



6 Iraqi archbishop readies for pope visit amid scars of war



8 Mogul vs Mogul: Australia tech law pits Murdoch against Zuckerberg



13 'Bite Club': Shark attack survivors find solace in unity



16 Nets end road trip with win, Ingram powers Pelicans



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

Cabinet imposes new curbs, but no lockdown or curfew

No dine-in at restaurants, land and sea borders shut from Feb 24

Govt wants to withdraw KD 5 billion annually from future generations fund

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The government yesterday sent a draft law to the National Assembly seeking to withdraw KD 5 billion annually from the future generations fund to meet an ever-rising budget deficit due to low oil prices. The draft law stipulates to allow the government to withdraw a maximum of KD 5 billion from the future generations fund in favor of the general reserve fund, which provides for government expenditures.

Under the existing law, the government is forbidden to make any withdrawals from the future generations fund or even use its returns, which must be added to the fund, whose assets are esti-

imated at around \$600 billion. The government said it needs the funds to finance its cash-strapped general reserve fund, which gets money from state revenues, which have been badly affected since 2014 because of the sharp fall in oil prices, which make up more than 85 percent of public revenues.

As a result, Kuwait has posted huge budget deficits since then. In the current and next fiscal years, the government has projected a deficit of KD 26 billion. The drop in revenues was accompanied by a continuous rise in public spending, resulting in draining the general reserve fund.

In past years, Kuwait was transferring 10 percent of total revenues into the future generations fund, but last year, the

Assembly passed a law allowing the government to stop making the transfer because of weak revenues. The government tried to pass a law in the Assembly to secure fresh funding through external and internal loans, but MPs refused to pass the legislation.

MPs yesterday called the government's move to withdraw money from the future generations fund as "dangerous", saying it reflects its failure to manage the country's finances. They vowed not to pass the law. MP Muhalhal Al-Mudhaf said after the government drained the general reserve fund, it has turned to the future generations fund by proposing a law "which we will not allow to pass".

Continued on Page 2

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The Cabinet yesterday decided against imposing a lockdown or curfew, but banned dining at restaurants and closed all land and sea borders as part of additional measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus. The dine-in ban at restaurants and cafes will go into effect on Wednesday, Feb 24 until further notice, the Cabinet said in a statement following a meeting at Seif Palace. However, takeout and delivery services are allowed.

The Cabinet also decided to close all land and sea borders to foreigners from Feb 24 until March 20, but allowed Kuwaitis, their close relatives and domestic helpers to use the borders to return to the country. Shipping services and workers in the neutral zone are exempt from the decision.

The Cabinet also decided to form a joint committee consisting of the inte-

rior and health ministries and the civil aviation authority to oversee the implementation of hotel quarantine for all people arriving through the airport. The Cabinet also assigned the interior and health ministries along with the Olympic committee to set health conditions for any sport activity in the country as proposed by the Public Authority for Sports.

The government had already extended indefinitely a two-week ban on the entry of foreigners into Kuwait, but excluded foreign diplomats and foreign medical staff and their families. It had also ordered the closure of commercial shops and malls from 8 pm to 5 am and banned all forms of gatherings, including those for national celebrations on Feb 25 and 26.

Kuwait has reported a significant increase in the number of coronavirus cases in the past several weeks and blamed the rise on failure to comply with health measures by the public.

News in brief

Kuwait population falls

KUWAIT: Kuwait's population in 2020 experienced the biggest annual drop recorded in almost 30 years, as the number of resident expatriates fell sharply, while the number of Kuwaiti nationals continued to rise, according to a report by NBK. Since the start of the pandemic and the implementation of lockdowns and restrictions, more than 130,000 expats left the country. (See Page 8)

Mumbai imposes new curbs

NEW DELHI: India's financial capital Mumbai imposed fresh coronavirus restrictions yesterday as a rise in cases in the worst-affected region sparked fears of a new wave. All religious, social and political gatherings are banned in the city and the surrounding western state of Maharashtra, home to 110 million people, after infections spiked to levels last seen in October. — AFP

COVID 'vaccination passport'

WELLINGTON: Air New Zealand will trial a digital travel pass to give airlines and border authorities access to passenger health information, including their COVID-19 vaccination status, the carrier said yesterday. The scheme, dubbed a "vaccination passport" by industry observers, is intended to streamline travel once borders reopen by allowing passengers to store their health credentials in one place. — AFP

Trump offered Kim ride home

SEOUL: Donald Trump offered North Korean leader Kim Jong Un a ride home on Air Force One after a summit in Hanoi two years ago, according to a new BBC documentary. If Kim had accepted the offer, it would have put the North Korean leader inside the US president's official aircraft and seen it enter North Korean airspace, raising multiple security issues. In the event, Kim turned it down. — AFP

Morocco seizes cannabis haul

RABAT: Around 9.5 tons of cannabis resin was seized from a refrigerated lorry near Rabat yesterday. A police operation intercepted a refrigerated lorry carrying 380 bales of around 9.5 tons of the drug, hidden among a cargo of foodstuffs. — AFP

Boeing grounds, UK bans 777s after engine fire

NEW YORK: Boeing confirmed yesterday that dozens of its 777 aircraft were grounded worldwide, while Britain announced a temporary ban on those jets following a weekend scare involving a United Airlines plane in Colorado. The incident on the flight out of Denver - which quickly returned to the airport after part of the engine caught fire and broke off - prompted United and other airlines to ground the planes with the same Pratt & Whitney engine.

While no one was injured in the Denver incident, the episode is the latest setback for Boeing, which only recently resumed deliveries of the long-grounded 737 MAX following two fatal crashes of that plane. Shares of Boeing shook off early weakness yesterday as aviation experts said the incident mostly raised pointed questions about Pratt & Whitney and United over engine maintenance.

Continued on Page 2

Italian ambassador killed in DRC attack

GOMA, DR Congo: Italy's ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo was among three people killed yesterday when a UN convoy came under attack in the troubled east, DRC sources and the Italian government said. Luca Attanasio died of his wounds after a World Food Program (WFP) convoy came under gunfire near Goma while he was on a field trip, a senior diplomatic source said in Kinshasa.

The Italian government confirmed Attanasio's death and said an Italian policeman, Vittorio Iacovacci, as well as a driver it did not identify, had also died. President Sergio Mattarella lashed what he called a "cowardly attack". "The Italian republic is in mourning for these servants of the state who lost their lives," he said in a statement.

Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio expressed his "great dismay and immense sorrow", breaking off from a meeting in Brussels with EU counterparts to make an early return to Rome. "The circumstances of this brutal attack are not yet known and no effort will be spared to shed light on what happened," Di Maio said. His Congolese opposite number Marie-Therese Tumba Nzeza offered Italy the DRC government's



HERNDON, Virginia: In this file photo, an inspector for Pratt and Whitney engines checks a United Airlines Boeing 777 after it made its inaugural flight from Heathrow Airport in London to Washington Dulles International Airport on June 7, 1995. — AFP

condolences for "this huge loss", pledging in a video sent to media to "do everything to find out who is behind this despicable murder".

Attanasio, 43, had been representing Italy in Kinshasa since 2017, first as head of mission, and then as ambassador from October 2019. The envoy suffered "gunshot wounds to the abdomen" and was taken to a hospital in Goma in critical condition, the diplomat in Kinshasa said. The DRC's army said its troops were searching the area for the assailants.

A vast country the size of continental western Europe, the DRC is grappling with numerous conflicts, especially in its remote, mineral-rich east. Scores of militias roam the four eastern provinces, many of them a legacy of wars in the 1990s that sucked in countries around central-southern Africa and claimed millions of lives. The Rome-based WFP said that Attanasio was on a fact-finding mission with the UN's food agency.

"The delegation was travelling from Goma to visit a WFP school feeding program in Rutshuru when the incident took place," it said in a statement. "The attack... occurred on a road that had previously been



Luca Attanasio

Top US general in Mideast urges Iran restraint

MUSCAT: Iran must refrain from any provocation as Washington steps up efforts to salvage the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran, the head of US forces in the Middle East told AFP. "I would think this would be a good time for everybody to behave soberly and cautiously, and see what happens," General Kenneth McKenzie said in an interview Sunday during a visit to Oman, from where he flew close to neighboring Iran in a helicopter. "I do believe we will be prepared for any eventuality, however."

US President Joe Biden's administration, European powers and Iran have boosted attempts to revive a 2015 deal that has been on the brink of collapse since Donald Trump withdrew from it three years later. On Sunday after talks in Tehran, UN nuclear watchdog chief Rafael Grossi announced a "temporary solution" to allow Iranian facility inspections to continue.

The four-star general, head of the US Central Command (Centcom) which covers the region urged Iran not to undertake any "nefarious activities" in a bid to rebuild trust.

Continued on Page 2

Local

Amir advises for Kuwait education's overhaul

Sheikh Nawaf meets premier, education, housing ministers



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Dr Ali Fahad Al-Mudhaf and members of the commission tasked with overhauling education. — Amiri Diwan and KUNA photos

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received, at Seif Palace yesterday, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also hosted Minister of State for Housing Affairs and Minister of State for Services Abdullah Marafi, who presented His Highness with a copy of

the visual presentation of the Public Authority for Housing Welfare's enterprises, including new housing districts and partnership ventures.

Later on, His Highness the Amir received Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Dr Ali Fahad Al-Mudhaf and members of the commission tasked with overhauling education. His

Highness the Amir urged them to work for promoting the sector to the highest possible level. The Amiri Diwan's head Sheikh Mubarak Faisal Saud Al-Sabah attended the meeting.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Seif Palace Housing Minister Marafie,

who also presented a presentation of the Public Authority for Housing Welfare' projects. His Highness the Crown Prince also received Education Minister Dr Mudhaf. His Highness praised the educational process and its advancement, and the endeavor to establish the best educational systems. — KUNA



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Dr Ali Fahad Al-Mudhaf and members of the commission tasked with overhauling education.

Govt wants to withdraw...

Continued from Page 1

MP Thamer Al-Suwait said "an incompetent government comes up with bad solutions". MP Fares Al-Otaibi described the bill as "dangerous", adding

Boeing grounds, UK bans 777s...

Continued from Page 1

"It's nothing like the MAX," said Teal Group aviation analyst Richard Aboulafia. "After all these years of service it is unlikely to be a design issue with the engine, certainly it is something to do with maintenance." Boeing said all 128 of the 777 models with Pratt & Whitney engines were grounded following Saturday's emergency landing of United flight 328 to Hawaii.

"I have just had confirmation that all the 777s equipped with this engine have been grounded," a spokeswoman for the planemaker told AFP in a text message yesterday. And British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps announced a temporary ban on jets with Pratt & Whitney 4000-112 series engines from entering UK airspace. "I will continue to work closely with the (UK Civil Aviation Authority) to monitor the situation," he tweeted.

The Denver incident comes on heels of a similar problem in Japan in December. A video shot from inside the United aircraft - which had 229 passengers and 10 crew on board - showed the right engine ablaze and wobbling on the wing of the Boeing 777-200. Residents in the Denver suburb of Broomfield found large pieces of the plane scattered around their community.

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has ordered extra inspections of some passenger jets after the incident. "I have directed them to issue an Emergency Airworthiness Directive that would require immediate or stepped-up inspections of Boeing 777 airplanes equipped with certain Pratt & Whitney PW4000 engines," FAA chief Steve Dickson said in a statement.

Dickson said a preliminary safety data review

that failure to find viable solutions for the budget deficit threatens the future of Kuwait's finances.

Meanwhile, the legal and legislative committee yesterday approved a draft law calling on the government to purchase the personal loans of Kuwaiti citizens and exempt them from interest. It referred the bill to the financial and economic affairs committee for an in-depth study of the law. The committee also passed a law calling to compensate small and medium businesses affected by the coronavirus closures and referred it to the financial panel.

pointed to a need for additional checks of the jet engine's fan blades, which were unique to the model and only used on 777 planes. Officials from the FAA met with Pratt & Whitney and Boeing representatives on Sunday evening, he added. The US National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) said a preliminary investigation indicated two fan blades fractured on the number 2 engine on the plane.

"The airplane sustained minor damage," the NTSB said in a statement Sunday. "The examination and documentation of the airplane is ongoing." Pratt & Whitney said it was cooperating with the NTSB probe and "will continue to work to ensure the safe operation of the fleet". United said Sunday it was removing the aircraft from its schedule, "and will continue to work closely with regulators to determine any additional steps".

Japan's transport ministry earlier said it had ordered stricter inspections of engines after a Japan Airlines 777 plane flying from Haneda to Naha experienced trouble with "an engine in the same family" in December. Asiana Airlines, South Korea's second-largest carrier, also said it would not fly any of its seven currently operational 777s.

The engine failure is unwelcome news for Boeing, which only recently resumed deliveries of the 737 MAX following a 20-month global grounding after two tragic crashes killed 346 people. The MAX began returning to commercial service in late 2020, a time when commercial airline travel remains depressed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Boeing executives said last month they expect it will take about three years for activity to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Michel Merluzeau, an expert at consultancy AIR, agreed the latest problem did not appear to result from poor plane design by the aerospace giant. "It's not really a problem for Boeing," he said. "It's more an issue of maintenance - how United or Pratt & Whitney is maintaining engines that have been in use for a while". — AFP

Italian ambassador killed in DRC...

Continued from Page 1

cleared for travel without security escorts," it said. Yesterday's attack occurred north of Goma, in Nyiragongo Territory.

Armed groups in the area include a Rwandan Hutu militia called the FDLR, as well as the M23, also known as the Congolese Revolutionary Army. The region includes the UNESCO-listed Virunga National Park, a vast wildlife reserve that is home to a quarter of the world's population of critically endangered mountain gorillas. More than 200 of the park's rangers have been killed in attacks stretching back more than a decade. The UN's

refugee agency, the UNHCR, said last week that more than 2,000 civilians were killed in North and South Kivu and Ituri province last year.

Attanasio joined the Italian diplomatic service in 2003 and served previously in Switzerland, Morocco and Nigeria. He was hailed as "a man gifted with uncommon courage, humanity and professionalism" by Emanuela Del Re, who was deputy foreign minister from 2018 until last month. Del Re said she worked with Attanasio on the emergency repatriation of a "very sick" nun from DR Congo.

"I remember his infectious smile, his class, his great knowledge of African affairs," she said. "Ciao (good-bye) my dear esteemed Luca." Attanasio is the second European ambassador to have been killed while serving in the DRC. In Jan 1993, French ambassador Philippe Bernard was killed during riots in Kinshasa sparked by troops opposing dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. — AFP

Top US general in Mideast urges...

Continued from Page 1

"I think they would want to be recognized as a responsible member of the family of nations and a stable member in the region," McKenzie said.

The US accuses Iran of destabilizing the region through financial and military support for Shiite militant groups, especially in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Washington also accuses Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards of disrupting maritime traffic in the strategic Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint through which a fifth of world oil output passes.

The Strait of Hormuz was the focus of the US general's visit to Oman, officially intended to make contact with the country's new chief of staff, Rear Admiral Abdallah Ben Khamis Al-Raissi. On Saturday, he visited Oman's rugged peninsula at the naval base at Khassab, which controls maritime traffic in the strait from its side, flying over the sea towards the Iranian island of Qeshm. "We were about 28 miles (45 km) across the channel and we were looking at Qeshm island," he said. "It was a hazy day, couldn't see it," he added with a grin.

The visit passed off peacefully but security was tight, and the general did not rule out that Tehran would try to avenge revered Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, killed in an US drone strike in Baghdad in Jan 2020. "I think there's still a risk that they might entertain that as a course of action," he said. "Look,

we constantly assess our force protection here in the region. We look at that very hard. So I'm confident that we're ready for anything."

But he said he was not fearful himself that he was at risk of being attacked. "I'm an old Marine general," he said. "There's been a risk for me many times in many places. I'm confident that we have good force protection measures in place." Last month, a Twitter account linked to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei posted a call to avenge Soleimani that appeared to target former US President Donald Trump.

In Iraq in recent months, several rocket attacks that Washington blames on pro-Iran factions have hit bases used by the US military. The Sultanate of Oman is a US ally, which has several air bases in the country, with the navy using the southern port of Salalah. It has often acted as a mediator between Iran and its regional enemies, and played a key role in facilitating talks involving the US that led to the 2015 nuclear deal.

Oman, with a population of 4.5 million, is also a neighbor of Iran - and international sanctions against Tehran have hit Muscat's economy by impacting trade. Oman's ruler, Sultan Haitham, ascended to the throne in Jan 2020 after the death of his cousin, Sultan Qaboos, modern Oman's founding father. Qaboos transformed the former Arabian Peninsula backwater into a modern nation with a staunch policy of neutrality and non-interference. Sultan Haitham has made several changes to government and reshuffled the military leadership since he came to power, but he has vowed not to change the sultanate's policy. — AFP

Local

Kuwait reports 899 new COVID cases, five deaths

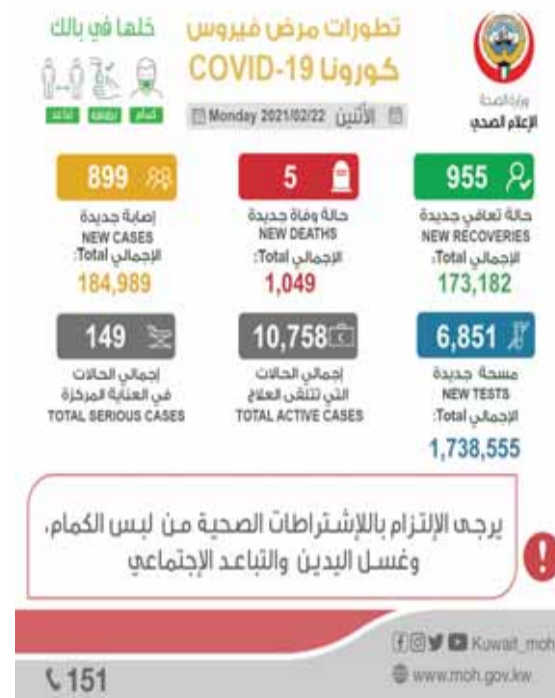
COVID-19 shots protect well against infection, says ministry

KUWAIT: Kuwait yesterday reported 899 new coronavirus cases and five COVID-related deaths, taking the total cases up to 184,989 and deaths to 1,049. The Ministry of Health also reported that 955 more people have been cured of the virus, raising the total of those to have overcome the disease to 173,182. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood yesterday at 10,758, with 149 of them in intensive care units, ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad told a press conference. He added that some 6,851 swab tests were conducted over the same period, bringing the total up to 1,738,555. He went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing, to help curb the spread of the virus.



