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MPs vow 'catastrophic' fund withdrawal bill will not pass

Lawmakers slam 'dangerous' draft law, blame govt policies

Zain Group generates revenue of \$5.3bn for 2020 amid challenges

Board recommends cash dividend of 33 fils per share

KUWAIT: Zain Group, a leading mobile telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa, announced its consolidated financial results for the full-year 2020, and fourth quarter ended Dec 31, 2020. The group ended the year with a customer base of 47.8 million customers.

For the full-year 2020, Zain Group generated consolidated revenue of KD 1.63 billion (\$5.3 billion), reflecting a two percent year-on-year (y-o-y) decrease, while consolidated EBITDA for the period declined by 8 percent y-o-y to reach KD 673 million (\$2.2 billion), reflecting a healthy EBITDA margin of 41 percent. Consolidated net income reached KD 185 million (\$605 million), down 15 percent and reflecting earnings per share of 43 fils (\$0.14).

The Board of Directors of Zain Group recommended a cash dividend of 33 fils per share for 2020, adhering to the group's commitment made last year of a minimum 33 fils dividend for 3 years. Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi commented: "The group's performance for 2020 reflects the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption on economic-social activity and the unavoidable impact it had on the financial results." (See Page 9)



Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Lawmakers, spearheaded by National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, vowed yesterday that a government-sponsored draft law to withdraw KD 5 billion annually from the country's sovereign wealth fund will not pass at the Assembly, describing it as "catastrophic". The government has said the bill aims to finance cash-strapped state coffers, responsible for public expenditure, which has been drained due to a sharp fall in oil revenues.

The government has been facing acute shortfalls in the state budget, which in the current and coming fiscal years are projected to hit KD 26 billion. Oil income accounts for more than 85 percent of public revenues.

Kuwait has two reserve funds - the first is the general reserve fund which provides money for public spending and gets its funds from public revenues, while the second is the future generations fund, or the sovereign wealth fund, which gets its assets by a transfer of 10 percent of revenues every year. But this step has been suspended due to low oil prices.

Ghanem said the draft law is "extremely dangerous", adding he believes it will not be approved by the Assembly. He said the bill aims at using funds that "we do not own" because it is the property of future generations. Ghanem said the

bill is not the best option from an economic viewpoint because the cost of selling assets is higher than borrowing.

He said that the cost of selling investments is estimated at KD 300 million a year, while the cost of borrowing is just KD 75 million if calculated for the KD 5 billion. The speaker said he believes the fundamental solution to this chronic problem is for the government to announce wide-ranging reforms and be transparent with the people.

Opposition MP Bader Al-Dahoum strongly lashed out at the government, saying that it is the same government which failed to manage the country's financial resources when oil prices were \$120 a barrel and squandered public funds by granting unnecessary projects to some influential corrupt people. He said if the government continues with its policies, the country is at risk of going bankrupt, adding that MPs will not allow the bill to pass. He called on economists to prepare studies for better alternatives that can save the future generations fund.

Opposition MP Mohammad Al-Mutair said he will not approve withdrawals from the future generations fund unless it is in the form of a loan, provided the government submits a plan on how to repay it. MP Hesham Al-Saleh said the withdrawal of KD 5 billion from the sovereign wealth fund is "catastrophic" and extremely dangerous.

US-Kuwait success story: 30 years since liberation



By Alina L Romanowski
US Ambassador to Kuwait

I remember visiting Kuwait in 1991, shortly after the country's liberation from the six-month occupation. Like most Americans, I had been consumed by the 24-hour news coverage of the invasion. Even 6,000 miles away in Washington DC, I watched in horror as the tragic events unfolded on my television screen.

Perhaps most jarring were the images of Kuwait's oil wells as they went up in flames, black plumes of smoke blanketing the sky so that you couldn't tell night from day. The heroism of the Kuwaiti people while under occupation was impressive, but it was only afterwards that we learned details of their sacrifices and bravery. I have learned much more since my return to Kuwait last year.

President George H W Bush was clear when launching Operation Desert Storm on January 17, 1991: The United States' goal was not about the conquest of Iraq; it was about the liberation of Kuwait. Nearly 700,000 US troops took part in the war, and many lives were sacrificed in the fight for Kuwait's freedom, including those of nearly 300 American soldiers and over 900 Kuwaiti nationals.

My visit to the Al-Qurain Martyrs Museum last month offered me a glimpse into the fight. I learned of the bravery of the Al-Messilah group of Kuwaiti resistance fighters, who battled Iraqi soldiers as they fired with tank, rockets, and

Continued on Page 2

Kuwaiti, US troops conclude joint drills

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Army land force, namely the Mechanized Liberation Brigade, with the participation of US Army artillery and air force units, wrapped up mock battles code-named "Liberation-21". The Kuwaiti-US drills were carried out in the region of Al-Udairi and patronized and attended by Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister

Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah.

In a statement, the minister lauded the skills manifested by the national forces. He also conveyed to the personnel who took part in the maneuvers greetings from Their Highnesses the Amir and the Crown Prince.

On the 60th anniversary of the National Day and the 30th anniversary of the Liberation Day, the minister recalled the great sacrifices by the army in repelling the enemy that occupied the country. Moreover, Sheikh Hamad praised the allied forces that backed the national forces in resisting and fighting the occupiers. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah meets troops taking part in the "Liberation-21" drill. — KUNA

US mourns 500K deaths; WHO slams vaccine hogging

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden ordered flags lowered to half-mast Monday after the United States crossed the "heartbreaking" milestone of 500,000 COVID-19 deaths, while Britain eyed lifting lockdowns in the latest sign of global gains against the pandemic. "I know what it's like," an emotional Biden said in a national television address, referring to his own long history of family tragedies.

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WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden, First Lady Jill Biden, US Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband Doug Emhoff hold a moment of silence during a candlelight ceremony in honor of those who lost their lives to the coronavirus on the South Lawn of the White House on Monday. — AFP

Former Saudi oil minister Yamani dies aged 90

RIYADH: Former Saudi oil minister Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, a key player behind the 1973 oil embargo, died yesterday aged 90 after a long career that laid the foundations of the kingdom's

energy sector. Yamani, dubbed by local papers as the "godfather of black gold", died in London, said state-owned El-Ekhabriya television, without giving the cause. It said he will be buried in the holy city of Makkah, in western Saudi Arabia, where he was born.

In 1973, he was a key player in OPEC's decision to raise oil prices in protest at Israel's occupation of Arab land seized in 1967, sparking a world economic crisis. Two years later, he was among oil ministers kidnapped by pro-Palestinian mili-

tants led by the infamous Carlos the Jackal at an OPEC meeting in Vienna.

Yamani, who served as oil minister from 1962 until 1986, was the first Saudi representative in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). He was dismissed in 1986 for undisclosed reasons, apparently over disagreement with the king at the time on oil output quotas. He played a pivotal role in the nationalization of Saudi Arabia's oil industry, led today by energy giant Aramco. — AFP



Ahmed Zaki Yamani

Local

Kuwait reports eight new COVID deaths, 1,015 cases

Hospitalized patients at 10,859, including 146 in ICUs

KUWAIT: Kuwait yesterday reported 1,015 new coronavirus cases and eight COVID-related deaths, taking the total cases up to 186,004 and deaths to 1,057. The Ministry of Health also reported that 906 more people have been cured of the virus, raising the total of those to have overcome the disease to 174,088. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood yesterday at 10,859, with 146 of them in intensive care units, ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad told a press conference. He added that some 8,221 swab tests were conducted over the same period, bringing the total up to 1,746,776. He went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing, to help curb the spread of the virus.

Coronavirus Emergencies, and decided the following:

First: Closing the land and sea borders, with the exception of shipping operations and workers in the divided zone and their relatives. The return of citizens from land and sea borders, their first-degree relatives, and their companions, which may

ers in the workplace by no more than 50 percent. Furthermore, full commitment should be observed in all cases to health preventive measures set by the competent health authorities, as well as procedures, rules, flexible working hours and remote work in accordance with the manual of policies and procedures for the gradual return to work issued by the Civil Service Bureau. The decision is effective from today until further notice.

Public transportation

Fourth: Forcing public transportation to adhere to the number of passengers, which should not exceed 30 percent of the total carrying capacity in buses, with a commitment to apply the health and preventive measures in force by the Ministry of Health in this regard, effective from today until further notice.

Fifth: The Cabinet was informed on the mechanism adopted by the Public Authority for Sports and the Kuwaiti Olympic Committee regarding the proposed procedures to enforce health requirements at sports facilities for the return of sports activity in the country. The Public Authority for Sports was assigned, in coordination with the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Health, and Kuwaiti Olympic Committee, to take measures necessary to implement the mechanism needed.

Sixth: Forming a joint committee headed by the Ministry of Interior and membership of each of Ministry of Health, Directorate General of Civil Aviation to oversee the mechanism for enforcing institutional quarantine applied to all arrivals to the country.

Seventh: The Cabinet approved a Ministry of Health request regarding the



906 patients recovered in 24 hours

include domestic workers, will be allowed. The Cabinet also assigned the Ministry of Interior and General Administration of Customs to implement the provisions of the decision, which shall be enforced as of today until further notice.

Second: Prohibiting dining inside all kinds of restaurants and cafes, including those inside malls and shopping centers, with the exception of takeout orders and delivery services which will continue to operate. The decision shall be enforced as of today until further notice.

Third: The number of workers in public workplaces must not exceed 30 percent, and each government agency shall determine the appropriate percentage for it in a way that does not exceed these limits in accordance with the requirements of the public interest and work conditions. Meanwhile, the private sector must adhere to the percentage of the number of work-

Latest developments

The Cabinet had followed up on the latest developments related to the pandemic during its weekly meeting chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah on Monday. Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basil Hmoud Al-Sabah briefed ministers on the health situation in the country, including details of the overall statistics and non-positive indicators that confirm the recent high numbers of infection cases compared to the number of swabs. The Cabinet was also briefed on the remarkable increase in the number of fatalities, in addition to an increase in the number of people receiving treatment in hospitals and the percentage of intensive care occupancy, which warns of the need to take strict measures to limit the spread of this pandemic. In this regard, the Cabinet reviewed recommendations by the Ministerial Committee for



KUWAIT: These photos released by Kuwait Airways yesterday show workers fumigating Terminal 4 (T4) at Kuwait International Airport. Kuwait Airways said in a statement that the building is regularly sanitized to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) or any possible new variants.

US-Kuwait success story: 30 years...

Continued from Page 1

machine-gun fire during a 10-hour siege. I saw the faces of those young martyrs and my heart went out to their families.

Today, the museum may be strewn with bullet holes and riddled with damage, but the structure still stands proudly, battle scars and all. To me, it perfectly symbolizes the Kuwaiti people's spirit while under occupation - tenacious and impossible to destroy.

In the 30 years since liberation, Kuwait has re-emerged as a pillar of stability in a region marred by conflict. In these past three decades, the relationship between our two countries has only grown stronger. Since 2003, Kuwait has provided the main platform for US and coalition operations in Iraq, and it continues to play an integral role in the fight against ISIS.

But our relations are so much more than security and defense matters. When Hurricane Katrina devastated parts of America in 2005, Kuwait pledged \$500 million in aid to US relief efforts, the single largest donation of its kind at the time. Americans appreciated Kuwait's generosity during our time of crisis.

More recently, after the Gulf crisis broke in 2017, the United States quickly turned to the late Amir to help settle the dispute. Both our countries recognized early on that the rift harmed our mutual interests and only served our adversaries in the region. If not for Kuwait's role, who knows where the GCC would stand today?

To mark the creative bonds between our people, US and Kuwaiti musical artists were inspired to record a beautiful version of a traditional Kuwaiti song "Kulama Zadat Al Mihan". American and Kuwaiti sculptors also designed and produced the first-ever glass sculpture of the Kuwait desert bush, the Arfaj.

2021 is an important year for the United States and Kuwait. In addition to the 30th anniversary of the liberation, we will mark 60 years since establishing formal diplomatic relations between our two countries. Foreign Minister Dr Ahmed Al-Nasser Al-Sabah described the US-Kuwait relationship best during the Strategic Dialogue in Washington last November: "We have a beautiful story, and we will make sure that story continues for generations to come."

I couldn't agree more with the Foreign Minister, and as US Ambassador to Kuwait, I will continue my work and that of my predecessors to further strengthen our two countries' ties. Undoubtedly, under President Biden's administration, and through the wise leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, our story will continue to flourish for years to come.

US mourns 500K deaths; WHO...

Continued from Page 1

"I ask all Americans to remember, remember those we lost and those they left behind," Biden said. "I also ask us to act, to remain vigilant, to stay socially distant, to mask up, to get vaccinated." Biden, accompanied by his wife Jill and Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband Doug Emhoff, then stood outside the White House to mark a moment's silence in front of 500 candles representing the toll - the highest reported of any country.

Earlier, flags were lowered over the White House and at federal buildings nationwide as well as at embassies around the world. "As a nation we cannot and must not let this go on," Biden said, urging unity. "We have to fight this together as one people, as the United States of America."

Unlike his predecessor Donald Trump, who often sought to minimize the disease, Biden has made the pandemic his top priority, simultaneously pushing an aggressive vaccine rollout and making frequent, public shows of empathy. It is a strategy that could make or break the Biden presidency, already juggling high-stakes economic challenges and the tense political aftermath of the Trump era.

Biden has warned that the US toll could still go "well over" 600,000. But signs are also emerging that progress is being made both in the United States and around the world, with infections dropping sharply and vaccine deliveries rising steadily.

In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson outlined a "gradual and cautious" approach to lifting curbs in England that could see life there return almost to normal by the end of June. The first step will be the return of children to schools from March 8. There was also good news from a University of Edinburgh study finding that Pfizer and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccinations have led to a "substantial reduction" in COVID-19 admissions to hospitals in Scotland.

Despite the dramatic losses in the United States, the trend there is also sharply downward. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control, said US deaths are at their lowest since December, with a 39 percent drop in the latest seven-day average of new daily cases. Globally, the toll is nearing 2.5 million.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization on

Monday blasted wealthy countries for not only hogging COVID vaccines but in doing so, hindering the pathway for poorer nations to get them too. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said some rich countries' direct deals with manufacturers had meant that previously-agreed vaccine allocations for poorer countries, via the Covax program, were being reduced.

The UN health agency chief said money was available to procure doses for some of the poorest countries, following fresh contributions from the United States, the European Union and Germany - but it was worthless if there was nothing to buy. Tedros urged wealthy nations to check whether their own deals with pharmaceutical companies were undermining Covax, which poorer countries are relying on as they await their first doses.

"Even if you have the money, if you cannot use the money to buy vaccines, having the money doesn't mean anything," he told a virtual press conference with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. The ONE Campaign, an organization co-founded by U2 singer Bono, said last week that members of the Group of Seven top industrialized nations along with the rest of the EU plus Australia had collectively bought nearly 1.25 billion more doses than they needed to inoculate every member of their populations against COVID-19.

The first wave of Covax vaccines are to be shipped out between late February and the end of June. Some 145 participating economies are set to receive 337.2 million doses - enough to vaccinate a little over three percent of their combined populations. Covax has said it hopes to raise the figure to up to 27 percent in lower-income countries by the end of December.

Steinmeier said that although countries were focused on protecting their own citizens from coronavirus, it made sense for the wealthier nations speeding ahead in the vaccine race to ensure that people in poorer nations were jabbed at the same time.

The European Commission is working with pharmaceutical giants to ramp up production of vaccines to between two and three billion doses per year, more than enough for the EU population of 450 million. Visiting the Pfizer-BioNTech plant in Puurs, Belgium, EU Commissioner Thierry Breton said the goal was for Europe to become the number one vaccine producing continent, but that its neighbors would not be forgotten.

Earlier, Tedros called for intellectual property rights on COVID-19 medical goods to be waived - a move which could facilitate greater knowledge-sharing and the rapid scale-up of production sites. The idea, currently before the World Trade Organization, is staunchly opposed by pharmaceutical giants. — AFP



WASHINGTON: The American flag is seen at half-staff over the White House in honor of the 500,000 lives lost to coronavirus in the United States. — AFP

Local

Amir meets top Chinese official, receives message from President Xi

Amir, Crown Prince receive Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Director of the Chinese Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office Yang Jiechi. — Amiri Diwan and KUNA photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received, in the presence of Foreign Minister Dr Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, Director of the Chinese Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office Yang Jiechi. The official delivered to His Highness the Amir a verbal message from Chinese President Xi Jinping focusing on historic bilateral relations and ways to enhance them on all possible levels. The message also touched on issues of mutual interest as well as regional and international development. Officials from the Amiri Diwan and the office of His Highness the Amir attended the meeting. In other news, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah yesterday at Bayan Palace. — KUNA



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Japan's envoy marks Emperor's birthday

KUWAIT: Japan's Ambassador to Kuwait Masato Takaoka released the following statement on the occasion of the birthday of Japan's Emperor Naruhito:

"As Japan celebrates this week His Majesty the Emperor's birthday on the 23rd of February, I wish to convey my warmest greetings to the leadership and people of the State of Kuwait. I am always thankful that Japan and Kuwait enjoy great partnership. There are genuine warm feelings between us which have been cultivated in our long history. The year 2021 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of our diplomatic relations.

"Japan is one of the first countries that recognized the independence of the State of Kuwait. This week's calendar is also marked by the 60th anniversary of the Kuwait National Independence and the 30th Anniversary of Liberation. Japan and Kuwait have come a long way together over those years, helping each other. Thirty years ago, at the time of tragedy in Kuwait, Japan provided an unprecedented level of support totaling 13 billion dollars for the operations of the multinational coalition forces and for contributing to the regional stability. We also sent Japanese minesweepers to Kuwait to remove dangerous mines floating in the water to ensure the safe navigation of vitally important sea lanes.

"On the other hand, 10 years ago, when Japan was devastated with the major earthquakes and tsunami, Kuwait came to offer enormous support. We will not forget the Kuwaiti generosity and kindness. People in Fukushima, for example, are eager to host the Kuwaiti Olympic team this summer. Japan and Kuwait are friends in need and friends indeed. Currently we are faced with the national and global coronavirus crisis, but we will overcome together. The Embassy of Japan in Kuwait is planning to organize a number of events this year, initially on-line, to commemorate the important milestone of the relations between our two countries. I invite all Kuwaiti friends to participate in our activities. I hope we will soon be celebrating our friendship face-to-face."

