



**3** Manpower authority explains new labor law amendments



**5** Algeria anti-govt protesters hit streets after year-long hiatus



**9** Hi, Robot: Japan android pets ease virus isolation



**16** Stones sends Man City 13 pts clear at the top



# Opposition MPs cancel sit-in after interior minister's visit

## MP Dahoum faces three challenges in court to nullify his election victory



KUWAIT: Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Al-Sabah (center) visits the diwaniya of MP Mohammad Al-Mutair (second right) yesterday. Also present are MP Bader Al-Dahoum (second left) and other opposition MPs.

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Opposition MPs yesterday cancelled a planned gathering in support of leading opposition lawmaker Bader Al-Dahoum - whose National Assembly membership is on the line awaiting a court ruling on March 3 - after a visit by the interior minister. Dahoum is facing three challenges in the constitutional court against his election victory in the Dec 5 parliamentary polls, all demanding that the court, whose rulings are final, to nullify his win.

A large number of opposition MPs and activists had decided to stage a sit-in outside Dahoum's home tomorrow ahead of the court's ruling to declare their total support to him. However, Interior Minister Sheikh Thamer Al-Sabah yesterday visited the diwaniya of MP Mohammad Al-Mutair and discussed with a number of lawmakers the emergency health conditions due to the coronavirus pandemic, and as a result the lawmakers called off the gathering.

Mutair said on Twitter that following the meeting with the interior minister and due to the prevailing health conditions, the gathering will not be held. Instead a press conference will be held that will be

broadcast on social networks.

A special interior ministry commission had disqualified Dahoum from contesting the Assembly election, so he appealed the decision in court. The lower court supported the decision, but it was overturned by the appeals court and later upheld by the court of cassation, whose rulings are final.

But three petitions challenging Dahoum's election were filed at the constitutional court. One of the petitions claims that Dahoum is barred for life from contesting elections because he was convicted for taking part in storming the National Assembly building during an opposition protest in Nov 2011.

Top constitutional experts said the case is very sensitive, especially after the court of cassation had already granted Dahoum full approval to contest the election. The constitutional court in Kuwait reviews decisions to ensure they are in line with the constitution. Regular courts cannot tackle such issues.

The court must first decide to accept or reject to handle the case. Three legal experts - Mohammad Al-Fili, Hussein Al-Abdullah and Fawaz Al-Jadaei - said they believe the court might refuse to take the case.

### News in brief

#### Belgium hit by UK variant

BRUSSELS: The more contagious British variant of the coronavirus is now the dominant strain in Belgium, authorities said Friday, as they explained why infection numbers have again started to rise. "Last week, we estimate that 53 percent of infections were caused by the UK variant, against 38 percent a week earlier," a spokesman for the government's coronavirus response, Steven Van Gucht, told a news conference. — AFP

#### EMA approves Regeneron therapy

THE HAGUE: Europe's medicines regulator on Friday provisionally approved use of US biotech firm Regeneron's COVID-19 therapy, saying it prevented patients with from getting worse. Regeneron's synthetic antibody treatment was used to treat former US President Donald Trump after he contracted coronavirus last year. The European Medicines Agency said preliminary results showed treatment with REGN-COV2 reduced the amount of the virus in the back of the nose and throat and led to fewer medical visits. — AFP

#### Rooster kills owner with blade

NEW DELHI: A rooster fitted with a knife for an illegal cockfight in southern India has killed its owner, sparking a manhunt for the organizers of the event, police said yesterday. The bird had a knife attached to its leg ready to take on an opponent when it inflicted serious injuries to the man's groin as it tried to escape, officers said. The victim died from loss of blood before he could reach a hospital in the Karimnagar district of Telangana state earlier this week. — AFP

#### NY gets Trump tax records

NEW YORK: New York prosecutors investigating former president Donald Trump's finances have finally received his tax returns following a marathon legal battle, a spokesman said Thursday. "Our office obtained the records on Monday," Danny Frost, a spokesman for Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, told AFP. The prosecutor is investigating hush payments made to two women who allege they had affairs with Trump and possible fraud. — AFP

#### Thousands support patriarch

BKERKE, Lebanon: Thousands rallied yesterday in support of the Maronite patriarch following powerful Shiite group Hezbollah's recent criticism of the Christian leader's positions. Earlier this month, Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi had called for a UN-sponsored "international conference", but Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah last week slammed the proposal. — AFP

## Kuwait supports Saudi statement on Khashoggi case

KUWAIT: Kuwait's foreign ministry yesterday expressed support towards the Saudi foreign ministry's statement regarding the US Congress report on the case of journalist Jamal Khashoggi's 2018 murder. In a statement, the Kuwaiti foreign ministry stressed the important role played by Saudi Arabia under the leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz both regionally and internationally in support of moderation and denouncing of violence and extremism.