Non-essential surgeries halted

health ministry said on Sunday, allaying concerns about the efficacy of the shots. Non-essential surgeries in Kuwait have been halted to ensure that health-care facilities are prepared to manage a potential influx of COVID-19 cases, as health ministry data continues to show an upward trajectory of new infections, Dr Sanad said. Conversely, the number of people to have recovered from COVID-19 in Kuwait has slightly increased, with the recovery rate now at 93.5 percent, a figure that still pales in comparison with the current pace of infection, added the spokesman. He revealed that the ratio of positive tests to total swabs sits at 12.8 percent, which indicates that the infection rate has not yet slowed, subsequently triggering a spike in hospital admissions for COVID-19. Despite the rising numbers, with at least 80 virus-induced deaths seen this month alone, the spokesman stressed that the national healthcare system remains well-prepared to deal with the outbreak. —KUNA



Message to every woman around the world
By Azzah Al-Ghamdi
local@kuwaittimes.net

In this article I would like to focus on an important issue faced by all women around the world. I will try to offer a suitable solution to protect them from pain and other problems. The issue is sexual exploitation, which has increased in the last few decades. Women face this issue in the entire world and not only in one state or another.

We notice that men sexually exploit women under the guise of love, and after they get bored, leave them with a lot of pain and tears. Many visit psychologists to continue with their lives and rebuild themselves. Some can but most cannot, especially if the woman still loves the man, who is not coming back. Another major thing is if a woman becomes pregnant and the man refuses to recognize the baby - this will cause trouble for such children when other children will ask them where is your father? Why don't you have a family like we have?

I don't want to ask the United Nations to set laws and penalties to protect women and children. I want all women around the world to protect themselves, learn how to deal cleverly with men and not be cheap. Chances of marriage and starting a family are becoming rarer these days. If we go back more than a 100 years, when it was not easy to have sexual relations with a woman because it was forbidden in the entire world, our grandmothers were happier than we are today. Because women were not easy to get, men saw women as something important.

Also, we have duality in morals in some societies, which give men all the rights to play with women and trick them. At the same time, they kill their female relatives if they have sexual relations with others under the name of religion. Some societies have no penalties for such killings. The victim in the end is always the woman.

So the most important issue that all women around the world should focus on is how we can protect ourselves in a system that is designed to disempower and cheapen women, and how can we protect each other from men's tricks. This needs support from the international media and also the UN, to place women's issues under their care.

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

Kuwait FM receives letter from Egyptian President to Amir

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah received yesterday a letter from Egyptian President AbdelFattah Al-Sisi to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah over boosting bilateral ties and issues of mutual interest. The letter was delivered by Egyptian Ambassador to Kuwait Tareq Al-Qouni during a meeting with Sheikh Dr Ahmad, a foreign ministry statement said. Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab Affairs Fahad Al-Awadhi and Deputy Foreign Minister for Minister's office Saleh Al-Loughani attended the meeting. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Egyptian Ambassador to Kuwait Tareq Al-Qouni hands over the letter to Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah. — KUNA

Defense Minister meets ambassadors

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah discussed joint cooperation with US Ambassador Alina Romanowski, Egyptian Ambassador Tareq Al-Qouni, and Turkey's Ambassador Ayse Koytak in separate meetings yesterday. The Directorate of Moral Guidance and Public Relations of the Kuwaiti Army said in a statement that during the meetings, they also discussed topics of common interest and ways to strengthen cooperation and work bonds between Kuwait and the brotherly countries, in addition to examining latest developments on the regional and international arenas. Chief of the Kuwaiti Army General Staff Lieutenant General Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah attended the meeting. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah meets US Ambassador Alina Romanowski. — Defense Ministry photo

News in brief

Info ministry fire
KUWAIT: Work resumed regularly at the headquarters of the Ministry of Information yesterday, following a fire that broke out in a ventilation hatch in the building, a ministry official said. The building was evacuated when smoke emanated from the burning spot, however all staff returned to the offices after the blaze was put out, the ministry's official spokesperson Anwar Murad said. The ministry, in cooperation with Kuwait Fire Force, is investigating the cause of the fire.

Travel ban
KUWAIT: Criminal security foiled an attempt to allow a wanted Lebanese man facing seven travel ban orders to leave the country, by arresting a Kuwaiti lawyer and his Lebanese client before departure, Al-Anbaa Arabic daily reported yesterday. Security sources quoted in the report said an employee at the airport reported a lawyer who offered her KD 1,000 to stamp the passport of a person banned from traveling. Both were arrested at the airport, and the incident was documented with video and audio. Both suspects confessed to the charges and were sent to concerned authorities for further legal action.

Foul language
KUWAIT: A 30-year-old investigator was surprised by a Kuwaiti, 63, who entered his office and demanded to complete investigations in a traffic accident quickly. He also used foul language, adding "my daughter is a doctor - we do not have time for this," Al-Anbaa Arabic daily reported yesterday. The case was referred to criminal detectives for further investigations. The suspect denied his actions, but a Bangladeshi witness contradicted his claims, so a case was filed.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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Top Chinese official visits Kuwait today

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ambassador to China Samih Hayat said yesterday a high-ranking Chinese official is scheduled to start a visit to Kuwait today, during which he will deliver a message from Chinese President Xi Jinping to the political leadership regarding bilateral ties. Hayat added that the visit of Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs, at the head of a high-level delegation to Kuwait, is a vital addition to Chinese diplomacy to joining hands with Kuwaiti diplomacy in strengthening and consolidating strategic ties between both countries at all fields for 50 years.

Yang's visit is one of the ongoing visits of consultation and coordination between both countries' officials, which will further strengthen the distinguished relations, and will achieve many results due to good planning in advance. Bilateral talks between them will be profound with limitless strategic dimensions in all aspects of cooperation and various fields, Hayat pointed out.

There is a previous and vital harmony between the Kuwait 2035 Vision and the Belt and Road Initiative to revive the Silk Road and establish a vital trade zone serving the countries of the world by air and sea, plus contributing to the prosperity of the global economy, which resulted in signing several agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), that reached 60, he mentioned. Hayat commended the joint statement issued in July 2018 on strengthening the comprehensive strategic ties, underscoring that this would open opportunities, prospects, as well as new areas of cooperation between Kuwait and China in the next stage that will benefit the interests of their people. Kuwait and China celebrate on March 22 the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties that officially began in 1971. —KUNA

Zain celebrates joys of Kuwait with all-new National Day TVC

Views exceeded one million in first days of launch



KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced the launch of its latest National Day television commercial for 2021, starring great Kuwaiti singer Sulaiman Al-Qassar along with aspiring Kuwaiti stars Haneen Al-Kandari and Nasser Al-Meshari. The national production features lyrics by Kuwaiti poet Safer, and was composed by Bashar Al-Shatti and directed by Khalid Al-Refai.

As it does every year, Zain launched its National production to mark the celebration of Kuwait's National and Liberation days on February. This year, the celebrations are even more special as the country commemorates the 60th anniversary of its Independence Day and 30th anniversary of its Liberation Day. The TVC, which reflects national pride and values with its wonderful lyrics and beautiful music, has exceeded one million views on Zain's official YouTube channel during the first days of its launch.

The current circumstances witnessed by Kuwait and the entire world has inspired Zain to select fast-paced and cheerful music mixed along with hopeful lyrics in an attempt to spread positivity in the nation's future. In the TVC, singer Sulaiman Al-Qassar - who is locally renowned for performing wedding ceremonies - introduces Kuwait as the bride and praises its beauty in melodies inspired by Kuwaiti wedding ceremonies. Zain has handpicked Kuwaiti youngsters Haneen Al-Kandari and Nasser Al-Meshari to perform parts of the TVC to reflect its strong belief in the unlimited talents of Kuwait's youth.

Zain hosted a LIVE virtual event on its official Instagram channel to celebrate the launch of the new TVC. The event attracted large numbers of followers



and viewers, who were keen on learning about the behind-the-scenes story of the TVC and take part in the many exciting national-themed entertainment segments presented by social media star Hamad Qalam. The company gave away many valuable prizes, smart devices, and accessories to participants in a joyful national atmosphere. Zain was keen on celebrating the joyous occasion in a virtual format in support of public measures and great sacrifices exerted by frontliners to protect the health and safety of everyone.

Zain takes this opportunity to express its gratitude to everyone who contributed to making this national production a success. Special thanks go to great singer Sulaiman Al-Qassar and aspiring stars Haneen Al-Kandari and Nasser Al-Meshari for their exceptional performance, Bashar Al-Shatti for composing, Khalid Al-Refai for directing, Najim for music arrangement,



Rabea Saydawi for mix and master, Ahmad Al-Hati for studio and vocal recordings, Fikra Productions for casting, Sara Al-Muhana for art direction, Mohammad Samir for directing photography, as well as Joy Production's team headed by Mai Al-Saleh, and PH All Over Group's team.

US, Palestine, Pakistan envoys congratulate Kuwait

KUWAIT: US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski released a statement yesterday to congratulate Kuwait on its national holidays. "On behalf of the US Embassy, I'd like to congratulate His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the people of Kuwait on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Kuwait's Independence and 30 years since the Liberation," the ambassador said in the statement. "Three decades ago, the US stood by our Kuwaiti friends to build an international coalition that expelled Saddam's forces from the country. Our relationship has only grown stronger since. I'd like to congratulate the people of Kuwait on this momentous occasion in the shared history of our countries."

Palestinian Ambassador to Kuwait Rami Tahboub sent a similar statement, expressing congratulations to Kuwait on this occasion. "On behalf of the President of the State of Palestine and Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Executive Committee Mahmoud Abbas, and on behalf of the Palestinian community in the State of Kuwait and myself, I congratulate His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Parliament Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh

Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti people on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Independence and 30th anniversary of Liberation," the ambassador said. "I pray to Allah Almighty to bestow health upon His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince, and guide them for all that is good for Kuwait and its people, and to protect Kuwait against all evils."

In the meantime, Ambassador of Pakistan to Kuwait Syed Sajjad Haider released a 'felicitation message' on the occasion of Kuwait's national holidays. "On behalf of the government and people of Pakistan, and on my own behalf, I would like to convey warm felicitations to His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, on the auspicious occasion of the National Day of the State of Kuwait," the ambassador wrote in the message.

"Pakistan and Kuwait are linked by historic bonds of common faith, civilization and culture," the ambassador added. "It is our earnest desire to further solidify the mutually beneficial relations in all spheres of cooperation. I would like to extend my wishes of long lasting prosperity, success and peace to the friendly people of Kuwait. I believe that the relations of friendship and cooperation between the Pakistan and Kuwait will continue to further strengthen for the mutual benefit of two countries and people in the years to come. On this gracious occasion, I wish the State of Kuwait, its leadership, the government and the glorious people, my best wishes for peace, happiness and prosperity."

NBK trains ports security affairs' staff

KUWAIT: As part of its contributions in developing the capabilities of human resources in government bodies, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is organizing a training program for the staff of Ports Security Affairs of the Ministry of Interior on the protocols of dealing with the public and customer service. The program is attended by 75 participants and comprises several sessions and workshops.

The program was launched in a reception ceremony in the presence of Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior for Ports Security Affairs, Major General Mansour M Al-Awadhi, and Emad Al-Ablani, General Manager of Group Human Resources at National Bank of Kuwait.

On this occasion, Ablani said: "At NBK, we are pleased with this partnership aiming to provide training for MOI Ports Security Affairs staff, as it reflects the trust placed in NBK as a leading bank with strong relationships with the local community."

"NBK harnesses all its capabilities and takes it upon itself to develop human resources, as part of its partnerships with all institutions, especially government, and in line with the bank's social and development commitments. In addition, the bank organizes various initiatives on annual basis, stemming from its belief in the effective impact of these



programs in serving the society and its people, as well as reflecting the leading role it has been playing in this field for long decades," he added.

Ablani pointed out that NBK's partnerships with different government bodies stems from the bank's unshakable belief in the importance of strengthening cooperation between the public and private sectors, noting that the bank is always seeking to consolidate and expand these partnerships with the aim of developing the Kuwaiti national cadres.

NBK's training initiatives reflect its profound vision for investing in human resources. To this end, the bank engages a selection of their most reputable experts to share their expertise with these promising cadres. The bank aspires to aid in the development of human resources in Kuwait's public institutions, as part of its partnerships with all institutions, especially the government, and in line with the bank's social and development commitments.

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 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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US nears 500,000 COVID deaths as vaccine drives gather momentum

EU warns Myanmar, mulls sanctions on Russia over Navalny crackdown

Page 7

Page 6



VIENNA: Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Mariano Grossi addresses the media after his arrival at Vienna International Airport. —AFP

IAEA, Iran hammer out 'temporary deal'

Tehran says IAEA chief's visit led to 'significant achievement'

TEHRAN: Iran yesterday hailed a visit by the UN nuclear watchdog chief and a temporary agreement on site inspections as a "significant achievement", amid international efforts to salvage its troubled nuclear deal. US President Joe Biden, European powers and Tehran are trying to keep alive Iran's 2015 nuclear agreement that has been on the brink of collapse since Donald Trump withdrew from it almost three years ago.

Tehran demands Washington take the first step by scrapping sanctions Trump reimposed since 2018, while Washington insists Iran first return to all its nuclear commitments, some of which it has backed away from. In the standoff, Iran's parliament last year demanded that Tehran by today this week limit some inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) if sanctions were not lifted by a deadline two days before then.

IAEA chief Rafael Grossi on Sunday held last-ditch talks in Tehran, where the two sides hammered out a temporary technical deal for up to three months that is in line with the Iranian parliament's

demands. They confirmed that Iran will continue to allow access to UN inspectors to its declared nuclear sites.

But Iran will temporarily suspend so-called "voluntary transparency measures"—notably inspections of non-nuclear sites, including military sites suspected of nuclear-related activity.

Tehran will also deny the IAEA real-time access to footage from surveillance cameras installed at some sites and, if sanctions are not lifted within three months, delete it, Iran's Atomic Energy Organization has said.

Not 'flying blind'

Grossi said afterwards that under the new temporary understanding "there is less access" but that the IAEA will be able to "retain the necessary degree of monitoring and verification work". The last-minute deal had prevented the IAEA from "flying blind", he said, adding that now "political discussions at other levels can take place".

Iran's foreign ministry yesterday hailed the out-

come, saying it complied with parliament's demands and "resulted in a very significant diplomatic achievement and a very significant technical achievement". The United States and Iran have been bitter enemies since the 1970s, and Washington accuses Iran of destabilizing the region through support for Shiite Muslim militant groups, especially in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.

Animosity deepened under Trump, whose diplomatic and economic "maximum pressure" campaign has denied Iran crucial oil revenues and cut it off from global banking, deepening its economic woes.

Under Trump, the United States and Iran came to the brink of war several times, most recently early last year when a US drone strike in Baghdad killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.

'Soberly, cautiously'

Biden has sought to resume diplomacy with Iran and rescue the nuclear deal that was struck with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany while he served under former

US president Barack Obama. The parties to the deal with Iran saw it as the best way to stop the Islamic republic from building a nuclear bomb—a goal Tehran has always denied.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif warned Sunday that if the sanctions are not lifted, his nation would continue scaling back its commitments under the nuclear deal.

The stockpile of "enriched uranium will increase", he said, stressing that Tehran had the right within the agreement to stop observing commitments "totally or partially" if the other parties fail to honour theirs. "We are still in the partial phase," Zarif said. "We can be total."

The head of US forces in the Middle East, General Kenneth McKenzie, in an AFP interview Sunday urged Iran to refrain from any provocation and not to undertake any "nefarious activities", in a bid to rebuild trust. "I would think this would be a good time for everybody to behave soberly and cautiously, and see what happens," said the head of the US Army Central Command. — AFP



NEW YORK: Reggie Wood and the Ilyasah Shabazz (left), Qubillah Shabazz (center) and Gamilah Shabazz (right) daughters of Malcolm X during a news conference to present new evidence in the assassination of the civil rights activists in New York City. —AFP

Malcolm X's family calls to reopen probe into murder

NEW YORK: The daughters of prominent Black activist Malcolm X have called to reopen the investigation into his murder in light of new testimony implicating the New York police and the FBI.

"Any evidence that provides greatest insight into the truth behind that terrible tragedy should be thoroughly investigated," said Ilyasah Shabazz, one of Malcolm X's six daughters, during a press conference on Saturday. Considered alongside Martin Luther King Jr as one of the most influential African Americans in history, Malcolm X

was an outspoken Muslim advocate of Black rights, although critics said he preached racism and violence.

He was gunned down during a public speaking appearance in New York in February 1965.

When contacted Sunday by AFP, a spokesman for the Manhattan district attorney said the office's "review" of the case is "active and ongoing." During the press conference, a letter written by former New York police officer Raymond Wood, now deceased, was read out, in which he accused the NYPD and FBI of being complicit in the killing.

According to his cousin, Wood, who was Black and worked as an undercover operative, claimed to have approached Malcolm X's entourage on orders from his higher-ups.