Kuwait, China discuss further cementing ties

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met yesterday with a senior Chinese official discussing the solid bilateral relations and the distinctive partnership bonding the two friendly countries. The meeting between Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser and Yang Jiechi, Director of the Chinese Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office and member of the politburo of the central committee of the

Chinese Communist party, was held at the Foreign Ministry headquarters. The discussions dealt with means of cementing further the close relations between the State of Kuwait and China - established 50 years ago, along with cooperation at various levels as well as the distinguished partnership between the two friendly countries in diverse vital and key arenas, in addition to regional and international topics. Sheikh Hamad Nasser lauded the close bilateral relations while his Chinese guest affirmed Beijing's keenness on strengthening the partnership in the economic, investment and commercial sectors. Moreover, Jiechi praised Kuwait's balanced foreign policy and its efforts for maintaining regional peace and security. Several ranking ministry officials attended the meeting. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Director of the Chinese Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office Yang Jiechi chair their respective countries' delegations during the meeting. — KUNA



King Felipe VI of Spain



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

Spain King congratulates Amir on national days

KUWAIT: King Felipe VI of Spain sent greetings to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on the occasion of Kuwait's national days. "On the occasion of celebrating the National Day of Kuwait, I would like to express to your highness, as well as on behalf of the government and people of the Kingdom of Spain best congratulations," King Felipe VI wrote in a telegram the Embassy of Spain forwarded to Kuwait's foreign ministry to deliver to His Highness the Amir. "I would also like to express our wishes of good health to your highness, and peace and prosperity to your friendly people."

News in brief

Amir congratulates Japanese Emperor

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a cable yesterday to the Emperor Naruhito of Japan, congratulating him on his birthday. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables. — KUNA

FM receives call

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah yesterday received a phone call from his Swedish counterpart Ann Linde, discussing means of fostering the close bilateral relations further, regional and international affairs. The two sides affirmed determination to pursue bilateral efforts toward the Yemeni cause, namely coordination for holding the donors conference for Yemen, due on March 1. Moreover, they affirmed necessity of pursuing the coordination for finding a peaceful solution to the crisis in Yemen. Sheikh Dr Ahmad renewed the condemnation of the recurring attacks, carried out by the Houthi militias, against Saudi Arabia. — KUNA

Kuwait decries attack

ROME: The State of Kuwait has denounced the attack on a convoy of the United Nations World Food Programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the Italian ambassador was killed. This criminal operation affirms pending need for doubling international efforts to nip violence and terrorism in the bud, said the Foreign Ministry in a statement on Tuesday, a day after Italy declared that its envoy was killed along with another person in the armed assault on the convoy in the east of the African country. Moreover, the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry has emphasized Kuwait's principled and unwavering stance that renounces all forms of these two phenomena. It extended condolence and sincere solace to the government and people of the friendly Republic of Italy and families of the victims. — KUNA

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.



'Still recovering': Restaurants lament dine-in ban in Kuwait

Restaurants hit hard in 2020 despite allowing takeout, delivery services

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The Cabinet on Monday decided to ban dine-in at restaurants and close all land and sea borders from today as part of additional measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus. For Cristina, a restaurant owner, it's a struggle running her small business.

"Restaurants have not completely recovered from 2020 lockdowns and curfews. We are not fully operational and functional to this day because we are still observing social distancing, so the restaurant is never filled to capacity. Now dine-in has been banned. It will definitely affect our sales," she told Kuwait Times.

At the time of restrictions in 2020, she recalled the drastic impact of the closures on her sales, as only takeout and delivery services were allowed. "It will be same now - because if you are at home, you can cook your own food. Why order from a restaurant? There was a decline of 70 percent in sales at that time, and it could be the same this time," Cristina added.

Small restaurants cannot afford to pay delivery companies. "Delivery services are too expensive for us. You have to sign a contract and pay the amount they need for the delivery service - we cannot afford it. So we ask taxi drivers or any available transport to take the food to our customers. The delivery charge is shouldered by

the customer. Who would like to order food worth KD 5 if the delivery charge is also KD 5, if you are in faraway places like Fahaheel or Jahra?" Cristina asked.

Cristina said the cost of delivery is more expensive than going directly to restaurants. "This is the reason why many restaurant owners like dine-in instead of delivery, because sometimes the food is cheaper than the delivery charge," she said, adding that nearby customers have an advantage. "If you live in the vicinity, delivery is free."

Workers' salaries

Kuwait Times asked her if she will pay her workers full salaries. "I don't know - I need to meet our sales target. How will I pay my workers; where will I get money for rent," she asked. "I hope the government, like in Western countries, compensates small business enterprises because they have no other source of income. We don't even know how long we will be closed. I hope after the holidays we can return to normal operations," she said.

The dine-in ban at restaurants and cafes will go into effect today until further notice, the Cabinet said in a statement following a meeting at Seif Palace. However, takeout and delivery services are allowed throughout the day.

Jason, a waiter at a restaurant in Salmiya, said he was informed by his boss yesterday to report to duty only



KUWAIT: This archive photo shows people dining outside a restaurant in Kuwait. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

for three days a week. "I will not be paid in full. Since there is no dine-in, what will I do there? No tables to clean. So I was told to come only on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. I don't know where to get money to send to my family in the Philippines. I am praying the restrictions will not stay longer than a week," he said.

Leo, another restaurant owner, was dismayed by the dine-in ban. "I just opened the restaurant in November. Now I am closing dine-in - I've hardly got any return on my investment. I am still trying to cope," he said. Leo also has a cargo and electronics business, which he said were not as promising

as a restaurant. "I entered the restaurant business because they say it's the only business that can survive a crisis, but I was wrong. I hope restriction won't stay longer than a week," he told Kuwait Times.

The Kuwaiti government on Feb 7 had 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.

Crimes

Nine sentenced to prison in human trafficking case

KUWAIT: The criminal court sentenced a Kuwaiti company manager and an Egyptian man to 15 years in jail and seven Egyptians for 10 years in a human trafficking case, Al-Rai Arabic daily reported yesterday. The prosecution referred the manager and the suspects to court, charged with bringing their compatriots to Kuwait and falsely telling them there was work for them. The prosecution charged all of them with human trafficking. The victims were brought in by a company managed by the first accused, who took their passports. They were tricked into believing that they were hired in Kuwait in various professions for wages of KD 150 per month each, in addition to other advantages. They were charged money for work contracts. The suspects took advantage of the victims' plight in order to take additional money from them and restrict their freedom.

Felony and kidnapping

KUWAIT: A security source said a Kuwaiti told them he saw a woman near Doha chalets who seemed disoriented. The woman claimed she was kidnapped, so West Sulaibkhat police responded and found the citizen with the woman, who did not have an ID on her, Al-Rai Arabic daily reported yesterday. She claimed that she took a taxi from Nahda to take her to Doha, but after she boarded the car, she was beaten by the driver who also took her phone, before losing consciousness after he placed a scarf on her face. She said when she came around, she found herself on the ground without clothes. The victim was taken by police to Sabah Hospital to obtain a medical report. A deputy prosecutor questioned her and asked a felony and kidnapping case be registered. Detectives are investigating.

Arab, African trade union calls for safe working environment

KUWAIT: The President of the International Federation of Asian and African Trade Unions Saud Hujailan stressed the importance of the International Labor Organization Convention on the Elimination

of Violence and Harassment, 2019 (No 190), pointing to the right of workers, especially women, to work in an environment free from violence and harassment.

Hujailan indicated, in a press statement, that these anomalous phenomena negatively affect millions of people around the world, calling on the countries that have ratified the agreement to start taking steps to protect, provide the necessary legal environment, make appropriate improvements to the work environment and push it in the right direction that provides job security for workers from both genders.

Hujailan pointed out some psychological, health, and economic passive effects that result from violence and harassment in the world of work, which affects labor productivity, especially after the emerging of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis. Hujailan stressed the need to activate the role of civil society institutions, first in spreading awareness and second in forming a front to pressure on governments to sign the agreement and implement all its provisions for the benefit of a large number of workers.

He explained that the Convention (No 190) defines violence and harassment as "a range of unacceptable behaviors and practices or threats associated with them, whether they occur once or

repeated, that aim, lead, or are likely to lead to physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm. It includes violence and harassment on the basis of gender," which includes bullying and harassment, and other matters, noting that the Convention recognizes the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including violence and harassment on the basis of gender, and provides broad protection that applies to the public and private sectors, the formal and informal economy, and in urban and rural areas.

Hujailan revealed that the International Federation of Asian and African Trade Unions adopts spreading awareness of the importance of the International Labor Organization Convention on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment, 2019 (No. 190), through a series of events and visits to members of the diplomatic corps accredited by the member states of the Union.



Saud Hujailan

tant deputy rector for research cooperation, said in a statement to the press that the production and marketing patent accord was recently inked for Kuwaiti teacher and researcher Mohammad Al-Ansari. On January 19, a deal for production of the medicine was inked with a Dutch company for distributing the drug in international markets this year. Dr Salman Al-Sabah said the drug's ingredients include a mixture of plant-extracted materials that activate the melanin cells and others that have anti-oxidation effects. — KUNA

Kuwait University produces effective drug against vitiligo

KUWAIT: Kuwait University, namely the patents bureau, yesterday announced producing a medicine for treating vitiligo. Dr Salman Al-Sabah, the assis-

viduals and groups that will inspire society as a whole to boost Kuwait's status and development. Dr Mosawi encouraged people to register with KAFO to serve the country and develop its future. Meanwhile, the official indicated that the launch of the campaign coincided with 100-day countdown for the launch of the first Kuwaiti satellite QMR-KWT. SpaceX will handle the launch of the satellite scheduled for mid-2021. KAFO is an entity associated with the Amiri Diwan and came into existence according to the wishes of late Amir His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to help the youth achieve their dreams. — KUNA

KAFO launches 'unleash your dream' campaign

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Achievers for Future Opportunities (KAFO) will launch the "unleash your dream" campaign aimed at cultivating national talents. In a press release, executive director of the campaign Dr Fatema Al-Mosawi indicated that the campaign was looking for indi-

Kuwaiti oil price rises 56 cents to \$61.95 pb

KUWAIT: Kuwait oil gained 56 cents during Monday's trading to reach \$61.95 per barrel (pb) compared with \$61.39 pb last Friday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Benchmark Brent crude closed at \$65.24 pb after rising by \$2.33, and West Texas Intermediate increased by \$2.44 to \$61.70 pb. The OPEC daily basket price of 13 crudes went up by 70 cents to \$62 pb on Monday, compared with \$61.30 last Friday, said the OPEC Secretariat yesterday. OPEC annual price in 2020 was \$41.47 pb. However, the prices of other standard crudes increased due to the slow resumption of US crude production after it was reduced by freezing weather conditions, while demand recovered from its low levels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Market traders indicate that American producers need at least two weeks to resume production of more than two million barrels per day (bpd) of

crude, due to cold weather, as recovery is slowed by frozen pipelines and power cuts. Prices were also boosted by expectations of investment bank Goldman Sachs that oil would reach \$70 in Q2 and \$75 in Q3. The countries of the OPEC alliance agreed on January 5 to curb the high production and to deal with caution with regard to production levels by gradually returning 2 million bpd to the market, with the speed being determined according to market conditions and developments.

OPEC Secretariat said in its periodic report for the current month of February that the demand for OPEC crude in 2021 will reach 27.5 million bpd, about 5 million bpd more compared to 2020. OPEC Plus will hold its 14th ministerial meeting on March 4, to assess the developments in the global oil market and take a decision in proportion to the expected demand for crude and the speed of the global economic recovery. The OPEC Reference Basket of Crudes (ORB) is made up of the following: Saharan Blend (Algeria), Girassol (Angola), Djeno (Congo), Zafiro (Equatorial Guinea), Rabi Light (Gabon), Iran Heavy (Islamic Republic of Iran), Basra Light (Iraq), Kuwait Export (Kuwait), Es Sider (Libya), Bonny Light (Nigeria), Arab Light (Saudi Arabia), Murban (UAE) and Merey (Venezuela). — KUNA

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- 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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Metal fatigue chief suspect in United Airlines engine scare

Malaysia deports 1,000 Myanmar nationals despite a court order

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Sri Lanka Muslims protest COVID cremations

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan arrives on official visit



COLOMBO: Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan (center) walks with his Sri Lankan counterpart Mahinda Rajapakse (center right in white) at Bandaranaika International Airport in Katunayake yesterday after Khan arrived for a two-day official visit to Sri Lanka. —AFP

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's minority Muslims demonstrated in Colombo yesterday demanding an end to forced cremations of COVID-19 victims as Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan arrived on an official visit. Dozens of Muslims carried a mock janazah, or coffin, denouncing the Sri Lankan government's policy of banning burials of virus victims disregarding their funeral rites.

The demonstration was aimed at the visit of Khan who two weeks ago had weighed in on the plight of Muslims in Sri Lanka. Khan had welcomed an announcement by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse on February 10 that burials would be allowed, but a day later Colombo backtracked and said there would be no change in the cremation-only policy. "Respect Prime Minister's statement and allow burials," said a banner carried by the demonstrators who assembled at an open space in front of President

Gotabaya Rajapakse's office.

His government has rejected international pleas and recommendations from its own experts to allow Muslims to bury their dead in line with Islamic custom. The government first banned burials in April amid concerns—which experts say are baseless—by influential Buddhist monks that burying bodies could contaminate groundwater and spread the virus.

The World Health Organization has said there is no such risk, recommending both burial and cremation of virus victims. Traditionally, Muslims bury their dead facing Makkah. Sri Lanka's majority Buddhists, who are strong backers of the current government, are typically cremated, as are Hindus.

In December, the authorities ordered the forced cremation of at least 19 Muslim COVID-19 victims, including a

baby, after their families refused to claim their bodies from a hospital morgue.

This stoked dismay and anger among the Muslim community, moderates and abroad, with the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation repeatedly expressing concern. There have been ongoing tensions between Muslims and the majority Sinhalese—who are mostly Buddhists—since the deadly 2019 Easter bombings carried out by local jihadists.

Muslim community leaders say more than half the 450 COVID-19 victims were from the Muslim minority which accounts for just 10 percent of the 21 million population. Muslims have a disproportionate number of fatalities because they don't seek treatment, fearing they will be cremated if they are diagnosed with the virus, they have said. —AFP

Indian climate activist wins bail

NEW DELHI: An Indian climate change activist was granted bail yesterday 10 days after being arrested for allegedly creating a "toolkit" to help the country's farmer protests that was tweeted by Greta Thunberg. The arrest of 22-year-old Disha Ravi on charges of sedition—which can carry a sentence of life imprisonment—sparked fierce criticism from activists and India's opposition politicians.

Police alleged that Ravi was a "key conspirator" in the formation of the toolkit, which was shared by Swedish climate activist Thunberg on social media. The toolkit offers basic advice on joining the protest on the ground and spells out how to show support on social media.

Officers said the aim appeared to be to "create disharmony among various social, religious and cultural groups and encourage disaffection and ill-will" against the Indian government.

Police also said Ravi and two others had been in contact with a Canada-based organization that allegedly supported separatists from India's Sikh minority. According to the Indian Express newspaper, a Delhi court yesterday found no "palpable reason" to deny bail to Ravi, "considering the scanty and sketchy investigation".

The protest by thousands of farmers, many of them Sikhs, on the outskirts of New Delhi since late November against new agricultural laws has emerged as a major challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The demonstrations have been mostly peaceful but turned violent on one day in late January when a tractor rally by farmers in Delhi became a rampage, leaving one person dead.

The protest then took an international turn in early February when pop star Rihanna, Thunberg and the US vice president's niece Meena Harris tweeted about the subject. India's foreign ministry called the comments "sensationalist". Thunberg has sparked further ire by tweeting in support of Ravi. —AFP

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International

Metal fatigue chief suspect in United Airlines engine scare

Episode latest in a series of setbacks for Boeing

NEW YORK: Metal fatigue has emerged as chief suspect in last week's spectacular engine failure on a United Airlines plane, which scattered debris over suburban Denver and led to dozens of Boeing 777 aircraft being grounded worldwide. The incident on the Hawaii-bound flight—which quickly returned to the airport after part of the engine caught fire and broke off—prompted United and other airlines to ground 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. "A preliminary on-scene exam indicates damage consistent with metal fatigue," Robert Sumwalt, chair of the US National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB), told a briefing Monday.

He said two fan blades fractured on the number 2 engine on the Boeing 777-200. One of them was later found on a soccer field, while the other remained lodged in the engine. Boeing said all 128 of the 777s with Pratt & Whitney engines were grounded following Saturday's emergency landing of United flight 328. Of the 128 planes, only 69 were in service while 59 were in storage. Besides United, which removed 24 planes from service, affected airlines included Japanese carriers Japan Airlines and All Nippon, and South Korea's Asiana and Korean Air. British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps announced a temporary ban on jets with Pratt & Whitney 4000-112 series engines from entering UK airspace.

Aviation experts said the incident especially raised questions about Pratt & Whitney and United over engine maintenance. "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." The Denver incident followed a Japan Airlines 777 incident in December involving the same type of engine, as well as an engine problem in February 2018 on a United flight. "There might be a common theme" among the three incidents "but until the investigation is complete, we don't know that," said Scott



BROOMFIELD, Colorado: In this file photo pieces of an airplane engine from Flight 328 sit scattered in a neighborhood in Broomfield, Colorado. — AFP

Hamilton of Leeham News, an aviation news site.

Engine on fire

A video shot from inside the United aircraft—which had 231 passengers and 10 crew on board—showed the right engine ablaze and wobbling on the wing. Residents in the Denver suburb of Broomfield found large pieces of debris from the plane scattered around their community. The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has ordered extra inspections after the incident.

FAA chief Steve Dickson said a preliminary safety data review pointed to a need for additional checks of the fan blades, unique to the model and only used on 777 planes. FAA officials met Pratt & Whitney and Boeing representatives Sunday evening, he added. 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 it was removing the aircraft from its schedule, "and will continue to

work closely with regulators to determine any additional steps."