The ministry affirmed that it categorically rejects all malicious attempts against Saudi sovereignty, saying the kingdom always played a role in security and stability, both in the region and worldwide. Saudi Arabia on Friday said it "completely rejects" the declassified US report.

## Israeli vessel hit by blast in Gulf of Oman

DUBAI: An Israeli vessel travelling from Saudi Arabia to Singapore was hit by an explosion in the Gulf of Oman, maritime security groups and the owner said Friday. The MV Helios Ray vehicle carrier "suffered an explosion within the Gulf of Oman", the Dryad Global maritime security group said. The vessel was understood to have been travelling from Dammam, a port city in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, to Singapore when the blast occurred

## Biden says US strike in Syria warning to Iran

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden said Friday that a US air strike against an Iranian-backed militia in eastern Syria, the first since he took office, should be seen by Iran as a warning. Asked what the message was from the air strike, Biden said: "You can't act with impunity." "Be careful," he added, speaking in Houston during a tour of relief efforts after a huge winter storm in Texas.

Syria and Iran on Friday condemned the attack with Damascus calling it a "bad sign" from the new Biden administration and Tehran saying it would further destabilize the region. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said two F-15E "Strike Eagles" dropped seven precision-guided munitions on Thursday on facilities in

"The government of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia completely rejects the negative, false and unacceptable assessment in the report pertaining to the kingdom's leadership, and notes that the report contained inaccurate information and conclusions," the Saudi foreign ministry said in a statement.

"It is truly unfortunate that this report, with its unjustified and inaccurate conclusions, is issued while the kingdom had clearly denounced this heinous crime, and the kingdom's leadership took the necessary steps to ensure that such a tragedy never takes place again," the foreign ministry said. "The kingdom rejects any measure that infringes upon its leadership, sovereignty, and the independence of its judicial system," the ministry added.

Following the release of the report, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington wants to "recalibrate" but not "rupture" its relations with Riyadh, a longstanding security partner in the Middle East. Despite its anger over the report, Saudi Arabia also stressed that it was keen to maintain the relationship.

"The partnership between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America is a robust and enduring partnership," the foreign ministry said. "We look forward to maintaining the enduring foundations that

Thursday, northwest of Oman, it said.

"The MV HELIOS RAY is owned by HELIOS Ltd, an Israeli company registered in the Isle of Man," it added. The owner of the vessel, Israeli businessman Rami Ungar, confirmed the blast in statements to Israel's Kan state television and said it caused some damage. "The damage is two holes about a meter and a half (five feet) in diameter," he said, without elaborating, according to Kan.

"But it is not yet clear to us whether it was caused by missile fire or mines attached to the ship," he added. "We have no idea if this is an incident that is part of the tensions between Iran and the United States and if it has to do with the fact that the owner of the ship is Israeli." Ungar said there were no casualties among the crew and no damage to the engine, Kan reported.

eastern Syria used by the militias believed to be behind a spate of rocket attacks on US troops in Iraq.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Biden was sending "an unambiguous message". "He's going to act to protect Americans and when threats are posed, he has the right to take an action at the time and in the manner of his choosing," Psaki said. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the administration wanted to make it "very, very clear - notably to Iran - that they cannot act with impunity against our people, our partners, our interests." "And I think - and expect - that that message was clearly received," Blinken said.

Syria condemned the strike as "cowardly American aggression". "It is a bad sign regarding the policies of the new US administration which should adhere to international (norms)," the foreign ministry said. The Iranian foreign ministry strongly condemned what it called "illegal attacks" that are a "clear violation of

Continued on Page 2



ward to maintaining the enduring foundations that have shaped the framework of the resilient strategic partnership between the kingdom and the United States." — Agencies

The Israeli state broadcaster said the vessel was transporting cars from Dammam to Singapore when the blast occurred. Dryad said it appeared the vessel was returning to its port of origin. But according to the Kan report, Ungar said the vessel was heading to the United Arab Emirates, where it was due to arrive yesterday morning to undergo checks.