Wood said he set up two of the activist's bodyguards, who were arrested only a few days before the murder. On February 21, 1965 — 55 years ago to the day—El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, Malcolm

X's Muslim name, sans the two bodyguards, was shot dead by three gunmen as he prepared to give a speech in the Audubon Ballroom, a theater in Harlem, in the north of Manhattan.

Wood, who did not want his testimony to become public until after his death, maintained that the New York police department and the FBI kept certain aspects of the case secret.

In February 2020, after the Netflix release of the docuseries "Who Killed Malcolm X?", Manhattan district attorney Cyrus Vance asked his teams to review the case in order to determine whether or not the investigation should be reopened. When contacted Sunday by AFP, the New York police said it had released "all available records relevant to that case" to the DA's office.

The NYPD "remains committed to assist with that review in any way," a spokesperson said. The FBI's New York office did not respond to AFP's request for comment. — AFP

Algerians hit streets on protest 'versary

ALGIERS: Thousands of Algerians marched yesterday in the capital and other cities to mark the second anniversary of the North African nation's anti-government "Hirak" protest movement, AFP journalists said. The protest movement in April 2019 forced longtime president Abdelaziz Bouteflika into resigning, and yesterday's demonstration in Algiers is the largest since rallies were suspended in March last year in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Police were deployed in force in Algiers, with helicopters hovering overhead. "We are not here to celebrate, but to demand your departure," the protesters shouted, referring to a regime that they see as being little changed from the one headed for two decades by Bouteflika.

"The fateful hour has arrived," read one banner brandished by demonstrators. Security checkpoints created traffic jams across the city, with identity checks carried out around key flashpoints, with several arrests made.

Police tried to block protesters from gathering around the Grand Post Office, which was at the heart of the mass protests that kicked off in Algiers and several other cities on February 22, 2019 to oppose Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term. Elsewhere in the country, marches were being held yesterday including in Annaba, Oran, Setif and Mostaganem, according to witnesses and accounts on social media.

'Same old people'

Demonstrators kept up their action after Bouteflika's resignation,

demanding a sweeping overhaul of a ruling system in place since Algeria's independence from France in 1962. They only suspended marches last March due to coronavirus restrictions, but calls circulated on social media for a return to the streets from yesterday.

On the eve of the anniversary, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, elected in December 2019 on a very low turnout in a poll boycotted by the protest movement, announced a limited government reshuffle, in a bid to head off renewed rallies. The reshuffle saw few major changes by Tebboune, who was once a prime minister under Bouteflika. Among those retained are Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad and Justice Minister Belkacem Zeghmati, seen as a symbol of Algeria's judicial crackdown on protesters and opposition activists.

Tebboune also signed a decree dissolving parliament, clearing the way for early elections, for which no date has yet been set. In a gesture of appeasement on Thursday, he announced pardons which have led so far to the release of almost 40 pro-democracy activists, including opposition figure Rachid Nekkaz and journalist Khaled Drareni, who has become a symbol of a struggle for a free press.

Zaki Hannache, a 33-year-old activist, said Hirak supporters were unimpressed by the president's reshuffle and his call for early legislative polls. "The reshuffle doesn't interest me, it's the same old people. Same thing with parliament, the new ones (deputies) will work, like the current regime, for their own interests, not for the people," he said.

Last Tuesday, thousands of Algerians rallied in the northern town of Kherrata, where the first major protest erupted in 2019 against Bouteflika's bid for a fifth presidential term. The first nation-wide protests were held a week later. — AFP

International

US nears 500,000 COVID deaths as vaccine drives gather momentum

Global toll approaching 2.5 million, but winter's massive spike in infections dropping

WASHINGTON: The United States stood on the brink of 500,000 COVID-related deaths yesterday, while the vaccination rollout picked up pace globally including with the first shots in Australia. The catastrophic US toll comes as some signs of hope are emerging in the world's hardest-hit country, with millions of people now vaccinated and winter's massive spike in infections dropping. But deaths are still coming, and President Joe Biden last month warned that "well over" 600,000 people in the US could die from the virus. "It's terrible. It is historic. We haven't seen anything even close to this for well over a hundred years, since the 1918 pandemic of influenza," Biden's chief medical advisor Anthony Fauci told NBC's "Meet The Press."

"It's something that is stunning when you look at the numbers, almost unbelievable, but it's true," Fauci added. The US toll stood at 498,897 by yesterday morning, according to Johns Hopkins University. Globally, the figure was approaching 2.5 million.

Normal 'by end of year'

After America's first COVID-19 death was announced in February last year, it took about three months to pass the 100,000 mark, during a first wave that hit New York particularly hard. But as the outbreak surged across the country, the pace of deaths increased, with the toll jumping from 400,000 in just over a month after a spike fueled in part by holiday gatherings.

Fauci noted the number of daily new infections was on a steep decline after peaking in January, but he added normal life may still be some way off. "I think we'll have a significant degree of normality... as we get into the fall and the winter, by the end of the year," Fauci said on CNN's "State of the Union."

Meanwhile India, the world's second worst-hit nation



NEW YORK: In this file photo Sandra Lindsay (left), a nurse at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, is inoculated with the COVID-19 vaccine by Dr Michelle Chester, at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, in the Queens borough of New York. — AFP

in terms of infections, passed a bleak threshold yesterday by registering its 11 millionth case following a renewed rise in cases. Fresh restrictions on gatherings came into force in the western state of Maharashtra, home to financial capital Mumbai, which has logged almost 52,000 deaths since the start of the pandemic. The vast nation's inoculation drive is creeping slowly, and India's Serum Institute—the world's biggest vaccine maker—has urged other countries to be "patient," saying it has been told to prioritize the home market. In the capital New Delhi, vegetable vendor Radhekrishna

Negi spoke for many around the world, telling AFP: "I am fed up of corona."

Vaccination rollouts

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 61 million people have received at least one shot of vaccine in the United States, with some 18 million getting the full two doses. Biden has made it a priority to get 100 million people vaccinated within the first 100 days of his administration. In Australia, top officials Sunday were among a small group receiving the first vaccinations, a day before the program starts in earnest. Prime Minister Scott Morrison got the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine at a medical center in Sydney, in what the government said was a bid to boost public confidence after some anti-vaccine protests. And in Gaza on Sunday, some 20,000 Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine doses arrived from the United Arab Emirates. The jabs came via the Rafah crossing with Egypt, meaning they did not pass through Israel, which has maintained a tight blockade on Gaza since 2007.

Britain's government has vowed to offer a first dose to every adult by the end of July. More than 17 million people have now received at least a first vaccine dose—one third of the adult UK population. Prime Minister Boris Johnson was yesterday set to start unwinding England's third lockdown as a quickening UK-wide inoculation drive relieves pressure on hard-hit hospitals. Johnson is expected to confirm the reopening of all English schools on March 8 in the first big step towards restoring normal life, nearly a year after he imposed the first stay-at-home order. In Hong Kong, leader Carrie Lam received a shot of the Chinese Sinovac drug after the financial hub last week fast-tracked its approval. — AFP



MOSUL: The Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Mosul Najeeb Michael (left) chats with a young resident the old part of the northern city of Mosul, during a tour to follow the progress of restoration works there. — AFP

Amid scars of war, Iraqi archbishop readies for pope

KARAMLESH, Iraq: From Mosul's rubble-strewn streets to ancient churches at Karamlesh, badly damaged by the Islamic State group, Archbishop Najeeb Michael is preparing for the first-ever papal visit to Iraq. Amid the cleanup and reconstruction, the priest has ensured some scars of war from IS's brutal campaign remain—a broken chalice, a smashed cross on a church bell tower—to remember the horrors the Christians of Iraq's Nineveh plains have survived. "We forgive, without forgetting," said Michael, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, as he visited Karamlesh and other war-ravaged Christian villages of northern Iraq.

"But the most important thing is that joy enters the hearts of all, because this is not a simple formal visit—it is a spiritual moment," he said with an infectious smile. Since he learnt that Pope Francis would visit Iraq in March, the clergyman has seen his workload double. "We're under enormous pressure: the Holy Father is not your average person—he's the representative of a state and of all Catholics worldwide," Michael told AFP.

Ancient churches in ruins

Pope Francis has previously shied away from using bullet-proof vehicles in favour of a more open "popemobile", the better to meet people, but that may be difficult in a country where security threats still linger. Aged 84, he may also struggle to make his way through the uneven pavements and debris-filled alleyways of Mosul. "Everyone is going to want to get close to him, so it's a huge job," said Michael. "All security officials are going to be on their toes." Michael checks on preparations by local choirs and scout troops.

He also coordinates with priests who will translate masses between Latin, Arabic, Italian and a form of Aramaic, the ancient language of Jesus Christ, that is still spoken in Iraq's north. It will be a first for the pope, too, as he will preside over his first-ever liturgy in the Eastern rite. There is no cathedral or stadium large enough to hold the numbers of worshippers expected to turn up for a mass in Nineveh province, but authorities are working on a possible open-air venue. In the interim, Michael is checking on more than a dozen churches—many dating back to the 5th and 6th centuries—that remain in ruins. One is Miskinta Church, still heavily damaged, but the worst is the church of Saint Simon, its stone walls collapsing and its crypts filled with rubble and rubbish.

'Mosaic of a thousand colors'

Michael, a native of Mosul, a melting pot of Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious communities, worked as an oil engineer before he answered a calling to join the Church. He is well known for his work in 2014 saving hundreds of rare manuscripts and scrolls by piling them into his car as IS was approaching. Now, Michael wants to show the pope the beauty of Iraq's patchwork of minorities. "This country is a mosaic of a thousand colors, and you can't leave it broken apart the way it is today," he said. Michael told AFP that the pope's "strong words, his blessing, and his moral support" would help bring communities back together. It is a view that lies at the heart of the pope's visit, especially when he holds inter-religious prayers at the ancient city of Ur in Iraq's south. — AFP

Governor Greg Abbott met with legislators of both parties Saturday to discuss the billing problem and said, "We have a responsibility to protect Texans from spikes in their energy bills."

For his part, Turner said "those exorbitant costs (should be) borne by the state of Texas, and not the individual consumers who did not cause this catastrophe." President Joe Biden on Saturday issued a major-disaster declaration for much of the state, providing badly needed financial and administrative aid. His spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Sunday that Biden hoped to visit Texas "as early as this week" if he could do so without interfering with recovery efforts. Michael McCaul, a Republican congressman from Texas, said the financial impact of the weather crisis could equal that of Hurricane Harvey, a devastating 2017 storm that caused an estimated \$125 billion in damages.

He said Biden's emergency declaration could provide funds to help users pay their exorbitant electric bills. State and local officials have demanded investigations of how the power crisis unfolded so disastrously. A US senator, Tina Smith, a Democrat of Minnesota, has called for a federal investigation. She said spot prices of natural gas had spiked by up to 100 times normal rates, and utilities passed the higher rates on to customers. — AFP



BARCELONA: Catalan regional police 'Mossos d'Esquadra' officers detain a protester following clashes after a demonstration against the imprisonment of Spanish rapper Pablo Hasel in Barcelona. — AFP

Rapper's arrest last straw for Spain's young protesters

BARCELONA: At Saturday's protest, a hood covers one young woman's hair, a mask her face. Only her dark eyes can be seen staring out at the latest demonstration in Barcelona against the jailing of Spanish rapper Pablo Hasel. Hasel was jailed for a string of tweets which were found to be "glorifying terrorism" in what his supporters say illustrates the lack of free speech in Spain. But for Maria (not her real name), his arrest and imprisonment last week was the spark that lit a larger bonfire of other grievances. "We are fed up with injustices, job insecurity, repression and this has made us explode," the 20-year-old history student said.

The protests have been going since Tuesday in Barcelona, when police forced their way past barricades at the Catalan university where Hasel and his supporters were holed up to arrest him. In the nights that followed, police and protesters clashed repeatedly in the streets of Barcelona, Spain's second city and the capital of the northeast region of Catalonia. They fought at the makeshift barricades, around the burning dumpsters in the streets of the city. The unrest spread to other cities in the region, where separatist sentiments run deep and suspicion of Madrid is strong. In Vic, for example, 11 police officers were injured after demonstrators attacked a police station there. Police

detained 38 people and there were 13 people injured during Saturday night's clashes across Catalonia.

'Society is collapsing'

Over the last few nights, young people's growing anger has overwhelmed any fear they might have about clashing with the police. Protesters have jumped on to police cars, even chased them. Nor have police charges—and the firing of foam rounds that have already cost one young woman protester an eye—deterred them. "It's really scary to come here and to be arrested, take a beating or lose an eye," said Maria. "But it's scarier to stay at home and not to fight for our rights." This is not her first time protesting on the streets.

She was among those who protested in October 2019, during the five nights of unrest in Barcelona after a court handed down jail terms to nine Catalan separatist leaders for their failed 2017 independence bid. This time round, the protests have spread beyond Catalonia to cities across Spain, including the capital Madrid, Valencia in the east and Granada in the south. And most of those on the streets have been young people. The unrest has also allowed others to exploit the chaos to loot luxury shops, hotels and even car dealerships.

"There are a lot of things behind it," another student protester, Alba, told AFP. Don't let her frail physique and soft voice mislead you. Even at just 20 years old, she has years of experience as a climate activist behind her—and her message is uncompromising. "We see that society is collapsing on many levels—economically, ecologically, socially—and our generation will be the one to pay the bill," she said. "We are fighting because we refuse to be a lost generation." — AFP

Anger over huge power bills in Texas weather crisis

HOUSTON: Millions of Texans were still without safe water on Sunday as officials fielded angry complaints over shockingly large power bills spawned by a cold weather crisis that Houston's mayor said was ultimately preventable. The frigid air mass that paralyzed parts of the southern and central United States early in the week claimed more than 70 lives, left millions temporarily without power and froze water lines.

"All of what happened this week was foreseeable and preventable," Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner told CBS's "Face the Nation," saying it had long been clear that the independent electric grid in Texas was vulnerable to extreme weather. Turner said Houston, the fourth-largest US city, still needed both plumbing supplies and plumbers, but was making progress in restoring service.

Both Houston and nearby Galveston on Sunday lift-



HOUSTON, Texas: An electrical substation is reflected in the window of a dress shop on Sunday in Houston, Texas. — AFP

ed orders for residents to boil drinking water. But some 28,000 households remained without electricity on Sunday, the poweroutage.us website said, and many Texans were suffering an added insult: residential electric bills sometimes running into the thousands of

dollars, with one as high as \$16,000. While most of the state's utility customers are on fixed-rate plans, some had signed up to variable-rate plans that can save money in fair weather but produce explosive increases in frigid temperatures.

International

EU warns Myanmar, mulls sanctions on Russia over Navalny crackdown

19 Venezuelan officials blacklisted for 'undermining democracy'

BRUSSELS: The EU yesterday warned Myanmar's military rulers it was ready to impose sanctions over this month's coup, as foreign ministers also prepared to target those behind Russia's crackdown on Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. The ministers from the 27-nation bloc met in Brussels for a packed agenda that includes a wide-ranging videoconference with new US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Shortly after the start, they issued a statement on Myanmar, saying "the EU stands ready to adopt restrictive measures targeting those directly responsible for the military coup and their economic interests". They called for "a de-escalation of the current crisis" triggered by the February 1 military coup in Myanmar and demanded that the overthrown civilian government be restored.

The ministers did agree to move ahead and add 19 Venezuelan officials to a blacklist for "undermining democracy" and human rights abuses after the EU rejected legislative elections in December as undemocratic. There were also expectations they would pull the trigger on sanctions against Russian officials over the jailing of opposition leader Navalny and repression of his supporters.

Any such move would come two weeks after EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell was caught in a diplomatic ambush in Moscow that enraged member states. Capitals are eyeing using the EU's new human rights sanctions regime for the first time to hit individuals responsible for the Russian clampdown with asset freezes and visa bans, diplomats said. "It's clear that Russia is on a confrontational course with the European Union," Borrell said, calling for a "united and determined" response.

Targeted sanctions

Diplomats said they expect a political agreement to be reached on punishing Russian officials—with the list of names to be worked out in the coming days. "There is a very large majority supporting the adoption of new sanctions," Romania's Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu said. Two of Navalny's closest associates called for the targeting of President Vladimir Putin's closest allies—including oligarchs—after meetings with eight EU foreign ministers in Brussels.

"If it's just ten Kremlin officials who don't travel abroad and don't have assets abroad, then, indeed, it would not be painful," Navalny's key aide Leonid Volkov said. European diplomats say only those directly implicated in the clampdown can be targeted because the list needs to withstand any court challenge. The mood towards Moscow has hardened in the wake of Borrell's disastrous trip to Russia, during which Moscow announced the expulsion of three European diplomats and rebuffed talk of cooperation. The EU has already hit Russia with waves of sanctions over the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Moscow's fuelling of the war in Ukraine.

The bloc in October slapped six officials on a blacklist over the August poisoning of Navalny with Novichok, a nerve agent. Putin's most prominent domestic critic was this month jailed for almost three years after returning to Russia following treatment in Germany. His sentencing sparked nationwide protests that saw baton-wielding security forces detain thousands of people.

