

Friday Times

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Kuwait Times
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REGISTER TODAY

for the **COVID-19 vaccine**

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KUWAIT: Policemen enforce the early closure of shops at a shopping mall in Jahra in accordance with government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions on Wednesday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait reports 1,048 new COVID-19 cases, 5 deaths

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#LAN_ASKET:

The movement
that shook Kuwait



JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

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What were you wearing? Were you wearing a tight or short dress? Were you wearing a lot of makeup? Which place were you heading to? What time was it? Unfortunately, these are the questions being asked if a woman complains about being harassed, instead of asking: Who was it? Were you able to take a photo or record a video of him? Did you note his car's plate number? The victim is the one who is blamed.

Recent reports about Saudi Arabia introducing tougher penalties against harassment have sparked a debate about the topic in Kuwait. Saudi Arabia's Public Security Department launched a new version of its app "Kolonna Amn" (We Are All Security) with added features such as reporting harassment, human trafficking and cyber-crimes. Experts believe that the inclusion of these crimes in the app will serve as a deterrent, according to Arab News.

This led to several Kuwaiti fashionistas and bloggers to speak up about their personal experiences on their social media plat-

forms. Many women have reacted and shared their experiences about harassment, which became a hot topic on Twitter with the hashtag "#expose the harasser".

What is harassment? Harassment is any behavior, whether physical, verbal, written or psychological, that is unwanted and unwelcomed, and may offend or humiliate an individual. This definition applies to both men and women equally. The harassment can be at your workplace, street, home or school. It is a boundless subject - it can be handled from different angles and perspectives.

As a woman, I will talk about street harassment, one of the most common types of harassment and which I can relate to the most, since I have personal experience of it. So what is street harassment? It is the dirty comments, requests and demands. Staring and commenting on physical appearance, such as someone's body or the clothing they are wearing. Continuing to talk to someone after they have asked to be left alone. Flashing, following or stalking. Groping, intentionally invading personal space or blocking the way. Persistent requests for someone's name, number or other information. Public touching and whistling.

Unfortunately, I doubt there's any woman who has not been exposed to at least one of the acts mentioned above, even if she was wearing a niqab. If a woman has not been exposed to any of these acts, then she must consider herself to be among the lucky ones.

I cannot deny that maybe some women (a minority) consider staring or commenting on physical appearance as okay or a compliment and do not make a big deal out of it. But no form of harassment is okay - and it is never a compliment. Being harassed in public can make you worried about your physical safety and creates an environment of fear and intimidation.

With increasing harassment and sexual abuse, the question remains: How can it be stopped against girls and women? The answer can be in the following:

1. Home

It all starts from home. Instead of only teaching women to dress properly and decently, parents should teach boys from a young age to respect women, whatever they are wearing or doing. Parents should be role models at home and there must be respect between them in front of their children. Because children see, children do.

2. School

School is the second home. Raising children's awareness in school is very important. Educating them and discussing in detail - not talk about it briefly - why it is unacceptable, disrespectful and offensive not to respect women in all matters.

3. Law

Enforce serious and tough penalties on abusers and harassers. Let them be a

deterrent for others. Individuals should be aware that certain behaviors may result in penalties.

4. App

A simple and direct application to report these incidents, where victims can easily and instantly report cases, and guarantee that it is confidential.

5. Social media

Campaigns such as #Lan_asket that was launched to provide a platform where victims of harassment can speak up and share their experiences.

In the 21st century, women should be able to feel comfortable and safe in public without the fear of being harassed, and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. This subject should not be considered a taboo due to cultural influences, and women should not be scared to speak up anymore.

Unfortunately, we have a social ideology where women are assumed to be the reason behind harassments. However, women should understand that they are not alone; it is not their fault - this is not normal or acceptable. They should not be blamed as they are the victims in this situation and not the other way around.

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Local

PHOTO FEATURE



Wafra

A bucolic getaway

By Shakir Reshamwala

Looking for some soothing greenery, away from the monotonous ochre landscapes of Kuwait? Head out to Wafra on a weekend to relax at a farm, shop at a farmers market or just enjoy the long drive out of town. The area is the “salad bowl” of Kuwait - with all kinds of fresh produce grown here and supplied all over the country.





Many owners let out their farmsteads too, which makes it convenient to stay over. Most farmhouses have all modern trappings and outdoor facilities for barbequing, with swimming pools of varying

sizes. However, do keep in mind that coronavirus restrictions are in place, markets may not be open and social gatherings are strictly not allowed.



— Photos by Shakir Reshamwala

Local

ONLINE PLATFORM BOOSTS SALES OF FLOWER SHOPS DURING PANDEMIC

By Ben Garcia

Valentine's Day is around the corner, and many flower shops in Kuwait have displayed a variety of fresh flowers to attract customers. The prices of various types of flowers usually jump during the Valentine season by over 50 percent, a florist told Kuwait Times. Roses are sold for KD 2 compared to KD 1 during regular days. Prices go higher if the bouquet is accompanied by ornamentalations and vases or even chocolates and teddy bears. The price of a bouquet of flowers can reach up to KD 300.

Pandemic: Bring hope by giving flowers

Although the flower business has been affected by the global coronavirus pandemic, those who innovated managed to survive, a female Kuwaiti flower shop owner told Kuwait Times.

"Prior to the pandemic, we were already online. We survived despite being closed for around a month in March and April last year. Our business has been great so far," said the florist, who preferred to remain anonymous.

"We are getting business from those who failed to innovate and go online. Prior to the COVID pandemic, we made KD 800 per day in sales, but when the pandemic struck, sales on our online platform suddenly increased. Our daily sales are now at KD 1,300 to 1,500," she revealed. "Many of our customers are Kuwaiti. The reason why my business is growing and we are surviving is because if somebody is sick in the family, people give flowers so they feel better."

Flowers are also given when celebrating graduations, births, Valentine's Day or

thanking someone for doing a great job or favor.

"We have several hotel customers and we delivered flowers to them prior to the pandemic. Those orders were all cancelled due to the closure of hotels. But many Kuwaiti students returned from abroad and are spending money at various stores, including flower shops, so our business is benefiting. Also, our shop is in a Kuwaiti residential area, so we are in the right place at the right time," she added.

But everything is not so rosy for some other flower shops amid the pandemic. Liza, a florist at a small flower shop in Hawally, said they have incurred huge losses since reopening in late August last year. "My boss wanted to close down the shop for good after the prolonged closure

(when Kuwait imposed lockdowns and curfews), but maybe because he was thinking about me as the shop's lone worker who will be out of a job, he continued," she said.

"The reality is sales are down by 50 percent, maybe because we only wait for customers to show up and don't utilize online services or delivery. I told my boss to open an online delivery service, but he hasn't done so till now. If we had online sales or delivery perhaps, the story would have been different. But I think this was not done because of budget constraints," Liza told Kuwait Times.

"Before COVID, I used to order fresh flowers from various suppliers in Kuwait every day. Now I order only once a week. We have a huge contract with some

hotels, but the majority of hotels are closed, so we don't have bulk orders anymore," she said.

Flowers sold in Kuwait are sourced from all around the world, as Kuwait has a harsh climate. A few Kuwaiti farmers grow flowers in greenhouses, but it is a very costly affair. Flowers are mostly imported from the Netherlands, but also from Columbia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, India and Peru, among others. There are around five wholesale suppliers of fresh flowers in Kuwait, who directly import flowers from various sources. Prices vary depending on class and where the flowers come from.



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Local

Oil producers facing \$9tn shortfall as demand falters

Kuwait can lose between 20-40% of government revenues

PARIS: Oil and gas producing nations face up to nine trillion dollars in lost income as the world accelerates the transition to renewable energy, saddling poorer but resource-rich nations with higher risk of stranded assets, an analysis showed yesterday. Over 400 million people live in the worst affected countries, where declining fossil fuel revenues could see government income fall by at least 20 percent, leading to cuts in public services and greater unemployment, according to an assessment by the Carbon Tracker industry watchdog.

Half of those set to be impacted live in Nigeria, where a 70-percent drop in oil revenues would cut state income by one third, it found. As renewable energy such as wind and solar becomes cheaper than fossil fuels, oil producing nations collectively risk a \$13 trillion loss by 2040, compared with industry expectations. The report warned that governments needed to act now to reduce dependence on oil and gas revenues or face the risk of wasted capital and obsolete infrastructure projects.

Andrew Grant, head of climate, energy and industry at Carbon Tracker, said recent net-zero announcements from global powerhouses such as China and Japan have added impetus to the shift away from highly polluting energy. "Clearly for certain places in the world there will be trade-offs," he told AFP. "Thinking about fossil fuel producing countries who are reliant on fossil fuel revenues to balance their budgets, they're going to have to face challenges. It really is a matter of when, rather than if," he added.

The analysis found that seven countries, including Angola and

Azerbaijan, could lose at least 40 percent of total government revenues by 2040 if oil failed to hold its price at long-term OPEC forecast levels of \$60 a barrel. Nigeria, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq were among 12 nations that could lose between 20-40 percent of government revenues, while Russia, Mexico and Iran were set to lose between 10-20 percent, the study said.

'Opportunities'

The 2015 Paris climate deal enjoins nations to work to limit temperature rises to "well below" two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels through sweeping cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. Under the framework ratified in that accord, richer nations and businesses are supposed to provide \$100 billion annually to countries most vulnerable to climate change. Half of that money is meant to help those states adapt to the heating planet and to green their economies with new technology. The analysis said that countries could be helped to transition with funding for technical assistance, as well as regulatory and tax reform to ease the shock of weaning their economies off of fossil fuels.

Pointing to social unrest caused by government decisions to lower oil and gas subsidies - which increases the cost for the consumer - Grant said states needed to improve their messaging. "These things are always framed as an increase in price of a tax. But it's not like the money is disappearing, you can do other things with it," he said. "It's about making sure people are aware of the opportunities, not just the cost." —AFP

Inflation in Kuwait rises 2.95% in Dec

KUWAIT: Kuwait's inflation rate in December rose by 2.95 percent on a year-on-year basis, the Central Statistics Bureau (CSB) said yesterday. In its monthly consumer prices index (CPI) report, CSB noted that the monthly inflation rate rose by 0.34 percent in December compared to a month earlier. On the scale of individual sectors, there were significant price rises in food and beverages (9.81 percent), culture and recreation (7.23 percent), commodities and miscellaneous goods and services (5.73) and telecommunications (5.3 percent).

Other sectors that witnessed rises were home furnishings and household maintenance (4.18 percent), transport (3.34 percent), cigarettes and tobacco (2.43 percent), clothing and footwear (2.19 percent) and health-care (1.73 percent). Education was the only sector to have witnessed a downturn, plummeting by 15.46 percent. Elsewhere, two sectors, namely housing services and restaurants and hotels, remained unchanged - the former unaffected for the second month in a row. The CPI measures prices in general, either on a monthly or yearly basis. It is also a basic indicator for growth or economic recession, which the state may take into consideration when making decisions regarding economic and commercial sectors or to map out monetary and financial policies. —KUNA

National Guard ready to support authorities



KUWAIT: Deputy National Guard Chief General (Rtd) Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah visits Tahreer Camp yesterday.



KUWAIT: Deputy National Guard Chief General (Rtd) Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah said National Guard emergency units are capable of supporting military and civil authorities in dealing with various crises. He made the comments during a tour of several administrative backup units, chemical

defense and radioactivity monitoring center at Tahreer Camp.

Sheikh Ahmad said the National Guard, at the instructions of Chief HH Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah, has strategic plans to expand its duties in backing up state departments, so it upgraded the administrative backup system. He also lauded the ca-

pabilities of the chemical defense and radioactivity monitoring center in supporting concerned state departments to protect the environment. Sheikh Ahmad also visited Kabd relay station and met with the security force there. He asked them to remain vigilant at all times.

Local

MP threatens PM with grilling if Cabinet not formed in a week

Lawmaker proposes committee to recover stolen funds

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Opposition MP Osama Al-Munawer yesterday threatened to file a grilling that will end the political career of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah if he does not form the new Cabinet by next Thursday. "The new cabinet has not been formed and I don't think it will be formed in the foreseeable future," Munawer told reporters.

"This is a clear message to the prime minister: If you don't form the Cabinet by next Thursday," a comprehensive grilling will be filed against you and it will "end your political career", the law-

maker warned. He said he will file the grilling during the first session of the National Assembly after the new Cabinet is formed if the period exceeds beyond next Thursday.

The prime minister resigned last month after the government boycotted the Assembly session on Jan 6, a day after three opposition MPs filed to grill the prime minister. The grilling was backed by 38 lawmakers.

The resignation was accepted by HH the Amir on Jan 18, and on Jan 24, HH the Amir renamed Sheikh Sabah to form the new Cabinet. Sheikh Sabah told editors of local dailies that he will take some time to form the Cabinet because of consultations with As-

sembly blocs, MPs, civil societies and others.

Meanwhile, MP Bader Al-Humaidi yesterday proposed the formation of a five-member committee to coordinate to recover funds stolen in corruption cases. He proposed that the panel will consist of two MPs, the minister of state for Assembly affairs and two economic and financial experts. The panel will have the power to go after public funds stolen by corruption cases.

MP Saud Al-Mutairi yesterday asked the finance minister about a report stating that the government has withdrawn KD 7.5 billion from the Future Generations Fund to finance the budget deficit.

Kuwait reports 1,048 new COVID-19 cases, 5 deaths

KUWAIT: Kuwait said 1,048 people tested positive for COVID-19 with five related deaths yesterday, taking total cases to 175,031 as deaths to 985, according to the health ministry. The number of people hospitalized with the virus currently stands at 10,150, with 114 of them in intensive care units, according to ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad.

He added some 10,659 swab tests were conducted over the past day, taking total tests to 1,640,047. Sanad urged nationals and expatriates alike that abiding by health precautions, mainly following social distancing rules, is the only way to halt the spread of the virus. The ministry earlier reported 631 more people recovered from the virus over the past day, raising total recoveries to 163,895. —KUNA



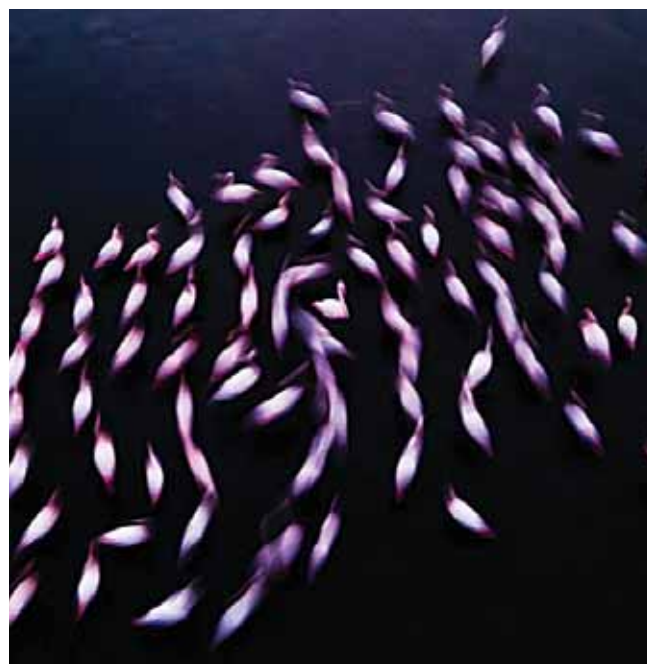
Kuwaiti photographer wins 2021 Sony award

KUWAIT: Nasser Al-Omari of Kuwait won in the 2021 Sony World Photography Awards' national awards category for his captivating depiction of a flock of flamingos in northern Kuwait. The image, titled 'The Queen', taken in the Jadailiyat area northeast of Kuwait, was one of 54 national and regional winners selected by a jury out of more than 330,000 photos from around the world, Omari told KUNA.



Nasser Al-Omari

The shot is distinguished by one of the birds standing still in the middle of a surrounding mobile flock, giving the image a greater aesthetic due to the timing of its capture, he said. The photographer said he was delighted at this achievement, which he dedicated to the Kuwaiti leadership and people. —KUNA



The winning image of flamingos.

News in brief

Break-in, breach of trust

KUWAIT: A security source told police that a sheikh accused a Syrian of unauthorized entry into the Kuwait Automobiles Club, breaking the window of a room containing files and stealing a file of a general assembly meeting. Detectives took over the case and are investigating. In a separate case, a sheikh accused an Egyptian employee of breach of trust for signing contracts with investors without his knowledge. The sheikh said employees reviewing files discovered contracts and money collection without the office's knowledge. Concerned authorities are investigating.

Dispute leads to shooting

A family dispute and verbal exchanges on social media escalated after a suspect shot at his relatives in Abu Fatira. The victims told police one of them was in his car and the other in the house. Both said the suspect is a relative with whom they had disputes, leading him to fire at them before escaping.

Ex-wife accused of theft

A Kuwaiti man accused his ex-wife of entering his house in his absence and stealing its contents and important papers. The citizen went to a Jahra police station and accused his former wife of stealing valuables and important documents. He said she had a copy of the door keys before their divorce and that he had not changed the lock. The woman was summoned and charged as accused. Investigations continue.

Man falls to death

An Iranian lost his life after falling from a building under construction in Qusour. Police and paramedics rushed to the area and discovered the victim had suffered head injuries, leading to his death. Investigations indicate there was no foul play in the incident. —Al-Rai



Beirut was 'lucky', says German company clearing blast-hit port

Myanmar anti-coup protesters march as US sanctions generals



WUHAN: Visitors go on one of the water rides at an amusement park in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province yesterday.— AFP

WHO says Europe still 'vulnerable'

COVID-19 has claimed 100,000 lives so far in Mideast: Report

COPENHAGEN: The World Health Organization yesterday warned of a "false sense of security" in Europe, saying most of the continent's nations were still vulnerable despite a fall in COVID cases. WHO Europe director Hans Kluge told a press conference that "the decline in cases conceals increasing numbers of outbreaks and community spread involving variants of concern." More than a million cases are registered every week across the 53 member states in the UN agency's European region, which includes several in central Asia.

A total of 100,000 people have died in the Middle East after contracting COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic in December 2019, according to an AFP tally yesterday based on official data.

In all, 4,991,770 people in the region have tested positive for the new coronavirus. In terms of deaths, the Middle East is the fifth most affected region in the world, behind Europe (789,310 deaths from 35,032,194 cases), Latin America and the Caribbean (628,398, 19,819,222), the United States/Canada (492,313, 28,095,746) and Asia (245,899, 15,548,576).

Over the last seven days, the number of new daily cases detected in the Middle East has risen slightly to an average of 25,114 per day, an increase of three percent compared to the previous week. But the trend is clearly downwards in terms of deaths, with an average of 238 recorded per day, down 19 percent over the week. Iran is the country in the region that has suffered most from the pandemic. It has 58,686 deaths from 1,488,981 recorded cases of COVID-19, ranking it 11th in the world in terms of fatalities. Iraq follows far behind, with 13,140 deaths from 634,539 cases, then Saudi Arabia (6,415, 371,356) and Israel (5,233, 706,416).

In total, since the WHO office in China reported the outbreak of the disease at the end of December 2019, the pandemic has led to 2,353,534 deaths worldwide from 107,220,146 infections, as of yesterday. But the number of reported cases has been falling over the past four weeks and deaths have also been declining over the past two weeks. "At this point, the overwhelming majority of European countries remain vulnerable," Kluge said, adding that as of now there is "a thin line between the hope of a

vaccine and a false sense of security."

The number of vaccine doses administered in Europe now stands 41 million, greater than the nearly 36 million cases recorded since the start of the pandemic. According to data from 29 out of the 37 countries that have begun vaccinations, 7.8 million have received both doses of the vaccines, Kluge said, warning that the number only accounts for 1.5 percent of the population in those countries.

"Vaccines are essential, but as of now, they are not sufficient to control the pandemic," Kluge said. The regional WHO director cautioned against "rash decisions" for countries contemplating easing restrictions. "Time and again we have seen countries reopen too fast and lose hard-earned gains," Kluge said. With the emergence of new variants, vaccinations could also be undermined if the virus is allowed to circulate, potentially causing mutations that "may influence vaccine efficacy."

"Unless we halt transmission now, the expected benefits from vaccinations in controlling this pandemic may not be evident," Kluge said. The WHO director also reiterated a call for an equitable distri-

bution of vaccines to include poorer countries, both citing it as a "moral imperative," but also as a means to mitigate risks.