Navigating industry downturn

The engine failure is unwelcome news for Boeing, which also faces a fresh investigation in the Netherlands after a Boeing 747-400 cargo plane showered a small town with debris, injuring two people, on the same day as the Denver incident. Boeing only recently resumed deliveries of the 737 MAX following a 20-month global grounding after two crashes killed 346 people. The MAX began returning to commercial service in late 2020, with airline travel still depressed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Michel Merluzeau, an expert at consultancy AIR, agreed the latest problem did not appear to result from poor plane design. "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

Hutu rebels accuse DRC, Rwanda over Italian's killing

KINSHASA, DR Congo: Rwandan Hutu rebels yesterday denied allegations they were behind the killing of the Italian ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo and instead accused the armies of the DRC and Rwanda. Luca Attanasio died of his wounds on Monday after a World Food Program convoy came under fire near the eastern city of Goma while he was on a field trip, according to a senior diplomatic source in Kinshasa and the WFP. The Italian government confirmed the death and said an Italian policeman, Vittorio Iacovacci, and a driver it did not identify, had also died.

The DRC interior ministry blamed the killings on "members of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)," a Rwandan Hutu rebel group that has plagued the region for more than a quarter of a century. But the FDLR rejected the allegation, in a statement received by AFP yesterday. It said the ambassador's convoy was attacked near the Rwandan border, "not far from a position of the FARDC (DR Congo armed forces) and Rwandan soldiers."

"The responsibility for this despicable killing is to be found in the ranks of these two armies and their sponsors who have forged an unnatural alliance to perpetuate

the pillaging of eastern DRC," it said. The FDLR denied "being involved in the attack" and called on Kinshasa and UN peacekeeping force MONUSCO to "shed light" on the killings "instead of resorting to hasty accusations." The DRC and Rwanda authorities have not reported the presence of any regular Rwandan troops in the DRC.

An expert at the Kivu Security Tracker (KST), a US monitor, told AFP: "The FDLR are near the place where the attack took place. It's in the realm of possibility that the Rwandan rebels are responsible for this attack." Attanasio, 43, had been representing Italy in Kinshasa since 2017, first as head of mission, and then as ambassador from October 2019. Italian President Sergio Mattarella confirmed what he called a "cowardly attack."

United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres issued a statement urging the DRC to swiftly investigate a "heinous targeting" of a UN mission. Scores of militias roam the DRC's 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. Monday's attack occurred in thickly forested, mountainous terrain north of the North Kivu capital of Goma, in Nyiraragongo Territory—one of the most dangerous parts of the country. The FDLR is one of a number of armed groups operating there. Some of the group's founders were involved in the 1994 Rwandan genocide during which the Hutu majority slaughtered 800,000 people, mainly Tutsis but also Hutu moderates. The group is opposed to the current Rwandan government, but has not launched any large-scale offensive in Rwanda since 2001.— AFP



GOMA, DR Congo: An Italian Air Force plane waits on the tarmac of Goma airport before it repatriates the bodies of slain Italian Ambassador and an Italian Carabinieri police officer yesterday. — AFP

Why the US has the highest COVID death toll

NEW YORK: The United States crossed the grim milestone of 500,000 deaths from COVID-19 on Monday, a year since announcing its first known death from the virus on February 29, 2020 in the Seattle area. Why does the world's leading power have the highest death toll and what lessons are American health specialists learning from the past year?

Here, infectious disease experts Joseph Masci and Michele Halpern provide answers to some of the key questions. Masci, 70, is one of the leaders of Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, which was at the heart of New York's epidemic. Halpern is a specialist at the Montefiore hospital group in New Rochelle, a New York suburb where the epidemic arrived in force in February 2020.

Why has the US been hit so hard?

Prior to this pandemic, the United States observed coronaviruses "from a distance," explained Masci.

"There was SARS in Canada but very little or none in this country. There was no MERS here at all," he said. "There was a lot of preparation made for Ebola coming to the United States, and it never really did. 'Suddenly this (coronavirus) was a problem where the United States was the epicenter.'"

Masci said it was difficult to compare the United States with other countries. "I think smaller countries that had structured health care services had a good chance of bringing things into play quickly. 'In a country like ours, with 50 independent states, and a huge landmass, with largely a private hospital system, it is always going to be difficult to get everybody on board with one particular set of strategies,'" he explained. Masci added that Donald Trump's administration had a "haphazard approach", which did not help.

"The fact that hospitals were competing with each other to get personal protective equipment didn't make sense. They had to centralize all of that very quickly and they didn't. 'It was a struggle to try to deal with those obstacles that were put up,'" he said. Masci and Halpern rue that mask-wearing was politicized. "It's purely a health care issue," said Masci, adding that it is going to be difficult for the federal government to "reframe" that message. Halpern insists that people should not see mask-wearing as "infringing" on their freedom.—AFP

News in brief

El Chapo's wife arrested in US

WASHINGTON: US authorities arrested the wife of jailed Mexican drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman on Monday at an airport outside of Washington on narcotics smuggling charges, the Justice Department said. Emma Coronel Aispuro, 31, faces one charge of conspiracy to traffic cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin and marijuana for importation into the United States, the department said. She was arrested at Dulles International Airport. Guzman was the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, one of Mexico's most notorious drug trafficking groups.—AFP

Ebola vaccination in Guinea

CONAKRY, Guinea: Guinea will launch an Ebola vaccination drive yesterday after a flight delayed by a Saharan dust storm arrived carrying thousands of jabs, as the West African country fights to stamp out a resurgence of the deadly virus. The outbreak, declared last weekend, is the first in the region since a 2013-16 epidemic left more than 11,300 people dead, mainly in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The start of the inoculation campaign had to be delayed by one day after a plane carrying more than 11,000 vaccine doses was unable to land in Guinea's capital Conakry due to a dust storm. A special flight carrying the Merck vaccine finally landed in Guinea late Monday, an AFP correspondent reported.— AFP

US slaps sanctions on Myanmar junta

WASHINGTON: The United States on Monday announced sanctions against two more leaders of Myanmar's junta and warned of further action as hundreds of thousands defiantly rallied for the restoration of the nation's democracy. The United States said it was blocking any US property and suspending the entry into the country of two members of the newly ruling State Administrative Council-General Maung Maung Kyaw, who commands the air force, and Lieutenant General Moe Myint Tun. "We will not hesitate to take further action against those who perpetrate violence and suppress the will of the people. We will not waver in our support for the people of Burma," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, using Myanmar's former name.— AFP

Serbian ex-mayor convicted

BELGRADE: A court in Serbia yesterday sentenced a former mayor to more than four years in prison for ordering an arson attack on the home of a journalist who was investigating corruption. The verdict is a rare case of justice delivered for journalists who have faced violence and threats in the Balkan state, where press freedoms are withering. Dragoljub Simonovic, the former mayor of Grocka, outside Belgrade, and a member of the ruling SNS party, was found guilty of ordering the attack on the house of corruption reporter Milan Jovanovic in December 2018. He was sentenced to four years and three months in jail, a spokesman for the court in Belgrade told AFP.— AFP

7,000 flee escalating violence in western Ethiopia, says UN

GENEVA: Around 7,000 people have fled rapidly-escalating communal violence in western Ethiopia, seeking safety in neighboring Sudan, the United Nations said yesterday. The region has long been plagued by competition over land and resources, and the UN said many people arriving in Sudan are seeking food, water and health care. The displacement is not related to the unrest in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, which has pushed more than 61,000 to flee also into Sudan in recent months.

Tensions have been high in the Metekel Zone of the western Benishangul-Gumuz region since 2019, with several reports of inter-communal attacks, the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, said. A few hundred refugees crossed the border in November but the number has surged since then. "The situation has rapidly escalated in the past three months," spokesman Babar Baloch told reporters in Geneva. "The stories the refugees are bringing—they are fleeing attacks from their opponents," said Baloch. UNHCR said that of those who have reached southeastern Sudan's Blue Nile State, around 3,000 have so far been registered, while nearly 1,000 have been provided with humanitarian assistance.

"Refugees have received food, access to health, water and sanitation facilities, and aid supplies," said Baloch. The agency will "ramp up the response," he added. Ethnic violence has been a persistent problem under Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who came to power in 2018 on the back of popular protests.

Contests over land and resources in Benishangul-Gumuz have spurred violence between ethnic groups. Some leaders of the Amhara ethnic group, Ethiopia's second largest, have asserted ownership of Metekel-claims that have inflamed tensions with ethnic Gumuz in the area.—AFP



TBILISI: Georgian opposition supporters take part in a rally following the arrest of the leader of the United National Movement (UNM) in Tbilisi yesterday. — AFP

Opposition leader's arrest sparks protests in Georgia

TBILISI, Georgia: Opposition parties called for major demonstrations in Georgia yesterday after a leading political figure was arrested in an early morning raid on his party headquarters, deepening a spiraling political crisis following disputed parliamentary elections last year. Hundreds of riot police used tear gas against Nika Melia's supporters who were camped out at his United National Movement headquarters in Tbilisi before the opposition leader was arrested and placed in pre-trial detention. The raid sparked swift condemnation from the US and UK embassies in Georgia, mounting fears over the country's fragile democracy.

Scores of his supporters were also detained in the overnight raid and the leader of opposition Lelo party called for "a peaceful, unwavering struggle to defend Georgian democracy". "Liberation of political prisoners and snap parliamentary elections are the only possible way from the crisis," Mamuka Khazaradze said, speaking to journalists on behalf of all opposition leaders. He urged supporters to gather outside government headquarters to protest Melia's arrest. The United States Embassy in Georgia said in a statement it was "deeply concerned by the government's decision to detain the head of a major opposition political party."

"Force and aggression are not the solution to resolving Georgia's political differences. Today, Georgia has moved backward on its path toward becoming a stronger democracy in the Euro-Atlantic family of nations," British ambassador Mark Clayton wrote on Twitter he was "shocked by the scenes at UNM headquarters this morning". But Georgia's interior ministry defended the raid, saying "police used proportional force and special means".

'Broken democracy'

Georgia has been in the grip of a political crisis since parliamentary elections in October, which opposition parties slammed as rigged after the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed narrow victory. On Thursday, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned over Georgian Dream's plans to arrest Melia. Last week, a court in Tbilisi ordered Melia to be placed in pre-trial detention after he refused to pay an increased bail fee ahead of hearings in a case related to anti-government demonstrations in 2019. He has been charged with "organizing mass violence" during the protests and faces up to nine years in prison. Supporters had been camped out at his party headquarters last week until the raid yesterday. Melia, 41, rejects the case as politically motivated. The detention order has raised the stakes in the crisis over the disputed elections. Opposition members have refused to take up their seats in the new parliament, in a boycott that weighs heavily on the ruling party's political legitimacy.—AFP

International

Malaysia deports 1,000 Myanmar nationals despite court order

US, UN and right groups condemn plan to send detainees back

LUMUT, Malaysia: Malaysia yesterday deported over 1,000 Myanmar detainees back to their homeland just weeks after a coup, despite a court order halting the repatriation and a storm of criticism from rights groups. The migrants were ferried on buses and trucks to a military base on Malaysia's west coast where three Myanmar navy ships had docked. The United States and the United Nations had criticized the plan, while rights groups said there were asylum seekers among the group.

Hours before the deportation, a Kuala Lumpur court ordered it should be temporarily halted to allow activists to present a legal challenge. They argued it should not go ahead as Malaysia would breach its international duties if it deported vulnerable people, and that the Myanmar military's seizure of power meant they were at even greater risk. But the vessels later set sail carrying 1,086 of the detainees, with authorities offering no explanation as to why the court order had been ignored.

Malaysian immigration chief Khairul Dzamee Daud offered assurances no members of the persecuted Rohingya minority-not recognized as citizens in Myanmar-or asylum seekers had been deported. "All of those who have been deported agreed to return of their own free will, without being forced," he said. Those deported had been held in immigration detention centers since 2020, he said. Authorities earlier said 1,200 detainees

were to be deported, and it was not clear why the final number was lower.

Refugees from conflict areas

Officials insist those sent back had committed offences such as overstaying their visas, and the deportation was part of their regular program of repatriating migrants from poorer parts of Asia. About 37,000 foreigners were repatriated last year. Malaysia is home to millions of migrants who work in low-paying jobs like construction. It is rare for rights groups to launch legal challenges against deportations, but they were prompted to do so by concerns the migrants faced greater risks since the Myanmar military seized power and that some were asylum seekers. Activists have been growing increasingly alarmed since authorities blocked the UN refugee agency from accessing immigration detention centers in Malaysia in 2019.

This means the UN cannot assess whether foreigners are economic migrants looking for work or asylum seekers fleeing persecution and conflict, who would usually be granted refugee status and the right to remain in Malaysia. In the latest case, the detainees were believed to include members of the Christian Chin minority and people from conflict-riven Kachin and Shan states, according to Lillian Fan, international director of the Geutanyoe Foundation, which works with refugees. Since seizing power at the start of February,



LUMUT, Malaysia: An immigration truck carrying Myanmar migrants from Malaysia back to their homeland, is seen heading towards the Naval base in Lumut, outside Kuala Lumpur yesterday. —AFP

authorities in mostly Buddhist Myanmar have gradually ratcheted up their use of force, with three anti-coup protesters killed in demonstrations so far. Malaysia initially expressed "serious con-

cern" at the coup, but just days later news emerged it had accepted an offer from the Myanmar junta to send warships to repatriate the detainees. —AFP

Myanmar generals come under renewed pressure

YANGON: Myanmar's military leaders came under renewed pressure yesterday as the world's wealthiest nations condemned the junta for responding to anti-coup demonstrators "with violence", a rebuke coming on the heels of tightened sanctions from Washington and Brussels. Authorities have gradually ratcheted up their use of force against a massive and largely peaceful civil disobedience campaign demanding the return of ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Three anti-coup protesters have been killed in demonstrations so far, while a man patrolling his Yangon neighborhood against night arrests was also shot dead on the weekend. "Use of live ammunition against unarmed people is unacceptable," the foreign ministers of the G7 group of rich democracies-comprising Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain, the United States together with the EU-said in a statement yesterday. "Anyone responding to peaceful protests with violence must be held to account," they said, calling for Myanmar security forces to "exercise utmost restraint and respect human rights and international law".

The sharp condemnation comes after the overnight blacklisting of another two members of the regime by the United States-air force chief Maung Maung Kyaw and fellow junta member Moe Myint Tun-after announcing targeted sanctions against other top generals earlier this month. "We



YANGON: Police advance towards protesters demonstrating against the military coup in Yangon. —AFP

will not hesitate to take further action against those who perpetrate violence and suppress the will of the people," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

Hours before, the European Union had also approved sanctions targeting Myanmar's military and their economic interests, with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell saying that financial support to the government reform programs is "withheld". Protesters continued staging rallies across Myanmar, though commercial hub Yangon saw much smaller numbers massing at key junctions yesterday. In the northern Kachin city of Myitkya-

which has seen bursts of violence from authorities-protesters rode their motorbikes across town waving the Myanmar flag and flashing a three-finger salute, a symbol of resistance.

Mandalay saw a more sombre crowd at the funeral of Thet Naing Win, a 37-year-old man shot and killed Saturday when security forces opened fire into a crowd of anti-coup protesters. "I beg for all to help see that my husband's case is ruled with justice," said his widow Thidar Hnin, adding that she wants to see "the dictator dethroned". "This country is owned by the citizens," she told AFP. —AFP

Afghanistan begins vaccine campaign amid rise in violence

KABUL: Afghanistan yesterday launched a COVID-19 vaccination campaign aimed at inoculating hundreds of thousands, as the war-weary nation reels from near-daily attacks by insurgents. Doctors, security personnel, and journalists were among the first volunteers to receive doses of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine, donated earlier this month by India. "Today, I congratulate the people of Afghanistan for the launch of the first stage of COVID-19 vaccine [drive] with 500,000 doses of vaccines. This is a big opportunity for the people of Afghanistan," said Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as the first jabs were administered.

"We don't expect any miracles, but let's help this campaign to be implemented justly," the country's acting health minister Waheed Majroh added. Afghanistan is believed to have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic in the last year, but limited testing and a ramshackle healthcare sector have hampered its ability to track the virus. Officially the country has recorded just 55,600 confirmed cases and about 2,430 deaths. But a survey published by the



KABUL: This handout photograph shows an Afghan security personnel receiving a dose of COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine during a ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Kabul, as Afghanistan launched a COVID-19 vaccination campaign. —AFP

country's health ministry last August estimated that up to 10 million people-nearly a third of the population-might have been infected with the coronavirus.

Kabul, along with urban areas across the country, have been rocked in the recent weeks by frequent explosions on an almost daily basis amid fraught peace talks between the government and the Taliban. Decades of conflict have slowed past

vaccine drives in Afghanistan, including an anti-polio campaign, with swathes of the country under the control of insurgents making access difficult for inoculation teams. The war-torn country kicked off its vaccine drive as controversies dogged inoculation plans across the globe, with accusations of dose hoarding, supply shortages and logistical headaches slowing the delivery of jabs. —AFP

Paris raps Pakistan over Alvi remarks on French Muslims

PARIS: The French foreign ministry has summoned Pakistan's envoy to protest claims by President Arif Alvi that a French bill cracking down on radical Islam stigmatizes Muslims. Addressing a conference on religion on Saturday, Alvi said: "When you see that laws are being changed in favor of a majority to isolate a minority, that is a dangerous precedent." Specifically referring to the legislation drafted after the beheading of a French teacher by an Islamist radical over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, Alvi said: "When you insult the Prophet, you insult all Muslims. I urge the political leadership of France

not to entrench these attitudes into laws... You have to bring people together-not to stamp a religion in a certain manner and create disharmony among the people or create bias." Pakistan was one of several Muslim countries that saw angry anti-French protests in October over President Emmanuel Macron's defense of the right to show blasphemous cartoons.

The country with the second-largest number of Muslims in the world after Indonesia does not have an ambassador in France. The French foreign ministry said late Monday it had called in Pakistan's charge d'affaires to mark "our surprise and our disapproval (over Alvi's remarks), given that the bill contains no discriminatory element."

'Constructive attitude'

"It is guided by the basic principles of freedom of religion and conscience, makes no distinction between the different religions and applies therefore equally to all faiths," the ministry said.

"Pakistan must understand this and adopt a constructive attitude for our bilateral relations," it added. The bill adopted by the lower house of the French parliament last week is dubbed the "anti-separatism" bill in reference to Macron's claim that Islamists are closing themselves off from French society by refusing to embrace secularism, gender equality and other French values.