Blinken calling

The ongoing repression in Belarus is set to feature



BRUSSELS: Chief of Staff and Political director of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Leonid Volkov (center left) and CEO of the Anti-Corruption foundation, Ivan Zhdanov (center right) give a press conference at the Lithuanian Embassy in Brussels yesterday. —AFP

as the EU weighs whether it needs to introduce a fourth round of sanctions against President Alexander Lukashenko's regime. Ministers are also set to discuss China's crackdown on Hong Kong and see if the EU needs to beef up its response as Beijing tightens its grip. The focus will pivot to cooperation when Blinken joins for his first full talks with the bloc, with all sides looking to put the tensions of the

Trump era behind them. The discussion looks likely to range from a joint approach to common adversaries like Russia and China to the pressing issue of trying to bring the US back into the Iran deal. The EU is currently looking to broker a meeting between Washington, Tehran and other signatories—including Moscow—to try to work out how to salvage the accord after Trump quit it in 2018. —AFP

Huge anti-coup rallies in Myanmar after junta threat

YANGON: Hundreds of thousands of anti-coup protesters rallied across Myanmar again yesterday after a clear threat from the junta that it was prepared to use lethal force to crush what it branded as "anarchy". The warning came after three demonstrators were shot dead over the weekend, and the funeral on Sunday for a young woman who died from bullet wounds at an earlier rally. International alarm continued to build, with the United Nations chief yesterday condemning the military's "brutal force", and the European Union announcing it was ready to impose sanctions on the junta.

Massive street demonstrations have taken place since Myanmar's military staged a coup on February 1 and detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, ending a decade-long experiment with democracy. A civil disobedience campaign has also since choked many government operations, as well as businesses and banks, and the junta late Sunday gave its most ominous signal yet that its patience was wearing thin. "Protesters are now inciting the people, especially emotional teenagers and youths, to a confrontation path where they will suffer the loss of life," said a statement on state-run broadcaster MRTV.

The statement, read out in Burmese with text of the English version on the screen, cautioned protesters against inciting "riot and anarchy". But pro-



YANGON: Protesters mass around vehicles as they block roads during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon yesterday. —AFP

testers yesterday were undeterred by the warning, with hundreds of thousands rallying in Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city and commercial hub. "We came out today to join in the protest, to fight until we win," said Kyaw Kyaw, a 23-year-old university student. "We are worried about the crackdown, but we will move forward. We are so angry." Residents had woken up yesterday to a heavier security presence, including police and military trucks on the roads and an embassy district barricaded. Tens of thousands of professionals and public servants also rallied in Naypyidaw, the capital and a military

stronghold. There were large protests in other cities, including Myitkyina and Dawei.

Myanmar's generals had already responded to the uprising by gradually ratcheting up the use of force, and the number of political prisoners. Troops and police have used rubber bullets, tear gas, water cannon and some live rounds. On the weekend, two people were killed when security forces fired at protesters in the city of Mandalay, and a third man was shot dead in Yangon. A young woman also died on Friday after being shot in the head at a protest and spending almost a fortnight on life support. —AFP

Malaysia urged to halt Myanmar deportations

LUMUT, Malaysia: Malaysia faced calls yesterday to halt the deportation of 1,200 Myanmar nationals on navy ships to their homeland weeks after a coup, with the United States the latest to voice concerns. The migrants, who include members of vulnerable minorities, are set to be repatriated Tuesday aboard three vessels sent from Myanmar, where the military seized power at the start of February. The ships arrived at the weekend and docked at a naval base at Lumut, on Malaysia's west coast.

The US embassy in Kuala Lumpur told AFP it had expressed concerns and urged authorities to allow the UN refugee agency access to the detained Myanmar nationals, which would allow them to assess if any were asylum seekers. The refugee agency has said at least six among

those to be deported are registered with the body and in need of international protection, but it has not had access to the vast majority of them. Amy Smith, executive director of Fortify Rights, said that the planned deportation "puts lives at risk and gives undeserving legitimacy to the abusive military coup in Myanmar".

"This is a time to extend protection to people fleeing Myanmar and grant the UN access, not put them into the hands of a military junta with a long track record of serious human rights violations." Among those to be deported are members of the Christian Chin minority and people from conflict-riven Kachin and Shan states, according to Lillianne Fan, international director of the Geutanyoe Foundation which works with refugees.



LUMUT, Malaysia: Myanmar vessels UMS Than Lwin (right) and UMS Sin Phyu Shin, which will be used to deport Myanmar migrants from Malaysia back to their homeland, are seen docked at a jetty in Lumut, outside Kuala Lumpur yesterday. —AFP

Officials say those being repatriated have committed offences including overstaying their visas and no members of the Rohingya Muslim minority, who are not recognized as citizens in Myanmar, will be repatriated.

Malaysia is home to millions of migrants from poorer parts of Asia who work in low-pay jobs such as construction. As well as Myanmar, they come from countries including Bangladesh and Indonesia. —AFP

Manila OKs China jab but health workers may miss

MANILA: The Philippines' drug regulator gave emergency approval yesterday to the Chinese-made Sinovac coronavirus vaccine, with the first doses set to arrive this week—but health workers will not get the jab due to its comparatively low efficacy. CoronaVac is the third vaccine approved for emergency use in the country, but so far none have been delivered and President Rodrigo Duterte's government is under fire over the delayed rollout. Beijing has agreed to donate 600,000 doses, which will

arrive in the next three to five days, officials said—despite misgivings over its safety and effectiveness.

"It is decided... that the benefit of using the vaccine outweighs the known and potential risks," said Eric Domingo, head of the Food and Drug Administration. The CoronaVac can be given to "clinically healthy" adults aged 18 to 59, but was not recommended for frontline health workers or the elderly, he said. Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said workers considered essential to the economy and soldiers were likely to receive the first jabs. Although trials in Turkey found CoronaVac to be 91.25 percent effective, other, more robust trials in Brazil only demonstrated an efficacy rate of around 50 percent.

Roque defended the push to use the Sinovac vaccine, saying "it's better than not having protection at all." Many world leaders have been among

the first in their countries to receive jabs to boost public confidence. But Duterte preferred to wait for a different Chinese vaccine made by state-owned Sinopharm, Roque said, citing the president's old age. The Sinopharm vaccine was secretly given to members of Duterte's security team last year even though it had not been approved for use.

The government is in talks with seven vaccine makers, including Sinovac, in the hope of securing enough doses to inoculate 70 million people—about 60 percent of the population—this year. But the lack of transparency and delays in delivery of the first doses have fuelled criticism of the government over its handling of the health crisis. More than 560,000 cases of coronavirus have been recorded in the country, including over 12,000 deaths. Social distancing rules and travel restrictions have crippled the economy. —AFP

Top Chinese official outlines plan to ensure 'patriots' run Hong Kong

HONG KONG: A top Chinese official yesterday outlined plans to ensure only "patriots" run Hong Kong as Beijing seeks to neuter any remaining democratic opposition and take a more direct role in how the business hub is run. The landmark speech by Xia Baolong, head of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, came just two weeks ahead of the annual meeting of China's rubber-stamp legislature as speculation grows that further measures are being planned to sew up control of the city. "The most vital and pressing task to enforce rule by patriots is to improve the relevant systems, particularly the relevant electoral system," Xia said, according to a speech published by his office. "Being patriotic means loving the People's Republic of China."

Hong Kong has never been a democracy—something that has fuelled protests and resentment towards Beijing. But until recently, the city had a veneer of choice that allowed a small and vocal opposition to flourish at certain local elections. After huge and often violent democracy protests swept the city in 2019 — and opposition politicians won a landslide in district council elections—Beijing responded with a major crackdown. At last year's meeting, China's National People's Congress imposed a sweeping national security law that outlawed much dissent in Hong Kong and radically transformed its relationship with the authoritarian mainland.

Hong Kongers are therefore looking closely at what the next meeting might bring. Xia's comments suggest Beijing is seeking to ensure no opposition candidates are able to stand in the city's limited elections and echoing weeks of calls in China's state media for such a purge. Authorities, he said, must "close loopholes" that allow "anti-China troublemakers" into politics. "Improving the relevant electoral system must be led by the central government," he added.

'Red lines'

Xia also laid out the criteria for what makes a "real patriot", including love for the People's Republic of China, its constitution and the Communist Party. He added that the judiciary must also be patriots—a potentially ominous warning for those who fear Beijing is planning to overhaul Hong Kong's independent courts, one of the pillars of its success as a business hub. Ahead of its 1997 handover by Britain, China agreed to let Hong Kong keep certain liberties and autonomy for 50 years in a model dubbed "One Country, Two Systems".

Western governments and critics accuse Beijing of shredding that commitment in recent years. Beijing counters that it is restoring stability. What form electoral reform might take remains to be seen. Beijing could further ramp up control of the city's half-elected legislature to maintain an even more solid majority for its supporters in a chamber already devoid of any opposition after the courts disqualified some opposition figures because of their political views. It could also go after district council elections—the only time Hong Kongers get to vote for every seat. —AFP

Business

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2021

NBK Economic Report

Kuwait population falls to below 4.7m as expatriate numbers drop

As fallout from pandemic, companies shed jobs, economic activity slows

KUWAIT: Kuwait's population in 2020 experienced the biggest annual drop recorded in almost 30 years, as the number of resident expatriates fell sharply, while the number of Kuwaiti nationals continued to rise. The fall in expat numbers was partly driven by fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw companies shed workers amid a weaker economic environment, but also by proposed changes to the residency law and continued enforcement of Kuwaitization policies.

Kuwait's population trends lower in 2020

According to the latest demographic data from the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI), Kuwait's population decreased by 2.2 percent y/y in 2020 to 4.68 million, after an increase of 3.3 percent in 2019. This was driven by modest growth among Kuwaiti nationals (+2.0 percent) and by a sharp decrease in expatriate numbers (-4.0 percent). The share of expatriates in the total population fell back to 68.7 percent, its lowest in seven years.

Since the start of the pandemic and the implementation of the lockdown and restriction measures, more than 130,000 expats left the country, as economic slowdown due to the coronavirus pandemic forced companies to cut their workforce. Also, job losses and higher living costs have forced some working spouses to send their dependents back home. The number of expatriate dependents has continued to decline, falling by 0.4 percent y/y in 2020 after a drop of 0.3 percent a year earlier.

Despite the continued deceleration in the growth of the number of Kuwaitis under the age of 15 (down to 0.2 percent y/y in 2020 from 0.4 percent a year ago and 2.0 percent in 2013), this cohort of around 493,000 still makes up more than a third of the Kuwaiti population.

Meanwhile, growth in the number of working age nationals above the age of 15 has remained steady at 2.7 percent over the last couple of years. The young population underscores the urgency for creating a considerable number of jobs in the coming years to absorb the increasing number of youth that will eventually enter the labor market.

Total employment declines

After a growth of 4.9 percent y/y in 2019, total employment in 2020 recorded its largest decline in almost 30 years of 4.2 percent. This reflected by moderation in hiring activity among Kuwaiti nationals and a big drop in expat employment. Employment growth among Kuwaitis moderated from 2.4 percent in 2019 to a still decent 2.1 percent in 2020, as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were felt particularly in the private sector (-1.2 per-



KUWAIT: Kuwaitis and expatriates at the Avenues Mall in this file photo. Kuwait's population in 2020 experienced the biggest annual drop recorded in almost 30 years as the number of resident expatriates fell sharply. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Table 1: Population (end-year)

	Population ('000)			% y/y		
	Kuwaiti	Non-Kuwaiti	Total	Kuwaiti	Non-Kuwaiti	Total
2014	1,276	2,816	4,092	2.7	3.4	3.2
2015	1,308	2,931	4,239	2.5	4.1	3.6
2016	1,338	3,073	4,411	2.3	4.8	4.1
2017	1,370	3,130	4,500	2.4	1.9	2.0
2018	1,403	3,219	4,622	2.4	2.8	2.7
2019	1,432	3,344	4,776	2.1	3.9	3.3
2020	1,460	3,211	4,671	2.0	-4.0	-2.2

Source: Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI)

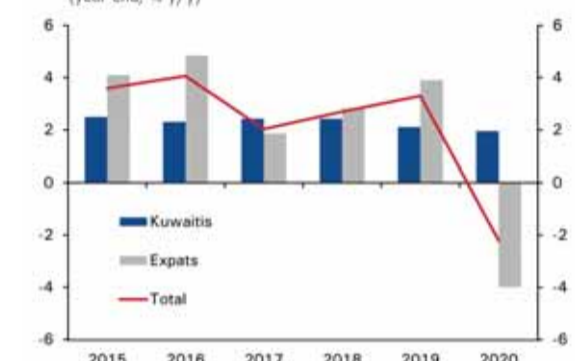
cent). The public sector has fared quite well (+2.7 percent) in comparison to the private sector, partly attributed to Kuwaitization efforts.

In contrast, expatriate employment dropped by 5.2 percent in 2020 after an increase of 5.4 percent a year earlier, on the back of hiring activity decline in both the public (-3 percent) and private sector (-5.3 percent). However, within the overall total, domestic (i.e. household) workers' employment was

less affected, as their number decreased only by 1.5 percent in 2020. In fact, the government allowed domestic helpers to start returning to the country once flights resumed. Excluding domestic workers, expat employment decreased by an even greater 6.7 percent, led by a sharper decline in hiring activity in the private sector (-7 percent versus +2.2 percent in 2019).

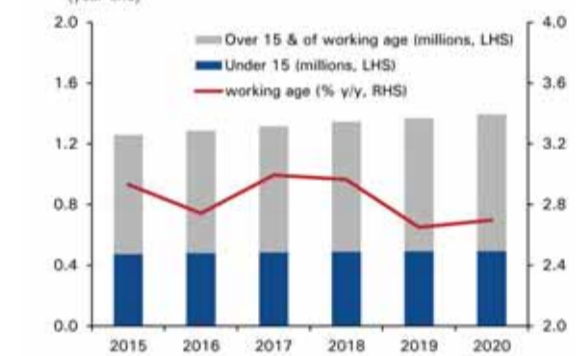
The drop in expat employment in the private

Chart 1: Population of Kuwait
(year-end; % y/y)



Source: PACI

Chart 2: Population of Kuwaiti nationals
(year-end)



Source: PACI

sector (excluding domestic workers) was due mainly to a sharp decline in hiring in construction (-12.9 percent y/y) and real estate (-6.3 percent), in line with weaker project activity and muted demand on housing during the pandemic period. Expat employment also declined in other sectors such as manufacturing (-6 percent) and Hotels & restaurants (-3.4 percent). This trend highlights that large numbers of low-paid and low-skilled expatriate workers were the most affected by the pandemic fallout. In fact, our estimate based on the educational qualification data from PACI is that about 95 percent of the expatriate job losses were from low-skilled workers, slightly above their share of all private sector expat employment. More expat workers are expected to leave in the coming period, on the back of proposed changes to the residency law, continued enforcement of Kuwaitization policies, and as companies are forced to shed workers amid a weaker economic environment.

Australia's tech law pits Murdoch against Zuckerberg

SYDNEY: Australia's push to regulate tech giants has become a power struggle between two of the world's most powerful men, with Rupert Murdoch and Mark Zuckerberg locked in a generational battle for media dominance.

Efforts in Australia to make Google and Facebook pay for news has garnered worldwide attention, creating what some call a defining moment for the web and for journalism, and even a litmus test for democracy. But beyond the high-sounding rhetoric lies a more base struggle, with the barons of traditional media fighting back against their digital heirs.

Sydney tech billionaire Mike Cannon-Brookes went as far as calling the Australian push to force payments for content a "shake-down". The landmark legislation may carry the seal of government, but media and political insiders see the fingerprints of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp all over it. "This has been a passionate cause for our company for well over a decade," said News Corp chief executive Robert Thomson, hailing his boss' "fervent, unstinting support" for the cause.

"For many years, we were accused of tilting at tech windmills, but what was a solitary campaign, a quixotic quest, has become a movement, and both journalism and society will be enhanced."

For decades, the Melbourne-born billionaire behind Fox News, The Sun and Sky News Australia has bestraddled politics in the United States, Britain and Down Under. Today, he controls roughly two-thirds of daily newspaper circulation in Australia's major cities, with complete monopolies in Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart and Darwin.

That has prompted critics to paint the 89-year-old in almost cartoonish terms—as an all-powerful political puppetmaster. While he still

wields political power, the rise of Facebook and Google has seriously challenged Murdoch's pre-eminence—gouging ad revenues that kept many of his publications in the black.

'Frightened of Murdoch'

At the turn of the millennium, newspapers had 96 percent of Australia's classified revenues. Now, that is down to around 12 percent. For every \$100 spent by Australian advertisers today, \$49 goes to Google and \$24 to Facebook, according to the country's competition watchdog, which proposed the law in direct response to this duopoly.

"Let's not kid around, this was very deliberately designed to put money in the pockets of a very few specific companies—News Corp and others," Lucie Krahulcova of advocacy group Digital Rights Watch told AFP. An initial draft of the law even cut out public broadcaster ABC—which Murdoch's outlets and Australia's conservative government have long attacked—from receiving Google and Facebook payments.

Former prime minister Kevin Rudd, an outspoken Murdoch critic, told lawmakers in Canberra on Friday that the proposed laws solved the digital dominance problem "by enhancing the power of the existing monopoly—that's Murdoch".

"Everyone is frightened of Murdoch," he maintained. Everyone, it seems, except Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who made a worldwide splash last week by refusing demands to pay Murdoch's News Corp and other Australian media.

Rather than follow Google and reach agreements to pay for content, Zuckerberg went nuclear, removing news from Australia on the platform and sparking a global backlash.

Enormous political power

The two men were born more than three decades apart and come from staggeringly different eras, but both wield enormous political power. Where Murdoch could hobble governments or torpedo campaigns with a rapier front-page



Australia's push to regulate tech giants has become a power struggle between two of the world's most powerful men, with Rupert Murdoch (left) and Mark Zuckerberg locked in a generational battle for media dominance. — AFP

splash, Zuckerberg's platform can change the tenor of a US election campaign. Like Murdoch, Zuckerberg has come under fierce scrutiny for his influence over society. It is also not the first time they have tussled.

Murdoch's bid for social media dominance failed spectacularly when MySpace was left in the dust of Zuckerberg's rapidly growing Facebook. According to reports by tech magazine and website Wired, the pair had a testy exchange in Sun Valley, Idaho in 2016, with Zuckerberg allegedly warned to offer publishers a better deal or expect New Corp to lobby regulators around the world.