German warning

German leaders warned yesterday that they could not rule out shutting Germany's borders with its neighbors because of troublingly high coronavirus infections fuelled by more contagious variants in countries like Austria and the Czech Republic. "We believe it would be sensible to declare both (Austria and Czech Republic) as mutation areas. This will likely happen," said Bavarian state premier Markus Soeder. He had warned late Wednesday that if the Czech Republic was unable to take appropriate measures to curb contagion, then a "border closure must also be an issue". Germany in late January banned most travellers from countries classed as so-called mutation areas or places hardest hit by new, more contagious coronavirus variants. Only a handful of exceptions are allowed to enter Germany from these countries, including returning Germans and essential workers. — AFP

International

Belarus strongman tells loyalists to fight off foreign ‘blitzkrieg’

Lukashenko promises to unveil reforms

MINSK: Belarus strongman Alexander Lukashenko said yesterday his country had fought off a foreign “blitzkrieg”, in a defiant address to loyalists following months of protests against his decades-long rule. The authoritarian leader had promised to unveil reforms at the people’s assembly in the capital Minsk, but his opening address to a packed auditorium of delegates in military and official uniforms instead focused on attempts to overthrow his government.

“The blitzkrieg did not succeed. We held on to our country,” Lukashenko said, using language especially resonant in a country that suffered huge losses at the hands of German forces in World War II.

“Despite the tensions in society artificially created by external forces, we survived,” Lukashenko said. “We have to resist at all costs. And 2021, this year, will be decisive.” Belarus’s opposition, whose leaders have either been jailed or forced into exile in neighboring EU countries, have dismissed the two-day All-Belarusian People’s Assembly as a piece of political theatre. Lukashenko last year faced the most serious threat to his rule since coming to power in the ex-Soviet country in 1994. Tens of thousands took the streets across the country to demand Lukashenko’s resignation after he claimed to have won a sixth presidential term in August elections opponents said were rigged.

The authorities unleashed a violent crackdown on protesters, detaining thousands, many of whom reported torture and abuse in custody. Lukashenko in November promised to change the constitution to calm the protests, just weeks after he was shown during a demonstration brandishing a Kalashnikov assault rifle and referring to protesters as rats.

At the assembly, which brought together 2,700 representatives mainly from state-backed sectors, he rebuffed the opposition’s calls and appeared to push back a promised timeline for the constitution changes. “We must closely consider issues of social de-



MINSK: Belarus’ President Alexander Lukashenko delivers a speech at the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly in Minsk yesterday. — AFP

velopment... think about the possibility of adjusting the basic law,” Lukashenko told delegates, without specifying when the proposed changes would be revealed.

Call for fresh protests

On the eve of the assembly, the Nexta Telegram channel, which mobilized and coordinated demonstrators over the months of rallies, called for fresh demonstrations. “This is a gathering of unfortunate Lukashenko supporters who were rounded up for one purpose—to amuse the pride of one person,” Nexta wrote, encouraging residents of Minsk to take to the streets.

Belarus police promised to “suppress” any illegal activities and warned of potential road closures in the capital, officially due to expected heavy snowfall. Lukashenko has held constitutional referendums twice before, both times pushing through changes that strengthened the presidency.

In 1996, he gave himself greater power to appoint judges, including the chair of the Constitutional Court. A second referendum in 2004 allowed him to serve three terms instead of two. The All-Belarusian People’s Assembly is typically convened by Lukashenko during his presidential campaigns to give his candidacy a semblance of popular support. — AFP

Iran producing uranium metal, violating deal

VIENNA: Iran has started producing uranium metal, the UN nuclear watchdog said Wednesday, in a fresh breach of the limits laid out in Tehran’s 2015 deal with world powers. The latest violation of the deal, which is aimed at preventing Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, came as Iran warned that time was running out for new US president Joe Biden’s administration to save the agreement. The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in a statement seen by AFP that on February 8, it “verified 3.6 grams of uranium metal at Iran’s Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant in Esfahan”. IAEA director general Rafael Grossi informed member states of the new violation, the statement added. The news had been expected after Iran said last month it was researching uranium metal production, aiming to provide advanced fuel for a research reactor in Tehran.

But the topic is sensitive because uranium metal can be used as a component in nuclear

weapons. The landmark deal—reached in 2015 by the United States, China, Russia, Germany, France and Britain—contained a 15-year ban on “producing or acquiring plutonium or uranium metals or their alloys”. The deal says that after 10 years, Iran would have been allowed to initiate research on producing uranium metal-based fuel “in small agreed quantities,” but only if the other parties had given approval.

The new violation comes a month after Iran announced it had stepped up its uranium enrichment process to 20 percent purity, far above the 3.67 percent level permitted by the deal but far below the amount required for an atomic bomb. In 2018, US president Donald Trump dramatically withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed crippling economic sanctions on Tehran. The following year, Tehran announced it would start breaking the deal’s limits on nuclear activity. Trump’s successor Biden is seeking to revive the agreement, but the two sides appear to be in a standoff over who acts first. “If they want Iran to return to its commitments... the United States must entirely lift the sanctions, in practice and not on paper,” supreme Iranian leader Ali Khamenei said Sunday. When Biden was asked later that day whether he would halt sanctions to convince Iran to return to the bargaining table, Biden offered a clear reply: “No.” — AFP

Al-Qaeda’s Yemen leader appears in video despite UN report of arrest

DUBAI: The leader of Al-Qaeda’s branch in Yemen appears to be still at large despite a United Nations report which claimed he had been under arrest for months, the SITE Intelligence Group and two local tribal leaders said yesterday after he was seen in a video released by the jihadist group. Khalid Batarfi, who has been the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) for about a year, talks about the storming of the US Congress last month in the video, which came out Wednesday. The video, which opens with footage of the January 6 assault by Donald Trump supporters, belies reports that Batarfi was under arrest, said SITE, which monitors extremist organizations.

In the 20-minute video titled “America and the Painful Seizure”, Batarfi says “storming the Congress is only the tip of the iceberg of what will come to them, God willing”. A report filed to the UN Security Council last week claimed Batarfi was arrested and his deputy, Saad Atef Al-Awlaqi, killed during an “operation in

Ghayda City, Al-Mahrah governorate, in October”. Two local tribal leaders in the Al-Bayda governorate in central Yemen, where AQAP is active, told AFP there was a high probability the person arrested was not Batarfi but another member of the jihadist group.

“Most probably, he wasn’t arrested, and the one who was arrested was another senior leader in the group,” one of the tribal leaders said. The UN report, which summarized global potential jihadist threats, did not disclose his whereabouts or reveal any further details of the October operation. AQAP revealed it had appointed Batarfi, believed to be in his early 40s, as its leader in February 2020 following the death of his predecessor Qassim Al-Rimi in a US air strike in Yemen. Batarfi, who was designated a global terrorist by the US State Department in 2018, has appeared in numerous AQAP videos over recent years, according to SITE, and appeared to have been Rimi’s deputy and group spokesman. — AFP

International

Beirut was 'lucky', says German company clearing blast-hit port

Dangerous substances stored in containers at the port turned it into a minefield

BEIRUT, Lebanon: After a blast of historic proportions at Beirut's port last year, Lebanon only escaped a second chemical inferno by chance, the German company clearing the dockside has said. Michael Wentler, a chemical expert managing Combi Lift's Beirut operation, said thousands of liters of dangerous substances stored in decaying containers for more than a decade at the port had turned the area into a minefield of chemical hazards. "We found substances that, if mixed together, would lead to an explosion," he told AFP on Wednesday, recounting an assignment he said compared to no other.

"The port is lucky, because the containers have a distance" between them, Wentler added. There were a series of subsequent blazes in the port since the August 4 explosion, that killed more than 200 people and devastated swathes of Beirut. Heavy lift transport company Combi Lift in November signed a contract with Lebanese authorities to deal with the hazardous substances at the blast site. This month, Wentler and his team finished treating 52 containers, in a process he said revealed the lethal chaos that has long prevailed at Beirut harbor.

"I have never seen a situation like this before in my life," Wentler said, describing festering chemical mixtures so corrosive they burned gaping holes right through massive shipping containers. "You have like a sea or a river of yellow

and green substances that came out" of some containers, he added. "These chemicals were bubbling". The containers—which have been at the port for more than 10 years—were stored haphazardly in seven different locations. Most were located in an open-air cargo zone at the opposite end of the blast site. Interim port chief Bassem al-Kaisi said in November that Beirut could have been "wiped out" if the substances caught fire.

Mysterious shipments

The August 4 blast was caused by tons of ammonium nitrate that had been inadequately stored for more than six years. Authorities are yet to explain why the large fertilizer shipment ended up in Lebanon, and why it stayed there so long. The origin of chemical substances treated by Combi Lift is no clearer. "None of the authorities seem to know anything about these shipments," Wentler said, apart from the date they entered the port. "I don't think the port authorities know what they have on site, inside the port."

Last year's blast severely disfigured the containers, which were already decaying and punctured with acid burns after years of neglect. "It was not possible to lift or move many of the containers, because their condition was so bad," Wentler said, meaning experts had to move the chemicals by hand. Wentler said he was saved by a hazmat suit



BEIRUT: This file aerial photo shows the massive damage done to Beirut port's grain silos (center) and the area around it, one day after a mega-blast tore through the harbor in the heart of the Lebanese capital. —AFP

when hydrochloric acid burned through the bottom of a barrel he was lifting and splashed to the ground. Hydrochloric acid, a corrosive and toxic substance, made up 60 percent of the chemicals Combi Lift came across, Wentler said.

The firm also had to handle thousands of liters of acetone, which is highly flammable, and containers of hydrogen peroxide, a liquid sub-

stance, which if mixed together could lead to an explosion, Wentler said. By chance, the containers of acetone and hydrogen peroxide were stored in separate locations, Wentler added. The "most dangerous" chemicals treated included hydrofluoric acid, which can be deadly if it enters the bloodstream or makes contact with the skin, according to Wentler. —AFP

Turkey rejects US appeal to release rights leader

ANKARA: Turkey yesterday rejected a US call to release jailed civil society leader Osman Kavala, accusing Washington of interference. Kavala, a businessman and philanthropist who has been imprisoned for more than three years without a conviction, is being tried on charges related to a 2016 coup attempt and 2013 protests against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The 63-year-old was acquitted in a case related to the 2013 protests last February. He was then immediately rearrested and charged with the 2016 coup plot. A Turkish court last month also overturned his earlier acquittal and a judge last week combined the two cases into one.

The US State Department on Wednesday called the charges against Kavala "specious" and demanded his "immediate release". The Turkish foreign ministry fired back at Washington by demanding that it "respect" the independence of its courts. "Turkey is a state governed by the rule of law," the ministry said in a statement. "No country or person can give orders to Turkish courts." The exchange underscored the tough stand Turkey could face on human rights issues from the new administration of US President Joe Biden. —AFP

Erdogan's call for constitution revamp shakes up politics

ANKARA: Four years after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan assumed sweeping powers, he has wrong-footed his opponents once again by calling for a new constitution, sparking accusations of trying to set up a diversion from the country's woes. Taking seemingly everyone off guard, Erdogan mentioned early last week during one of his near-daily speeches that "it may be time for Turkey to reopen the debate about a new constitution". The timing aroused immediate suspicions over the intentions of a man who has been at the apex of Turkish political life since 2003, first as prime minister and since 2014 as president.

The 66-year-old Turkish leader is facing a sudden burst of student protests, an economy that was under strain even before the coronavirus pandemic struck last year, and polls showing a melting support base. The current constitution was changed in a controversial 2017 referendum which created an executive presidency. It went into force barely a year later when Erdogan won re-election, with the amendments allowing him to consolidate his power. Since then the only politicians demanding constitutional changes have been members of the opposition, all calling for a return to the previous parliamentary democracy.

Few think this is what Erdogan has in mind. "This is only an attempt to change the agenda so that the economy, the pandemic, farmers' concerns, traders' worries and rights violations aren't discussed," Idris Sahin, deputy chairman of the opposition Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), told AFP. DEVA was launched last year by Ali Babacan, a former Erdogan ally who won the West's trust as economy minister.

'Not sincere'

Sahin dismissed Erdogan's move as "absolutely not a sincere idea", describing it instead as a belated response to opposition parties' attempts to dilute the executive presidency. He surmised that the president's team realised that "for the first time, they weren't setting the agenda. They lagged behind the opposition." Last month, Babacan and Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the main opposition CHP party agreed to work together on a "strengthened parliamentary system". Aware of these efforts weeks before the president took his stand, Erdogan's coalition partner Devlet Bahceli of the ultranationalist MHP branded attempts to tinker with the executive presidency as "proof of desperation".

Bahceli also suggested changing the law on political parties, further fuelling speculation that he wields outsized power despite being Erdogan's junior partner, and was a major instigator behind the president's call for a new basic law. The MHP leader soon also backed the move. But, like DEVA's Sahin, a Western diplomat was sceptical that Erdogan is angling for actual changes.

"In the short term, the main objective seems to be to divide the opposition by forcing parties to take a stance on the constitutional debate which will probably be framed along the lines of 'with or against Turkey'," the diplomat told AFP.

'Not serious'

Some think that if Erdogan does have anything specific in mind, it could be about scrapping an electoral rule that requires a presidential candidate to garner more than 50 percent of the vote to avoid a second round. "At this stage, this is not a serious or a well-developed proposal," said Galip Dalay of the Robert Bosch Academy and Chatham House. But "if he goes for the change of constitution, his main goal would be to change the requirement of the election of the president," Dalay said. Aysuda Kolem of Berlin's Bard College agreed, projecting a scenario in which the opposition would have to rally behind a single candidate to challenge Erdogan in the next presidential vote, expected in 2023. —AFP

International

From pandemic to politics, tough road ahead for S African president

Country has seen nearly 1.5m COVID infections and over 46,000 deaths

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa delivered his annual address to the nation yesterday while appearing increasingly fragile politically, hit by massive health and economic crises as well as a divided ruling party.

Each February he outlines his national plan for the year, but this time he will be hard put to try to uplift a pandemic-weary and more impoverished population, while battling for political survival within his ANC. His country is Africa's hardest-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, which has sent the economy tanking to its worst in many decades, and a slew of government officials are embroiled in embarrassing cases of looting of funds meant to help fight the pandemic.

being forced to resign on the back of corruption scandals. A year later he won a popular mandate following national elections.

'Absent president'

But now Ramaphosa appears to be struggling to firmly stamp his authority over the 109-year-old party of Nelson Mandela and more broadly throughout the country—the continent's most advanced economy. "As long as you have to fight the battle inside your own party, it's very difficult to actually create a sense of stability outside the party," Gouws said. He faces mounting hostility from factions within the ANC and opposition groups that accuse him of failing to rein in corruption. Ramaphosa has been careful not to ruffle feathers, refusing to directly chastise fellow party members implicated in corruption, including Zuma and secretary general Ace Magashule. "His hands are tied. If he goes against the Zuma faction we are going to see a very serious political fallout," warned Gouws.

His predecessor, who still commands support in the ANC, has derided the country's top court, refusing to appear before a panel which is investigating state corruption during his nine-year tenure. Instead he appears to be getting cozy with one of Ramaphosa's most formidable political rivals, leader of the leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) Julius Malema. Photographs of the beaming politicians released after their meeting last week fuelled rumors among South Africans of a possible alliance aimed at toppling Ramaphosa. The largest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, wants Ramaphosa "to show South Africans that he is in fact the man in charge".

"At the moment it looks like we have an absent president," said Gouws. The country has seen nearly 1.5 million COVID infections and more than 46,000 deaths, and its vaccine rollout has been troubled. This week authorities delayed the start of a much-anticipated vaccination campaign after a study showed the AstraZeneca jabs failed to prevent mild and moderate infection from the variant first identified in South Africa. Ramaphosa, who gives regular updates on the coronavirus fight, recently appeared teary and visibly worn-out during one of his broadcast addresses to the nation.

The former trade unionist who later became a wealthy businessman should deal with "the prevailing crisis of confidence and legitimacy that the government is facing from the people," warned Sizwe Pamla, spokesman for Cosatu, the largest trade union federation and an ANC ally. — AFP

and human rights defenders said. The landmark case, nearly a year in the making, had received the full backing of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), before being abruptly pulled without explanation. Neither police nor the prosecutor's office have spoken publicly about the decision to withdraw charges, and spokespeople for both institutions did not reply to repeat requests for comment. "Anybody with an interest in accountability would be greatly shocked by this twist of events, and greatly disappointed," Kiama said.

The accused officers were enforcing a coronavirus curfew in Busia County on the evening of March 30 when they allegedly entered the private home of Benard Orenga. Police alleged the premises was a bar, Amnesty International said. According to the charge sheet, the officers embarked on a violent frenzy. Police let off teargas, smashed windows and furniture, and savagely beat Orenga in front of his family before turning their clubs and whips on his wife, children and neighbors. The Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) launched an investigation. It found sufficient evidence to recommend prosecuting all 15 accused police, and six county enforcement officers were also implicated. The DPP agreed and on January 21 charges were announced in a watershed moment.

"Of course we were elated. It was unprecedented," said Harriet Wachira, a program coordinator at Transparency International. The charges made headlines after a year in which public anger over police brutality had erupted in protests. —AFP

Shelling killed scores of civilians in Tigray war, says HRW

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia: Ethiopian forces shelled heavily populated areas in the first weeks of the conflict in the Tigray region, killing at least 83 civilians and displacing thousands, Human Rights Watch said yesterday. Artillery attacks by forces backing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner, "struck homes, hospitals, schools and markets", according to the report, which focuses on the regional capital Mekele and the towns of Shire and Humera.

"At the war's start, Ethiopian federal forces fired artillery into Tigray's urban areas in an apparently indiscriminate manner that was bound to cause civilian casualties and property damage," said Laetitia Bader, HRW's Horn of Africa director. The report calls for a UN investigation of possible laws of war violations. Abiy announced military operations against the leadership of Tigray's ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in early November, saying this was in response to TPLF-orchestrated attacks on federal army camps.

He declared victory after pro-government troops took Mekele in late November, though the TPLF vowed to fight on, and aid workers say persistent insecurity has hampered the delivery of badly-needed humanitarian assistance. Abiy has previously said the military acted with special care for civilian lives, telling lawmakers in late November that no civilians were killed as his forces entered Tigray's cities. His office did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday.

In the western town of Humera, doctors reported that at least 46 people were killed and 200 injured on a single day during the first week of fighting, HRW said, adding that "total casualties that day were most likely higher". "Civilians started arriving in the hospital with injuries to the abdomen, chest, head. We were at a loss," HRW quoted a doctor as saying. "People with no hands, people with their stomachs hanging out." A doctor at a hospital in Mekele has previously told AFP that 27 civilians were killed in "artillery and rocket shelling" on November 28, the day federal forces arrived, and that more than 100 were wounded. —AFP



An Eritrean refugee child stands under an umbrella at Mai Aini Refugee camp, in Ethiopia. — AFP



PRETORIA: A morgue attendant at the Pretoria branch of the South African funeral and burial services company Avbob stands still next to the body of a patient died of COVID-19 related illnesses as a coffin being brought along ahead of burial.— AFP

His government has come under fire for its handling of the pandemic, and lately for delays in acquiring and rolling out vaccines. "He's going to get it from all sides," said Amanda Gouws, political scientist at Stellenbosch University.

Ramaphosa will have to perform a juggling act to reignite public confidence while also not agitating a rival faction of the African National Congress (ANC) party to ensure his survival. He came to power in 2018 after an internal struggle in the ANC resulted in Jacob Zuma

Shock as historic charges against Kenyan police dropped

NAIROBI: The case was unprecedented in the years-long campaign against police impunity in Kenya—a record 15 officers ordered to stand trial, accused of a terrifying rampage through a family home.

Never had so many officers—nearly an entire station in western Kenya—faced criminal charges over a single act of alleged police brutality. The victims filed into a courtroom in February expecting to witness a rare and historic moment of justice. Instead, they sat in shock as state prosecutors told the court the case was being withdrawn. "The prosecutor just appeared and said 'I am dropping this'. They were not even required to plead," said Peter Kiama, executive director of the Independent Medico-Legal Unit, a nonprofit that provided the victims with legal aid.

The quiet shelving of such a high-profile case bore the opaque hallmarks of a darker past, when the state shielded police from prosecution and embarrassing trials had a habit of disappearing, lawyers

International

France risks losing the fight for hearts and minds in West Africa

In Sahel 'information war,' Paris struggling to impose itself

PARIS: As well as suffering a spate of recent battle-field casualties in the Sahel, France risks losing the fight for hearts and minds in the strategic west African region. Eight years since it deployed troops against jihadists in Mali, Paris is struggling to impose itself in a separate information war being waged for public opinion. "Fighting against terrorism implies... protecting yourself during communication and disinformation wars targeting the local populations, which can change perceptions," French Defense Minister Florence Parly said recently during a speech to special forces. Part of the problem has been highlighted by recent events on the ground.

The French "Barkhane" force—made up of 5,100 troops—came under severe scrutiny in January after an air strike in a remote and largely inaccessible region in northern Mali. More than a month later, the facts remain murky. Some locals have told journalists that up to 20 people attending a wedding in the village of Bounti were killed, while the French military insists that they targeted a gathering of jihadists. "Once the French military becomes engaged with responding to accusations of civilian deaths and collateral damage, whether these allegations turn out to be accurate or not, it will already be perceived as a propaganda victory for the jihadists," Colin Clarke from the Soufan Center, an American think-tank, told AFP.