The legislation significantly expands the state's powers to close religious organizations and places of worship if they are found to air "theories or ideas" that "provoke hate or violence towards a person or people." It also creates a new crime of "separatism"-described as threatening a public servant in order to gain "a total or partial exemption or different application of the rules"-that is punishable by up to five years in prison. Pakistan's government has been particularly virulent in its condemnation of Macron's clampdown on radical Islam, which follow a wave of attacks that have killed over 250 people. —AFP

News in brief

Nine women held in Philippines

MANILA: Nine women suspected of plotting to blow up military targets in the restive southern Philippines have been arrested, the army said yesterday. Security forces detained the women and seized bomb-making equipment during raids on Friday of several homes on Muslim-majority Jolo island, a stronghold of the Islamic State-linked Abu Sayyaf group. Most of the women were the daughters or widows of slain Abu Sayyaf fighters and included several "potential suicide bombers". Major General William Gonzales said in a statement. —AFP

Ukraine takes Russia to Europe court

STRASBOURG, France: Ukraine has accused Russia of targeted assassinations of "perceived opponents" in a case lodged at the European Court of Human Rights, the latest salvo by Kiev in a barrage of legal complaints against Moscow. The case, which was filed last week, accuses Russia of carrying out "state-authorized" assassinations "in Russia and on the territory of other states... outside a situation of armed conflict", the court said yesterday. —AFP

Zuma corruption case to heard in May

PIETERMARITZBURG, South Africa: South Africa's scandal-tainted former president Jacob Zuma and French arms dealer Thales, accused of graft in a case going back more than two decades, will go on trial in May, the High Court ruled yesterday. Zuma is facing 16 charges of fraud, graft and racketeering relating to the purchase of fighter jets, patrol boats and military equipment. He allegedly took bribes of four million rand (\$270,000 or 224,000 euros) over a \$3.4-billion arms deal with French aerospace and defense giant Thales in 1999, when he was deputy president. —AFP

WFP may suspend work in N Korea

SEOUL: Strict coronavirus restrictions imposed by North Korea could force the World Food Program to suspend operations in the country, where chronic malnutrition is rife, a report on the UN organization's website said yesterday. The impoverished country-which is under international sanctions over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs-has long struggled to feed itself, suffering chronic food shortages. The World Food Program (WFP) has by far the largest international aid operation in the country and provides specialized foods to around a million pregnant women, nursing mothers and children every month, according to its website. —AFP

Australian MP quits party

SYDNEY: An Australian lawmaker who frequently peddled pandemic misinformation quit the conservative governing party yesterday, weeks after being publicly dressed down by Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Craig Kelly, a member of Morrison's Liberal Party, repeatedly used social media and the floor of parliament to question the safety of coronavirus vaccines, oppose lockdowns, and promote unproven COVID-19 treatments such as Malaria drug hydroxychloroquine and headlice medication ivermectin. "I felt that for the rest of this parliamentary term, if I'm going to act and speak according to my conscience and my beliefs, that I can do so more effectively as an independent," the Sydney MP told public broadcaster ABC. —AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2021

NBK Economic Report

Kuwait's trade rebounded in 3Q20

KUWAIT: Kuwait's international goods trade rebounded sharply in 3Q20 (exports up 58 percent q/q and imports up 7.9 percent), according to Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) data, having fallen in 2Q20 as oil prices fell and lockdown measures reduced purchases across the globe.

However, trade flows remained well below pre-pandemic levels.

The notable rise in exports was mainly driven by a higher Kuwait Export Crude (KEC) oil price, which increased by 69 percent q/q to \$44/bbl in 3Q20.

Higher oil prices boost oil exports

The impact of higher oil prices on exports more than offset lower oil production, which declined by 9.3 percent q/q to 2.24 mb/d due to OPEC+ production cuts. On the other hand, non-oil exports (domestic exports plus re-exports, constitute 11

percent of total exports) witnessed a notable rise of 59 percent q/q, though were still down significantly year-on-year. In terms of economic categories, intermediate and consumption goods saw a steep decline of 31 percent and 21 percent y/y, respectively, while capital goods registered a softer decline of 13.6 percent y/y. The fall in these categories could be a reflection of trade disruptions and the decline in external demand due to the impact of the pandemic. It's worth noting that the Ministry of Industry and Trade lifted the ban on local companies' exports of certain items in August 2020, which will help in boosting non-oil exports in the following quarters.

Imports start to recover from Q2 lows

Trade disruptions continued to weigh on Kuwaiti imports, though the year-on-year decline in imports eased in 3Q20 to 18.3 percent compared with 26 percent in the previous quarter. The ease was driven by a softer decline in consumption goods (nearly half of all imports) as growth in food & beverages, transport equipment and durable goods all picked up, however car imports (10 percent of consumption goods) witnessed a steep decline of 55 percent y/y following a 28 percent fall in 2Q20. Meanwhile, the fall in capital goods (around one-fifth of imports) eased to 15.5 percent y/y.

The quarter-on-quarter rise in imports could be explained by the resumption of economic activities following the pandemic-related lockdowns in 2Q20. As a result of the above movements and the increase in the price of oil, the trade surplus in goods increased to KD 1.1 billion (12 percent of estimated pro-rated GDP) compared with around KD 0.1 billion (2 percent of GDP) in 2Q20.

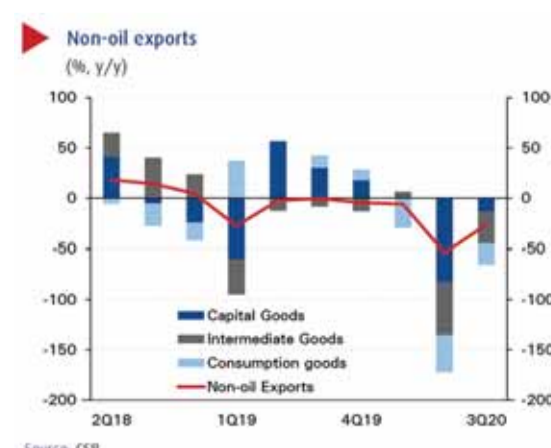
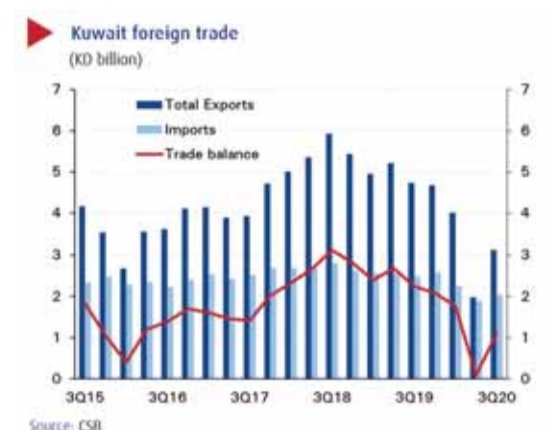
Kuwait's main trading partner

The top five destinations for non-oil exports (including re-exports) remained relatively the same compared to 2Q20. Sales to these countries (UAE, Saudi Arabia, China, India, and Qatar, 63 percent of all non-oil exports) declined by 17.8 percent y/y. On the other hand, the top five source countries for Kuwait's imports (China, UAE, Saudi Arabia, USA, and India, 45 percent of total imports) witnessed a decline of 22 percent y/y in 3Q20. GCC countries were the main non-oil trading partner for Kuwait (22 percent of total trade), followed by China.

A stable Kuwaiti dinar

The Kuwaiti dinar nominal effective exchange rate (NEER) remained relatively stable against the currencies of major trading partners, depreciating by 0.8 percent y/y in 3Q20. (Chart 5.) The performance of other main currencies against the dinar were mixed: the Indian rupee and the Turkish lira depreciated by 4.8 percent and 26 percent, respectively, while the euro, GBP, yen, and the yuan appreciated against the dinar by 5.5 percent, 5.3 percent, 1.9 percent, and 2.2 percent, respectively. Similarly, the real effective exchange rate (REER), which takes into account relative inflation movements between countries, depreciated mildly by 0.7 percent y/y compared with a 1.6 percent y/y appreciation in the previous quarter. The depreciation in the REER after strengthening in the last couple of years.

International trading activity is forecast to recover in following quarters with the rise in oil prices (KEC remained at \$44/bbl in 4Q20 but broke through \$60/bbl in mid-February) as well as the lift of the exporting ban. Re-opening the Kuwaiti economy could also give a boost to imports. While there remains considerable uncertainty over the evolution of the pandemic, an effective vaccine rollout (which has already begun in Kuwait and the authorities aim to complete by 3Q21) should help a return to more normal trade conditions by the end of the year.



Net Income

185

Million KD

47.8
Million

Customers

1.6
Billion KD

Revenue

673
Million KD

EBITDA

43
Fils

EPS

FY 2020 results

Business

Zain Group generates revenue of \$5.3bn for 2020 amid challenges

Net profit reaches \$605m • Board recommends cash dividend of 33 fils per share



Zain Group Chairman Ahmed Al-Tahous

- Q4 2020 revenues KD 432 million (\$1.4 billion), net income KD 54 million (\$176 million)
- The Group's revenues incur foreign currency translation impact of \$110 million
- Efficiency drive by management reduced operational expenses by \$168 million
- 2020 highlighted by 9% increase in data revenues due to expansion of 4G & 5G services and monetization initiatives

- 4Sight strategy driving future growth as company enters new lucrative business verticals
- Zain Group has most number of 5G network sites across the region
- Zain Kuwait maintains its market leadership in 5G and all key indicators
- Zain Saudi Arabia successful capital restructuring paves the way for dividends
- Zain Iraq records a 28% increase in net profits, recent 4G launch to drive revenues



Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi

Chairman Ahmed Al-Tahous: During COVID-19 pandemic, key focus has been on providing meaningful connectivity and implementing more digitalization initiatives

Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi: Board adhering to its three-year dividend commitment, 77% payout ratio of earnings is one of the highest in the region

KUWAIT: Zain Group, a leading mobile telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa, announces its consolidated financial results for the full-year 2020, and fourth quarter ended 31 December, 2020. The Group ended the year with a customer base of 47.8 million customers.

For the full-year 2020, Zain Group generated consolidated revenue of KD 1.63 billion (\$5.3 billion), reflecting a two percent Year-on-Year (Y-o-Y) decrease, while consolidated EBITDA for the period declined by 8 percent Y-o-Y, to reach KD 673 million (\$2.2 billion), reflecting a healthy EBITDA margin of 41 percent. Consolidated net income reached KD 185 million (\$605 million), down 15 percent and reflecting Earnings Per Share of 43 fils (\$0.14).

For the full-year, foreign currency translation impact, mainly due to the 16 percent currency devaluation in Sudan from an average of 45.6 to 54.4 (SDG/USD), cost the Group \$110 million in Revenue, \$50 million in EBITDA and \$16 million in net income.

The Board of Directors of Zain Group recommended a cash dividend of 33 fils per share for 2020, adhering to the Group's commitment made last year of a minimum 33 fils dividend for 3 years. This is subject to the Annual General Assembly and statutory approvals.

For the fourth quarter (Q4) of 2020, Zain Group generated consolidated revenue of KD 432 million (\$1.4 billion), down 2 percent Y-o-Y. EBITDA for the quarter amounted to KD 172 million (\$563 million), down 10 percent Y-o-Y, reflecting an EBITDA margin of 40 percent. Net income for the period amounted to KD 54 million (\$176 million), down 16 percent Y-o-Y, representing Earnings Per Share of 13 fils (\$0.04).

For Q4 2020, foreign currency translation impact, cost the Group \$33 million in revenue, \$14 million in EBITDA and \$7 million in net income.

Key operational notes for 12 months ended 31 December, 2020

1. COVID-19 pandemic disrupted economic activity due to lockdowns and travel bans across all Zain markets, impacted Group's revenue by \$417 million for the full year
2. Decisive cost optimization measures such as contracts renegotiation and management of cash-flows succeeded in reducing operational expenses by \$168 million
3. The year was highlighted by the notable revenue growth from 5G in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia that underscored the Group's consolidated data revenue growth of 9 percent Y-o-Y, to reach \$2.2 billion, representing 41 percent of the Group's revenue for 2020
4. Throughout 2020, Zain Group invested \$1.4 billion in CAPEX (26 percent of revenues), predominantly in 5G rollouts in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; 4G upgrades and new network sites across Iraq and Jordan; expansion of Fiber-to-the-Home (FTTH) infrastructure; and spectrum license fees
5. Zain KSA completed its capital restructuring during Q4 2020 with massive demand in the remaining priority rights subscription that was oversubscribed by an unprecedented 469 percent
6. Zain Iraq granted 4G license with mobile license extended to 2030
7. Handover of Lebanon's network to the Ministry of Telecom, effective October 30, 2020
8. Company launches a new powerhouse in gaming, 'Zain eSports' to boost the gaming ecosystem
9. The Zain Group Application Program Interface (API) platform witnessed impressive customer uptake, generating healthy revenues from having over 5 million transactions per month
10. Zain joins a global effort with GSMA to improve Digital Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities
11. Zain ranked best Telecom employer in the region by Forbes' World's Employers list for 2020. Also

ranked 4th best regional employer across all industries and only company from Kuwait in Forbes list

Commenting on the results, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Zain Group, Ahmed Al-Tahous said, "Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Group's key focus has been on providing meaningful connectivity and implementing more digitalization initiatives to better serve communities, businesses and governments, aiming to lessen the impact of the pandemic on society. I would like to thank all the government ministries and regulatory authorities across our markets for their wisdom and understanding of the emerging industry dynamics, supporting us in overcoming challenges faced by the telecom sector during these unique times."

Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi commented, "The Group's performance for 2020 reflects the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption on economic-social activity and the unavoidable impact it had on the financial results.



The Board and management are working closely together in minimizing this impact across our footprint with a particular focus on driving efficiencies, cost optimization and monetizing our 4G and 5G networks. Our 4Sight strategy is taking shape, building on our many strengths while seeking new value-creating business verticals that support our vision of becoming a leading ICT and digital lifestyle provider."

Al-Kharafi continued, "Last year, in a first by any corporate entity in Kuwait, the Board of Directors recommended a new cash dividend policy committing to a minimum 33 fils per share for three years. Despite the \$417 million loss of revenue due to the impact of COVID-19 on the business and a foreign currency translation impact of \$110 million on revenue, I am pleased to reaffirm the Board's dividend commitment for 2020 will be fulfilled. This 33 fils per share dividend reflects a 77 percent payout ratio of earnings, one of the highest in the region."

The Vice-Chairman added, "The Board's recommendation is a result of the operational performance attained by the Group in 2020, supported by our decisive efficiency drive that succeeded in reducing operational expenses by \$168 million since

the beginning of the pandemic. It also reflects the confidence in the future potential of our digital growth strategy in seeking new business verticals. Moreover, due to operational efficiencies, we managed to reduce the Group's total net debt by approximately \$1 billion, an achievement that has bolstered our financial position."

"We are focused on optimizing the synergies between the Group and all operations and investing heavily in 5G rollouts, FTTH, 4G expansion and spectrum whereby we invested \$1.4 billion in CAPEX during 2020, representing 26 percent of revenue. Moreover, we are mobilizing resources to capitalize on the enormous opportunity that 5G technology and FTTH provides, creating vast opportunities particularly related to Enterprise (B2B) services to government and businesses of all sizes. The recent establishment of Zain Data Park will provide cloud hosting and managed services across the ICT stack, including applications, cyber-

strategic investments in the Kingdom's telecommunications sector, growing its profitability and paving the way for dividends."

Al-Kharafi concluded, "I would like to recognize and thank all the 7,500 dedicated and talented Zain colleagues across all our operations who have remained motivated to their duties and provided exemplary services, helping deliver on the critical role we play in maintaining connectivity and supporting the communities we serve throughout these exceptional times. Zain was committed to ensuring their wellbeing and safety, and the company took decisive actions to support and provide them with the tools needed to adapt and deliver during this time of crisis."

"Moreover, I would like to express my deep, personal gratitude to our customers, the Board of Directors, and the government agencies and bodies we cooperate with to deliver the mobile experience we do at such a high level."

Operational review of key markets for the 12 months ended 31 December, 2020

Kuwait: Maintaining its market leadership on all levels, Zain Group's flagship operation saw its customer base serve 2.6 million. It remains the Group's most profitable operation with revenue for full-year 2020 reaching KD 321 million (\$1.05 billion), EBITDA reaching KD 112 million (\$367 million), representing an EBITDA margin of 35 percent. Net income reached KD 76 million (\$248 million), with data revenue accounting for 38 percent of total revenue.

Saudi Arabia: Zain KSA generated revenue of SAR 7.92 billion (\$2.1 billion), EBITDA for the period reached SAR 3.44 billion (\$918 million), reflecting an EBITDA margin of 43 percent. Net income reached SAR 260 million (\$69 million). Data revenue grew by 8 percent Y-o-Y and represents 50 percent of total revenue with the operator serving 7.0 million customers.

Iraq: Zain Iraq's revenue reached \$943 million and EBITDA amounted to \$378 million, reflecting EBITDA margin of 40 percent. The operation reported a net profit of \$80 million, a 27 percent Y-o-Y increase. The operator served 16.2 million customers maintaining its market leading position.

Sudan: Zain Sudan generated revenue of SDG 22.5 billion (\$416 million), a 62 percent increase in SDG terms and 37 percent increase in USD terms, with EBITDA amounting to SDG 9.3 billion, up 67 percent (\$171 million, up 41 percent), reflecting an EBITDA margin of 41 percent. Net income for the period reached SDG 3.3 billion, up 47 percent (\$61 million, up 23 percent). With the continual expansion of 4G services across the country, data revenue represented 26 percent of total revenue, growing an impressive 142 percent in SDG terms (104 percent in USD). The operator's customer base grew 4 percent Y-o-Y to reach 16.6 million, further cementing its market leadership.

Jordan: Zain Jordan revenue reached \$487 million, EBITDA reached \$216 million, reflecting an EBITDA margin of 44 percent, with net income reaching \$79 million, a three percent increase. With the expansion of 4G services across the country, data revenue represented 46 percent of total revenue, an impressive 12 percent increase. The operator served 3.5 million customers maintaining its market leading position.

Bahrain: Zain Bahrain generated revenue of \$164 million, EBITDA for the year increased by two percent, to reach \$57 million, reflecting an EBITDA margin of 34 percent. Net income amounted to \$14 million, up 3 percent Y-o-Y. With the soft launch of 5G services mid-2020 and monetization initiatives, data revenue grew 7 percent, representing 51 percent of total revenue.

