail. —AFP

North Korea stole \$300m in crypto to fund nukes: Experts

SEOUL: North Korea has stolen more than \$300 million worth of cryptocurrencies through cyberattacks in recent months to support its banned nuclear and ballistic missile programs, a confidential UN report said. Compiled by a panel of experts monitoring sanctions on Pyongyang, the report said the country's "total theft of virtual assets from 2019 to November 2020 is valued at approximately \$316.4 million", citing a UN member state.

Financial institutions and exchanges were hacked to generate revenue for Pyongyang's nuclear and missile development, said the report, which was seen by AFP. The vast majority of the proceeds came from two thefts late last year. The North is known to operate an army of thousands of well-trained hackers who have attacked firms, institutions and researchers in South Korea and elsewhere.

It has also been accused of exploiting its cyber capabilities for financial gain. The North is under multiple sets of international sanctions over its banned nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, which have made rapid progress under leader Kim Jong Un. A summit between Kim and then-US president Donald Trump in Hanoi in February 2019 broke down over sanctions relief and what Pyongyang would be willing to give up in return.

Nuclear talks have been stalled ever since, while the North showed off several new missiles at military parades in October and last month, when Kim pledged to strengthen his nuclear arsenal. —AFP

Who's left of the Gaddafi clan 10 years after revolt?

TRIPOLI: Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and killed in the 2011 uprising, but several of his family members survived. A decade on, what has happened to them?

Three of Gaddafi's seven sons died in the uprising, including Mutassim, who was killed by rebels in the dictator's home town of Sirte on October 20, 2011, the same day as his father. Another son, Seif Al-Arab, perished in a NATO air raid in April 2011, and his brother Khamis died in combat four months later, at the height of the revolt.

But other members of the Gaddafi clan survived, including his wife Safiya, his eldest son Mohammed—from his first marriage—and his daughter Aisha, who are known to be living in exile. Mystery, however, surrounds the whereabouts of the dictator's erstwhile heir apparent, Seif Al-Islam Gaddafi, who is wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The family

After the fall of Tripoli to rebels in August 2011, Safiya, Mohammed and Aisha escaped to neighboring Algeria. They were later granted refuge in the Gulf sultanate of Oman on condition they do not carry out political activities, the country's then foreign minister Mohammed Abdelaziz told AFP in 2013.

Aisha, a lawyer by profession and a former UN goodwill ambassador, had been part of an international defense team for Saddam Hussein after the Iraqi leader was ousted

in the 2003 US-led invasion. High-rolling son Hannibal also sought refuge in Algeria after the uprising, before trying to sneak into Lebanon to join his wife, Lebanese model Aline Skaf. But Lebanese authorities arrested and charged him in 2015 with withholding information about prominent Muslim cleric Mussa Sadr, who went missing in 1978 during a visit to Libya. Hannibal and his wife had sparked a diplomatic incident with Switzerland in 2008, when they were arrested in a luxury Geneva hotel for assaulting two former domestic employees.

Playboy son Saadi Gaddafi—once a professional footballer in Italy—fled to Niger after the uprising but was later extradited to Libya, where he was wanted for murder and repression during the revolt. He is currently held in a Tripoli prison, accused of crimes committed against protesters in 2011 and of the 2005 killing of Libyan football player Bashir Al-Rayani.

Heir apparent

Seif Al-Islam, whose name means "sword of Islam", was captured by a Libyan militia in November 2011, days after his father was killed. Four years later, a Tripoli court sentenced him in absentia to death for crimes committed during the revolt. The armed group which captured him announced in 2017 that Seif Al-Islam had been released.

The claim was never confirmed independently, and in 2019, the ICC prosecutor said there was "reliable" information that he was in Zintan, western Libya. But Seif Al-Islam has not been seen or heard from since June 2014, when he appeared via video from Zintan during his trial by the Tripoli court.

During his glory days, Gaddafi considered himself the "Leader of the Revolution" and declared Libya a "Jamahiriya", or "state of the masses" run by local committees. Thousands of his supporters, including from his



ANKARA: In this file photo taken on August 22, 2011, a portrait of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi Kadhafi and copies of his green book are set on fire by demonstrators during a protest outside the Libyan embassy in Ankara as Libyan rebels entered the heart of Tripoli in a final drive to oust Gaddafi. —AFP

own Kadhadfa tribe, fled Libya during and after the regime's fall, with many settling in Egypt and Tunisia. "Contrary to what is thought, the Kadhadfa tribe suffered under the regime of Kadhafi, and several members who had opposed him landed in jail," said Libyan law professor Amani Al-Hejrissi.

The clan also included members of Gaddafi's revolutionary guard—a paramilitary force tasked with protecting the regime against its detractors—who were not necessarily blood relatives. Some pined for home, and a group in Cairo later revived the Al-Jamahiriyah television network, Gaddafi's propaganda arm. But could Gaddafi's exiled supporters play a political role in the now divided country? "I don't think so," said Hejrissi. "Most Libyans see the fallen regime as the root of the corruption and destruction of the political system." —AFP

CONSUMER PROTECTION DEPARTMENT

RECALL INFORMATION

Mitsubishi
 Model: Outlander & ASX
 Model year: 2016
 Total Vehicles Involved: 380 (Outlander) – 65 (ASX)

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Inspect Rear Brake Calipers, as it may cause decreased parking brake force.

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International

WHO expert slams US pandemic intel as curbs tightened in Europe

Merkel eyes extension of virus curbs, EU defends faltering vaccine rollout

WUHAN: A WHO expert sent to China to probe the coronavirus hit out at US intelligence on COVID-19 as his team headed home with few answers about the origin of a pandemic that was forcing more clampdowns in some of the hardest-hit parts of the world.

disengaged under Trump & frankly wrong on many aspects." He said they worked "flat out under the most politically charged environment possible".

China had repeatedly delayed the WHO trip, and bristled at accusations of a lack of transparency. Beijing

Leyen was due to explain the EU's vaccine strategy to the European Parliament in Brussels yesterday, with the bloc's leadership under growing pressure.

At the same time, the resurgence of infections across the continent is adding to the pressure on its leadership. A stricter lockdown will be imposed in Greece from Thursday-in particular in the Athens region-as Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis warned that his country was facing a third COVID-19 wave. Wary of infection numbers exploding again, German Chancellor Angela Merkel will seek to extend strict curbs at least until the end of February as fatigue grows with the partial lockdown in Europe's top economy. Immunization efforts are being ramped in other parts of the world with a number of vaccines. Peru on Tuesday began administering shots developed by China's Sinopharm, while Argentina approved the Indian-made version of the AstraZeneca vaccine. South Korea yesterday also authorized the AstraZeneca shot for people aged 18 and above, including over-65s. Japan will start vaccinations next week but it is scrambling to secure suitable syringes so doses won't go to waste.



WUHAN, China: Tianhe WHO team member Peter Ben Embarek (center) and other members of the group arrive at Tianhe International Airport to leave Wuhan in China's central Hubei province yesterday, after the World Health Organization (WHO) team wrapped up its investigation into the origins of the COVID-19.—AFP

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was set to seek an extension of strict virus curbs, as the European Commission chief prepared to defend the stumbling vaccination rollout in the continent—which accounts for a third of the 2.3 million COVID-19 deaths worldwide. The coronavirus has infected close to 107 million people, devastating the global economy, and questions over the handling of the initial outbreak in central China sparked an intense diplomatic row between Washington and Beijing. The WHO mission to the ground zero city of Wuhan wrapped up Tuesday without any concrete answers, with Washington again expressing skepticism about China's transparency and cooperation.

But WHO team member Peter Daszak tweeted: "Please don't rely too much on US intel: increasingly

warned Washington not to "politicize" the mission after the White House demanded a "robust" probe. State Department spokesman Ned Price said Tuesday that the United States supports the investigation. But when asked if China had fully cooperated with the WHO, he said: "The jury's still out." The WHO team did not identify which animal transferred the coronavirus to humans, but said there was no indication it was circulating in Wuhan before December 2019, when the first official cases were recorded. WHO expert Peter Ben Embarek also scotched the controversial theory that the virus may have leaked from a lab in Wuhan.

Vaccine, surge worries in Europe
European Commission President Ursula von der

Valentine's Day worries

Along with mass vaccinations, researchers and engineers around the world are searching for other ways to help end the pandemic and return life to normal—especially international travel.

Tech-savvy Estonia is working on a pilot project with the WHO on how a globally recognized electronic vaccine certificate might work, including addressing concerns about security and privacy. A more immediate concern for authorities in many countries this week is Valentine's Day, with fears that the upcoming celebrations could lead to a surge in infections. Authorities in Thailand's capital Bangkok announced the city would not register marriages on Valentine's Day, a popular day for weddings.

In Brussels, however, where restaurants are closed, some hotels have converted rooms into private dining salons for two. "We're over the moon about being here tonight, just like in a restaurant," said Marine Deroo, a 34-year-old who tried out the concept ahead of Valentine's Day.—AFP

Pilots reported multiple problems with Indonesia jet before crash

JAKARTA: Indonesian pilots had reported multiple problems with an ageing jet's throttle system before it plunged into the sea after takeoff in January, killing 62 passengers and crew, investigators said yesterday. The malfunction in the Sriwijaya Air Boeing 737-500's engine control system was highlighted in a preliminary report on the January 9 crash, but investigators said it was too early to pinpoint an exact cause.

The 26-year-old plane—previously flown by US-based Continental Airlines and United Airlines—plunged around 3,000 meters (10,000 feet) into waters off Jakarta just minutes after takeoff.

Divers are still attempting to locate the cockpit voice recorder, which could provide vital clues to what the desperate crew was saying when the flight from Jakarta to Pontianak in Borneo went down.

Yesterday investigators said they were probing the autothrottle system—and possible human error. Crews on previous flights had reported that the system was "unserviceable" and it had been repaired several times before the fatal crash, the report said.

"The left (engine throttle) was moving backward too far while the right one was not moving at all—it was stuck," said National Transportation Safety Committee investigator Nurcahyo Utomo. "But what would have caused this anomaly? We can't conclude anything just yet." Communications with air traffic control were

described as normal up until the moment the plane deviated from its course and crashed. Despite appeals from air traffic controllers, the crew—including an experienced captain—did not respond to questions about the plane's change of direction.

Red flag

Analysts say a faulty autothrottle could explain the aircraft's unexpected turn and subsequent dive. But it was still unclear why the crew did not switch off the system and take manual control of the plane. "The aircraft... had previous known maintenance problems immediately prior to the crash," said Stephen Wright, professor of aircraft systems at Finland's Tampere University. Repeated attempts to fix the system was a red flag and may be a key factor in the crash, he added. "Technical problems are usually manageable," said Jakarta-based aviation analyst Gerry Soejatman.

Divers have recovered the plane's flight data recorder, but were still searching for the cockpit voice recorder (CVR), which tracks flight crew conversations. "That's why we need the CVR to see whether there are human factors" involved, he added. There no indication that the bad weather played a pivotal role in the accident, authorities said, adding that two other commercial planes flew the same route without incident just before and after the plane.—AFP



JAKARTA: This file picture shows Indonesian navy divers standing next to the flight data recorder (FDR) at the port in Tanjung Priok in Jakarta after it was recovered.—AFP

Senators transfixed by riot footage shown at Trump trial

WASHINGTON: With footage of a pro-Trump mob storming the US Capitol playing out in their chamber, US senators sat transfixed before the shocking images that dominated the start of the former president's impeachment trial. Despite the sergeant at arms' command that all 100 senators remain silent "on pain of imprisonment," an informal, detached mood descended Tuesday on the Senate's Republican side, where many lawmakers have said they oppose holding the unprecedented second trial of Donald Trump.

Chitter-chatter swirled. Marco Rubio flipped non-committal through a thick book. A sockless Richard Burr, bracing for a marathon session, stuffed his desk

with snacks. Freshman Senator Cynthia Lummis, perhaps not having received the memo about coronavirus precautions, sat maskless for 30 minutes as she pored over documents. Even as top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer opened the proceedings by describing the incitement of insurrection allegation against Trump as "the gravest charges ever brought against a president of the United States," many Republicans met the declaration with a collective shrug. And conservative Senator Tom Cotton made a point of working on a spreadsheet instead of focusing on the debate about the constitutionality of the trial. But when Democratic impeachment manager Jamie Raskin played a 13-minute video montage depicting some of the most violent clashes of the deadly January 6 siege, the chamber fell under a hush, with senators riveted by the graphic images and chaotic audio.

