

# Friday Times

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## FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

Student Art Competition 2021

See Page 3



Kuwait Times  
THE LEADING INDEPENDENT DAILY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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# Travel restrictions lifted with 14-day quarantine

No visit visas • No lockdown

See Page 2

# Travel restrictions lifted with 14-day quarantine

No decision on visit visas • No lockdown

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's civil aviation agency said yesterday that a five-month ban on the entry of flights from 35 countries will be lifted from February 21 but arrivals must be quarantined at local hotels for 14 days. Those countries include India, Egypt, Philippines, Pakistan and Bangladesh whose citizens make up the majority of expats living in Kuwait. They were banned as part of measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation's announcement means that a 14-day total ban on the entry of all expats into the country will also be lifted. The announcement said that arrivals from those banned countries must first register through the 'Kuwait Mosafer' application and select one of the local hotels authorized by the government. Stay at the hotels is at the expense of arrivals.

As for flights from other countries, passengers must be quarantined for seven days at one of the hotels and undergo a PCR test on the sixth day. If the test result is negative, they will be quarantined at home for another seven days, according to the announcement.

The announcement said that airlines operating to Kuwait must not accept any passenger without registering at 'Kuwait Mosafer' platform through link <https://Kuwaitmosafer.gov.kw>. Passengers must pay the cost of two PCR tests through 'Kuwait Mosafer' application or through coordination with the airlines.

## No lockdown

In the meantime, the government yesterday quashed rumors that a decision to impose a lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. "No decision has been issued to impose a partial or total lockdown. However, all options to face the con-

sequences of the COVID-19 are on the table of the health authorities," government spokesman Tareq Al-Mazrem said on his Twitter account. He called on all to comply with health measures and to stay away from rumors. No mention of any change in the suspension of visit visas. The issuance of new visit visas has been suspended since March 2020.

Lawmakers, meanwhile, yesterday acknowledged that the suspension of the assembly sessions for one month is the unquestionable constitutional right of the Amir, but they blamed Prime Minister His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah for the political stalemate in the country.

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Wednesday issued a decree ordering the suspension of the assembly sessions for one month starting from February 18, based on an article in the constitution. The last regular session the assembly held was on January 5. The fol-

lowing day the government boycotted the assembly session after three opposition lawmakers filed to grill the prime minister.

Twelve opposition MPs issued a joint statement in which they bluntly blamed the prime minister and assembly speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem of attempting to "undermine the constitution and forge the popular will" and insisted they are the main reason for the current crisis.

## Ban on 35 'restricted' countries ends

The statement stressed the way out of this political crisis is through respecting the constitution, allowing MPs to exercise their constitutional rights and separating between the powers of the three authorities. The statement called for sparing the Kuwaiti judiciary from being involved in political disputes. They pledged to continue their relentless campaign against forces of corruption.

MPs who signed the statement include Mohammad Al-Mutair, Abdulkarim Al-Kundari, Bader Al-Dahoum, Mubarak Al-Hajraf, Musaed Al-Mutairi, Shuaib Al-Muwaizri, Thamer Al-Suwait, Marzouk Al-Khalifa, Khaled Al-Oteibi, Fares Al-Oteibi and Saifi Al-Saifi.

Later, MP Muwaizri said that the best solution to the crisis is through the resignation of Ghanem and His Highness Sheikh Sabah. MP Osama Al-Munawer said he will carry out his threat and file to grill the prime minister for delaying the formation of the new cabinet.

MP Dahoum welcomed the possibility that the assembly may be dissolved as a result of the ongoing crisis "because this will end the era of Ghanem and Sheikh Sabah," adding that the Kuwaiti people will elect a stronger assembly.



**KUWAIT:** An archive photo showing the interior of Kuwait International Airport.

# FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

## Student Art Competition 2021



It is our pleasure to welcome each and every youngster to our Student Art Competition. We hope that everyone is ready to create beautiful artworks and show support for our heroes of Kuwait! We're searching for great art – so get your paintbrushes, color pencils, crayons and markers ready. Let your talent flow and start painting. Good luck to our young artists!

- The competition is open to students aged 6 - 18 years with categories (6 - 8 years) (9 - 11 years) (12 - 14 years) (15 -18 years) and special abilities students.
- The competition is open to all schools in Kuwait (government and private).
- Submissions are open from February 14, 2021 till March 31, 2021.
- 5 winners from each category will receive valuable prizes.
- All participants will receive a certificate of appreciation.
- All schools and individuals interested in participating in this competition are welcome.
- Participants in the ages 6 - 8 years may use marker colors only.
- You can use any drawing sheet, but of A3 size.
- All artwork must be hand drawn and not computer generated.
- All paintings should be submitted by email at [painting@kuwaittimes.net](mailto:painting@kuwaittimes.net) in PDF format ONLY.
- Participant must include on the bottom of the artwork the following: name, age, email address, phone number and school in legible font.

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PHOTO FEATURE



# NATIONAL & LIBERATION DAYS OF KUWAIT

Celebrations marking Kuwait's national and liberation day holidays have been cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic but across the country people and businesses honor the nation by draping flags and showing love for Kuwait.



Local



— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Fouad Al-Shaikh

## Local



# Preserving Kuwait's heritage: Dhow making

By Ben Garcia

To preserve the national heritage and legacy of dhows in Kuwait, a group of Kuwaiti artisans makes miniature dhows for government bodies and as gifts for individuals and companies. The objective is to preserve and impart the legacy of dhows for generations to come. These artisans are striving to share and impart their skills as they approach the twilight of their lives.

"Many of us are elderly. We have volunteered to be part of this national heritage preservation to leave an indelible legacy that lasts. We organize workshops for youth, but because of the pandemic, this has stopped. But we are ready to again welcome anyone who wants to learn to build dhows soon," said 60-year-old Sadique Al-Qallaf, a volunteer worker at Diwaniya Al-Qallaleef in Sharq near the fish market. The diwaniya has around 350 members.

"This is a very important part of Kuwait's history, so we don't want it to be forgotten by our young people. In order to preserve our national heritage, we have to contribute something. We do this while we are still capable of working," he told Kuwait Times. Qallaf said this work helps the artisans to reconnect and bond with longtime friends. "Most people making model dhows are elderly, but there are some youngsters who have an interest in preserving this heritage. Instead of just sitting at home doing nothing, this work is reuniting us here. We come here almost daily and we are happy," he added.

"I just want to spend my remaining time on earth productively and help the government preserve the most precious part of our heritage - making dhows. Without this treasure, we were not able to reach the status of a nation state. I love Kuwait and my love for this country is eternal. Because of these dhows, many of us Kuwaitis survived and managed to achieve our ambitions and goals. Our forefathers sacrificed and protected us during a time when we had nothing but the sea and sand. Thank you dhows for bridging us with the past!" he exclaimed.

Along with the Kuwait Towers, the dhow

is likely the most photographed icon in Kuwait. It is a symbol of Kuwaiti culture and heritage. Dhows come in various shapes and sizes and usages. The Soffar for example was the main source of transportation for people who wanted to travel outside Kuwait. Prior to World War I, according to Qallaf, Kuwait had around 800 boats, which increased to 1,200 vessels in the early 1900s.

"Ships at that time were as important as aircraft now. They were built according to international maritime standards and were a means of transportation for many to go from one place to another in the pre-oil era. This was how we were able to visit India and neighboring countries in the Arab world," Qallaf said.

"In 1917, the 'Muhammedi' was the biggest dhow (boom) built for Kuwaiti merchant Mohammed Marafi by Al-Estad Humoud bin Hassan. In 1937, Al-Mohallab dhow was made for Thunayan Al-Ghanim by Al-Estad Muhammad Al-Abdullah. It was almost the last ship left in Kuwait at the National Museum, which was burned down by Iraqi soldiers during the invasion," he added.

Al-Batil and Al-Ghawas were other types of dhows used for pearl diving, while Al-Baghlah and Boom Khattah were popular for transporting goods. "These kinds of dhows were made to stand tall against the strongest winds in the Arabian Gulf and roughest waves at sea. These types of dhows were the favorites of many because of their style and coolness," Qallaf told Kuwait Times. There were special dhows for fetching freshwater (Al-Ma'a) from neighboring countries as well.

Dhows were used for trading and fishing



and have long defined Kuwait's identity since its early existence. The miniature dhows are normally ordered by ministries and schools to be used for display or as decor. The money collected from the sales of miniature dhows is the main source of funding for the diwaniya and the training workshops conducted by the group.

A miniature dhow takes at least a month to make, depending on its size. Most of the wooden materials used are sourced from wood stores in Shuwaikh. "The most important thing is the preservation of national heritage and sharing of expertise with the new generations," Qallaf concluded.



# 1st



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## Local

# Defense Minister visits military college, authority

## Sheikh Hamad recalls sacrifices on liberation anniversary



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah in a group photo during his visit to the Mubarak Al-Abdullah Joint Command and Staff College.— Defense Ministry photos



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah in a group photo during his visit to the Military Education Authority.



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah is seen during his tour at the Mubarak Al-Abdullah Joint Command and Staff College.

**KUWAIT:** Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah yesterday visited a number of military units. Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant General Khaled Al-Saleh Al-Sabah, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant General Fahad Abdulrahman Al-Nasser and several senior officers accompanied the minister during the visit.

The minister conveyed His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's greetings and appre-

ciation to Kuwait Army personnel, as he also relayed salutes from His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, the Defense Ministry said in a press statement. Furthermore, the minister recalled the sacrifices of Kuwait Army personnel during the 1990/91 Iraqi Invasion, as Kuwait celebrates the 30th anniversary of liberation and 60th anniversary of independence this month.

dors also constitutes a crime, the official added. Relevant bodies tasked with the matter will be backed by security teams, who are ready to swiftly carry out their duties to prevent the spread of the virus in the interest of the safety and security of the public, he said. The official called on anyone who spots these activities to immediately report the incident to authorities on the emergency services 112 hotline for legal measures to be taken out against the offenders.

This comes as traffic police broke up a large gathering of vehicles on Sheikh Jaber Causeway which obstructed traffic flow and violated the COVID-19 preventive measures with regards to banning celebrations of national days, Al-Jarida Arabic daily reported yesterday. A security source quoted in the report said that operations received calls about a large gathering of vehicles on Sheikh Jaber Causeway, which was reportedly called for over so-

Sheikh Hamad first visited the Mubarak Al-Abdullah Joint Command and Staff College, where he was received by Commander Lt Gen Talab Al-Fulaij and a number of college officials. During the tour, the deputy premier listened to a detailed presentation on the college's duties and tasks. Sheikh Hamad then visited the Military Education Authority, where he was received by its president Brig Gen Fahad Al-Turaiji and a number of authority officials. He was briefed on the authority's tasks, plans and educational activities.

## Strict measures against COVID-19 rule offenders during national days

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Ministry of Interior reiterated yesterday that it will 'strictly penalize' businesses and individuals found in breach of government-imposed COVID-19 measures during national holidays. Businesses violating the 8:00 pm-5:00 am closing hours and individuals found in a crowd could face imprisonment, fines or both, the ministry's media director Brig Tawheed Al-Kandari warned in a press statement. The sale of fireworks by street ven-



cial media. Patrolmen reported to the scene, and officers were asked to note down the vehicles' license plates numbers so the drivers can be summoned booked accordingly, the report reads.



## Local

# Kuwait reports eight new COVID deaths, 979 cases

## Fifth batch of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrives Sunday

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MoH) registered yesterday 979 additional COVID-19 cases over a 24-hour span, increasing the total number of infections to 181,484, while eight fatalities were recorded, raising the death toll to 1,027. Plus, 986 fresh recovery cases were added to a total of 169,406 cured people, MoH's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said during the 108th regular press conference.

Active cases amounted to 11,051 with 153 of them in intensive care units (ICU) as of yesterday, the ministry confirmed. Health authorities conducted 10,622 swab tests to a total of 1,708,081, he revealed. Dr Sanad urged everyone in Kuwait to comply with the precautionary measures against the virus and maintain social distancing. He recommends that everyone should visit MoH's official accounts and official authorities in the country to view the instructions, recommendations, and everything that would contribute to help fight the pandemic.

Meanwhile, Assistant undersecretary for medicine affairs in the Ministry of Health Abdullah Al-Bader said the fifth batch of Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine will arrive on Sunday. The ministry is closely monitoring safety of taking the vaccine, and its quality standards globally, Bader said yesterday. Kuwait began the vaccination campaign on December 27, with 454,522 people registered to take the vaccination as of this past Monday. About 137,000 people have taken the vaccine, among them about 119,000 Kuwaiti citizens, while the daily rate of vaccinations is recorded at 16,000 people. — KUNA



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Health Minister Dr Basel Al-Sabah met yesterday with Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George, and they discussed measures taken to fight the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). — KUNA

## Weather to improve in coming days

**KUWAIT:** Temperature has currently dropped in Kuwait amid an incoming high pressure from the west bringing with it an improved weather. Yasser Al-Bloushi, the head of marine forecast at Kuwait Control and Meteorological Center (KCMC), said that the

temperature today would be in the range 19-20 degrees during the day. The weather yesterday was cold with unsteady north-westerly winds (15-45 km/h), while temperature ranged between 18-20 degrees, he said. — KUNA



### News in brief

#### Kuwait imports \$1b gasoline

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) resorted to purchasing gasoline for KD 135 million (\$450 million) from the direct market during the 2019-2020 fiscal year to meet the increased local demand. Delays in some capital projects, including the construction of gasoline production units in oil refineries, have forced KPC to import the fuel from abroad, Al-Anba Arabic daily reported. Official oil sources said Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) bore the cost of importing gasoline for \$1 billion during the period from April 2018 to March 31, 2020, due to the delay in completing the Clean Fuel Project. The company seeks to meet the local market's demands after the start of operating gasoline production units within the Clean Fuel Project in the Mina Al-Ahmadi and Mina Abdullah oil refineries.

#### Kuwait oil rises to \$63.55 pb

**KUWAIT:** Price of the Kuwaiti crude oil rose 55 cents to \$63.55 per barrel Wednesday against \$63 pb Tuesday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation said yesterday. In international markets, the Brent crude oil settled at \$64.34 pb rising by 99 cents while the West Texas intermediate crude closed at \$61.41 pb increasing by \$1.09.



Battle of bases: Dubai, Riyadh head for corporate showdown

## Misinformation fears after FB blacks out news in Australia



ROUND ROCK: Residents help a pickup driver get out of ice on the road in Round Rock, Texas, on Wednesday after a winter storm. — AFP

# Texas shivers amid power outages

## Deadly winter spell pummels southern part of US

**HOUSTON:** Power was gradually being restored but hundreds of thousands of households remained without electricity early yesterday across Texas, the oil and gas capital of the United States, with some facing water shortages as a deadly winter cold spell that pummeled the southeastern part of the country headed east. The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a winter storm warning for a swathe of the country ranging from east Texas to the East Coast state of Maryland. The NWS said the storm would bring ice, sleet and heavy snow to parts of Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi as it tracks to the northeast, causing power outages, tree damage and making driving hazardous.

Even though the Arctic air mass was beginning to lose its grip on an area of the country not used to such extreme cold, the frigid temperatures would continue, the NWS said. "Record cold daily maximum and minimum temperatures are likely to transpire in the South Central US through Saturday morning," it said early yesterday. "The Plains and Mississippi Valley can expect daily temperature anomalies ranging between 20 and 30 degrees below normal." President Joe

Biden was forced to postpone until Friday a visit to the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing site in Kalamazoo, Michigan, while federal government offices in Washington closed yesterday.

More than 30 storm-related deaths have been reported by media in the United States since the cold weather arrived last week, many in traffic accidents. Hundreds of thousands of residents of the Texas metropolis of Houston were suffering from both power outages and a loss of water pressure. "Water pressure is very low," Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner tweeted. "Please do not run water to keep pipes from bursting." Nearly seven million Texans were being advised to boil their water before drinking it or using it for cooking, Toby Baker, who heads the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality said Wednesday, adding that nearly 264,000 people were impacted by non-operational water systems. David Hernandez, 38, spent the night at a Houston church with other people who have fled their homes. "My car got stranded and I was trying to sleep in the car but it was just too cold," Hernandez said. "Liquids in my car were actually turning to ice so it was like sleeping in an ice box. "I had to come here,"

he said. "There's no choice."

Power companies in Texas have implemented rolling blackouts to avoid grids being overloaded as residents crank up the heat. ERCOT, which manages the state grid, said on Wednesday it had restored power to around 1.6 million households. "We are working around the clock to restore power to Texans," ERCOT president Bill Magness said in a statement. According to PowerOutage.US, 674,000 customers in Texas were still without power by yesterday morning, the only one of the US's 48 continental states to have its own independent power grid.

### 'Nearly a failed state'

Beto O'Rourke, a former Democratic presidential candidate from Texas, told MSNBC television the situation in the Lone Star State was "worse than you are hearing." "Folks have gone days now without electricity. They're suffering," he said. "So much of this was avoidable," O'Rourke added.

"The energy capital of North America cannot provide the energy needed to warm and power people's homes in this great state. We are nearing a failed state in Texas."

Austin Energy, the local power company in the capital city of 950,000, said tens of thousands of area customers were without electricity, and that whilst they were able to start restoring power in some spots, it was not expected to stay on indefinitely.

The energy company published the locations of "warming centers" set up in local schools. As electricity companies struggle to get power restored, Austin-Bergstrom International Airport resumed flights on Wednesday after a two-day hiatus caused by heavy snowfall. Jeff Zients, the White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator, said the cold weather was impacting delivery and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. "There's certain parts of the country, Texas being one of them, where vaccination sites are understandably closed," Zients said.

"What we're encouraging governors and other partners to do is to extend hours once they're able to reopen." Many weather-related deaths so far have resulted from traffic accidents, but Houston police said a woman and a girl died from carbon monoxide poisoning after sitting in a car in a garage with the engine running to keep warm. — AFP

## International

# Europe to meet US on Iran as nuclear deadline looms

## Diplomats explore means to save the landmark deal

**PARIS:** Top diplomats from European powers and the United States held talks yesterday to see how to revive the 2015 deal on Iran's nuclear drive, days ahead of a deadline set by Tehran that could hinder the efforts by limiting inspections. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian will host his German and British counterparts in Paris, with America's new top diplomat Antony Blinken joining via videoconference, the French foreign ministry said Wednesday.

Highlighting the tough path ahead, German Chancellor Angela Merkel voiced "concern" that Iran was failing to meet its obligations in telephone talks with President Hassan Rouhani, her spokesman said in a statement. Analysts say only a small window of opportunity remains to save the landmark deal, which received a near-fatal blow when former US president Donald Trump walked out of the accord in 2018. The administration of Joe Biden has said it is prepared to rejoin the deal and start lifting sanctions if Iran returns to full compliance, a precondition disputed by Tehran.

Ahead of the talks Biden spoke overnight to Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, with the two leaders discussing the "Iranian threat and regional challenges", according to a White House readout. Adding to the tension, Iran plans to restrict some UN nuclear agency inspections if the US does not lift its sanctions-imposed since 2018 — by February 21, under the terms of a bill adopted by its parliament in December.

### 'On the cards'

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Rafael Grossi is to travel to Tehran on Saturday for talks with the Iranian authorities to find a solution for continuing inspections in the country, the agency said. It warned that the step threatened by Tehran would have "a serious impact on the IAEA's verification and monitoring activities in the country." In Washington, State

Department spokesman Ned Price said that Iran should provide "full and timely cooperation" with the IAEA. "Iran should reverse the steps and refrain from taking others that would impact the IAEA assurances on which not only the United States, not only our allies and partners in the region, but the entire world relies," he said, adding that Blinken saw an "important role" for the EU.