Those lobbying efforts are now bearing fruit in Australia, with Google agreeing to pay the company for news in a three-year deal. The amounts were not disclosed, but similar Google deals with other Australian media groups were said to be worth around US\$23 million a year.

Supporters have cheered that as a victory for journalism—a struggling industry long in decline—although questions remain about whether the money will be ploughed back into reporting.

With legislation in the works in Canada, Europe and perhaps even the United States, Murdoch's "quixotic quest" against the tech giants is unlikely to stop in Australia. — AFP

Global tech firms in Australia launch anti-disinformation code

SYDNEY: Global tech firms in Australia unveiled a new code of practice yesterday to curb the spread of disinformation online, following pressure from the government. The lobbying group DIGI—representing Facebook, Google, Twitter, Microsoft, TikTok and Redbubble—committed under the code to a range of actions including labelling false content on their platforms, demoting fake content and prioritizing credible sources of information.

They also agreed to suspend or disable offending and fake accounts, including "bots" that automatically disseminate information across their platforms. The measures—which largely codify existing practices—are said to target paid and political advertising as well as content shared by users.

"All signatories commit to safeguards to protect Australians against harm from online disinformation and misinformation, and adopting a range of scalable measures that reduce its spread and visibility," the group said in releasing the 29-page code. The voluntary code was developed in response to an Australian government inquiry into the role of online platforms in the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The problem became particularly acute during historic bushfires that swept the country in late 2019 and 2020 and during the coronavirus pandemic, when social media platforms were flooded with false information on the origins of the disease and efforts to curb its spread.

The government's Communication and Media Authority (ACMA), which will oversee the code's implementation, said yesterday that in 2020 more than two-thirds of Australians expressed concern over the extent of online misinformation. "False and misleading news and information online—like that spread through the 2020 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic—has the potential to cause serious harm to individuals, communities and society," it said in a statement. — AFP

Business

ABK-Egypt reports solid results for financial year ended 2020

Net profit increased by 27% y-o-y to reach EGP 666 million

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait - Egypt (ABK-Egypt), one of Egypt's fastest growing banks, has reported solid results for the financial year ended 2020. Net profit increased by 27 percent year-on-year to reach EGP 666 million, while net interest income grew 30 percent to reach EGP 1.86 billion.

Net operating profit grew 34 percent year-on-year to EGP 1.37 billion and total assets were at EGP 41.23 billion at the end of 2020, an increase of 16 percent compared to 2019. Customer Loans stood at EGP 21.71 billion, a growth of 12 percent year-on-year, and customer deposits increased by 19 percent year-on-year to reach EGP 33.55 Billion.

Ali Ebrahim Marafi, Chairman of ABK-Egypt, said: "We are extremely happy with these strong results, notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic that created significant disruption to individuals, communities and businesses around the world. Throughout 2020, the Bank remained resilient and focused under extremely challenging circumstances."

"I would like to thank the Central Bank of Egypt and the Government authorities for their guidance during this pandemic. I also thank our Board of Directors, Shareholders and clients for their ongoing support and



Ali Ebrahim Marafi

Khaled El Salawy

loyalty. Last but not least, I thank our Executive Management and all our employees for their hard work and dedication throughout the year."

Khaled El Salawy, CEO and Managing Director of ABK-Egypt, said: "ABK-Egypt's strong balance sheet coupled with its ability to withstand the social and financial impact of the pandemic has enabled the Bank to successfully mitigate the impact of the crisis, and deliver strong results against a backdrop of a very challenging year. These results were achieved through a

proactive and prudent strategy and an extremely dedicated and focused team. ABK-Egypt's agility was evident as robust measures were implemented right from the onset of the pandemic to safeguard our customers and employees.

"Our continuous investment in technology enabled us to provide uninterrupted services to our clients, and during the year our online and mobile banking clients increased by 84 percent and the volume of online transfers increased by 51 percent.

"In line with our 'Simpler Banking' strategy, ABK-Egypt was the first bank to implement an Electronic Know-Your-Customer (e-KYC) solution, which resulted in a 37 percent increase in new customers availing ABK-Egypt's Mobile Wallet. Furthermore, during the year the Bank also launched the QR Code Payments via its Mobile Wallet, as well as ABK's Xtra Loyalty Reward Program on ABK-Egypt Cards."

In closing, El Salawy said: "I would like to take this opportunity to thank our Chairman and Board of Directors for their guidance and support. I also thank each and every employee for their hard work and dedication, and our customers for their loyalty and ongoing support."

The Bank continued to invest heavily in human capital during 2020, with a comprehensive set of programs focused on developing team capabilities, enhancing employee engagement levels and building loyalty. These initiatives remain key to empowering employees with the skill sets and knowledge necessary to sustain the growth trajectory of the bank. Over the course of 2020, the bank launched ABK-Egypt Corporate Academy and hired 18 graduates of class 2020, who were carefully chosen from over 250 university graduates. The bank also launched the first virtual summer training program, and enrolled more than 140 university graduates. ABK-Egypt will remain committed to developing Egyptian youth and supporting them with opportunities that fulfill their career aspirations.

ABK-Egypt strongly believes in the importance of social responsibility and continues to support the communities in which it operates. With an innate understanding of the crucial role donations play in overcoming challenges that face the Egyptian society, the Bank supported a number of organizations to help those impacted by current circumstances due to the pandemic, in addition to providing medical devices and supplies to public hospitals operating with limited resources.

German business confidence bucks shutdown impact

BERLIN: German business confidence improved in February, a key survey showed yesterday, as the robust industrial sector of Europe's top economy bears up despite the impact of coronavirus restrictions. The Ifo institute's monthly confidence barometer, based on a survey of 9,000 companies, climbed to 92.4 points from 90.3 points in January, when the index slipped as tougher measures to fight the pandemic were introduced.

Analysts surveyed by Factset had expected a smaller increase of 0.4 points. "The German economy is showing its resilience despite the lockdown thanks to the strong industrial economy," Ifo president Clemens Fuest said in a statement. The manufacturing sector recorded its highest score since November 2018, surging to 16.1 points from 9.1 points last month.

The mood in the services and retail sectors also brightened, inching up to readings of minus 2.2 points and minus 14.6 points respectively. Ifo said managers were upbeat about their current situation, rising to 90.6 from 89.2 points last month, while the expectations sub-index jumped to 94.2 from 91.5.

Germany this month extended orders for bars, restaurants, leisure facilities and non-essential shops to stay closed until at least March 7 while allowing schools to partially reopen.

Crucially for production, factories have kept up output during the second wave of the pandemic and are seeing strong demand from China in particular. But it remains unclear when other businesses will be able to resume operations.

"It's a nice surprise," said LBBW analyst Jens-Oliver Niklash of the closely watched indicator. "But there won't be a quick and full economic recovery without the prospect of a reopening."

After dropping sharply in January, the number of new infections has plateaued in February in Germany amid serious concerns about highly contagious virus variants.—AFP

Markets struggle as inflation fear offset recovery hopes

HONG KONG: Markets mostly fell yesterday as falling infection rates and more good news on the vaccine front were overshadowed by growing worries about high valuations and inflation.

While the United States is approaching 500,000 deaths, there is optimism that there is light at the end of the tunnel in the COVID-19 crisis as governments embark on immunization programs that will allow economies to reopen. Expectations that President Joe Biden's vast stimulus will be passed next month are also keeping spirits up, as a raft of data last week on factory and services activity indicated the financial hit to the United States and Europe might not be as bad as feared. London's benchmark FTSE 100 index dropped 0.5 percent to 6,590.64 points, with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson set to outline later in the day how England will exit its third pandemic lockdown. In the eurozone, Frankfurt's DAX 30 index shed 1.0 percent to 13,856.88 points and the Paris CAC 40 lost 0.7 percent to 5,732.29.

In Asia, Shanghai and Hong Kong led losses, shedding more than one percent as the Chinese central bank sucked cash out of financial markets to ease bubble concerns. Sydney, Seoul, Wellington, Manila, Mumbai and Bangkok also fell, though there were gains in Tokyo, Singapore, Taipei and Jakarta.

London, Paris and Frankfurt all fell at the open. The rally that has characterized the past few months looks to have come to a halt as traders fret that prices may have become a little too frothy. There is growing concern that the expected recovery and Biden's spending package will fire a surge in inflation, which could force the Federal Reserve to wind back the loose monetary policies and record-low interest rates that have been a key pillar of a near-year-long market surge.

Sterling holds dollar gains

"The Biden administration continues to stay on message stressing Congress's need to pass a significant fiscal package, downplaying recent more robust economic data as... a package exceeding \$1.9 trillion heads for a House vote this week," said Axi strategist Stephen Innes. "The unprecedented and highly stimulatory poli-



Abdulwahab Essa Al-Roshood

cy is an attempt to exceed one million jobs a month from April to September. "But timing is everything. The next leg of the reflation will have to be carried more and more by a continued recovery in economic growth... and all the while this will bring the Fed closer to acknowledge that policy normalization is coming." And Simon

Results of this initiative that aims to help debtors and relieve their families, adding that KFH has also implemented this program in the Kingdom of Bahrain in collaboration with the Bahraini Ministry of Justice. He appreciated the efforts of all concerned parties, especially the Ministries of Justice in both countries, for their role in the success of the initiative, stressing the continuation of KFH pioneering social responsibility role that reflects its prestigious position as a leading Islamic financial institution at the level of the private sector and worldwide.

"As part of its national commitment toward Kuwait and its people, KFH has made various contributions to support Kuwait's efforts to combat the Coronavirus crisis, while being the largest contributor to the KD 10 million CBK fund to support the government's efforts." Al-Roshood explained.

He added that KFH made an additional contribution to the fund and placed it at the disposal of the Council of Ministers to support the government's efforts, needs and urgent measures to combat Coronavirus impacts.

He affirmed that KFH keeps assuming its national and social role and committing to society and governmental and official bodies in various circumstances.

Al-Roshood also indicated that KFH plays a pivotal role in achieving sustainable community development through its contributions that cover various social activities and initiatives. This encompasses the fields of health, education, youth and environmental activities, enhances the spirit of social solidarity, supports people with special needs, cares for the workforce and provides continuous support to the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) and others.

He added that KFH's social efforts received local and global recognition, laying the foundations of leadership, excellence, and sustainability.



A Wall Street sign at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in New York City. — AFP

cy is an attempt to exceed one million jobs a month from April to September. "But timing is everything. The next leg of the reflation will have to be carried more and more by a continued recovery in economic growth... and all the while this will bring the Fed closer to acknowledge that policy normalization is coming." And Simon

Ballard at First Abu Dhabi Bank warned that more big gains in stocks are "going to create increasing levels of concern". He added: "It's driven by, on one side, stimulus expectations from Mr Biden and also the expectation of that continued dovish rhetoric and more acceptance of early stages of inflation from the Fed."

However, OANDA's Jeffrey Halley said Treasury yields were still below pre-Covid levels and that the rise to one-year highs was "no bad thing" as it showed the economy was improving.

Investors are keeping tabs on China-US relations after Biden called on European allies to stand up to political and economic challenges from Beijing. On currency markets, the pound held gains above \$1.40 — its highest levels since April 2018 — as the British government's vaccine drive continued to progress well and as Prime Minister Boris Johnson laid out a plan for easing an economically painful virus lockdown. Bitcoin eased to \$57,150, having hit another record high of \$58,350 over the weekend, and having passed \$1 trillion in market capitalization. And oil prices bounced after being sold at the end of last week on profit-taking—having hit a 13-month high—and as US energy firms slowly restarted operations in Texas that had been hammered by a severe cold snap.—AFP

KFH pays \$65m in debts to thousands of debtors

KUWAIT: As part of a strategic initiative in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, Kuwait Finance House (KFH) is covering over \$65mn in debts to release approximately 10,000 defaulting debtors and those whom the court ordered to be brought before it. This recommendation comes as part of KFH's Board of Directors' keenness to expand the scope of corporate social responsibility (CSR), given the circumstances the country has been going through since the beginning of 2020. Acting Group Chief Executive Officer at KFH, Abdulwahab Essa Al-Roshood said that benefiting from the initiative is subject to well-thought out criteria and conditions in accordance with sharia principles.

He added that lifting the anguish off a number of debtors from poor families who were burdened by debt and defaulted due to their economic conditions embodies KFH's leadership in CSR and sustainability based on a comprehensive development concept. The initiative also incorporates the bank's keenness on strategic partnership with state institutions, reflecting the vision of Kuwait's leadership and its people in humanitarian work. Al-Roshood explained that paying debts of debtors as per the conditions contributes to relieving their anguish and enables them to return to normal life optimistically and lead a decent life. This process is carried out by the Ministry of Justice and the competent authorities with high confidentiality, transparency and professionalism.

It is worth noting that the first part of the program, which was implemented in 2020, received a positive response from society. This prompted KFH to continue the initiative this year as well and expand its scope to include a larger number of debtors as part of CSR.

Al-Roshood expressed his happiness over the posi-



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Ooredoo Kuwait the 'Best Internet Service Provider' for the year 2020

Recognition from Service Hero at annual awards ceremony 2020



KUWAIT: Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, Fadi Kawar, Mijbil Alayoub and Faten Abu Ghazaleh during the awards ceremony

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, was awarded the "Best Internet Service Provider" at the annual Service Hero Awards for the year 2020, endorsing the company's long standing commitment to its customers. Recognized as the benchmark in the telecom industry, Ooredoo Kuwait was recognized for its excellence in offering complete coverage at high speeds, multiple plan options to suit different needs along with offering an excellent customer service. The prestigious award was presented to Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, Chief Executive Officer, Fadi Kawar, Chief Operating Officer, and Mijbil Alayoub, Senior Director, Corporate Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait, by Faten Abu Ghazaleh,

President of Service Hero.

As part of its constant efforts to foster a culture of "service excellence" where both brands and customers flourish, Service Hero, the company providing the region's only consumer powered customer satisfaction index, honored the country's best performing service providers along with nationwide winners. The awards ceremony which was held virtually shed light on the companies' ability to overcome numerous challenges and provide the best customer experience despite the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The ceremony also explored the consumer behavior changes due to the global pandemic, COVID-19, and the importance of the robust relationship between customers and companies in the continuity,

prosperity and growth of businesses.

Indeed, the year of the pandemic 2020 was one of the biggest challenges that offered companies and brands the opportunity to prove their ability to adapt to the changes, and offer the best customer experience despite all the obstacles and uncertainty the world witnessed.

Commenting on the new award earned by the company, Abdulaziz Al-Babtain, Chief Executive Officer, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "As a customer-oriented management, we are keen on creating and maintaining an emotional bond between us and our customers. We do so through communicating with compassion, and empathy during times of crises, creating and implementing customer value delivery strategies, along

with more encompassing structure and process changes."

Al-Babtain added: "Although the COVID-19 pandemic was unexpected, yet, our pre-crisis plan, flexible management mindset, talented employees, and strong relationship with the public, we, at Ooredoo Kuwait were able to overcome and recover without significant damage. We expatiated our digital transformation to ensure smooth operation and business continuity and resilience."

Based in Kuwait, Service Hero is the only consumer powered customer satisfaction index in the Middle East. The company is a member of ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research) and adheres to the global organization's principles and

guidelines for self-regulation and ethical practice. Service Hero is overseen by an Independent Advisory Council to assure results that are impartial, objective, and accurately reflect consumers' preference, making the company's findings a credible benchmark that offers transparent and relevant insight for companies. It is comprised of academics and business professionals representing leading institutions and corporate establishments in Kuwait and the UAE, including the American University of Kuwait, Australian College of Kuwait, Gulf University for Science and Technology, Abu Dhabi University, and Zayed University. Since 2010, Service Hero has measured over 300,000 validated consumer assessments covering more than 600 private sector companies.



KUWAIT: Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain receiving the award from Faten Abu Ghazaleh

Jamal Al-Barrak named as VC of Gulf Bond and Sukuk Association

KUWAIT: Kuwait International Bank (KIB) wishes to extend its warm congratulations to Jamal Al-Barrak, General Manager of Investment Department at KIB, on being appointed as Vice Chairman of the Gulf Bond and Sukuk Association (GBSA),

the non-profit membership organization that represents the Arabian Gulf debt capital market. Founded in 2009 in UAE, GBSA is based in the Dubai International Financial Centre. The non-profit association works with governments, regulators, participants in the Sukuk and bond market to identify and encourage best practices, to promote the deep and liquid fixed income markets needed to support economic growth and transformation in the Gulf region, in addition to addressing issues affecting markets at the local and regional levels.

In a statement, KIB expressed pride at the appointment of its General Manager of Investment Department to assume this position, stressing that Al-Barrak shall excel in his new role, thanks to his more than 20-years of experience in the field of investment banking, financial management and corporate finance.

On his part, GBSA's President Michael Grifferty said: "We are delighted to work with someone of Jamal Al-Barrak's caliber in a leadership role. And we look forward to working closely with him on initiatives to further enhance the market."

The Bank further praised Al-Barrak's successful career upon joining its executive management team, leading a group of investment professionals in managing and expanding KIB's investment portfolio, thus playing an active role in making its strategic initiatives. In addition, gaining accolades and awards for the Bank in the debt capital markets by their active and prudent participation in the Sukuk market.

KIB is focused on advancing the individual career development and leadership of national human capital like Al-Barrak. To that end, the Bank always strives supporting individuals throughout their career life cycle in line with its strategic goals to strengthen its position in the local and regional markets. The Bank will continue to participate in award-winning deals in collaboration with local, regional and international financial institutions.



Jamal Al-Barrak



stc launches national celebrations with 'Ezhalha'

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, launched its Kuwait national holiday celebrations under "Ezhalha", its new multi-faceted campaign. Under the Ezhalha umbrella, stc released its creative TVC, a nationwide campaign both online and throughout the streets of Kuwait, as well as an internal campaign for employees.