Group Key Performance Indicators (KD and USD) for the Full-Year 2020

Total Active Customers	47.8 million
Consolidated Revenue	KD 1.63 billion - (USD 5.3 billion)
EBITDA	KD 673 million - (USD 2.2 billion)
EBITDA Margin	41%
Net Income	KD 185 million - (USD 605 million)
EPS	43 fils - USD 0.14

Group Key Performance Indicators (KD and USD) for the Fourth Quarter 2020

Consolidated Revenue	KD 432 million - (USD 1.4 billion)
EBITDA	KD 172 million - (USD 563 million)
EBITDA Margin	40%
Net Income	KD 54 million - (USD 176 million)
EPS	13 fils - USD 0.04

Business

Jazeera Airways announces FY 2020 earnings

Positive outlook for travel industry starting second half of 2021

KUWAIT: Jazeera Airways yesterday announced its earnings for 2020 reporting an operating revenue of KD 41.4 million.

Number of passengers flown during the year subsequently came in at 696,093, down from 2.4 million in 2019 with a load factor of 64.3 percent while yield increased 38.4 percent to KD 57.4.

Jazeera Airways ended the year with a cash balance of KD 19.7 million; a solid sign of how the company managed to navigate through a very tough and exceptional year and a confirmation of Jazeera's solid and stable cash position. Operating revenue for 2020 stood at KD 41.4 million while the company reported a net loss of KD 26.4 million impacted by various one-offs and adverse accounting treatment specifically related to IFRS 16, which combined were equivalent to KD 15 million.

Commenting on the results, Jazeera Airways Chairman, Marwan Boodai said: "Jazeera's performance in 2020 was in line with industry benchmarks. Its number of passengers decreased by 71 percent during the year in comparison to 72.9 percent in the Middle East and 65.9 percent worldwide, while load factor decreased by 13.2 percent in comparison to 18.9 percent for the Middle East and 19.2 percent worldwide."

"While the extent of the pandemic was not foreseen back in March 2020, Jazeera took immediate action to safeguard its position against airport closures and ensure its business continuity as a private company. The airline suspended its 2019 dividend payment, activated the drawdown of bank facilities that were not previously tapped and renegotiating cost structures with suppliers and aircraft manufacturers. We were very prudent in our cash management and closed the year with enough cash coverage for the upcoming 20 months without the need to access any additional external funding."

"Jazeera's flexible business model has proved once again its success in adapting to times of cri-

sis to protect its customers, employees and shareholders' rights. We were able to reallocate our resources to support our local community and economy in a commitment to our role as a Kuwaiti national carrier, served our customers when government regulations permitted and continued to commit to our obligations."

Commercial flights at Kuwait International Airport were suspended for close to five months from March 13 until July 31. Operations resumed with limited capacity from suspended direct flights from 34 destinations, which increased to 35 by year-end, and a mandated 14-day quarantine for all incoming passengers slowed down demand for travel.

During the suspension of commercial flights, the airline redirected its capacity and capabilities to operating full-cargo and charter flights as well as supporting government efforts during the pandemic, mainly with the repatriation of Kuwaiti nationals.

In Kuwait, PCR testing on arrival is being implemented at Kuwait International Airport, which is a critical solution to ensuring the safety of passengers and citizens entering the country while the rollout of vaccinations is being accelerated by the Ministry of Health.

2020 was an exceptional year for airlines worldwide, impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and qualified by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) earlier this month as the "Worst Year in History for Air Travel Demand".

Financial and Operational Highlights

2020 Highlights:	Q4 2020 Highlights:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operating revenue: KD41.4 million Operating loss: KD20.7 million Net loss: KD26.4 million Passengers: 696.1 thousand Load factor: 64.3% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operating revenue: KD8.6 million Operating loss: KD10.0 million Net loss: KD10.9 million Passengers: 90.2 thousand Load factor: 54.9%

New destinations
Jazeera launched its first service to the touristic destination of Trabzon on August 3, with two return flights per week every Monday and Friday. A second new service followed to Dhaka on October 1, and a third with weekly flights to Muscat on November 2.



Marwan Boodai



Tehran, Tbilisi and Sarajevo.

In addition to these efforts, Jazeera Airways converted its Park & Fly facility into the first drive-through virus testing center in Kuwait for the use of the Ministry of Health. A second drive-through testing facility was also constructed by the Jazeera Airways team at the Jaber Al-Ahmad national stadium.

By the end of June, Jazeera Airways granted 50,000 free round-trip tickets to frontline heroes fighting the Covid-19 pandemic in the State of Kuwait.

Outlook

Jazeera Airways' Chairman concluded: "The high demand for travel to and from Kuwait will always be there and our passengers will want to travel as soon as restrictions are lifted. We expect travel to gradually return to its pre-2019 levels starting from the second half of 2021. The focus of Jazeera's board and management now is to come out of this global situation stronger than when it started and active steps are being taken to achieve that goal. Jazeera Airways will be announcing several new launches in the coming few months and will take delivery of four new aircraft during 2021 that will complement the company's expanding fleet and network growth."

KIB welcomes fresh talent to support strategic plans

KUWAIT: In continuation of its effort to attract and retain young national talent as a core component of its strategic plans, KIB recently announced the appointment of a new group of high-caliber banking professionals across its organization. This comes as part of the Bank's efforts to develop its organization and strengthen the overall business performance across departments, by infusing young talent and fresh industry perspective to optimize KIB's ability to deliver on its expansive strategic plans.



Feras Aldarmi

KIB's new recruitment push comes in line with the Bank's vision to strengthen and innovate its banking services whilst providing customers an unprecedented and unique experience, with that at their forefront, it requires a tech-savvy team with the digital know-how that is capable of developing the Bank's technological base and digital applications, in order to meet the needs of a more digitally-sophisticated generation with dynamic needs and ever-higher expectations.

On this occasion, Feras Aldarmi, Deputy General Manager of the Human Resources Department at KIB, said: "KIB has been a trusted and well-respected banking partner throughout the years, owing to its long-standing and record in the Islamic banking market. This means the Bank is able to attract competent and ambitious talents looking to build a long-term career in banking. We are proud of the new competencies who have recently joined our team, particularly in the Retail Banking Department, which plays a critical role in delivering next-level banking services and products to customers, as well as bringing overall performance up to the highest industry standards."

Aldarmi further added: "At KIB, we believe that each team member plays a complementary role in achieving the Bank's vision and strategic plans, which is why the strategy of our Human Resources Department is focused on developing and strengthening the Bank's most valuable asset: its human capital. Moreover, the Bank is constantly looking to scout the right candidates for positions that fit their expertise, thus ensuring they live up to their full potential, in addition to contributing to the Bank's business objectives."

Concluding his statement, Aldarmi noted: "We are working tirelessly across the Bank to build a strong operational infrastructure and set in place solid foundations, in order to deliver the best digital banking services, products and tools in addition to a seamless, simplified banking experience to customers." He added: "Our aim is to carve out a banking niche in the market, therefore we are striving to build a high-performing team that we can reliably entrust with this mission. That is why we have invested a lot of effort towards building a strong internal culture that promotes and nurtures personal and team growth. We are also always looking to attract and retain the best local talent by providing opportunities for career growth and continuous personal development, as well as offering training courses and other benefits to improve overall employee satisfaction, boost motivation and promote career stability and cooperation among team members."

It serves to note that KIB's Human Resources Department seeks to attract young national talent by providing them with suitable employment opportunities, in addition to rotating competent staff to ensure a continued career development of employees in across all the Bank's departments. The Department has also been moving towards a policy of Kuwaitizing senior management positions by increasing its national employment rate to 73.14% as part of its commitment to support Kuwaitization in banking sector in line vision of the Central Bank of Kuwait.

25-26% cashback on purchases made with NBK-KAC Visa cards

KUWAIT: Underscoring its care to celebrate with its customers on the occasion of national days, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is launching special exclusive offer, as the bank has increased the cashback to 25 percent on purchases made on 25th February and 26 percent on 26th of February when using NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Cards.

NBK's national days cashback offer comprises a wide variety of leading participating brands including: Abyat, ASOS, Bershka, Best Al-Yousifi, Boggi Milano, Carrefour, City Centre, Decathlon, Eureka, Farfetch, LuLu Hypermarket, Massimo Dutti, Namshi, Ooredoo, Pottery Barn, SHEIN, STC, tala-bat, The Sultan Center, Trafalgar, X-cite, and Zain.

NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Cards enable customers to earn up to 15,000 Welcome Elite Tier Miles upon card activation, as well as up to 10,000 additional miles when spending within the first 3 months of card issuance. Customers will then earn up to 4 Oasis Club Miles for every KD 1 spent on their daily purchases.

Additionally, NBK has provided a 3-year annual fee waiver for new customers applying for NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Infinite Credit Card or NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Signature Credit in an offer

ABK advocates 'Card Sense' in 'Let's Be Aware' campaign

KUWAIT: In support of the 'Let's Be Aware' campaign recently launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association in cooperation with local banks, Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait stresses the importance of best practices for card users.

Muneerah Al-Maraghi, Executive Manager - Retail Banking at ABK commented: "As card transactions continue to grow, driven by higher merchant acceptance, spread of ATM kiosks, POS and an ongoing increase in online usage, linked to excellent rewards and benefits when using credit cards, it is the bank's responsibility to

enlighten clients with advice and guidance to ensure they fully benefit from the services and also understand the importance of security when using their cards."

Speaking on the importance of security, Maraghi added: "Customers should never share their card PIN with anyone nor write it down anywhere. The back of the card must be signed to make sure it is accepted by merchants everywhere and this limits fraudulent usage. It is necessary that customers update the bank on their travel plans to avoid interrupted services or deactivation triggered by suspicious activity abroad."

"In addition, customers can avoid extra exchange rate charges by choosing the local currency when using their credit cards while abroad. When using an ATM, confirming that it belongs to an accredited financial institution is crucial, and users should avoid unfamiliar machines and suspicious devices. Clients should immediately alert the bank if they notice any discrepancies and suspicious charges, or if they lose their cards. In

order to efficiently do so, they should download the bank's official mobile app, and activate email and notifications to monitor all transactions, especially when travelling. As a precautionary step, they are encouraged to change their PIN number upon returning from a trip."

The "Let's Be Aware" campaign is scheduled to run throughout 2021, and will spearhead the dissemination of key information on banking services and practices including filing of complaints, special needs services, fraud management, investments and savings as well as loans and borrowing.

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Mohammed Al-Othman

Meshal Lafa Al-Mutairi

including NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Credit Cards that give travel lovers unlimited services and rewards. NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Infinite Credit Card and NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Signature Credit Card, as well as NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Platinum Prepaid Card offer customers an array of benefits; including: earning Oasis Club Miles when using the card, redeeming earned miles for tickets with Kuwait Airways, upgrading to Business or First Class, in addition to many other benefits.

Furthermore, NBK - Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Cards allow customers to enjoy more privileges that make travelling a lot more comfortable and enjoyable, such as access to airport lounges worldwide, travel insurance, special assistance at airports NBK Rewards Program allowing customers to earn points that can be redeemed at more than 900 participating outlets, as well as a 10 percent cashback when shopping at selected outlets until 5 March 2021.



Muneerah Al-Maraghi

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UK unemployment edges up to 5.1% on pandemic fallout

LONDON: Britain's unemployment rate edged up to 5.1 percent in the final quarter of 2020, official data showed yesterday, as coronavirus lockdowns slashed economic activity.

The rate compared with 5.0 percent in the three months to the end of November, which was a 4.5-year high, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. Analysts expect unemployment to surge when the UK government's furlough scheme paying the bulk of wages for millions of private-sector workers comes to a stop-as currently planned-at the end of April.

Finance minister Rishi Sunak yesterday hinted at further employment support in the coming months as England begins to exit its third lockdown form early March.

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LONDON: Unemployed youths pose outside a job center in the UK. —AFP

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Business

Facebook to restore Australia news, pay media companies

Last-gasp deal reached on pending landmark legislation

SYDNEY: Facebook said yesterday it will lift a contentious ban on Australian news and pay local media companies for content, after a last-gasp deal on pending landmark legislation. Australia's Treasurer Josh Frydenberg announced a face-saving compromise that will see Google and Facebook plunge tens of millions of dollars into the struggling local news sector.

In return the US digital firms will, for now, avoid being subjected to mandatory payments that could cost them vastly more and create what they see as an alarming global precedent. Just hours after the compromise was unveiled, Facebook announced its first proposed deal with an Australian media company, Seven West, and was said to be pursuing commercial deals with other local news organizations.

The company is expected to use the content to launch a dedicated news product in Australia later this year. "As a result of these changes, we can now work to further our investment in public interest journalism, and restore news on Facebook for Australians in the coming days," said Will Easton, managing director of Facebook Australia.

The social media firm sparked global outrage last week by blacking out news for its Australian users in protest at the proposed legislation, and inadvertently blocking a series of non-news Facebook pages linked to everything from cancer charities to emer-

gency response services.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison had angrily accused Facebook of making a decision to "unfriend" Australia. Google has already brokered deals worth millions of dollars with local media companies, including the two largest: Rupert Murdoch's News Corp and Nine Entertainment. Commentators described the eleventh-hour amendments - which came as parliament looks set to pass the law this week - as "a reasonable compromise".

"Everybody can walk away saying, well we got what we wanted," University of New South Wales business professor Rob Nicholls told AFP. Both companies now have an additional two months to reach further agreements that would stave off binding arbitration.

Precedent-setting

The tech firms had fiercely opposed the legislation from the get-go, fearing it would threaten their business models. In particular, the companies objected to rules that made negotiations with media companies mandatory and gave an independent Australian arbiter the right to impose a monetary settlement. That process will now be avoided if companies are deemed to have made a "significant contribution" to the Australian news industry through unspecified "commercial agreements".

"We now face the strange possibility that the news media mandatory code could be

passed by parliament and it applies to precisely no one," said Marcus Strom, head of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, a union. "It will just sit in the Treasurer's (drawer) as a threat to misbehaving digital companies."

Google was also keen to avoid creating a precedent that platforms should pay anyone for links, something that could make their flagship search engine unworkable. Facebook - which is much less reliant on news content - had initially said being forced to pay for news was simply not worth it and shut down content. "There is no doubt that Australia has been a proxy battle for the world," said Frydenberg.

Critics of the law say it punishes innovative companies and amounts to a money grab by struggling but politically connected traditional media. Thousands of journalism jobs and scores of news outlets have been lost in Australia alone over the past decade as the sector watched advertising revenue flow to the digital players. For every \$100 spent by Australian advertisers today, \$49 goes to Google and \$24 to Facebook, according to the country's competition watchdog.

Tech insiders see the legislation as driven, in particular, by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, which dominates the local media landscape and has close ties with Australia's conservative government. A new provision in the law gives Facebook and Google more discre-



MENLO PARK, California: This file photo taken on Oct 23, 2019 shows a giant digital sign at Facebook's corporate headquarters. — AFP

tion over who they do deals with, and what the sums involved would be. "We have come to an agreement that will allow us to support the publishers we choose to, including small and local publishers," said Facebook vice president for global news partnerships Campbell Brown.

Facebook and Google could still face the prospect of having to replicate deals with media worldwide, as the European Union,

Canada and other jurisdictions move to regulate the sector. Since their emergence around the turn of the century, Google and Facebook have been largely unregulated and have grown into two of the world's largest and most profitable companies. But a string of scandals about misinformation, privacy violations, data harvesting and their virtual monopoly on online advertising has triggered the attention of watchdogs. — AFP

HSBC ramps up Asia pivot as virus hammers profits

HONG KONG: HSBC yesterday vowed to accelerate its Asia pivot despite spiraling tensions between China and the West after it reported a 30 percent plunge in profits for 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Reported profit after tax came in at \$6.1 billion, which the bank blamed primarily on higher-than-expected credit losses and other bad debt charges.

The results came as HSBC published a new strategy laying out plans to redouble its attempt to seize more of the Asian market - the region of the world where Europe's largest lender makes the vast majority of its profits. The strategy will see the London-headquartered bank plough some \$6 billion into shoring up operations across Asia, with a particular focus on targeting wealth management in the increasingly affluent region.

The bank made specific mention of markets in Southeast Asia such as Singapore, as well as China and Hong Kong, and also the Middle East. After "the economic impact of COVID-19 hit" profits, HSBC will invest in "markets that set us apart, whilst also moving the heart of the business to Asia, including leadership", chief executive Noel Quinn said in webcast.

The global economic slowdown caused by the virus

has hit financial giants hard but HSBC has a further headache - its politically precarious position as a major business conduit between China and the West.

HSBC makes 90 percent of its profit in Asia, with China and Hong Kong the major drivers of growth. As a result, it has found itself more vulnerable than most to the increasingly frayed relationship between China and western powers - especially after Beijing imposed a draconian security law on Hong Kong last year and cracked down on democracy supporters.

HSBC endorsed the security law, a move that led to criticism from lawmakers in Britain and the United States. It has frozen the bank accounts of some Hong Kong democracy activists with Quinn summoned to testify before British lawmakers earlier this month.

At the same time HSBC has found itself called out by

Chinese state media for providing information that helped lead to the arrest in Canada of a top Huawei executive. HSBC says it has to obey the laws in each jurisdiction it operates in. But the dual crises neatly encapsulate the delicate position that a bank so reliant on China has now found itself in.

"The geopolitical environment remains challenging - in particular for a global bank like HSBC - and we continue to be mindful of the potential impact that it could have on our strategy," chairman Malcolm Tucker said in a statement attached to yesterday's results. Despite those complications, HSBC looks set to go all in on Hong Kong. According to Bloomberg and the Financial Times, the bank is planning to move three of its top executives from London to Hong Kong in the coming months. — AFP

Vaccine hopes boost British pound

LONDON: The British pound continued a frantic two-month rise against the euro and the dollar, reaching new highs this week in a sign of traders' enthusiasm for the country's vaccination roll-out. Just before Christmas, investors feared the country would leave the European single market without a post-Brexit trade agreement. At the same time, a deadly second wave and new, more transmissible coronavirus variants pushed infection rates up and saw the death toll soar.