Ellie Geranmayeh, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said it was "unlikely" the E3/US meeting yesterday would produce a significant political or economic gesture to prevent Iran from going ahead with the restrictions. "This deadline has been on the cards for months, and in absence of economic relief Iran's leaders feel compelled to move ahead," she told AFP. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in Vienna in 2015, was based on Iran providing safeguards that it would not make an atomic bomb, in exchange for a gradual easing of international sanctions.

But Iran has stepped up its nuclear work in violation of the accord after US sanctions were reimposed as part of Trump's "maximum pressure" policy to weaken the Iranian regime. The UN nuclear watchdog said last week that Iran had started producing uranium metal in a new violation of the accord, prompting the European powers to warn that Tehran was "undermining the opportunity for renewed diplomacy." In her talks with Rouhani, Merkel said that "now was the time for positive signals that create trust and increase the chances of a diplomatic solution". However the Iranian presidency said Rouhani in the call "criticized Europe's performance" on its JCPOA commitments after the US withdrawal.

### 'Only action'

While Iran's policy is ultimately determined by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iranian presidential elections in June add another time pressure factor. Rouhani—a key advocate of nuclear diplomacy with global powers—is set to step down after serving



**VIENNA:** In this file photo Rafael Grossi, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), speaks during the 64th General Conference of the IAEA at the agency's headquarters in Vienna. —AFP

the maximum two consecutive terms, and a more hardline figure is possibly in line to replace him. "There is a short window of time to limit the damage that could ensue from Iran's next steps, for example by reducing the impact of such moves on the quality of inspections by international monitors," Geranmayeh said.

She said Washington should move in political and practical terms to show Iran that the Biden administration "is distancing itself from Trump-era maximum pressure." Khamenei emphasized Wednesday that Iran wanted to see action from the US administration that would help its economy. "This time, only action, action. If we see action from the opposite side, we will act too," he said. —AFP

## Quake injures more than 30 in southwest Iran

**TEHRAN:** A 5.4 magnitude earthquake rocked southwestern Iran late Wednesday, injuring more than 30 people and causing widespread damage in mountain villages, Iranian media reported. The quake struck at 10:05 pm near the town of Sisakht, in a mountainous district of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province, the US Geological Survey said.

It left 32 people injured, two of them seriously, and caused "extensive damage to buildings, infrastructure and homes", Iran's state news agency IRNA reported. According to a preliminary survey, "78 villages suffered serious damage with some houses completely destroyed", it said.

The magnitude of the quake was sufficiently large that most villagers spent the night out in the open for fear of aftershocks, it added. Iran sits astride the boundaries of sev-



**S?SAKHT, Iran:** An image grab from footage obtained from Iranian State TV IRIB yesterday shows medics transporting an injured man on a stretcher following a 5.4 magnitude earthquake near the town of Sisakht. —AFP

eral major tectonic plates and experiences frequent seismic activity. In June, a quake near Mount Damavand, Iran's highest peak, killed one person and injured more than 20 just east of the capital Tehran. Last February, a 5.7 magnitude earthquake that rattled the western village of Habash-e Olya killed at least nine people over the border in neighboring Turkey. Iran's deadliest quake was a 7.4-magnitude tremor in 1990 that killed 40,000 people in the north of the country, injured 300,000 and left half a million homeless. —AFP

## Nigerian forces say tracking kidnapers after student abduction

**KAGARA:** Nigerian security forces yesterday said they were tracking the armed gang that kidnapped more than 40 people from a school a day earlier, after President Muhammadu Buhari ordered a rescue operation. The abduction in Kagara in central Niger state was the latest mass kidnapping in Nigeria, where criminal gangs known as "bandits" have stepped up attacks. Heavily-armed men in military uniforms raided the Government Science College in Kagara early Wednesday, killing one student and spiriting others into a nearby forest. Kidnappers snatched 42 people, including 27 students, three teachers and other relatives of school staff, according to Niger state officials.

The Nigerian army said it was working with other security agencies to safely return the kidnap victims. "We are doing whatever we can to free the students and the teachers," Niger state information commis-

sioner Muhammad Sani Idris told AFP. "They are being pressed. We have security agents on their heels. We are hoping we will rescue the students in a very short time." Kidnappers have made no ransom request and authorities would not pay any, he said. The Kagara school was closed up yesterday and the town was quiet, an AFP journalist at the scene said. Armed men attacked Gurmana, another town in Niger state, on Wednesday night, killing two people and abducting several others, Ibrahim Audu Hussein, Niger emergency management agency spokesman told AFP. The latest mass abduction came just two months after 300 students were kidnapped from a school in Kankara in nearby Katsina, Buhari's home state, while the president was visiting the region.

The boys were later released after negotiations with government officials, but the incident triggered outrage and memories of the kidnappings of Nigerian schoolgirls by jihadists in Dapchi and Chibok that shocked the world. Kidnappings are just one security challenge facing Buhari in Africa's most populous country, where militants are waging a jihadist insurgency in the northeast and ethnic tensions are simmering in some southern regions. —AFP

## International

# Battle of bases: Dubai, Riyadh head for corporate showdown

## UAE accelerates reforms amid fresh challenges

**DUBAI:** Modern infrastructure and a business-friendly attitude have made Dubai the regional base of choice for international companies, but Riyadh's remarkable rise has woken a long-sleeping heavy-weight competitor. The wealthy Gulf emirate has made opening businesses as easy as ordering a meal, in a region choking with bureaucracy, helping it attract around 140 headquarters in three decades, far more than any other Middle East city.

While Dubai's business environment flourished, Riyadh, the capital of the biggest Arab economy, floundered thanks to ultra-conservative policies, security threats and corruption.

The young Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman sought to end all that when he came to power in 2017, and now the city surrounded by sand dunes is enjoying a relative boom, drawing new businesses from restaurants to tech startups.

"Our target is to have Riyadh become one of the top-ten largest city economies in the world," the 35-year-old de facto leader said in January. But despite the big salary packages and contracts that are drawing expats and foreign firms to Riyadh, the city's lack of attractions, a no-alcohol policy and other disincentives has slowed the shift.

Saudi officials have said the kingdom accounts for less than five percent of the region's HQs—even though it's the biggest Arab economy and offers the "lion's share" of business and contracts. To change the status quo, Saudi this week heaped pressure on foreign companies to move their Middle East headquarters to the kingdom, saying it will stop signing contracts with firms with hubs in other countries from 2024.

The surprise move is a direct challenge to Dubai and threatens a heated open race between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates-neighbors, al-

lies and competitors. "I do not think this is the intention, but it is how it works out in practice, as Dubai tends to be the default location for international companies' regional HQs," said Steffen Hertog, associate professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

### Boiling competition

Under Prince Mohammed, Saudi adopted a series of once unimaginable social changes and abolished some of its old laws. Riyadh, a city of 7.5 million once seen as a bastion for conservative policies, opened its doors for entertainment and investment, the notorious religious police were sidelined and anti-corruption campaigns embarked on.

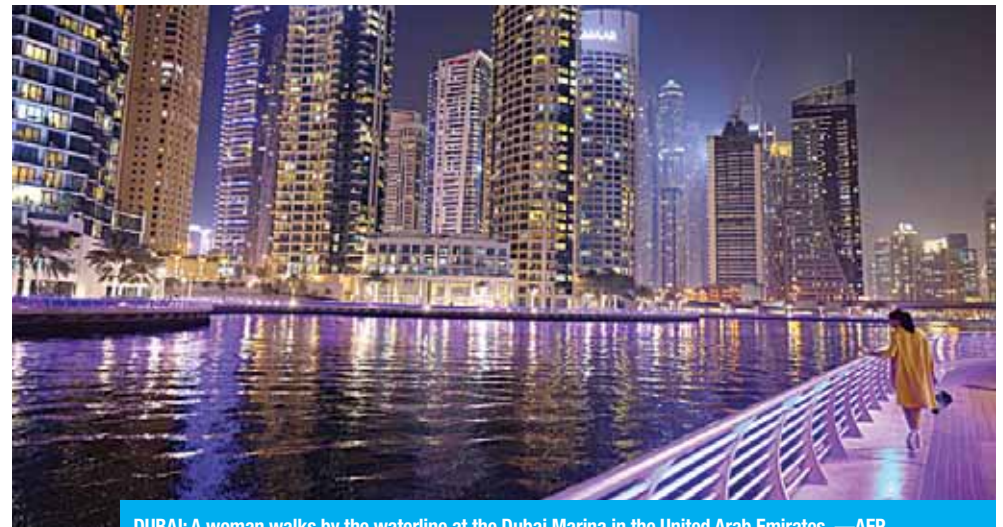
But the new-look capital has nevertheless drawn many hoping to cash in on multi-billion-dollar projects like the futuristic NEOM megacity planned for the kingdom's Red Sea coast.

Saudi entrepreneur Haya Akhdar and her husband Ugo Baudez, a French national, launched their Dubai-based consultancy specializing in luxury brands in 2017.

For the young couple, now is the right time to open a new office in Riyadh, but like many they will keep one foot in each city. "We have witnessed the growth of the market and the shift of many brands' attention to KSA, specifically in Riyadh... We need to be close to our clients in both important markets," Baudez said.

### 'A million welcomes'

The UAE has responded quickly to the new competitive mood. The country of one million citizens and nine million expats lifted a ban on unmarried couples living together, loosened



DUBAI: A woman walks by the waterline at the Dubai Marina in the United Arab Emirates. —AFP

restrictions on alcohol, offered long-term residency, and struck a normalization deal with Israel to harness the power of the two major economies.

To stay competitive with Saudi Arabia, a powerhouse with a youthful market of 34 million, the UAE has to "accelerate some reforms that are still unthinkable for Saudi Arabia," said Ryan Bohl, a Middle East analyst at risk consulting firm Stratfor. Saudi cities still lack proper infrastructure in key areas like transport and banking, and some ministries remain hopelessly mired in bureaucracy.

"Riyadh and Jeddah remain light years behind Dubai and even Abu Dhabi in terms of social liberalism, housing, schooling and entertainment venues," said Bohl. The other "hard reality is that Saudi

Arabia still has 19 million largely conservative citizens who are going to be less amenable to copying the relatively Westernised social mores of the UAE for many years to come," he added.

While Dubai is seen as one of the safest cities in the region, Riyadh faces a threat from rebels and extremists in Yemen where its forces have been fighting since 2015. "Companies and banks operating from Dubai for 30 years chose it because of the quality of life, competitive advantages, a legislative and social environment and a unique infrastructure", tweeted Emirati professor of political science Abdulkhaleq Abdulla. "They will not leave it. Yet, a million welcomes to the competition." —AFP

## Missing three K2 climbers are dead: Pakistan official

**SKARDU, Pakistan:** Three climbers lost on Pakistan's K2 are believed to have died on the mountain, a Pakistan official said yesterday, more than a week after the group went missing while trying to summit the world's second highest peak. Climbers John Snorri from Iceland, Juan Pablo Mohr from Chile and Muhammad Ali Sadpara of Pakistan lost contact with base camp on February 5, sparking a massive rescue effort that included military helicopters and planes.

"All the weather experts, climbers, and experts from the Pakistan army have reached the

conclusion that a human being cannot live for that long in such harsh weather. That's why we are announcing that they are no more," said Raja Nasir Ali Khan, a provincial minister for tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan, where K2 is located. Khan said the search for the bodies would continue.

"My family have lost a kind father and the Pakistan nation has lost a great, brave, and experienced mountaineer," Sajid Ali Sadpara said. The announcement was made after the latest deaths further mar what has been a bitter-sweet winter season on K2. Two climbers had already died on its treacherous slopes since January, and a third mountaineer was lost during an acclimatizing mission on a nearby peak.

History was made, however, with a team of Nepali climbers reaching the top-sparking jubilation at home. —AFP

## Top Bhutan general and judges detained for overthrow plot

**THIMPU:** Police in Bhutan, the Himalayan kingdom famed for its happiness index, have detained a top general and two judges over an alleged plot to overthrow the country's top military officer and chief justice. The allegations about the conspiracy to take over top jobs in the army and judiciary have rocked the tiny country of 750,000 people jammed between India and China that prides itself on its clean-cut image.

Former Royal bodyguard commandant Brigadier Thinley Tobgay, Supreme Court judge Kuenley Tshering and top district court judge Yeshey Dorji appeared in court on Wednesday after being detained at their homes. The three have been accused of plotting to overthrow the country's top military officer, Lieutenant General Batoo

Tshering by implicating him in a corruption scandal. All were denied bail by the Thimphu district court and remanded in custody until a first formal hearing on February 27. According to reports, Tobgay was alleged to have illegally obtained military documents on the procurement of vehicles from the United Nations. The Bhutanese newspaper said that while the tender was handled publicly and fairly, the documents were to be used to undermine the position of the military number one.

Other reports said the plot between the three men was revealed to authorities by a woman detained a few months ago. The three "friends" wanted to take on the jobs in charge of the military, as chief justice of the Supreme Court and as attorney general, the reports said. Batoo Tshering has been Bhutan's chief operations officer for more than a decade. The country is known as a tourist paradise in the Himalayas and for its happiness index which was developed in the 1970s after a former king ruled that "gross national happiness is more important than gross domestic product". —AFP

## International

# Learning lifeline for London kids struggling to do online lessons

## CatBytes Group helps children get computers

**LONDON:** In a community center in a deprived London suburb surrounded by old computers and tangled leads—volunteers take their screwdrivers to the piles of donated equipment. Their aim? To throw a learning lifeline to the many kids unable to access online lessons during the UK's latest coronavirus lockdown. Many children in London have struggled to continue their schooling during the pandemic due to a lack of computers or tablets. Since the lockdown introduced in January, the CatBytes group in Lewisham in southeast London has seen demand from local schools constantly outstrip supply. "The demand from Lewisham is way in excess of what we can deliver", says CatBytes founder Damian Griffiths, who works with volunteers most weekdays, fixing up the donated computers. Schools in England closed in early January as the new variant of coronavirus caused cases to surge. A date for reopening has not yet been set, but the government said it will announce a roadmap for easing restrictions next week. School closures have revealed the large number of families who cannot afford the laptops or tablets needed for remote learning.

Throughout the pandemic, "food insecurity has been the main issue discussed but I think digital (scarcity) is really rising up the ranks", says Griffiths. While children often access the internet on phones, "I was surprised at how many don't have any laptops at home", he says. Lewisham is nothing exceptional: the number of children in poverty there is slightly below the average for the capital.

CatBytes usually runs workshops for adults, but during the pandemic, it has switched to helping children and has "a lot more volunteers", Griffiths says. Marz, who is repairing a donated computer, works as a videographer. Volunteers sort through the laptops, prioritizing ones that can be easily fixed while others are put to one side. These "we can fix during our little downtimes," Marz says.

### 'Digital divide'

The communications regulator Ofcom estimates that between 1.1 and 1.8 million children in the UK—or nine percent—do not have access to a computer, laptop or tablet at home. "They don't have something appropriate for doing schoolwork or homework," says Griffiths. "And now, with online learning, online schooling, every child needs a laptop." The Department for Education has delivered more than one million laptops and tablets to the most disadvantaged children across the country, as part of a £400 million (\$554 million) investment to support schools. Stacey McIntosh, the pastoral manager and safe-

guarding lead at nearby Rushey Green Primary School, drops in to pick up five laptops for the pupils. While the school received 74 laptops and tablets from the government, as well as some wireless routers, that is not enough, she says. "There are still children without computers. "The school has been providing children without devices with printed-out lesson packs but they "have been missing out on key learning from their teacher", McIntosh says.

Her school has received over 30 laptops from CatBytes since January and she says this is important for children socially, too. During lockdown, "the children have lost their friendships, their teachers who they are close to," she says. "Being able to give them the opportunity to get online to see their friends virtually in those little squares, well, it's significant." Vital as the computers are, some children face an additional struggle because their families cannot afford internet access, says Griffiths. "The main problem that no one knows how to fix is the data problem," he says. "With a laptop, somebody can give it to you and you can refurbish it and redistribute it but data is an ongoing cost". Ofcom says that seven percent of households can only access the internet through a mobile device such as a dongle or USB. A number of data providers, including Vodafone, BT Mobile and O2, are now offering free mobile data increases.—AFP



**LONDON:** A member of the team at Catbytes, a computer repair charity, repairs a donated computer at Ewart Community Hall in south London.—AFP

that almost everyone is tied to the private market," Shaffir told AFP.

The private housing market is largely unregulated in Israel. Shaffir, who was later elected to parliament, introduced the "fair rental law", passed in 2017 to strengthen tenants' rights. Property must now be in "good condition and the repairs are done at the expense of the owners... who can no longer evict the tenants as quickly as before," said the 35-year-old activist, who heads Israel's Green Party.

### Housing bubble

But the law has had limited impact on rent prices, which are not capped in Israel, said Danny Ben-Shahar, director of the Alrov Institute for Real Estate Research, at Tel Aviv University. Low borrowing rates coupled with population growth—in a country with both high birth and immigration rates—means demand for apartments outstrips supply. The result is a "drastic" increase in house prices, which has a knock-on impact on rents, Ben-Shahar said.

"Housing is still a major concern," he added. The problem is especially acute in Tel Aviv. The Mediterranean city is ranked as the fifth most expensive city in the world in The Economist magazine's latest cost-of-living report—ahead of New York and Geneva. "To buy a four-room apartment costs on average three million shekels (\$920,000) in Tel Aviv, and 1.7 million shekels elsewhere (\$520,000)", he said. Such costs price out all but the wealthy.—AFP

## Draghi sets out plan to rebuild virus-hit Italy

**ROME:** Prime Minister Mario Draghi pledged Wednesday to use "all means" to fight the coronavirus pandemic that has devastated Italy, and said it presented an opportunity for the country to rebuild as it did after World War II. In his first speech since taking office, the former European Central Bank chief listed the pandemic as his top priority of a long list of issues requiring urgent attention. "The government will carry out reforms but will also tackle the emergency," he told the Senate, the upper house of parliament, where he has almost unanimous support for his new government of national unity. The 73-year-old, parachuted in after the previous centre-left government collapsed, has been dubbed "Super Mario" since promising to do "whatever it takes" to save the euro during the 2012 debt crisis.

On Wednesday he promised to fight "with all means" the pandemic that has left more than 94,000 Italians dead and sparked a deep recession, with the economy contracting almost nine percent last year. "Today we have, as did the governments of the immediate post-war period, the possibility—or rather the responsibility—to start a new reconstruction," Draghi said in his almost hour-long address. His new government involves a wide range of parties from leftists to Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) and Matteo Salvini's eurosceptic, far-right League. Draghi said backing him meant "sharing the prospect of an ever more integrated European Union that will arrive at a common public budget capable of supporting countries in times of recession". He added: "Today, unity is not an option, unity is a duty."

### Dramatic situation

Draghi was sworn in on Saturday as Italy's 30th prime minister since it became a republic, ending a month-long political crisis sparked by the implosion of ex-premier Giuseppe Conte's coalition. On Wednesday, Draghi said it was a time of "intense emotion" personally to take over with Italy in such a "dramatic situation". With rising concern about the spread of new coronavirus variants, which have sparked a series of mini-lockdowns in towns across Italy, Draghi emphasized the importance of speeding up vaccinations.

After a strong start in late December, the campaign has slowed, with only 1.3 million people out of a population of 60 million immunized so far. And after almost 450,000 people lost their jobs last year, mostly women and young people, Draghi also underscored the importance of protecting all workers—but said "it would be a mistake" to also save all companies from insolvency.

Another immediate challenge is drawing up a plan to spend what Draghi has previously called the "extraordinary resources" offered by the EU. Italy expects to receive more than 200 billion euros (\$240 billion) from the EU's post-coronavirus recovery fund, but in return, it is expected to commit to potentially difficult or unpopular reforms. "These resources will have to be spent with an aim to improve the growth potential of our economy," Draghi said. He promised reform to Italy's stifling bureaucracy, labyrinthine tax code and snail-paced justice system, as well as a focus on education, closing the gap on female employment and fighting climate change.—AFP

## Israeli housing crisis, a decade after its 'tent revolution'

**TEL AVIV:** Ten years since protests against the cost of living rocked Israel, affordable housing remains just as scarce, even prompting some city-dwellers to seek cheaper living on a rural kibbutz. The 2011 "tent revolution" saw young Israelis furious at sharp rises in rents erect shelters on the upmarket Rothschild Boulevard in the heart of Tel Aviv. Thousands of protesters soon took to the streets across Israel, shouting slogans demanding social justice.