Ezhalha is a traditional Kuwaiti term used to express assurance and confidence that a task or request will be done, on the same lines as "consider it done" in the English language, reflecting how one can depend on the Kuwaiti people. The newly launched campaign aims not only to express the Company's deeply rooted sense of nationalism, but also highlights talented Kuwaiti individuals who have dedicated their time and effort to spread a positive influence in the community. Additionally, through its multi-program initiative in celebration of the special days, stc aims to spread joy throughout the streets of Kuwait and through its digital platforms. The Company will host several competitions open to the public with prizes distributed to the lucky winners.

Under the Ezhalha umbrella, stc produced its TVC in collaboration with the beloved popular singer, Ibrahim Al-Hakami, as a dedication to the people of Kuwait, and the individuals included in the production who expressed their deep national pride in celebration of the country's National and Liberation Days. stc took this opportunity to showcase several influential public figures that positively reflect the country's qualities, two of which are stc employees - Aseel Al-Shaheen, an International Tennis Federation certified umpire in the GCC, and Mohammad Al-Maraghi a player in Kuwait's national hockey team. The production also displayed the courageous role of front-liners, not only during the pandemic, but indefinitely.



Danah Al-Jasem

stc highlighted that the heroes who participated in the production, including the singer, used sign language as a form of expression, signifying that emotions and feelings can also be interpreted through body language. Extending the celebration to its offices, stc launched a series of internal initiatives for its employees to commemorate Kuwait's national holidays. Employees will get a chance to participate in activities and competitions that are aimed at highlighting the joyous occasion, with prizes distributed to the winners showcasing their national pride.

stc expressed its gratitude and appreciation to the teams at AM Agency and Vision Visuals for their collaborative efforts in conceptualizing and producing the TVC, which received widespread positive feedback from the public. The Company also thanked all the talented Kuwaiti individuals who participated in the production for their positive impact in the community, serving as role models to the younger generation. The Company extended a special thanks to the Ministry of Interior for their collaborative efforts, equestrienne Sherifa Al-Awadhi, local artist Hamad Al-Humaidhan also known as 'Young Picasso' by BBC, Tarahom Volunteer Team, cross-fit athlete Fahad Al-Jarallah, Ibrahim Al-Langawi and Abdulrahman Al-Awadhi the Tennis National Team players and champions, ITF certified umpire Aseel Al-Shaheen, and Kuwait National

Hockey Team player Mohammad Al-Maraghi.

When implementing all its initiatives, stc ensures that all safety measures and social distancing protocols are considered and applied across its headquarters, branches, and at any external initiatives it participates in to mitigate the risk associated with the current pandemic.

Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc said, "We would like to congratulate His Highness the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and His Highness the Crown Prince, Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, may God protect and preserve them, on the celebration of Kuwait's national holidays. In its role, stc is committed to continue giving back to its beloved country in various ways that help empower and strengthen the community. During celebratory occasions, such as the national holidays, stc is proud to showcase its love, devotion, and patriotism towards the people of Kuwait and the country."

Commenting on the TVC, AlJasem expressed that the positive feedback generated from the public regarding the concept behind the production reflects the values that stc holds closely to its heart when dedicating a message of appreciation to the people of Kuwait. When it comes to Kuwait, stc will spare no effort to reflect the true appreciation and sense of attachment it holds to the country.

Al-Jasem added, "We dedicate this production to the people of Kuwait. Our focus was to bring to light some of the individuals that have had a positive impact on the community and carried the Kuwaiti flag across nations. We are proud to partake in this special occasion and greatly believe in the role the private sector plays in supporting the community and highlighting some of the talented individuals that have greatly influenced our society. In line with our mission to provide unwavering support to the local community and the people of Kuwait, stc will continue to participate in and implement initiatives that will leave a long lasting and beneficial impact for the future generations."

To find out more about stc's sponsorships, promotions, and events, follow stc's official social media platforms, visit one of stc's branches, download mystc mobile application, visit www.stc.com.kw or contact the customer service center by dialing 102 for around the clock assistance.

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Lifestyle | Features



Ana, a member of the collective "Mujeres de la Tierra", speaks during an interview, in Milpa Alta, Mexico City. — AFP photos



View of corn at the kitchen of the collective "Mujeres de la Tierra".



View of tamales -traditional Mexican food- at the kitchen of the collective "Mujeres de la Tierra".

Cooking collective helps Mexican women escape abuse

On the outskirts of Mexico City, a group of women prepare tortillas in a community kitchen that has provided sanctuary from gender violence and the economic fallout of the pandemic. While one lights the stove, others grind corn, knead dough and wash vegetables. The Latin American country, long beset by a culture of machismo, is in the grips of a femicide crisis with 10 women murdered every day. The pandemic, and the confinement it forced on them, has been a wake-up call for some women facing abuse at home. The members of the Mujeres de la Tierra (Women of the Land) cooperative now sell tortillas, tamales and other maize-based delicacies through social networks. "Unfortunately we have all suffered from violence of some kind... psychological, physical, financial violence," said Alma, 31, who like the others did not want to give her full name.

The project has given the women new hope, since the coronavirus robbed them of their jobs and exposed them to increased domestic violence, which they prefer not to talk much about. "We're very lucky to be able to work with what the land gives us to produce and escape the violence that we experienced at home," said Alma, standing next to a still-smoking stove. In recent



Leticia, a member of the collective "Mujeres de la Tierra", works in the kitchen.

years, Mexico has seen a relentless increase in gender violence, and the pressures of the pandemic have only made things worse. Last year, there were around 940 femicides, while the authorities received more than 260,000 calls for help because of violence against women, the most in five years.

'Yes we can'

In March 2020, when the pandemic arrived in Mexico, the members of the collective found themselves among the many women put out of work by the crisis. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the participation of

Latin American women in the labor market fell from 52 percent in 2019 to 46 percent in 2020. Gris said that when times were tough they turned to what they knew: putting tortillas and other corn delicacies like tlacoyos and gorditas on the grill.

Mexico's economy contracted 8.5 percent in 2020, the worst slump since the Great Depression some nine decades ago. But the economic gloom cannot overcome the sense of happiness in the kitchen, filled with music and brightened by purple corn on the cob. "Our self-esteem is sometimes really low with so many problems, said Gris, a 34-year-old mother of four.

"Then suddenly there's good news," she added. "It motivates us to say: yes we can. There will be ups and downs." The trust they have built has made it possible for the women to support each other, each in their own way. "It was our needs and the stark realities that made us say, in an act of desperation: enough!", said Chio, 33. Leticia, 39, said the cooking collective and its spirit of solidarity have brought many benefits. "I feel very good because this project has given me confidence as well as financial and emotional security. It has given me many things," she said. — AFP

SECOND 'METOO' WAVE CRASHES OVER FRANCE AFTER EXPLOSIVE BOOK

In a book of over 200 pages, the shocking revelations about incest feature on only around a dozen of them, but their impact is still being felt in France more than six weeks after publication. The book "La familia grande" by Camille Kouchner initially sent shockwaves through the close-knit intellectual world of Left Bank Paris, but has since led to multiple police investigations and another national reckoning with sexual abuse. Just over three years since the #MeToo movement broke taboos around rape across the world, France is seeing another outpouring of stories and a wide-ranging debate about sex, power and consent. Each week brings new revelations targeting the rich and powerful, with one of the country's best-known television presenters, Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, becoming the latest to be accused of rape on Thursday, which he denies.

"I'm bowled over by what's happening," Kouchner said this week during a television interview about her book, which has sold 300,000 copies since its release in early January. "I absolutely didn't expect this." She attributed its success to the MeToo movement which opened the floodgates to long-suppressed stories of sexual abuse globally, forcing policymakers and men to acknowledge the scale of the problem for the first time. But she also pointed to another book last year by author Vanessa Springora, who detailed how she had been groomed and abused by the celebrated French author Gabriel Matzneff, who had never hidden his pedophilia. "I knew... that there was a chance I would be listened, that it was maybe the right time," Kouchner told the Le Quotidien TV show on Monday.

'A detonator'

In "La familia grande", the 45-year-old lawyer recounts her life in a supremely well-connected Parisian family, with its showbiz relatives, divorces, intellectual friends, and sun-kissed holidays in the south of France. Kouchner is the daughter of left-wing writer and intellectual Evelyne Pisier, who once had a relationship with Fidel Castro, and Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of the Medecins Sans Frontieres humanitarian group and a former foreign minister. In 1987, her mother divorced and married political scientist Olivier Duhamel, the wealthy son of a former minister, who rose to become an advisor to several presidents and a well-known figure in the capital's most elite social circles.

Duhamel, Kouchner writes, began sexually abusing her twin brother when they were in their early teens, a scandal they revealed only 20 years later, which was ignored by their mother and the couple's close friends once they were informed. For French Justice Minister Eric Dupond-Moretti, the book has been a "spark in a pile of gunpowder", while ruling party MP Bruno Questel called it "a detonator". Questel gave a wrenching live television interview at the end of January in which he explained how he had been raped at the age of 11 by someone "not from the family but while on holiday by a family friend." "It's a huge movement that has set people free to talk," he said, referring to Kouchner's book.

1960s libertarianism

Duhamel, 70, now faces a criminal investigation and has resigned from his host of academic, media and executive positions, which included heading the elite Parisian networking club Le Siecle. He described the incest allegations in a statement as "personal attacks", but has not given an interview or spoken publicly to deny them more forcefully. Part of the explanation for the alleged abuse, and reluctance of those who knew the truth to speak out, has been attributed to the "anything-goes" attitudes of bourgeois left-wing Paris which are rooted in 1960s libertarianism. "Was there consent? What age did it start, and was there a form of reciprocity?" well-known philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, one of the few to try to defend Duhamel publicly, asked during an interview on the LCI channel last month. When reminded that the allegations were of child abuse by a step-father, Finkielkraut responded: "It's an adolescent, it's not the same thing." The resulting outcry, which saw Finkielkraut barred from LCI, cast light on France's current laws on child abuse, sexual assault and incest which campaigners have long sought to change. —AFP



Ana, a member of the collective "Mujeres de la Tierra", prepares Mexican traditional food.

Kim and Kanye West's 'quick' divorce

Kim Kardashian West and Kanye West's divorce "came together quickly". Representatives for the 40-year-old reality TV star confirmed that she has filed for divorce from the 43-year-old rapper after almost seven years of marriage and insiders say the pair were in agreement about custody of their children and the splitting of assets. A source told PEOPLE: "The parenting plan and split of assets came together quickly, in the past few days. Kim and Kanye basically wanted the same thing." And Kim - who is asking for joint legal and physical custody - is reportedly trying to be "as gentle and kind" as possible to Kanye, who has bipolar disorder.

The source said: "She's worried about sending him into another tailspin, because that's not good for anyone, especially the kids. So she's being as gentle and kind as she can be, while still standing up for what she feels she needs to stand up for." Kim and Kanye have agreed not to contest their pre-nuptial agreement and the pair are close to working out a full settlement. Right now, their main focus is on caring for their children; North, seven, Saint, five,

Chicago, three, and Psalm, 21 months. Another insider said: "Both of them want nothing but the best for the kids. They want the kids to be happy. The kids will stay with Kim, but Kanye will be able to see them whenever he wants to. They will work out a schedule that is good for everyone." —BangShowbiz



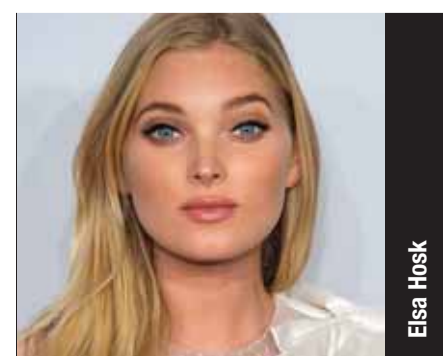
Kim Kardashian West and Kanye West

Hosk named her daughter after a Finnish goddess

Elsa Hosk named her daughter after a "forest goddess" in Finnish mythology. The 32-year-old model welcomed her first child, Tuulikki Joan Daly, with her partner Tom Daly just one week ago, and she has now opened up on the meaning behind the tot's unique moniker. Elsa revealed Tuulikki is her mother's middle name, and is also the name of a goddess, as the literal translation of the Finnish moniker is "little wind". In a Q&A on her Instagram Story, she said: "It wasn't hard to choose her name because I always knew I wanted a Finnish name. I think Finnish names are so cute. And Tuulikki is my mom's middle name and my mom's side of the family is from Finland, and they all have Finnish names and they're all so cute. "And when I told Tom about this name, he loved it too, which was a sign because it's kind of a very unique name. So for him to love it, I thought, 'We have to name her Tuulikki.'"

"Tuuli" means 'wind' and 'Tuulikki' means 'little wind,' and [it's] also the

name of a forest goddess." Meanwhile, Elsa recently spoke about the downsides of giving birth, as she described the process as the "worst pain, fear and darkness" she has ever felt. She said: "It's the worst pain, fear and darkness I've ever experienced in those moments. I feel like an animal. I have given up every sense of what you're supposed to look like, what anyone would think of me, what was normal many, many hours ago." The star also opened on the emotional moment when she welcomed her daughter to the world. She recalled: "With the biggest, most extended push, and a sound and sensation that I've never felt or made in life - the whole head came out. I'm so relieved, I've never felt more relieved. I feel like it's over. Then her body with another big push. And she is put on my chest. All bloody and fluids are everywhere and she is pooping all over me, and she is looking for my nipple. And the most pain I've ever felt is forgotten, I am overwhelmed with love, pride, happiness." — Bang Showbiz



Elsa Hosk

Lifestyle | Features



This picture shows Australian surfers (from left to right) Kevin Young, Dave Pearson, Bruce Locas and Ray Short posing for pictures on Crowdy Bay National Park at Port Macquarie.



This picture shows Dave Pearson, an Australian shark attack survivor, surfing on Crowdy Bay National Park at Port Macquarie.



This picture shows Dave Pearson, an Australian shark attack survivor, walking back after surfing on Crowdy Bay National Park. — AFP photos

'Bite Club': Shark attack survivors find solace in unity

The first rule of Bite Club is you talk to Dave Pearson, a shark attack survivor who connects hundreds of people from around the world to support each other "beyond the bite". The 58-year-old almost died a decade ago when a bull shark tore into his arm while he was surfing off Australia's east coast. Since the day when friends hauled him to shore-away from the three-meter predator that dragged him around the bottom of the ocean before losing interest-he has been helping others escape the psychological grip of nightmare attacks.

"My life is shark attacks," the wind, sun and surf-weathered Aussie told AFP, still dripping wet after another day on the waves at the beach where he was bitten. "You know if there's a shark attack somewhere in the world, I'll hear about it." Pearson is the founder of Bite Club, initially a small group for survivors of shark encounters that now includes victims of dog maulings, alligator bites and even a hippo attack. Its members-nearly 400 people in all-usually meet in person at least once a

year, but some meet more often for a casual surf while the rest keep in contact on social media. The club acts as a network for survivors to seek out support from the group when they need it most, and Pearson says he spends most nights speaking with at least one member over the phone.

He realized the power of talking to others who shared his ordeal even before he had left the hospital. By chance, Lisa Mondy-bitten a few days before him-was recovering in the same facility. "Everybody was there to wish me the best, but until I spoke with Lisa it was like, they didn't really understand what my head was going through," said Pearson. The brutality of maulings-combined with the media attention they receive-can shake survivors, victims, their relatives and rescuers for years and in some cases cause post-traumatic stress disorder.

When Kevin Young's 19-year-old son Zac was killed by a tiger shark while surfing on a reef near Coff's Harbour in 2013, he felt like a hurricane had swallowed him. "I was inside the

eye of that storm, and I feel like I've been here ever since," Young said. His son's legs were almost completely severed in the attack but, clinging to life, he paddled across to his three friends to tell them he loved them and prayed for their protection from the killer shark lurking below. Surrounded by water thick with their friend's blood, the trio-at the time aged 14, 15 and 19 — paddled Zac back to shore on their shoulders, in a journey that took nearly half an hour.

By the time they reached the beach, nothing could be done to revive Young's son, despite their efforts. "Those three boys, in my mind, became men that day," said Young. "I'm indebted to them for life in what they tried to do for my son."

'So many people affected'

Like Pearson, Young speaks of others' pain before his own. Each of his son's rescuers has paid a psychological price, he said.

"Whether it's a partner, the wife, the son, the daughter, a friend, or just a

community member-there's so many people affected." Young says it is a privilege to serve in a club that helps support people who would otherwise be left to struggle alone. That includes people like Ray Short, who was 13 years old in 1966 when a shark clamped down on his leg while swimming near Wollongong. "It's just something that was never there when I was young. If you got to meet or hear from one or two other shark bite victims, it was amazing," Short says. "Now there's a group there that can all sit and relate to each other." Pearson says that while the group is closely connected, the perspective of members is varied: some become anti-shark, pushing for culls, while others become conservationists.

'It's more special now'

Similarly, paths to recovery differ. But leaving the ocean behind was never an option for Pearson-or for many in the group. "Surfing has changed for me, and in fact, it's probably more special now than it used to be because I

know the consequences," he said. Young knows at least one of his son's friends struggled to return to the waves. But "all of us are surfers-that's our place, that's our zen place," he added.