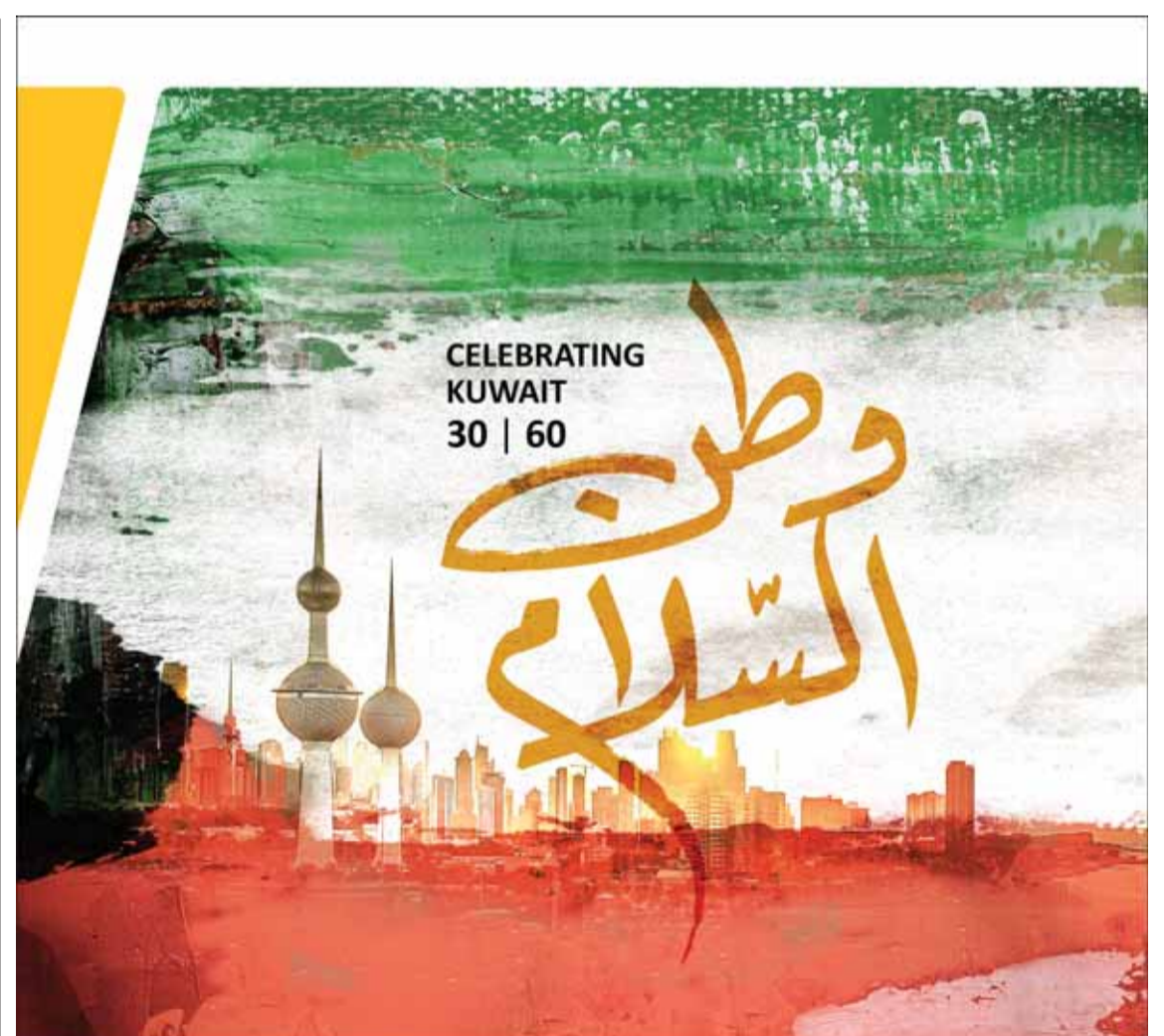
It currently stands at more than 120,000 — one of the worst in the world. But since December, the pound has gained more than five percent against the euro and US dollar, making it a top performer among major currencies. The jump is due to the number of people vaccinated: according to the government, one adult in three has already received a first dose, representing more than 17.5 million people. Another reason for optimism is Prime Minister Boris Johnson's publication Monday of a "cautious but irreversible" roadmap to ease lockdown restrictions by July. "After a year in which the government's reputation was soured by a string of policy U-turns, the UK has made good decisions regarding vaccines," Jane Foley, head of FX strategy at Rabobank, told AFP. "The vaccine rollout has improved the economic outlook in the UK relative to elsewhere, especially in the EU," Capital Economics added in a note.

Positive rate

"Markets are still adjusting to the fact that the Bank of England is unlikely to implement negative rates for now," added analysts at Swiss bank UBS. Like other central banks, the Bank of England adopted a record low interest rate of just 0.1 percent to cushion the economic impact of the pandemic.

But traders were mainly worried it would adopt a negative rate like the European Central Bank or the Bank of Japan. At its last monetary policy meeting, the bank took that option off the table until August, and governor Andrew Bailey said it might not be implemented then either. As a result, forex traders began to bid up the pound against the dollar and the euro. Unlike Europe's single currency, whose strength has weighed on exports, the pound is still at relatively low levels. While it is just above \$1.40 at a near three-year high, the British currency is still six percent below levels seen before the June 2016 Brexit referendum, and 12 percent down against the euro. "A stronger pound is another headwind for UK exporters and provides some small relief for households," noted Paul Dales of Capital Economics.

"But it's not going to make a big difference to the economy," Foley warned that "there are speed bumps ahead". The effectiveness of vaccines against coronavirus variants and the strength of the UK recovery will determine if the pound remains at its current levels or not, she forecast. And another risk looms on May 6 when elections for the devolved parliament in Scotland could give fresh impetus to the pro-independence movement, she added. — AFP



CELEBRATING KUWAIT

ABK extends its congratulations to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and to the Kuwaiti government and its people, on the occasion of Kuwait's National and Liberation days.

On this occasion, ABK will be closed for business starting Thursday, 25 February 2021 until Sunday, 28 February 2021 and will resume its regular working hours on Monday, 1 March 2021.

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Lucid CEO Peter Rawlinson. US electric carmaker Lucid Motors announced on Monday that it will go public via a merger with a company that values it at \$24 billion. —

Electric carmaker start-up Lucid Motors to go public

SAN FRANCISCO: US electric carmaker Lucid Motors announced Monday that it will go public via a merger with a company that values it at \$24 billion. The California-based start-up has chosen to go through a SPAC, or "Special Purpose Acquisition Company," which is a company with no commercial activity whose aim is to raise funds by going public.

The SPAC, Churchill Capital Corp IV (CCIV), contributed \$2.1 billion, and Lucid also negotiated \$2.5 billion from investors including BlackRock, Fidelity Management & Research LLC, Franklin Templeton and Neuberger Berman.

"The transaction values Lucid at an initial pro-forma equity value of approximately \$24 billion," the carmaker said in a statement, and will bring in "approximately \$4.4 billion in cash."

IPOs via SPACs exploded in the United States in 2020. They allow companies to go public with a windfall. "Lucid is going public to accelerate into the next phase of our growth as we work towards the launch of our new pure-electric luxury sedan, Lucid Air, in 2021 followed by our Gravity performance luxury SUV in 2023," the automaker's CEO, Peter Rawlinson, said in the statement.

The funds will also enable the Silicon Valley-based company to expand its Arizona plants, which are expected to produce approximately 365,000 vehicles per year within the next few years. Lucid employs nearly 2,000 people and hopes to hire an additional 3,000 by the end of the year.

The start-up expects to close the deal in the second quarter of 2021. "CCIV believes that Lucid's superior and proven technology backed by clear demand for a sustainable EV make Lucid a highly attractive investment," Michael Klein, the SPAC's CEO, said in the statement. Several major automakers such as Ford and GM recently announced major investments in electric vehicles, a market dominated by California-based Tesla. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

ALLEN SAYS NEW DOCUMENTARY
'RIDDLED WITH FALSEHOODS'

Oscar-winning director Woody Allen described a new documentary that details his alleged sexual abuse of his young adoptive daughter Dylan Farrow as "a hatchet job riddled with falsehoods." HBO broadcast the first episode of the four-part series "Allen v. Farrow" on Sunday. In it, Farrow, Allen's adopted daughter with actress Mia Farrow, repeats her allegation that Allen

sexually assaulted her in August 1992 when she was seven years old. The 84-year-old director of "Annie Hall" and "Manhattan" has always denied the abuse and has been cleared of the charges after two separate months-long investigations.

"These documentarians had no interest in the truth," Allen and his wife Soon-Yi Previn said in a statement. "Instead,

they spent years surreptitiously collaborating with the Farrow and their enablers to put together a hatchet job riddled with falsehoods. "As has been known for decades, these allegations are categorically false. Multiple agencies investigated them at the time and found that, whatever Dylan Farrow may have been led to believe, absolutely no abuse had ever taken place," they added.

The statement said that Allen and Previn "were approached less than two months ago and given only a matter of days 'to respond,'" which they declined to do. "While this shoddy hit piece may gain attention, it does not change the facts," the statement said. Many actors have distanced themselves from Allen since the #MeToo movement in 2017 and the publication of a column by Dylan Farrow. In 2019, Allen settled a multimillion dollar breach of contract lawsuit against Amazon, which cancelled a four-movie deal with him over the long-standing allegations. — AFP



In this file photo US director Woody Allen and his wife Soon-Yi Previn pose as they arrive for the screening of the film "Cafe Society" during the opening ceremony of the 69th Cannes Film Festival. — AFP

Black kings, but
no politics: Murphy
returns in 'Coming
2 America'

Thirty years before "Black Panther," Eddie Murphy's 1980s comedy classic "Coming to America" disproved the stubborn Hollywood myth that films with Black casts flop overseas; it earned nearly \$300 million worldwide. Now that Marvel's African superhero blockbuster has smashed that disbelief for good with its billion-dollar box office haul, Murphy has decided it's time for a sequel: "Coming 2 America" is out on March 5. But according to Murphy, the global success of the two predominantly Black franchises has nothing to do with any growing interest in racial politics and history, or in movements like today's Black Lives Matter-but instead in old-fashioned, universal storytelling.



In this file photo actor Eddie Murphy arrives for the 77th annual Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California. — AFP

"Most of our movies, they shine a light on some social injustice or some civil unrest... (but) around the world they don't give a shit about that," said Murphy. "Coming 2 America" is not about any of those things. It's just about family and love and doing the right thing and tradition." Murphy's comments come as Hollywood has been launching a flood of prestigious Black cast-led movies about the civil rights movement which are hotly tipped for Oscars glory, including "Judah and the Black Messiah" and "One Night in Miami." Whether modern global audiences will respond to those films will be hard to gauge, with movie theaters still closed due to Covid-19. Indeed, "Coming 2 America" was made by Paramount but sold to Amazon's streaming service during the pandemic.

Speaking at a recent press day, Murphy expressed pride that the original "Coming to America" was "the first movie

in the history of movies that had an all-Black cast that was successful all around the world." But since then you can count "on one hand" the Hollywood films that have repeated that international success—"and you'll have fingers left over," said the 59-year-old star. "The legacy of this movie is that it's accessible to all audiences," Murphy added. "The reason why our movies don't go around the world is because our story is provocative (only) to us. Around the world they don't give a shit about our stuff."

'It was magical'

Set decades after Murphy's pampered prince hit New York in search of true love, "Coming 2 America" sees the veteran comic play an elder monarch seeking a long-lost male heir to save his fictional African kingdom. Murphy said his new film shares royal DNA with 2018 smash hit "Black Panther," which starred the late Chadwick Boseman and was praised for its message of pan-African unity. "These amazing images of Black kings and queens and princesses... 'Black Panther' did it," said Murphy. "The very first one was 'Coming to America,'" he added.

The sequel is packed with real-life Black showbiz royalty, from actors Wesley Snipes, Tracy Morgan and James Earl Jones to a number of extremely high-profile, surprise musical guests. "Let me just say that there is not a Black actor-older, middle-aged or younger-in this town, or any town, that didn't want to have just a little piece of this movie," said comedian Luenell, who also stars. Adding to the sense of dynasty, Eddie's daughter Bella appears as one of the young Amazonian princesses.

The 19-year-old admitted to journalists she was nervous when she had to hit "Wesley Snipes in the head" during a memorable fight scene with the "Blade" action-movie legend, but was desperate to take part after re-watching her father in the original. "It was cool to see my dad like that, because that was the first time I saw images of Black royalty on screen... and even cooler that it was my dad," she said. "I felt really empowered." The movie was shot at Tyler Perry Studios, the self-contained 330-acre (130-hectare) production "campus" at a Civil War-era Confederate military base in Atlanta, Georgia owned by Black entertainment mogul Perry. "It was magical, that this brother created this," said returning co-star Arsenio Hall. "There were days I'm standing with Tracy Morgan, and Leslie [Jones]... on the Tyler Perry lot, laughing my ass off. It was the greatest experience," he added. "Coming 2 America" launches worldwide on Prime Video from March 5. — AFP



In this file photo US rap artist Jay-Z performs at the Glastonbury Festival at Worthy Farm, in Glastonbury. — AFP

JAY-Z SELLS HALF
HIS CHAMPAGNE
BRAND TO LVMH

LVMH, the world's biggest luxury goods company, said on Monday it had agreed to buy 50 percent of Armand de Brignac, the champagne brand owned by rapper Jay-Z. The company said the purchase for an undisclosed sum and made through its Moët Hennessy drinks division-also involved a distribution deal and would kick off a partnership reflecting a "shared vision" between the singer and the company. Jay-Z's champagne brand, known informally as Ace of Spades, had been "a fantastic success", Moët Hennessy CEO Philippe Schaus said in a joint statement with Jay-Z.

"Armand de Brignac breaks barriers and reflects contemporary luxury, while preserving the traditions of the Champagne terroirs," he said. Jay-Z, quoted in the statement, said "it is a partnership that has felt familiar the entire time", adding he was confident that "the sheer power of the Moët Hennessy global distribution framework, its unparalleled portfolio strength and its long-established track record of excellence in developing luxury brands will give Armand de Brignac the commercial power it needs to grow and flourish even further". — AFP



In this file photo (from left to right) Britain's Sophie, Countess of Wessex, Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, Britain's Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, Britain's Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex and Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge stand on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to watch a military fly-past to mark the centenary of the Royal Air Force (RAF). — AFP

family, in a move that has reportedly angered its remaining members. Westminster Abbey, where the annual service was to have been held, said Monday the program will also involve Harry's father Prince Charles, elder

brother Prince William, and other senior royals. Harry and Meghan announced last week the "intimate" interview with the US chat show host, in which they are expected to air their grievances about how they were treated inside the family



In this file photo former US President Barack Obama looks on after presenting musician Bruce Springsteen with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. — AFP

Two bosses, one
'American ideal':
Bruce and Barack
make a podcast

Streaming giant Spotify on Monday unveiled a new show featuring two American cultural heavyweights: rock star Bruce Springsteen and former US president Barack Obama. Two episodes of the eight-show audio series "Renegades: Born in the USA" are now available online. It's a marketing coup for Spotify, which has focused on podcasting as a growth driver since 2019, pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into acquisitions. "On the surface, Bruce and I don't have a lot in common," Obama says in a promotional clip for the series.

"He's a white guy from a small town in Jersey. I'm a Black guy of mixed race, born in Hawaii. He's a rock'n'roll icon. I'm... not as cool." The pair met for the first time during Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and have since become friends. They recently spent several days in New Jersey recording the show together, creating what they hope to be a

reflection on the state of America and ways to "unify" a nation rife with political and socioeconomic divisions. "What we discovered during this conversation was that we still share a fundamental belief in the American ideal, not as an act of nostalgia, but as a compass for the hard work that lies before us," the 59-year-old Obama says. "We found some answers, learned a few things, had some laughs, and a few drinks."

The former president's foray into podcasting follows that of his wife Michelle, who found success in the medium last year, notably with an episode that brought the pair together on air. The new show is produced by Higher Ground Productions, the company the Obamas founded in 2018 that has also worked with Netflix on television and film projects. In December, Spotify also announced a partnership with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, who will produce a podcast series for the platform. Also on Monday, the powerful streaming company announced it was expanding its services to more than 80 new markets worldwide, nearly doubling its reach. New countries where both the free and paid-subscription options will be available include large population centers like Nigeria, Pakistan and Bangladesh. — AFP

Chinese man
causes outrage
after sit-ups atop
power pole

A man in China scaled a utility pole to do sit-ups off the top of it, stunning onlookers and causing a power cut to thousands of homes, media said yesterday. The unnamed man was taken away by police following his antics on Sunday evening on the outskirts of the southwestern city of Chengdu, the People's Daily said. It published a video on the Twitter-like Weibo showing the man suspended about 10 metres (30 feet) in the air as he did a stomach crunch off the top of the pylon.

"The local power company initiated an emergency power cut... affecting tens of thousands of households," the People's Daily said. Emergency services, including medical personnel, rushed to the scene, The Paper in Shanghai said. It was not clear why the man decided to do sit-ups off the pole but state media warned against anyone copying him. "The man's behavior is too dangerous!" said one outlet. The incident was a hot topic on Chinese social media, with at least 1.7 million views of one hashtag relating to it. "I was annoyed because no electricity... and when I see the news and know the reason, I feel annoyed and amused at the same time," said one Weibo user affected by the bizarre incident. Another on Weibo did not find it so funny. "Blackouts can waste a lot of money and potentially lead to a fatal accident," they said. Local police were unavailable for comment. — AFP

following their fairy tale wedding in 2018.

Shortly after revealing the interview, Buckingham Palace announced the couple had permanently quit royal duties, just over a year after they rocked the monarchy by announcing plans to "step back" from their roles. The Queen ordered the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, as they are formally known, to relinquish their honorary titles and patronages following the confirmation that they would not be returning as working royals.

The couple relocated to the United States last year, in a move dubbed "Megxit" by the British press, and have since embarked on several commercial ventures there including lucrative tie-ups with the streaming platforms Netflix and Spotify. They announced on Valentine's Day that they are expecting their second child, and also hit the headlines earlier this month when Meghan won her high-profile privacy claim against a British newspaper group for publishing a private letter that she wrote to her estranged father. — AFP



This picture shows the Queen's theatre of the Chateau de Versailles, in Versailles. — AFP

MARIE-ANTOINETTE'S
PERSONAL THEATRE
GETS A LOCKDOWN
MAKEOVER

Pandemic or not, it's a theatre space that very rarely sees an audience: Marie-Antoinette's personal playhouse in the grounds of Versailles is a fragile historical gem in need of delicate care. The late 18th century was a time of "theatre-mania" in which many wealthy princes and financiers built their own stages on their estates, said Raphael Masson, lead conservator at Versailles. The last queen of France before the revolution was a passionate fan of music and theatre, and had her built deep in the grounds of the chateau where she could escape with her retinue.