Such widespread social upheaval had not been seen in Israel since the early 1970s, when thousands of people, led by a group called the Black Panthers, campaigned against racial discrimination suffered by Mizrahi Jews of Middle Eastern descent. But many of the demands of the tent revolution remain a dream. "Since then, prices have continued to increase," said Stav Shaffir, a figurehead of the 2011 protests. "Social housing—important in the 1960s and 1970s—has been cut back so

## International

# Georgia PM resigns over move to arrest opposition leader

## Move to detail Melia sparks outrage and warnings

**TBILISI:** Georgia's prime minister resigned yesterday over plans to arrest a top opposition leader, deepening a political crisis that has gripped the Caucasus nation since elections last year.

Giorgi Gakharia, a 45-year-old with the ruling Georgian Dream party who was prime minister since 2019, said he was stepping down because of disagreement in the government over enforcing a court order to arrest Nika Melia. The move to detain Melia—the chairman of the United National Movement of ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili—sparked outrage in the opposition and warnings from Georgia's Western allies.

With opposition party leaders gathered at the UNM headquarters in Georgia's capital Tbilisi and television reports showing riot police mobilizing nearby, Gakharia said he could not enforce the court order and would resign. "It is inadmissible to enforce a judiciary decision... if that poses a risk to the health and lives of our citizens or creates the possibility of a political escalation in the country," he said.

A court in Tbilisi on Wednesday ordered Melia placed in pre-trial detention after he refused to pay an increased bail fee ahead of hearings in a case related to anti-government demonstrations in 2019.

He has been charged with "organizing mass violence" during the protests and is facing up to nine years in prison.

### Call for snap elections

Melia, 41, rejects the case as politically moti-

vated and his supporters have vowed to obstruct police if they move to arrest him. The detention order has raised the stakes in the crisis over October's parliamentary elections, which the opposition denounced as rigged after Georgian Dream claimed victory. Opposition members have refused to take up their seats in the new parliament and demanded new elections. Melia told journalists yesterday that the opposition was ready for talks on a snap vote.

"Power will change in Georgia peacefully and very soon," he said. The interior ministry said it had "temporarily postponed the planned detention" of Melia in connection with the prime minister's resignation. The ruling party's chairman, Irakli Kobakhidze, said its leadership would decide by Friday on a candidate to take over as prime minister, adding that he "regretted" Gakharia's decision.

"I urge Melia to obey the court decision. Otherwise, the government will enforce the judiciary decision and arrest him," he told a news conference. Melia is accused of fomenting violence during protests that erupted in Tbilisi in June 2019 after a Russian lawmaker addressed parliament from the speaker's seat, a controversial move in a country where ties with Moscow remain strained after a brief war in 2008. The rallies saw thousands of protesters clash with police who used tear gas and rubber bullets against the crowds.



**TBILISI:** Nika Melia, one of the leaders of exiled former president Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), holds a briefing at the UNM headquarters in Tbilisi late on Wednesday. —AFP

### 'Dangerous situation'

Then-interior minister Gakharia led the crackdown and was appointed premier in September 2019. Dubbed "Moscow's man" by the opposition, Gakharia worked in Russia as a regional director for German aviation company Lufthansa and is a graduate of Moscow's Lomonosov University.

Georgia gained its independence with the

1992 collapse of the Soviet Union and in the decades since has been divided between its longstanding relationship with Moscow and efforts to seek closer ties with the West. In a statement ahead of Melia's trial, the European Union envoy to Georgia, Carl Hartzell, described the circumstances surrounding his prosecution as a "dangerous trajectory for Georgia and for Georgian democracy". —AFP

## Belarus court sentences two journalists

**MINSK:** A court in Belarus yesterday sentenced two journalists to two years in prison on charges of fomenting protests against strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko.

Authorities in the ex-Soviet country are pursuing a number of criminal cases against activists and journalists in the wake of months of anti-government protests last year. The demonstrations swept Belarus after Lukashenko claimed a landslide victory in an August election that the opposition and many Western countries said was fraudulent.

In response, the authorities unleashed a mass crackdown, which left at least four protesters dead, thousands in jail and hundreds claiming torture in custody. Poland-based opposition television station Belsat reported yesterday that the two journalists, Katerina Bakhvalova, 27, and Daria Chultsova, 23, were sentenced for leading "group actions that grossly violate public order" while filming a November rally in support of a dead anti-government protester.

Both women, who were photographed yesterday smiling and flashing the V for victory sign from inside a cage for defendants, had been held in pre-trial custody since. "I showed these events live. For this I was thrown into jail on trumped-up charges," Belsat reported Bakhvalova as telling a judge Wednesday in her final statement before sentencing. —AFP

## Spain's Montero: From anti-austerity agitator to minister

**MADRID:** A protester-turned-politician, Spain's Equality Minister Irene Montero is an outspoken feminist and young mover-and-shaker in the leftwing government. A huge rainbow flag graces the front of her ministry, trailing the draft law on transgender rights that Montero—the partner of the leader of the radical leftwing Podemos—will present this spring.

Her plan to let people register a gender change on their identity documents without a medical report faces stern opposition from the Socialists, who run Spain's coalition government in which Podemos is the junior partner. Born in Madrid to a father in the removals business and a teacher mother, Montero went to a liberal Montessori-style school then as a teen joined a Communist youth organization.

In politics, she has embraced a confrontational style hallmarked by an assertive defense of feminism. While she can both divide and annoy, in 2017 the strategy saw her flagged by Forbes magazine as one of the most influential European politicians under 30. Her persona is pure Podemos, slotting into the party led by her partner Pablo Iglesias which emerged out of the anti-austerity "Indignados" movement that occupied squares across Spain in 2011 at the height of the economic crisis.

With a PhD in psychology, Montero has been at the forefront of Iglesias' leadership team since the party was formed in 2014, and a year later was elected as an MP when Podemos surged into Spanish parliament for the first time.



**Spain's Minister for Equality Irene Montero.** —AFP

### Two at the top

At 33, her style is casual, with a jacket thrown over a T-shirt. And she's well versed in "speaking the language of the people, in a simple, unsophisticated way that is 'less highbrow' than her Podemos colleagues, almost all of whom are political scientists or university professors", says political analyst Euprepio Padula. Just 29 when she became the leader of Podemos' parliamentary group, Montero made her mark in 2017 when she took to the podium to argue for an ultimately unsuccessful motion of censure against then rightwing premier Mariano Rajoy. "It was the first time that a woman had stood up to defend a censure motion," Montero told AFP in an interview, saying she felt "a great sense of responsibility". As she has gained visibility, the spotlight has also turned on her relationship with Iglesias. When Podemos entered government in January 2020, Montero was named equality minister and Iglesias became one of Spain's four deputy prime ministers. Her portfolio was a solid win for a party that until then had made few inroads among female voters and was looking to compete with the Socialists, who "for years have attracted most female voters," noted Jose Rama, a political scientist at Madrid's Autonomous University. —AFP

## International

# 7 minutes of terror: Perseverance rover's nail-biting landing phase

## All set for the touchdown on Jezero Crater on Mars

**WASHINGTON:** Seven months after blast-off, NASA's Mars 2020 mission will have to negotiate its shortest and most intense phase yesterday: the "seven minutes of terror" it takes to slam the brakes and land the Perseverance rover on a narrow target on the planet's surface.

Entry, Descent, and Landing (EDL) begins when the spacecraft carrying Perseverance strikes the Martian atmosphere at nearly 12,500 miles per hour (20,000 kilometers per hour).

It ends around seven minutes later with the rover at rest on the surface. Touchdown on the Jezero Crater is scheduled for 3:55 pm US eastern time (2055 GMT). Weather conditions so far appear favorable in the Martian northern hemisphere spring, but nothing is taken for granted.

"This is one of the most difficult maneuvers that we do in this business, and almost 50 percent of the spacecraft that had been sent to the surface of Mars have failed," Matt Wallace, the mission's deputy project manager said.

### Atmospheric entry

Ten minutes before entering the Martian atmosphere, the spacecraft sheds its cruise stage that supplied the fuel tanks, radios and solar panels on the voyage. It's left with just a protective aeroshell, carrying the rover and descent stage, and it fires thrusters to make sure its heat shield is forward facing. At about 80 miles (130 kilometers) altitude, it careens into the atmosphere and things start to get hot: peak heating occurs about 80 seconds in when the heat shield surface

reaches 2,370 degrees Fahrenheit (about 1,300 degrees Celsius).

Perseverance is tucked away safely in the aeroshell, only experiencing room temperature. The craft might need to fire thrusters to stay on course as it hits air pockets.

### Parachute deployment

Once the spacecraft has slowed down to less than 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) an hour, it's time to deploy the 70.5 feet (21.5 meters) wide supersonic parachute at an altitude of seven miles (11 kilometers). Perseverance is deploying a new technology called Range Trigger that decides the precise moment to deploy, based on the craft's position relative to the landing site.

Asked to name the single most critical event, NASA's EDL lead Allen Chen said: "Obviously there's a lot of concentrated risk in supersonic parachute opening." To try out its new design, NASA had to carry out extensive supersonic parachute testing from high altitudes here on Earth, a field of research that had been dormant since the 1970s.

### Heat shield separation

Next, the spacecraft jettisons its heat shield, around 20 seconds after the parachute has been deployed. The rover is exposed to the atmosphere for the first time, and uses a landing radar to bounce signals off the surface and calculate its precise altitude.

The mission will also see another technology deployed for the first time: the "Terrain Relative Navigation" (TRN) system that uses a special camera to identify surface features and

cameras, two microphones, and a suite of cutting-edge instruments to assist in its scientific goals.

Before it can embark on its lofty quest, it will first need to survive the dreaded "seven minutes of terror"—the risky landing procedure that has scuppered nearly 50 percent of all missions to the planet. Shortly after 3:30 pm Eastern Time (2030 GMT), the spacecraft will careen into the Martian atmosphere at 12,500 miles per hour (20,000 kilometers per hour), protected by its heat shield.

It will then deploy a supersonic parachute the size of a Little League field, before firing up an eight-engined jetpack to slow its descent even further, and then eventually lower the rover carefully to the ground on a set of cables.

Its target site, the Jezero Crater, is full of perilous terrain, but thanks to new instruments Perseverance is capable of landing with far greater precision than any robot sent before it.

Scientists believe that around 3.5 billion years ago the crater was home to a river that flowed into a lake, depositing sediment in a fan-shaped delta. "We have very strong evidence that Mars could have supported life in its distant past," Ken Williford, the mission's deputy project scientist said Wednesday.

But if past exploration has determined the planet was once habitable, Perseverance is tasked with determining whether it was actually inhabited. It will begin drilling its first samples in summer, and its engineers have planned for it to traverse first



**NEW YORK:** This NASA photo released Wednesday shows the Empire State Building in New York illuminated in red to celebrate the February 18, 2021 scheduled landing on Mars of NASA's Perseverance rover. — AFP

compare them to an onboard map where engineers pre-programmed the safest landing sites.

"That gives our vehicle eyes, and the ability to really see where she's going and figure out where she is," said Chen.

### Powered descent

In the thin atmosphere of Mars, the parachute will only get the vehicle down to 200 miles (300 kilometers) per hour—so Perseverance has to cut the chute loose, dispense with its back shell, and use rocket thrusters to ease itself down. It does this using an eight-engined jetpack that's installed directly above the rover and fires up at around 6,900 feet (2100 meters) above the surface.

The vehicle has to tilt right away in order to avoid the falling parachute and back shell, then uses its sophisticated systems to continue its descent.

### Skycrane

With 12 seconds to go, at a height of 66 feet (20 meters), the rocket-powered descent stage lowers the rover down to the ground using long cables in a maneuver called "skycrane." The rover locks its legs and wheels into a landing position and touches the ground at a little less than two miles (1.2 kilometers) an hour, as the descent stage flies off and makes its own controlled landing. Perseverance is now set for its mission as Earth's fifth rover on Mars. — AFP

## Was there ever life on Mars? Perseverance rover wants to find out

**WASHINGTON:** Seven months in space, a mission that was decades in the making and cost billions of dollars, all to answer the question: was there ever life on Mars? NASA's Perseverance rover prepared for touchdown on the Red Planet to search for telltale signs of microbes that might have existed there billions of years ago, when conditions were warmer and wetter than they are today.

Over the course of several years, it will attempt to collect 30 rock and soil samples in sealed tubes, to be eventually sent back to Earth sometime in the 2030s for lab analysis. "It's of course trying to make significant progress in answering one of the questions that has been with us for many centuries, namely: are we alone in the universe?" NASA Associate Administrator Thomas Zurbuchen said Wednesday.

Perseverance is the largest and most sophisticated vehicle ever sent to Mars. About the size of an SUV, it weighs a ton, is equipped with a seven foot (two meter) long robotic arm, has 19

the delta, then the ancient lake shore, and finally the edges of the crater. Perseverance's top speed of 0.1 miles per hour is sluggish by Earth standards but faster than any of its predecessors, and along the way it will deploy new instruments to scan for organic matter, map chemical composition, and zap rocks with a laser to study the vapor.

"We astrobiologists have been dreaming about this mission for decades," said Mary Voytek, head of NASA's astrobiology program. Despite its state-of-the-art technology, bringing samples back to Earth remains crucial because of anticipated ambiguities in the specimens it documents. For example, fossils that arose from ancient microbes may look suspiciously similar to patterns caused by precipitation.

Before getting to the main mission, NASA wants to run several eye-catching experiments. Tucked under Perseverance's belly is a small helicopter drone that will attempt the first powered flight on another planet. The helicopter, dubbed Ingenuity, will have to achieve lift in an atmosphere that's one percent the density of Earth's, in a demonstration of concept that could revolutionize the way we explore other planets. Another experiment involves an instrument that can convert oxygen from Mars' primarily carbon dioxide atmosphere, much like a plant, using the process of electrolysis to produce 10 grams of oxygen an hour. — AFP

## International

# Democrats to unveil Biden's US immigration reform bill

## Bill to create a path to citizenship for 11m undocumented immigrants

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden's immigration bill, which aims to create a path to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants, was unveiled yesterday to begin its legislative process, senior White House officials said. "This was a day-one commitment of the president, and it is his vision of what it takes to fix the system," a senior administration official told reporters.

Two Democratic legislators, California Congresswoman Linda Sanchez and New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez, will present the initiative in the House of Representatives and the Senate, respectively.

The bill aims to create a path to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants who can prove they were in the United States on January 1, 2021. The legislation will benefit the so-called Dreamers, people who were brought to the United States illegally as children and grew up there.

Then-president Barack Obama issued an executive order in 2012 which offered protection for Dreamers at renewable two-year periods, including authorization to work. His successor Donald Trump attempted to end the program in 2017 as part of his crackdown on

all kinds of immigration.

The case ended up in the US Supreme Court, which ruled that the Trump administration had not followed proper administrative procedures to end the policy, although the Department of Homeland Security reinstated it only partially. People benefiting from Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which prevents the deportation of citizens from countries affected by natural disasters or conflict, and farmworkers who can show a history of employment in the United States will also be able to get permanent residence.

For Biden, it is "a chance to kind of reset and restart conversations on immigration reform after the last four years," the senior official added. The Trump administration passed more than 400 executive orders to curb immigration and punish the undocumented. Since coming to power, Biden has announced a push to reform immigration and roll back his predecessor's hardline policies, including with the creation of a special task force to reunite families separated by Trump's "zero tolerance" border policy towards undocumented immigrants. Starting this week, he will begin to dismantle the controversial "stay in Mexico" program,



WASHINGTON, DC: An LED truck displaying messages expressing concern over the continuing mass deportations of Black immigrants drives past the office of US Customs and Border Protection prior to a #BidenAlsoDeports rally in Washington, DC. — AFP

which forced tens of thousands of asylum seekers to remain at the border pending resolution of their cases.

The bill will also replace the term "alien,"

used to refer to foreigners in immigration legislation, with "non-citizen" "to better reflect the president's values on immigration," the official said. — AFP

## Behind the power crisis in petroleum center Texas

NEW YORK: Some 2.7 million households in Texas were still without power as of Wednesday morning in the wake of extremely cold weather buffeting the region.

But while the unusual Arctic air mass has lashed numerous states with snow and sleet with more on the way yesterday, Texas, the heart of the country's oil industry, has seen the worst of the power outages.

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT), which operates much of the state's power grid, underestimated the surge in demand caused by the unusually cold weather and used planned outages to avert an uncontrolled blackout. Some families have been out of power for more than 48 hours.

The frigid temperatures also caused outages at key energy installations—natural gas-fired power plants, wind turbines and nuclear plants—which are not typically insulated as they are in other states with colder climates. ERCOT was formed to give the state authority over its own power system rather than FERC, and the outages were exacerbated by the fact that unlike other states, the power grid in Texas is largely disconnected from the national grid, which means it cannot import power in the event of outages. Experts have pointed to several other factors behind the crisis, including a lack of surplus power capacity. — AFP

## Trump rages, Biden yawns

WASHINGTON: Insisting that he won the US election and brawling with his own party's top senator, Donald Trump was back to demanding national attention this week. President Joe Biden just yawned.

"I'm tired of talking about Donald Trump, don't want to talk about him anymore," Biden said during a CNN town hall in Wisconsin late Tuesday. Trump is doing his best to get talked about. Since grumpily departing the White House on January 20 and ceding to Biden, he has largely kept to himself. But on Wednesday he marked the death of right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh by calling into Fox News and reupping his false claim that he was robbed of victory in the November 3 election.

"Rush thought we won and so do I by the way. I think we won substantially," Trump said, adding how "angry" the country is about the supposed fraud, which no court has substantiated. Trump lit up the political landscape on Tuesday by firing a remarkable broadside at Senator Mitch McConnell, the senior Republican in Congress. McConnell's sin was to have ripped Trump in a speech after helping acquit the former president in last Saturday's impeachment trial.

McConnell did not join the seven rebel Republicans voting with Democrats to convict Trump for inciting insurrection at the Capitol on January 6. He stuck to the party line and in doing so likely ensured that the number of defectors remained just a trickle.

But having done his duty to Trump, McConnell then let loose, blaming him for a "disgraceful dereliction of duty" and recalling that the mob attacking the Capitol was "carrying his banners... screaming their loyalty to him."

Trump's riposte was a humdinger. "Mitch is a dour, sullen, and unsmiling political hack," a statement from Trump's



WASHINGTON, DC: A temporary security fence topped with concertina razor wire surrounds the US Capitol on Wednesday in Washington, DC. The fence was erected around the Capitol, the Supreme Court, the Library of Congress and their associated office buildings following the deadly January 6 insurrection.— AFP

Florida retreat said.

How Biden was going to deal with the specter of a vengeful Trump has been a question ever since his convincing victory in November. Typically, former presidents fade gracefully into the background, but Trump is different. Now Biden has given his answer.

"For four years all that's been in the news is Trump. In the next four years I want to make sure all the news is the American people," Biden said in the CNN town hall.

Throughout the appearance, Biden stuck to promoting a gigantic \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus package and getting the country vaccinated against COVID-19. It's the same line he took during last week's impeachment trial drama and ever since entering the Oval Office. References he did make to Trump were notable mostly for their indifference. — AFP



# Anti-coup hackers target govt sites as protesters jam Yangon roads

## Myanmar junta presses on with internet blockades, troop deployments

**YANGON:** Hackers targeted Myanmar government websites yesterday to protest against the military coup, as the junta pressed on with its attempts to stymie nationwide opposition with internet blockades and troop deployments. The cyberattacks came a day after tens of thousands of people rallied across the country to protest against the generals toppling Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government earlier this month.