But in addition to anti-French messages spread by jihadist groups—which fall on fertile ground in a region once colonized by France—Paris believes Russia is also

behind a disinformation campaign about its activities in the region. "The battle over Barkhane's image is more important than any actual battle in this kind of conflict," said Michael Shurkin, an analyst at the US-based security consultancy Rand. "The French government and military have been slow to engage in 'information warfare,'" he added, saying that "doing 'propaganda' makes the French military nervous."

'Trolling'

It may have been slow to catch on, but there is evidence that France is now taking action. In December, Facebook said it had closed down two Russian-linked networks of fake troll accounts which sought to sway public opinion, as well as a third with "links to individuals associated with French military." The French defense ministry initially declined to comment, before saying that it could not attribute responsibility for the accounts. But Alexandre Papaemmanuel, an intelligence specialist at the IEP research center in France, believes some figures in the military were relieved to see France adopting the same tactics as its rivals.

"But to become tougher, should democracies follow the example of authoritarian regimes?" he asked. "It's a slippery slope." Part of the problem for France may be that for many people living in the region, the results of Barkhane's operations are difficult to see because the jihadists have dug in and keep launching attacks. "The results are imperceptible for an average Malian," said Denis Tull from the German Institute of Interna-



MENAKA, Mali: This file photograph shows the France-led special operations logo for the new Barkhane Task Force Takuba in Menaka. —AFP

tional Relations (SWP). He also blames French "arrogance" for the way leaders respond to local criticism.

"Any Malian criticism is seen as ingratitude and sparks irritation," he said, adding that Paris "is in the process of losing the battle for public opinion almost everywhere in French-speaking Africa." The future of the Barkhane mission is set to be discussed at a summit in Chad on February 15-16 between the countries of the Sahel region—Burkina Faso, Chad,

Mali, Mauritania and Niger—and France. French President Emmanuel Macron is known to want to reduce France's presence by sharing the burden of military operations with the countries of the region and fellow European partners. A 13,000-strong UN force is also based in the Sahel, which suffered further casualties on Wednesday when 28 peacekeepers were wounded during an attack on their base in central Mali. —AFP

Saudi says Yemen rebel drone intercepted after Abha hit

DUBAI: Saudi forces intercepted an armed drone fired by Houthi rebels in Yemen yesterday, the Riyadh-led coalition said, a day after a rebel strike on an airport in the kingdom. The latest drone attack targeted the garrison town of Khamis Mushait in southern Saudi Arabia that hosts a key airbase but was destroyed before reaching its target, coalition spokesman Turki Al-Maliki said, quoted by the kingdom's official SPA agency.

Several drones attacked Abha's international airport in the kingdom's southwest on Wednesday prompting Washington to call for an end to Houthi aggression. The coalition said the attack set a civilian aircraft ablaze, while the Houthis said they had struck Abha airport with four drones, claiming it was used to launch attacks inside Yemen. The United States reacted by calling for the rebels to "immediately stop these aggressive acts", just days after demanding an end to any new offensive in Yemen. US President Joe Biden, who has reversed his predecessor Donald Trump's policy on the conflict, has deployed his new Yemen envoy to Saudi Arabia. Tim Lenderking and his UN counterpart Martin Griffiths met Saudi's deputy defense minister, Khaled bin Salman, who oversees the Yemen portfolio. —AFP

Mexico's community doctors deal with pandemic overflow

TULTITLAN, Mexico: Every day Mexicans with suspected coronavirus infections seek treatment at the small clinic of Erika Reyes, one of thousands of community-based doctors helping to prevent the country's health system from collapsing. With both public and private hospitals struggling to cope during the pandemic, Mexico's neighborhood physicians are busy dealing with the overflow.

"We can treat COVID-19 cases here so that the health system doesn't become overwhelmed," the 30-year-old told AFP. Reyes was herself infected with the virus, but after recovering she continued working. She now treats about 30 patients a day, most of whom have Covid-19, in her private clinic in Tultitlan near Mexico City using the recommendations of the government and colleagues.

Reyes said she feels "very, very, very unprotected" because vaccination has only been offered to health workers in the public sector so far. Outside her clinic patients queued up waiting their turn, while an assistant offered hand sanitizer and checked the temperature of people entering.

In Mexico, 43 percent of general medical consultations occur in private clinics, according to the pharmacies and clinics association Unifacc. "We give 180,000 consultations a day," said its president, Oscar Zavala. Many community-based doctors work from a small office attached to a pharmacy.

Fear of dying alone

Mexican health workers have paid a high price during the pandemic: 2,687 of them have lost their lives, of whom nearly half were doctors and around one-fifth were nurses, according to official figures. Unifacc has reported the deaths of 32 doctors and 48 pharmacists among its members, as well as 186 relatives who became infected. The overall figure could be higher, since there are 18,000 clinics attached to drugstores around the country.

One big appeal of neighborhood doctors is that a consultation costs around 35 to 100 pesos (\$1.7-5.0), compared to 200-500 pesos in larger clinics. In the early days of the pandemic Karla Montano used to see perhaps a couple of confirmed COVID patients a week. "Now I see up to 10 confirmed patients a day," said the 35-year-old doctor.

She offers consultations in her small office, by video call or through home visits wearing full personal protective equipment in Mexico City. Some of her patients say they avoid going to public hospitals for fear of dying there, separated from their families. Montano said the pandemic has left her exhausted because coronavirus patients can call any time day or night. "It's really hard as a doctor to have to stay strong in this situation, and having to appear strong to people is a heavy burden, because a doctor can't have a breakdown," she said.

Mexico has officially registered around 170,000 deaths from COVID-19 — the world's third highest toll—and nearly two million known cases. Community-based doctors want to be included in the first phase of the government's vaccination program, which has given priority to front line health workers in public institutions. "I want to keep working and supporting my community," said Montano. "But I need to be vaccinated so I can continue working without putting my family at risk." —AFP

International

Biden announces review of China defense stance in Pentagon visit

President says administration will use force only as a last resort

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden announced a review of the US military stance toward China, saying the country needs a “strong” approach, while pledging that his administration will use force only as a last resort. On his first visit to the Pentagon as president, Biden also sought to break from the policies of his predecessor Donald Trump, promising the US defense force to keep domestic politics out of the country’s security. “I will never dishonor you, I will never disrespect you,” he said, as Vice President Kamala Harris and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stood at his side.

“I will never politicize the work you do.” In brief remarks after meetings with the Pentagon’s top generals and civilian leaders, Biden focused on China as the premier strategic threat to the United States. He announced a special Defense Department task force on China and ordered an immediate review of the military’s strategic approach to the challenge from Beijing.

The move was necessary “so that we can chart a strong path forward on China-related matters that will require a whole-of-government effort,” he said. “We need to meet the growing challenges posed by China to keep peace and defend our interests in the Indo-Pacific and globally,” he added.

‘Meet the China challenge’

The new task force was given four months to

come up with assessments and recommendations on US military strategy toward China; technology, force structure and force posture; and alliances and bilateral defense relations with Beijing.

Biden said the results of the Pentagon review needed to be backed by both political parties and Congress, as well as bring together allies and other partners. “That’s how we will meet the China challenge and ensure the American people win the competition in the future,” he said.

Biden, whose late son Beau served in Iraq under Austin, also pledged to keep the military strong. But both he and Austin highlighted the new administration’s “diplomacy first” approach, after Trump jettisoned previous policy for a more robust and aggressive “America First” stance with both allies and adversaries.

“So often, our armed forces and the Department of Defense staff are how the rest of the world encounters America,” Biden said. “But our country is safer and stronger when we lead not just with the example of our power, but with the power of our example.”

Biden said he would “never hesitate” to deploy US forces to protect vital US interests but that he believes “force should be a tool of last resort, not first.”

‘Full diversity’ reflected at top

During his visit to the Pentagon, Biden took



BEIJING: In this file photo taken on December 04, 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping (right) shakes hands with US Vice President Joe Biden (left) inside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. —AFP

time out to visit an exhibit portraying the often little-known contributions of African-Americans to the US military. Both Austin and Harris are the first African-Americans to serve in their positions. The president noted the 22 Black service members who had won the Medal of Honor, and those who pioneered their way to the rank of general.

“It’s all part of a long history of barrier-break-

ing service,” he said. “Right now, more than 40 percent of our active duty forces are people of color.” Biden said that minorities, who are thinly represented in the Pentagon’s officer ranks, need more opportunities.

“It’s long past time that the full diversity and full strength of our forces is reflected at every level in this department, including our secretary of defense,” he said. — AFP

Biden presses Xi on HK, Xinjiang in first phone call

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden challenged Chinese leader Xi Jinping on human rights, trade and regional muscle-flexing, in their first call since the new US president took office. An increasingly assertive Beijing has tested US patience since Xi came to power, and under former president Donald Trump found itself on the receiving end of trade tariffs as relations frayed.

Biden is under pressure at home and abroad to maintain the stance that Trump adopted, as the West looks to hold China to account for human rights abuses and its crushing of opposition in Hong Kong, as well as sabre-rattling over Taiwan.

His call on Wednesday was about setting the tone for the relationship, at a time when many in the US and the wider world blame China for failing to contain the coronavirus pandemic, which was first discovered in Wuhan. Biden “underscored his fundamental concerns about Beijing’s coercive and unfair economic practices, crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and increasingly assertive actions in the region, including toward Taiwan,” the White House said after the call.

The president told Xi his priorities were to protect the American people’s security, prosperity, health and way of life, and to preserve “a free and open Indo-Pacific.” Washington and its Asian allies have bristled at China’s expansion in the South China Sea, a huge and economically vital waterway where Beijing has built militarized islands, despite multiple overlapping claims from neighboring states.

The US has repeatedly sailed warships through the area to press the point that the sea is globally recognized as international waters. The two leaders also spoke about the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and weapons proliferation, the White House said.

“President Biden committed to pursuing practical, results-oriented engagements when it advances the interests of the American people and those of our allies.” Chinese state media reported simply that the two sides “exchanged in-depth views on bilateral relations and major international and regional issues.”

Trump’s unilateral approach

It was not Biden’s first interaction with Xi; the two met when Biden was vice president in the 2009-2017 administration of Barack Obama. Criticism of that administration’s softly-softly approach to Beijing has gathered in recent years, with US companies increasingly frustrated by what they say is state-sponsored industrial espionage, and fears over a lopsided trade relationship.

Trump took strong unilateral actions against China in an unsuccessful effort to close the yawning US deficit with the country. Relations soured even further beginning a year ago when Trump accused Beijing of hiding the origin of the coronavirus, which has now killed more than 470,000 Americans.

While Trump severed relations with longstanding allies for a go-it-alone approach to Beijing, Biden has used his first three weeks in office to rebuild those relationships as a basis for a more collective approach. One US official said Biden “found merit” in Trump’s approach of intense strategic competition towards China.

But, the official said, the previous administration’s strategy of partnerships being neglected or even sabotaged, along with Trump’s chaotic implementation of policy, had played into China’s hands. —AFP

US backs Japan concerns on China ships

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken voiced concern Wednesday over China’s incursions into Japanese territorial waters, recommitting to the ally’s defense.

In a telephone call, Blinken and Japanese foreign minister Toshimitsu Motegi “expressed concern over increased Chinese assertiveness around the Senkaku Islands following China’s enactment of a new coast guard law,” State Department spokesman Ned Price said. “Secretary Blinken reaffirmed that the Senkakus fall within the scope of Article V of the US-Japan Security Treaty,” he said, referring to the section that commits the two nations to defend each other if either is attacked.

Tokyo has voiced alarm over increased Chinese incursions after Beijing enacted legislation allowing its coast guard to use weapons against foreign ships seen as illegally entering its waters. Japan administers the rocky islets in the East China Sea that are also claimed by Beijing, which calls them the Diaoyu, as well as Taiwan.

Blinken’s call comes as President Joe Biden promises to keep his predecessor Donald Trump’s tough line on a rising China while also paying closer attention to allies. Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton first said the Senkakus fell under Article V, although Trump went a step further by warning against attempts to contest Japan’s control over the islands.

The State Department said Blinken and Motegi also discussed last week’s military coup in Myanmar, also known as Burma, where Biden is rolling out punishment for the generals if they do not return power to elected leaders. — AFP

International

Tears, guilt and hope for Hong Kongers seeking new life in UK

Britain's visa scheme a response to national security law in HK

HONG KONG: As the clock counts down to her finally leaving Hong Kong, Judy is riddled with self-doubt and guilt over the gut-wrenching decision to move her family to the other side of the world for a new life in Britain. Over the past few years, the 36-year-old mum of two has looked on as authorities dismissed successive waves of pro-democracy protests and then went after those who took part in them.

When Britain introduced visas offering a pathway to citizenship to any Hong Konger born before the city's 1997 handover to China, Judy and her husband decided to take the plunge. The former public affairs officer quit her job and the family is preparing to depart in April. But saying goodbye—to friends, to family, to Hong Kong's food and language—is far from easy. "My grandfather is in his nineties and I am leaving him behind in the last mile of his life," she told AFP.

"I feel very guilty and unhappy but I also do not want to stay anymore because I feel unsafe here." Judy was one of a dozen Hong Kongers AFP has spoken to in recent weeks either planning to relocate to Britain or already there. Some were happy to talk openly while others, like Judy, requested their identity be masked.

Middle-class migrants

Britain's new scheme is a response to Bei-

jing's decision last year to impose a sweeping national security law on the former colony. It is not clear how many Hong Kongers will take up the offer—especially while the coronavirus pandemic strangles so much normal activity around the world and restricts international flights. But applications for British National (Overseas) passports—the document Hong Kongers born before 1997 can apply for—have soared 300 percent since the security law came in.

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

Hong Kong officials have played down the departures, saying few will ultimately leave and that those who do can be replaced by arrivals from the Chinese mainland.

Prominent pro-Beijing politician Regina Ip dismissed those going to Britain as people with "no money, skills or education". But much like the hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers who left ahead of the 1997 handover—many of whom subsequently returned—the average profile of those departing who AFP spoke to tended to be the opposite.

Most were educated, middle-class families, often with young children and—most importantly—enough money in the bank to make the move and survive the prospect of many months



LONDON: This photo taken on January 26, 2021 shows Winston Wong (left), who arrived in Britain last year from Hong Kong, and his wife Connie Chan (right) with their son Cheston at home in Chelmsford. —AFP

looking for work in Britain. Many owned property with a good portion of the mortgage already paid off—a valuable nest egg considering the average price for a 500-square-foot (46-square-metre) apartment is around HK\$7million (\$900,000).

Ellie, a 30-year-old psychologist, said

she and her IT-professional husband were looking to leave in the next two years but already have a plan in place to "expedite" their move if it looks like China might stop people going to Britain. "I have my son's future at stake as education in the city is changing," she told AFP. —AFP

Why some Hong Kongers are leaving

HONG KONG: A new visa scheme is offering millions of Hong Kongers a pathway to British citizenship as the city's former colonial master opens its doors to those wanting to escape China's crackdown.

Authorities responded to huge and often violent pro-democracy protests in 2019 with mass arrests and the imposition of a sweeping national security law. As Beijing attempts to snuff out dissent in the semi-autonomous city of 7.5 million, AFP met with some Hong Kongers who have already left, or plan to head to Britain in the coming months.

Spike in inquiries

Billy Wong, an immigration consultant, has fielded a torrent of calls in recent months on one topic—moving to Britain. "Many people want to leave," the 44-year-old told AFP, saying the number of enquiries is "scary".

Wong is also planning to relocate, something he and his wife Eileen Yeung had been considering for a few years. "Now we have this new law, we are being very careful about our speech and measure what we can write on Facebook," said Yeung, referring to the security law. "What I want most for my daughter is that she can be herself and think freely," she added.

Daughter Tinyu, 10, has already been admitted to a boarding school in Derby and is full of questions about what the next chapter

holds. "What does immigration mean? Does it mean we have to move—like moving to another place in Hong Kong? What is UK like? Are the British polite? I asked myself a lot of questions," she said.

'Time to leave'

Three months after Gavin Mok, 42, and his wife Lydia moved to Britain, their possessions have finally caught up. After the shipment wound its way from Hong Kong to their new home in Exeter, in southwest England, Mok filmed the unloading for his YouTube subscribers.

He hopes his channel will encourage other Hong Kongers to make the same move. "I would like to share my experience, to let them know that it's the time to leave," Mok told AFP.

Mok went to school and university in Britain. For his daughters, aged 9 and 11, it is more of an adjustment. But they stay in touch with friends back home via video call and are looking forward to British school once the coronavirus pandemic is under control.

"In some ways they already speak English more than Cantonese," he laughed. A former trader in Hong Kong's lucrative financial sector, Mok knows he has little chance of matching his old salary. "I'm prepared to do any kind of low-paid, blue-collar work, like food and parcel deliveries," he said. "I don't miss Hong Kong because I gave up on Hong Kong as a place a long time ago. There's nothing for me there," he added. "But I will never give up my identity as a Hong Konger."

My son's future

It was an assault on democracy protests by a gang of stick-wielding government supporters wielding sticks in June 2019 that convinced Winston Wong and Connie Chan, both 40. "We literally decided like overnight. Okay, I think it's better that we leave," said Chan, who is able to run her business remotely since moving to



HONG KONG: This photo taken on January 25, 2021 shows immigration consultant Billy Wong (center), his wife Eileen Yeung (left) and their daughter Tinyu (right) playing the board game Monopoly at their Hong Kong flat. —AFP

Britain last year. They have since settled in Chelmsford with their 9-year-old son.

"We were worried about our kid and his future," said Chan. Moving in the middle of a pandemic hasn't been plain sailing. Wong left behind a well-paying job as a finance director and has yet to find work in Britain. China has vowed to retaliate in some form against Britain for its visa offer but Wong says he is unruffled.

"If the authorities made me choose, I won't hesitate to give up my Hong Kong ID card," he said. "Because I don't think my identity as a Hong Konger is defined by an ID." —AFP

International

India, China agree to pull back from part of disputed border

Biggest push to ease tensions between neighbors since clash in June

NEW DELHI: India said yesterday it had reached an agreement with China for both to pull back from part of their contested Himalayan border, in the biggest push to ease tensions between the nuclear-armed neighbors since a deadly clash in June.

India and China fought a border war in 1962 and have long accused each other of seeking to cross their frontier—which has never been properly agreed-in India's Ladakh region, just opposite Tibet. The latest stand-off was triggered in May when Indian officials claimed Chinese troops encroached over the demarcation line on parts of the northern side of the Pangong Tso lake and some of the strategically important Galwan river valley.

In mid-June, 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a brutal, high-altitude border battle in the Galwan valley in one of the deadliest clashes between both sides in recent decades. Beijing has not revealed how many casualties it suffered.

The world's two most-populous nations later sent tens of thousands of extra troops to the border. Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh said the agreement with Beijing to pull back forces from the Pangong lake area "envisages that both sides will cease their forward

deployments in a phased, coordinated and verified manner".

"It will substantially restore the situation to that existing prior to commencement of the stand-off last year," he told parliament, stressing that "we have not conceded anything". Singh said the disengagement started Wednesday and "mutual and reciprocal steps" to be taken including the removal of structures built since April and a temporary halt on military activities, including patrolling, on the north side of the lake.

The deal had been struck at the ninth round of high-level military talks since the June clash, with the next meeting to take place after "complete disengagement" in the area, he added.

China's defence ministry spokesman, Wu Qian, said in brief comments Wednesday that the frontline troops from both sides "began to disengage in a synchronized and planned way on February 10".

Retired Lt. General D.S. Hooda, who until 2016 headed India's Northern Command, told AFP that the agreement was "a good beginning for the desired process of disengagement". The deal was also in line with New Delhi's demands for a "restoration of the status quo".

"A temporary moratorium on patrolling... I



In this file photo taken on July 4, 2020 Indian army soldiers drive vehicles along mountainous roads as they take part in a military exercise at Thikse in Leh district of the union territory of Ladakh. —AFP

think is good. No patrol clashes will help the situation. I think the situation now is equal on both sides," Hooda said.

India and China share a 3,500-kilometre (2,200-mile) border, with disputes at other

points in Ladakh, including at Aksai Chin, a strategic corridor linking Tibet to western China next to the Galwan valley, and at Naku La pass further east, which connects Sikkim state with Tibet. — AFP

Indian rescuers try drilling from above into disaster tunnel

TAPOVAN, India: Indian rescuers began drilling from above a debris-filled tunnel yesterday in a desperate bid to reach dozens of people missing since a flash flood likely caused by a breaking glacier four days earlier. Workers have toiled night and day clearing rocks and mud from the tunnel at a damaged hydroelectric plant at Tapovan in Uttarakhand in northern India since Sunday's disaster.