Republicans and Democrats alike sat rigid as some of the coarsest epithets ever to color a Senate proceeding rang out in the chamber. Then, they watched the chilling images of a self-described QAnon shaman and other invaders taking over the Senate itself after many of the

News in brief

Prince Charles gets COVID-19 jab

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II's eldest son and heir Prince Charles, who contracted COVID-19 last year, has received a first vaccine dose, his office said yesterday. The 72-year-old Prince of Wales and his wife Camilla, 73, both received the shot as health authorities urged those over the age of 70 to get a jab. Britain, which was the first Western nation to roll out Covid jabs in the general population, is banking on its biggest ever vaccination program as a way out of a contagion that has killed more than 113,000 people. Some 12.5 million people have so far been inoculated using either the Pfizer/BioNTech or Oxford/AstraZeneca shots.—AFP

One killed in US health clinic shooting

WASHINGTON: One person was killed and four others wounded Tuesday when a man who was unhappy with the treatment he had received at a Minnesota health clinic opened fire inside the facility, authorities and US media said. Police arrested the suspected shooter, identified as Gregory Ulrich, 67, who was known to law enforcement from previous encounters. He allegedly went into the Allina Health Clinic in Buffalo, Minnesota just before 11:00 am (1700 GMT) and opened fire. Images on local television showed the clinic with several blown-out windows, though it was not clear if this was from an explosion or from gunfire.—AFP

BioNTech starts production in Germany

BERLIN: German COVID-19 vaccine maker BioNTech said yesterday it has started production at its new facility in Marburg, expected to significantly boost the EU's vaccine supply. "We have started the first step of vaccine production in our production facility in Marburg," the company said in a statement. The factory, whose launch was fast-tracked by German authorities, will produce mRNA, the active ingredient in BioNTech's vaccine developed with US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer. It will then be purified and concentrated before being transported to a "production partner" to be finished.—AFP

Russia virus caseload passes 4 million

MOSCOW: Russia officially surpassed four million coronavirus infections yesterday, days after the country dramatically revised upwards its fatality rate, cementing its place as one of the world's worst-hit nations. A government tally showed infections had reached 4,012,710, which is the fourth-highest rate globally after the United States, India and Brazil. But Russia has come under fire for its official virus statistics and the government's stated death toll of 78,134 in particular has been undermined by recent mortality data.—AFP

Syringe shortage hits Japan drive

TOKYO: Japan will start coronavirus vaccinations next week, its prime minister said yesterday, but it is scrambling to secure suitable syringes so doses won't go to waste. The country has reached deals with three major drug firms to buy enough vaccine doses for its population of 126 million. But it has not yet announced a detailed roll-out plan for the jabs, less than six months before the pandemic-postponed Olympics begin. The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is likely to become the first jab approved for use in Japan in the coming days, following domestic clinical trials required by the country's health authorities.—AFP

Australian pleads guilty

SYDNEY: An Australian man once described as a "loyal agent of North Korea" pleaded guilty yesterday to attempting to broker arms, oil and coal deals for Pyongyang in breach of international sanctions. North Korea is under tough curbs aimed at choking off revenue to its nuclear and missile programs. South Korean-born Chan Han Choi was on trial in the New South Wales Supreme Court when he pleaded guilty to two of the seven charges against him.—AFP

lawmakers—the same ones sitting as jurors Tuesday—fled for their lives.

"It's not very often you have a trial at the scene of the crime," Democratic Senator Chris Murphy told AFP shortly before the proceedings began, speaking of the emotion that could weigh on senators as they sit in judgment of Trump. "It was our chamber that was violated," he added. "We were all party to the insurrection, we experienced it first-hand," said another Democrat, Senator Ben Cardin. "It's something that's personal to those of us who were in harm's way." But Republican Senator Bill Cassidy said he would not be caught up in such passions. "The settings in which we hold the trial do not make (the events of January 6) more vivid for me," Cassidy said. "They're vivid enough in and of themselves." They were for Raskin, too. The congressman from Maryland, managing the arguments against Trump just six weeks after his son died by suicide, choked up as he recalled how his daughter and his son-in-law, visiting the Capitol that day, "thought they were going to die." Raskin pointed to the multiple deaths and gruesome injuries suffered during the insurrection.—AFP



ISTANBUL: In this file photo students chant slogans in front of the Bogazici University in Istanbul during a protest against the direct appointment of a new rector the University by the Turkish President.—AFP

Turkish student protests feed anti-Erdogan anger

ISTANBUL: Fenced in by riot police, Zeynep Kurbanzade stands with her university classmates in daily protest against the rector picked by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has ruled Turkey since she was just one year old. Small in number, loud in voice and filled with a thirst for change, the Bogazici University students are posing a worrisome challenge to the 66-year-old Turkish leader, who has responded by flooding the streets with police. For the religiously conservative Erdogan, their social media-driven campaign—now in its second month—has ominous echoes of 2013 protests that began in defense of an Istanbul park before morphing into a national movement. For the students, the appointment of Melih Bulu, a losing parliamentary candidate from Erdogan's ruling party who denies claims of plagiarizing his doctorate thesis, as head of the elite Istanbul institution was the last straw in a life filled with discontent. "We are not happy with the economy, we are not happy with the growing pressure," Kurbanzade, 19, told AFP outside the campus, which has been besieged by police barricades since the start of the year.

"Acts of femicide go unpunished, mobsters walk free from jail and are given the red carpet treatment, but our friends are detained because of a tweet. We don't accept this," she said. Police have fired rubber bullets and tear gas while detaining hundreds across Istanbul and in smaller solidarity rallies in big cities such as Ankara and Izmir.

Although most are quickly released, the jailings and heavy-handed police tactics remind many of the sweeping powers Erdogan has assumed since surviving a coup bid in 2016, which was followed by a punishing social and political crackdown. "A mood of discontent—from the presidential regime to the economic collapse—has found a new form of expression through Bogazici," said Zeynep Gambetti, an associate professor of political theory at the university.

Culture wars

After initially ignoring the protests, Erdogan this month decided to turn them into part of a broader culture war being waged across Turkey's deeply polarized society. For the first time since assuming power in 2003, he unleashed several verbal assaults on the LGBT movement, blaming it for the protests with a venom that drew immediate condemnation from the United States and the European Union. "Don't pay attention to what those lesbians say," he told a group of female supporters last week, defending Bulu's appointment as lawful. The students have responded to Erdogan on the streets and on Twitter, with several who run the protests' social media accounts jailed and charged with insulting the president.—AFP

International

Anger as hopes fade for Indian workers after glacier disaster

Kin of 30 people still trapped in tunnel jostle with police

TAPOVAN, India: Dozens of angry and desperate relatives of about 30 people trapped in a tunnel since a glacier disaster in India jostled with police yesterday as hopes faded that they would be found alive. More than 170 people were still missing after a barrage of water and debris hurtled with terrifying speed and power down a valley on Sunday morning, sweeping away bridges and roads and hitting two hydroelectric plants.

Thirty-two bodies have been found so far, officials said yesterday. It may take days for more bodies to be recovered under the tons of rocks and other debris and the thick blanket of grey mud. The main focus of the massive rescue operation, under way day and night since Sunday, is a tunnel near a severely damaged hydroelectric plant that was under construction at Tapovan in Uttarakhand state.

Workers there have been battling their way through hundreds of tons of sludge, boulders and other obstacles to try and reach between 25 and 35 people who rescuers hope are still alive in air pockets.

"As time passes, the chances of finding them are reducing. But miracles do happen," Piyosh Rautela, a senior state disaster relief official told AFP. "We are working round the clock-man, machinery we are all working round the clock. But the amount of debris is so much that it's going to take a while to remove all that," he said.

'A joke'

Outside there were medical teams on standby

with oxygen cylinders and stretchers, as well as increasingly desperate and enraged relatives. There have been no signs that their loved ones are still alive. "This entire rescue operation is a joke," Sanjay Pant, whose 24-year-old electrical engineer brother Abhishek was in the tunnel, said. "We are not living in the 18th century where just one bulldozer can be used to clear tons of slush. Where is our technology, where are our machines?"

"Authorities are not showing any urgency to rescue those trapped. Another day and we will have to give up hope," said Santosh Yadav whose brother-in-law Sanjay was also in the tunnel.

"They cannot survive too long in the tunnel even if they are alive now. There is no air, water or food inside and it is freezing cold inside the tunnel. Only God can save them."

Shuhil Dhiman, 47, said that his brother-in-law Praveen Diwan, a private contractor and father of three, had driven into the tunnel on Sunday morning with three others when the flood hit.

"I am hoping against hope," he said. "The authorities are doing their best but the situation is beyond anyone's ability," he said.

Climate change

Twenty-five of the bodies recovered so far were yet to be identified. Many of the victims are poor workers from hundreds of miles away in other parts of India. The cause of the disaster is thought to have been a chunk of glacier breaking off. Glaciers have



CHAMOLI, India: Family members of the people trapped in a tunnel after the flash floods shout slogans to protest alleging slow pace of rescue operation in Tapovan, Chamoli district, yesterday. —AFP

been melting rapidly in the Himalayan region because of global warming, and experts predict similar catastrophes in the future.

Building activity for dams, the dredging of

riverbeds for sand and the clearing of forests for new roads—some to beef up defense on the Chinese border, others for pilgrims—are other factors. —AFP

Myanmar military tightens grip amid anti-coup protests

YANGON: Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Myanmar's biggest city for a fifth consecutive day yesterday, defying a ban on protests as the military moved to tighten its grip on the country. Crowds swarmed through Yangon demanding the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, facing down police a day after officers dispersed crowds elsewhere with tear gas and rubber bullets, and ramped up their harassment of the ousted leader's party.

The sudden escalation of force against the demonstrations sweeping the country since last week's coup prompted a fresh chorus of international condemnation after officers fired live rounds at one rally in the capital Naypyidaw. Two people were critically wounded in the incident—including one woman who was shot in the head. Images depicting her in the moments after she was shot were by Wednesday appearing on a huge protest banner and had been widely shared online alongside expressions of grief and fury.

"They can shoot a young woman

but they can't steal the hope and resolve of a determined people," UN special rapporteur Tom Andrews said yesterday. Massive crowds returned to the streets of Yangon yesterday, where the day before they had faced off against a phalanx of riot police standing alongside water cannon trucks near Suu Kyi's residence.

Though there were no reported clashes with authorities in the commercial hub on Tuesday, university student Khin Nyein Wai said she was still afraid. "I still came out as I do not like the military dictatorship," she told AFP. "This is for our future."

More politicians from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy were detained on Tuesday along with 30 others—including a journalist from local broadcaster DVB—at a protest in Mandalay, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group said. Their arrests came as police fired tear gas at protesters in the city who were waving red NLD flags.

State media claimed that the crowd



YANGON: Protesters dressed in cosplay outfits hold up signs during a demonstration against the February 1 military coup in Yangon yesterday. —AFP

had used "obscene language" and thrown objects at police, injuring four officers, in its first direct mention of the protests since they began on the weekend. "Therefore, the police members dispersed in accordance with the methods and laws," the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported, without mentioning other police confrontations elsewhere in the country. But elsewhere the disci-

pline of security forces appeared to be breaking down, with four officers defecting from their lines in the eastern town of Loikaw to join the anti-coup protests, according to local media reports. Soldiers raided NLD headquarters in Yangon after night fell, but party member Soe Win told AFP that his colleagues had been prevented from intervening due to a blanket curfew imposed on the city. —AFP

New Zealand Maori MP defies tie rule, rejects 'colonial noose'

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's parliament backed down yesterday after rejecting a Maori lawmaker because he refused to wear a tie, allowing him to speak without an accessory he labeled a "colonial noose". The issue flared on Tuesday when Maori Party co-leader Rawiri Waititi was ejected from the parliamentary debating chamber for not wearing the required attire during question time.

Waititi, who has a full-face "te moko" tattoo and dons a black cowboy hat, argued that he was wearing legitimate Maori business attire—a traditional pendant. "This is not about ties, it's about cultural identity," he said as he left. Indigenous Maori make up about 15 percent of New Zealand's five million population but are over-represented in statistics such as

poverty and imprisonment, with many blaming injustices dating back to the days of British colonial rule.

Waititi said the tie row showed race relations still needed to improve in the South Pacific nation. "This is a breach of the rights of indigenous peoples, we (must) have the freedom to express our cultural identity in a space like this," he said. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she had no objection to lawmakers not wearing ties but added "there are much more important issues for all of us".

After strictly enforcing the dress code on Tuesday, parliamentary speaker Trevor Mallard took a more relaxed approach when a tie-less Waititi spoke yesterday.

Rather than have the Maori leader ejected, Mallard simply let him ask a



WELLINGTON: This television frame grab taken from TVNZ television shows co-leader of New Zealand's Maori party Rawiri Waititi simulating a noose during his maiden speech in Wellington. —AFP

question unhindered, later saying a permanent rule change was being considered. Waititi was elected to parliament for the first time last year and in his maiden speech recounted the tale of an ancestor who was wrongly

hanged by the British for murder.