A group called Myanmar Hackers disrupted websites including the Central Bank, the Myanmar military's propaganda page, state-run broadcaster MRTV, the Port Authority, and the Food and Drug Administration. "We are fighting for justice in Myanmar," the group said on its Facebook page.

"It is like mass protesting of people in front of government websites." Cybersecurity expert Matt Warren from Australia's RMIT University said it was likely the aim was to generate publicity.

"The sorts of attacks they would be undertaking are denial of service attacks or defacing websites which is called hacktivism," he said. "The impact will be potentially limited but what they are doing is raising awareness." Internet access was severely curtailed for the fourth night

running at about 1:00 am yesterday (1830 GMT Wednesday), according to NetBlocks, a Britain-based group that monitors internet outages around the world. It said connectivity had dropped to just 21 percent of ordinary levels, and was restored eight hours later ahead of the start of the working day.

"The practice is detrimental to public safety and incites confusion, fear and distress in difficult times," NetBlocks tweeted.

### Traffic blockades

For a second day, motorists in Yangon blocked roads with vehicles, leaving their bonnets up and pretending they were broken down to stop security forces from moving around Myanmar's biggest city. Buses and cars could be seen on live feeds parked around a bridge at North Dagon yesterday morning, as protesters chanted: "Don't attend the office, leave it. Join the civil disobedience movement."

"We need the US Army to save our situation," read a sign held by a monk in saffron robes. Dozens of police patrolled the vicinity of Myaynigone junction as motorists also blocked roads.

"We gathered about five taxis and one pre-



**YANGON:** Police block a road as workers remove protesters' graffiti with a message "save Myanmar" during a demonstration against the military coup in Naypyidaw yesterday. — AFP

tended his car had broken down and blocked the street. Others also surrounded him. But we didn't stay long. We blocked (for) about 30 minutes," said a 30-year-old taxi driver. "We are doing this to cause difficulties for police. If they come and it's a little bit tense, we leave then."

Than Than, a street food vendor, said the traffic snarls were a minor inconvenience, but she supported the campaign. "I walked about 40 minutes because of cars blocking my way back home yesterday afternoon before I got a bus," the 50-year-old said. — AFP

## Air pollution caused 160,000 deaths in big cities last year: NGO

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Serious pollution caused around 160,000 premature deaths in the world's five most populous cities last year, even as air quality improved in some places due to coronavirus lockdowns, an environmental group said yesterday.

The worst-affected was New Delhi, the most polluted capital on Earth, where around 54,000 deaths are estimated to have occurred due to hazardous PM2.5 airborne particles, according to a report from Greenpeace Southeast Asia. In Tokyo, the figure was 40,000 with the rest spread across Shanghai, Sao Paulo and Mexico City, according to the report, which looked at the impact of microscopic PM2.5 matter produced by burning fossil fuels.

"When governments choose coal, oil and gas over clean energy, it's our health that pays the price," said Avinash Chanchal, climate campaigner at Greenpeace India. PM2.5 particles are considered the most harmful for health. They damage the heart and lungs, and increase the chances of severe asthma attacks.

Some studies have linked PM2.5 exposure to a higher risk of dying from COVID-19. The report used an online tool that estimates the impacts of PM 2.5 by taking air quality data from monitoring site IQAir and combining it with scientific risk models, as well as population and health data.

The tool is a collaboration between Greenpeace, IQAir, and the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air. Despite the high numbers of deaths, coronavirus lockdowns imposed across the world—that took traffic off the streets and shut down polluting industries—did temporarily clear the skies above big cities. Delhi, for instance, underwent a dramatic transformation for a period last year when curbs were imposed, with residents revelling in



**Smoke rising from a chimney at Lafarge Holcim cement factory, in Contes southern France. Serious pollution caused around 160,000 premature deaths in the world's five most populous cities last year, an environmental group said yesterday. — AFP**

azure skies and clean air.

Scientists say that massive drops in some pollutants due to lockdowns are bound to have prevented deaths. Nevertheless, Greenpeace urged governments to put investment in renewable energy at the heart of plans to recover from the pandemic-triggered economic downturn.

"To really clean up our air, governments must stop building new coal plants, retire existing coal plants, and invest in clean energy generation, such as wind and solar," said the group's air pollution scientist Aidan Farrow. — AFP

## US charges North Korean hackers in \$1.3bn theft scheme

**WASHINGTON:** The US Justice Department charged three North Korean military intelligence officials Wednesday in a campaign of cyberattacks to steal \$1.3 billion in crypto and traditional currencies from banks and other targets. The first action against Pyongyang by President Joe Biden's administration took aim at what the department called "a global campaign of criminality" being waged by North Korea.

The department accused the three of a wide-ranging hacking and malware operation to obtain funds for their government while avoiding punishing UN sanctions that have cinched off its sources of income. Over at least seven years, the officials created malicious cryptocurrency applications that opened back doors into targets' computers; hacked into companies marketing and trading digital currencies like bitcoin; and developed a blockchain platform to evade sanctions and secretly raise funds, the department said.

The case filed in federal court in Los Angeles builds on 2018 charges against one of the three, identified as Park Jin Hyok. He was charged with the 2014 hack of Sony pictures, the creation of the notorious WannaCry ransomware, and the 2016 theft of \$81 million from the central bank of Bangladesh.

The new charges added two defendants, Jon Chang Hyok and Kim Il. The allegations said the three worked together in the North Korean military intelligence's hacking-focused Reconnaissance General Bureau, better known within the cybersecurity community as the Lazarus Group, or APT 38. In addition to the earlier charges, the three allegedly operated out of North Korea, Russia and China to hack computers using spearfishing techniques, and to promote cryptocurrency applications loaded with malicious software that allowed them to empty victims' crypto wallets. — AFP

## International

# Misinformation fears after FB blacks out news in Australia

## Credible sources cut off while fake news and conspiracy theories left untouched

**BRISBANE:** Facebook's news blackout in Australia has raised fears misinformation could come to dominate the platform in the country, with fake news and conspiracy theories left untouched while credible sources have been cut off. From yesterday Australians were unable to post links to news articles or view the Facebook pages of local and international news outlets, while Aussie news sources disappeared from the site worldwide. The social media giant was acting in response to tough new regulations that will force it and Google to pay for the news stories shown on their platforms.

"By restricting independent, professionally produced news in Australia, Facebook is allowing the promotion of conspiracy theories, misinformation, fake news and QAnon crackpots on its platform," representative Marcus Strom said. "This irresponsible move by Facebook will encourage the dissemination of fake news, which is particularly dangerous during the COVID pandemic and is a betrayal of its Australian audiences."

A Facebook spokesperson said the company's "commitment to combat misinformation on Facebook has not changed". "We are directing people to authoritative health information and notify them of new updates via our COVID-19 Information Centre," they said, also pointing to its ongoing fact-checking partnerships.

AFP is among the organizations currently working with Facebook's fact-checking program. Facebook pays to use fact checks from around 60 such organizations, including media outlets and specialized fact checkers, on its platform and on Instagram.

The Facebook blackout came just days ahead of Australia's planned vaccine rollout, raising concerns official health messaging could be drowned out by anti-vaxxer voices. "I would say again to Facebook, think again. You may be in it for the money, but the rest of us are in it for safety, protection and responsibility," Health Minister Greg Hunt said. "This is the moment to return to your origins. Where you were meant to be, as a company, focused on community, engagement, not on the money."

Facebook has said it generates hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for Australian media organizations via clicks. Critics hit out at the speed and scope of Facebook's action against Australia after years of what they described as its apparent reluctance to clear the platform of violence, hate speech and misinformation.

"And people wonder why this didn't happen with certain hate groups in other parts of the world, why there wasn't such an attempt to remove that content wholesale," Lucie Krahulcova of Digital Rights Watch told AFP. "Because I think Facebook really lagged and dilly-dallied and failed many social movements as a result."

Facebook was already under fire for not doing enough to curb misinformation and vitriol globally before this latest controversy. Last month, CEO Mark Zuckerberg said the company was seeking to "turn down the temperature" on its sprawling platform by reducing the kind of divisive and inflammatory political talk it has long hosted.

The social network has also set about banning groups that share debunked COVID-19 claims and highlighting health advice from reliable official agencies that remain accessible. But Reset Australia, which aims to counter digital threats to democracy, said the Australian news blackout revealed "just how little the platform cares about stopping misinformation". —AFP

demn the claims. Police said they had arrested the 34-year-old founder of the site at a Kuala Lumpur condominium and he would appear in court. They have launched an investigation under laws aimed at combating prostitution, which is illegal in Malaysia, and misusing the internet. They did not name him but he is believed to be Darren Chan, whose social media profile describes him as the founder and CEO of Sugarbook.

Regulators had warned against using Sugarbook, with local media reporting that it had been blocked, although the site can still be accessed on some internet providers in Malaysia and downloaded as an Android app. After this, Chan released a statement saying he believed "our Malaysian government knows what's best for the people".

But he added the site was taking "measures to ensure the ban does not happen in other countries". Founded in 2016, Sugarbook says it has expanded to countries including Singapore, Thailand and the United States. More than half of Malaysia's 32 million population are Muslims, and they are banned under Islamic law from having sex outside marriage. The multi-ethnic country has a dual-track legal system with Muslims subject to sharia laws in certain areas. — AFP



**KUALA LUMPUR:** Rosmah Mansor (center), wife of Malaysia's former prime minister Najib Razak, leaves the Duta court complex after a hearing in her graft trial in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.— AFP

## Former Malaysia first lady's graft trial to proceed

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The corruption trial of Malaysia's scandal-plagued former first lady will proceed after a judge ruled yesterday that prosecutors had presented sufficient evidence to make a case, boosting efforts to bring her to justice. Rosmah Mansor will now present her defense in the next stage of the case, and told the Kuala Lumpur High Court she will take the stand to testify. Notorious for her overseas shopping trips and vast collection of handbags, she became a lightning rod for public anger as the government of prime minister Najib Razak was engulfed by graft allegations.

Her husband's long-ruling coalition suffered a shock election defeat in 2018 in large part due to claims he and his officials plundered billions of dollars from the IMDB sovereign wealth fund. Both the former leader and his wife were hit with multiple charges over the looting of the investment vehicle, and last year Najib was handed a 12-year jail term after being convicted in a IMDB-linked trial.

Rosmah's first trial does not, however, center on IMDB, but on allegations she received bribes linked to a government project. Prosecutors allege she pocketed 6.5 million ringgit (\$1.6 million) for helping a company secure the project to provide solar power generators to schools on the Malaysian part of Borneo island. The 69-year-old is also accused of soliciting a further 187.5 million ringgit. She faces three counts of corruption in the trial, which began a year ago, and denies all charges against her.

Prosecutors recently wrapped up their case, and judge Mohamed Zaini Mazlan ruled they had "credible evidence to prove every element of the offences" under the three charges.

"I therefore call on the accused to enter her defense," he said. If the judge thought the case was too weak, she would have been acquitted. Defense lawyer Jagjit Singh said Rosmah was "upset and distressed, and we had to comfort her. "The defense team feels saddened. The (judge) has not given the reasons for his decision." The defense stage of the trial will begin in June. Najib, who is free on bail as he appeals his conviction, turned up at court to show support for his wife. The couple's lavish lifestyles came to symbolize the perceived rot in Malaysia's ruling elite. Following the 2018 election, police discovered valuables-including cash, jewelry and luxury handbags-worth up to \$273 million in properties linked to them. — AFP



**MENLO PARK:** This file photo shows a Facebook employee walking past a sign displaying the "like" sign at Facebook's corporate headquarters campus in Menlo Park, California. Facebook was branded "arrogant" and "unconscionable" for banning Australian users from sharing news yesterday.— AFP

The shock move sparked an angry backlash. Several critical government agencies—tasked with issuing emergency COVID-19, bush-fire, flood and cyclone advice—were initially caught up in the news ban before Facebook began restoring them. An assortment of other Australian pages were also rendered blank, including cancer and homelessness charities, major businesses and even popular satire accounts. But unaffected by the blackout were a series of pages owned by purveyors of fake news and conspiracy theories—despite their frequently posting about current events.

Among them were several pages identified by AFP's fact-checking team as sharing false claims that circulate to tens of thousands of users. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance said the professional journalists it represents acted as a check on the spread of misinformation before their work was barred from Facebook feeds.

## Malaysian police arrest boss of 'sugar daddy' website

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Malaysian police have arrested the founder of a controversial "sugar daddy" dating website under anti-prostitution laws after it boasted thousands of young students were using the service, officials said yesterday.

Sugarbook bills itself as a site "where romance meets finance" and aims to link up older men with younger women, with the men expected to provide financial support for their companions.

But it sparked an uproar last week after releasing statistics purportedly showing thousands of students were using it to make money in the socially conservative country, leading one university to con-

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A French bulldog named Magnolia wears a Chanel pouch outside Spring Studios during New York Fashion Week: The Shows (NYFW) in New York City. — AFP

*Market for edible flowers  
blossoms in Tunisia*

See Page 21

# HAIRCUTS ON ICE IN LATVIA TO PROTEST COVID BAN

**H**airdressers in Latvia are taking the unusual step of offering their services in snowy forests or on frozen lakes as they protest against COVID restrictions. “We cannot work otherwise,” hairdresser Diana Silina told AFP as she prepared her equipment on the icy surface of a lake outside the capital Riga. Hairdressing and spa salons have been closed in Latvia since December 21 and outdoor contacts are limited to a maximum two people—so hairdressers are only taking one client at a time. “We don’t know whether even this way is fully legal, but we must try, otherwise we have no income at all,” Silina said.

The hairdresser said her boyfriend was supporting her financially and did not want her to risk a 500-euro (\$600) fine. A supporter of the initiative, Riga city councilor Ieva Brante, has also posted a video of herself having her hair done in the middle of a forest where she said there would be no police patrols. “Being a lawyer, I support people finding legal ways around regulations, if that allows them to work and earn their living,” she said on Facebook.

Brante’s hairdresser Zane Melnace was quoted by Polish media as saying that she was calling the sessions “outdoor training” to circumvent the rules. “I want to work! Officially! And now! Not in three weeks, two months or maybe another half a year! I can’t wait any longer, because the monthly payments for the apartment and the loan have to be made now,” she said. Brante told AFP that after posting the video she was contacted by the police but had not received a fine.

During a government meeting, Health Minister Daniels Pavluts also reportedly signaled his tacit support for the initiative, saying: “Getting your hair done in the forest is absolutely OK!” But two professional associations representing beauticians and hairdressers are threatening to sue the government in the Constitutional



**A hairdresser cuts hair on the frozen lake Babelitis while a winter swimmer enjoy swimming in an ice hole, in Riga, Latvia. —AFP photos**

Court if their work is not allowed to resume in some form. “The decision to ban our services was taken without consulting us and without statistics which would show that hairdressing spreads COVID-19,” the associations’ leaders Sabine Ulberte and Renate Reinsone wrote in a statement.

Their move follows a similar lawsuit launched by the Book Publishers Association which led to the reopening of bookshops in



Latvia earlier this week, after no proof was found to link in-person visits to bookshops with coronavirus infections. Parliament will hold a special session on the issue after 10,000 signatures were collected for a petition to allow hairdressers and other beauty professionals to resume work. —AFP

## New York designer Minkoff mixes in-person show with ‘extended reality’

**R**ebecca Minkoff is one of few designers to present her collection at New York’s Fashion Week in person—but she’s also betting on the power of streaming, using innovative technology to immerse online viewers in her work. Just like at last fall’s edition of Fashion Week, this spring’s collections will be presented almost exclusively online due to the Covid-19 pandemic—and many of the major designers have opted out altogether. The exceptions include Jason Wu, who held a show for 25 people on Sunday, and Minkoff, who invited 100 people to a studio in Soho to view her latest collection on Tuesday with mask-wearing and social distancing required.

Thousands more watched on Instagram and Tik Tok, and on Thursday her show will be available on Fashion Week’s official website. The New York designer will also present the collection on Yahoo on Wednesday, using extended reality technology to offer a 360-degree show in collaboration with Yahoo Ryot Lab and Verizon Media’s 5G content studio.

Using a cell phone, viewers will be able to focus in on pieces from all angles to get a sense of the details—an option rarely available even from a show’s coveted front-row seats. “Immersive content really helps to contextualize a collection and allows the consumer to get up close with the designer and the garments without stepping into a store,” Minkoff told the trade outlet Women’s Wear Daily. But many people hold that nothing can replace seeing a collection in person.

“It’s a lot more exciting in person—you can feel the atmosphere and you can see the fabrics better, there’s music. At home, in YouTube, it doesn’t have the same vibe,” Russian model and blogger Karina Bik told AFP after the show, which featured leather shorts and summery maxi dresses in animal prints, and of course matching



masks. Esther Santer, a 30-year-old fashion blogger, told AFP the experience is “100 percent different” online: “You lose the energy, the magic of it all and the social experience.”

“At the end of the day there’s nothing like seeing how a garment moves, how it’s styled, how it looks like in person,” Santer said, praising Minkoff for putting on a live show. “It was great to get out and take a taste of Fashion Week because I know we all miss it.”—AFP



**Models pose during the Rebecca Minkoff Spring 2021 presentation at Spring Studios during New York Fashion Week: The Shows (NYFW) in New York City. —AFP photos**



# Market for edible flowers blossoms in Tunisia



Sonia Ibidhi, tastes some petals in the greenhouse of her small farm where she produces edible flowers, in the northwestern Tunisian coastal town of Tabarka. —AFP photos



Sonia Ibidhi walks among rows of plants at her small farm.



Sonia Ibidhi poses with pots of nasturtiums in the greenhouse of her small farm where she produces edible flowers.

**A** Tunisian entrepreneur growing edible flowers says she is surprised by the appetite for her homegrown product in the North African country and hopes to see a “new culinary culture” bloom. Sonia Ibidhi, a 42-year-old journalist, turned to organic farming of the niche but in-demand product “out of love” for working on the land. Among the flowers she grows are borage, a blue star-shaped flower that tastes like cucumber, chive flowers—purple blossoms with a flavor similar to onion—and nasturtiums, bright yellow to orange flowers with a radish-like taste.

“I thought the flowers would be for export and of no immediate interest to the local market, but I’ve been surprised by the growing demand, in particular from some top-end hotels,”

she said. After bringing back 42 seed varieties from France, Ibidhi began planting around a dozen types of flowers. She said she chose the mountainous Tabarka region in the country’s northwest for its humid climate and abundant fresh water, and now uses her own seeds. “I do something that I love, that is beautiful and colorful,” she said proudly. She said she hoped her flowers would spark “a new culinary culture in the country”. Tunisians already use certain flowers in their traditional cuisine—some sweets feature dried rose petals, while lavender is an ingredient in a spice mix used in couscous recipes. But fresh flowers, which can be used for dishes from soups to salads as well as teas, are a novelty.

In a luxury hotel in Gammarth, an upscale

northern suburb of the capital Tunis, chef Bassem Bizid uses nasturtiums for his fish tartar and accompanies other dishes with a flower-leaf salad or a sorbet garnished with fresh violets. Clients are “very satisfied to discover something new”, he said. The hotel’s master chef, Italian Alessandro Fontanesi, said that during the novel coronavirus pandemic, the flowers went beyond introducing a new look and flavor.

“Not only are we using a rare Tunisian product, which makes the plate more attractive and adds a special taste, but it can take our clients on a culinary journey,” he said. Ibidhi launched her business in 2019, after four years of planning. As well as needing to do an “enormous” amount of paperwork, she said she had

to repeatedly explain to the forestry department “what edible flowers were for”.