More than 170 people are missing elsewhere in the Himalayan state, slightly smaller than Switzerland, after the disaster. Because of the amount of debris, only 34 bodies have been recovered so far.

As hopes fade for the missing, the tunnel operation has made slow progress—clearly frustrating desperate relatives. "This entire rescue operation is a joke," said Sanjay Pant, whose 24-year-old electrical engineer brother Abhishek was believed to be in the tunnel.

"We are not living in the 18th century where just one bulldozer can be used to clear tonnes of slush," he told AFP. "Where is our technology, where are our machines?"

Yesterday rescuers turned to a new method, attempting to drill down into one of several side tunnels to reach the missing men, authorities said. "This is connected to the main tunnel at a point beyond the slush and debris," rescuer Vivek Pandey told the Times of India daily.

"We hope that the trapped workers are in an auxiliary tunnel which can be accessed." There have been no signs of life from the missing men—thought to number between 25 and 35 — but rescuers and relatives hope they somehow



This combination of pictures taken on Wednesday shows relatives holding pictures and mobile phones with pictures of missing workers at the Tapovan-Vishnugad Hydro Power Project and Rishiganga Power Project following a flashflood. —AFP

they managed to stay alive.

The disaster saw a barrage of water and debris hurtle down a valley at terrifying speed and with frightening power, sweeping away bridges and roads, and hitting two hydroelectric plants. The cause of the disaster is thought to have been a chunk of glacier breaking off. Glaciers have been melting rapidly in the Himalayan region because of global warming. The construction of dams, dredging of riverbeds for sand, and the clearing of forests for new roads—some to beef up defenses on the Chinese border, others for Hindu pilgrims—are also contributing factors. —AFP

Expectant father among India glacier missing

TAPOVAN: From a first-time expectant father to a son whose promised lunch break call never came—relatives of those missing after India's glacier disaster waited for news and prayed for a miracle.

More than 170 people are still unaccounted for since Sunday, when a wall of water and debris-blamed on a chunk of glacier breaking off upstream—barrelled furiously down a valley in northern India, leaving a trail of destruction and despair. Those missing come from all over India, many of them workers at two of the many hydroelectric dams controversially dotting the ecologically sensitive Himalayan state of Uttarakhand.

Four days later, their families are hoping against hope that some are still alive in the warren of tunnels where rescuers have been toiling to dig them out.

The 27-year-old welder Rawal Silsiwal, from Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, had 20 days of leave planned next month for the birth of his first child. "He was thrilled about the child and had started a countdown until his holiday," said his uncle Vinod Pokhriyal.

"His wife won't survive the shock of losing him, and that makes us worry about the child." Vijay Kumar Singh, 24, from Uttar Pradesh, missed his Saturday shift due to illness and worked on Sunday to compensate. He last spoke to his father the evening before.

"He called me every day before entering the tunnel but on Sunday he didn't," his father Ram Dhawan said. "I don't know where to look for him." Santosh Yadav, 36, also from Uttar Pradesh, last spoke to his father at 9:45 am on Sunday before entering the tunnel. "He promised to call back at 12:30 pm but around 12:00 pm I saw the news of floods," father Ramesh said. "I will wait for his call until my last breath." —AFP

International

Myanmar anti-coup protesters march as US sanctions generals

Security forces use tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets against protesters

YANGON: Anti-coup protesters yesterday took to the streets of Myanmar for a sixth consecutive day, after US President Joe Biden announced sanctions against the Southeast Asian nation's generals and demanded they relinquish power.

There has been an outpouring of anger and defiance since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi last week and detained her along with other senior figures of her National League for Democracy party. Security forces have used tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets against the protesters, with isolated reports of live rounds also being fired. Police also ramped up their harassment of the NLD with a raid on its headquarters.

have to join together to fight against the military dictatorship," Saw Z Net, an ethnic Karen protester and sound engineer, told AFP.

There are more than 130 ethnic minority groups across Myanmar, some of whom have been forced to flee their homes due to clashes between the military and ethnic armed groups, who agitate for autonomy in various states. Fresh rallies also cropped up in the cities of Dawei and Mandalay, with protesters carrying signs that said "Restore our Democracy!" and "We condemn the military coup".

In the ancient city of Bagan, a UNESCO heritage site, hundreds of protesters dressed in traditional outfits marched between the temples and pagodas, hoisted painted portraits of Suu Kyi in the air and called for the military to "Free our leader".

US sanctions

Western nations have repeatedly denounced the coup, with the United States leading calls for the generals to relinquish power. In the most significant concrete action to pressure the junta, Biden announced Wednesday that his administration was cutting off the generals' access to \$1 billion in funds in the United States.

"I again call on the Burmese military to immediately release democratic political leaders and activists," Biden said, as he flagged further sanctions. "The military must relinquish power."

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has also warned the bloc could impose fresh sanctions on Myanmar's military.

Crackdown deepens

There were more reports of arrests yesterday, including the deputy speaker of the parliament's lower house and a key aide to Suu Kyi, taking the number of coup-linked detentions to more than 200, according to monitor Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

The military justified last week's power grab by claiming widespread voter fraud in November's polls, which saw a landslide for Suu Kyi's party. It quickly moved to stack courts and political offices with loyalists as it ended a decade of civilian rule. Fears are growing over how long the junta will tolerate the protests. Live rounds were fired at a rally in Naypyidaw this week, critically wounding two people—including a woman who was shot in the head. Images depicting the woman have been shared widely online alongside expressions of grief and fury. The military's clampdown on information using internet blackouts—with tech companies ordered to cut communications intermittently—has drawn widespread condemnation. Concern was also building yesterday that the junta was planning to impose a much harsher and sustained internet crackdown. Tech-focused Myanmar civil society organization MIDO tweeted that a draft cybersecurity bill had been sent to telecom companies, which would allow the military to order blackouts and website bans.—AFP

50,000 people in the front line of the pandemic—health workers, people with serious underlying illnesses and border officials, the presidency said in its statement. State television TVGE said the president's son, who is also chairman of the National Committee to Fight Covid-19, would be the first person in Equatorial Guinea to receive the vaccine, yesterday evening. The tiny state has been ruled by Obiang, 78, for the past 41 years and his son is widely considered to be lined up as his successor. It has officially recorded 5,614 cases of coronavirus, of which 87 have been fatal.

According to official figures reported on state TV, there were fewer than 15 cases per week towards the end of 2020, compared with more than 50 per week currently. Sinopharm, in an announcement on December 31, said its vaccine was 79 percent effective. The figure is lower than the 95 and 94 percent effectiveness of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines. However, these have to be kept at very low temperatures, which crimps their use in hot, poor countries where extreme refrigeration is impractical.—AFP



HONG KONG: People walk through a flower market in Hong Kong yesterday ahead of the start of the Lunar New Year, which ushers in the Year of the Ox today. — AFP

Chinese migrants torn over staying put for Lunar New Year

BEIJING: China's migrant workers face a difficult choice this Lunar New Year holiday: long journeys home fraught with coronavirus restrictions, or financial incentives enticing them to stay put. Normally, the festival period starts with the world's biggest annual human migration as hundreds of millions of China's workers undertake a pilgrimage back home from industrial zones and big cities.

This year, the government is walking a tightrope between controlling the pandemic and boosting the economy. Carrot-and-stick tactics are being used to encourage workers not to travel, including offers of free phone data and online films, versus requirements for virus tests and quarantine.

"To go home, I need to do a nucleic acid test and get a certificate, which is very inconvenient," said Hou Sibai, a Gansu native working as a delivery driver in Beijing. By contrast, some 40 million yuan (\$6.2 million) in coupons is being given out to residents in the capital who "answer the government's call to stay put", reported state media.

The incentives appear to be working. Trips taken on January 28 — the first day of the official, 40-day peak travel period—plummeted 74 percent on last year, said state broadcaster CCTV.

Beijing's transport committee said air and rail travel was down more than 80 percent, while road traffic dropped by nearly a third. Train stations across the city were emptier than usual for this time of year, with rows of empty seats on the concourse and no queues at the ticket machines.

Returning home

In the days before the holiday, China's domestic Covid-19 cases dropped to zero, giving some travellers more confidence. Li Xinjun, a 50-year-old housekeeper, was heading to Hebei to see her son and his family. "Because of the epidemic (last year), I didn't take a break," she told AFP from outside Beijing Railway Station. "My clients work in the hospital and because of the epidemic, they didn't take leave, so I didn't go home either." "I haven't been home to see my children for a long time." A recorded message at the station reminded travellers to lower face masks for a facial recognition check on their way in, and to keep one meter (three feet) apart. One man, who only gave his surname Liu, told AFP he decided to see his elderly parents in northern Shanxi province, but the rules mean they can't gather with any other relatives.—AFP



YANGON: People give a three-finger salute after calls for protest went out on social media in Yangon yesterday as Myanmar's ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi was formally charged on Wednesday two days after she was detained in a military coup. — AFP

But demonstrators again marched peacefully yesterday in Naypyidaw—the capital and military stronghold—as well as Yangon, the largest city and commercial hub, which saw tens of thousands flood into the streets. "Don't go to the office," chanted a group of protesters outside Myanmar's central bank in Yangon, part of an effort urging civil servants and people in other industries to boycott work and put pressure on the junta. "We aren't doing this for a week or a month—we are determined to do this until the end when (Suu Kyi) and President U Win Myint are released," one protesting bank employee told AFP.

Joining the protest were dozens from the ethnic Karen, Rakhine and Kachin minority groups, who marched down Yangon's main Myaynigone junction. "Our ethnic armed groups and ethnic people

China donates 100,000 doses to Equatorial Guinea

MALABO, Equatorial Guinea: The West African state of Equatorial Guinea said yesterday that China had donated 100,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine to help it launch a COVID immunization campaign. The vaccines were ceremonially handed over at Malabo airport on Wednesday to Vice President Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, the son of head of state Teodoro Obiang Nguema, the presidency said on its website. On Tuesday, Equatorial Guinea, an oil-rich but widely impoverished nation of 1.3 million people, declared a nightly curfew and reimposed restrictions that had been lifted against the coronavirus.

The Chinese vaccines will be used to provide two doses to

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Lebanese trap shooter Ray Bassil trains in the underground parking of her building, in Sahel Alma near the coastal city of Jounieh, north of the capital Beirut. — AFP

In locked down Lebanon, Olympic trap shooter trains in garage

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Anis Bouchnak tries a briar wood pipe that he made at his workshop in the northwestern Tunisian coastal town of Tabarka.



Anis Bouchnak works on a briar wood pipe at his workshop. —AFP photos



Dying breed: TUNISIAN CRAFTS SMOKING PIPES FROM BRIAR WOOD

Ent over a century-old machine, Tunisia's sole artisan pipe-maker Anis Bouchnak carves smoking pipes from native briar wood, a craft passed down by his grandfather and father. "I am proud to be the only pipe-maker in Tunisia," said the craftsman, his hands roughened from his trade. "But frankly, I would have liked to have competition, because this would have motivated me to progress." The Bouchnak family workshop was established half a century ago in Tabarka, a northwestern tourist town nestled in verdant hills that plunge towards the Mediterranean.

In 1968, Anis's grandfather Chedly Bouchnak travelled to Switzerland and brought back a rasp, a drill and other woodworking tools to transform briar wood into smoking pipes. But

French pipe-makers refused to teach him their craft. Determined, Chedly spied through the window of a workshop in Saint-Claude—the French city considered the capital of briar pipes—to learn the secrets of their manufacture. Over the years, Bouchnak pipes have gained a certain renown.

But 37-year-old Anis, who had been living in France since he was a child and worked in the restaurant business, never imagined he would take up the mantle. Then in 2011, after the death of both his grandfather and father, he returned to Tunisia and decided to reopen the workshop.

'Passing on the torch'

A Tunisian pipe collector "passed on to me the passion for this work and showed me the

future prospects of this trade", he told AFP. He learnt the ropes from a master pipe-maker employed by his grandfather, who died last year. Now, Bouchnak makes pipes in his own original style—while not sacrificing functionality. He is the only producer in Tunisia, and among the rare few in the region, to continue to make the pipes by hand.

The mountainous Kroumirie area in northwestern Tunisia is known for its briar—harvested from the root of the Erica arborea shrub, native to the Mediterranean basin and long used in French pipe factories. Connoisseurs appreciate briar wood for its heat tolerance and neutral smell, which allows the smoker to better savor the aromas of the tobacco. Bouchnak said his early customers—academics, lawyers, doctors and politicians—had made way for a clientele of collectors and diplomats "looking for something original".

"It's a whole market that's mine," he said. "But it's a burden to be the only pipe-maker, because I'm responsible for carrying on this craft and passing the torch on to someone else." Bouchnak has taken on two apprentices and said there was plenty of work. "Everything I make is sold straightaway."

Soul, spirit

While many Tunisian artisans have suffered from the collapse in tourism due to the coronavirus pandemic, Bouchnak said he continued to get orders by offering "something other than the camel, the palm tree and the carpet". He said he found inspiration in the tin-roofed workshop in a courtyard of the family home. "With all these old machines, I have the impression of going back in time and... of preserving the traditional way of making pipes, like my father and grandfather before me," he said. "For me, it's a workshop-cum-museum that has a soul."

His work starts with choosing a piece of briar burl—the blocks cut from the shrub root structure—from a room whose floor is covered by the family treasure: burls that have been drying sometimes for 20 years. "I have enough to last me another 10 years" making two pipes a day, Bouchnak said. The burl must first be cut, then boiled for 12 hours before it is left to dry for four to 20 years, its quality improving with age. The artisan then drills the wood and shapes it with rasps and files before sanding it down. "I could work with new machinery, it would make my job easier," Bouchnak said. "But I prefer to continue to work by hand, because there is a satisfaction in doing something that comes from the spirit and the



LVMH suspends Rihanna's fashion house

French luxury giant LVMH announced Wednesday that it was suspending popstar Rihanna's ready-to-wear fashion line that she launched in 2019, to focus on the cosmetics and lingerie parts of her brand Fenty. LVMH said in a statement

that it was putting the Fenty fashion house on hold "pending better conditions". However, it said a new round of funding for Rihanna's lingerie line, Savage X Fenty, had been secured from US investors, and that LVMH would focus on expanding her Fenty Beauty and Fenty Skin products.

Rihanna's tie-up with LVMH was the first time the fashion giant had built a brand from scratch since Christian Lacroix in 1987, and was part of a strategy to reach more millennials. It was also the first time one of LVMH's houses had been headed by a woman. Fashion magazine WWD reported that the Fenty maison had not posted anything on its Instagram since the start of the year, and that its e-commerce site would stop operating in the coming weeks. LVMH has also collaborated with artists Kanye West for its sportswear brand Adidas, and Pharrell Williams at Chanel.—AFP



In this file photo US pop singer Robyn Rihanna Fenty celebrates the launch of FENTY at Bergdorf Goodman in New York City. —AFP

In locked down Lebanon, Olympic trap shooter trains in garage



Photos show Lebanese trap shooter Ray Bassil works with her cousin and temporary trainer in the underground parking of her building, during a training session for this summer's Olympics, in Sahel Alma near the coastal city of Jounieh, north of the capital Beirut. —AFP photos

Lebanon may be under coronavirus lockdown, but that has not stopped Lebanese trap shooter Ray Bassil from training for the Olympics this summer—between parked cars in her underground garage. Determined to stay fit despite the pandemic, the 32-year-old turned the parking spaces under her apartment block north of Beirut into a virtual firing range—all without shooting a single round. Lebanon went into full lockdown in mid-January after gatherings over the winter holidays triggered a sharp rise in coronavirus cases.

Bassil herself had fallen ill from Covid-19, but sprang back into training despite the round-the-clock curfew. “The shooting clubs were forced to close... I had no other option” than to train in the garage, she said. “I have to stay physically, mentally and technically in shape.” Bassil is the only Lebanese to have qualified for the Tokyo games so far, and hopes are high she will win the country an Olympic medal—a feat not repeated since a bronze in Greco-Roman wrestling in Moscow in 1980.

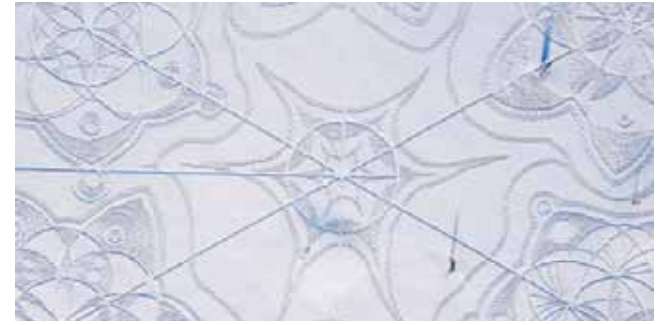
“The hope is for an Olympic medal, especially as it’s not just my dream but also my country’s,” said the athlete, who will be competing in her third Olympics. In Rio in 2016, she finished 14th. Inside the 500-square-metre (5,400-square-foot) garage near the town of Jounieh, Bassil aimed her rifle at the pale grey wall, but instead imagined flying clay plates. Standing on one leg near a parked black car and red moped, she aimed her rifle left and right, following instructions from her cousin and temporary trainer Nahi.

In another exercise, he tapped her on the back to destabilize her and help her practice balance. Bassil recently travelled to Italy to continue her training, before she takes part in the Shotgun World Cup in Cairo from February 22 to March 5. Even without Covid-19, it has been a tough year for Lebanon. Lebanese are struggling to cope with soaring prices as the country is battered by its worst economic crisis in decades. And a huge explosion at Beirut port in August killed more than 200 people and ravaged swathes of the capital. But Bassil remains confident. “All these difficulties haven’t affected my morale,” said the athlete, whose father was a volleyball player. “I’m from a very sporty family and I’ll be up to the challenge.”—AFP





Aerial photographs show snow drawings made entirely of footprints on a golf course outside the Finnish capital Helsinki, in Espoo. — AFP photos



Flurry of interest for Finnish snow art work

At ground level it looks like a mess of footprints across a snowy golf course, but from above, a stunningly intricate piece of snow art comes into view. Measuring 160 metres across, it is believed to be the Nordic country's largest snow work, and has seen creator Janne Pyykko deluged with interest and media requests since he led a team of 12 volunteers to tread out the design at the weekend. "It was a social challenge for me to explain everything and keep everybody enthusiastic about the project," the IT consultant told AFP, "and it worked!"

Inspired to "create something beautiful" in the 30 centimeter (nearly 12 inch) deep snow, Pyykko designed a geometric image made up of interlocking circles on his computer, and recruited collaborators from a Finnish snowshoeing Facebook group. The group followed a printed-out map and used ropes to trace out perfect circles in a pattern reminiscent of needlepoint on a snow-covered driving range in Espoo, on the outskirts of the capital Helsinki. "We spent three hours laughing together and walking," volunteer Elena Ceccarelli told AFP in the minus 10 degrees Cel-

sus (14 degrees Fahrenheit) sunshine.

"Any more than that and it would have started to get cold, but Janne was very good with the timing," she added. "While we were doing this it was very hard to understand what this art will look like," snowshoeing enthusiast Petri Teralainen told AFP. "So it was great to see the picture from above, it was perfect." Pyykko says he has further projects in mind, though "a bit smaller, perhaps". "But because people are now so enthusiastic, I think there will be new snow drawings in the coming weeks." —AFP

Kim Kardashian robber won't benefit from book

Yunice Abbas, awaiting trial for the robbery of US reality star Kim Kardashian in Paris four years ago, will not benefit financially from the book he has published about the heist, lawyers said Wednesday. The lawyers, Henri de Beauregard and Mohand Ouidja, said they had on Tuesday obtained a court order "authorising the seizure of rights" on the sales of his book entitled "I Kidnapped Kim Kardashian" which was published at the beginning of the month. They represent the night watchman at the luxury residence Kardashian rented while she attended Paris Fashion Week in 2016.

Abbas, who calls himself a "part-time crook," was one of 12 people arrested for nabbing a small fortune in jewels after surprising Kardashian in the rented apartment. As his book's title makes clear Abbas, 67, has no plans to contest the charges at a trial prosecutors are hoping will begin this year. It was the biggest robbery of an individual in France in two decades, with the thieves making off with a combined haul worth about nine million euros (\$10.8 million). Most of the pieces were never found: police have recovered only a diamond-encrusted cross that



Yunice Abbas, one of five men who robbed US media personality Kim Kardashian at her hotel in Paris poses during a photo session for the release of his book in Paris. — AFP

Abbas dropped while leaving the scene by bike.