"I will adorn myself with the treasures of my ancestors and remove the colonial noose around my neck so that I may sing my song," he said as he removed his tie. —AFP

Bangladesh Islamists to hang over publisher's murder

DHAKA: Eight Islamic extremists were yesterday sentenced to death in Bangladesh for the murder of a publisher, as the Muslim-majority nation grapples with tensions between religious hardliners and secularists. Faisal Arefin Dipan, 43, the owner of a Dhaka-based publishing house that had released several atheist books, was hacked to death in October 2015 by men suspected to be members of a local jihadist group.

The attack was part of a wave of violence between 2013 and 2016 targeting secular activists, bloggers and atheist writers. Several top Islamist political party leaders were hanged over the violence under the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Prosecutor Golam Sarwar Zakir told AFP that the judge at Dhaka's Special Anti-

Terrorism Tribunal had convicted all of the eight accused men. "He (the judge) said their goal was to muzzle people's voices by murdering bloggers, writers and publishers. They wanted to disrupt public security by creating panic among the people," Zakir said. Two of the men are still on the loose and were sentenced in absentia, including mastermind Syed Ziaul Haque, a sacked army officer, Zakir added.

Haque has been charged with the killings of several secular activists. A defense lawyer for the eight men said they would appeal against the sentences.

The Bangladesh government has set up two major anti-terrorism police units in recent years to crack down on Islamic extremists. More than 100 suspected Islamists have been killed in anti-terror raids across the country and hundreds have been detained. Around half-a-dozen Islamist militant outfits have been banned. Star Bangladeshi cricketer Shakib Al Hasan has become the latest target of radicals and had to be given an armed bodyguard after he was threatened for attending a Hindu ceremony in neighboring India. —AFP

Pakistan commutes death sentences of 2 mentally disabled

LAHORE: Two mentally disabled prisoners on death row had their sentences commuted yesterday by Pakistan's Supreme Court in what activists called a landmark judgment on mental illness. The top court ordered Kanizan Bibi and Imdad Ali to be transferred to a mental health facility and called for the case of a third inmate facing execution to be reviewed. It also called for the establishment of a medical board to vet inmates for mental illness in capital cases.

"The Supreme Court of Pakistan has made a landmark judgment in the case of three mentally ill death row prisoners," said Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), a legal nonprofit representing the three inmates.

"We hope the guidelines detailed in the judgment will permeate to all levels of the judiciary and prison staff so that mental illnesses can be detected and treated instead of being ignored and denied," JPP spokesperson Ali Haider Habib added. —AFP

Two killed as multiple bombs rock Kabul

KABUL: At least two people, including a local police chief, were killed after multiple bomb blasts rocked the Afghan capital early yesterday, officials said. The latest violence in Kabul follows a pattern of attacks during morning rush-hour traffic targeting prominent Afghans including politicians, journalists, activists and judges. Police spokesman Ferdawz Faramarz told reporters that two people were killed and another wounded in their vehicle by a bomb in downtown Kabul.

Interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian told AFP that one of those killed was a district police chief in the capital. An AFP photograph at the scene said the bomb had ripped through the rear of what appeared to be an armored vehicle.

Minutes earlier, another blast targeting a vehicle in the same district wounded four people, Faramarz added. A third blast targeted a police vehicle in Paghman district on the outskirts of Kabul. Authorities did not say if the blasts were caused by so-called "sticky bombs" attached to the vehicles, or roadside improvised explosive devices.

Yesterday's blasts come a day after militants shot dead four government employees in an ambush in the capital. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attacks. Afghan and US officials have blamed the Taliban for the wave of violence, but the group has denied the charges. The surge in violence comes as peace talks that started in September between the Taliban and Afghan government have so far failed to achieve a breakthrough. —AFP

Hong Kong radio host denied bail

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong internet radio host was denied bail yesterday under Beijing's new national security law—even though he has not been charged with an offence under the sweeping legislation. The court's decision illustrates how the presumption of bail for non-violent crimes—once a hallmark of Hong Kong's common law legal system—is being swept away by the new national security law and expanded to include other offences.

Wan Yiu-sing, 52, was charged earlier this week with sedition, a colonial-era law, for the content of four online talk shows he hosted last year. Yesterday he was remanded into custody ahead of his eventual trial after a judge decided his alleged sedition offences were a national security risk.

It comes a day after Hong Kong's top court delivered a landmark judgment concerning bail for national security crimes. On Tuesday the Court of Final Appeal said the security law "creates such a specific exception to the general rule in favor of the grant of bail and imports a stringent threshold requirement for bail applications". The ruling also said offences outside the security law could also be considered national security risks where bail might be denied, offering treason, sedition and "incitement to disaffection" as examples.

The sedition charges against Wan are only the second time the colonial-era law has been used since Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China. Last year another internet radio host was also charged with sedition and remanded into custody. Police and prosecutors are using an expanded suite of legal powers to pursue dissidents following huge and often violent democracy protests in 2019. —AFP

Business

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2021

Gulf Bank records a net profit of KD 29 million in 2020

Board of Directors recommends a cash dividend of 5 fils per share

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank K.S.C.P. ("Bank") announced its financial results for the year ended 2020.

Financial summary

Gulf Bank reported a net profit of KD 29 million and earnings per share of 10 fils for the year ended 31 December 2020 compared to a net profit of KD 64 million and earnings per share of 22 fils for the year ended 31 December 2019. The Board of Directors is recommending a cash dividend of 5 fils per share for shareholders' approval at the Annual General Meeting to be held in March 2021. This would be the sixth straight year in a row Gulf Bank has paid cash dividends to shareholders.

The decline in net profit compared with the prior year was driven by lower interest income (KD 47 million) from a sharply lower interest rate environment, lower fee income (KD 8 million) from a slack in economic activity, and non-recurring interest income in 2019 (KD 20 million) partially offset by lower interest expense (KD 27 million) and a reduction in operating expenses (KD 14 million). However, the Bank is well positioned as it enters 2021 with strong credit quality, high excess provisions, significant capital buffers, and 'A' ratings from the major credit rating agencies.

The bank's non-performing loan ratio for the year-end 2020 stood at 1.1 percent, no change from year-end 2019.

At the end of 2020, total provisions on credit facilities were KD 284 million compared with KD 172 million of provisions required under the IFRS 9 accounting standard. Thus, the Bank held excess provisions of KD 112 million compared with KD 106 million a year ago. This was the third straight year since IFRS 9 was introduced where the Bank's excess credit provisions exceeded KD 100 million.

The bank's regulatory capital ratios remained strong as the Tier 1 ratio of 14.85 percent was 5.4 percent above the regulatory minimum of 9.5 percent and the Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 18.25 percent was 6.8 percent above the regulatory minimum of 11.5 percent.

The bank maintained its 'A' ratings from the four major credit rating agencies:

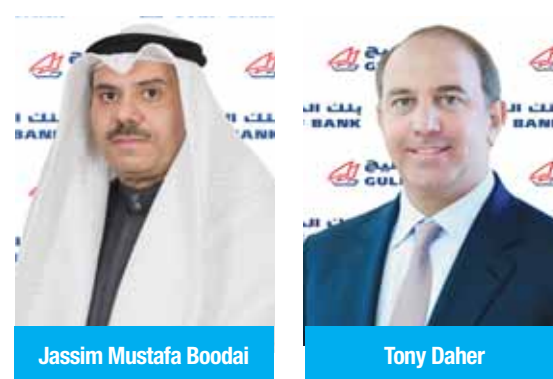
- Moody's Investors Service maintained the Long-Term Deposits Rating of "A3" with a "Stable" outlook.
- Fitch Ratings affirmed the Bank Long-term Issuer Default Rating of "A+" with a "Stable" outlook.
- S&P Global Ratings affirmed the Bank Issuer Credit Rating at "A-" with a "Negative" outlook.
- Capital Intelligence affirmed Gulf Bank's Long-term Foreign Currency Rating of "A+" with a "Stable" outlook.

Commenting on the results, Jassim Mustafa Boodai, Gulf Bank's Chairman said: "2020 was truly an unprecedented year. Our everyday lives have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, which is still having an impact on the economy and society. During 2020, Gulf Bank's financial performance highlighted the strength of its franchise and its ability to navigate through the current environment. The bank's solid capital, comfortable liquidity levels, ample credit provisioning, and low non-performing loan ratio have served us well throughout these challenging times. We continue to focus on our priorities: customers, employees, and our communities. The Bank's strategy remains centered on three key pillars:

- Leveraging technology and digitalization in order to improve customer experience and operating efficiencies.
- Driving selective organic growth without compromising our risk standards.
- Promoting a strong performance driven culture, reinforced with engagement," Boodai added.

Business highlights

Commenting on the bank's operations, Tony Daher, Gulf Bank's CEO said: "The consumer banking segment continued its upward trajectory, grow-



Jassim Mustafa Boodai

Tony Daher

its extensive ATM network and digital banking channels. In addition, the digital platform was enhanced through improved biometric login, push notifications, and 'know your customer' updates."

"Despite very challenging market conditions, the Corporate segment remained agile and selective in managing the loan book of KD 2.7 billion as of year-end 2020, which contributes 62 percent of the total loan book. The Corporate team shifted their focus to support Corporate clients and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to meet their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic," Daher added.

Key messages

1. Earnings per share of 10 fils for the year ended 31 December 2020
2. The Board of Directors recommends cash dividend of 5 fils, representing the sixth straight year where Gulf Bank have paid out cash dividends to shareholders.
3. Non-performing loan ratio for the year-end 2020 stood at 1.1 percent, no change from year-end 2019.
4. The Bank's regulatory capital ratios remained strong with Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 18.25 percent.
5. The Bank maintained its 'A' ratings from the four major credit rating agencies.

ing by 6 percent to reach KD 1.7 billion as of year-end 2020, contributing 38 percent of Gulf Bank's total loan book.

Although physical branches were not operating at 100 percent capacity during most of the year due to the country's lockdown, the Bank was able to provide continuity of service to customers through

The bank ended 2020 with several digital achievements and information technology enhancements. Throughout the year, Gulf Bank achieved several digital milestones and implemented major updates that all customers - from individuals to larger businesses and SMEs - benefited from. Gulf Bank launched several initiative and online banking

solutions including "Visit Gulf Bank," a mobile application allowing customers to book appointments to visit their nearest branch. Also, large-sums cash deposit machines were provided to facilitate the depositing process in one transaction. A complete digital loan application process was also launched during the year. In addition, the Bank facilitated the process of checking on the status of ministry and public sector salaries by publishing the latest updates on the Gulf Bank website as soon as salaries were disbursed to clients. Businesses can apply now for letters of credit and guarantees online, with end-to-end processing.

Sustainability

2020 marked a year of historic changes, requiring communities everywhere to respond quickly to unprecedented challenges. From the start of the pandemic to date, Gulf Bank has been at the forefront of that response; mobilizing rapidly to improve conditions for its employees, the general public, and our beloved Kuwait.

At the start of the pandemic, Gulf Bank contributed to the Central Bank of Kuwait's KD 10 million support Fund designed to allow local banks to assist national efforts in combating the spread of the novel coronavirus. Gulf Bank also launched a nationwide mental and physical wellness campaign to raise awareness about adjusting to the gradual and safe return to the workplace. Psychological services and well-being webinars were offered for employees in recognition of the importance of mental and social health during the pandemic. And as a champion of women's economic empowerment and the importance of a mother's role in the society, Gulf Bank provided its female employees an option of flexible working hours to support their families.

Appreciation

Boodai concluded his remarks by stating: "On behalf of the Board of Directors, we would like to express our gratitude to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, for their wise leadership and vision. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Capital Markets Authority for their dedicated efforts in supporting and promoting Kuwait's Banking sector. Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all frontliners who have put their lives and wellbeing on the line to fight this pandemic. I would also like to thank our shareholders, our customers, and our teams for their loyalty over the years, with a special appreciation to our board of directors for their guidance and valuable contributions."

Chip shortage puts the brakes on automakers

PARIS: A shortage of silicon chips is forcing automakers to cut back on production across the globe and may encourage efforts to cut reliance on Asian suppliers. Ford announced Thursday that it would drastically reduce output of its top-selling F-150 truck because of the shortage of semiconductors, while General Motors has announced it will suspend work at three North American factories.

In China, certain factories are shutting for two weeks. In Germany, Volkswagen halted production lines at two factories in January and in France Stellantis is cancelling Saturday shifts. Today's cars are chock full of processors. For example, an Audi SUV contains 38 of them, from the engine to the ABS braking system, and from the air bags to the parking assistance.

With automakers having in recent decades extended their supply chains and having become increasingly reliant on just-in-time delivery of parts, the shortage is quickly having a major impact on the sector. Market research firm IHS Markit recently estimated the shortage could delay the production of 672,000 vehicles in the first quarter of the year, mostly in China and Europe.