Israel normalized ties last year with the UAE, a move followed by fellow Gulf state Bahrain. United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) also reported the blast and said the crew were safe, adding that an investigation into the incident was underway. The Marine Traffic website said the Bahamas-flagged vessel had left Dammam on Wednesday and was due to arrive in Singapore next week.

Continued on Page 2



AL-QAIM, Iraq: This handout satellite image released on Friday shows the aftermath of recent US airstrikes on a small group of buildings at an unofficial crossing on the Syria-Iraq border. — AFP



## Local

# Amir congratulates Saudi King on Crown Prince's successful surgery

## Sheikh Nawaf reassures on Mohammad bin Salman's health

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Friday phoned Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz and congratulated him on the successful surgery of Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz. His Highness the Amir wished King Salman and Crown Prince

everlasting good health, and Saudi Arabia further progress and prosperity. Meanwhile, King Salman expressed great gratitude to His Highness the Amir for the call that embodies the deep-rooted and historical relations between the two countries and their brotherly peoples. The King wished the Amir permanent wellbeing.

In the meantime, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah phoned Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to congratulate him on the successful surgery. In his call, His Highness the Amir wished the Saudi Crown Prince everlasting wellness and wished the Saudi Kingdom further progress and welfare under the

wise leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman thanked His Highness the Amir of Kuwait on the call and his sentiments which reflect the strength and depth of relations between the two Arabian Gulf nations. He also wished His Highness the Amir everlasting wellbeing. — KUNA



CAIRO: Egypt's President Abdelفتاح Al-Sisi reads a letter from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah during his meeting with Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah yesterday. — KUNA

## Kuwait's Amir sends letter to Egypt's president

CAIRO: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a written

message to Egypt's President Abdelفتاح Al-Sisi, which was delivered by Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah yesterday. The message discussed the deep-rooted bilateral relations between the two countries, and means to support and strengthen these ties. The letter was handed to the president during a meeting he held with Kuwait's foreign minister, who was on a state visit to Cairo. — KUNA

## US Defense Secretary congratulates Kuwait on national celebrations

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah received a phone call from US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, congratulating Sheikh Hamad on the 60th National Day and 30th Liberation Anniversary yesterday. In a statement published by Kuwait Army's public relations department, Sheikh Hamad thanked Austin for his kind feelings, underlining the strong ties and joint work between Kuwait and the US. Meanwhile, he noted America's key role in liberating Kuwait and the sacrifices of the American army members during the Gulf Storm operation. The minister also spoke of the great efforts of leaders who led the military operations, mainly former US President George Bush. Austin invited his Kuwaiti counterpart to visit the US in the near future, as part of the deep relations between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received a phone call yesterday from his UAE counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who extended his congratulations on Kuwait's 60th National Day and 30th Liberation Day. The UAE foreign minister wished the Kuwaiti people



Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin

further prosperity and progress under the wise leadership of Their Highnesses the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In turn, the Kuwaiti foreign minister expressed gratitude for the warm sentiments, wishing the Emirati people progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Children wearing face masks celebrate Kuwait's Liberation Day on Friday. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



## Biden says US strike in Syria...

Continued from Page 1

human rights and international law". The air strikes would lead to "intensifying military conflicts and further destabilize the region," the foreign ministry spokesman said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 22 fighters from Iraq's state-sponsored Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary force were killed. It said US warplanes hit three trucks loaded with munitions coming from Iraq near the Syrian border town of Albu Kamal and destroyed border posts of the Hashed, an umbrella group that includes small militias with ties to Iran.

Kirby said the Pentagon had received "preliminary details" about casualties but declined to release any figures. He said nine "facilities" used by the militias were "totally destroyed" and two "partially destroyed". It was the first US military action targeting such groups since Biden took office five weeks ago and came just as Washington had opened the door to resuming negotiations with Tehran over its nuclear program.

Kirby said the targeted location was used by Kataeb Hezbollah and Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada, two Iraqi pro-Iran groups operating under the Hashed. Kataeb Hezbollah said one of its fighters was killed and slammed the strike as a "heinous crime in violation of international law". Kirby said Iraqi and Kurdish partners had provided intelligence that led to the identification of the groups behind the rocket attacks.