It was here, in 1785, that she gave her own last performance on stage, as Rosine in "The Barber of Seville" in front of its author, Beaumarchais. Today, it is the only 18th century theatre in France to still have its original working machinery—"a miracle of conservation," said Masson. It has three sets-a rustic interior, a forest and a temple of Minerva-the latter being the oldest intact decor in the world, dating to 1754: "Our own Mona Lisa," said Masson.

The sets were highly innovative at the time, riding on rails from both sides of the stage to create moving backdrops-the "special effects of the 18th century," said Masson. "A testimony to the virtuosity of the 18th century decorators." The theatre was deemed worthless at the time of the revolution, and so never sold off. Yet restoring its former glory has been a job of painstaking conservation. With visitors kept away by the pandemic, the team has been working on a new curtain, stitching the dazzling cobalt-blue linen together by hand using the original techniques.

They are also using the chateau's original inventory to rebuild other parts that have been lost over the years, including machinery that allows a tree to rise from a trapdoor. But even when visitors are able to return, the 250-seat theatre will not be giving regular performances. Despite being brought back to functioning life with a major restoration in 2001, its fragility has meant it only gives concerts once every two years. — AFP

Queen to send TV
message hours
before Harry's
tell-all interview

Queen Elizabeth II will appear on television to celebrate the Commonwealth on March 7 — the same day as her grandson Harry's eagerly-anticipated but controversial interview with Oprah Winfrey will air. She will share her annual message to mark Commonwealth Day, which is on March 8 this year, in a special programme on BBC One that will replace the usual annual service, which has been cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Her appearance will come just hours before Harry and his wife Meghan tell the world about why they left the royal

Lifestyle | Features

French dance music superstars Daft Punk split

One of the era's defining dancefloor acts hung up their helmets on Monday, as electronic music stars Daft Punk announced their retirement in typically enigmatic fashion with a video showing one of them exploding in a desert. The French duo released an eight-minute clip titled "Epilogue", using footage from their cult 2006 film "Electroma" in which one of the robots sets other to self-destruct mode. After the explosion, a cutaway reads "1993-2021" with two robot hands making a circle around a sunset.

Their publicist, Kathryn Frazier, confirmed the news to AFP by email, without giving a reason for the split. From "Da Funk" in 1995 to "Get Lucky" in 2013, Daft Punk became the torch-bearers for French house music across the globe, winning six Grammy awards and pioneering the monumental sound-and-light shows that came to characterize the electronic dance movement (EDM) of recent years. They did so while almost never revealing their faces—the ubiquitous helmets became another much-copied trope of EDM stars, but also afforded Thomas Bangalter, 46, and Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo, 47, freedom from the fame that quickly encircled them. "We have daily lives that are a lot more normal... than the lives of artists who have the same level of fame as us, but who might be attached to being physically recognised," Bangalter said in a 2015 BBC documentary.

'A flawless legacy'

Monday's announcement set off a



In this file photo nominee For Best Album Of The Year "Random Access Memories" Daft Punk arrive on the red carpet for the 56th Grammy Awards at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California.



In this file photo Daft Punk performs at the Coachella Music Festival in Indio, California. — AFP photos

wave of tributes to Daft Punk's hit-making influence. "They always cultivated a taste for the paradoxical," electro pioneer Jean-Michel Jarre told AFP, praising the duo's "extremely elegant manner of saying goodbye to their fans". "Eternally grateful," tweeted Christine and the Queens singer Chris. Star music producer Marc Ronson also hailed the "gorgeous French robots", writing on Twitter: "Daft Punk left the game with a flawless legacy." Despite endless rumors of an imminent new tour or album, Daft Punk had been quiet for several years.

Their last album, 2013's "Random Access Memories", was a phenomenal success, winning them four Grammys the following year including record of

the year for "Get Lucky", the millions-selling lead single featuring Pharrell Williams and Nile Rodgers. But the much hoped-for return to touring never took place. They showed up one more time for the Grammys in 2017. Despite the Twittersphere erupting in excitement last month amid rumors they would appear alongside The Weeknd for the Super Bowl half-time show, that did not materialize.

'Daft punky thrash'

Bangalter and Homem-Christo met at school in Paris before an inauspicious start in music with the rock band Darlin', which also featured a future member of the French indie band Phoenix. One

review in the British music press dismissed the band as "daft punky thrash"—which struck a chord with them. Reemerging as an electronic outfit, they met with instant success. Early singles "Da Funk" and "Around the World" became club fixtures, and led to massive sales for their debut album "Homework" in 1997. It was in the video for "Around the World" that they first donned the helmets that would become their signature look.

It mirrored the tight control they exercised over every part of their career, which included ownership of their master recordings. They followed up with the even more successful "Discovery" in 2001, which spawned the hits "One

More Time" and "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger". There were some distinctively left-field choices in the years that followed, including producing the 2003 film "Interstella 5555" by Japanese anime master Leiji Matsumoto, which featured music from "Discovery". If their next album in 2005, a more sombre "Human After All", received mixed reviews, these were quickly forgotten amid the euphoria of their live shows over the next two years.

This included a headline appearance at US festival Coachella in 2006, performed inside a giant LED pyramid. EDM fans still speak about it with an almost religious reverence. In 2010, they released a soundtrack to the Disney reboot of Tron, which picked up a Grammy nomination. But no one predicted the massive success of "Random Access Memories", for which they gave up their usual makeshift home rig for a full commercial studio—and used entirely live instruments. The resulting work dominated album-of-the-year lists and helped lift their total worldwide sales to 12 million.

In December, Strokes frontman Julian Casablancas told music website The Needle Drop that he'd been "trying to do something" with Daft Punk after collaborating with them on their 2013 single "Instant Crush". But he was told they were "not doing music right now", with one of the duo "focused on video stuff" and the other "obsessing with ancient aliens or something". — AFP

RARE ISRAELI BEDOUIN AUDIO ARCHIVE SHEDS LIGHT ON NOMADIC SOCIETY

Leading Bedouin scholar Clinton Bailey has amassed hundreds of hours of recordings about the nomadic society's poetry, history and legal system, in a career that began while jogging through Israel's Negev desert. Bailey's unique Arabic audio archive is now being transcribed and digitized by Israel's National Library, a project aimed at enriching Bedouin scholarship in Israel, the Arab world and beyond. "I find that in understanding Bedouin culture... you understand human nature, how people adjust to living under very difficult circumstances," Bailey told AFP. There are some 250,000 Bedouins living in Israel, part of the mainly Palestinian-Arab community that stayed in the Jewish state following its creation in 1948.

Impoverished and often living on the margins, Bedouin culture is understudied in Israel, a problem Bailey's recordings will help address, said Raquel Ukeles, head of collections at the library. The national library has consistently prioritized material on Islam, but focused less on the culture and history of indigenous Arab communities, she told AFP. "This collection enables us to preserve and document Bedouin culture, in an



Israeli researcher Clinton Bailey shows his collection of audio tape recordings of interviews with members of the Bedouin community at his home in Jerusalem.

area we are trying to fill in gaps and document all aspects of Israeli society," she said.

'Going to disappear'

Bailey was teaching political science at New York's Columbia University in the late 1960s when he decided to move to Israel to teach English on a southern kibbutz. An Arabic speaker, he was frequently invited by Bedouins into their tents as he jogged in the surrounding area. Eventually, he bought a jeep to visit Bedouin communities further afield. Now in his early 80s, he recalled thinking that Bedouin society was at a transition point. Watching them use radios and plastic containers was a harbinger of encroaching modernity that would inevitably infringe on their traditional ways, he said, adding he feared Bedouin culture "was going to disappear".

In order to preserve it, Bailey decided to chronicle the Bedouins orally-based culture. The first step was to acquire a tape recorder. "My senses told me that

recording what they remembered and how they lived was the important thing to do." His interviews with Bedouin citizens of Israel and in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, which Israel occupied for more than a decade after the 1967 Six-Day War, yielded around 350 hours of recordings. The content includes Bedouin poetry, legal issues, religion, history and environment.

Bailey, who in 1994 won a human rights award from the Association for Civil Rights in Israel for his advocacy, has also penned books, including a tome of 113 Bedouin poems. To complete its three-year digitization project, the library has hired members of Israel's Bedouin community to help, among other things, transcribe the recordings using their knowledge of the local dialect.

Ukeles said the library would make the archive accessible online, enabling Bedouins in the Sinai to access the rare cultural record by mobile phone. The library is also seeking collaboration with scholars in the Gulf, a prospect made easier by recent agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to establish ties with Israel. "It's a high quality, rare oral history of a culture" that was very important "in the rainbow of cultures here in Israel," said Ukeles.

Rights advocate

Israel's Bedouins once laid claim to much of the Negev desert, but the minority community now survives on the margins of Israeli society and often in poverty. Land ownership is one of main bones of contention between the Bedouins and Israeli authorities. "We decided not to recognize their claims to any plots or any areas they held in common, because they had no written deeds," Bailey said, faulting Israeli policy makers for alienating the Bedouins. Bedouin property rights are codified in their oral legal system, and as a result tensions over land issues have persisted.

Israeli authorities have repeatedly tried to relocate Bedouins from some villages to build new towns and demolished structures they deemed illegal. If Israel does not address the community's grievances, it will become "more restive, more belligerent... and it will be more difficult to deal with them," warned Bailey. —AFP

600 generations ago

She said partnerships could weave together traditional knowledge with western science, adding that the dating of the oldest known rock shelter painting "holds a great deal of significance for Aboriginal people and Australians and is



In this undated handout image, a curator at the National Museum of Norway uses an infrared scanner in the quest to reveal author of hidden graffiti on Edvard Munch's original painting of The Scream in Oslo. — AFP photos

Munch wrote 'madman' tag on 'Scream' painting, museum rules

A mysterious inscription on Edvard Munch's famed painting "The Scream" has baffled the art world for years, but Norwegian experts have now concluded it was written by none other than the artist himself. Barely visible to the naked eye, the phrase "Can only have been painted by a madman" is written in pencil in Norwegian in the upper left corner of the iconic artwork. The dark painting from 1893, now a symbol of existential angst, depicts a humanlike figure standing on a bridge, clutching its head in apparent horror against the backdrop of a swirling sky.

The author of the phrase has long been a mystery, with the main theory until now holding that it was a disgruntled viewer who penned it at the beginning of the 20th century on one of the four versions made by Munch. But, using infrared technology to analyze the handwriting, experts at Norway's National Museum have now concluded that it was the artist himself. "The writing is without a doubt Munch's own," museum curator Mai Britt Guleng said in a statement. "The handwriting itself, as

well as events that happened in 1895, when Munch showed the painting in Norway for the first time, all point in the same direction."



This undated handout image, shows an image made by a curator at the National Museum of Norway while using an infrared scanner.

The first showing of the work to the public in Oslo then known as Kristiania-provoked furious criticism and raised questions about Munch's mental state, which, according to Guleng, likely prompted Munch to write the inscription on the canvas shortly afterwards. A pioneer of expressionism, Munch was haunted by the premature deaths of several family members, including his mother and his sister Johanne Sophie, due to illness. In 1908, he was temporarily committed to a psychiatric hospital. This version of "The Scream" was stolen in 1994, the opening day of the Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer. —AFP

The images were mostly depictions of animals, including a snake, a lizard-like figure, and three macropods—marsupials including kangaroos, wallabies and quokkas. "This is a significant find as through these initial estimates, we can understand something of the world these ancient artists lived in," said Finch in a statement, adding that the environment would have been cooler and drier than today.

"We can never know what was in the mind of the artist when he/she painted this piece of work more than 600 generations ago, but we do know that the Naturalistic period extended back into the Last Ice Age." The research, part of Australia's largest rock art dating project, was published in the journal Nature Human Behavior. — AFP

Traditional owner Ian Waina inspecting a painting of a kangaroo that is at least 12,300 years old, based on the age of wasp nests over the paint. — www.abc.net.au



Israeli researcher Clinton Bailey shows books he authored on the Bedouin community at his home in Jerusalem. — AFP photos

Kangaroo painting Australia's oldest Aboriginal rock art

A kangaroo painting created over 17,000 years ago by Aboriginal artists has been identified—with a little help from some ancient wasps—as Australia's oldest intact rock art. The two-meter-long (six-feet) artwork on the sloped ceiling of a rock shelter in Western Australia's Kimberley region was painted in an early naturalistic style, which often features life-sized renderings of animals, according to research published Monday.

Scientists worked with the local Aboriginal community, who can trace their heritage in the region back tens of thousands of years, to establish the age

of original rock artworks, many of them worked and reworked over millennia. "The main challenge, globally, in dating ancient paintings is that they very rarely employed a pigment that can be dated with any of the current, quantitative dating techniques," lead author Damien Finch, a geochronologist at the University of Melbourne, told AFP. To get around this the researchers identified a way to work out the age of the painting using ancient mud wasp nests.

Finch and his colleagues found that some of the rock paintings had the remains of these nests—which can be radiocarbon dated—above and below the images. They estimated that the kangaroo painting was between 17,500 and 17,100 years old, the oldest discovered to date. "It's important that Indigenous knowledge and stories are not lost and continue to be shared for generations to come," said Cissy Gore-Birch, head of the Balangarra Aboriginal Corporation, in a statement from the University of Western Australia.



Sports

Photo of the Day



Aerobatic helicopter pilot, Aaron Fitzgerald, performs over the New York City skyline. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Kenyan Olympic teams set for bubble training

NAIROBI: Kenya's Olympic teams are to start training in specialized bubble camps early March in the run-up to the Tokyo games, officials said yesterday. The camps are to start on March 2 and will see athletes confined to specific areas as they train, to counter the spread of COVID-19. "The athletics long distance runners will be based in the high-altitude training region around Eldoret, while the team sports, including the men's and women's rugby Sevens, volleyball and Taekwondo do will be based at the Kasarani stadium," the secretary-general of Kenya's National Olympic board Francis Mutuku said. "The aim of the bubble camps is to cut down the amount of travelling by athletes back to their families from training, and reduce the risk of exposure to the still raging COVID-19 pandemic."

A total of 87 Kenyan sportsmen and women have already qualified for July's Tokyo Olympics, with the number expected to increase as the new sporting season gets underway. Kenya hopes to take a team of 100 athletes to the rescheduled games which will be held between July 23 and August 8. Mutuku said the athletes would be tested frequently for COVID-19 while they are in the camp, which will be closed off to outsiders. "All the qualified athletes will be tested before they are admitted into the bubble camp." Kenya, a world athletics superpower finished 15th and as the top African nation at the 2016 Olympics in Rio, with a total of 13 medals: six gold, six silver and one bronze. Kenya also topped the overall medals table at the 2015 World Athletics Championships in Beijing, for the first time in its history with seven gold, six silver and three bronze medals. — AFP

Golden oldie 'King Kazu' leads Japan's football veterans

Miura, 54, set to extent record as oldest J-League starter

TOKYO: Japan's Peter Pan striker Kazuyoshi Miura is preparing to play another season despite turning 54 this week, but he is far from his country's only footballing golden oldie. Miura, better known as King Kazu, will be looking to extend his record as the oldest J-League first-division starter when his club Yokohama FC kick off their season on Saturday.

But he won't be the only veteran rolling back the years, with nine players over the age of 40 currently lining up for teams across the league's three divisions. "I think Japanese culture might have something to do with it," 40-year-old Keiji Tamada, a striker with second-division V-Varen Nagasaki, told AFP. "Of course the aim is to play in matches, but I think a lot of players stay with their teams because they feel they can make a contribution beyond that," by passing down knowledge and experience, he said.

Miura, who is preparing to begin his 36th career season, became the oldest player in the world to score in a professional match in 2017, when he found the net aged 50 years and 14 days. He extended his own J-League record as the oldest starter in September last year, one of four league appearances he made for Yokohama last season.

"I was feeling the joy of playing football at a time when the world was facing a tough situation because of the new coronavirus," he said after renewing his contract last month. "Personally it was not a satisfactory season, but my ambition and enthusiasm for football are increasing."

But Miura, who began his professional career in 1986, is not the only veteran raging against the dying light in the J-League. Former Celtic midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura is still going strong at 42, while ex-Japan internationals Junichi Inamoto, Yasuhito Endo and Teruyoshi Ito — now 46 — are all playing into their fifth decades.

Miura's 53-year-old former Japan strike partner Masashi Nakayama was registered as a player with third-division Azul Claro Numazu until last month, although his most recent J-League appearance came as a 45-year-old in 2012.

'A true pro'

Midfielder Shinji Ono, now 41 and preparing for his 24th professional season, says the older generation "spur each other on". "Sometimes we meet up and have a chat," Ono, who made 14 appearances in the second division last season before moving to top-flight Consadole Sapporo, told AFP. "But we never talk about when we're going to retire, because you can feel that everyone is enjoying playing football."

Footballers playing on into their 40s is relatively rare in Europe, with Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon and Montpellier defender Hilton — both 43 — two of the few still active. Dutch defender Calvin Jong-a-Pin, a teammate of Miura's at Yokohama, believes the less physically bruising nature of the J-League "definitely helps" players continue for longer.

But he can't find fault with the seemingly evergreen Miura's fitness. "He's highly motivated and just a true professional," said Jong-a-Pin, a relative spring chicken at 34. "In training, we have hard sessions where we have to run, and he's running at the front. He's the first guy doing all the laps, and everyone is behind him."

Jong-a-Pin says Miura has a personal trainer "who follows him everywhere," and even has his own driver "so he doesn't lose energy driving from his home to the clubhouse." Ono, who has played in the Netherlands, Germany and Australia, says he also takes special care of his body, and is feeling "in really good shape" heading into the new season.

"I don't think about retiring — I don't think about the future," he said. "If no club wants me, I won't have



KAWASAKI: In this file photo taken on September 23, 2020 Yokohama FC forward Kazuyoshi Miura (right) is tackled by Kawasaki Frontale forward Leandro Damiao during the J-League football match between Kawasaki Frontale and Yokohama FC at Todoroki Athletics stadium in Kawasaki. — AFP

a team to play for, and I'll have no choice but to quit. That day will come at some point, but until then, I'll enjoy playing football."