Shortage to last months

Today's shortages are the boomerang effect of auto factory shutdowns in early 2020 as Covid-19 first swept the world. "The sharp slowdown in the global auto industry in the first quarter of 2020 resulted in putting suppliers on temporary standby and delaying planned investments to respond to demand," said Claude Cham, who represents French auto parts



PARIS: A shortage of silicon chips is forcing automakers to cut back on production across the globe and may encourage efforts to cut reliance on Asian suppliers.

suppliers. But with chips in strong demand across various industries—especially as sales of computers exploded during lockdowns—chipmakers turned their attention to other clients.

The auto sector then recovered more swiftly than expected in Asia, particularly in China. Bosch, the world's top auto parts manufacturer which produces some chips itself, said it is difficult to respond to swings in demand as setting up production can take up to six months for complicated models.

Meanwhile, 70 percent of production of the most advanced chips is assured by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), according to IHS Markit. TSMC said its chip fabrication plants are running at full capacity and was doing its best to meet demand from automakers.

"We don't see any improvement in the

first quarter," warned Helmut Gassel, marketing director at German chipmaker Infineon. "For the second quarter, it depends to what extent the supply chain can shift. But this could last until the end of the year," he warned. IHS doesn't see a quick recovery either.

"The shortage is expected to last until the third quarter of 2021, when re-allocation of capacity from semiconductor foundries and possibly some cooling-off of consumer electronics demand should provide greater supply security."

Automakers say they are doing their best to handle the situation, but it still harms them when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-fueled plunge in sales last year. Ford said last week that it expects the delays could cost it \$1-\$2.5 billion in 2021. Most hope to be able to catch up on lost production in the second half of the year. — AFP

Firms hope for post-COVID profits from 'digital nomads'

PARIS: Companies around the world are betting that spiking interest in working from abroad during the pandemic will prove the foundation for a profitable new sector that can thrive in the years ahead.

"COVID has sped things up, what used to be a niche has become the norm," says Emmanuel Guisset, whose firm Outsite rents slots in shared living and working spaces to so-called "digital nomads" from Portugal to Hawaii.

He calls the pandemic a "springboard" for his business, one in a whole web of companies offering highly-mobile online workers everything from coworking spaces to Instagrammable villas and training to ease them into their new way of life. Although it had to close its properties in the first months of the coronavirus outbreak, Outsite enjoyed a 30-percent increase in

reservations compared with 2019 and masses of new users.

"When things are back to normal, it's going to explode," Guisset predicts. Crucially, employers are increasingly open to the idea, with around 20 companies contacting Guisset to arrange paid-for stays for their workers—"a way of hanging on to talented employees," he says. "The million dollar question" for the budding sector is whether such openness at workplaces will outlive pandemic restrictions, says Professor Maurice Cohen of the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Living in Outsite's Lisbon space since last autumn, Ambroise Debret has been chasing the digital nomad dream as a freelance web marketer for the past four years. He sees the stay as a way to get to know others walking the same path—saying "it's a bit as if we were all going to the office together".

Despite their footloose wanderings, such workers feel both "the need for a connection to the local and to belong to a community," says researcher Clement Marinos of France's University of Southern Brittany. Debret even has a side hustle offering training in the lifestyle, saying he's seen growing interest with 24 signups in January. — AFP



Business

WhatsApp flap shows importance of message platform to Facebook

Trust in service is increasingly important to leading social network's future

WASHINGTON: When WhatsApp users began to raise concerns about a new privacy policy being rolled out, members of a Washington pickup soccer group decided to switch their communications to rival messaging platform Signal, ditching the Facebook-owned service. The shift was "about moving as many users away from the Facebook empire, which for my liking has become way too big and powerful," said Bernhard Fleck, one of the players.

The flap over WhatsApp's privacy policy - described by Facebook as a misunderstanding about efforts to bring businesses onto the platform - threatens to erode trust in the service which is increasingly important to the leading social network's future. The California giant last month delayed implementation of a new policy which critics said could expand data collection from some two billion WhatsApp users around the world.

Even with the delay in place, the policy caused an uproar and prompted a surge in interest in rival messaging services such as Signal and Telegram. A WhatsApp blog post cited "confusion" over the policy update and maintained that it "does not expand our ability to share data with Facebook".

The update concerns how merchants using WhatsApp to chat with customers can share data with Facebook, which could use the information for targeted ads, according to the social network. The policy will be reviewed and won't be implemented before May 15, according to the company.

Ryan Calo, a privacy researcher with the University of Washington's Tech Policy Lab, said that even though many users misinterpreted the new policy, the backlash is understandable. "The original sin was purchasing WhatsApp and folding it into the business model of Facebook which monetizes all the data they have," Calo said. "The

changes aren't as dystopian as some people are thinking. But it is moving to a model that many people don't trust."

WhatsApp, acquired in 2014 for some \$19 billion - the largest sale of a venture-backed firm at the time - is seen as a strategic asset for Facebook as it faces slowing growth for its core social network and looks to expand its offerings for connecting users and businesses. The controversy comes as Facebook seeks to integrate its "family" of applications with a common technology and provide more ways for people and businesses to connect, while US antitrust enforcers meanwhile press to "unwind" Facebook's acquisition of WhatsApp and Instagram.

Merrill Lynch analyst Justin Post said in a recent research note that "we continue to see WhatsApp as an important driver of potential future Facebook stock value" and predicted that the social media giant would overcome these issues as it did with the Cambridge Analytica political scandal.

With easy connections for voice and video calls, WhatsApp has a strong global user base but has not begun any meaningful monetization of the service, said Jasmine Enberg, senior analyst of global trends at the research firm eMarketer. "It was only a matter of time before Facebook worked out a way to make it into a revenue stream," Enberg said.

She added that since Facebook has apparently ruled out using WhatsApp for advertising, it is moving toward making it an e-commerce platform along the lines of China's WeChat with business tools for customer service and support.

Privacy advocates point out that WhatsApp has in fact been sharing data with Facebook since it implemented a new policy in 2016, except from users who opted out at that time. Data from European Union users has also been excluded with-



out affirmative consent under EU privacy laws. Indicating that WhatsApp users could no longer opt out last month, "was a little insulting to people's intelligence," said Gennie Gebhart, a privacy researcher with the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

"A lot of people joined WhatsApp to get away from Facebook, but now they are seeing they are sharing their data with that company," she said. But Gebhart said users have limited options now because of the so-called "network effect" - with so many people on WhatsApp, it's difficult to move away from the free service.

According to eMarketer data from last year, WhatsApp had more than 99 percent of mobile messaging app users in Brazil, 97 percent in India and 52 percent in the United States. Enberg said the latest privacy dust-up is unlikely to slow momentum for WhatsApp and Facebook, especially since there is often a "disconnect" between what people say and what they do on privacy. "Sure, many people left and more may leave," she said. "But it's unlikely we will see a mass exodus. And WhatsApp's user base is already so large, it would take precisely that to make a significant dent." — AFP

Tougher EU privacy rules loom for Messenger, Zoom

BRUSSELS: Messaging apps such as Messenger or WhatsApp and video calls on Zoom face stricter privacy rules in Europe, after a draft law passed a key EU hurdle yesterday.

The EU's 27 member states approved a proposal that was stuck since 2017, with countries split between those wanting strict privacy online and others wanting to give leeway to law enforcement and advertisers. Portugal, which currently holds the EU's rotating presidency, submitted a compromise proposal that was approved by qualified majority at a meeting in Brussels.

"The path to the council position has not been easy," Portugal's minister of infrastructure Pedro Nuno Santos said. "But we now have a mandate that strikes a good balance between solid protection of the private life of individuals and fostering the development of new technologies and innovation."

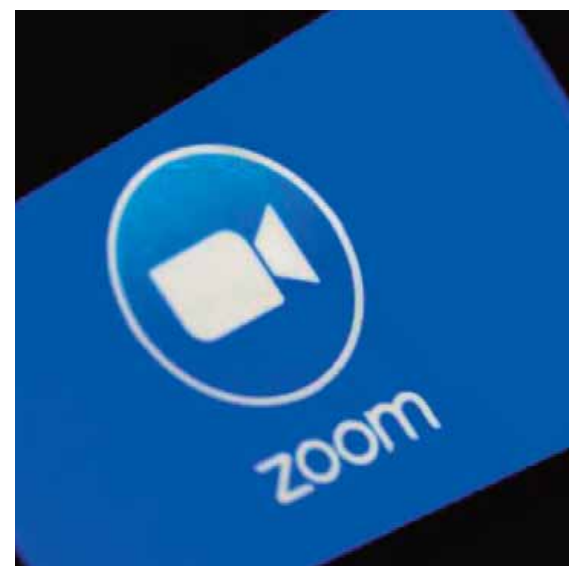
France, which wants to give its police forces stronger tools to fight terrorism, wants to limit the law's curbs on access to private data.

The fight against child pornography was also a major concern of many member states. But Germany supported far more robust privacy rules, with fewer exceptions. In the approved text, member states agreed that service providers are allowed "to safeguard the prevention, investigation, detection or prosecution of criminal offences". In addition, companies such as Facebook and Google, can continue to process metadata of their users, but only with consent and if the information is made anonymous.

The final text also lent support to the advertising

industry and abandoned a plan to ban so-called cookies that closely track user activity online. The proposal updates existing EU rules that date back to 2002, under which strict privacy protection is only applied to text messages and voice calls provided by traditional telecoms, sparing tech giants. Portugal will now negotiate with the European Parliament on a final version of the plan, that would then need ratification by MEPs and the 27 member states.

But the lead parliament's rapporteur overseeing the negotiation warned that the talks would be rigorous. "It is to be feared that the industry's attempts to undermine the directive over the past years have borne fruit - they've had enough time to do that," Birgit Sippel, a German MEP from the center left S&D group, said. "We must now analyze in detail whether the proposals of the member states really contribute to better protecting the private communication of users online, or instead primarily serve the business models of some digital corporations." — AFP



Thyssenkrupp sees 'signs of recovery' after virus hit

BERLIN: Troubled German industrial giant Thyssenkrupp said yesterday it narrowed losses in the first quarter, buoyed by a "recovery" in demand for steel and car parts after the initial hit from the pandemic. The Essen-based group, which is in the throes of a painful restructuring, posted a net loss of 141 million euros (\$171 million) between October and December, compared with a 449 million euro loss over the same period a year earlier.

The group made an adjusted operating profit of 78 million euros, reversing a loss of 185 million euros in its first quarter a year ago.

"We're noticing signs of an economic recovery and our measures are starting to bear fruit. But we're not out of the woods yet," CEO Martina Merz said in a statement. The long-struggling conglomerate, which employs around 100,000 people, last year sold off its lucrative elevator business to fund a turnaround plan that will include 11,000 job cuts.

The coronavirus outbreak compounded Thyssenkrupp's woes, pushing it deep into the red in its 2019/2020 fiscal year as lockdown measures closed dealerships and disrupted production at factories around the world. But the group said economic activity picked up in the final stretch of 2020 and it saw strong demand for car parts and industrial components used in wind energy, particularly in China and Germany.

Catch-up demand from the auto and construction sectors also boosted Thyssenkrupp's long-struggling Steel Europe unit, which has been battered by years of cheap Chinese competition.

Thyssenkrupp has repeatedly indicated that it is looking for a partner to shore up its steel operations. It has yet to formally respond to a takeover offer from Britain's Liberty Steel last October. Looking ahead, Thyssenkrupp said it now expects a "significant improvement" in full-year adjusted operating earnings towards "almost break-even", after earlier forecasting a pre-tax loss in the mid three-digit million euros range. — AFP

China factory prices see first rise in a year

BEIJING: Factory prices rose in China for the first time in a year last month as the country's vast industrial sector leads a recovery from the virus pandemic, with analysts hailing the data as a turning point for the world's number two economy.

But the lingering effects of the disease weighed on the country's vast army of shoppers as consumer prices slipped, hit by new outbreaks that led to the reimposition of containment measures.

Official data showed the producer price index (PPI), a key measure of input costs, came in at 0.3 percent in January, having fallen every month but January in 2020 owing to a collapse in demand as the virus broke out around the country and then the world. The figure was in line with forecasts and a big improvement in the 0.4 percent fall seen in December. "We believe that the turn of PPI is very solid, from a deflation trend to an inflation trend," said ING chief economist for Greater China Iris Pang. "Although this is mild,

it is a turn, a very important turn, and it will last for the rest of 2021."

The reading comes as China leads a recovery in the world economy, with the rollout of vaccines and slowing infection rates fuelling hopes that lockdowns and other containment measures can be eased, setting up a huge bounce this year. However, the consumer price index edged down a worse-than-expected 0.3 percent as a spike in infections that led to new tough restrictions in the north of the country combined with a high base from January last year.

"With the Spring Festival (Lunar New Year) taking place in February this year, and the impact of a partial epidemic spread, there were decreases in both residents' travel and some contact-based services in January," said National Bureau of Statistics official Dong Lijuan.

Dong added that air ticket prices fell by a third, while travel agency fees dropped nearly 10 percent.