He was one of five men aged 60 to 72 — dubbed the "Grandpa robbers" in the press—who entered Kardashian's apartment at around 2:30 am on the night of October 3, 2016. The star later told police the men, at least one of whom was wearing a jacket with police insignia, tied her up with plastic cables and adhesive tape, and placed her in the bathtub. In his book, Abbas gives the details of what he describes as a perfectly executed crime. The night guard's lawyers said that "our client considers this communication campaign indecent. He maintains that the individuals who attacked him that evening were not peaceful 'grandpa robbers', but determined and armed criminals". —AFP

Pandemic-hit Oscars to be broadcast from 'multiple locations'

This year's Oscars will be broadcast live and "in-person" from multiple locations, the Academy said Wednesday, as details of Hollywood's pandemic-delayed big night finally begin to take shape. The Academy Awards in recent decades have taken place at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, but with the United States' second largest city still under Covid-19 restrictions, the ceremony is "adapting to the requirements of the pandemic," said a spokesperson. "To create the in-person show our global audience wants to see... the ceremony will broadcast live from multiple locations, including the landmark Dolby Theatre," they said in a statement to AFP.

The 93rd Academy Awards will be "an Oscars like none other, while prioritizing the public health and safety of all those who will participate," the spokesperson added. No further new details were offered on the ceremony, which caps Hollywood's lengthy award season. It is not the first time the Oscars will take place at multiple locations. As far back as 1953 — the first time the ceremony was televised — proceedings were split between Los Angeles and New York. This year, other award shows are already experimenting with multiple locations including this month's Golden

Globes. The Globes will see a "first-ever bi-coastal telecast" in which Tina Fey hosts from New York's Rainbow Room and Amy Poehler from the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles, organizers said. Television's Emmys in September were broadcast from a near-empty Los Angeles theater, with nominees and winners dialing in from their homes and socially distanced gatherings via video call. — AFP



In this file photo an Oscar statue watches over the 91st Oscars Nominees Luncheon at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills. — AFP

Feline silly? Lawyer appears as cat on Zoom call

A Texas lawyer appeared as a talking cat during a Zoom call with a judge, sparking worldwide delight at the latest video conferencing mishap of the pandemic work-from-home era. The cat filter left lawyer Rod Ponton struggling to explain his situation to sympathetic judge, Roy Ferguson. "I believe you have a filter turned on in the video settings," the judge said. Ponton—his voice appearing to be spoken by an increasingly anxious white kitten—asked "Can you hear me, judge?" The judge responded saying "I can hear you. I think it's a filter..."

"It is," the nodding cat said. "And I don't know how to remove it. I've got my assistant here, she's trying to, but I'm prepared to go forward with it... I'm here live. I'm not a cat." The judge replied "I can see that," before later sending out a tweet saying the incident underlined the legal profession's dedication to justice despite the challenges presented by Covid-19. Ponton, who was appearing in a civil forfeiture hearing, told US media "if I can make the country chuckle for a moment in these difficult times they're going through, I'm happy to let them do that at my expense." —AFP



This video grab courtesy of the 394th District Court of Texas obtained, shows Texas lawyer Rod Ponton appearing as a cat during a virtual hearing of the 394th District Court of Texas. — AFP



Coffee dregs is pictured in a park on paths in Krakow. —AFP photos

Coffee replaces sand in snow-covered Krakow

The city of Krakow in southern Poland has woken up and smelled the coffee-on the paths winding through its picturesque snow-covered parks. The city is sprinkling coffee grounds from local cafes instead of sand or salt in green areas. Krakow's parks department said that using coffee was an "environmentally friendly and cheaper" alternative and the idea had "aroused great enthusiasm among residents and numerous cafes".

The department said on its website that using coffee on the ground was also more "dog-friendly". More than 50 cafes are already contributing their coffee waste and the city said it hoped it would encourage more local residents to buy coffee to go and help cafes "in this difficult time". Cafes and restaurants in Poland are currently only allowed to operate a takeaway service. Krakow credited the city of Lviv in Ukraine and Scandinavian cities for coming up with the idea.

Parks officials said they currently use about 75 to 80 tons of sand per week during snowy periods. The idea appeared popular with residents as park keepers sprinkled coffee grounds from large buckets on Wednesday near the city's famed Old Town. "It's a nice idea. My dog's happy," said Bartek, who was walking his Australian Shepherd, Furia. Another passerby told AFP it was good not to use "harmful salt" and a third said it "could encourage more people to drink coffee during lockdown". —AFP



A dog sits on a path sprinkled with coffee grounds in a park in Krakow.



Municipal workers sprinkle paths in a park with coffee dregs in Krakow.



A municipal worker fills coffee dregs in buckets to sprinkle paths in parks in Krakow.

In Denmark, music, glitter balls brighten Covid tests

As so called party buses are in short demand due to Covid-19 restrictions, a suburb of Copenhagen decided to convert one into a mobile testing centre, putting a musical spin on virus testing. In the suburb of Glostrup, to the west of Denmark's capital, the town's mayor John Engelhardt explained on Wednesday that "it takes very little," to convert the buses normally reserved for events like bachelor parties and hen dos. "Party buses are not used for parties as everything is dead in this area at the moment, so these buses are available," Engelhardt told AFP.

Now fitted for nurses to be able test for Covid-19, the bus still retains the neon lights and sparkly disco ball. Though alcohol is no longer served aboard, the speakers are still used to play music, contributing to a very different atmosphere compared to what you might expect at a typical clinic. In line with the government's strategy and to encourage Danes to get tested regularly even when not showing symptoms, the aim is to make testing available to as many people as possible by bringing the test facility to the workplace. On Wednesday, the bus had several stops, among them two schools. "We are more exposed as teachers. With the party bus, you are safer," 32-year-old teacher Julie told AFP.

"It's easier to do it here, rather than going to a center after work," her colleague Sine added, saying she found the atmosphere "cozy". The combination of music and lights has even encouraged staff to get up for the odd dance between patients. "It's fun to be at work and listen to music and see the lights," testing manager on the bus Theresa Kay-Heeno said. But she stressed that health protocols were not sacrificed. "The quality of the testing and the hygiene is top priority," she said. In five days, 1,500 people have been tested in the bus, which will remain in service "for as long as we need it", according to Engelhardt.

Denmark, which has been in partial lockdown since Christmas, reopened primary schools on Monday as the number of new cases has slowed down. However, non-essential shops, bars and restaurants, cultural venues, secondary schools, colleges and universities remain closed. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

No kidding: Video calls with goats boost British farm

A British farmer came up with a jokey idea to rent out her goats to liven up video call meetings—and found an unexpected source of lockdown income. The floppy-eared goats glance curiously as farmer Dot McCarthy holds up a mobile phone to film them eating hay and prancing around in a barn. The video of the goats appears on a Zoom call as three other participants smile and McCarthy tells them the goats' names. Meanwhile, a farm employee is filming another goat in a simultaneous call. Cronkshaw Fold Farm in Lancashire, northwestern England, offers a five-minute appearance by a goat on any video-calling platform for £5 (nearly \$7, 6 euros).

Customers have their choice of seven different goats on the farm's website, from



Farmer Dot McCarthy films her goats for a Zoom call at Crankshaw Fold Farm, Rossendale, northwest England. — AFP photos

“highest-ranking nanny” Margaret to cute brown-and-white kid Lulu. “Say you’re doing a video call with work or whatever, or maybe a really long family call and it’s getting a bit boring,” McCarthy says. “You can book a goat to join you in the meeting and just see if any of your colleagues notice.” And business is thriving, the 32-year-old farmer says. “This started as a joke—putting goats on video calls to prank people in their work routines—and it’s just gone a bit crackers, really.”

Since it started offering the service nearly

a year ago, the farm has earned £50,000 pounds, “which is crazy”, she adds. The small family farm also has sheep and chickens. Before Covid hit, it had diversified with various side businesses such as conducting farm tours and sheepdog demonstrations, providing guest rooms and even goat yoga. But when the first lockdown hit, McCarthy faced letting go two part-time staff she had recently hired. The popularity of the goats on Zoom has allowed them to keep their jobs and also provide additional work for the



DA VINCI'S 'LAST SUPPER' LIFTS SOULS WITH REOPENING

The Milan monastery housing Leonardo da Vinci's “The Last Supper” has reopened its doors, bringing delight and solace to locals who for once can visit the masterpiece without booking weeks ahead. “After this terrible pandemic, it allows me to escape, it lifts my soul, and lets me feel emotions again,” said Milan res-

ident Alessandria Fabbri, 37, as she admired the world-famous mural. Painted on the refectory wall of the Dominican monastery inside Santa Maria delle Grazie, The Last Supper attracted more than 445,000 visitors in 2019, lured to Milan for the 500th anniversary of the death of the great Renaissance painter and inventor.

That, of course, was before coronavirus struck last year, tourism ground to a halt and annual revenues of 1.2 million euros (\$1.5 million) fell by 80 percent, according to the Cenavolo Vinciano Museum, which operates the site. “There are no more queues, silence prevails—optimal conditions to admire this extraordinary masterpiece and escape from the pandemic,” said Michela Palazzo, the museum's director.



Visitor watch “The Last Supper” (Il Cenacolo or L'Ultima Cena), Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci's late 15th-century mural painting housed by the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. — AFP

'It's magical'

The work—described by the 16th century painter and art historian Giorgio Vasari as “a beautiful and marvelous thing”—portrays Christ's last meal with his twelve apostles, capturing the moment when he predicts Judas' upcoming betrayal. Working between 1494 and 1498, Da Vinci eschewed the traditional technique for frescoes, in which water-based paint is quickly applied to wet plaster, which binds the colors on drying. Instead, his experiment using oil and tempera paint on top of a dry foundation achieved a brilliant lustre, but it soon began flaking and showing signs of damp.

The Cenavolo Vinciano reopened its doors on Tuesday after being closed since November, when Italy began new restrictions to counter a second wave of the virus. Like many other museums allowed to reopen from Mondays through Fridays, the Cenavolo Vinciano is now betting on local tourism for the immediate future. Palazzo said she hopes to attract Milanese normally put off by crowds of international tourists—mostly Americans, Chinese and Koreans in recent years. “The monastery is part of their culture, their history,” she said.

Now, small groups limited to 12 people take turns every 15 minutes to study what is one of Da Vinci's most recognizable works, along with the Mona Lisa, hung in the Louvre in Paris. One visitor, Anna Oganisyan, came with her daughter, hoping to be almost alone to admire Da Vinci's work. “It's the most beautiful work of art I've ever seen in my life,” she said, after buying a ticket at the last minute—an option unimaginable before the pandemic. “A mixture of art and spirituality, it's magical.”— AFP

local community, important in a rural area, she says.

At the same time she is not giddy over the success of what she calls the “goat video call wave”. “I've been saying this since the first lockdown, but I definitely think this is just a phase,” she says, laughing. “But yeah, we'll keep going—as long as people want goats, we will bring goats to the people.”— AFP



Rocker Bruce Springsteen arrested on intoxicated driving charge

Rocker Bruce Springsteen was arrested in New Jersey in November on a charge of driving while intoxicated, authorities said Wednesday. The “Born To Run” singer was also cited on November 14, 2020 for reckless driving and consuming alcohol in a closed area, in New Jersey's Gateway National Recreation Area. “Springsteen was cooperative throughout the process,” a National Park Service spokesperson said. The 71-year-old rock icon will make a court appearance by teleconference “probably toward the end of this month,” according to the New Jersey US Attorney's Office.

Following the revelation, carmaker Jeep pulled a two-minute commercial featuring Springsteen, which debuted on Sunday during the Super Bowl. In the ad, Springsteen is seen in the US Midwest promising “hope on the road up ahead” while calling on Americans to overcome their divisions, one of the many ads featuring such a message during the game.—AFP



French director of the Museum of Natural History, Francis Duranthon (right), assistant Guillaume Fleury, and archaeologist and CNRS researcher Carole Fritz (left) stand by a *Charonia lampas* trumpet shell, which was first found in 1931 in an archaeological dig at the mouth of the Marsoulas Cave, at the museum in Toulouse. — AFP



Guillaume Fleury, who works at the Museum of Natural History, shows a *Charonia lampas* trumpet shell.



Guillaume Fleury, who works at the Museum of Natural History, shows a *Charonia lampas* trumpet shell.

Earliest shell horn played for first time in 17,000 years

After more than 17,000 years of silence and decades forgotten in a French museum, a shell fashioned into a horn by our prehistoric ancestors has been played again as a result of new research published Wednesday. Scientists believe the ancient conch, from a species of large sea snail still present in the Atlantic and North Sea, is the oldest wind instrument of its type yet found. The shell was unearthed in 1931 at an archaeological dig in the Pyrenees near the mouth of the Marsoulas Cave, whose walls are painted with the artwork of Magdalenian people living there at the end of the last ice age.

Scientists initially thought it bore no trace of human modification, assuming it was a type of ceremonial drinking cup. It was taken to the Museum of Natural History in Toulouse and forgotten. But a new examination using modern technology found not only that it had been altered, but that it could still hold a note. Or three, as it turned out. Played by a musician, it had tones close to C, C sharp and D. And it boomed at a resounding 100 decibels a meter from the conch. "This sound is a link, a direct link with Magdalenian people," said Carole Fritz, lead author of the study and a senior scientist at the French National Centre for Scientific Research.

She said it was "very important because you have the sea in the cave", adding the shell was from the Atlantic, some 200 kilometers from the cave. Instruments older

than the conch have been found—flutes whittled from the bones of large birds like swans and eagles—but the researchers said this was the oldest shell horn, symbolizing the importance of the ocean to Magdalenian people. The study, published in *Science Advances*, said radio-carbon dating of items at the cave suggest it was occupied around 18,000 years ago. "To our knowledge, the Marsoulas shell is unique in the prehistoric context, not only in France but also at the scale of Paleolithic Europe and perhaps the world," the study said.

One clue to the shell's importance was its markings. Painted red dots the size and shape of fingerprints are similar to those used to depict bison on the cave wall. When the shell was discovered in the 1930s, scientists likely assumed its broken tip—leaving a 3.5 cm diameter opening—was due to accidental damage, said co-author Gilles Tosello, researcher at the center for prehistoric art at Toulouse University.

But this is the strongest part of the shell and is "almost impossible" to break naturally, he said. On closer inspection, researchers found the shell had been carefully modified with an "elaborated technique", with a CT scan revealing two holes that they think were drilled to install a mouthpiece.

'Sound from prehistory'

The Magdalenian people were prehistoric hunters, spread across Europe, from

northern Spain to Germany, at a time when animals like bison roamed in large herds. Their culture disappeared around 12,000 years ago as the cool, near-glacial climate warmed. They left an abundance of flint tools and weapons as well as caves decorated with paintings, like Marsoulas and Altamira in Spain. Researchers think the conch may have played a part in rituals or ceremonies, as it still does today in modern societies from Polynesia to South America.

With its loud sound—roughly equivalent in decibels to an approaching subway train—the Magdalenians may have used the shell as a calling device. "The intensity produced is amazing," said co-author Philippe Walter, director of the laboratory of molecular and structural archaeology at Sorbonne University. "You can imagine what can happen at the entrance of the cave, or inside a cave, with this very strong sound." Future attempts to make music from the shell will use a 3D printed version of the fragile artefact. Walter said that researchers—looking at modern-day use in traditional ceremonies, and even to play jazz—are convinced there are many other notes in its repertoire. But he said we will never know what music the Magdalenians heard. "We cannot reconstitute the sound from prehistory," he said. — AFP

In Spain, virtuoso violinist pays tribute to war-torn Lebanon childhood

In the garage where he sought shelter from bombs in his native Lebanon, Ara Malikian discovered the power of music. The bearded and heavily tattooed 52-year-old paid homage to this childhood hiding spot in his latest album released online in January called "Petit Garage". "It was a place full of rats and cockroaches," he said during an interview with AFP in Madrid where he has lived for the past two decades. "We would hear the bombs, it was a very dramatic situation and suddenly some of us started to make music, others to sing, everyone dancing," he added. "I saw how music and art changed people's mood, gave them hope, joy. We forgot all our sorrows, the war and the bombs."

Born in Beirut in 1968 to an Armenian family, Malikian started playing the violin at a very young age, encouraged by his violinist father who has performed with legendary Lebanese singer Fairuz. "From the moment I was born, he put a violin against my chin and, whether I liked it or not, I had to play it," he recalled. "Luckily I fell in love with this instrument, so I had no psychological problems," he added with a smile. "It is true that my father was very strict, very severe, he forced me to study and practice for hours since I was very little."



Armenian-Spanish violinist Ara Malikian poses during an AFP interview at the WiZink Center in Madrid. — AFP

The hours of work turned him into a prodigious musician and allowed him to go to Germany to perfect his skills. But there he found a "very, very conservative" world of music conservatories which did not appeal to him. "I had to earn a living so I secretly played in bars and nightclubs," said Malikian, adding he learned the importance of being "mad and open-minded" during this period. He recalled feeling embarrassed because he did not know who The Doors were when asked to play the US rock band's music at a "transvestite bar". — AFP

Lifestyle | Feature



Sister Andre, Lucile Randon in the registry of birth, sits in a wheelchair in her room as she holds an alarm, on the eve of her 117th birthday.

FRENCH NUN, EUROPE'S OLDEST PERSON, TURNS 117 AFTER SURVIVING COVID

Europe's oldest person, French nun Sister Andre, turned 117 yesterday after surviving COVID-19 last month and living through two world wars, with a special birthday feast including her favorite dessert-baked Alaska. Born Lucile Randon on February 11, 1904, Sister Andre said she didn't realize she had caught the coronavirus, which infected 81 residents of her retirement home in the southeast city of Toulon, killing 10 of them. "I'm told that I got it," the nun told AFP on Wednesday at the home, where she sat basking in the winter sun, her eyes closed and hands clasped in prayer.



Sister Andre, Lucile Randon in the registry of birth, the eldest French and European citizen, prays in a wheelchair, on the eve of her 117th birthday. — AFP photos

"I was very tired, it's true, but I didn't realize it," she added in a steady, strong voice that belies her years. But David Tavella, spokesman for the Sainte Catherine Laboure nursing home, said she had "experienced a triple confinement: in her wheelchair, in her room and without a visit". "So

her birthday, it reinvigorates us," he added, following the deadly outbreak. Sister Andre, who has been inundated with calls from reporters around the world, said she was not planning to do anything special for her 117th birthday.

But the home has other ideas, with a celebration to include a video call with her family. The facility, home to a dozen nuns, plans a special mass, and the chef is preparing a birthday feast with foie gras, capon fillet with porcini mushrooms and Sister Andre's favorite dessert: baked Alaska.

A glass of wine a day

She says her favorite food is lobster and she enjoys "a small glass of wine every day". Born in the southern town of Ales in a Protestant family, she grew up as the only girl among three brothers. One of her fondest memories was the return of two of her brothers at the end of World War I. "It was rare, in families, there were usually two dead rather than two alive. They both came back," she told AFP last year, on her 116th birthday. As a young woman she worked as a governess to children of wealthy families in Paris, a job she said "suited me very well."

She converted to Catholicism and was baptized at the age of 26. Driven by a desire to "go further", she joined the Daughters of Charity order of nuns at the relatively late age of 41. Sister Andre was then assigned to a hospital in Vichy, where she worked for 31 years and then spent 30 years in a retirement home in the French Alps before moving to Toulon.—AFP

Britain's brass bands fear being blown away by virus curbs

They have been central to working-class life in mining communities for decades but Britain's colliery brass bands say they are now fighting to survive due to coronavirus restrictions. With Britain again under lockdown, brass bands are struggling from the lack of opportunity to perform and drum up crucial funds, or even to practice together. Even the most famous among them—the Grimethorpe Colliery Band, which inspired the 1996 film "Brassed Off!" starring Ewan McGregor—has not escaped the effects.

"The issue really is about survival at the moment," Andrew Coe, director of the band, based in northern England and founded in 1917, told AFP. "We were staring down the abyss of running out of money probably this summer," he said. Known for their colorful uniforms and fierce rivalries, colliery brass bands have faced existential threats before, not least in the year-long national miners' strike over coal pit closures in 1984-85. Coe said that the turbulent period under then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher had been "pivotal" for the amateur bands, associated with pits. "Under great pressure, a lot of them did disappear, sadly," he said.

'Brink of extinction'

Since March last year when Britain imposed its first virus lockdown, bands have turned to online crowdfunding to cover costs like renting practice halls and paying salaried staff. So far, more than £140,000 (\$193,000, 160,000 euros) has been raised under the aegis of the Brass Bands England support organization, which represents 400 bands in England and Wales. Kenny Crookston, the organization's chief executive, said that the money had been vital to giving traditional brass bands a future.

"It really is that serious for them. They are on the brink of extinction if they don't get some money in," he warned. He said the funds had provided a lifeline not only to bands like Grimethorpe, which tours around the world, but smaller ones with just a handful of players. The British government has also provided £1.6 billion to help keep all arts organizations afloat during the outbreak.