She sold her car to help finance the business, and later received a grant from the African Development Bank, she said. She now pays the state 1,400 dinars (around \$520) annually to lease five hectares (12 acres) of land. But Ibidhi now fears seeing her business wither. As well as edible flowers, she has planted a large quantity of strawberries, selling both the fruit and the leaves, which can be used for herbal teas. But the authorities say growing strawberries is in breach of her lease agreement. Ibidhi said she risked a large financial loss were she to uproot them. “My flowers have become my world,” she said. “I will fight tooth and nail for my project. —AFP

## Abbey Road among London street signs on sale at auction

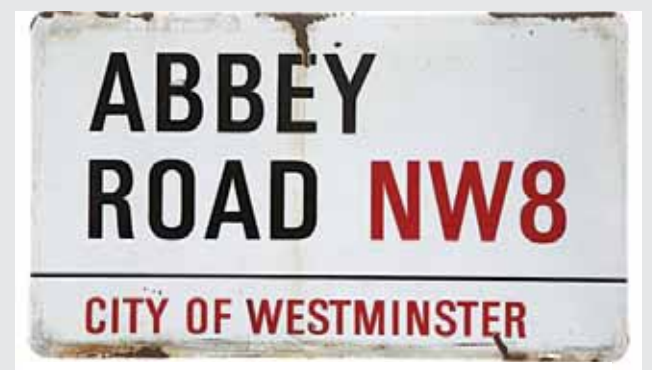
**A**nglophiles, collectors and Beatles fans began a bidding battle Wednesday as a bevy of original London street signs, including one of the iconic Abbey Road, went on sale at auction. The world-famous street, home to the studios where The Beatles recorded most of their albums, is the stand-out lot in the collection of around 270 used signs being offered at the two-week online sale. Abbey Road itself featured on the cover of the “Fab Four” album of the same name and the sign could fetch more than £5,000 (\$6,930, 5,750 euros), according to auctioneer Catherine Southon, who is handling the offering.

“Who knows? The sky’s the limit,” she told AFP, describing it as “the real king of the road signs”. Bidding for the unique piece of signage reached £1,110 within hours of the auction getting under way. Other notable names going under the virtual hammer include Prince’s Gate, which overlooks Hyde Park in the upmarket Knightsbridge district, and Savoy Place near the River Thames in the West End. Pimlico Road in the SW1 postcode—a key destination for antiques dealers and interior designers—Westbourne Park Road on the Notting Hill Carnival

route and Belgrave Place in swanky Belgravia are also expected to prove popular.

Westminster City Council, responsible for local governance in most of central London, is selling the collection, pledging to invest the money raised “back into services for people in our city”. The signs’ iconic design, which features the street name in black and the corresponding postcode in red, was created by architect and designer Misha Black in 1967 for the council. It cannot be used anywhere else in the world under copyright law. “This collection offers a unique opportunity to own part of our city’s history,” deputy leader Melvyn Caplan said in a statement announcing the sale last month.

“These are original signs which have been on the streets of London in recent years—through historic moments and cultural milestones.” He noted a small number of signs have typographical errors, while some others also feature graffiti marking moments of cultural and political significance. Some lots have starting prices as low as £30, but Southon said interest in the overall collection has been “astronomical”, suggesting that bidding could be brisk and prices could climb considerably



over the 14-day sale. “People have been buying into this whole idea of buying a street sign and putting it up in their home for a bit of nostalgia,” she added. “It’s just iconic, this wonderful black and red, which is just something that we associate with London. “At times like this, when a lot of us are staying outside of London and not commuting in, you forget the sights, the sounds, the smells of the city, and it’s just wonderful to have something like this to remind us.” —AFP



A group of observers who take part in the national condor census, point at a map of the Purace National Natural Park before starting the observation and counting the Andean condors.



An Andean condor is seen at the Purace National Natural Park.



An Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*) flies at the Purace National Natural Park in Purace, Colombia. — AFP photos

# Scientists and indigenous people unite to save **Colombian condor**

Rosendo Quira silently shakes a medicinal plant to attract a condor to the bait. The bird of prey glides through the clouds over Colombia towards a mountain pass some 3,200 meters above the sea. As this scene plays out, a hidden camera clicks into gear to record the ritual. Amongst a group of some 300 volunteers, many of them indigenous people like Quira, the 52-year-old stands out for his ancestral knowledge. The volunteers deployed last weekend at 100 sites around Colombia to con-

duct the first-ever census of the bird that is emblematic of the Andes mountain range.

Quira, a traditional doctor in the Purace indigenous reserve, leaves a piece of meat on a rock and uses a sprig of sage to drizzle it with a herbal infusion. In his other hand he holds a stick, while his backpack is filled with medicinal plants. Shortly after, a bird spanning three meters from wingtip to wingtip appears through the clouds covering the clearing and swoops down to feast on the offering. The Kokonukos indigenous peo-

ple consider both the condor and the rock where it perches to be sacred. The volunteers are helping biologists count the condors, one of the largest birds of prey in the world, to help the species survive.

Experts believe there are just 130 condors in the Colombian Andes, where the animal is critically endangered according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature. On a global scale, the condor's existence is close to being threatened. "We need to know how many there are in the country and what state they're in," biologist Adriana Collazos, who installed the hidden camera, told AFP. The census is the initiative of a number of NGOs, including the National Natural Parks of Colombia and the Neotropical Foundation.

## The 'sun's messenger'

There has never before been a census of Colombia's condors. Indigenous people from Purace in the country's southwest say there is at least one pair of these monogamous birds living in their territory, but some claim to have spotted another solitary female. The biologists hope their cameras will solve the mystery. "If it approaches it's because we're spiritually well, if it doesn't approach, it's because we're failing," said Quira after his close encounter with the condor.

For his community, the condor is "the sun's messenger"—it can warn about pending threats or predict climate change. Quira says a condor once came to him in a dream with recipes for



An Andean condor is seen at the Purace National Natural Park.

healing the sick. The condor can be found throughout the Andes, from Venezuela in the north down to the far south of Chile and Argentina. The expansion of agriculture and animal husbandry into high mountain territories where the condor lives are the main threats to its conservation. And females lay only one egg every two to three years.

In 2018, a condor couple were found poisoned in the center of the country. Conservationists managed to save them and return them to the wild a few months later. But farmers often use poison to protect their animals from attacks. Although condors, which can weigh between nine and 15 kilograms, are scavengers, they have



A group of observers take part in the national Andean condor census, at the Purace National Natural Park.



An indigenous man walks by a mural depicting an Andean condor in Purace.



An indigenous man sits next to an Andean condor at the Purace National Natural Park.

been known to attack live animals on occasion.

**Potential 'fatal loss'**

"Knowing the populations of species is the starting point to propose conservation strategies," said Fausto Saenz, scientific director at the Neotropical Foundation. Saenz is hoping to get the first census results in three weeks' time. The census will allow future repopulation efforts to maintain a balance between males and females. Almost half of the condors in Colombia were reared in captivity and released in the Andes as part of these initiatives.

Although the indigenous people of Purace believe the hidden cameras bother the sacred bird, they're working with the biologists out of a desire to help the condor survive. "Not having that symbol would be a fatal loss to our reserve," said Javier Jojoa, the acting governor of the Purace reserve. —AFP



An Andean condor is seen at the Purace National Natural Park.



An Andean condor flies at the Purace National Natural Park.



Indigenous traditional doctor Rosendo Quira performs an harmonization ritual before meeting Andean condors.



An Andean condor flies at the Purace National Natural Park.



Aerial view of the Purace National Park in Purace.

## BACK TO THE SOIL AS COVID ROBS CUBAN TOWN OF ITS BREAD AND BUTTER

**A** year ago, Carlos Millo was renting out rooms to foreigners in the picturesque town of Vinales, a popular tourist getaway in rural Cuba. Now, Millo and other townsfolk have had to return to an age-old means of survival, growing their own food as the coronavirus pandemic has robbed them of holidaymakers. “We have had to return to the land,” he told AFP while dusting soil from the chard plants he has started to grow in a 50-square-meter (538-square-foot) garden behind his house.

Until the global health crisis, tourism directly and indirectly provided an income for about 80 percent of the 28,000-odd residents of the town nestled in a fertile valley surrounded by dramatic limestone outcrops known as “mogotes.” Just a decade ago, Vinales’s economy was an agrarian one based largely on tobacco farming. But as communist-governed Cuba’s economy opened up, the tourist dollars started flooding in, and people like Millo turned their attention away from farming to the services industry. But as suddenly as it arrived, the new-found prosperity was cut short by the pandemic. And today, the porches of the town’s famously multi-colored wooden

Eduardo Hernandez, owner of a private restaurant and a tobacco cultivator, works in his land in Vinales, Cuba. — AFP photos



Yusmani Garcia, a blacksmith and tour guide, makes a horseshoe at his house in Vinales, Cuba.

Yusmani Garcia, a blacksmith and tour guide, puts a horseshoe on a horse at his house in Vinales.





**Eduardo Hernandez, owner of a private restaurant and a tobacco cultivator, smokes a cigar in his house in Vinales.**



**Eduardo Hernandez, owner of a private restaurant and a tobacco cultivator, works in his land in Vinales.**



**Yusmani Garcia, a blacksmith and tour guide, works as a blacksmith in Vinales, Cuba.**

homes-many turned into guesthouses, restaurants, cafes and shops-are heart-breakingly empty.

"They said things would go back to normal in six months, but it's still going on. We're heading for one year," said Millo, who before Covid-19 rented out two rooms in the house he shares with his wife and daughter. "We are in decline, we are without work," he said, walking through his rows of tomatoes, beans and other legumes. Tourism "helped the families a lot," said Millo, who cannot wait to return to being a guesthouse host.

#### Heritage town

The Vinales Valley from which the town

takes its name was declared a heritage site in 1999 by UNESCO, which describes it as "an outstanding karst landscape in which traditional methods of agriculture (notably tobacco growing) have survived unchanged for several centuries." The region also preserves a rich vernacular tradition in its architecture, crafts, and music, according to the UN's cultural organization. These attributes proved popular with tourists.

Vinales first turned to tourism after Cuba's partial economic liberalization in 2011 allowed for small business licenses, and benefited from the tourist boom that followed the warming of ties between Havana

and the United States a few years later. Tourism is the economic mainstay of the island, raking in some \$2.6 billion in 2019. The townsfolk of Vinales have bitter memories of March 2020, when the last tourists left en masse as borders were rapidly shuttered due to the fast spread of the deadly virus.

#### 'A difficult change'

"There was a time when there were not enough rooms and tourists had to sleep on the town square," recalls Millo of Vinales's early days as a destination for globetrotters. But the tide started turning even before Covid-19, with US sanctions and other

restrictions tightened under the presidency of Donald Trump. This, in combination with the pandemic shockwave, saw tourist numbers to the island dropping from 4.3 million in 2019 to 1.1 million in 2020. Cuba itself is one of the countries least affected virus in Latin America, with some 47,000 recorded infections and 277 deaths.

But it has not been spared the after-effects. Until last year, Yusmani Garcia made a tidy 500 pesos (about \$21) per trip with his horse-drawn cart to show tourists the breathtaking views at the heart of the valley. At the time, the minimum wage for a Cuban was \$36 per month. He had built his own cart with throw-away pipes and other construction materials. Its wheels sport old pot lids for hubcaps.

But today the improvised vehicle is stored in a garage, and Garcia-a 45-year-old father of two-has taken to making horse shoes. "It has been a difficult change, not many people want to do this job," he said while removing a piece of red-hot metal from a furnace with a pair of tongs. He bent the softened metal and hammered it into a horseshoe shape. He sells two pairs for 50 pesos.

#### Tobacco tourism

Eduardo Hernandez, 52, runs the Paco-Concha tobacco farm that has been in his family since 1888, and also became a hot tourist attraction. Since the foreign income dried up, the family now grows its own food, and Hernandez says his workers have what they need to survive: rice, maize, beans, pigs and sheep. He has, however, had to let some of the employees go.

For Hernandez's sister, Rosita, the change has meant the shuttering of her restaurant, where visitors used to see out the day with food and music in the lush, green setting. At one time, "we had 106 tourists together from different" countries, she sighed while folding red tablecloths. "It was all we had. But without tourism, there is no more money coming in."— AFP



**Carlos Millo, owner of a lodging for tourists, works on his plot of land in Vinales, Cuba.**

## Lifestyle | Music &amp; Movies

# Soviet star and New Year's icon **Andrei Myagkov** dies at 82

**A**ndrei Myagkov, a Russian actor whose box office hits including New Year's Eve favorite "The Irony of Fate" became iconic across the Soviet Union, has died in Moscow aged 82. Myagkov starred in some of the biggest classics of Soviet cinema and "The Irony of Fate" — a 1976 romantic comedy — continues to be watched across Russia and the countries of the ex-Soviet Union on every New Year's Eve. The press service of the Moscow Art Theatre (MKhAT), where Myagkov worked for decades, said that the "great artist who was loved by the people" passed away in the early hours of yesterday morning.

The statement did not specify the cause of death. Myagkov was born in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) in

1938, as a child surviving the prolonged siege of the city during World War II. At the start of his acting career Myagkov joined the troupe of the free-thinking Sovremennik Theatre in Moscow that was founded by young actors in the years of the "thaw" following the death of Joseph Stalin. In 1977, Myagkov moved to MKhAT, the country's best-known drama theatre, where he worked as an actor for many years, later becoming a teacher and director there. However, it was Myagkov's roles in cinema that truly gained him popularity in the USSR.

He collaborated with renowned director Eldar Ryazanov for a number of films including "The Irony of Fate", where Myagkov plays a Moscow surgeon who after drinking with friends on New Year's Eve is put on a plane to Leningrad and arrives thinking he is still in the capital. The movie — which gently skewered Soviet-era planning by suggesting every city looked the same — has become a cultural phenomenon and is still traditionally watched by millions of Russians during the winter holidays.

Myagkov was also among the star-studded cast of "Office Romance" (1977), portraying a statistics bureau worker who plans to secure a promotion by seducing his boss, played by another Soviet film star Alisa Freindlich. In a career spanning several decades, Myagkov played more than 50 roles on screen and on stage. MKhAT said that in recent years Myagkov and his actress wife Anastasia Voznesenkaya did not appear on stage and "lived in solitude, devoting themselves to each other". Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov yesterday told journalists that the president expressed his "deep condolences" over the actor's death. —AFP



Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with actor Andrei Myagkov during an awards ceremony at the Kremlin in Moscow. — AFP

## Kim wants Kanye to 'play a huge role' in kids' life

**K**im Kardashian West wants Kanye West to continue "playing a huge role" in their children's lives. The "Keeping Up With The Kardashians" star is splitting from the rapper but she is as keen as he is that he stays involved in the kids' - North, seven, Saint, five, Chicago, three, and Psalm, 21 months - life. A source said: "He still wants to play a huge role in their lives and Kim would never discourage that ... He is no longer living at the house with Kim and the kids. When he sees the kids, he meets them elsewhere." And the 40-year-old television personality and the 43-year-old rapper are in no rush to officially end their marriage as they are effectively split from each other now anyway.

The insider added to E! News of the couple's impending break up: "Kim already feels like she is divorced. They are at a standstill currently and neither of them are pushing [to make the split official]. At this point in time, there is no rush for the paperwork to be finalized." Meanwhile, it was previously revealed that Kanye is "less than thrilled" that his divorce from Kim will be broadcasted on the family's E! reality show as it plays out.

A source shared: "He is less than thrilled. She will continue to focus on her business empire. Kim has been in individual counseling and is at peace with where her life is headed." Kim and Kanye had been in marriage counseling as they "tried to work through things". An insider added of their counseling sessions: "Divorce has been discussed, but Kim wants more than anything for their relationship to work. There wasn't anything specific that happened that led them to this point ... They are 100 percent aligned when it comes to the kids." However, another insider insisted at the time that the couple were just dealing with "regular issues". They added of the couple's struggles: "It's just regular relationship issues. There is no one else involved. Divorce talks have been on and off with them since the spring." — Bang Showbiz



Kanye West and Kim Kardashian West



In this file photo singer Nicki Minaj performs onstage at the 2011 American Music Awards held at Nokia Theatre L.A. LIVE. — AFP

## Driver arrested for allegedly killing Minaj's father in hit-and-run

**A** driver accused of striking and killing US rapper Nicki Minaj's father in a hit-and-run has been arrested, police said Wednesday. Charles Plevich, 70, was charged with 'Leaving the Scene of an Accident with a Fatality and Tampering with Evidence,' New York state's Nassau County Police said on Twitter. Plevich, who pleaded not guilty, was released on a \$250,000 bond, his lawyer Michael Scotto told CNN.

Minaj's 64-year-old father Robert Maraj was walking down the street in the municipality of Mineola on Long Island on Friday when he was struck by a car. The driver fled the scene and Maraj was taken to the hospital where he died Saturday. Minaj, who was born in Trinidad and Tobago but raised in a Queens neighborhood not far from where her father was struck, has not yet issued an official statement. — AFP



## Barrymore didn't feel confident with her hairstyle

**D**rew Barrymore didn't feel "very confident" with her hairstyle at the 1998 Oscars. The 45-year-old actress has admitted at the time she was insecure about her short choppy tresses with daisies, but now she looks back at the snaps taken at the prestigious awards ceremony and loves her whole look, which was complete with a "ton of body glitter", a brick red lip and a little black dress. She admitted: "I didn't feel very confident with this haircut, but now looking back on it, I love it. This was before there was so much scrutiny about everybody's hair, make-up, and wardrobe, and I thought that I should wear what I wore in normal life to the Academy Awards. So I picked up some Marguerite daisies from the bodega and put on a ton of body glitter. I'm also a huge fan of a brick red lip because it really warms up your face. I can only imagine what people would have said about this look today." Elsewhere, Drew revealed she "fought really hard" for Cinderella to be brunette in 'Ever After: A Cinderella Story'. — Bang Showbiz



In this file photo US actress Demi Moore presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones for the Fendi's Spring-Summer 2021 collection during the Paris Haute Couture Fashion Week, in Paris.



In this file photo actor Rami Malek attends Tribeca Talks - A Farewell To "Mr. Robot" at Spring Studios in New York City.



In this file photo US media personality Kim Kardashian West attends the WSJ Magazine 2019 Innovator Awards at MOMA in New York City.

# Celebrities turn to podcasts to hang on to fans during pandemic

**C**ooped up like many of us, movie stars, politicians and reality show types eager to hold onto their fans are turning to podcasts to get through the pandemic, converting their homes—even a bathroom in one case—into makeshift recording studios. There is something out there for everyone: While Demi Moore, with her trademark raspy voice, headlines an erotic podcast called "Dirty Diana," Jamie Lee Curtis and Matthew McConaughey read stories for kids.

Former first lady Michelle Obama talks about personal issues in a podcast called simply "The Michelle Obama Podcast," while actors Jason Bateman, Sean Hayes and Will Arnett interview other celebrities on one called "SmartLess." Donald Trump's former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, has been waging a crusade against him since September in a podcast called "Mea Culpa." Prince Harry and Meghan Markle have one, too. The first episode featured contributions from prominent people talking about how they are coping with the pandemic and what they are learning from it.

Reality show stars are also in on the craze. Paris Hilton is scheduled to launch a podcast at the end of February through radio giant iHeartMedia late this month and Kim Kardashian signed a deal this summer with Spotify to develop a show on criminal justice reform, a cause in which she has been active. While podcasts with stars are nothing new, their sudden abundance is a natural consequence of the Covid-19 crisis, said Nicholas Quah, creator of a blog called Hot Pod. With Hollywood largely shut down because of the pandemic "so many of these celebrities are unable to get television or film productions going," he said "This is an opportunity for these people to still reach fans and reach people."

## No need for a set or wardrobe

Many are drawn by the flexibility of podcasts because there is no need for a set or camera or special wardrobe, and doing them is safe Covid-wise. For the sexy podcast "Dirty Diana," co-produced by media and podcast company startup QCODE, the actors recorded themselves at home, the company's co-founder Rob Herting told AFP. For the best sound, he said, "they had to find a great room in their house. And for Demi it was the bathroom. It ended up being a lot of fun and we certainly have had other actors recording in closets, or whatever has the best acoustics."