This year, authorities have been



Consumer prices in China fell in January after a brief improvement at the end of last year.

encouraging residents to stay at home instead of travelling for the holiday owing to the virus but CPI is still tipped to recover. "Consumer price inflation is likely to spike in February as the New Year effect reverses," said analysts at Capital Economics, adding

the slip in January was "no cause for concern". Pork prices, however, continued a downward trend after costs of the staple meat soared last year as an African swine fever outbreak led to the culling of more than a million animals. — AFP

Equinor posts deep 2020 loss, sells US assets

OSLO: Norwegian energy giant Equinor reported yesterday a deep loss for 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic slashed demand and prices and announced it was divesting its loss-making US assets.

Equinor was the latest oil group to fall heavily into the red in 2020, reporting a net loss of \$5.5 billion compared to a profit of \$1.8 billion in 2019. That is the biggest annual loss ever reported by the group, according to financial news site e24.no.

Equinor said it was selling off its interests in the Bakken oil field straddling the US states of North Dakota and Montana to Grayson Mill Energy, backed by EnCap Investments, for around \$900 million.

After a series of ill-fated investments, Equinor has accumulated more than 200 billion kroner

(\$23.7 billion) of losses in the US in recent years. A large share of that stems from the Bakken field which, in the fourth quarter of 2020, contributed around 48,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day to Equinor's production.

"Equinor is optimizing its oil and gas portfolio to strengthen profitability and make it more robust for the future," chief executive Anders Opedal said in a statement. "By divesting our Bakken position we are realising proceeds that can be deployed towards more competitive assets in our portfolio," he added.

Analysts at RBC Europe questioned the timing of the operation. "Given the weak performance from its US assets in recent years, and multiple rounds of impairments, we believe the company was under pressure to retrench from its international expansion efforts," they said in a note.

"Clearly it is not a good time to be selling upstream assets," they added. Equinor's adjusted operating income, which excludes one-off items and is its preferred indicator, fell to \$3.9 billion from \$13.5 billion a year earlier.

Sales dropped 29 percent to \$45.8 billion in 2020. Like its peers, Equinor was hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing economic



crisis in 2020, as Brent oil prices briefly dropped below \$20. Oil prices even fell into negative territory at one point early last year as the pandemic saw governments worldwide impose harsh lockdown restrictions.

In the last few months however prices have recovered steadily, with Brent crude now back above \$60 after producers cut output and the global economy shows signs of a rebound.

Owned 67-percent by the Norwegian state, Equinor was able to mitigate some of the damage by cost-cutting, yielding savings of \$3.7 billion in 2020. — AFP

Business

NBK-Kuwait Airways Visa Credit cards free of charge for three years

Exceptional offers for travel lovers from NBK and Kuwait Airways

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) always seeks to reward its customers with exclusive offers that meet their needs and expectations. In this context, and in celebration of the first anniversary of its successful partnership with Kuwait Airways, NBK has decided to provide its customers with a three-year annual fee waiver for NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Infinite Credit Card or NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Signature Credit Card, for a limited period.

NBK-Kuwait Airways Visa Credit cards enable customers to earn up to 15,000 bonus Welcome Elite Tier Miles upon card activation, as well as up to 10,000 additional miles when spending within the first three months of card issuance. Customers will then earn up to 4 Oasis Club Miles for every KD 1 spent on their daily purchases.

The cards also allow customers to enjoy more privileges that make travelling a lot more comfortable and enjoyable, such as accessing airport lounges worldwide, enjoying travel insurance and special assistance at airports, as well as earning

points with NBK Rewards Program which can be redeemed at more than 850 participating outlets, as well as a 10 percent cashback when shopping at any of these outlets until 5 March 2021.

On this occasion, Anwar Al-Ballam, Cards Products Manager, at Consumer Banking Group, at National Bank of Kuwait said: "At NBK, we are committed to provide our customers with an integrated banking experience combining the most advanced banking services and payment solutions with a comprehensive rewards program that includes exclusive offers and prizes that are tailored to fit their needs." "We have well-established relationships with major leading institutions across many sectors, and we are keen to ensure that our continuous collaboration with them is reflected in the exclusive benefits offered to our customers, which contribute to enrich their experience and provide services and offers that live up to their expectations," he added.

Al-Ballam affirmed that NBK-Kuwait Airways

(Oasis Club) Visa Credit Cards are especially designed for travel lovers, as clearly reflected in the nature of the offers and rewards provided by these cards, which suit the unique lifestyle of this customer segment. NBK Credit Cards provide the best payment method, given the exclusive benefits they provide, including NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Credit Cards, which give travel lovers unlimited services and rewards.

NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Infinite Credit Card and NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Signature Credit Card, as well as NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Platinum Prepaid Card offer customers an array



Anwar Al-Ballam



of benefits including earning Oasis Club Miles when using the card, redeeming earned miles for tickets with Kuwait Airways, upgrading to Business or First Class, in addition to many other benefits.

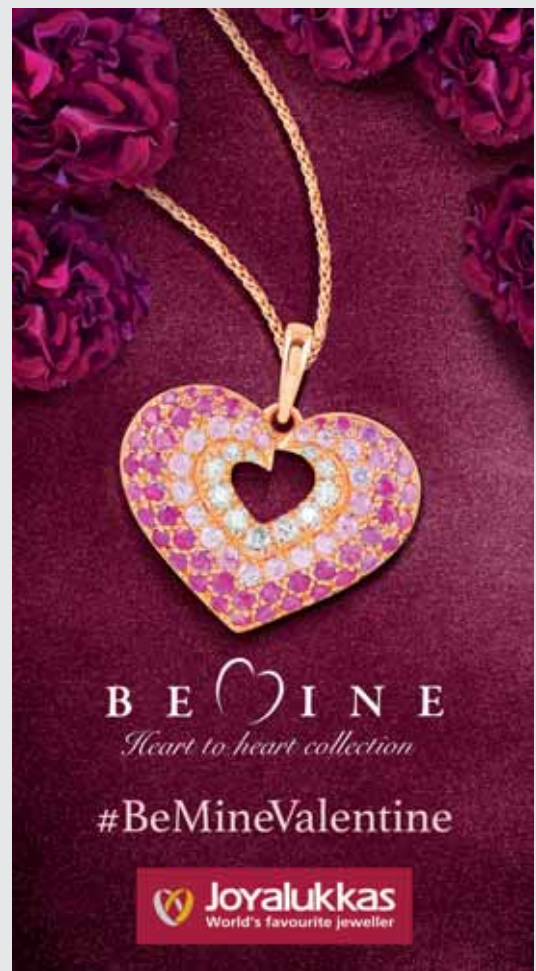
Celebrate Valentine's Day with Joyalukkas

KUWAIT: This Valentine's Day, open up your heart and express your love with a gift as unique as her with Joyalukkas Be Mine Heart to Heart Collection. The limited-edition collection features an exciting range of intimate heart-themed jewelry including pendants, rings, earrings and bracelets in diamonds and gold.

The 2021 collection is modeled on the latest design trends and is a fine blend of creativity and craftsmanship. The elegant collection is young, stylish and perfect for every occasion. To make it all the more special, Joyalukkas has announced exciting offers on every purchase including free gold coins and exchange offers.

John Paul Alukkas, MD, Joyalukkas International operations, launched the collection and quoted during the occasion, "Last year, we all learned the need for loved ones more than ever. It was love that saw us sail through the difficult period. It's time to return the love with a gift that her heart desires. I invite everyone to explore our all-new Be Mine Heart to Heart 2021 Collection and express your love with all your heart. I wish everyone a Happy Valentine's Day."

During the promotion period, customers will be rewarded with a free 1-gram Gold Coin on purchase of Diamond, Polki and Pearl Jewelry worth KD 250. Customers can also sell or exchange their old gold jewelry purchased from any jeweler for cash or brand new jewelry by Joyalukkas. The offers are valid till 15th February 2021 across all Joyalukkas showrooms.



BE MINE
Heart to heart collection
#BeMineValentine

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Heineken to cut 8,000 jobs as virus takes fizz out of sales

THE HAGUE: Dutch brewing giant Heineken said yesterday it would cut around 8,000 jobs worldwide as the coronavirus pandemic pushed it into the red. The world's number two brewer after Belgian-Brazilian AB InBev will slash nearly 10 percent of its workforce as COVID restrictions keep bars and restaurants closed.

Heineken reported a net loss of 204 million euros (\$247 million) for 2020, compared with a net profit of 2.1 billion euros a year earlier, while sales fell 17 percent to 23 billion euros. Heineken CEO Dolf van den Brink, who took charge last April, said it had been "a year of unprecedented disruption and transition" for the company. —AFP

Gulf Bank to announce winner of grand prize worth 100 times their monthly salary today!

KUWAIT: Today, Gulf Bank will be announcing the name of the lucky winner who will take home a cash prize worth up to 100 times their monthly salary, as part of Gulf Bank's annual grand Salary Package draw. The draw, which will kick off tonight at 7 PM on Kuwait Pulse FM 88.8, will be held in the presence of a representative each from the Ministry of Commerce and Ernst & Young. In addition to the grand prize draw, the Bank will also be holding a draw to reveal the name of the monthly Salary Package draw winner for January 2021, who will receive a prize equivalent to 12 times his or her monthly salary.

Commenting on the draws, Mohammed Al-

Qattan, General Manager of Consumer Banking at Gulf Bank, said: "Gulf Bank's Salary Account is one of the most rewarding salary accounts in Kuwait, offering clients a wide range of valuable benefits, including automatic entry into the account's monthly and annual draws. In addition, Salary Account clients can apply for interest-free loans and take advantage of multiple cash gifts, fee waivers and more exclusive rewards throughout the year. Today, we are proud to be celebrating our annual grand prize winner of 2020, who will receive a prize worth 100 times their monthly salary! We will also be announcing the first winner of the 2021 Salary Account draw cycle and are excited to congratulate them on winning a prize worth 12 times their salary. We invite everyone to stay tuned to our draw event on Kuwait Pulse FM this evening and wish everyone the best of luck."

About Gulf Bank's salary package

The 2021 Kuwaiti Salary Package automatically enrolls new Kuwaiti customers who transfer their salaries to Gulf Bank in the monthly and annual

Toyota says Q3 net profit soared, hikes full-year outlook

TOKYO: Toyota said yesterday that net profit soared 50 percent in the third quarter and upgraded its full-year forecasts as the global auto industry gradually recovers from the coronavirus pandemic.

The world's top carmaker said it made 838.7 billion yen (\$8.0 billion) in the three months to December, compared with 559.3 billion yen a year earlier, and revised up full-year forecasts for the second straight quarter. Net profit was at 1.90 trillion yen for the fiscal year to March, compared with its earlier estimate of 1.42 trillion yen. Sales are now seen at 26.5 trillion yen, compared with the 26.0 trillion yen previously forecast.

The firm last year overtook Volkswagen as the world's top carmaker for the first time in five years.

Analysts said it was bouncing back quicker than competitors from the effects of the global economic crisis caused by the pandemic. "In a tough business environment, Toyota is outperforming its rivals," Satoru Takada, auto analyst Tokyo-based research and consulting firm TIW, told AFP before the announcement. The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the global auto

sector but demand recovered swiftly in the second half of last year, most notably in the US and China.

"Japan's auto industry showed a steady performance as major markets are recovering from the negative impact of the new coronavirus globally," Takada said.

"But we should not be too optimistic as the current shortage of semiconductors is forcing carmakers to cut back production." On Tuesday, Toyota's smaller rival Nissan upgraded its full-year profit forecast, beating market expectations to return an operating profit for the first time in four quarters.

Honda also revised upward its full-year outlook as net profit more than doubled in the third quarter. But Nissan and Honda downgraded their sales forecasts for the current fiscal year, citing in part the chip shortage.

Reclaiming top spot

Toyota said the shortage was not causing output reductions, and sales for the third quarter increased in Japan, North America and Europe, Toyota said. It upgraded its global sales forecast to 9.73 million units for the fiscal year. Operating officer Kenta Kon said the firm was aware it could eventually face shortages that would force output reductions "so we are closely communicating with suppliers and manufacturers."

"The chip shortage has hit wide-ranging industries around the world and is expected to last at least until the end of March," Yasuo Imanaka, chief analyst at Rakuten Securities, told AFP.

"But since the revolution, the situation has frightened us. There are too many weapons among the Libyans and the militias don't respect the laws," he said. "It is more and more difficult for me, as a father, to earn a good living."

'A huge waste'

In January last year, armed groups loyal to eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar blocked key oil installations. They demanded a greater share of hydrocarbon revenues managed by the rival UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli.

Output tumbled from 1.2 million to just 100,000 barrels per day—it was nine months before Haftar agreed to release the chokehold. Libya's energy sector has sprung back to life following the ceasefire deal. But the World Bank said the fighting and oil blockade brought "the most serious political, economic and humanitarian crisis" since the tumult of 2011. "It is an economic recession without precedent," economist Kamal Al-Mansouri told AFP. More than 800,000 people are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance in Libya, the United Nations says, highlighting protection, access to critical services like healthcare and education as well as to basic household goods and commodities, including food, as among the key needs.