'Uncertainty'

Some top brass bands participate in international competitions and perform at high-profile venues, such as London's Albert Hall. Smaller local bands normally appear in bandstands, at village halls or local marches. But repeated changes in

coronavirus restrictions have provided a series of false dawns. "The biggest problem we have is that uncertainty," Crookston said. Last year, when infection rates and deaths fell, some areas of the country saw restrictions eased, allowing bands to play under social distancing rules.



Principal cornet player Mark Wilkinson (right) and solo trombonist John Barber of Foden's Band, pose for a photograph.

During that period, Brass Bands England worked closely with Britain's culture ministry and public health officials to provide specialist advice. "A lot of bands went to a bit of expense and a bit of trouble to make the place spotlessly clean, put screens up, good ventilation... just to get the band back together partially," said Crookston. But, as rules have tightened again, including another lockdown from last month, Brass Bands England has said all practicing should stop. There is currently no indication of when practices or performances will return.

Heart of life

Financial difficulties aside, bands are also concerned about the pandemic's lasting impact on local communities. A sign welcoming visitors to the northwestern market town of Sandbach calls it "Home of the World Famous Foden's Brass Band". Manager and cornet player Mark Wilkinson, who has been in the band for 29 years, said that in normal times it would be the centre of members' social lives.

Usually the band, which dates back to 1900, would perform 30 concerts a year and rehearse every Tuesday and Thursday for two hours. "We feel so busy, we will spend a lot of time with each other," he said, adding that members, spouses and children were all friends with one another. Foden's has managed to keep playing online, including organizing regional competitions, judged remotely.

But it has been hard for the band to miss live performances, such as representing England in the European Brass Band Championships in Lithuania in May last year. Solo trombonist and band chairman John Barber described the thrill of performing live as a "rollercoaster type of experience". "When there are 25 or 26 people on stage who are absolutely giving it their all, it's not just the sheer volume and the timbre of the sound that quite literally pins you to your seat," he said. "There's a collective responsibility and pride because you're representing your band."—AFP



A visitor attends an exhibition dedicated to the “Alan Ford” comic book in Belgrade. — AFP photos



Serbian novelist and musician Marko Selic poses with the “Alan Ford” comic book, in a comics shop in Belgrade.



A visitor attends an exhibition dedicated to the “Alan Ford” comic book.

Forgotten at home, Italian comic strip enjoys cult status in ex-Yugoslavia

Alan Ford, a 1960s Italian comic strip following hapless secret agents as they battle a bizarre cast of villains, including one who steals from the poor and gives to the rich, was intended as satire. But for fans throughout what was then Yugoslavia, the black comedy and rogue characters from the series felt like an accurate description of their everyday reality. Created half a century ago by Italian comic artists Luciano Secchi and Roberto Raviola, known by their pen names Max Bunker and Magnus, the comic still enjoys a cult status in the Balkan countries that emerged from socialist Yugoslavia’s bloody collapse in the 1990s.

Based in New York, the series offers, according to various fan interpretations, criticism of aspects of American society like capitalism or racism. Yet the books were never translated into English and failed to reach a global audience. And while the comic’s popularity has faded in its native Italy over the years, in Yugoslavia it was an instant hit whose influence has seeped across pop culture, remaining a reference in music and film decades later. The comic books themselves have also stood the test of time, with new editions still regularly printed in the region.

In Belgrade, an exhibit at the Museum of History of Yugoslavia dedicated to the series features original drawings and rare editions of the comic. It is “very rare” for a foreign cultural product to become “an inseparable part

of the cultural heritage of the recipient country,” Lazar Dzamic, who wrote a book on Alan Ford’s success in Yugoslavia, said at the exhibit’s opening.

Antiheroes

The comic features a band of misfit secret agents, including the titular Alan Ford, who operate from a flower shop. Led by a nameless, ageless, wheelchair-bound character known as Number One, the gang of antiheroes includes the kleptomaniac British nobleman Sir Oliver, a hypochondriac known as Jeremiah, and the short-tempered, short-

statured Bob Rock. Dzamic, whose book is titled “Flower Shop in the House of Flowers”, argues that Alan Ford’s sensibility resonated in the Balkans where surrealism is “not an art form, but rather a way of life”.

Readers facing soul-crushing bureaucracy and widespread corruption recognized parts of their society in Alan Ford’s satire, he told AFP. “Latin America gave the world magical realism, while our gift to the world is documentary surrealism. For us, it is a natural form of social organization”.

Serbian novelist and musician Marko Selic cites the comic book as major inspiration for

his work, especially when it comes to social criticism. “It is a catalogue of characters from our real world. We are more inclined to recognize our reality somewhere and laugh at it, than to sit and mourn,” Selic told AFP.

Erasing swastikas

A key factor behind Alan Ford’s success in the Balkans is the nimble work of translators Nenad and Davor Brixy, a father and son who managed to transpose the distinct Milanese humor to the local language, creating a new form of slang. According to Davor Brixy, Yugoslavia’s communist authorities forced them to alter some of the satirical drawings to remove sensitive political references. “We had to take off the swastikas but we could leave the Nazi uniforms. The American soldiers had to lose their insignia, and the Russians their stars,” Brixy told AFP.

“Text-wise, we didn’t need more ‘interventions’, because the author’s style of insulting the politicians, army or the police was subtle”, he added. Max Bunker, one of the creators of the comic, declined to speak to AFP but has previously acknowledged the fame he enjoys in this corner of Europe. “I have to say that people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, the whole of the former Yugoslavia, are very intelligent because they very quickly understood my sense of humor and accepted it,” he told Al Jazeera in 2014.— AFP



A visitor attends an exhibition dedicated to the “Alan Ford” comic book.

Kids Page

Word Search

Civil War
Generals

DIRECTIONS: Find and circle the ALL CAP NAMES in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.



General Ulysses S. GRANT



General Robert E. LEE

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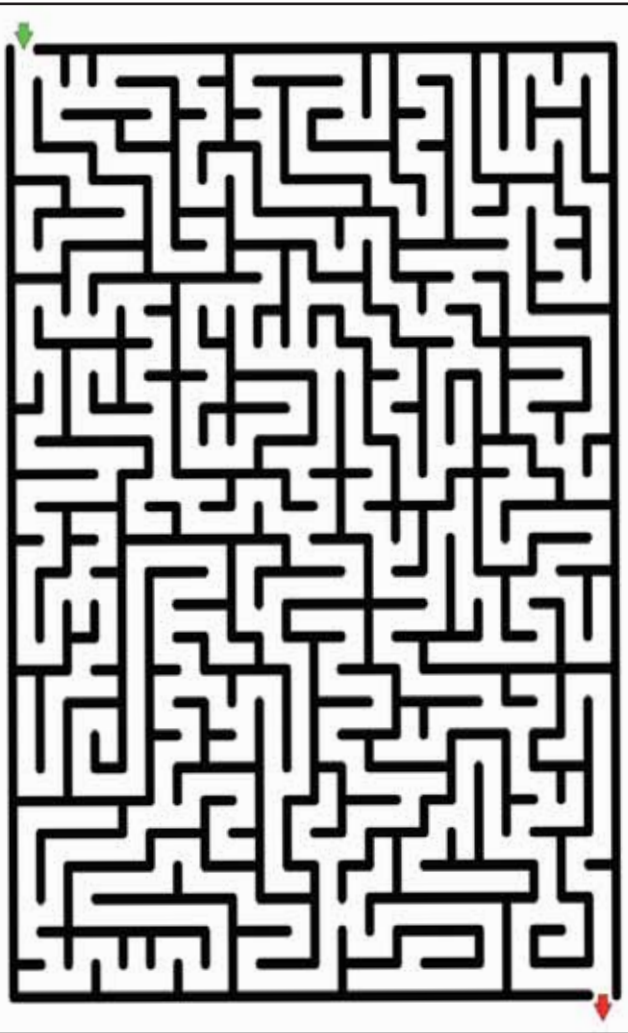
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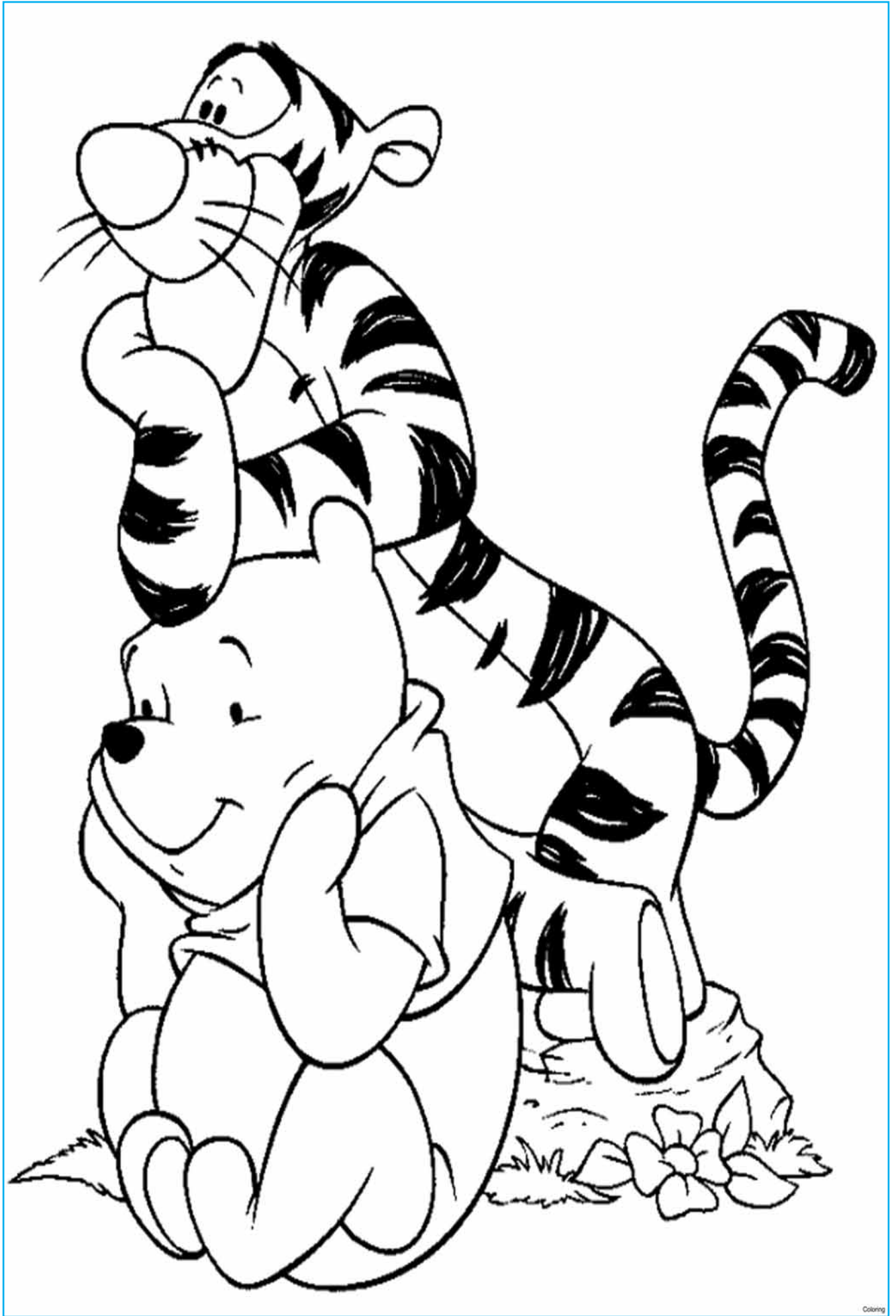
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Kids Mazes



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Dr. Abdullah Al Haddad
 Surgery Department
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Call to sequence African genomes

PARIS: A \$4.5 billion initiative to sequence the genomes of three million Africans would not only benefit a continent long neglected in gene-based healthcare, but advance understanding of genetic disease worldwide, the project leader said. Twenty years ago this month, the first complete mapping of the human genome was published after a more than decade-long marathon that marshaled hundreds of scientists and cost three billion dollars.

That pioneering effort revolutionized medicine and led to thousands of so-called genome-wide association studies (GWAS) shedding light on the

role genes play in a host of diseases, conditions and treatments.

Today, the cost of sequencing a genome to a similar level of precision is less than \$1,000. But the continent from which humanity emerged got left behind in this giant leap forward, and remains a genetic blank slate compared to Europe or the United States. "Most genomic research on the African continent over the last two decades has largely been driven by agendas defined more by European and American investigators," Ambrose Wonkam, a medical genetics professor and deputy dean of research at the University of

Cape Town's Faculty of Health Sciences, told AFP.

The genomes of more than a million individuals have been sequenced so far, but less than two percent were from Africa or of recent African descent. This, despite the fact that the continent has far more genetic diversity than any other region in the world—a diversity that would yield huge research dividends if mined and mapped.

"The Three Million African Genomes (3MAG) project would require sequencing individuals carefully selected across Africa to cover ethnolinguistic, regional and other groups," Wonkam said. "The aim is to capture the full scope of Africa's

genetic variation—for the benefit of all human populations and to ensure equitable access to genetic medicine."

Wonkam made his case in a commentary published Wednesday in the journal Nature, arguing that Africa's diverse gene pool would make it easier to pinpoint mutations likely to cause or contribute to a specific disease or condition. A variant, for example, of the gene PCSK9 gene that became apparent only because it is 200 times more common among African Americans than Europeans correlates with much lower levels of certain blood lipids. — AFP

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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Warm with light to moderate north westerly wind with speed of 12 - 35 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

BY NIGHT: Rather cold and Partly cloudy with light to moderate north westerly wind to wind with speed of 08 - 28 km/h with a chance for light fog forming over some areas.

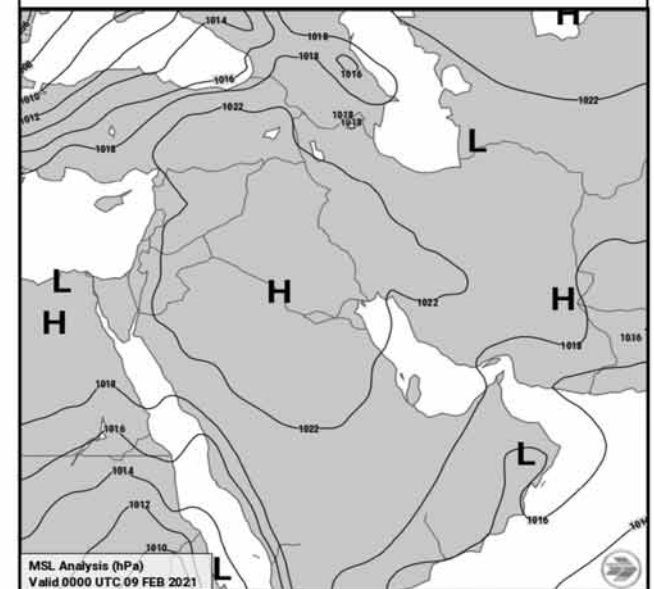
WEATHER WARNING

No Current Warnings

STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	24 °C	15 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	24 °C	10 °C
ABDALY	24 °C	11 °C
BUBYAN	21 °C	17 °C
JAHRA	25 °C	12 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C
SALMIYAH	23 °C	16 °C
AHMADI	22 °C	15 °C
NUWAISIB	24 °C	13 °C
WAFRA	24 °C	12 °C
SALMY	21 °C	09 °C

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09/02/2021 0000 UTC



4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Wednesday	02/10	Warm and Partly cloudy	25 °C	11 °C	NW	15 - 35 km/h
Thursday	02/11	Warm and some scattered clouds will appear	26 °C	12 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 28 km/h
Friday	02/12	Warm	25 °C	11 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 30 km/h
Saturday	02/13	Warm	24 °C	11 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 26 km/h

PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	05:11
Sunrise	06:33
Zuhr	12:02
Asr	15:10
Sunset	17:33
Isha	18:51

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	22 °C
MIN. Temp.	12 °C
MAX. RH	96 %
MIN. RH	43 %
MAX. Wind	N 28 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

All times are local time unless otherwise stated.

UP.0

Business

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2021

34 France to scrap 'obsolete' Paris airport expansion**35** VW, Microsoft tie up on autonomous vehicles**36** KIB announces KD 64 million operating income for EOY 2020

Oil market fragile over virus curbs: IEA

Shell unveils green strategy after oil output peak

PARIS: The International Energy Agency warned yesterday the world oil market remains fragile, despite a recent recovery in prices, as tighter restrictions are imposed to curb more contagious coronavirus variants. At the same time, the IEA said the economic outlook was brighter overall, especially in the second half of this year.

"The rebalancing of the oil market remains fragile in the early part of 2021 as measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, with its more contagious variants, weigh heavily on the near-term recovery in global oil demand," the IEA said in its latest monthly report. "But fresh support has been provided by a more positive economic outlook for the second half of the year, along with a pledge from OPEC+ to hasten the draw-down of surplus oil inventories," it added.

OPEC producers plus their non-cartel allies, principally Russia, have stuck to hard-won output limits, driving prices back to around \$60 per barrel, levels last seen early last year before the pandemic took hold. The IEA noted that in January, the International Monetary Fund had raised its global growth forecast for this year to 5.5 percent from 5.2 percent, largely due to "the robust recovery in manufacturing activity and stronger growth expectations for the United States."

In Europe, however, the outlook was weaker, it noted. "Renewed lockdowns, stringent mobility restrictions and a rather slow vaccine rollout in Europe have delayed the anticipated rebound until the second half of the year," it said. The IEA said it had left its 2021 global oil demand forecast unchanged, at 96.4 million barrels per day (mbd), which represents a gain of 5.4 mbd over 2020.

It added however that "the forecasts for economic and oil demand growth are highly dependent on progress in distributing and administering vaccines, and the

easing of travel restrictions in the world's major economies."

Shell initiative

Energy giant Royal Dutch Shell declared yesterday that its oil output is locked in decline after peaking in 2019 as it outlined green plans to switch away from fossil fuels. The London-listed company will invest up to \$6.0 billion (4.9 billion euros) per year in green energy products such as biofuels, electric car charging and renewables, it said in a strategy update.

The group said it anticipates a "gradual reduction" in oil output of 1.0-2.0 percent each year, including divestments. Total carbon emissions for the company peaked in 2018, it added.

The global oil sector, nursing vast losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is accelerating plans to switch into greener energy and slash carbon emissions in the face of with intensifying climate change fears.

"Our accelerated strategy will drive down carbon emissions and will deliver value for our shareholders, our customers and wider society," Shell chief executive Ben van Beurden said yesterday. "We must give our customers the products and services they want and need—products that have the lowest environmental impact."

The sector's transition demands big investments at a time when oil majors are looking to make sizeable savings and axe thousands of jobs. Yesterday's update came one week after Shell posted huge annual losses as the coronavirus pandemic slashed energy demand and prices in 2020.

After lockdowns began to spread towards the end of last year's first quarter, oil prices dropped off a cliff, even briefly turning negative. Prices have rebounded sharply however to 13-month highs, levels last seen just



LONDON: In this file photo, a Shell service station is reflected in a puddle in London. Anglo-Dutch oil giant Shell will invest up to \$6 billion (4.9 billion euros) per year in green energy after its oil output peaked in 2019, the group said yesterday. — AFP

before the pandemic took hold.

Profits evaporate

Shell dived into a net loss of \$21.7 billion (18.1 billion euros) last year as factories shut and planes were grounded. The loss compared with a net profit of \$15.8 billion in 2019. Shell is axing up to 9,000 jobs in a cost-cutting drive to combat the turmoil, which is mirrored elsewhere in the sector.

British rival BP, which is cutting around 10,000 positions, reported a 2020 net loss of \$20.3 billion. US giant Exxon Mobil suffered an annual loss of \$22.4 billion.

French peer Total on Tuesday said it was changing its name to TotalEnergies to reflect a move away from fossil fuels, alongside news it had posted a \$7.2-billion net loss last year. Gigantic sector-wide losses have meanwhile sparked concern over plunging tax revenues for countries across the world leading to a major shortfall in budgets. Oil and gas producing nations face up to nine trillion dollars in lost income as the world accelerates the transition to renewables, according to research published yesterday by the Carbon Tracker industry watchdog. — AFP

Business

ABK reports results for financial year ended 2020

Bank recommends distribution of 5 percent bonus shares

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced its financial results for the year ended 2020. The total operating Income was KD 141.5 million, an 18 percent drop compared to the same period in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly disrupted the business of global and local companies and led to almost a halt in commercial and economic activities locally and internationally, causing massive effects on social, commercial and economic levels.

As a result of the Board of Directors' resolution to take prudent and proactive measures to mitigate potential credit losses resulting from some customers affected by the economic crisis caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, and especially taking into account that the pandemic has not yet ended, and still represents risks to business continuity, the bank has conservatively taken provisions amounting to KD 136.5 million, resulting in a net Loss of KD 69.7 million for the year ended 2020. The Capital Adequacy Ratio stood at 17.26 percent while the Non-Performing Loan (NPL) ratio was 1.57 percent and NPL coverage was 339 percent.