What is more, podcasts can be made relatively quickly and cheaply. "Dirty Diana," for instance, was recorded in May and released in July, whereas once a movie is shot it can

take a couple of years for it to come out. The average budget for a QCODE podcast, some of which feature Oscar-winning actors such as Rami Malek, is in the low to mid six-figures, while even a low budget movie needs maybe a million dollars, said Herting. Revenue from the podcast industry is still far smaller than that of movies, TV or music, even if podcasts are all the rage now. Ad revenue from podcasts should rise by 15 percent in 2020 once figures are in and approach a billion dollars, said a study published in July by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

"This is now a space that some entertainment industry people see as a worthwhile investment. And that was not necessarily a 100 percent the case previously," said Quah. "It's bad in the sense that a lot of the advertiser money which would have been going to

people who were in the space for the long term ends up going to them first," he said, referring to the celebrities.

## Staying in the limelight

"I think most celebrities that come in, they would probably think that it's an extension of their brand," said Quah. "It's just for the celebrity to stay in your attention, whether they're going to sell you a book or not, as long as they still have your attention," he added. However, podcast studios like projects with stars because their fans guarantee an audience and these shows offer the possibility of being adapted to film or TV. Amazon, for instance, is getting ready to turn "Dirty Diana" into a TV series starring Moore.

But will the podcast boom last after pandemic lifestyles end and stars go back to making movies and such? Yes, says Herting. "The time commitment for an actor is just so low," said this boss of QCODE, which plans to launch more than a dozen star-studded podcasts in the coming year. But Colin Anderson of Stitcher, which produces a comedy podcast featuring the actor Rob Lowe, warns of the risk of saturation of "just famous people talking to other famous people." "Celebrities are going to have to be more creative with the podcasts they launch and give people a more compelling reason than just their celebrity to subscribe," said Anderson.— AFP



In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex (right) and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex leave after attending a Commonwealth Day Service at Westminster Abbey in central London. — AFP photos

Kids Page

Word Search

**Famous Authors**

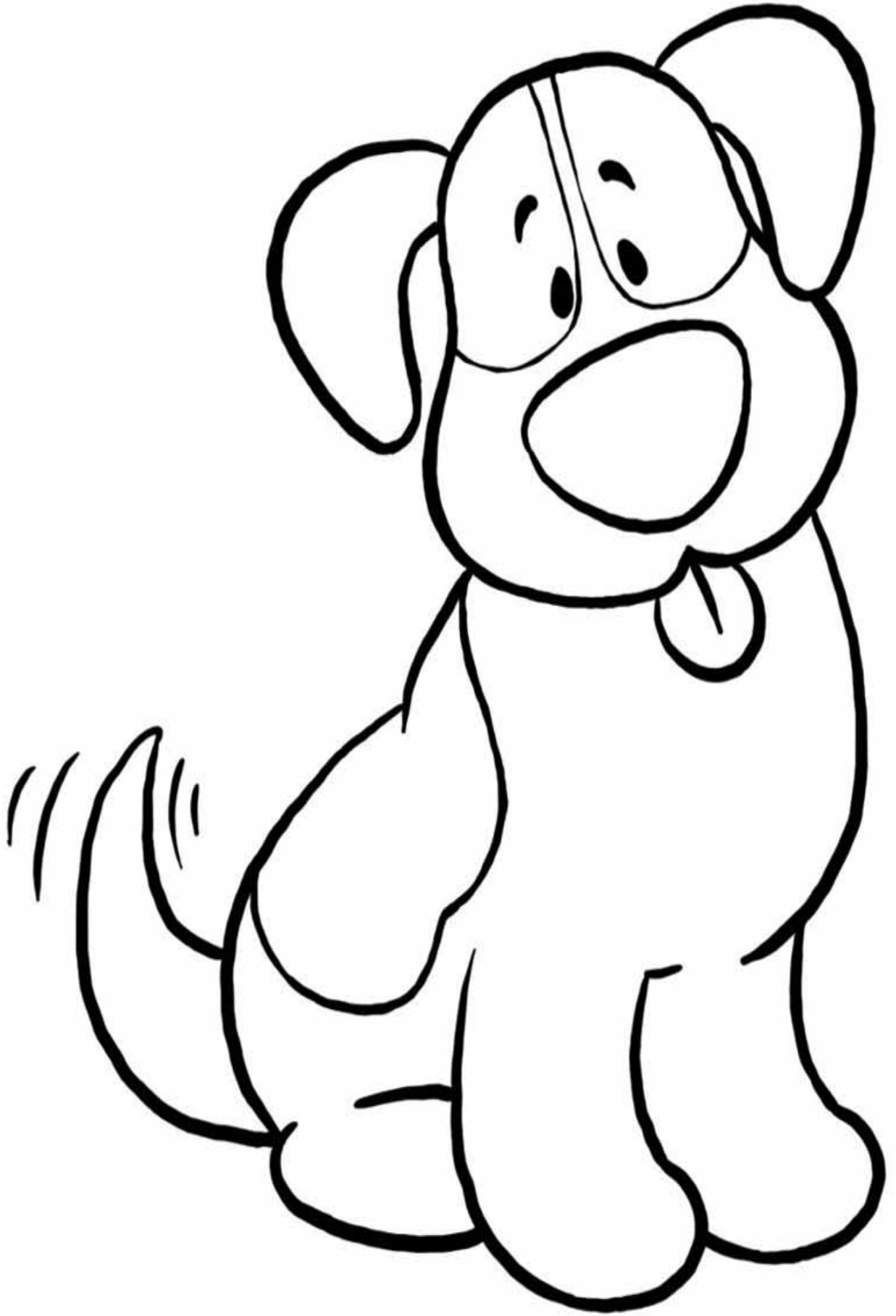
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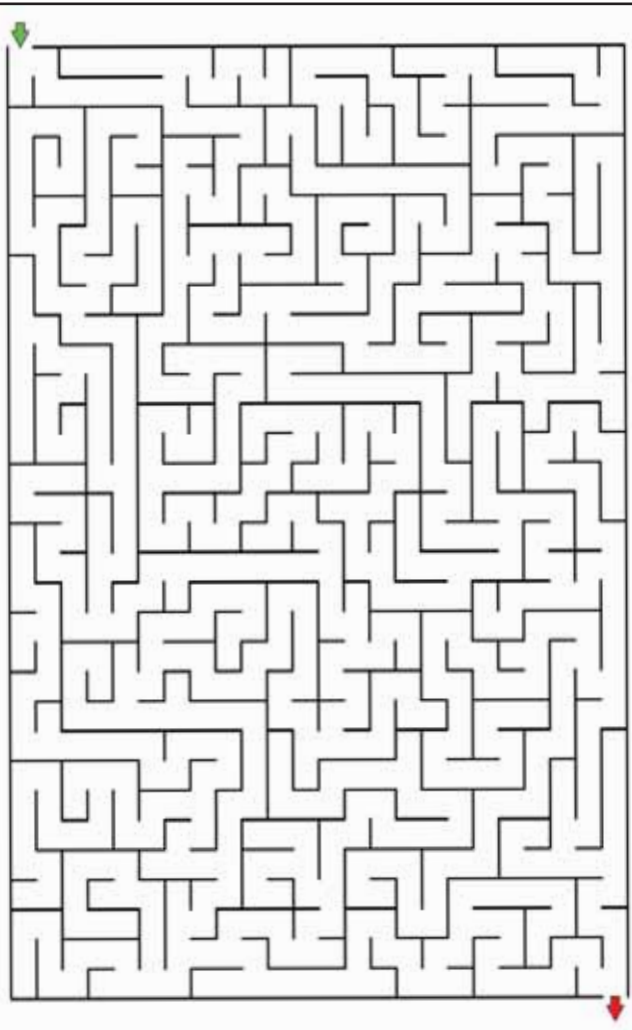
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| HEMINGWAY, Ernest    | SHAW, George Bernard |                 |
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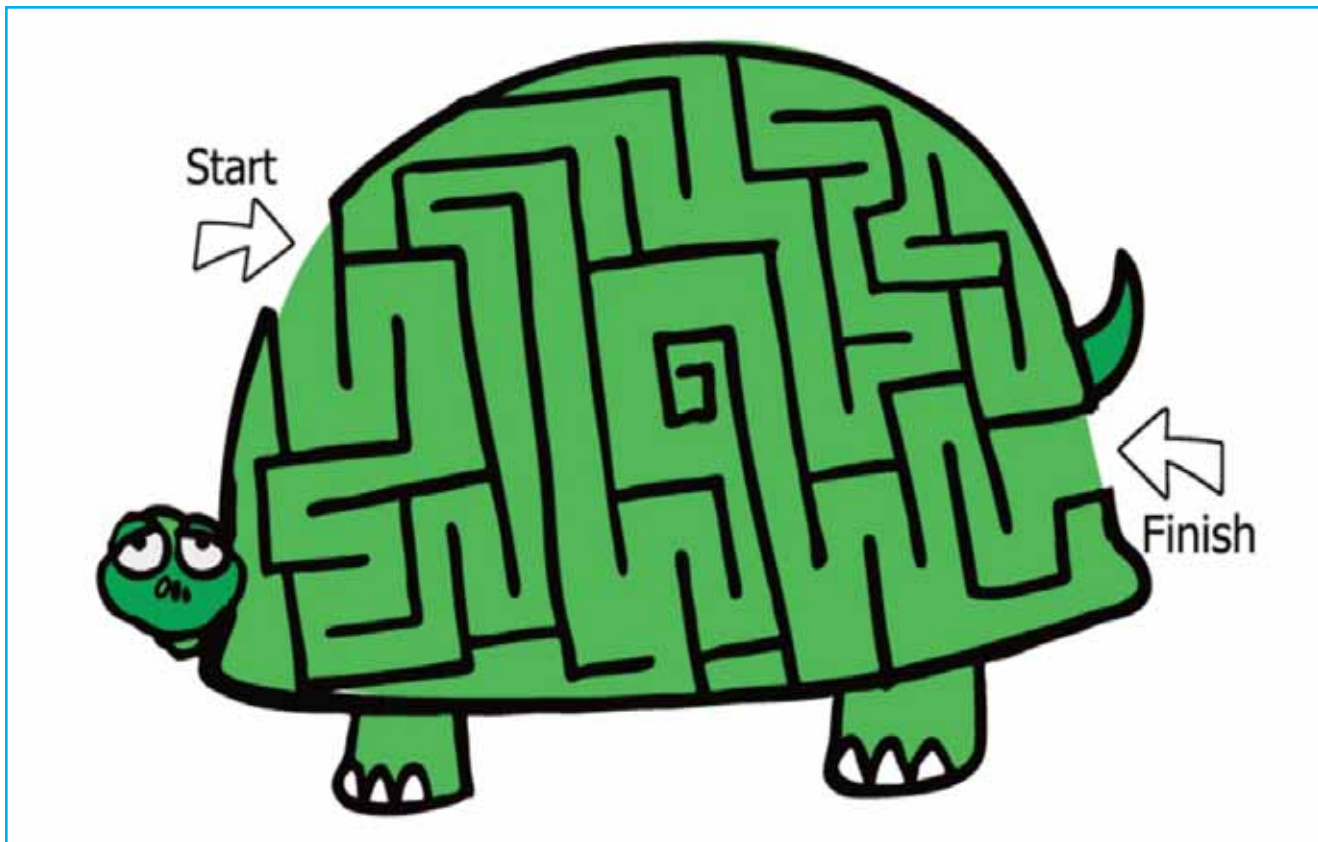
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# Raoni on 'final mission' to save Amazon lands

**RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil:** One of the most iconic defenders of the Amazon rainforest, 91-year-old indigenous chief Raoni Metuktire, is launching a worldwide appeal for help with his "final mission": gaining protected status for his people's ancestral lands.

Raoni, a chief of the Kayapo people in north-central Brazil, is making the appeal as part of a live webcast called "Protecting the Amazon," organized by several environmental groups to pressure President Jair Bolsonaro's government to better protect the world's biggest rainforest. "I'm overwhelmed with sadness when I see how our lands are being destroyed more each day,"

Raoni said in a video pre-recorded for the event and shared with AFP.

"I want (the government) to officially demarcate the Kapot-Nhinore indigenous reserve. It's my final mission. I'm very old, but I have to do this," said the chief, who is known for his colorful feather headdresses and the large disc inserted in his lower lip. Raoni, who survived a bout with Covid-19 last year, was born in the Kapot-Nhinore territory, a once-isolated strip of rainforest that is today encroached upon by illegal farming and ranching.

Environmentalists say one of the best ways to protect such areas is to demarcate them as

indigenous reserves, officially protecting the land and its tribes. However, the demarcation process is threatened under Bolsonaro, a far-right climate-change skeptic who is pushing to open protected lands to mining and agribusiness.

Raoni and another top indigenous leader, Chief Almir Narayamoga Surui, last month asked the International Criminal Court to investigate Bolsonaro for crimes against humanity, accusing him of unprecedented environmental damage, killings and persecution in the Amazon. Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has surged since Bolsonaro took office in 2019,

destroying an area larger than Jamaica last year.

"We have an absolute state of emergency in the Amazon today, because Bolsonaro is blowing up every single measure to protect the rainforest and indigenous lands," said Gert-Peter Bruch, an organizer of yesterday's webcast and the founder of environmental group Planet Amazon. Thursday's event will feature a slate of prominent environmentalists, including primatologist Jane Goodall, Sea Shepherd founder Paul Watson, Princess Marie-Esmeralda of Belgium and young Belgian climate activists Adelaide Charlier and Anuna de Wever. — AFP

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Rawda	22517733
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**BY NIGHT:** Rather cold with light to moderate north westerly wind with speed of 08 - 30 km/h with a chance for light fog forming over some areas.

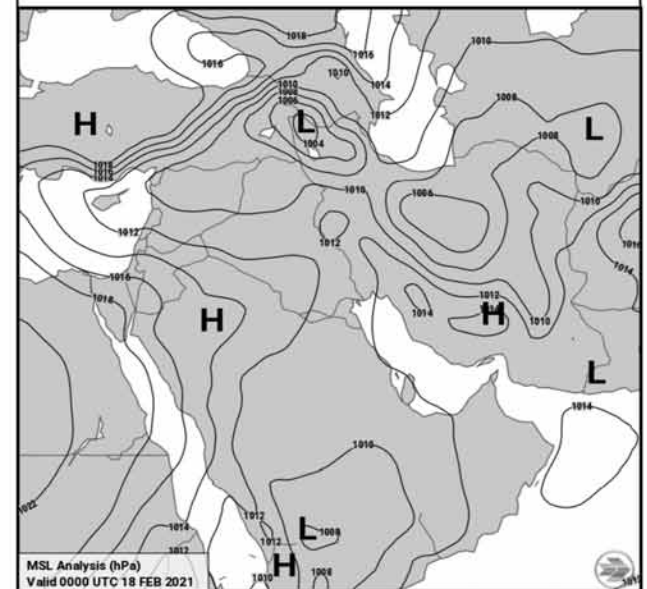
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No Current Warnings

STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	22 °C	15 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	21 °C	15 °C
ABDALY	18 °C	14 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	20 °C	15 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C
SALMIYAH	22 °C	16 °C
AHMADI	21 °C	17 °C
NUWAISIB	23 °C	16 °C
WAFRA	19 °C	15 °C
SALMY	18 °C	12 °C

### SFC. CHART

18/02/2021 0000 UTC



### 4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	02/19	Rather cold	18 °C	09 °C	VRB-NW	08 - 28 km/h
Saturday	02/20	Fair and Clouds will increase gradually	20 °C	09 °C	VRB-SE	06 - 28 km/h
Sunday	02/21	Fair and Partly cloudy with a chance for scattered rain later on	20 °C	10 °C	VRB-NW	08 - 35 km/h
Monday	02/22	Fair and Partly cloudy	21 °C	12 °C	NW	15 - 40 km/h

### PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	05:05
Sunrise	06:24
Zuhr	12:02
Asr	15:14
Sunset	17:39
Isha	18:57

### RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	30 °C
MIN. Temp.	18 °C
MAX. RH	64 %
MIN. RH	14 %
MAX. Wind	S 57 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

All times are local time unless otherwise stated.

UP.0



# Business

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2021

## 34 Coronavirus crisis upends hopes for aviation careers



## 35 New Ghibli Hybrid: First e-vehicle in Maserati's history arrives in Kuwait



## 36 Return of Britain's fallen star fund manager sparks concern



# Phones, consoles get pricier as chip crisis bites

## A 'perfect storm' of supply chain disruptions causes microchip shortages

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Prices of popular gadgets such as PlayStations and iPhones could rise because of microchip shortages caused by a "perfect storm" of coronavirus-driven demand, supply chain disruptions and trade war stockpiling, experts warn. In the months after the pandemic hit, people stuck at home went on a spending spree to buy items including extra monitors, new computers and tablets—each of which runs on all-important chips.

Compounding the crisis are US-China tensions—Huawei stockpiled semiconductors last year before American sanctions aimed at cutting the tech giant off from global chipmakers kicked in, adding further pressure to supplies. The squeeze in the market was highlighted when automakers, enjoying a pick-up in car-buying, tried to source specialized semiconductors, only to find manufacturers had prioritised consumer electronics and could not fill orders.

The auto sector is the highest-profile victim so far, with giants including Ford and Volkswagen forced to cut production, but shortages appear to be spreading to a wide range of electronic items.

"A perfect storm of coronavirus chaos, trade-war stockpiling, and a paradigm shift in work-from-home devices is causing the chip squeeze," Neil Mawston, executive director at consultancy Strategy Analytics, told AFP. "Anything with a chip is affected—cars, smartphones, games consoles, tablets and laptops. Electronic gadgets and cars will be in shorter supply or more expensive throughout 2021."

Sales of certain iPhone models have reportedly been limited because particular components were not available, while some have pointed to chip shortages for problems in getting hold of Sony's new PlayStation 5 and Microsoft's latest Xbox. A growing number of major chipmakers

have voiced concern at the brewing crisis, including US firm Qualcomm, the world's biggest mobile chipmaker, and rival AMD, both of which supply to major consumer electronics companies.

The microchip supply chain is complex and the US giants design the semiconductors but do not for the most part make them. The production is mostly outsourced to Asian companies such as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) and South Korea's Samsung. However, Samsung supplies are now threatened after it was forced to halt production at its Texas factory owing to power outages caused by a severe winter storm. Manufacturers have faced challenges in meeting strong consumer electronics demand and then having to pivot their operations to car chips — shifting production processes can take months. Taiwan, home to some of the world's biggest and most advanced foundries, and its manufacturers have come under growing pressure from carmakers and governments because of the shortages.

The island vowed last month to ramp up production of car chips while TSMC said the auto industry was a "top priority"—but warned its factories were already at full capacity.

The rollout of 5G technology has added to pressure because of the need for myriad chips to build a new generation of phones, wireless infrastructure and other equipment, said GlobalFoundries, a US-headquartered chipmaker with factories in Singapore.

Washington has been increasing pressure on Huawei, which it accuses of stealing American trade secrets, last year unveiling sanctions that ban the smartphone maker from using semiconductor designs developed with US technology. When the tech giant began stockpiling



**TEHRAN:** A man walks past a window shop displaying PlayStation 4 (PS4) game consoles for sale at a shop in the central market of Iran's capital Tehran. Prices of popular gadgets such as PlayStations and iPhones could rise because of microchip shortages, experts warned yesterday. —AFP

semiconductors before the sanctions, other companies followed their lead, adding to the global shortage.

"Hoarding has been causing more hoarding," said Mawston of Strategy Analytics.

"As Huawei has stockpiled phone chips, other rival brands have sought (to a lesser degree) to hoard their own stocks to help guard future supply." Chip shortages could delay production of nearly one million vehicles in the first quarter of this year, according to market research firm IHS Markit, although analysts say it is too early to assess the impact on other industries.