Salima Younis, 57, a Tripoli school secretary, said that the past decade had taken a heavy toll on Libyans. "People are so angry, frustrated, and many live in fear and increasing poverty in a rich country. It's unfair and such a huge waste."

Pariah years to boom time

Oil has long been king in Libya, whose reserves top those of Nigeria and Algeria respectively.

The petroleum sector normally makes up 60 percent of economic output and over 90 percent of export earnings. When big oil reserves were first discovered in 1959, Libya was still among the

Salary Account draws. The monthly draws allow customers the chance to win cash prizes of up to 12 times their salary, while the yearly draw gives them the opportunity to win Kuwait's largest salary prize of up to 100 times their salary.

The Salary Account also gives new customers the opportunity to receive either a KD 200 cash gift upon transferring their salaries to Gulf Bank or an interest-free loan of up to KD 10,000. Customers must have a minimum salary of KD 500 and will be eligible for the offer following their first salary transfer to Gulf Bank. Customers can also enjoy additional benefits like a Visa or MasterCard credit card free of charge for a year, as well as a chance to apply for a loan of up to KD 70,000 or a consumer loan of up to KD 25,000.



Mohammed Al-Qattan

Oil-rich Libya in poverty after decade of conflict

TRIPOLI: Libya has Africa's largest proven oil reserves and only seven million people, but a decade of bloody conflict has left its economy shattered and its population mired in poverty.

The dinar has crashed and consumer prices have surged, power outages and fuel shortages are common, and even clean water is rare in a country that was once among the continent's richest per capita. In Tripoli, defunct cranes tower precariously above the rusty steel and concrete skeletons of half-finished buildings in deserted, overgrown construction sites.

They are sad reminders of the relative prosperity and economic stability under dictator Muammar Gaddafi, whose 42-year grip on power ended with the Arab Spring uprising 10 years ago.

In recent years, the economy has fallen victim to the violent turmoil that has seen Libya torn apart by two rival administrations and countless militias. Today, while the guns have mostly fallen silent since a fragile October truce, the frontline still runs from the coastal city of Sirte to the "Oil Crescent" that holds 90 percent of its crude deposits.

After the last upsurge in fighting from 2019-2020, and amid the COVID pandemic, the already struggling economy plummeted by 66.7 percent last year, initial IMF estimates show. On top of daily insecurity, the economic crisis is further testing people in the country.

In the old days under Gaddafi, "we were safe if we were careful," said Mamadou Traore, a 62-year-old father of five from Mali, who came to Libya in the mid-1990s to find work.



A general view of the Zawiyah oil installation in Libya in this file photo. — AFP

world's poorest nations. But since then "everything concerning Libya has inextricably been linked to oil," said petroleum industry engineer Al-Mahdi Omar.

Gaddafi seized power in 1969, and his Arab Socialist Party regime quickly centralized its political hold and nationalized much of the economy. While oil helped maintain his rule by paying for public sector jobs, generous social welfare and healthcare, Gaddafi's anti-Western regime made it a pariah, cut off from major outside investment. Sanctions were imposed on Libya because of Gaddafi's support for militant groups and attacks as well as his stockpiling of chemical weapons and uranium, acquired to build a nuclear weapon.

But his regime slowly rehabilitated itself in later years and renounced unconventional weapons, leading the United Nations to lift its sanctions regime from 1999 and sparking years of economic liberalization. French contractors piled in—including for the construction of a new airport in Tripoli—as did Italian, Turkish, South Korean and Emirati firms. Russian and Chinese companies meanwhile secured rail-building contracts. —AFP

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Lifestyle | Features

COVID Cupid shoots down Thailand Valentine's Day marriages

Lovers across Bangkok will be heart-broken come Valentine's Day, with city officials declaring yesterday that all of the Thai capital's 50 districts will be banned from issuing marriage licenses. The holiday, immensely popular across the kingdom, is also typically considered an auspicious day for couples to tie the knot resulting in large queues at marriage registration offices across the city. The most popular district is Bang Rak which translates as "district of love" in Thai. But the hopes of eager-to-wed couples have been dashed.

"Bangkok's 50 district offices will refrain from providing marriage license registration service on this Valentine's

Day," Thailand's Public Relations Department said on Twitter. "The cancellation aims to prevent the spread of #COVID19." The announcement also said Chinese New Year festival, which usually involves a raucous parade in Bangkok's Chinatown, will not go on. Last year, Bang Rak district had scores of couples dressed in matching outfits or formal wear lining up before dawn to register for licenses, helped by pink-shirted civil servants wearing "love" headbands. Little fanfare has been made among the city's malls and businesses compared to previous years, though that hasn't stopped some restaurants for punting out Valentine's Day-themed

meal offerings. Burger King Thailand has debuted "Black and Pink burgers" for Valentine's Day, featuring a pink salmon patty with rose-color buns. Last year Thailand was faring well in handling the pandemic but infections have climbed to more than 23,000 cases after a new wave hit in December. This has led to a partial lockdown in Bangkok, with authorities banning bars and alcohol sales in restaurants. — AFP



In this file photo a couple shows their newly-issued marriage license on Valentine's Day in Bang Rak, the Thai capital's "district of love," in Bangkok. — AFP

VIRUS THREATENS 'GAME OVER' FOR JAPAN'S ARCADES

Evenings are normally the busiest time at Mikado, a retro gaming arcade in Tokyo, but these days the shutters come down early, leaving "Street Fighter" fans out in the cold. Bright, noisy arcades are still a neighborhood fixture in Japan, but they have been disappearing as business is hit by virus-curtailed opening hours. "This is when the place usually starts to fill up," laments Yasushi Fukamachi, a manager at Mikado, whose 250 vintage machines attract nocturnal students and office workers who have just clocked off.

It is approaching 8pm and a few dozen gamers wearing face masks are fighting it out on joystick classics, eking out their final minutes of fun before being shooed out. Since early January, Tokyo and other parts of Japan have been under a state of emergency to bring down surging virus cases. Businesses are told to close early, with possible fines for those that refuse. But unlike bars and restaurants, arcades like Mikado do not receive government cash as compensation for lost income. Several arcades went bust following Japan's first state of emergency last year, which saw most of them close completely for two months, and those that survived are now struggling. "Customers were slow to return," after the first virus emergency, Fukamachi told AFP, but by November the arcade's takings were back at 90 percent of normal levels. By late December, as Covid-19 cases soared in the capital and elsewhere, this dipped to around 50 percent. Customers stayed away despite anti-infection measures, from plastic barriers between machines to the daily disinfection of 100 yen coins for the slots, he added.



This picture shows Yasushi Fukamachi, a manager at the Mikado game center, posing in front of arcade game machines following an interview with AFP in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.

"Space Invaders" Even before the pandemic, "smaller, independent gaming centers were already closing down at a rapid rate", Morihiro Shigihara, a journalist and author who once managed an arcade, told AFP. The number of Japan's arcades has plunged from 22,000 in 1989 — around a decade after the release of "Space Invaders"-to just 4,000 in 2019, according to police, who license the establishments. And since late last year, a number of well-known arcades in Tokyo have shut up shop for good, including in the entertainment districts of Akihabara and Shinjuku.

"The fact that even big arcades are

going out of business one after the other shows the situation's severity," said Shigihara. Gaming giant Sega in November sold off 85 percent of its arcade business, although its logo still adorns game centers nationwide that are now run by another company.

With consumers likely to own a console, and facing competition from mobile games, arcades have had to adapt to survive. More than half of a typical arcade's takings are now from profitable claw-crane toy machines, according to the Japan Amusement Industry Association. Video games only accounted for 13 percent of arcade sales in 2017, down from a third in 1993, it says.



A man playing a game at the Mikado game center in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.



Staff member working at the Mikado game center as the center closes early due to the state of emergency from the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP photos



Yasushi Fukamachi, a manager at the Mikado game center, cleaning the machines.



A man standing in front of arcade game machines at the Mikado game center in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.



This picture shows posters asking people to wear facemasks at the Mikado game center in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.

ARCTIC TOWN'S OLYMPIC BID HIGHLIGHTS RACE TO SAVE PLANET

A snow-covered Arctic village in Finland has struck a viral hit with a fake bid for the Summer Olympics to highlight the impact of climate change in the far north. Authorities in Salla, a remote municipality of 3,500 people in northern Finland, in January released a pitch to become a candidate city for the 2032 Games, despite average temperatures barely climbing above freezing for six months of the year. "I've never felt

warmth before, but I'm sure it's coming," one resident says in the video bid, which warns that a snow-covered tundra will become a beach volleyball pitch and a frozen river the site for surfing if climate change is not addressed.

The video describes the town as "in the middle of nowhere" and says it is the coldest place in Finland. In winter, temperatures regularly sink to minus 10 to minus 20 degrees Celsius (14 degrees to

minus four degrees Fahrenheit). A #Salla2032 website introduces the campaign's mascot, a reindeer called "Kesa" ("Summer") which is plagued by mosquitoes—a reference to insects migrating further north in the Arctic region. Scientists say the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the global average, endangering local wildlife as well as releasing carbon stored in the melting permafrost. The video has become a hit on social media, garnering around 400,000 views, mayor Erkki Parkkinen told AFP.

It has prompted "messages and calls from around the world saying 'We can't let the summer games happen in Salla,'" he said. "It's helped people understand that here on the Arctic circle, we have livelihoods which need winters, and if we lose our winters it makes many big prob-

lems for us and for the whole planet." The stunt, produced in conjunction with the Fridays for Future movement, urges people to take action to help the climate, from recycling to volunteering to lobbying MPs. "We hope our small campaign to 'Save Salla, save the planet' gets more people thinking and doing climate-friendly acts," Parkkinen said. In Lapland, where tourism has been a major source of income, Salla's municipal leaders are pushing the government to reinstate an old railway allowing visitors to reach the remote region by more eco-friendly means. "We don't want to be the best place to host the summer games in 2032," Parkkinen said. "We want to keep Salla and the planet as it is now." — AFP

Mads Mikkelsen comedy among international Oscars shortlist

A boozy Mads Mikkelsen comedy from Denmark, a Netflix musical drama from Mexico and an elderly lesbian romance from France are among the Oscars hopefuls on the best foreign film shortlist announced Tuesday. Fifteen contenders for the international feature film Academy Award were selected from 93 eligible submissions, and will be whittled down to five nominees next month, before April's Oscars ceremony.



Danish tragicomedy "Another Round" stars former James Bond villain Mikkelsen as a middle-aged alcoholic who vows to get drunk every day, as part of a pseudoscientific experiment featuring three fellow school teachers. The movie, which bagged a Golden Globe nomination last week, debuted at last year's Toronto festival, and was dubbed an "engaging tribute to friendship, family and bacchanalian hedonism in moderation" by The Hollywood Reporter.

It will compete with Mexican teen drama "I'm No Longer Here," set within the colorful Latin American musical tradition of cumbia, and France's "Two of Us," about a pair of retired women who have kept their passionate affair secret for decades. Last year's international Oscar went to South Korea's "Parasite," which became the first winner to also scoop overall best picture. The country failed to make this edition's shortlist, with East Asia represented by Taiwan's acclaimed family drama "A Sun" and Hong Kong's high-school bullying saga "Better Days."

But "Parasite" distributor Neon will hope for repeat glory with Ivory Coast's "Night of the Kings," a mystical fable told within the walls of the African country's notorious Maca prison. "La Llorona," a modern political retelling of the folklore horror tale, set among ruthless military leaders and indigenous tribes, hopes to become Guatemala's first nominated film. Romania and Tunisia also never nominated-made the cut with their submissions too.

Submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chile, Czech Republic, Iran, Norway and Russia round off the international feature film list. Italy's submission "Notturmo" did not feature on the international shortlist, even though no country has won more Oscars in the category than the land of Federico Fellini. But "Notturmo," about everyday people fleeing devastating Middle East conflicts, made the best documentary Oscar shortlist-also unveiled Tuesday- instead.

It will compete with disability documentary "Crip Camp" from the Obamas' production house, as well as Wuhan pandemic hospital film "76 Days," Texas teen politics portrait "Boys State" and prison system feature "Time." This year's Oscars, delayed by the pandemic, take place April 25. — AFP

Sports

Manchester United reach FA Cup quarter-finals, Burnley crash out

McTominay ensures Red Devils remain in hunt for first FA Cup title since 2016

LONDON: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer warned "wasteful" Manchester United to be "more clinical" after they edged into the FA Cup quarter-finals with a hard-fought 1-0 win against West Ham on Tuesday. Solskjaer's side were well below their best in a scrappy fifth round tie at freezing, snow-dusted Old Trafford.