As for Miura, Jong-a-Pin believes it will take an act

of God to make him hang up his boots. "He told me he would die on the field," Jong-a-Pin said. "I believe him. Somebody has to make him stop, because he will not stop." — AFP

Pogacar in control after UAE Tour climb stage win

JEBEL HAFEET: UAE Emirates rider Tadej Pogacar took a major step towards victory in his team's home cycling Tour winning the first climbing stage yesterday to strengthen his hold on the overall lead. The Tour de France champion had already started the day in the leader's red jersey and finished it by beating last year's UAE Tour winner Adam Yates.

The Ineos team leader here Yates now sits second, 43sec behind with one more climb stage to overhaul the on

form Slovenian. Yates took the battle to Pogacar with a series of accelerations on the way up the 10km 5.4 percent gradient Jebel Hafeet climb.

Only Pogacar could follow Yates as the other contenders, chiefly the brilliant Portuguese rookie Joao Almeida dropped away with Yates' relentless attacking. But under immense pressure to win this Tour Pogacar refused Yates' pleas to launch a joint bid to distance the others.

Instead, from a position of strength he sat on Yates' wheel and then skipped away from him over the final 400m. The Briton almost overhauled him on the line and the pair finished on the same time of 3hrs 58min 35sec. Almeida and the chasing group crossed the line 48 seconds off the pace, leaving the Quick-Step man in third overall at 1min 03sec. — AFP



JEBEL HAFEET: UAE Team Emirates' Slovenian cyclist Tadej Pogacar celebrates upon crossing the finish line to win the third stage of the UAE Cycling Tour from Al-Ain to Jebel Hafeet yesterday. — AFP

Root, Kohli fear pink ball twilight collapse

AHMEDABAD: England captain Joe Root and India skipper Virat Kohli have both warned of the challenges of playing during the twilight zone in day-night Tests — when batting collapses can happen — ahead of their third Test clash starting today. The match will be the first time that India and England — level at 1-1 in the four-match series — face each other in a day-night encounter. "It's much more challenging to play with the pink ball regardless of what pitch you are playing on," Kohli said on the eve of the match in the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

"And especially in the evening, if, as a batting team, you are starting your innings under lights, then that one-and-a-half hour is challenging," Kohli told reporters. "When it starts to get dark, especially during that twilight period, it gets very tricky. Light changes, it's difficult to sight the ball and under lights is like playing the first session in the morning in a normal Test match. The ball tends to swing a lot."

Both teams have had painful experiences of pink-ball cricket. India were bowled out for 36 by Australia in Adelaide in December and New Zealand skittled England in Auckland for 58 in 2018. "Both are bizarre experiences for two quality sides," Kohli said. "Barring that 45

minutes of bad cricket (in Adelaide) we dominated the Test match. We are very confident in how we play the pink ball."

'Roll with it'

Root agreed that batsmen need to be careful — and not just in the evening when the lights come on the ball can start swinging. "I think there's been a trend in all the pink-ball Test matches of collapses on occasion," Root told a separate news conference.

"It seems to be a trend and it's something as a batting group you need to make sure you stop," he said. "It's sometimes been right at the start of the game, you know the morning session, late on in day four, that this strange sort of passages of play has happened."

He added: "When you get that opportunity and you're on the right side of it, you're in the field with a ball in hand, you really get and roll with it. You take every opportunity and chance and you make that really count in your favor. Similarly with a bat in hand, you've just got to really make sure those (first) 20 balls, you're fighting with everything you've got to get yourself in, get accustomed to the wicket, the conditions and make sure you build that partnership which is so vital."

The Ahmedabad stadium has a capacity of 110,000 people and authorities have allowed 55,000 tickets to go on sale each day. Each side has had a convincing win in the first two Tests. England won the first by 227 runs, while India claimed the second by 317 runs. Both need a win to keep alive their hopes of reaching the World Test Championship final. — AFP

Sports

Gladbach face Man City with Rose under pressure

'Nothing to lose' - Rose urges Gladbach to be brave

BERLIN: Borussia Moenchengladbach take on high-flying Manchester City in the Champions League tonight with the German club's coach Marco Rose struggling to deal with the fall-out from the announcement he will join Dortmund next season.

Pep Guardiola's buoyant City come into the last 16, first leg, tie in Budapest on the back of a record 18-match winning run in all competitions. In contrast, Gladbach are reeling from Saturday's shock 2-1 home loss to second-from-bottom Mainz.

Rose blamed the defeat on the disruption caused by last week's bombshell announcement he will coach rivals Dortmund in 2021/22. News of his planned departure has also incurred the wrath of furious Gladbach fans. "Everything that has happened this week, everything that has hit the players, has happened because of me," a drawn-looking Rose confessed after Saturday's defeat. "And I bear responsibility for that."

The first-leg tie was moved from Moenchengladbach to Budapest because of Germany's Covid-19 travel restrictions. While Guardiola's City dispatched the likes of Everton, defending champions Liverpool and Tottenham in the Premier League in recent weeks, Gladbach have taken just a point from their last three Bundesliga games.

If Rose's two-year tenure in charge of Gladbach is not to come to an inglorious end, he has to turn things around quickly. With City looming, Rose said his immediate task is to gain "trust and calm" among his squad. The fixture list will offer him little assistance.

After City, Gladbach have an away league game at second-placed RB Leipzig on Saturday, then host Rose's future employers Dortmund in a German Cup quarter-final tie next Tuesday. Before the Mainz defeat, Gladbach captain Lars Stindl insisted news of Rose's departure will not jeopardize the season, but Saturday's performance suggested otherwise.

However, news that Rose is quitting could trigger other departures at Gladbach.

'Courage'

Germany midfielder Florian Neuhaus, who has a release clause in his contract, is urging his teammates not to show City too much respect. "Courage is a key factor," he told Kicker, adding that his future plans are unclear past the end of the season. "If we play to our best twice, then we have a good chance of going through."

"During the group stages, we learned how crucial a self-confident approach is," he added after Gladbach drew against Inter Milan and Real Madrid. Facing star-studded City in the last 16 of the Champions League is the biggest test Rose has faced in two years as Gladbach coach.

The 44-year-old former defender has forged a reputation as a rising star coach by rousing sleeping giants Gladbach. Before their recent slump, they beat Bayern Munich, RB Leipzig and Dortmund at home this season. Since taking charge in 2019, Rose has delivered on his promise to get Gladbach playing "dynamic, fast, active, combination football".

He has steered 'the Foals' to the knock-out stages of the Champions League for the first time. He had already proved himself by winning back-to-back Austrian league titles with Red Bull Salzburg before joining Gladbach. In his first season with Salzburg, Rose masterminded wins over Lazio and future employers Dortmund in a run to the Europa League semi-finals in 2017/18.

'Nothing to lose'

Rose insists his side has nothing to lose against Manchester City. "The boys have earned this special evening," Rose said yesterday with the home leg moved to Budapest due to Germany's COVID-19 travel restrictions. "You can only win, first and



MOENCHENGLADBACH: Moenchengladbach's players take part in a training session on the eve of the UEFA Champions League, last 16, first-leg football match Borussia Moenchengladbach v Manchester City in Moenchengladbach, western Germany yesterday. —AFP

foremost, in a game like this. It's a big thing for the club that we're in (the last 16). The boys should enjoy it. We need to trust ourselves and play with a lot of courage and passion."

Rose urged his team to put aside poor results and the off-field turbulence to make life hard for City. Gladbach have the players to shock City with their attack spearheaded by French forwards Alassane Plea and Marcus Thuram. "If there is

something that Manchester City don't like, then it's not having the ball. We need to play with courage and defend with passion," Rose added.

Gladbach's Swedish left-back Oscar Wendt is relishing the chance to see his team test themselves against the Premier League leaders. "The anticipation is huge. We have the chance to compete perhaps the best team in the world right now. It's just fun," said the 35-year-old. —AFP

'Extraordinary' Muriel firing Atalanta before Real Madrid clash

BERGAMO: Luis Muriel has moved beyond his 'super-sub' role with a rich vein of form to boost Atalanta's hopes against Real Madrid in the first leg of their last 16 Champions League tie in Bergamo tonight. Colombian ace Muriel scored and set up countryman Duvan Zapata for another as Atalanta warmed up for the Spanish champions with a 4-2 win over Napoli to move up to fifth in Serie A at the weekend.

"Muriel is extraordinary, not only for the assist and the goal," said coach Gian Piero Gasperini after the forward scored in a ninth consecutive Serie A appearances as a starter. "This year he has shown extraordinary mental, physical and athletic form, he has made a terrific leap in quality also in terms of consistency."

The 29-year-old is having the best campaign of his career with 17 goals so far including two in the Champions League group stages. He will be keen to impress after a disappointing 18 months at Sevilla, signed from Sampdoria in 2017 as the La Liga side's most expensive transfer. He scored 13 goals in 65 games in Spain before returning to Italy on a six-month loan spell with Fiorentina, moving on to Atalanta in mid-2019.

In his debut season, Muriel earned a reputation as a super-sub, scoring 18 Serie A goals despite only starting 10 matches. This season he has scored 14 league goals, the same as AC Milan star Zlatan Ibrahimovic, and behind Cristiano Ronaldo (18) for Juventus and Inter's Romelu Lukaku (17).

But while Lukaku and Ronaldo's goals include four penalties and Ibrahimovic's three, only one of Muriel's have been from the spot. "The coach is giving me space and more playing time lately so I want to make the most of it," said Muriel, who has scored 36 goals in 71 games for Atalanta.

'Unique opportunity'

Gasperini has shaken things up at Atalanta in



BERGAMO: In this file photo taken on December 01, 2020 Atalanta's Italian coach Gian Piero Gasperini gives instructions during the UEFA Champions League Group D football match Atalanta vs Midtjylland at the Azzurri d'Italia stadium in Bergamo, Lombardy. —AFP

recent months with emblematic captain Alejandro 'Papu' Gomez frozen out after disagreeing with the coach over tactics during a Champions League match. Gomez was left out of their final Group D game away at Ajax where Muriel scored the winner that sent the Italians through as runners-up behind Liverpool.

Gomez was then sold to Sevilla in January. The match against 13-time European champions Real will be the biggest game ever played by the Italian team whose only major trophy was the 1963 Coppa Italia. "It's a unique opportunity," said Muriel. "If Atalanta play like against Napoli, conceding little and creating a lot, it will be very difficult for them too."

The Bergamo side have the second best attack in the Italian league behind leaders Inter Milan.

Muriel, Zapata, Robin Gosens and Cristian Romero were all on target at the Gewiss Stadium on Sunday, the sixth time this season the club have scored with four different players. "This gives us a morale boost before Real Madrid," warned 63-year-old Gasperini, who has transformed the club into one of the top Italian sides since taking over in 2016.

The northerners reached the quarter-finals in their first Champions League campaign last season, beating Spanish club Valencia in the last 16, and will be hoping to match that achievement again. "We're up against the most successful club in the world," added Gasperini of Zinedine Zidane's La Liga champions. "An extraordinary fixture for us. I don't think Atalanta have ever faced such a team. We're curious to tackle them to see what we can do." —AFP

Ronaldo's Crotona double keeps Juve in title hunt

TURIN: Cristiano Ronaldo kept Juventus within sight of the Serie A summit on Monday with a headed brace which helped the champions to a 3-0 win over bottom club Crotona. Portugal forward Ronaldo struck twice late in the first half to break the resistance of lowly Crotona and keep Juve eight points behind league leaders Inter Milan. Weston McKennie made sure of the points midway through the second half, lashing home when the ball broke to him after a corner. Andrea Pirlo's side climb to third with the win thanks also to Roma, who are a point back in fourth, only managing a goalless draw at Benevento on Sunday night. They are also four points behind second-placed AC Milan who have lost three of their last five league matches, including Sunday's 3-0 derby thumping at the hands of Inter. Juve, chasing their 10th straight league title, have a game in hand on both Milan clubs and play Inter in the penultimate round of league games in Turin. Crotona meanwhile remain rooted to the bottom of the division thanks to their fifth defeat on the bounce. —AFP



TURIN: Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo (center) celebrates with Juventus' Swedish forward Dejan Kulusevski (left) and Juventus' Turkish defender Merih Demiral after scoring his second goal during the Italian Serie A football match Juventus vs Crotona on Monday at the Juventus stadium in Turin. —AFP

Spain looks to Real, Atletico to halt Liga decline

MADRID: "Sign him up Florentino," Real Madrid's fans wrote on Twitter before Zinedine Zidane was asked if he sent a message to the club's president Florentino Perez. Kylian Mbappe had just destroyed Barcelona at Camp Nou and 24 hours later Erling Haaland did the same to Sevilla at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan.

By the time Real Sociedad trailed 4-0 on Thursday evening to Manchester United, the feeling in Spain became clear: La Liga was in freefall. Later that night, Granada beat Napoli and Villarreal saw off Salzburg in a competition it should be remembered that was only six months ago won by Sevilla, for the fourth time in seven years.

In fact, a Spanish team has won the Europa League seven times out of the last 11. Three of those titles belong to Atletico Madrid, who take on Chelsea in the Champions League on Tuesday, after knocking out the English champions Liverpool last season.

Real Madrid face Atalanta, hoping to prevent a third year without winning the tournament, after winning all of the previous three. "Spanish teams are still strong, it's just a moment," said Barcelona coach Ronald Koeman last week. "You can't draw conclusions." If there is a need for perspective - that the speed of the fall is in part due to the heights previously reached - Spain's dominance in Europe has also been receding for some time. It perhaps began when Barcelona lost to Roma in 2018, continued with the departures of Neymar and Cristiano Ronaldo, before becoming entrenched, as financial impotence has prevented a revival.

Certainly for Barcelona and Real Madrid, hesitation in refreshing their squads has been punished to the full, the coronavirus pandemic enforcing a year without spending when they arguably needed to spend most. Real Madrid's youngsters are yet to blossom, while Barcelona have watched an historic era grow old, leave or retire. Atletico Madrid continue to rebuild after their own cluster of iconic departures. Sevilla have endured but Valencia are in a mess.

For most of this century, it has been a question of when not if a generational talent moves to Spain but now there are no guarantees. Mbappe has long been linked with Zidane but, as Lionel Messi has shown, the best players define themselves by Champions League victories and who could say confidently Paris Saint-Germain and Manchester City will not own more of those over the coming years than Barcelona and Real Madrid?

Ronaldo and Neymar left, before Messi tried to and still might. Last summer, City pinched Spain's most exciting young talent, Ferran Torres, while Atletico were powerless to prevent Thomas Partey even joining Arsenal. And while Pep Guardiola and Jose Mourinho fronted La Liga's peak at the end of the last decade, the most charismatic, modern coaches - Jurgen Klopp, Mauricio Pochettino, Thomas Tuchel, Julian Nagelsmann - have plied their trade almost entirely elsewhere ever since.

Along with Guardiola, they have driven the shift towards a more physical, vertical, high-pressing style, that seems to have left Spanish teams behind. "Barca always has been a team that has gone for lots of players for their technical qualities and not many for their physical qualities," said Koeman on Saturday. "You have to have both, to have balance we want the ball, to play from the back and create chances." —AFP

Jazz three-point barrage beats Hornets

Wizards beat Lakers in OT • Mavs, Suns win

LOS ANGELES: Donovan Mitchell had 23 points and eight assists as the NBA-leading Utah Jazz rained a franchise-record 28 three-pointers in a 132-110 rout of the Charlotte Hornets on Monday. Joe Ingles and Georges Niang scored 21 points apiece as the Jazz got a superb offensive performance from their bench to win for the 21st time in their last 23 games and improve to 25-6 overall.

Jordan Clarkson (five threes), Mike Conley (four threes), Mitchell (three threes) and Royce O'Neale (two threes) contributed to the Jazz's domination from beyond the arc. Conley also had 15 points. Gordon Hayward scored 21 points but had to leave the game in the fourth quarter with a hand injury as the Hornets' six-game road trip got off to a rocky start. Rookie LaMelo Ball also scored 21 points as the Hornets kept it close until the fourth quarter when the Jazz seized command.

In Texas, Tim Hardaway scored a team-high 29 points as the Dallas Mavericks delivered one of their best defensive games of the season, by limiting the Memphis Grizzlies to just 39 percent shooting on Monday. Luka Doncic scored 21 points and Jalen Brunson chipped in 19 as the Mavericks returned from an unexpected eight-day break to post a 103-92 victory at the American Airlines Center.

The Mavericks had not played since February 14 after a devastating winter storm wreaked havoc on the Dallas area and forced two postponements. Brunson scored 17 points as Dallas won its fifth game in the last six. The Mavs came out quickly, compiling a double-digit lead in the first half of the opening quarter, and cruised from there.

Ja Morant had 22 points and a game-high nine assists for the Grizzlies, who suffered their second straight loss and were held to their second-lowest season point total. The Grizzlies scored just two more points than they scored in a loss to Cleveland last month. Desmond Bane finished with 12 points, Brandon Clarke and Jonas Valanciunas 11 apiece and Tyus Jones 10 for Memphis. Valanciunas also grabbed 15 rebounds to complete a double-double.



SALT LAKE CITY: Rudy Gobert #27 of the Utah Jazz dunks the ball during the game against the Charlotte Hornets on Monday at vivint.SmartHome Arena in Salt Lake City, Utah. — AFP

Elsewhere, Devin Booker scored 34 points as the Phoenix Suns posted their 12th win in the last 14 games by rolling to a 132-100 victory over the visiting Portland Trail Blazers. Deandre Ayton added 19 points as the Suns dominated to open the second half by outscoring the Trail Blazers 37-17 in the third quarter.

Damian Lillard delivered 24 points and seven assists for Portland, who dropped their second straight contest following a season-long six-game winning streak.

Lillard's 24 points came on the same day he created a stir by calling out the Minnesota Timberwolves management for hiring Chris Finch as their new head coach instead of former Portland assistant David Vanterpool. Nassir Little scored 18 points, Gary Trent had 11 and Carmelo Anthony added 10 for the Trail Blazers. Enes Kanter collected 15 rebounds for Portland, which shot 12 of 39 from behind the arc.

In Los Angeles, Bradley Beal scored 33 points as

the Washington Wizards won their fifth straight, beating the Los Angeles Lakers 127-124 in overtime at Staples Center. LeBron James carried Los Angeles offensively, scoring a team-high 31 points but the Lakers missed two chances to force double overtime and instead lost their third in a row. It does not get any easier for the Lakers, who are playing without the injured Anthony Davis, as their next game is today against the Jazz. — AFP



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