Loans and advances decreased by 3 percent compared to 2019, to reach KD 3.1 billion while customer deposits increased by 5 percent to reach KD 3.5 billion compared to KD 3.3 billion in 2019. Shareholders' Equity stood at KD 499 million. The Board of Directors has recommended the distribution of 5 percent bonus shares to registered Shareholders. This recommendation is subject to approval at the Bank's Annual General Meeting.

Talal Mohammed Reza Behbehani, Chairman of ABK, said: "2020 was a landmark year of unprecedented challenges that tested the ability and flexibility of governments, large and small companies, in addition to the banking and financial system, in dealing with the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic in general. With the continuation of the health measures taken by the government, including partial and total curfews, closure of land and sea borders, in addition to stopping air traffic to and from the State of Kuwait, and numerous other obstacles, many businesses have had to find ways to absorb losses. ABK, in coordination with the Central Bank

of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association, from the onset of the pandemic, supported all initiatives set out to assist our clients through these extremely difficult times, which included a six month moratorium to corporate clients, and a six month repayment holiday on retail loans and interests thereof, including credit card repayments.

"We will continue to move forward with strong determination. We will focus on growth, adding sustainable Shareholder value, and making decisions that protect the operational performance of our business and the long-term viability of the Bank. I have full confidence in the Bank's executive team to achieve this."

George Richani, Group CEO, ABK, said, "While the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Bank's earnings is clear, ABK remains a well-capitalized, well-managed institution, that can withstand any future impacts. The management of repayment risk in this current environment is both prudent and necessary.

"Our International operations, especially Egypt, contributed positively to the Group's total operating income, witnessing a 15 percent increase in spite of the challenging circumstances of COVID 19. Our DIFC branch continued to focus on developing its offshore banking capabilities making a valuable contribution to the Bank's operating revenues.

"During 2020, the Bank's prior investment in digital technologies enabled it to switch quickly to remote working and maintain the level of our services. Our customer-facing technology ensured customers were able to swiftly execute banking via our various electronic channels. We will continue adopting technology-powered processes and realign our operating model with a focus on efficient centralization and embedding synergies in our processes."

"The robustness of our business and the resilience of our strategy means we are well positioned to embark on the recovery and growth journey in 2021." ABK has maintained strong investment grade ratings of A+ from Fitch and A2 from Moody's, which reflects the Bank's strong fundamentals, including its capital position,

The plan, with an estimated cost of between seven and nine billion euros (\$7.5-10.9 billion), had already run into resistance from environmental activists and local politicians as well as from the national environmental agency which said it fell short in terms of climate protection.

Le Monde said the government did not want the next project to focus on any extension of capacity. "We will always need planes, but we must move towards a more reasonable use of air travel, and reach a reduction in the sector's greenhouse gas emissions," Pompili said.

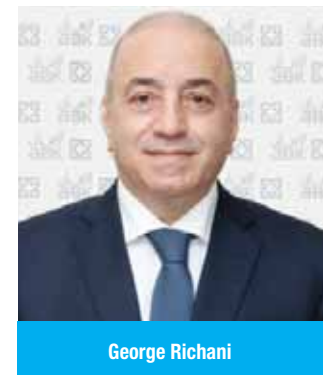
A sharp fall in air passenger numbers following Covid-19 restrictions worldwide recently prompted Transport Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari to say that boosting the airport's capacity now seemed like "an audacious bet". Pompili's announcement was welcomed by France's Green party, with its head Julien Bayou saying it was "a great victory for environmentalists" against what he called "an idiotic project".

He added, however, that the cancellation was "the least the government could do", saying France needed a more forward-looking policy to fight climate change than just "giving up projects". Audrey Pulvar, a Socialist candidate for upcoming elections in the Paris region, said the government's decision was "logical and necessary", while rival leftist politician Clementine Autain said she worried about preserving jobs at the airport "during this terrible crisis" due to Covid.

The head of France's employers' association Medef, Geoffroy



Talal Mohammed Reza Behbehani



George Richani

resilient earnings capacity, stable funding, and diversification of liquidity sources.

The Bank remains unwavering in its commitment to human capital development, and was able to facilitate employee training uninterrupted throughout the year, whilst ensuring adherence to social distancing. Towards the end of 2020, the Bank hosted a virtual graduation ceremony for its 29th batch of ABK Academy students. ABK remains strongly committed to enriching Kuwait's knowledge economy by hiring and developing Kuwaiti nationals and offering them fulfilling careers in the banking sector.

ABK continued its financial contributions to various causes throughout the year as part of the Bank's social responsibility, including but not limited to donations towards the National Fund to fight COVID-19, Kuwait Fight Corona Fund, Kuwait Association for the Care of Children in Hospitals (KAACH), Kuwait Public Authority for Disability Affairs National Campaign and LOYAC. The Bank also led numerous internal and external campaigns to re-emphasize the importance of adhering to health & safety measures set out by the Ministry of Health & the World Health Organization.

France to scrap 'obsolete' Paris airport expansion

PARIS: The French government has decided to cancel a planned expansion of the country's biggest airport, Paris's Charles de Gaulle, a minister said in remarks published yesterday. Barbara Pompili, France's environment minister, told Le Monde newspaper that boosting the airport's capacity was not in keeping with efforts to fight global warming. The government had therefore asked airport operator ADP, in which it owns a majority stake, to scrap the current project "and present a new one, more consistent with its objectives concerning climate change and the protection of the environment".

ADP said the move was "one of the outcomes of the COVID-19 crisis" and said it would now begin "a period of reflection" about the airport's future role. The decision comes a week after a court held the state had failed to take sufficient measures to halt climate change, a first in France. The now defunct plan called for the construction of a fourth terminal by 2037 to boost the airport's capacity by 40 million passengers per year.

Pompili called the project "obsolete" because it no longer corresponded to the government's environmental policy and the needs of "a sector in full transformation towards the green aircraft of the future".



PARIS: This file photo taken on July 8, 2019 shows a part of the terminal 2 and the control tower of the Roissy Charles-de-Gaulle Airport north of Paris. —AFP

Roux de Bezieux, said, however, that the outright cancellation of the expansion plans was "premature". A group of NGOs, including Greenpeace France, meanwhile demanded "legal guarantees" that any new plan for the project does not include an expansion after all. Charles de Gaulle airport, which opened in 1974, handled more than 76 million passengers in 2019, making it the second-busiest airport in Europe after London Heathrow. — AFP

Business

Uber posts big loss in 2020 as pandemic clobbers ridesharing

Food delivery narrows loss to \$968 million from \$1.1bn in 2019

SAN FRANCISCO: Uber on Wednesday reported another hefty loss in the final three months of 2020, though the company's food delivery operations partly offset the hit taken from the decline in ridesharing during the pandemic.

Thanks to that offset, the loss of \$968 million was narrowed slightly from \$1.1 billion in the same period a year earlier, according to Uber. Revenue in the quarter was \$3.2 billion, a 16-percent decrease from the same period a year earlier. "While 2020 certainly tested our resilience, it also dramatically accelerated our capabilities in local commerce," Uber chief executive Dara Khosrowshahi said.

Uber said its "mobility" segment, which includes ride-hailing, was down 52 percent from a year earlier, while its delivery operations—including its Uber Eats meal service—saw a revenue jump of 224 percent. This has the potential to be a "banner year" for Uber, as vaccination programs get people back to summoning rides and the company expands its delivery of alcohol and groceries as well as take-away restaurant meals, according to eMarketer analyst Eric Haggstrom.

Uber early this month announced it was acquiring Drizly, a startup specializing in delivery of beer, wine and spirits, for some \$1.1 billion and would integrate it with Uber Eats.

The two firms said Drizly, which operates in some 1,400 US municipalities and one Canadian province, would become a subsidiary of Uber and that its services would be available via Uber Eats as well as the

separate Drizly app. Uber last year introduced a grocery delivery service through another acquisition, Cornershop.

"Uber's continued expansion into alcohol and grocery delivery will help capture even more consumer spending in two large, rapidly digitizing markets," Haggstrom said.

Vaccine green light?

Khosrowshahi was optimistic about the road ahead for Uber, expecting new users won by its restaurant meal delivery service would become ride-share customers after pandemic lifestyle restrictions ease. "We have proven in big markets in Brazil and Australia that as these markets open up the mobility business comes back, and it will start growing again," Khosrowshahi said on an earnings call.

"There is no doubt in my mind that in 2022 and 2023 our mobility business will grow at substantial, double digit rates," Khosrowshahi has lobbied for Uber drivers to be made part of the Covid-19 vaccination effort, being given inoculations and then providing rides in the broader effort.

Daniel Ives at Wedbush Securities said the results represent "another major step in the right direction" and suggest an improving picture as Uber emerges from the pandemic.

"The company is clearly seeing a rebound in ridesharing metrics and coupled with a leaner expense structure is setting a stage for snapback in



growth and profitability," Ives said in a research note.

Flying taxis

Uber has been buckling down to endure the pandemic. The San Francisco-based firm sold its air transport unit to flying taxi maker Joby Aviation in a deal that closed last month.

Joby acquired Uber expertise and software, and the ability to offer its all-electric, vertical take-off and

landing passenger aircraft on the ride-hailing giant's app. While financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, they included Uber investing \$75 million into Santa Cruz-based Joby, which has said it hopes to have its flying taxis in operation as early as 2023. Uber in January also closed the sale of its autonomous car division to Amazon and Hyundai-backed Aurora, in a deal that gives Uber a 26 percent stake in the startup developing self-driving technology. —AFP

Biden team asks court to pause move to ban TikTok in US

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's administration has asked a US federal court to pause proceedings aimed at banning TikTok to allow for a fresh review of the national security threat from the popular Chinese-owned video app. The filing in a federal appeals court said the new administration had begun a review and would not for the moment press for a ban of the mobile app as sought by former president Donald Trump.

The filing said the Commerce Department "plans to conduct an evaluation of the underlying record justifying those prohibitions" sought by the previous administration of Donald Trump, which claimed TikTok posed a national security threat because of its links to the Chinese government.

After the new review, the administration "will then be better positioned to determine whether the national security threat" from TikTok. "The Department of Commerce remains committed to a robust defense of national security as well as ensuring the viability of our economy and preserving individual rights and data privacy," the filing said. —AFP

Graduation of first batches of 'Yalla Watani' trainees for 2021

KUWAIT: The National Bank of Kuwait marked the graduation of the Yalla Watani program, which included two batches of 25 Kuwaiti new recruits in January 2021, as they will be joining the local branches and the contact center. The new batch of trainees were welcomed by Mr. Emad Al-Ablani, General Manager of Group Human Resources and Mohammed Al Othman, General Manager of Consumer Banking Group, and a number of senior executives as well as the Training and Development team from Group Human Resources.

The Yalla Watani program extended up to five weeks including the on-job-training, focusing on - the development of personal and technical skills, covering communication and teamwork, anti-money laundering, anti-fraud awareness, anti-bribery and corruption training, principles of professional conduct and business ethics, and the Bank Customer Protection Manual.

In addition, the program covered banking principles, credit cards, loans, account types, and insurance. It also included training on work mechanism and enhancing trainees' skills to live up to work environment, followed by on job training in the contact center for three weeks.

As for the trainees in the domestic branches, they were trained on the bank's systems, familiarized with the branches work mechanism, and enhanced their skills followed by on-job training in their assigned branches. Due to the pandemic, the "Yalla Watani" program has recently undergone changes in the methodology and

design by adopting a Blended Learning approach, which comes in line with the measures taken to contain the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), and to keep everyone safe. The new Blended Learning approach is based on virtual training and NBK's E-Learning platform, which is designed to meet international standards, and includes a variety of topics such as: working under unstable circumstances, developing leaders, innovation and digital transformation, cyber security awareness and data protection. "Yalla Watani program is one of the most vital professional development programs for Kuwaiti fresh graduates in the private sector in Kuwait"

VW, Microsoft tie up on autonomous vehicles

FRANKFURT: German auto giant Volkswagen and US tech leader Microsoft said yesterday they were joining forces to develop autonomous vehicle driving systems, cementing a 2018 partnership to exploit the possibilities of the Cloud. Volkswagen said it aims to speed up development of such connected systems, which are increasingly becoming the norm in the auto industry as it transitions to electric vehicles. "This is the next step in our strategic partnership," Microsoft director Scott Guthrie said. The companies gave no information about the financial or contractual details of the accord. Volkswagen and Microsoft have cooperated since 2018 on creating a Cloud platform for connected vehicles. —AFP

Business

KIB announces KD 64 million operating income for EOY 2020

Growth in assets by 4% • Total Assets upward of KD 2.80 billion

KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait International Bank (KIB), Sheikh Mohammed Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah, announced that KIB has achieved almost KD 64 million in operating income for the year 2020. These results come despite the disruption in the economic sector as repercussions of COVID-19 continue.

Commenting on the Bank's financial results, Al-Jarrah said "During 2020, KIB maintained the quality of its assets, as the financial statements indicated that the Bank's assets grew by 4 percent to reach KD 2.80 billion versus almost KD 2.69 billion in 2019. This growth was the result of an increase in the size of the financing portfolio in amount of KD 113 million to nearly KD 1.98 billion compared to approximately KD 1.87 billion as in the end of 2019, achieving a growth of 6 percent. In addition, the investments (high quality Sukuk) increased by KD 4.5 million to reach almost KD 186 million compared to KD 181 million in 2019, as a result of the increase in investments in high-quality Sukuk. On the other hand, depositors' accounts grew by KD 175 million at 12 percent to KD 1.64 billion, compared to KD 1.47 billion at the end of the same period last year, while the shareholders' equity amounted to KD 258 million.

Al-Jarrah added "KIB achieved stable financial performance in 2020, despite all the difficulties and challenges the global economy faced due to the steep decline in oil prices and the dramatic disruption of life due to the global COVID-19 outbreak. This adversity has not prevented KIB from continuing to strengthen its position as a key player in the market, capable of achieving its objectives and policies towards further growth and prosperity, by following prudent risk management policies and providing the best-in-class customer experience, which helped sustain the Bank's stability and resilience in navigating the bleak economic situation worldwide."

Al-Jarrah also lauded: "KIB's commitment to maintaining a conservative approach to the risks faced in 2020, which reflected positively on the Bank's global credit ratings, Fitch affirmed KIB's Long-term Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'A+' and viability rating (VR) at "bb-", reflecting its sterling reputation and solid financial position as well as its adoption of a viable growth strategy.

Al-Jarrah further added, "Our main goal as a bank is to maintain customer satisfaction and provide rewarding returns to the shareholders, and we will strive to enhance our results and add more successes during the coming period by opening more digital branches in various regions of Kuwait, and we also promise you to launch more new services and solutions to maintain the confidence of our shareholders and the loyalty of our customers in long term"

On his part, Vice Chairman and Chief Executive Officer at KIB, Raed Jawad Bukhamseen, said: "As part of the Bank's strategy to strengthen its financial position in regional debt capital markets during November 2020 KIB successfully issued a \$300 million



Sheikh Mohammed Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah

Raed Jawad Bukhamseen

Tier 2 Basel III compliant 10-Year non-call 5-year Sukuk and priced at a profit rate of 2.375 percent per annum, with a total participation reaching approximately \$2.7 billion, which is about 9 times the volume of Sukuk issuances. The Tier 2 Capital Sukuk are the highest rated T2 in Kuwait and the GCC, in addition to being the first USD T2 Sukuk from Kuwait to be listed on London Stock Exchange (LSE). This issuance enhanced the bank long term funding base and increased KIB's capital ratios in accordance with Basel III; this was reflected on the Bank's capital adequacy ratio, which reached 22.13 percent as of December 31, 2020, thus exceeding the minimum required levels of CBK's regulatory bodies.

During 2020, the Bank made significant progress in terms of enhancing its capital, as highlighted by Fitch assigning KIB's Sukuk a final 'A-' rating and a final A+/'F1' long- and short-term ratings respectively to the Bank's Sukuk program.

Bukhamseen mentioned, "The reality is that the local, regional and global banking sector faced major challenges in 2020 due to the pandemic and the decline in oil prices. However, KIB has achieved solid financial performance thanks to its robust standing and its far-sighted management, in addition to its resilience and diversified sources of income, as well as its ability to maintain a competitive edge in the market by continuously adopting a customer-centric approach aimed at providing a seamless banking experience that exceeds customers' expectations at all times."

Bukhamseen further added: "In 2020, KIB made a concerted effort to innovate its Bank's business model and strengthen its technological foundation to enhance operational processes and ensure business continuity. In response to the immediate needs created by the pandemic, KIB swiftly adapted to changing work structures by launching online services, in addition to adhering to all decisions and preventive measures put forth by the government in attempt to curb the spread of the virus, the Bank also embarked

on a digital strategy to deliver an easy and convenient banking experience to its customers through introducing a range of tech-savvy solutions via its smartphone applications, website and advanced call center, allowing customers to complete their banking transactions in line with the latest technological advances in the banking sector. The reality is that the newly adopted digital transformation a major breakthrough in 2020."

At the conclusion of his statement, the distribution to depositors' accounts registered a good annual return by end of 2020. Profits were credited to depositors' accounts upon announcement of financial results.

A promising future for KIB's human capital

As part of the Bank's firm belief in investing in human capital - the cornerstone of business development and continuity - KIB's Human Resources Department (HRD) put in place comprehensive and ambitious strategies in 2020. These included shuffling capabilities and restructuring departments, as well as attracting young Kuwaiti talent to the Bank, offering them attractive career opportunities with long-term development tracks. KIB also moved towards upskilling current employees across all departments through intensive training programs, enabling them to keep up with the Bank's latest innovations and offer customers the best possible banking experience. It serves to note that during 2020, KIB increased its national employment rate to 73.14 percent as part of its commitment to support Kuwaitization in banking sector in line vision of the Central Bank of Kuwait.

Social responsibility in the wake of COVID-19

KIB continues to believe social responsibility is never more important than in times of crisis and turmoil. Accordingly, the Bank contributed half a million dinars to support the Central Bank of Kuwait Fund, which was established to support the government's efforts by donating KD 10 million as a contribution from Kuwaiti banks. KIB also continued to support companies affected by the repercussions of the pandemic, in accordance with the terms approved by the Central Bank of Kuwait as part of the Banks efforts to support the local operating environment. Furthermore, with the aim of supporting individuals and companies affected by this crisis, KIB implemented the decision of the Kuwait Banking Association to defer payments of consumer finance, housing and credit cards, in addition to postponing SMEs loan repayment for a period of six months, without incurring any additional profits as a result of the deferral. The initiative was seen as a short-term liquidity support to address potential customer cash flow problems and respond to the consequences of the new coronavirus outbreak.

The Bank also continued to support targeted community initiatives throughout the year, including the "For Kuwait" initiative which included producing 500 trash bins for the disposal of used face masks and gloves, in collaboration with the Environment Public Authority (EPA). Moreover, KIB acted as a key sponsor of Kuwait's 2020 Virtual Graduation Ceremony, held to honor graduates who worked hard to finish the school year successfully despite the challenges imposed by the coronavirus pandemic. The initiative won KIB "Social Responsibility Award" at the 8th Kuwait Creative Advertisement Award ceremony, organized by the Arab Media Forum.

In terms of the Bank's best business practices, KIB acted as Co-Manager for the noteworthy issuance of the first-of-its-kind 'Sustainability Sukuk' by the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), with a value of USD 1.5 billion for a period of five years and an aim to mitigate the effects of the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) for IsDB member states aimed at addressing the health and socio-economic implications of coronavirus pandemic.

- Growth of 6% in financing portfolio reaching KD 2 billion
- Growth in depositors' accounts by 12% reaching KD 1.6 billion
- Shareholders' equity amounted to KD 258 million
- Capital adequacy ratio 22.13%
- Long-term Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'A+'
- Profits were credited to depositors' accounts

Sports

Friday, February 12, 2021

Tokyo Olympics chief Mori to resign over sexist remarks

TOKYO: Tokyo Olympics chief Yoshiro Mori is to resign after he sparked outrage in Japan and abroad by claiming that women talk too much in meetings, reports said yesterday. The decision comes after a barrage of criticism from politicians to sports stars and is the latest headache for organizers as they battle public disquiet over plans to hold the Games this summer despite the pandemic.

Multiple Japanese media outlets, citing anonymous sources, said the 83-year-old has told officials he wishes to step down and would announce his resignation at a meeting of Games organizers today. His most likely successor is Saburo Kawabuchi, an 84-year-old long-time sports administrator, local media reported.

Mori, a former prime minister, has come under increasing pressure since remarks he made last week to members of the Japanese Olympic Committee. "When you increase the number of female executive members, if their speaking time isn't restricted to a certain extent, they have difficulty finishing, which is annoying," he said.