But a fine finish from Scotland midfielder Scott McTominay ensured United advanced to the last eight for a seventh successive season. United last won the FA Cup in 2016 and McTominay's third goal in three games kept them in the hunt to lift the trophy for the 13th time.

After the frustration of the late Everton equalizer that dented their Premier League title challenge on Saturday, this was an essential result to lift the mood at United. It was hardly an eye-catching performance however, with United laboring against defensive West Ham until McTominay and Bruno Fernandes were introduced as second half substitutes.

"When it's only 1-0 and we are wasteful, anything can happen to us. We knew that from the last game," Solskjaer told BBC Sport. "I think we got about 15 to 17 shots in the end but we need to be more clinical. We should have finished the game off earlier. We needed to have a good result and a good feeling after today because we were low after Everton game. We are in the hat and that's what we wanted. We want to challenge and we want to go to the final. That's what we're here at Man United for."

Amad Diallo was named on the United bench for the first time since the 18-year-old's January move from Atalanta as Solskjaer made six changes.

Lukasz Fabianski prevented United from taking the lead in the 27th minute when he brilliantly pushed Victor Lindelof's header onto the post. There was a nasty clash of heads between West Ham's Issa Diop and United's Anthony Martial towards the end of the first half. Both continued after treatment but Diop did not return in the second half due to concussion.

"To clarify, Issa Diop was replaced as a concussion substitute, meaning we can now make a total of six changes, as can Manchester United, if we see fit," West Ham said in a statement. Fabianski saved well from Marcus Rashford before the game went into extra-time. McTominay finally made the breakthrough in the 97th minute. Martial's cross was only half-cleared and Rashford's deft touch teed up McTominay to steer a composed strike past Fabianski from just inside the area.

Cherries shock Burnley

In Tuesday's other fifth round tie, Burnley suffered a surprise exit as second tier Bournemouth won 2-0 at Turf Moor. Sean Dyche's side fell behind to Sam Surridge's first half goal and Junior Stanislas finished them off with a late penalty. While the loss was embarrassing, it will be forgotten if Dyche ensures Burnley retain their Premier League status. Burnley are currently 17th in the Premier League, sitting eight points clear of the relegation zone.

It could have been an even more chastening night for Burnley, who initially included the ineligible Erik Pieters in the team before being alerted to the issue by Bournemouth's media chief. Dutch



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Scottish midfielder Scott McTominay (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring his team's first goal during the English FA Cup fifth round football match between Manchester United and West Ham United at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on Tuesday. — AFP

defender Pieters was banned after collecting bookings in the previous two rounds of the competition.

Pieters was replaced just before kick-off by Anthony Driscoll-Glennon, saving Burnley from a potential FA investigation. "The rules have changed this year with the booking situation and the number

of games in the FA Cup. It was just a clear oversight," Dyche said. "To be fair to Bournemouth, they flagged it and mentioned it, so credit to them for a bit of gentlemanly conduct. We jumped on it straight away and people at our club held their hands up in the right slots." — AFP

Juventus hold Inter to make Italian Cup final

TURIN: Juventus are in the final of the Italian Cup after a goalless draw with rivals Inter Milan on Tuesday put them through 2-1 on aggregate. Andrea Pirlo's side will face one of Napoli or Atalanta, who were locked at 0-0 ahead of last night's second leg in Bergamo, in May's final in Rome after comfortably holding Inter in a disciplined display at the Allianz Stadium.

Inter barely troubled veteran Juve goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon despite the return of Romelu Lukaku and Achraf Hakimi, while Cristiano Ronaldo was twice denied by fine Samir Handanovic saves at the other end.

Juve are unbeaten since losing 2-0 to Inter in Serie A last month as novice coach Pirlo drags his team into contention in league and cup after an uncertain start coaching the Italian champions. They have conceded just once since that defeat, in the first leg win at the San Siro last week, and look in ominous form as they return to the title chase at the weekend.

Juve sit seven points behind leaders AC Milan with a game in hand and a trip to troubled Napoli awaiting them on Saturday. "It's a completely different feeling as a coach, we're really happy but we haven't done anything yet," said Pirlo to state broadcaster Rai.

"We were really good today, they basically didn't have a shot on goal. Handanovic was the best player on the pitch," added the 41-year-old, who won four league titles as a Juve player. Antonio Conte, who led Pirlo to three of those Serie A crowns, will now have to concentrate entirely on overhauling Milan if he wants to win Inter their first trophy since 2011. Second-placed Inter are two points behind their city rivals ahead of their league clash with in-form



TURIN: Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo (left) shoots past Inter Milan's Slovak defender Milan Skriniar during the Italian Cup semifinal second leg football match between Juventus Turin and Inter Milan on Tuesday at the Juventus stadium in Turin. — AFP

Lazio on Sunday, while Milan travel to lowly Spezia.

Inter held at bay

Inter came into the match with a dismal recent record at Juventus, without a win since November 2012 when Conte was still managing the then-resurgent 'Old Lady' of Italian football. That win, 3-1 thanks to a brace from 2010 treble hero Diego Milito, ended a 49-match winning streak for Juve but no such heroics were on display on Tuesday night.

The return of Lukaku and Hakimi, who both missed the first leg through suspension, did nothing to improve Inter's fortunes in a blunt display from the away side, who had plenty of the ball but did very little with it. A first half of few chances featured a Juve team much-changed from the XI which beat Roma 2-0 at the weekend but equally comfortable

holding their opponents at bay.

Juve were content to sit on their first-leg lead, knowing that even a 1-0 defeat would have been enough for them to go through. Ronaldo came close to scoring first in the 64th minute when Weston McKennie pounced on sloppy play from Inter to put the Portugal captain through on goal. However Handanovic was quick off his line and pulled off a fine save to deny Ronaldo, who turned 36 last week.

Ronaldo was again denied by Handanovic five minutes later when he skipped past Milan Skriniar and Nicolo Barella and let rip with a powerful shot which the Slovene stopper did well to push away. Inter continued to push but the wall put up in front of Buffon held and Pirlo will have a chance to win his first trophy as a coach in debut season on the bench. — AFP

Real Madrid edge closer to Atletico after Getafe win

MADRID: A depleted Real Madrid moved to within five points of La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid on Tuesday by beating struggling Getafe 2-0. Madrid were without nine first team players, prompting Zinedine Zidane to adopt a 3-5-2 formation which he admitted they had not practiced, with Marcelo and the 20-year-old Marvin Park as wing-backs.

Karim Benzema and Forland Mendy scored the goals at Valdebebas, with Mendy's finish teed up by his fellow left-back Marcelo, who reveled in his new role. Madrid's victory puts them in sight of city rivals Atletico even if Diego Simeone's side have played two games fewer. "We have to believe in ourselves, we have to fight," said Zidane. "There is a lot of the league left, a lot in front of us."

Atletico had slipped up for the first time in nine league matches on Monday night, a late equalizer conceded in a 2-2 draw with Celta Vigo giving Madrid and Barcelona a ray of hope in the title race. And while the trophy remains very much in Atletico's hands, Madrid can only hope to increase the pressure by building some momentum themselves, especially with a Champions League tie against Atalanta around the corner.

Last week, an angry Zidane had castigated reporters for showing his team a lack of "respect" following a run of just two wins in seven matches, which included going out in both the Spanish Super Cup and Copa del Rey. His players have responded, backing up a gutsy win over Huesca on Saturday by seeing off a Getafe side that look a pale shadow of the team that has challenged for the top four in recent seasons. They drop to 13th, four points



MADRID: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema (right) scores a goal during the Spanish league football match between Real Madrid CF and Getafe CF at the Alfredo di Stefano stadium in Valdebebas, on the outskirts of Madrid on Tuesday. — AFP

above the bottom three.

Madrid deliver the goods

"We played with too much respect, too much fear," said Getafe coach Jose Bordalas. "We have to change and rediscover our identity." Zidane's long list of absentees includes Sergio Ramos, Eden Hazard, Eder Militao, Alvaro Odriozola, Lucas Vazquez, Fede Valverde, Dani Carvajal, Toni Kroos and Rodrygo.

To adapt, Zidane opted for a back three of Raphael Varane, Nacho and Mendy, with Marcelo at left wing-back and a surprise start for Park, who was born in Mallorca and coached at Tranmere

Rovers in England before joining Madrid's youth teams in 2016.

"In the end we weren't able to prepare it or train very much but we spent a bit of time talking about it," said Zidane. "The players have delivered very well what we discussed, which is good because it's not a system we are used to playing with."

Casemiro and Benzema both missed chances early on, the latter grazing the crossbar with a header, before Luka Modric drew a good save after the first of many marauding Marcelo runs. Getafe offered little, although Marc Cucurella had an opening in the box in the second half but took too long and the chance was lost. — AFP

News in brief

PSG lose Di Maria

PARIS: Argentinian forward Angel Di Maria will miss the first leg of Paris Saint-Germain's Champions League last 16 match at Barcelona, coach Mauricio Pochettino said on Tuesday. Di Maria suffered a thigh injury during the 2-0 Ligue 1 win against Marseille on Sunday and "he will not be at the Camp Nou" for the game on February 16, Pochettino said. Despite the bad news about Di Maria, last year's Champions League finalists hope to be able to select first-choice goalkeeper Keylor Navas, who is expected to return from a groin injury to resume training later this week. — AFP

Atletico v Chelsea moved

LONDON: Atletico Madrid's home match against Chelsea in the Champions League last-16 has been moved from Spain to Bucharest as a result of coronavirus restrictions, UEFA confirmed yesterday. Chelsea said in a statement on their website that the date of the match, February 23, and the kick-off time (20:00 GMT) would remain the same. The second leg is scheduled to take place at Stamford Bridge in London on March 17. The Spanish government on Tuesday extended a ban on flights from Britain, Brazil and South Africa from February 16 to March 2, in an attempt to stem the spread of new variants of COVID-19. — AFP

Man Utd, Arsenal play in Italy

PARIS: Manchester United and Arsenal's first leg matches in the last 32 of the Europa League have been moved to Italy, UEFA announced Tuesday, as coronavirus restrictions hit travel across Europe. United will face Spain's Real Sociedad in their away leg at Juventus' Allianz Stadium in Turin, while Arsenal will travel to the Stadio Olimpico in Rome to face Benfica. In a statement, UEFA said that both matches would take place as originally scheduled on February 18, with United kicking off at 17:55 GMT and Arsenal 20:00 GMT. Molde's home leg with Hoffenheim, also scheduled for 20:00 GMT on the same day, has been moved to Villarreal's Estadio de la Ceramica. — AFP

Racism action plan

LONDON: The Premier League on Tuesday launched a racism action plan to build on existing moves taken to promote equality, diversity and inclusion. The plan outlines a series of commitments aimed at creating greater access to opportunities and career progression for black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups in football, and actions to eradicate racial prejudice. Premier League chief executive Richard Masters said: "Football is a diverse sport, which brings together communities and cultures from all backgrounds. This diversity has made the game stronger on the pitch and it is vital we ensure this is reflected across all areas of the game." — AFP

Sports

Djokovic passes Tiafoe test, Serena sublime at Australian Open

Wawrinka, Venus out, Osaka charges through

MELBOURNE: Eight-time champion Novak Djokovic was made to sweat at the Australian Open yesterday as Serena Williams made serene progress in her bid for a record-equaling 24th Grand Slam title. Women's favorite Naomi Osaka also charged through but fellow major-winners Stan Wawrinka, Bianca Andreescu and Petra Kvitova were all second-round casualties. Djokovic was given a stern examination by America's Frances Tiafoe and dropped his first set of the tournament before recovering to win 6-3, 6-7 (3/7), 7-6 (7/2), 6-3. "I was fortunate to get through the third set today, it was anybody's game," said the defending champion, after his win in hot conditions on Rod Laver Arena.

The top seed looked in control after taking the first set, but lightning-quick Tiafoe, who reached the quarter-finals two years ago, refused to go quietly. The American bounced back to take a close second set but imploded as tensions rose in the fourth, receiving a code violation for an audible obscenity as Djokovic took charge. "I thought we both played on a pretty high level. I mean, he pushed me to the very limit," said Djokovic.

The Serb is targeting a record-extending ninth title and his 18th Grand Slam trophy overall as he snaps at the heels of Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer, who top the all-time list with 20 each. He avoided the fate of 2014 winner Wawrinka, who blew three match points in the fifth-set tiebreaker in his four-hour epic with Marton Fucsovics, who won 7-5, 6-1, 4-6, 2-6, 7-6 (11/9). "I had some chance to finish the match, I didn't finish," said the 35-year-old Swiss, a three-time Grand Slam winner. "I hesitated a little bit when I had the match point and I lost it."

'Here to have fun'

Osaka, whose three Grand Slam titles include the

2019 Australian crown, had no such trouble in her evening match against France's Caroline Garcia, winning 6-2, 6-3 in 61 minutes. Earlier Williams, 39, continued her quest to equal Margaret Court's all-time mark of 24 Grand Slams with a 6-3, 6-0 romp past 99th-ranked Serbian Nina Stojanovic. Williams hit 27 winners in her 101st Australian Open match while again sporting her unique, one-legged catsuit inspired by track legend 'Flo-Jo'.