Shortages are expected to ease later this

year as vaccines are rolled out—allowing factories to work at full capacity without workers social distancing—and new plants begin operating. But there could be supply problems in future as chip demand grows, and analysts say the latest crisis is a wake-up call for governments to strengthen domestic industries and reduce reliance on a few players. "Semiconductors are at the heart of the global economy," GlobalFoundries said in a statement. The company said it is urging "governments to invest in semiconductor manufacturing, and to do their part in helping address the clear mismatch in semiconductor supply and demand". —AFP

## Business

# Coronavirus crisis upends hopes for aviation careers

## Companies now shedding thousands of jobs amid crisis

**PARIS:** One year ago 26-year-old Perrine was on the cusp of realizing her childhood dream of becoming a flight attendant. Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived and Perrine is now on track for a job in insurance instead. At the CFA center near Paris's Bourget airport where Perrine has been training in mock aircraft cabins, the seats for passengers are now empty and there are no attendants.

Most of the 8,000-square-metre (86,000-square-foot) facility is silent. In a vast hanger that holds a Falcon business jet and a Super Puma helicopter for technical training, just a couple of dozen students are busy at work benches.

Making the traditional welcome speech at the start of the academic year in this very unusual year "was a bit touch and go", said instructor Pierre-Henri Greze. "Most of the students are concerned, anxious about the future," he added. The number of apprentices at the start of the 2020 academic year was down by half to 300, with the courses for flight attendants at a complete halt as airlines shed cabin crew jobs to match the vastly reduced number of flights they are operating.

The mechanic and technician students are down by a third. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw airlines ground most of their planes as travel came to a near standstill, graduates of the

CFA school had no problem finding jobs. Rather, it "had trouble finding candidates" for all the jobs that the aviation industry was looking to fill, said CFA director Veronique Flavigny.

In France, the aerospace and aviation industries recruited 8,000 apprentices in 2019, double the number a decade ago as air traffic expanded between 3.0 and 4.0 percent per year. But COVID-19 brought all that to a brutal halt.

### Dreams delayed or dashed?

Companies are now shedding jobs, thousands of them. Airbus has plans to let 15,000 staff go, including 5,000 in France. Air France plans to cut 8,500 jobs. Air traffic was down two-thirds globally in 2020, according to the International Air Transport Association, and it does not expect a return to 2019 levels before 2024. CFA director Flavigny hopes to make it through the worst of the pandemic so the school can survive.

"We found solutions for 2021," she said. But beyond that, "all depends on how things recover and the support we receive," she added, noting the school has tapped funding offered by the French government. Flavigny is worried about current and former students, many of whom now face becoming unemployed. Meanwhile, the students themselves fluctuate between depression and determination.

"You can't give up," said Marotea Archer,



PARIS: This file photo shows Air France planes at Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport in Roissy-en-France, outside Paris. —AFP

21, with a pair of pliers in his hands. "Maybe in a couple of years a company will need workers and hire us." Perrine Chaumet is not as optimistic. "Even if you move heaven and earth, you can't pursue your dream job in a crisis like this," said Chaumet. Last month, "I began to submit job applications for insurance and admin

jobs as I see the situation isn't improving and we don't know if that is for several months or several years," she added.

Nevertheless, after the crisis passes Chaumet still hopes to take to the skies. "I had the time to see that is what I want to do. It's what makes me want to get up in the morning." —AFP

## NBK gives its customers chance to win Alyasra Fashion Gift cards

**KUWAIT:** National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen to provide its customers with exceptional rewards through exclusive offers and rewards within NBK Rewards Program. In this context, and in cooperation with Alyasra Fashion, NBK gives its customers the chance to enter a draw to win the company's gift cards.

The offer allows eligible NBK Cardholders to redeem NBK Rewards Points for a chance to enter the draw, 1 entry for every KD 5 spent using NBK Rewards Points at Alyasra Fashion participating stores. Customers participating in the draw can win Alyasra gift card worth KD 600 or one of the 20 Alyasra gifts cards, each worth KD 100.

The participating Alyasra Fashion stores are: DKNY, ECCO, Triumph, ONTIME, Fossil, Trinkets, Comfort Zone. On this occasion, Sanad Al-Shatti, Senior Manager at Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait commented: "Rewarding our customers is one of the key pillars of their banking experience with NBK, so we are keen to design campaigns that suit their needs, expectations and daily lifestyles from all segments."

"We are always striving to ensure that our customers benefit from our strong relationships with the leading institutions across all different businesses sectors, which

contributes to providing them various exclusive offers and prizes, in addition to the top-notch banking services and products provided to them by NBK," he added. Al-Shatti pointed out that NBK Credit Cards give customers the chance to participate in exceptional campaigns all year round, in addition to the unique lifestyle and benefits provided to cardholders.

On his part, Hussein Hammoud, Head of Marketing at Alyasra Fashion said: "Alyasra and NBK have a strategic partnership, as both institutions seek to make their customers happy".

"We invite all NBK Credit Cardholders to join the program, and visit some of their favorite stores like DKNY, ONTIME, Comfort Zone, and Triumph to enjoy modern fashion, excellent customer service, matchless shopping experience, in addition to the chance to win great prizes," Hammoud added.

NBK always proves it is closer to its customers, as it continues to reward them during the exceptional circumstances imposed by the coronavirus pandemic over the past months, and its endeavors to continue its campaigns that are carefully designed to meet its customers' needs and expectations."



Sanad Al-Shatti

## Pandemic savages airline sector

**PARIS:** Dizzying losses, the looming threat of bankruptcies and tens of thousands of people thrown out of work: the aviation industry has been devastated by COVID-19 and there is still no light at the end of the tunnel. The sector may be unrecognizable when it finally emerges.

### What is the state of air traffic?

Air traffic took a beating due to the COVID-19 pandemic, dropping by two-thirds last year according to the International Air Transport Association (IATA). The airline trade association's chief economist Brian Pearce called it "the biggest shock the industry of air travel has ever experienced."

At 1.8 billion, the number of passengers fell back to the level of 2003, according to the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization. Border closures and quarantines had a greater impact on international traffic, which dropped by three-quarters, while domestic flights fell by just under half, according to IATA.

The situation differs sharply from country to country. The number of passengers on domestic flights in the United States—normally the world's top aviation market—was still down 63 percent in December. In India, the drop was 43 percent, 12 percent in Russia and eight percent in China. In Europe, the number of flights was down by two-thirds in mid-February, according to Eurocontrol, which coordinates air traffic control in the EU. —AFP

## New Ghibli Hybrid: First electrified vehicle in Maserati's history arrives in Kuwait

The vehicle is on display at Maserati Kuwait showroom since Feb 4



**KUWAIT:** The new Ghibli Hybrid, the first electrified vehicle in Maserati's history has arrived in Kuwait. The new Ghibli Hybrid represents one of the most ambitious projects for Maserati and sets the seal on another step forward towards the brand's new era.

The choice to introduce the hybrid technology on the Ghibli sedan is no coincidence: this model, with over 100,000 units produced since its launch in 2013, perfectly embodies the Modena-based manufacturer's DNA. The arrival of the new Ghibli Hybrid thus expands the Maserati range, which is now even more competitive and responsive to the demands of the market.

The new Ghibli Hybrid is on display at the Maserati Kuwait showroom from 4th of February 2021. The showroom is located in Al-Rai, 4th ring road at the Al-Zayani dealership.

### Design

Ghibli Hybrid is immediately recognizable, thanks in part to the new design of both exterior and interior. The common denominator of the restyling, developed by the Centro Stile Maserati, is the blue color, chosen to identify all cars with hybrid technology and the new world they represent.



On the exterior, the blue color characterizes the three iconic side air ducts, the brake calipers and the thunderbolt in the oval that encloses the Trident on the rear pillar. The same blue color reappears inside the car, in particular on the embroidered seams of the seats. The new Ghibli Hybrid also introduces new stylistic contents, starting from the new front grille, with bars redesigned to represent a tuning fork, a musical device that emits a sound of extreme purity, and which also evokes the Trident symbol itself. There are significant changes at the rear of the car, where the light clusters have been completely restyled, with a boomerang-like profile inspired by the 3200 GT and the Alfieri concept car.



### Mild hybrid

In perfect harmony with its DNA, Maserati has chosen a hybrid solution focused primarily on improving performance, while also reducing fuel consumption and cutting emissions. The hybrid technology exploits kinetic energy the car accumulates when in motion, recovering it and transforming it into electricity during deceleration and braking, and storing it in a battery.

The innovative powertrain, the outcome of in-depth engineering development work by the technicians and engineers of the Maserati Innovation Lab in Modena, combines an internal combustion engine (4 cylinders, turbo, displacement of 2.0 l) with a 48 volt alternator and an additional elec-

tric supercharger (e-Booster), supported by a battery. This solution is unique in its segment, and is the first in a new generation of powertrains, with the perfect trade-off between performance, efficiency and driving pleasure. The battery is mounted in the rear of the car, with benefits in terms of improved weight distribution.

This version weighs about 80 kg less than the Diesel. Thanks to maximum power output of 330 hp and torque of 450 Nm delivered from just 1,500 rpm, the new Ghibli Hybrid's performance data are very impressive: top speed of 255 km/h and acceleration from 0 to 100 km/h in 5.7 seconds. Ghibli Hybrid occupants will still revel in the unmistakable sound that characterizes all Maserati models, thanks to the optimized exhaust, which includes specially designed resonators.

The Maserati Intelligent Assistant multimedia system is latest-generation, based on digital inputs from Android Automotive, software that delivers an innovative User Experience fully customizable to the driver's personal preferences. The multimedia system's HD screen, with new graphics, more user-friendly and without surrounds, is increased in size from 8"4 to 10"1. A new instrument panel with digital devices and new graphics is also introduced.



## Business

# Return of Britain's fallen star fund manager sparks concern

## Woodford's spectacular fall from grace is still fresh in London's memory

**LONDON:** The return of Britain's former star investor Neil Woodford has caused concern in London's City finance district, where his spectacular fall from grace is still fresh in the memory.

Woodford Investment Management, which once boasted billions of pounds in assets under management, collapsed in 2019 having taken on too much risk, handing vast losses to pension funds, wealthy individuals and other fund managers. Last weekend however, Woodford, 60, shocked commentators and investors alike with news that he would establish a new finance firm.

"I'm sorry for what I did," he told the Sunday Telegraph in an interview and revealed that his new investment venture that will be called Woodford Capital Management Partners (WCM). "What I was responsible for was two years of underperformance. I was the fund manager, the investment strategy was mine, I owned it and it delivered a period of underperformance."

### Call for independent probe

In response, activist investment group the True and Fair Campaign—which promotes greater transparency in the finance sector—urged an independent probe. The campaign, founded by activist Gina Miller and her husband Alan, voiced concern Woodford would return to the financial world just 20 months after notorious failure.

"It is high time there was an independent investigation into the Woodford scandal," the campaign wrote in a letter to parliament's Treasury Select Committee. "We believe it ought to be a very serious source of public policy concern that high profile individuals

such as Mr Woodford can be allowed to re-commence trading when over 300,000 people... are scrabbling to make ends meet after seeing their life savings decimated."

The campaign also slammed Britain's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) regulator for its failings over the collapse. The FCA however stressed in a statement on Tuesday that Woodford's new business needed to apply for appropriate permissions before commencing any regulated activity.

The watchdog also confirmed that its official probe into the WIM collapse was still ongoing.

Woodford—once nicknamed "Britain's Warren Buffett" by media after the US investment guru—forged his name as a top stockpicker in a 30-year career in asset management.

In 2014, he established his Woodford Investment Management. Five years later, a series of disastrous investments turned sour after Woodford ploughed cash into a number of unlisted health-care and technology companies, alongside poor stock market bets. As investors clamoured to withdraw their money, Woodford ran into trouble raising cash.

### 'Damage in trust and confidence'

Most market watchers are surprised over the comeback, according to Ryan Hughes, head of active portfolios at stockbroker AJ Bell. "The news that Neil Woodford is looking to make a comeback will come as a surprise to many, especially those thousands of embattled investors who are still waiting to get the last of their money back," Hughes said.



The return of Britain's former star investor Neil Woodford has caused concern in London's City finance district, where his spectacular fall from grace is still fresh in the memory.

"He clearly hopes that much of the emotion and fury that he has faced over the past two years will disappear. "However, given the broader damage in trust and confidence that this whole affair has caused to the investment industry, it looks unlikely that investors of any kind will find it so easy to forget." — AFP

## EU to push greener trade policy, WTO reform

**BRUSSELS:** The European Union will make fighting the climate emergency central to its trade policy and push for major reform at the WTO, according to a new strategy revealed yesterday. The new thinking on EU trade policy came with hopes in Brussels for deeper cooperation with the Biden Administration in the US after four years of fractious ties with the protectionist Donald Trump.

The EU, a massive market of 450 million people, has struggled to meet its trade policy objectives in the face of US protectionism and other obstacles. A top official of the European Commission, which handles trade policy for the EU's 27 member states, announced the new strategy, which is intended to help set goals over the next 10 years. "The challenges we face require a new strategy for EU trade policy," EU Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis, who leads the bloc's trade policy, said in a statement.

"Trade policy must fully support the green and digital transformations of our economy and lead global efforts to reform the WTO," he said. In its new vision, the Commission proposed that future trade deals embrace the 2015 Paris climate change agreement, whose absence from previous accords has been seen as a major shortcoming. One example is the EU's long-negotiated trade deal with the South American Mercosur countries, which is in jeopardy because of concerns over mass deforestation in Brazil. Brussels will also seek to become more assertive in projecting its independence from the US and Chinese economic behemoths, with an embrace of multilateralism to include India and African nations. — AFP

## Barclays bank profit tumbles on pandemic fallout

**LONDON:** British bank Barclays yesterday announced a 38-per cent slump in net profit for 2020 and said expenses related to the coronavirus pandemic were set to stay high this year.

Profit after tax fell to £1.53 billion (\$2.12 billion, 1.76 billion euros), Barclays said in a statement.

Group credit impairment charges shot up to £4.8 billion from £1.9 billion owing "to the deterioration in the economic outlook driven by the COVID-19 pandemic", the bank said. Despite the tough year, "Barclays remains well capitalized, well provisioned for impairments... with a strong balance sheet, and competitive market positions across the group", chief executive Jes Staley said in the statement.

"We expect that our resilient and diversified business model will deliver a meaningful improvement in returns in 2021," he added. As well as offering a dividend to shareholders, Barclays said it would buy back shares at a cost of up to £700 million.

The bonus pool for 2020 stood at around £1.6 billion, up six percent. At the same time, the bank said that "Covid-19 related expenses are likely to remain elevated in 2021".

Barclays has kicked off the annual earnings round from Britain's major banks, with NatWest—formerly Royal Bank of Scotland—reporting Friday, before updates from HSBC and Lloyds next week. Barclays' "results are far from perfect, but in opening the reporting season it has set the bar high for its rivals", said Richard Hunter, head of markets at trading group Interactive Investor.

"The announced share buyback of £700 million should lend some support to the share price (going forward) and is indicative



of management confidence in prospects." In initial reaction to the earnings update however, Barclays' share price was down 1.5 percent at 152 pence on London's benchmark FTSE 100 index, which was flat. The bank said that group income edged up 1.0 percent last year to £21.8 billion, as a hefty drop in consumer payments offset a strong performance by its investment bank division.

Stock markets have surged in recent months on economic recovery hopes following the production of Covid-19 vaccines that governments worldwide are starting to roll out.

### Barclays after COVID, Brexit

Staley said he was looking forward to welcoming staff back to the bank's offices later in the year. "Right now there is no plan to make a major real estate move" regarding Barclays' headquarters in London, he said, amid expectations that office staff in general could continue working from home even after vaccination. Staley noted that Barclays had moved some staff to its European headquarters in Dublin following Brexit. He insisted however that "the EU will want to stay connected to the capital markets in London" after Britain's formal divorce from the bloc at the start of 2021. — AFP

# Williams exits in tears as Osaka, Djokovic reach finals

## Fans back after five-day coronavirus lockdown

**MELBOURNE:** Japan's Naomi Osaka brutally halted Serena Williams's latest bid for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam title yesterday, as Novak Djokovic wrote the final chapter of qualifier Aslan Karatsev's fairy-tale run. Fans returned after a five-day coronavirus lockdown in time to see an emotional exit from Williams, Jennifer Brady's win over Karolina Muchova and top-ranked Djokovic preserving his perfect semi-final record at Karatsev's expense.

Triple major-winner Osaka, 23, again proved Williams's nemesis with a one-sided 6-3, 6-4 win which heightened questions about whether the American, 39, will ever match Margaret Court's all-time record for Slam singles titles. Williams put her hand on her heart as she acknowledged a standing ovation on Rod Laver Arena, and later walked out of her post-match press conference in tears, saying: "I'm done."

The American has lost four Grand Slam finals since winning her 23rd in Melbourne in 2017, and victory over Osaka would have given her a golden opportunity against Brady, who is into her first major decider. But after going 0-2 down in the first set, Osaka reeled off five straight games to take charge against a despairing Williams and canter into the final.

The soft-spoken Osaka has never lost a Grand Slam match after reaching the quarter-finals, and Brady can expect the match of her life on Saturday. "For me, I have this mentality that people don't re-

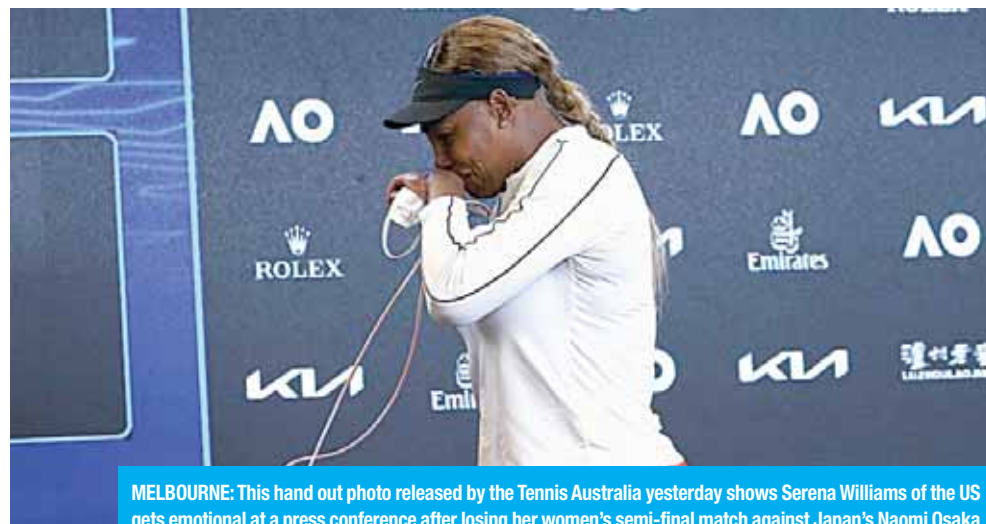
member the runners-up. You might, but the winner's name is the one that's engraved," Osaka said. "I think I fight the hardest in the finals. I think that's where you sort of set yourself apart."

Williams lamented a "big error day" and refused to discuss whether she had made her last appearance at a tournament she has won seven times, an Open-era record. "I don't know," she said, when asked if her salute to the crowd was a farewell. "If I ever say farewell, I wouldn't tell anyone."

### Thousands of fans

Williams's departure was watched by thousands of fans returning after a snap, state-wide lockdown, a welcome sight in Rod Laver Arena after five days of matches in front of empty seats. The Australian Open is the first COVID-era Grand Slam to welcome large numbers of fans after last year's Wimbledon was cancelled, the US Open took place behind closed doors and the French Open was limited to 1,000 a day.