Shark attacks are still incredibly rare, but last year was especially tough for the group, with seven people killed in 22 unprovoked incidents around Australia, according to the Taronga Conservation Society. This makes it the deadliest country in the world for shark bites in 2020, according to global data compiled by the Florida Museum of Natural History's shark research program. "I met with probably four families last year who lost someone, and it is tough," Pearson said. "It's hard, every attack brings your attack back." Pearson still works hard for his members, but says that more than anything, he wants to prevent more people joining the Bite Club. — AFP



French city cooks up furore over meat-free school lunches

The French government on Sunday accused the Green mayor of Lyon of insulting French butchers and harming the health of children by keeping meat off the menu for school lunches in the city. Mayor Gregory Doucet defended the decision, saying the idea of having a single menu without meat was to ensure a smooth service at lunchtimes during the social distancing enforced by the Covid-19 crisis. But the government pounced on the mayor, who was one of a number of Green politicians to win control of major cities in last year's local elections seen as a drubbing for the party of President Emmanuel Macron.

Lyon is also seen by many as the culinary capital of the country, famed for its hearty meat-based cuisine. "Let's stop putting ideology on our children's plates," Agriculture Minister Julien Denormandie wrote on Twitter. "Let's just give them what they need to grow well. Meat is part of it," he said, adding that he had asked the region's prefect, the state-appointed top local official, to overrule the move. Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said it was an "unacceptable insult" for French farmers and butchers. "We can see that the moralizing and elitist policy of the Greens excludes the popular classes. Many children often only get to eat meat at the school canteen."

Doucet hit back on Twitter, saying that the measure has been taken "solely" due to the health crisis and adding that his right-wing predecessor as mayor Gerard Collomb had taken "exactly the same measure" during the first wave of the pandemic. He said that the menu-which includes fish and egg products-was "balanced for all our schoolchildren". Doucet is not the first of the new breed of Green mayors to court controversy. Last year the new Green mayor of Bordeaux Pierre Hurmic decided to do away with the city's traditional Christmas tree as part of his pro-environment agenda, saying he was "not going to put dead trees in our squares." And Doucet himself raised eyebrows by saying the most French of sporting events-the Tour de France-was "macho and polluting" and not welcome back in the city as long as it was not "environmentally responsible." — AFP

Star French florist weathers pandemic

There was a time, pre-pandemic, that Thierry Boutemy's flowery creations graced catwalks, magazine covers and celebrity weddings. Now, of course, the French florist-who has worked for Sofia Coppola, Lady Gaga and the fashion house Hermes-is having to weather the crisis like anyone else. But his passion for petals has not withered. For more than 25 years, Boutemy has run his boutique in Brussels, a cob-walled den where Italian poppies, Dutch hellebores and tulips from the south of France perfume the air. All are imported-"Belgium doesn't produce anything in winter," he says-but they are all blooming, alive, from soil, free from chemicals and of verified provenance.

That attention to detail and devotion to nature means Boutemy sources most of his plants from small growers discovered on the sidelines of the Royal FloraHolland Auction House-the biggest in the world-in the Dutch city of Aalsmeer, near



French florist artist Thierry Boutemy poses for portrait pictures in his atelier and flower shop, during an interview with AFP, in Brussels. — AFP

Amsterdam. "That market is a disaster," he told AFP. "It's an industry-scale war machine that works like a poultry battery farm. It's full-on commercialism," he said, describing a technique used by some to color flowers by soaking them in dye. "Instead of buying a bunch of flowers at a supermarket check-out, it's better to buy a single flower for three euros," he argued, complaining how horticulturists

are being squeezed by the sector's industrialization.

No 'fashion florist'

Despite all that, Boutemy is forced at times to turn to the Aalsmeer auction market to complete artistic contracts, such as when he was tapped to provide a sumptuous peony display in the movie "Marie Antoinette" by Sofia Coppola-in the mid-

dle of winter. That project, he said, remains his "most beautiful career memory". Boutemy turned for inspiration to paintings by an 18th-century artist, Anne Vallayer-Coster, renowned for her skillful depiction of flowers, who caught the eye of King Louis XVI of France's wife Marie Antoinette.

The 52-year-old, wearing an orange jacket and sporting a curated beard, rejects the label "fashion florist" that some have thrown his way because of his work for couture houses such as Lanvin, Hermes and Dries Van Noten. "I'm not at all interested in fashion, actually," he laughed. What he prefers is "people who sweep me away in their passion; sometimes maybe it's not to my taste but I have fun trying to understand what's going on in their mind."

He has teamed up several times with big-name fashion photographer Mario Testino, notably for a 2012 Vogue magazine cover of Lady Gaga for which he improvised an arch made of flowers and plants. While waiting for normal activity to return, he is currently working on a film idea by an Italian director looking to tell the story of an eccentric who would like to build a palace made entirely of vegetation.—AFP



This handout photo shows rescuers racing to save dozens of pilot whales that beached on a stretch of New Zealand coast at Farewell Spit, notorious for mass strandings. — AFP

DOZENS OF WHALES STRAND AT NOTORIOUS NEW ZEALAND BAY

Rescuers were racing yesterday to save dozens of pilot whales that beached on a stretch of New Zealand coast notorious for mass strandings, wildlife officials said. The Department of Conservation (DOC) said the pod of 49 long-finned pilot whales was found early yesterday at Farewell Spit, about 90 kilometres (55 miles) north of the South Island tourist town of Nelson. By mid-afternoon, nine of the whales had died and more than 60 people were working to keep the survivors

alive for an attempt to refloat them at high tide, the DOC said. "Marine mammal medics will assist with refloating the whales and caring for them on the beach, keeping them cool and wet until they can be refloated," a DOC spokeswoman said.

Farewell Spit is a 26-kilometre hook of sand that protrudes into the sea at Golden Bay. It has been the scene of at least 10 pilot whale strandings in the past 15 years, the most recent in February 2017, when almost 700 of the marine mammals beached, resulting in 250 deaths. Scientists are unclear as to why the beach is so deadly, although one theory is that the spit creates a shallow seabed in the bay that interferes with the whales' sonar navigation systems.— AFP

Greek ex-national theatre chief accused of rape

The former artistic director of Greece's national theatre was arrested on Saturday over allegations of rape against minors, amid a belated #MeToo awakening. Dimitris Lignadis, a renowned actor and director, faces accusations of serial rape and indecent assault, according to an arrest warrant. Lignadis, 56, resigned on February 6 citing a "toxic climate of rumors, innuendo and leaks". He is at the centre of numerous allegations of sexual abuse of minors, according to Greek media.

He was detained a day after Culture Minister Lina Mendoni said she had asked the supreme court prosecutor to look into rumors circulating about him and publicly described him as "a dangerous person". "We strongly pressured Lignadis to say if he was the one named in the rumors... there was a steady denial that the rumors were about him," Mendoni said. He deceived us, he deceived me," she added. Her comments angered Lignadis who shot back: "If I am a dangerous man in my personal life or in my work, I think we should wait for this to be decided by the history and by other institutions." Lignadis' lawyer, Nikos Georgouleas, said on Saturday his client rejected all the accusations and that he was arrested after presenting himself to authorities.

'Cover-up'

A complaint was filed against Lignadis on Friday regarding the rape in



Former artistic director of Greece's national theatre Dimitris Lignadis (center) is escorted handcuffed by police officers to the examining magistrate in Athens. — AFP

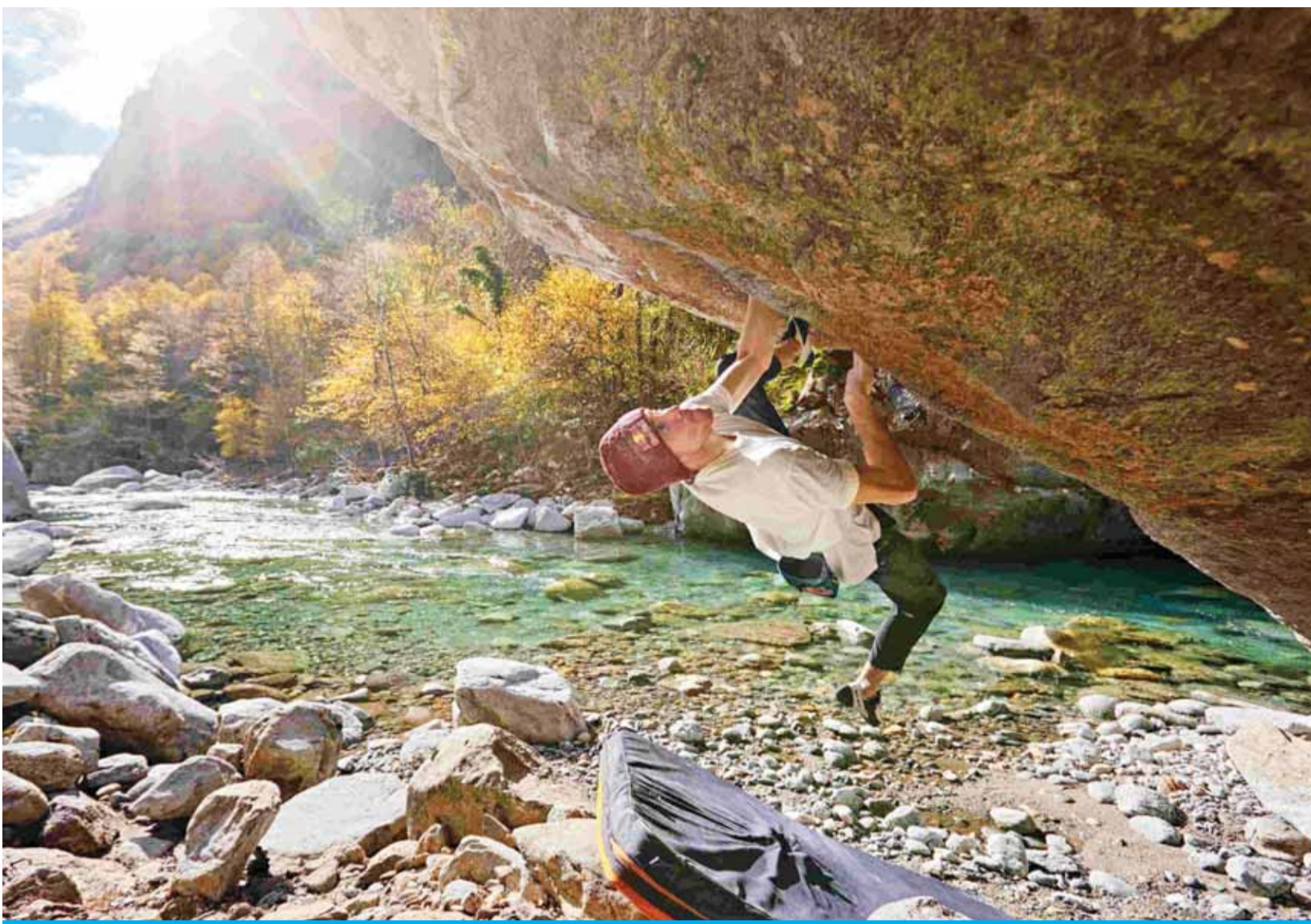
2010 of a 14-year old boy, according to ANA news agency. The now 25-year-old plaintiff is the second person that has accused the director of rape, according to public ERT TV. The prosecutor received another deposition late on Friday night, according to ANA.

This witness alleged that he was at the director's home with friends under 18, where the director was plying them with alcohol and drugs and asking them to have group sex. The Lignadis case has sparked a war of words between the government and opposition parties that have called for Mendoni's resignation accusing her of foot dragging in the case. The Syriza main opposition party leader, Alexis Tsipras, said on Friday that the Government attempted a "cover-up" adding that Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis was "a friend of Lignadis".

"It's truly obscene that Mr Tsipras tries to take advantage of all these shocking revelations, giving them a party-related tone," a statement issued by the Prime Minister's office said late on Friday. Mr Mitsotakis "knew Lignadis only for his theatrical performances which he attended", it added.—AFP

Sports

Photo of the Day



Giuliano Cameroni climbs in "Squalo bianco", Switzerland. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

'Asian Bowling' elects new board

KUWAIT: Twenty six Asian countries elected members of the Asian Bowling Federation Board of Directors, including Sheikh Talal Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah of Kuwait yesterday. Prince Abdelhakeem bin Musa'ed of Saudi Arabia was elected deputy chairman, along with two other candidates. The meeting also approved amendments made by the game's international federation, which will be implemented during the Asian Championship to be held in Hong Kong December 2021. The new board said in its first statement that it seeks to improve the game through continued support.



Sheikh Talal Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah

Brown wins Welsh Open

LONDON: Jordan Brown sealed one of snooker's greatest upsets as he beat six-time world champion Ronnie O'Sullivan in a final-frame decider to clinch the Welsh Open title at Celtic Manor on Sunday. The world number 81, who started the tournament as a 750-1 outsider and was working in a petrol station just three years ago, held his nerve to clinch a 9-8 win and become the lowest ranked winner of a ranking title in over a quarter of a century. A brilliant break of 74 in the decider completed victory for the Northern Irishman. The 33-year-old won four consecutive matches in final-frame deciders before sweeping aside Stephen Maguire 6-1 in the semi-finals. "I knew if I got over-awed about Ronnie I wouldn't win so I focused on my own game," Brown told the BBC. — AFP

New Zealand beat Australia by 53 runs in first T20

Black Caps overcome shaky start to finish on 184 for five

CHRISTCHURCH: A Devon Conway batting masterclass inspired New Zealand to a 53-run win over Australia in the opening Twenty20 international in Christchurch yesterday. Conway smashed an unbeaten 99 off 59 balls as the Black Caps overcame a shaky start to finish on 184 for five after losing the toss and being put in to bat.

In reply, the tourists were all out for 131 after 17.3 overs, with Black Caps spinner Ish Sodhi taking four wickets for 28 to give the hosts an early edge in the five-match series. Australia captain Aaron Finch refused to blame the loss on his team's two-week COVID-19 quarantine upon arrival in New Zealand. "It feels like a long time since we played but we were treated brilliantly (in quarantine)," he said. "They just ran harder and we didn't get it right."

Jhye Richardson, fresh from signing a multi-million dollar Indian Premier League contract, was the pick of the Australian bowlers, taking two for 31. But the tourists could not dislodge Conway, whose 59-ball knock included 10 fours and three sixes, helping the Black Caps bounce back from 19 for three.

Conway said he was "pretty chuffed" with his career-best effort, even though he was stranded just short of a century after failing to take two runs off the final ball. The South African-born batsman came to the crease with New Zealand teetering at 11 for two and was still settling in when captain Kane Williamson departed for 12. "The key was to try to stay positive, that's when I'm at my best," Conway said. "I was trying not to think too far ahead and just build good partnerships."

The frustrated Australians then suffered a horror show early in their innings, as seamers Tim Southee and Trent Boult tore through the top order. Luckless debutant Josh Philippe departed for two after sending a top-edge skyward. But old campaigners such



CHRISTCHURCH: New Zealand's Jimmy Neesham (right) and Martin Guptill celebrate the dismissal of Australia's Matthew Wade during the first Twenty20 cricket match between New Zealand and Australia at Hagley Park Oval in Christchurch yesterday. — AFP

as skipper Aaron Finch and Glenn Maxwell also failed to deal with the swinging ball and the tourists were soon four for 19.

Mitch Marsh top-scored with 45 and Ashton Agar contributed 23 a string of batting failures gave New Zealand a comfortable win. While trans-Tasman bragging rights are up for grabs, both teams also enter the series with one eye on the T20 World Cup in India later this year.

Established Australian stars such as Steve Smith, David Warner and Mitchell Starc are being rested as selectors look to unearth new talent. New Zealand have a more settled line-up, though veteran opening batsman Martin Guptill will be under pressure after his poor run of form continued with a duck in the opening over. The Black Caps may turn to uncapped Finn Allen for the next match in Dunedin on Thursday. — AFP

Pastrnak shines as Bruins dominate Flyers in outdoor game

STATELINE: Czech forward David Pastrnak scored three goals as the Boston Bruins continued their mastery over the depleted Philadelphia Flyers on Sunday with a 7-3 win in an NHL outdoor game on the shores of Lake Tahoe, Nevada. It was Pastrnak's second hat trick of the season against Philadelphia, who have now lost five straight games to the Bruins this season.

Pastrnak also scored three goals in a 4-3 overtime win on February 3. He is the second player to score three goals in an NHL outdoor game after Los Angeles Kings forward Tyler Toffoli, who bagged a hat trick a year ago against the Colorado Avalanche. "Oh man, it was beautiful," Pastrnak said. "We enjoyed every second of it, as you could see."

The evening game was played under floodlights after the NHL moved the start time back five hours because of poor ice conditions, which also resulted in an eight-hour delay for a similar outdoor contest on Saturday. Trent Frederic scored his first NHL goal, and Charlie McAvoy, Charlie Coyle and Nick Ritchie also scored for the Bruins, who improved to 11-3-2 on the season. Brad Marchand, Connor Clifton, Craig Smith and John Moore each had two



STATELINE: David Pastrnak #88 of the Boston Bruins scores a first period goal past Carter Hart #79 of the Philadelphia Flyers on an assist from teammate Brad Marchand #63 during the 'NHL Outdoors At Lake Tahoe' at the Edgewood Tahoe Resort on Sunday in Stateline, Nevada. — AFP

assists, and Tuukka Rask made 16 saves.

James van Riemsdyk had a goal and two assists, and Sean Couturier and Joel Farabee scored for the Flyers, who dropped to 8-4-3. Carter Hart had trouble seeing the puck Sunday and allowed six goals on 23

shots before Brian Elliott replaced him for the third period. The Flyers were without a number of key players who remain on the league's Covid-19 list, including captain Claude Giroux, Jake Voracek, Travis Konecny, Oskar Lindblom and Scott Laughton. — AFP

Decisive battle for India, England at world's biggest stadium

AHMEDABAD: India and England head into a crucial third Test starting tomorrow at the world's biggest cricket stadium with more than a series between two of the biggest rivals at stake, according to their pace spearheads Ishant Sharma and Jimmy Anderson. With the four-match series tied at 1-1, both sides need a win in Ahmedabad to be able to keep alive their hopes of reaching the World Test Championship final against New Zealand.