"I'm here to have fun and it's great to be playing in front of a crowd," said the American great. With Australia virtually virus-free, the tournament is welcoming the biggest Grand Slam crowds since the pandemic, although attendances are well down on previous years.

Williams' elder sister Venus, 40, was a major casualty on day three when she painfully rolled her ankle in the first set against Sara Errani before hobbling through a 6-1, 6-0 defeat. And Andreescu, the 2019 US Open champion who missed the entire 2020 season with a knee injury, saw her comeback come to an abrupt end 6-3, 6-2 against Taiwan's Hsieh Su-wei. "You need to find a way to get through and the crowd helped me fight," said Hsieh after beating the Canadian, who was coming off a draining three-setter against Mihaela Buzanescu.

Elsewhere Kvitova, the former Wimbledon champion and Melbourne runner-up in 2019, committed 44 unforced errors in her 6-4, 1-6, 6-1 defeat to Romania's Sorana Cirstea as the big names tumbled on day three. However, reigning US Open champion Dominic Thiem, runner-up to Djokovic last year, was all smiles as he beat Germany's Dominik Koepfer 6-4, 6-0, 6-2. "It was great, to be honest," Thiem said of his performance on Margaret Court Arena. Eighth seed Diego Schwartzmann of Argentina also hurried into the last 32, brushing



MELBOURNE: Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return against Frances Tiafoe of the US during their men's singles match on day three of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

aside Frenchman Alexandre Muller 6-2, 6-0, 6-3 in an hour and 32 minutes on 1573 Arena.

Later yesterday, volatile Australian Nick Kyrgios smashed a racquet, delivered underarm serves, ranted at the umpire and saved two match points Wednesday on his way into the Australian Open third round. The 25-year-old drew a raucous,

socially distanced crowd to his favored John Cain Arena and kept them highly entertained, with the atmosphere electric in a gripping clash with Frenchman Ugo Humbert. He eventually came through 5-7, 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4 after 3hrs 25mins against the 29th seed to set up a blockbuster clash with third seed Thiem. —AFP

Australian Open makes best of tough times

MELBOURNE: The usual Australian Open experience, with tens of thousands of excited fans streaming into Melbourne Park, is just a memory this year as the coronavirus puts a dampener on the tennis season's opening Grand Slam. Normally the complex on the banks of the Yarra River is abuzz for the 'Happy Slam', which is known for its relaxed atmosphere, perfect weather and ever-growing numbers of spectators.

But after months of effort and negotiations to get the Australian Open up and running in Melbourne, which is fiercely protective of its virtually virus-free status, the atmosphere so far has been low-key. While 64,387 fans crammed into the grounds on day one last year, only 17,922 turned up this time despite major drawcards such as Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic.

Some blamed the lacklustre turnout, which was well below the 30,000 maximum allowed under COVID restrictions, to unusually cool and cloudy weather. But even when the sun came out on day two, the numbers were much the same — although still considerably more than at any other Grand Slam since the pandemic took hold.

Last year, Wimbledon was cancelled for the first time since World War II, the US Open was held behind closed doors and only tiny numbers of fans were allowed at the delayed French Open. "I'm just glad it's on," said Jane Alexander, who was enjoying the tennis but disappointed at the atmosphere, with throngs of empty blue seats on the outside courts. "I just wish there were more people here."

Masks and sanitizer

Even diminished crowds are an accomplishment. Helped by aggressive travel restrictions and lockdowns, Australia has virtually eradicated the virus, making it one of the few countries where spectators can attend live sport. But the travel rules have also kept international fans away, and after the tournament was pushed back three weeks to allow for quarantine, it no longer falls in school holidays.

Fans who make the effort are faced with a precinct divided into three separate zones around



MELBOURNE: Fans of Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov cheer him on against Australia's Alex Bolt during their men's singles match on day three of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

Rod Laver, Margaret Court and John Cain arenas, curbing the usual free flow of spectators around the precinct. Social distancing measures are in place and sanitizing stations dotted around Melbourne Park. While patrons can go mask-free in the major stadiums if the roof is open, face-coverings must be worn if it is closed.

Garden Square, which has a giant screen and food outlets, is normally teeming with fans, but only a smattering were on-site yesterday, although those there were grateful the event was on at all. "Yeah it's exciting to be at the Australian Open. We've (Melbourne) worked really hard to keep (coronavirus) case numbers down. So it feels like a good reward," said Melbourne resident Elizabeth Little.

Kristen O'Brien said the tough measures were necessary to keep people safe in a city that only emerged from a four-month lockdown in October. "We don't want to go back into lockdown so it's worked out okay," she said. "We don't want to lose major events and we need tourism," she added, of the balancing act faced by organizers and the Victoria state government to ensure the event takes place.

Liverpool striker Salah. In a video call organized by their shared sponsor, he imparts wisdom on dealing with the pressures of high-level sport. "I can tell you that when I started working on my mental strength more, I saw huge improvements in my play," Salah told her in a post shared last week.

Guided by Spanish coach Justo Gonzalez, Sherif went on a 26-match win streak and cracked the top 200 in women's rankings just months into her budding career last year. In Egypt, where football is normally the dominant sport, her gritty demeanor and determination to excel have scored her much-needed sponsorship. One of Africa's richest tycoons, Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris, has lent his financial support to Sherif through his property firm Zed. She hopes to continue her stellar run and represent Egypt in the delayed Tokyo Olympics this year — another first for the country.

For now she is savoring the historic win and setting her sights on the next round in Melbourne. "It means a lot to me. This was a mental barrier I had to pass... it was very, very tough to adapt my game to it. Courts are faster and the heat... but (I am) very, very happy with my accomplishment," said Sherif. "And I'm going for more," she added. —AFP



MELBOURNE: Egypt's Mayar Sherif celebrates beating France's Chloe Paquet in their women's singles match on day two of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne on Tuesday. —AFP

Sherif becomes first Egyptian woman to advance in Grand Slam

CAIRO: Mayar Sherif became the first Egyptian woman Tuesday to advance past the first round of a Grand Slam tennis tournament on Tuesday, with a little help from superstar footballing compatriot Mohamed Salah. The Cairo-born, California-educated Sherif, 24, beat French player Chloe Paquet 7-5, 7-5 in what Australian Open organizers called a "slice of history".

The win guarantees Sherif will continue her meteoric rise in the world rankings (she is currently at 131) and comes only a few months after she secured a berth at Roland Garros last year — also a historic first at the time. She will face Kaja Juvan in the next round, after the Slovenian's British opponent Johanna Konta was forced to abandon her match due to injury.

The successive achievements of the young Egyptian tennis player since 2019, when she turned professional, have caught the eye of

News in brief

Mavs stop national anthem

LOS ANGELES: The Dallas Mavericks have opted to stop playing the US national anthem before games this season, reports said Tuesday, breaking with a pre-game ritual that is widespread in American sport. The Athletic website said the Mavericks' policy against playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before home games at the American Airlines Center was confirmed by owner Mark Cuban. Cuban did not comment further. NBA rules require players to stand for the anthem, but commissioner Adam Silver has relaxed that rule following the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests which erupted after the death of George Floyd last year. —AFP

MLB confirms April 1 start

LOS ANGELES: Major League Baseball and the league's players union have agreed health and safety protocols for the 2021 season, retaining two innovations introduced during last year's pandemic-shortened campaign, the league said Tuesday. A statement from MLB said the new 162-game season, which is due to start on April 1, would continue to use seven-inning doubleheader games to ease fixture congestion and use automatic base runners in extra innings. But the league has dispensed with the universal designated hitter rule used in both the American League and National League during last year's 60-game season. —AFP

Super Bowl viewership low

NEW YORK: The 2021 Super Bowl was watched by 96.4 million people across all platforms, the host broadcaster said Tuesday, the lowest viewership since 2007 — despite record-smashing streaming audiences. The NFL championship match is the most-watched TV event of the year in the United States. Some 102.3 million people tuned in for last year's Super Bowl. By comparison, the second-most watched event was another American football game which recorded 43 million views. The 55th Super Bowl was nonetheless a streaming success, becoming the most live-streamed NFL game ever, CBS said in a statement. —AFP

Mitchell masterclass as Jazz march on

LOS ANGELES: Donovan Mitchell poured in 36 points as the Utah Jazz extended their Western Conference lead on Tuesday with a 122-108 defeat of the Boston Celtics. Mitchell delivered another virtuoso performance which included six three-pointers and nine assists as the Jazz rolled to a win that equaled their best ever start to a season. Joe Ingles added 24 points while French international Rudy Gobert muscled his way to 18 points in Salt Lake City. The Jazz now lead the West with a 20-5 record, one game clear of the Los Angeles Lakers, having won 16 of their last 17 games.

"I think the biggest thing is our competitiveness, continuing the fight," said Mitchell, revealing that Utah were determined to atone for their disappointing first-round loss to Denver in last season's playoffs. "That was a tough loss for us, but this is how you're supposed to respond if you want to be the team we want to be," Mitchell said. —AFP

Pilot in Kobe crash 'probably disoriented'

Investigators say pilot likely suffered 'self-induced pressure'

WASHINGTON: The helicopter crash that killed NBA legend Kobe Bryant, his daughter and six other passengers was probably caused by the pilot becoming disoriented after flying into clouds, investigators said Tuesday. Ara Zobayan, the pilot of the chartered Island Express helicopter, probably suffered "spatial disorientation," the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) said.

Also likely contributing to the January 26, 2020 crash in Calabasas, California was "self-induced pressure" on the pilot to complete the flight for his celebrity client, the NTSB said. The NTSB also cited "inadequate review and oversight" of safety management processes by Island Express as a probable cause of the crash but did not find that the helicopter had experienced any mechanical problems.

Bryant, 41, was traveling with his 13-year-old daughter Gianna and six other passengers when the Sikorsky S-76 helicopter slammed into a fog-shrouded hillside west of Los Angeles. There were no survivors. The NTSB said weather conditions were marginal on the morning of the flight but acceptable for flying under visual flight rules, where a pilot stays out of the clouds and maintains eye contact with the ground.

Shortly before the crash, the pilot said he was climbing to 4,000 feet (1,200 meters) to get above the clouds but the helicopter was actually in a steep left turn and descending rapidly, NTSB investigators said. While the pilot perceived that the helicopter was climbing it was actually descending, they added. "We are talking about spatial disorienta-

tion where literally the pilot may not know which way is up or down, whether he or she is leaning left or right," NTSB chairman Robert Sumwalt said.

In its findings, the NTSB said "the probable cause of this accident was the pilot's decision to continue flight under visual flight rules into instrument meteorological conditions which resulted in the pilot's spatial disorientation and loss of control."

Island Express was not certified to fly passengers in instrument conditions and the pilot violated the rules by trying to fly through the clouds, it said. "He would have been illegal by going into the clouds," Sumwalt said.

'Likely self-induced pressure'

The NTSB also said in its findings that "contributing to the accident was the pilot's likely self-induced pressure." "Self-induced pressure is a real thing," Sumwalt said. "Pilots are 'can-do' oriented. The pilot is paid to fly. He wants to get the job done."

Zobayan was ferrying Bryant that day from Orange County to Camarillo for a basketball game to be played by a team featuring the former NBA star's daughter. Bryant was the youth team's coach. Two of Gianna Bryant's 13-year-old teammates were among those who died in the crash along with an assistant coach on the Mamba Sports Academy team.

The NTSB chairman said the accident was avoidable. "It could have been landed safely all the way up to the point where he went into the clouds," Sumwalt said. "There were opportunities along



CALABASAS: In this file still image taken from a January 27, 2020 video released by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), shows a NTSB official inspecting the remains of a helicopter which crashed near Calabasas, California, on January 26, 2020, killing retired NBA star Kobe Bryant, his daughter, Gianna, and seven others. — AFP

the way to have reversed course and prevent this crash by simply landing."

The NTSB said there had been "inadequate review and oversight" of Island Express's safety management processes but it was not considered an unsafe operator overall. "We did not find significant glaring issues with the organization," Sumwalt said. "They had cancelled a number of flights due to weather and

that's what we want companies to do."

And while the 50-year-old Zobayan was considered an experienced pilot with more than 8,500 hours of flight time he "did make mistakes," Sumwalt said. "It was an issue of judgement and decision-making that led to this tragic situation," he said.

Bryant was one of the greatest basketball players ever, an iconic figure who

became a face of his sport during a glittering two-decade career with the Los Angeles Lakers. He was a five-time NBA champion in a career that began in 1996 straight out of high school and lasted until his retirement in 2016. He also was a two-time Olympic gold medalist, helping spark the US squad of NBA stars to titles in 2008 in Beijing and 2012 in London. — AFP



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