He apologized for the sexist remarks, while insisting he was repeating complaints made by others, but then dug a deeper hole when he explained that he "doesn't speak to women much". Public broadcaster NHK and other media said Mori met Kawabuchi Thursday to ask him to take on the role of president.

Kawabuchi, who currently serves in the symbolic role of Olympic Village mayor, reportedly accepted Mori's request. "If I am elected as president, I will make utmost efforts" in the role, NHK quoted him as saying after the talks. In footage broadcast by Nippon TV, he said he would strive to do his "best in holding the Games". A former footballer, Kawabuchi played a large part in popularizing the game in Japan in the 1990s. He played for Japan when the country last hosted the Olympics in 1964, scoring a goal against Argentina.

'Completely inappropriate'

Mori's resignation would cap more than a week of controversy about his remarks. Tokyo 2020, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the resignation reports, will hold a special meeting tomorrow of its council and executive board. The meeting was called to allow officials to "express their opinions" on Mori's remarks and discuss "future gender equality initiatives of the Tokyo 2020 organizing committee", organizers said.

Having initially said it considered the matter closed with Mori's apology, the International Olympic Committee branded his remarks "completely inappropriate" as the backlash grew. An online campaign calling for action against Mori has attracted more than 146,000 signatures, while tennis



TOKYO: This file photo taken on July 24, 2019 shows president of Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games organizing committee Yoshiro Mori delivering a speech. —AFP

superstar Naomi Osaka slammed his comments as "ignorant". Since Mori's remarks, around 400 Olympic and Paralympic volunteers have quit, according to Tokyo 2020, which has said the number includes withdrawals for all reasons. A total of 80,000 volunteers from Japan and overseas have

been recruited for this summer's virus-postponed Games. Games sponsor Toyota on Wednesday issued a statement by its president Akio Toyoda saying: "It's very regrettable that the comments made by the leader of the organizing committee differ from the values that Toyota holds." —AFP

Marchand scores on breakaway to lift Bruins to win

LOS ANGELES: Brad Marchand scored 36 seconds into overtime and Tuukka Rask made 33 saves as the Boston Bruins edged the New York Rangers 3-2 at Madison Square Garden on Wednesday. Marchand scored on a breakaway after taking a long pass from defenceman Charlie McAvoy for the game winner in the opening game of a two-game series between the two Eastern Division NHL clubs.

"That was a real good play by our defense," said coach Bruce Cassidy of the Bruins, who have won four straight and eight of their last nine games. Anders Bjork and Chris Wagner, with a shorthanded goal, also scored for the Bruins. Finland's Rask made several clutch stops throughout the game, but also had a momentary lapse of concentration at the end of the third period which could have easily cost them the victory.

With the score tied 2-2 in the final moments, Rask started skating to the Bruins' bench, signalling that he either thought there was a delayed penalty or that his team was down by a goal and needed an extra attacker on the ice. Rask made it all the way to the front of the bench before his teammates frantically waved him back into the empty net to finish the third and set the stage for the brief but action-packed overtime.

Cassidy said immediately after the game that he hadn't had a chance to talk to Rask so didn't know what he was thinking but was just happy they came out with the victory. "You think he would have access to the scoreboard. But at the end of the day we got it



NEW YORK: Chris Kreider #20 of the New York Rangers falls over Tuukka Rask #40 of the Boston Bruins during the third period at Madison Square Garden on Wednesday. —AFP

squared away," Cassidy said.

The winning goal came quick and followed a scoring chance by the Rangers at the other end of the ice. New York had a two-on-one break but McAvoy intercepted the cross-ice pass and banked the puck off the boards to Marchand who skated in alone and shot it off the post past goaltender Alexander Georgiev.

Georgiev, who finished with 29 saves, was starting his first game since an altercation with former teammate Tony DeAngelo that led to DeAngelo being cut from the team and put on waivers. The Rangers also got goals from 23-year-old Julien Gauthier, with his first NHL goal in the opening period, and Kevin Rooney in the third period to tie it 2-2.

Bruins forward Jake DeBrusk appeared to score a goal early in the third putting it in off the crossbar. But after a video review the officials ruled the puck hit the crossbar and came straight down onto the goal line but did not cross over it before bouncing away. —AFP

Gut-Behrami kicks off ski world champs with super-G victory

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy: Switzerland's Lara Gut-Behrami landed the first gold of the world ski championships in Cortina d'Ampezzo, storming to an emphatic win in the women's super-G yesterday, while Mikaela Shiffrin claimed bronze. Gut-Behrami, who previously won world silver (2013) and bronze (2017) in the super-G, laid down a near-perfect run to clock 1min 25.51sec on the 2.15km-long Olympic delle Tofane course.

Corinne Suter made it a Swiss 1-2, finishing 0.34sec off the leading pace, while defending world champion Shiffrin paid the price for a mistake heading into the final third of the unforgiving course. Shiffrin skidded wide on one turn and saw her intermediate leads disappear, eventually finishing third, at 0.47sec, for her eighth world championship medal to draw level with now-retired former teammate Lindsey Vonn.

Reigning Olympic champion Ester Ledecka, the Czech code-hopper from parallel snowboarding, came in fourth at 0.54sec in front of empty stands, fans banned from attending the world champs because of the Covid-19 pandemic. In cold conditions, the picturesque course was bathed in brilliant sunshine after heavy snow and fog had caused the rescheduling of events earlier in the week.

Starting with bib number seven, three behind Shiffrin and two behind Suter, Gut-Behrami attacked from the start hut. With her distinctive low crouch, the 29-year-old kept her form to streak across the finish line for her first world gold, becoming the first Swiss racer to claim world super-G gold since Maria Walliser won the title in 1987.



CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy: Swiss Lara Gut-Behrami competes in the Women's Super G event yesterday during the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships. —AFP

She also equaled Italian Isolde Kostner and the American duo of Vonn and Julia Mancuso on a record three world championship medals in the discipline.

No destiny calling

Shiffrin, who had just four days of super-G training before the race, said she was "super-pleased" with her result. "I had such a good feeling skiing the hills. I loved it, it was so much fun!" said the 25-year-old, who spent 300 days away from racing last year following the sudden death of her father Jeff. "The things I've experienced this year and this day are separate," she insisted.

"There've been some crappy things happening in the year, but we came out today, it was sunny, I was so looking forward to racing on this track in super-G. "As much as I'd like to connect it and say it was somehow fate I'd come to super-G and all these things come together like some destiny, it's not." It was, however, fate that Gut-Behrami won, Shiffrin said. "Everybody thought Lara would win gold today," the American said. "The gold medal went to who it was supposed to go to." —AFP

Sports

Everton edge 9-goal Tottenham thriller, City cruise into quarters

LONDON: Everton upped the pressure on Jose Mourinho with a thrilling 5-4 victory over Tottenham after extra-time to reach the FA Cup quarter-finals, as Manchester City eased into the last eight by beating Swansea on Wednesday. Tottenham face a daunting trip to City in the Premier League on Saturday and defeat after a draining 120 minutes was the last thing Mourinho wanted.

Spurs have lost four of their last five games and one of three chances to end the club's 13-year wait to win a trophy in cup competitions is now gone. "Attacking football only wins matches when you don't make more defensive mistakes than you create," said Mourinho, who once described a 5-4 result as a "hockey score". "It was the mouse and the cat. The mouse was our defensive mistakes and the cat was us playing very well, scoring goals, but it wasn't enough."

Mourinho's men made a bright start at Goodison Park as Davinson Sanchez headed them into the lead after just three minutes. However, the defensive errors that have cost Tottenham dear in recent months were in evidence as Everton struck three times in seven minutes just before half-time through Dominic Calvert-Lewin, Richarlison and Gylfi Sigurdsson's penalty.

Erik Lamela reduced Spurs' deficit in first-half stoppage time before another rare goal for

Sanchez made it 3-3. Richarlison then smashed home from a narrow angle to restore Everton's lead. Mourinho had left Harry Kane on the bench from the start to ease his return from an ankle injury. But the England captain ended up playing for over an hour and met Son Heung-min's cross at the back post with bullet header seven minutes from time to send the game into extra-time.

Bernard's brilliant finish from Sigurdsson's scooped pass proved a fitting winner to a pulsating tie to keep alive the Toffees' chances of a first trophy since 1995. "It was a long night for everybody, but we came out on top which is the main thing," said Everton assistant manager Duncan Ferguson.

City's record-breaking run

The defending from both sides will encourage City, who also face Everton in the Premier League next Wednesday, after they broke the English football record for consecutive wins by a top-flight club. Kyle Walker, Raheem Sterling and Gabriel Jesus were on target for City, who extended their winning run in all competitions to 15 games with a 3-1 success over Swansea. Victory was also Pep Guardiola's 200th in 268 games as City boss, with his side still on course for a historic quadruple of trophies.



LIVERPOOL: Tottenham Hotspur's English striker Harry Kane takes a free kick during the English FA Cup fifth round football match between Everton and Tottenham Hotspur at Goodison Park on Wednesday. —AFP

Guardiola's men hold a five-point lead with a game in hand at the top of the Premier League, face Tottenham in the League Cup final in April and resume their challenge to win a first Champions League in the last 16 against Borussia Monchengladbach later this month. "It

is amazing for ourselves, we cannot deny how pleased and proud we are to break this record," said Guardiola. "Records are there to be broken, but they have to do well (to beat it). "It is not easy in the modern era to make 15 wins in a row." —AFP

Neymar walks off during PSG win with 'thigh pain'

PARIS: Neymar walked off the pitch without waiting to be substituted after being on the receiving end of a series of fouls during Paris Saint-Germain's 1-0 French Cup win at second-tier Caen on Wednesday, with coach Mauricio Pochettino saying he had "pain in his thigh". The Brazil attacker, captaining PSG with Marquinhos and Presnel Kimpembe absent, was fouled twice in the space of three minutes. He was visibly upset after the second foul, by Steeve Yago, exchanging words with the Caen player.

As the game resumed, Neymar continued to complain before walking down the tunnel to the dressing room in the 57th minute. The world's most expensive player was replaced three minutes later by Kylian Mbappe. "He has pain in his thigh, we will see tomorrow (Thursday) if it's an injury or not," said Pochettino. "We will see tomorrow after the scans. "I don't want to talk about the opponents' way of playing. But during the match, there is a feeling of having little protection. But it's not only in this match."

Neymar, although appearing to be moving quite comfortable, was grimacing while holding his thigh. Nevertheless, PSG will be worried, with their Champions League last-16 first leg against Barcelona at the Camp Nou on Tuesday. But Pochettino defended his decision to name a strong starting XI which included Neymar despite the forward only featuring as a substitute against Marseille on Sunday due to a stomach problem.

"Every game is important. I believe that PSG must win every game," said the Argentinian, who took over



CAEN, France: Caen's midfielder Johann Lepenant (left) fights for the ball with Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar at the Michel-d'Ornano Stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

from the sacked Thomas Tuchel last month. "If we had lost, you would have criticised me for not having given importance to the French Cup. We make the decisions, we analyse, we try to find the best team."

The holders did enough to win despite finishing the game without their stand-in skipper, as Moise Kean's 49th-minute goal, assisted by Neymar, proved to be the winner. PSG were never in serious trouble as they moved into the last 32.

Marseille grab 'welcome' win

Earlier on Wednesday, crisis-hit Marseille eased to a "welcome" first victory since suspending coach Andre Villas-Boas by beating second-tier Auxerre 2-0. Argentinian striker Dario Benedetto, with his just his fifth goal in 29 games this season, and Ahmadou Dieng found the net for Marseille. "Qualification is welcome in the period that we are going through, we are in a tough place," said stand-in coach Nasser Larguet. —AFP

Sevilla double leaves Barca with mountain to climb in Copa del Rey

MADRID: Barcelona's hopes of winning the Copa del Rey this season were left hanging by a thread on Wednesday after Sevilla won the first leg of their semi-final 2-0. Jules Kounde furthered his growing reputation as one of the world's most exciting central defenders by scoring a stunning goal at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan before Ivan Rakitic came back to haunt his former club by adding a second late on.

The 22-year-old Kounde dribbled past three Barca defenders and shot into the corner while Rakitic's strike turned a setback for Ronald Koeman's side into what now looks like a formidable challenge to make the final. The winner will meet either Athletic Bilbao or Levante, who play the first leg of their semi on Thursday, in the final.

"The result is a bit unfair, the reward feels too much for them," said Koeman. "The return will be complicated at 2-0 but we have had chances and we have to keep going. At home, this team is capable of anything." Koeman had described the cup as Barcelona's "shortest route" to a trophy this term and the sight of Kounde ghosting through his defence hardly inspires confidence ahead of next week's meeting with Paris Saint-Germain.

Barca face PSG at Camp Nou in the first leg of the Champions League last 16 on Tuesday. Yet all is not lost in the cup. Although Koeman fielded his best available XI, after resting players against Real Betis in La Liga last weekend, he will also hope to have injured defenders available again for the return game at Camp Nou on March 3.

With Ronald Araujo and Gerard Pique out, Koeman



SEVILLE: Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi challenges Sevilla's Brazilian midfielder Fernando Reges during the Spanish Copa del Rey semifinal first leg at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

played a patched-up back four of Jordi Alba at left-back, the left-footed Junior Firpo at right-back, right-back Oscar Mingueza at centre-back, alongside Samuel Umtiti, who is still regaining sharpness after a string of injuries.

Sevilla have 'hardest half' to come

"We are halfway through the tie with the hardest half to come," said Sevilla coach Julen Lopetegui. Lionel Messi was quiet but forced a decent save from Bono early on after a superb pass by Antoine Griezmann, with Sevilla the better side in the first half and deserving their goal. Kounde carried the ball out from deep in his own half and bounced the ball off Suso before advancing into Barcelona's defensive third. He ghosted past Griezmann, darted inside Sergio Busquets and with Alba dragged left, nicked it around the legs of Umtiti before driving into the far corner to complete a stunning individual effort. —AFP

Sports

Smiling assassin Nadal laughs off heckler in Australia history bid

MELBOURNE: Rafael Nadal laughed off a gesticulating heckler as he brushed aside Michael Mmoh and continued his quest for history at the Australian Open yesterday. On a day when defending women's champion Sofia Kenin departed in tears, but top-ranked Ashleigh Barty progressed, Nadal was impeccable on Rod Laver Arena.

Stefanos Tsitsipas, Feliciano Lopez and Lloyd Harris were all taken to five sets, as was Fabio Fognini - in an all-Italian clash that ended in a furious row. Teenager Coco Gauff, 16, who beat Naomi Osaka to reach the fourth round last year, saw her challenge ended by Elina Svitolina. But Nadal, who has complained of a bad back as he seeks a record 21st Grand Slam title, swept past America's 177th-ranked Mmoh 6-1, 6-4, 6-2.

A female spectator interrupted the match late in the second set, shouting and giving Nadal the middle finger, before she was ejected - and the Spaniard immediately fired two aces for a 2-0 sets lead. "No, and honestly I don't want to," said a smiling Nadal, when asked if he knew the heckler. "For me it was funny, somebody doing the finger to me. I don't know the reason, but I was surprised. But at the same time I was thinking, poor girl. Because probably she was drunk or something."

Next up for the Spaniard, who is attempting to overtake the injury-sidelined Roger Federer and become the first man to win 21 major crowns, is Britain's Cameron Norrie. Elsewhere Russia's Daniil Medvedev extended his winning streak to 16 matches on this 25th birthday, beating Roberto

Carballes Baena 6-2, 7-5, 6-1.

But world number four Sofia Kenin's first Grand Slam title defense went no further than the second round as she lost 6-3, 6-2 to Estonia's Kaia Kanepi. "I know I couldn't really handle the pressure," said an emotional Kenin, wiping away tears.

'Fit as a fiddle'

While the American became just the third defending champion since 1970 to fail to reach the third round, Barty lifted hopes of a first Australian winner since 1978. Playing with her left thigh heavily strapped, the top seed twice failed to serve out the win before ousting her 387th-ranked compatriot Daria Gavrilova 6-1, 7-6 (9/7). Barty, who is unbeaten in seven matches after sitting out nearly all of last year, blamed the lapse on ring-rust.

"Obviously going to have ebbs and flows not only in concentration but level of play as well," said the Aussie, dismissing any injury concerns. "I'm as fit as a fiddle," she said. Gauff beat Venus Williams and the then-champion Naomi Osaka en route to the round of 16 last year, when she was just 15, but Svitolina had other ideas this time around.

The Ukrainian world number five lifted her game in the pivotal moments to win 6-4, 6-3 as she eyes a maiden Grand Slam title. Tsitsipas was not expected to be troubled by 267th-ranked Kokkinakis but the Australian, roared on by his close friend Nick Kyrgios, saved a fourth-set match point before going down in five tight sets.

Spain's Lopez, 39, was also taken the distance in his record-extending 75th consecutive Grand



MELBOURNE: Spain's Rafael Nadal hits a return against Michael Mmoh of the US during their men's singles match on day four of the Australian Open tennis tournament yesterday. — AFP

Slam before beating Italy's Lorenzo Sonego 5-7, 3-6, 6-3, 7-5, 6-4. But the most combustible match was between Fognini and Salvatore Caruso, as the two Italians had to be separated by a tournament official during a heated argument after the 16th seed's four-hour, 4-6, 6-2, 2-6, 6-3, 7-6 (14/12) win.

Earlier Russian rising star Andrey Rublev maintained his unbeaten start to the year with a

6-4, 6-4, 7-6 (10/8) victory over Brazil's Thiago Monteiro. Sixth seed Karolina Pliskova ousted 2019 semi-finalist Danielle Collins, and Swiss 12th seed Belinda Bencic overcame veteran Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova 7-5, 2-6, 6-4. But 17-year-old Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz, tipped as a future great, lost against Mikael Ymer to end his debut Grand Slam. — AFP

Lakers win in OT for third straight game

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James forced the extra session with a three-pointer and scored 25 points as the Los Angeles Lakers won their third consecutive overtime game by outlasting the slumping Oklahoma City Thunder 114-113 on Wednesday. James finished with seven assists and six rebounds, Montrezl Harrell scored 20 points, Dennis Schroder contributed 19 and Kyle Kuzma added 15 for the host reigning NBA champion Lakers, who now have six straight wins.

Los Angeles played without injured star forward Anthony Davis (Achilles) for the second game in a row. This was the third straight overtime game for the Lakers and second against the short-handed Thunder, who have lost three of their last four. Los Angeles beat the Thunder in overtime on Monday and Detroit in double overtime two nights earlier.

Al Horford had 25 points, Kenrich Williams scored 24 points, Luguentz Dort had 17 and Hamidou Diallo collected 15 points and 13 rebounds in the loss. The Thunder were missing their best player, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, who is out with a knee injury. Also, Devin Booker drained clutch free throws with 32 seconds left as the Phoenix Suns overcame a 47-point performance by back-to-back MVP winner Giannis Antetokounmpo with a 125-124 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks.

Antetokounmpo also had 11 rebounds and five assists while shooting 15-of-23 from the floor en route to a season-high scoring performance. He put up a desperation 20-foot jumper at the buzzer to try and win it, but the ball bounced off the back

of the rim as the Bucks had their season-best five-game win streak snapped. Chris Paul added 28 points and seven assists as Phoenix earned its fourth straight win and its seventh in the past eight games.

Khriston Middleton had 18 points and 11 assists and Bryn Forbes scored all 17 of his points in the first half for Milwaukee, in front of a pandemic limited crowd of 1,400 mask-wearing fans in Arizona. Elsewhere, Luka Doncic scored 28 points with 10 assists and 10 rebounds Wednesday as the Dallas Mavericks rallied for a 118-117 NBA victory over the Atlanta Hawks.

Doncic notched his league-leading seventh triple-double of the season and the Mavericks rallied from a nine-point deficit heading into the fourth quarter as they continue to try to fight their way up from the depths of the Western Conference. A Doncic three-pointer gave the Mavericks their first lead since the second quarter, 104-101, with 5:29 to play.

Tim Hardaway Jr scored 13 of his 16 points in the fourth quarter and Jalen Brunson added 11 of his 21 in the final frame for Dallas. The contest opened with the first playing of the national anthem at a Mavs home game this season - the league instructing teams to maintain the tradition of the pre-game anthem a day after Mavericks owner Mark Cuban said he "decided not to play it and see what the response was."

The anthem has been a touchy topic since becoming the focal point for protests of social and racial injustice. The Los Angeles Clippers shook off a slow start to beat the Timberwolves 119-112 in Minnesota, avoiding their first three-game losing streak of the season. Kawhi Leonard scored 36 points with eight rebounds and five assists and Lou Williams added a season-high 27 points off the bench for the Clippers, who were without scoring threat Paul George. The Clippers welcomed starting guard Patrick Beverley back to action after an eight-game injury absence. — AFP



LOS ANGELES: Kyle Kuzma #0 of the Los Angeles Lakers dunks in the game against the Oklahoma City Thunder at Staples Center on Wednesday. — AFP



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