India just need to win the series to get through, while England have to win by 3-1. A tied series would let Australia through. The tension is rising in both camps who each registered a crushing win in the first two matches. "We have got to win two Tests matches, it is as simple as it gets for us," said Anderson who took crucial wickets in England's 227 run win in the first game.

England have "put to bed the disappointment" of their 317-run defeat in Chennai last week, the 38-year-old added. The team are "refreshed" and "we are excited that we have still got the opportunity to qualify for the Test championship and have still got the opportunity to beat India in India, which is something that not many teams do."

Ishant's Test ton

"I have just one thing on my mind," responded Sharma, India's 32-year-old veteran who will be in his 100th Test. "That is to win the next Test, win the series and qualify for the World Test Championship," Sharma said. "I have just one format to play and this is like a World Cup to me. So if we reach the Test championship final and win, so it's like winning an ICC World Cup."

An intense atmosphere is certain at the 110,000 capacity Sardar Patel stadium that was used for a rally by US president Donald Trump last February. Authorities have said more than 50,000 tickets will go on sale for the first cricket game to be played in the revamped ground. The pink ball, LED lights instead of usual floodlights and the size of the ground add to the test of nerves, according to batsman Rohit Sharma. "Whenever you play in a new stadium, that's always a challenge," said Sharma. "Getting used to the lights and the seats in the stadium, because its new seats so obviously it will be shiny."

India's last pink-ball outing ended in a disastrous show in Adelaide when Kohli's team were skittled out for their Test lowest of 36. The hosts, who beat Bangladesh in under three days in their first day-night Test in Kolkata in 2019, are expected to stick largely to their winning side from Chennai. Joe Root's England though will be forced to make changes because of their rotation policy. Moeen Ali headed back home after the second Test loss when he was England's standout performer with eight wickets and a quickfire 43 with the bat. Off-spinner Dom Bess is expected to get his place back and fast bowler Anderson should return. "I believe this series is absolutely on a knife-edge," former England spinner Graeme Swann said. "It is a brilliant place for England to be, and they've got a great chance to go ahead once more. I'm full of optimism going into this game, mainly due to Jimmy coming back. — AFP

Sports

Atletico show Chelsea virtue of stability under Simeone

Teams face off in Champions League on back of contrasting seasons

LONDON: Thomas Tuchel knew from his first day in charge at Chelsea the hire-and-fire culture that managers face when working under Roman Abramovich. "What does it change?" Tuchel responded when asked in his first press conference if he was concerned at being handed just an 18-month contract. "If they gave me four-and-a-half years and they are not happy, they will sack me anyway."

Despite seeing the fate of prestigious predecessors like Jose Mourinho, Carlo Ancelotti and Antonio Conte, who were all sacked after winning Premier League titles at Stamford Bridge, and a club legend in Frank Lampard, who was dismissed last month, Tuchel has embraced the challenge he now faces.

In stark contrast to the Chelsea model, Atletico Madrid's rise over the past decade has been built around one talismanic leader in Diego Simeone. Since Simeone took over a sleeping giant in 2011, Chelsea have had nine permanent managers.

The two sides meet for the first leg of their Champions League last 16 tie tonight in Bucharest on the back of contrasting seasons so far. Despite splashing out £220 million (\$308 million) on new players in a deflated transfer market due to the economic impact of coronavirus, Chelsea find themselves fifth in the Premier League.

Another change of manager deemed necessary by Abramovich just to salvage a top-four finish and Champions League football next season. Atletico's form has dipped in recent weeks, but they still enjoy a three-point lead at the top of La Liga with a game in hand over Real Madrid to spare.

Battle-hardened Atletico

Abramovich can claim that his refusal to accept any decline in standards has been rewarded. No English club has won as many trophies as Chelsea in the Russian's 18-year reign. That includes the only Champions League ever won by a London club in 2012.

But for a club of Chelsea's resources, the lack of progress in Europe's premier club competition suggests there have been consequences for constant regime change. Since losing to Atletico in the semi-finals of the 2013-14 season, Chelsea have not won a single knockout Champions League tie.

The Spanish side may have missed out in agonizing fashion twice in Champions League finals to local rivals Real in extra-time in 2014 and on penalties two years later. But the stability brought about by Simeone has allowed Los Rojiblancos to establish themselves as consistent contenders in the latter stages of European competition. On top of two runs to the final, Atletico have reached a semi-final, two quarter-finals and won the Europa League in the two seasons they did not make the Champions League knockout stages under Simeone. That is all the more impressive given Atletico do not enjoy the wealth of their La Liga competitors Madrid and Barcelona.

Even Chelsea with the backing of an oligarch in Abramovich have struggled to compete for the best talent since the emergence of state-funded projects backing Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain. Time and again Simeone has seen sides dismantled and had to rebuild given Atletico's place in European football's food chain.

Chelsea were among the predators in taking



SOUTHAMPTON: Chelsea's German head coach Thomas Tuchel (center) gestures at the final whistle during the English Premier League football match between Southampton and Chelsea at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton, southern England on Saturday. —AFP

Diego Costa and Filipe Luis from the 2013/14 La Liga title-winning team. Radamel Falcao, Arda Turan, Antoine Griezmann, Lucas Hernandez, Rodrigo and Thomas Parthey are among others to be sold on at huge profits.

"In a war, those that win are not those with

most soldiers, but those that use them best," Simeone once said in comparing how his side punch above their weight. Everyone is now aware that drawing Atletico in a Champions League knockout tie means a battle. And that is just how Simeone likes it. —AFP

Solskjaer not giving up hope of catching Man City

LONDON: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is not giving up hope that Manchester United can challenge Manchester City for the Premier League title, despite the scintillating form of the league leaders. City have soared 10 points clear of their local rivals thanks to an 18-game winning streak in all competitions.

United's own inconsistent form has helped open up the gap, but the Red Devils beat Newcastle 3-1 on Sunday to win for just the second time in six league games. "We've got to be there just in case," said Solskjaer. "Every time we get three points we've done our job and that's what we've got to do and see what other teams do."

Bruno Fernandes and Marcus Rashford were again on target on a night United needed their star men to paper over the cracks of another unconvincing performance. Solskjaer made five changes to the side that impressively thrashed Real Sociedad 4-0 in the Europa League on Thursday and was lucky not to be punished for a disjointed start from the hosts.

"We had to find a way to win it in the second-half. The first-half wasn't up to the standard that we wanted," added Solskjaer. "Maybe because of Newcastle, maybe because of what we did in the week. We asked them to go again after a high-intensity game and it took us to half time to get our legs and energy."

A run of two wins in 14 games has left Newcastle just three points clear of the drop zone, but Steve Bruce remains confident his side will survive. "Fulham have had a good week and won a couple of games, which at the bottom end of the table is big, but there are a few of us: Brighton, Burnley and maybe Crystal Palace looking over their shoulders," said Bruce. "My message to the supporters is that I'm convinced we'll be ok."

Poor goalkeeping cost Bruce's men the opening goal on the half hour mark as Rashford wriggled free inside the area, but his shot should have been kept out by Karl Darlow. United's sloppy defending from set-pieces was punished six minutes later, though, when Saint-Maximin swept the ball into the top corner after Harry Maguire only half-cleared a cross into the box.

After a blistering start to his United



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Welsh midfielder Daniel James (center) celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Newcastle at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on Sunday. —AFP

career last season, Dan James has struggled for game time, but the Welshman has now scored in his last three appearances as he blasted past Darlow from close range just before the hour mark.

More good footwork from Rashford then drew Joe Willock into an ill-advised challenge inside the box

and the on-loan Arsenal midfielder conceded a penalty. Darlow had saved the only spot-kick Fernandes has missed as a United player when the sides met earlier in the season. But he was wrong-footed this time as the Portuguese playmaker coolly converted to give United the two-goal cushion they craved. —AFP

Monaco get better of old boy Mbappe to dent PSG hopes

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain suffered a Champions League hangover as a 2-0 home defeat against Kylian Mbappe's old side Monaco on Sunday damaged their Ligue 1 title hopes after Lille earlier reclaimed top spot. Sofiane Diop and Guillermo Maripan scored to give Monaco the points as they stretched their unbeaten run to 11 games and moved to within two points of their opponents, who sit in third place.

While Monaco remain in contention for a return to the Champions League, PSG find themselves a point behind Lyon in second and four points adrift of Lille, who retook top spot earlier on Sunday with a 4-1 win at Lorient. It was a disappointing night for PSG as they failed to pick up where they left off in midweek, when they destroyed Barcelona in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie, Mbappe scoring a hat-trick in a 4-1 win.

"We were not at the level we need to be at to win, and as coach I take responsibility for that," said coach Mauricio Pochettino, who left Marco Verratti on the bench at kick-off in the only change from the Barcelona game. "We spoke about the importance of maintaining our concentration levels, but we can't exactly replicate our performance from one evening to the next."

Genuine chance

There is now a genuine chance that PSG will miss out on the Ligue 1 title for the first time since Mbappe's Monaco pipped them in 2017. Almost exactly five years to the day after he scored his first Ligue 1 goal as a 17-year-old for the principality side, Mbappe was kept quiet by the Monaco defense, while Neymar watched from the stands as he continues to recover from injury.

Monaco had already beaten the Parisians at home in November and they went in front here in the sixth minute when Ruben Aguilar knocked down Kevin Volland's cross for Diop to head in. The home side failed to muster a shot on target in the first half and continued to lack inspiration after the break, as Monaco doubled their lead in the 51st minute. Chilean defender Maripan dispossessed Ander Herrera inside the box and coolly slotted into the corner for what was



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe (center) controls the ball during the French L1 football match between Paris-Saint Germain (PSG) and AS Monaco FC at The Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris on Sunday. —AFP

already his fifth goal in 2021.

Mbappe had scored seven times in seven previous games against his old club since joining PSG in 2017, but he could not add to that tally as Monaco became the first team to beat PSG twice in the same Ligue 1 season since Nancy in 2011/12. They are the third team to beat PSG at the Parc des Princes in Ligue 1 this season, after Marseille and Lyon.

"We said we must delete Kylian Mbappe because he is a great striker, keep the ball away from his side, and I think we showed another side to our team because we didn't concede a lot of chances," said Monaco coach Niko Kovac, as he played down his club's chances of finishing in the top three and returning to the Champions League. "At the moment it is too early because we are not yet on the same level as Lille, Lyon and PSG," he said.

Earlier, Jonathan Ikone's fine free-kick helped Lille ease to victory at Lorient. Lyon had gone to the summit on goal difference with a 3-2 victory at Brest on Friday, but Lille responded to make it a club record seven straight away wins in the top flight, with Jose Fonte and Domagoj Bradaric also scoring after Andreu Gravillon's own goal had put them ahead in Brittany.

Gravillon deflected Jonathan David's shot into his own net midway through the first half, only for Jerome Hergault to equalize. Veteran center-back Fonte restored Lille's advantage in the 38th minute and French international Ikone curled in a free-kick just before the hour mark. Lorient had gone unbeaten through their previous five outings, notably beating PSG and holding Monaco, to boost their survival hopes. However, Bradaric wrapped up a big win for Lille in stoppage time, plunging Lorient back into the bottom three on goal difference behind Nantes. —AFP

Bayern struggle to shore up porous defense

BERLIN: Bayern Munich are showing chinks in their armor ahead of tonight's Champions League last-16 first leg at Lazio after dropping points and leaking goals in the Bundesliga. The reigning European champions crashed to a 2-1 league defeat at Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday, having already been held to a 3-3 home draw by strugglers Arminia Bielefeld last week.

Bayern's commanding lead in the Bundesliga has been slashed from seven points in early February to just two after second-placed Leipzig's 3-0 win at Hertha Berlin on Sunday. Their defense remains a cause for concern having conceded 31 goals after 22 league games — their worst record at the back for 29 years.

The Bavarians have looked fatigued since winning the Club World Cup in Qatar 11 days ago. Over the weekend, chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge took a swipe at the team's poor form. "We're too inconsistent," Rummenigge told broadcaster ZDF. "We sometimes only put in the effort over the last few meters," he added after Bayern had found themselves 2-0 down against both Frankfurt and Bielefeld. "That (dropping five points) is unusual for FC Bayern and not what we had in mind."

The strength in depth of Bayern's bumper squad has been severely tested since their Qatar sojourn. Defender Benjamin Pavard and Thomas Muller have been sidelined after testing positive for COVID-19. Midfielder Corentin Tolisso is expected to be out for months after surgery on an injured thigh, while winger Serge Gnabry is struggling to recover in time to face Lazio after also suffering a thigh problem.

Muller's understudy Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting has struggled to provide Lewandowski with the sort of service Bayern's top-scorer is used to. "We have had a few turbulent days, you must not forget that," said coach Hansi Flick. Bayern are struggling to cope with their condensed fixture list, having played 12 matches already in 2021. "The whole season is exhausting," Rummenigge admitted. "The team plays every third day and, of course, the players are stressed."

A shock German Cup defeat in a penalty shoot-out at second-tier Holstein Kiel in January means Bayern cannot repeat last season's treble. To defend their Bundesliga and Champions League titles, Bayern need to get their season back on track, starting with Lazio. "We have to play a bit more concentrated, a bit more committed," said Rummenigge.

Leroy Sane has so far failed to tighten the defensive side of his game to complement his undeniable flair in attack, which Bayern bosses have noticed, since joining from Manchester City. Rummenigge singled out Sane and center-back Niklas Sule for criticism for recent defensive lapses, saying: "These are mistakes that must not happen." Flick has suffered just six defeats since taking charge in November 2019, to match the amount of titles he has won. There was some good news in Saturday's defeat as Leon Goretzka came on for his first appearance since testing negative for COVID-19 in January. —AFP



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE		
Leeds United v Southampton		21:00
beIN Sports		
UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE		
SS Lazio v FC Bayern Munich		23:00
beIN Sports HD 2		
Atletico de Madrid v Chelsea		23:00
beIN Sports HD 1		

Nets end road trip with win over Clippers

Ingram powers Pelicans • T'Wolves fire head coach

LOS ANGELES: James Harden finished with 37 points and 11 rebounds as the Brooklyn Nets improved to 7-0 against Pacific Division teams this season with a 112-108 victory over the Los Angeles Clippers on Sunday. The Nets went a perfect 5-0 on their western swing road trip and extended their win streak to a season-high six games.

Harden recorded the 77th career double-double and added seven assists at Staples Center arena in southern California. "We just kept our composure," he said. "Down the stretch we wanted to get a good shot every single time and we came out with the win. "We are a very confident team that continues to grow."

Kyrie Irving scored 28 points with eight assists while Joe Harris, DeAndre Jordan and Bruce Brown scored 13 each for the Nets. Brooklyn's Kevin Durant missed his fourth straight game with an injured hamstring. The Nets also lost forward Jeff Green with an apparent shoulder injury after a collision with Clippers guard Patrick Beverley with just under three minutes left.

Kawhi Leonard tallied 29 points and 13 rebounds, while Ivica Zubac finished with 13 points and eight rebounds in the loss. Paul George had 34 points and seven rebounds but sat out the game's crucial moments down the stretch because Los Angeles wanted to limit his minutes in the game. "We had to bring him back to get the game close," said Clippers coach Tyrone Lue. "The biggest thing is he is healthy."

Largest comeback

Elsewhere, Brandon Ingram scored 33 points as the New Orleans Pelicans engineered their largest comeback in team history Sunday by overcoming a 24-point deficit to beat the Boston Celtics 120-115 in overtime. Ingram hit the go-ahead three pointer with 34 seconds remaining in the overtime.

Zion Williamson had 28 points and 10 rebounds, and Josh Hart had 17 points and 10 rebounds in the win. Jayson Tatum scored 32, Jaylen Brown had 25, and Tristan Thompson and Kemba Walker added 14 each to lead the Celtics. After an exchange of baskets to start the overtime scoring, Williamson made one of two free throws.

Brown made a layup to give Boston a 112-111 lead with 72 seconds left. Ingram tied it with a free throw and added a three-pointer to give the Pelicans a 115-112 lead in the overtime. Walker missed a three-pointer, and Hart hit two free throws for a five-point lead with 18 seconds left as New Orleans closed it out.

Lonzo Ball made one of two free throws at the end of the fourth quarter to give the Pelicans a one-point lead with 32 seconds left in regulation. Williamson then executed a three-point play to give the Pelicans a 108-106 lead with six seconds left. Tatum scored on a short shot with 0.2 left to send the game into the extra session.

Also, Fred VanVleet scored 23 points and had nine assists as the Toronto Raptors defeated the visiting Philadelphia 76ers 110-103 in Florida.



LOS ANGELES: James Harden #13 of the Brooklyn Nets shoots the ball during the game against the LA Clippers on Sunday at STAPLES Center in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

Pascal Siakam scored 23 points and had seven rebounds and eight assists for the Raptors.

Wolves sack coach

The Minnesota Timberwolves fired head coach Ryan Saunders on Sunday after a disappointing 7-24 start to the NBA season. "We would like to thank Ryan for his time and commitment to the Timberwolves organization and wish him the best in the future,"

Timberwolves president Gersson Rosas said in a statement. "These are difficult decisions to make, however this change is in the best interest of the organization's short and long-term goals."

Saunders was 43-95 as coach of the Timberwolves in two-plus seasons. They have won just seven of 31 games and lost eight of their past nine for the worst record in the NBA. Saunders' sacking comes after Minnesota lost 103-99 to the New York Knicks on Sunday.

Minnesota has been hit hard by injuries and COVID-19 issues this season, with starting guard D'Angelo Russell out for up to six weeks after undergoing surgery on his left knee. Karl-Anthony Towns contracted the coronavirus and suffered a wrist injury, resulting in him playing just 11 games so far this season. Toronto Raptors assistant coach Chris Finch is believed to be the frontrunner for the job to replace Saunders. — AFP



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