The returning spectators also witnessed the end of 114th-ranked Karatsev's astonishing campaign, when he became the first man in the Open era to reach a Grand Slam semi-final on debut. Karatsev knocked out three seeds to reach the last four but he was no match for Djokovic, the record eight-time Melbourne champion who has never lost a semi or final on his favorite court. "This is the best I've felt in the entire tournament," said the Serb,



**MELBOURNE:** This hand out photo released by the Tennis Australia yesterday shows Serena Williams of the US gets emotional at a press conference after losing her women's semi-final match against Japan's Naomi Osaka on day eleven of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne. —AFP

who has been carrying an abdomen injury since the third round, after his 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 win. "I could swing through the ball. No pain. The best match so far." Exemplifying the gulf between them, Vladikavkaz native Karatsev, 27, has won 18 Grand Slam sets in his career, while Djokovic, 33, is going for his 18th major title.

Brady versus Muchova was a far more competi-

tive affair as the American needed five match points before subduing the Czech 25th seed in three sets. Brady eventually prevailed 6-4, 3-6, 6-4 in 1hr 55min to reach her debut major final against the formidable Osaka. "My legs are shaking, my heart is racing," said Brady, 25, who has admitted she hated watching and playing tennis as a child. "My legs felt fresh but they weren't moving. They felt stuck in mud." —AFP

## Curry seals GSW late show, Jazz rout Clippers

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Steph Curry sealed a stunning late fightback to help the Golden State Warriors to a 120-112 overtime victory over the Miami Heat on Wednesday. Curry scored eight of the final 11 points, including a superb late three-pointer, to finish with a 25-point haul and complete a remarkable comeback at San Francisco's Chase Center. The Warriors had looked to be heading for a heavy defeat after Miami surged into a 61-46 half-time lead. Miami maintained that cushion for much of the second half, and led by a hefty 14-point margin at 99-85 with just over six minutes remaining.

### Jazz roll on

But after struggling to find their range throughout, the Warriors suddenly discovered their shooting touch and blitzed Miami 35-13 over the remainder of the game. Curry, who made only eight of 25 attempts from the field, was backed with 26 points from Kent Bazemore off the bench, while Andrew Wiggins and Kelly Oubre each had 23 points. "Everyone was missing shots from all over the court, even wide open ones," Curry said. "That's just basketball for you. It humbles you. But if you put the work in, eventually they'll fall. Thankfully they did." Bam Adebayo led the Miami scoring with 24 points while Jimmy Butler added a triple double with 13 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists.

Elsewhere Wednesday, Donovan Mitchell and Rudy Gobert led the way as the Utah Jazz produced a devastating second-half scoring display to rout a depleted Los Angeles Clippers 114-96 at the Staples Center. Mitchell and French international Gobert combined for 47 points to give Utah a ninth straight victory and extend the team's lead to 24-5 at the top of the Western Conference.

The Clippers, missing the injured Kawhi Leonard and Paul George, had scraped their way into a 51-46 lead at half-time, with 14 points from Lou Williams helping set up a five-point cushion. But the Clippers' hopes were snuffed out in a one-sided second half as Utah cut loose, outscoring the home team 68-45 in the third and fourth quarters. Mitchell finished with 24 points while Gobert had 23. Jordan Clarkson delivered another useful cameo off the bench with 18 points including four three-pointers.

In Philadelphia, Joel Embiid returned from injury as the 76ers ended their three-game losing streak with a 118-113 victory over the Houston Rockets. Embiid, who had missed Monday's defeat to Utah with a sore back, delivered 31 points, 11 rebounds and nine assists at the Wells Fargo Center. The 26-year-old Cameroon international was backed by Seth Curry with 25 points and Tobias Harris, who finished with 24. Australian star Ben Simmons, who had erupted for 42 points in Monday's defeat against the Jazz, was sidelined with stomach flu. The Sixers now lead the Eastern Conference with 19 wins against 10 defeats, ahead of the second-placed Brooklyn Nets (18-12) and Milwaukee Bucks, who are third with a 16-12 record.

### Grant haul in vain

In other games Wednesday, Jerami Grant posted a career-high 43 points but it wasn't enough to stop the Detroit Pistons falling to a 105-102 defeat against Chicago in a hastily rearranged fixture



**SAN FRANCISCO:** Stephen Curry #30 of the Golden State Warriors shoots a three pointer during the game against the Miami Heat on Wednesday at Chase Center in San Francisco, California. —AFP

added to the schedule after a flurry of COVID-19 postponements.

Grant made 15 of 25 from the field with four three-pointers, as well as perfect nine-from-nine from the free throw line. The Bulls chalked up the win though courtesy of 37 points from Zach LaVine, while Wendell Carter Jr had 18 points and Patrick Williams 15 points.

In Washington, Davis Bertans scored 35 from the bench and Bradley Beal had 25 points as the Wizards upset the Denver Nuggets 130-128. Russell Westbrook bagged the seventh triple double of his Wizards career with 12 points, 14 rebounds and 12 assists. —AFP

## Sports

# 'One of the best' - Haaland stars as Dortmund beat Sevilla

## Dortmund snaps Sevilla's nine-game winning streak

**SEVILLE:** Erling Braut Haaland produced another deadly display of finishing with a first-half brace as Borussia Dortmund came from behind to beat Sevilla 3-2 in Spain in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie on Wednesday. Suso's deflected strike gave last season's Europa League winners an early lead behind closed doors at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium, but Mahmoud Dahoud soon equalised before Haaland took over. The Norway phenomenon put Dortmund in front in the 27th minute and then scored again two minutes before half-time, the goals taking him to 25 in 24 appearances this season in all competitions. Still aged just 20, he has scored 18 times in just 13 Champions League appearances since the start of last season.

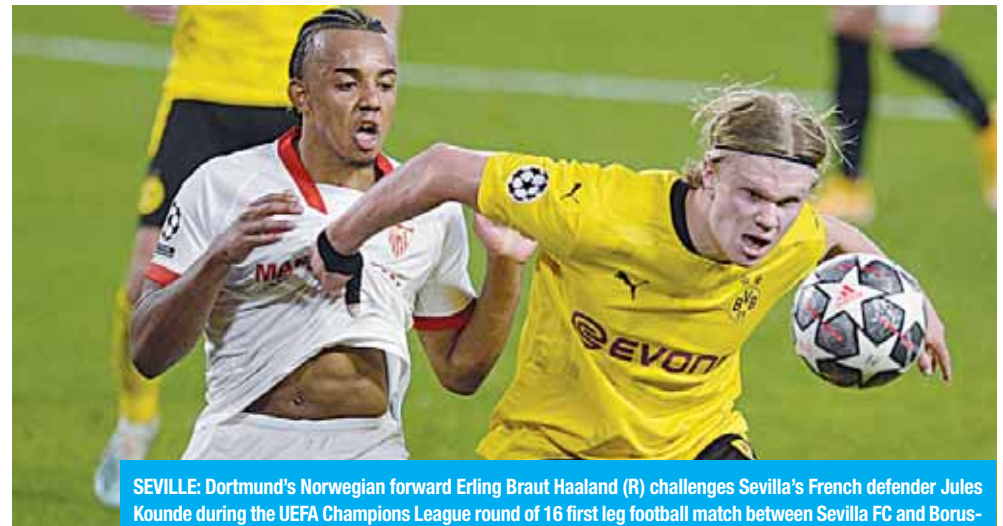
Substitute Luuk de Jong's late reply gave Sevilla cause for hope heading into the return leg on March 9, but Dortmund remain favorites to progress to the quarter-finals. "We didn't deserve to lose, but in the end they had one of the best players in the world up front and he made the difference in three situations which could have been avoided," said Sevilla coach Julen Lopetegui. Haaland, who also set up Dahoud's equalizer, produced a performance, in the first half at least, which showcased his remarkable strength, hold-up play and pace as well as his brilliant finishing.

### Winning run ended

It was too much for a Sevilla side who had come into this tie with high hopes, having only been beaten by La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid, away, in their previous 19 outings. Lopetegui's team had won their previous nine matches on the bounce and had kept seven straight clean sheets before the arrival of Dortmund and Haaland. "This was one of our best performances of the season," Dortmund coach Edin Terzic, who replaced the sacked Lucien Favre after the group phase, told Sky. "We are pleased with the result and proud to have beaten such a team."

Sevilla have won the Europa League or its predecessor, the UEFA Cup, an incredible six times since 2005, but only once have they got past the last 16 of the Champions League, when they beat Manchester United in 2018 before losing to Bayern Munich in the quarter-finals. The quality of Haaland was the difference here as Dortmund, having sunk to sixth in the Bundesliga on a poor run of form, came to life on their return to the Champions League.

"We had a good plan. Edin has been good and I've been talking a lot with him. He said today would be my game and that I would get my chances and I did, so it was an important win," Haaland told DAZN. Yet the game had started well for Sevilla, with Suso opening the scoring in the seventh minute, his shot deflecting



**SEVILLE:** Dortmund's Norwegian forward Erling Braut Haaland (R) challenges Sevilla's French defender Jules Kounde during the UEFA Champions League round of 16 first leg football match between Sevilla FC and Borussia Dortmund at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium in Seville on Wednesday. —AFP

in off Mats Hummels.

Dortmund drew level in the 19th minute as Haaland showed terrific strength to hold the ball up on the right before coming infield and feeding Dahoud, who worked his way into position to fire a superb shot high into net from just outside the area. It was the first goal Sevilla had conceded in more than 12

hours of football. Eight minutes later they conceded again. Haaland dropped deep, collecting possession near the halfway line, and then turned and charged towards goal, playing a pass to Jadon Sancho on the edge of the box and then continuing on to place the return ball past goalkeeper Yassine Bounou. —AFP

## Leaders Atletico held by Levante after Correa miss

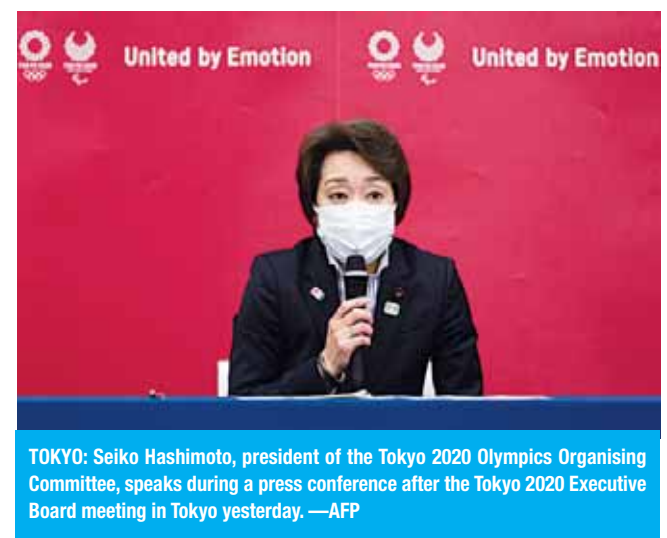
**MADRID:** Atletico Madrid failed to move eight points clear at the top of La Liga on Wednesday as they were held to a 1-1 draw at Levante in a game which saw a dreadful miss from Angel Correa. Diego Simeone's men sit six points clear of second-placed Real Madrid and have a game in hand, but have seen their control of the title race slip slightly after two draws in three matches. Atletico are looking for a first league title since their shock triumph in 2014 but suffered a setback in this delayed encounter. Hosts Levante took a surprise lead in the 17th minute as they broke at pace before Jorge de Frutos played in Enis Bardhi to slot past a stranded Jan Oblak in the Atletico goal. Simeone's away side continued to dominate possession but struggled to create clear-cut chances until scoring a fortunate equalizer eight minutes before half-time. Marcos Llorente's speculative long-range effort was nodded past his own goalkeeper by Levante center-back Rober Pier. The 26-year-old Llorente, having never scored a La Liga goal before last February, has netted 11 times in the league since. Levante goalkeeper Aitor Fernandez had to be alert to prevent Atletico taking the lead shortly afterwards, diving low to palm away Luis Suarez's fierce volley. Atletico should have forged ahead shortly after the break, as after Fernandez had saved from Suarez, Angel Correa inexplicably blazed over an open net from barely six yards out. —AFP

## New Tokyo 2020 chief vows to 'regain trust' after sexism row

**TOKYO:** Tokyo 2020's new president Seiko Hashimoto yesterday vowed to "regain trust" in the Olympic organizing committee after an embarrassing sexism row, with just over five months until the virus-postponed Games. Hashimoto, a seven-time Olympian, had been one of just two women in Japan's cabinet, serving as Olympic minister before stepping down to take the key post. She replaces 83-year-old Yoshiro Mori, who resigned after saying women talk too much in meetings, sparking outcry in Japan and abroad.

"I'm sure the Games are going to attract more attention related to gender equality, and in this regard I am determined to regain trust, by my fullest endeavors," she said after her appointment. She pledged to increase the number of women on the Tokyo 2020 executive board from around 20 percent to 40 percent, and urged Olympic torchbearers and volunteers who had quit in protest at Mori's comments to return.

Until yesterday, Hashimoto, 56, was also minister for gender equality and women's empowerment. "I recognize that there is still a lot of conscious division of roles according to gender (in Japan). What can be done to change that through the organizing committee's reforms is important," she said. She had reportedly been reluctant to take on the job, and will face an uphill struggle to win over the public before the



**TOKYO:** Seiko Hashimoto, president of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics Organising Committee, speaks during a press conference after the Tokyo 2020 Executive Board meeting in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

Games are due to open on July 23.

Anti-infection measures should be Tokyo 2020's "top priority", she said, pledging to work to "ensure that the public both domestically and abroad feel this is going to be a safe and secure Olympic Games". Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said Hashimoto's years as a sprint cyclist and speed skater — winning bronze in 1992 — would be good preparation. "She has experience of competing at the summer and winter Olympics seven times. I want her to work hard to firmly realize the philosophy of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics by making use of that experience," he said. —AFP

# Lackluster Juventus handed Porto victory 'on silver platter,' says Pirlo

## Second leg in Turin on March 9

**PORTO:** Cristiano Ronaldo's first game for Juventus in his native Portugal ended in 2-1 defeat as FC Porto out-played the Italians for much of Wednesday's Champions League last-16, first leg tie. Such was Juve's lackluster performance that coach Andrea Pirlo claimed his team handed victory to their hosts on "a silver platter."

Iranian striker Mehdi Taremi put Porto ahead after just a minute at Estadio do Dragao following a Rodrigo Bentancur error. And Mali striker Moussa Marega added a second straight after the break. But Federico Chiesa pulled a goal back with eight minutes to go to keep Juventus afloat with the second leg in Turin on March 9.

"The approach was wrong from the first minute," said Pirlo. "When you concede a goal like this it's normal that fear sets in, you lack a bit of certainty. Porto are good at closing down and after that goal it was much more difficult. We served them the match they wanted on a silver platter. Fortunately we scored an important goal through Chiesa and now we will focus on the return leg."

It was a below-par performance by Juventus, chasing their third Champions League title and first in 25 years. Record Champions League goal scorer Ronaldo, 36, drew a blank against a side captained by his Portuguese international teammate Pepe, as the visitors struggled to recover from their early blunder.

"We studied Juventus well," said defender Pepe who won three Champions League titles

with Ronaldo at Real Madrid. "We knew that we had to press hard to keep Juventus from playing. In these type of games it's difficult to concede goals at home, but we played a great game."

It was a shocking start for Juventus, with Wojciech Szczesny sending the ball out to Bentancur, who passed back to the Polish goalkeeper despite Taremi being just on front of goal. The Iranian quickly pounced to prod past Szczesny for his first Champions League goal. Porto pressed forward with Juventus almost conceding a second on 23 minutes as Szczesny cleared straight to Sergio Oliveira whose shot was deflected away from goal.

To add to Andrea Pirlo's woes captain Giorgio Chiellini limped off 10 minutes later with defender Merih Demiral coming off the bench. Pirlo had juggled Juve's defense with Leonardo Bonucci out injured with Alex Sandro returning, playing alongside veteran Chiellini, Matthijs de Ligt and Danilo. Juve had to wait until four minutes before the break for their first shot on goal with an Adrien Rabiot overhead kick cleared by Porto keeper Agustin Marchesin, but the offside flag had already been raised.

The Italians suffered another terrible start to the second half with Marega picking up a Wilson Manafa cross to finish low past Szczesny. Ronaldo had to wait until five minutes after the break to have a shot on goal. Weston McKennie nodded the ball into the path of the Portuguese star, whose weak effort was blocked.



**PORTO:** Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo (left) reacts to his team's defeat at the end of the UEFA Champions League round of 16 first leg football match between Porto and Juventus at the Dragao stadium in Porto on Wednesday. —AFP

However, Chiesa pulled Juventus back into the tie following a Rabiot run down the right with a pull back for the Italian to finish off into the corner of the net. "The goal will give us strength for the second leg, and it will certainly be another game," said Chiesa. It was the first goal

conceded by Porto in the competition at home this season for the former two-time winners. Ronaldo had penalty appeals waved away after going down under a Sanusi Zaidu challenge late as the hosts held on for their first win over Juventus in five meetings. —AFP

## Man City beat Everton to march 10 points clear

**LONDON:** Everton manager Carlo Ancelotti said he expects Manchester City to cruise to the Premier League title after Pep Guardiola's men opened up a 10-point lead at the top of the table with a 3-1 win at Goodison Park on Wednesday. Riyad Mahrez scored the pick of the goals in between Phil Foden and Bernardo Silva's strikes as City extended their English top-flight record winning run to 17 games.

"It is really difficult to say another name in this moment," said Ancelotti when asked if his side had just been beaten by the champions. "They are in a good form, they have belief and they are strong. We tried to be physical but it is difficult against Rodrigo (Ruben) Dias and (Aymeric) Laporte."

Richarlison's first-half equalizer was little consolation for seventh-placed Everton, who have now won just one of their last six league games to fall five points behind in the battle for a top-four finish. "We don't need to have regrets tonight," added Ancelotti as he looked forward to Saturday's Merseyside derby against Liverpool. "It's a fantastic opportunity. We know how important this game is for our supporters."

This fixture was rearranged from late December due to a coronavirus outbreak affecting multiple players at City that threatened to derail their title challenge. Guardiola's side were eighth in the

table at the time, but have not dropped a point in their 10 league games since to streak clear of the chasing pack. The visitors were without the in-form Ilkay Gundogan due to a groin injury, while Kevin De Bruyne was fit to return from a hamstring problem but only for a late cameo appearance off the bench.

Sergio Aguero was also among the substitutes, but Gabriel Jesus has failed to make the most of his chance to shine in the absence of the Argentine for most of the season and the Brazilian had another off night in front of goal as he blazed over an early chance.

When the deadlock was broken there was a hint of fortune to it as Foden's shot deflected off Seamus Coleman to leave the helpless Jordan Pickford wrong-footed. Ancelotti's men had shown no attacking intent until conceding, but were immediately rewarded for pushing forward after falling behind as Lucas Digne's shot came back off the post and ricocheted in off Richarlison.

A moment of the highest quality saw City restore their lead just after the hour mark. Silva's cushioned pass teed up Mahrez on the edge of the box and his sumptuous curling effort clipped the inside of the far post on its way into the net.

"We have the quality up front but always it comes through the passes," said Guardiola. "We need a little bit more patient, the second goal is an example of that. In the end we have to try and get the players up front in a better position." The roles were reversed for the visitors' third 13 minutes from time as Mahrez and Jesus picked out Silva on the edge of the box and his shot had too much power for Pickford.

At the other end of the table, Fulham missed the opportunity to close to within four points of survival as Burnley came back from a goal down to salvage a 1-1 draw. Both sides struck early in



**LIVERPOOL:** Manchester City's Portuguese midfielder Bernardo Silva celebrates scoring his team's third goal during the English Premier League football match between Everton and Manchester City at Goodison Park in Liverpool, north west England on Wednesday. —AFP

the second-half of a largely uneventful game as Ashley Barnes cancelled out Ola Aina's opener for Fulham. A point for Fulham takes Newcastle's advantage over the bottom three to six points, while Burnley remain eight points clear of the drop zone and edge up to 15th. —AFP



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