## Israeli vessel hit by blast in...

Continued from Page 1

Dryad suggested Iran could be behind the blast, noting the incident comes amid heightened tensions

Iraq's defense ministry denied the US had coordinated with it to conduct the strike, saying it only works together with the US-led coalition in the fight against the Islamic State group. Syria's ally Russia also condemned the attack, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov questioning the Biden administration's plans in Syria. "It is very important for us to understand the United States' strategic line on the ground," Lavrov said. Kirby responded to criticism by Lavrov that Moscow had been notified just four or five minutes before the US struck the targets. "We did what we believe was the proper amount of notification for this," he said. "It shouldn't come as a shock to anybody that we're going to do what we have to do to notify but we're also going to do what we have to do to protect our forces."

The US action followed three rocket attacks on facilities in Iraq used by US and coalition forces fighting IS. One of those strikes, on a military complex in the Kurdish regional capital Arbil on Feb 15, killed a civilian and a foreign contractor working with coalition forces, and wounded several US contractors and a soldier.

Last week, the Biden administration offered talks with Iran led by European allies as it seeks to salvage a 2015 nuclear deal, left on the brink of collapse after Biden's predecessor Donald Trump withdrew from it. But the new administration has also made clear it would not brook "malign activities" by Iran.

Iran is believed to be searching for an opportunity to avenge the US assassination of top general Qasem Soleimani one year ago. Soleimani, a senior Revolutionary Guards commander, was Iran's key liaison to its allies in Iraq and Syria, and elsewhere in the region. He was killed in a US drone strike just as he arrived in Baghdad for meetings with top Iraqi officials. — AFP

between Israel and the Islamic republic. "Whilst details regarding the incident remain unclear, it remains a realistic possibility that the event was the result of asymmetric activity by Iranian military," it said. "Tensions between Israel and Iran remain fraught, especially in light of increased signs of rapprochement between Iran and the Biden administration," Dryad added. "Increasingly, Iran is also becoming fearful of improving relations between Israel and the Gulf states." — AFP

## UK bids farewell to lockdown hero; US backs rescue plan

LONDON: Britain said farewell yesterday to fundraising war veteran Captain Tom Moore who died from coronavirus earlier this month, as the US pushed forward with a massive recovery plan for its COVID-battered economy. A vast \$1.9 trillion package - including \$1,400 payouts to most Americans and billions of dollars to boost vaccine delivery, help schools reopen and fund local governments - was passed in the US House of Representatives and will now move to the Senate.

"After 12 months of death and despair, the American recovery begins tonight," congressman Brendan Boyle told the House, just days after the US death toll surpassed 500,000. The bill is on track to be the second largest US stimulus ever, illustrating the huge effort needed to tackle the multiple crises unleashed by a pandemic that has killed more than 2.5 million worldwide.

Europeans continue to live under some of the world's toughest restrictions, and in France they just got tougher. Two cities - Dunkirk in the north and Nice in the south - locked down on the weekends to halt the spread. "We have to do something as Covid is getting worse in the region," Charlie Kentish, a British resident taking an early morning walk in Nice, told AFP. He was resigned to spending his weekends playing video games with his teenage children.

From Brazil to the Czech Republic, restrictions are being reimposed and tightened. Even in relatively unscathed New Zealand, the biggest city Auckland was thrust back into lockdown yesterday shortly after a three-day shutdown ended. A small cluster has been linked to a school, but the country's caseload still pales in comparison with the numbers seen in Europe and the Americas.

In Britain, 100-year-old Tom Moore helped lift the COVID-induced gloom last year by staging fundraising events including completing 100

lengths of his back garden using a walking frame. After his campaign went viral, he raised nearly £33 million (\$45 million) for healthcare charities, and was knighted for his efforts. His funeral, a small family ceremony, was shown live on national television and he was honored with a flypast of a World War II plane.

The rollout of vaccines has improved the prospects greatly for many older people, with Britain excelling in its distribution to vulnerable groups. But the campaign has not gone smoothly everywhere, with campaigners in Canada appealing for their loved ones to get the jab quickly. "I am 94 today! No gifts, just the vaccine please," reads a handwritten sign outside the Toronto home of Nina Rockett. Her daughter Margot has become frustrated with the relatively slow pace of Canada's rollout. "I think everybody should hang a banner like this outside their door or window or balcony," she said.

The virus has not spared younger people either. There is growing concern over cases of "long COVID", where people suffer symptoms for months after the initial illness. Areli Torres, a 31-year-old engineer from Mexico, told AFP she fell ill for a few days last June, but months later she is still suffering symptoms including numbness in parts of her body. "Everything's uncertain. Everything's been an ordeal. I've seen four doctors," she said. It had taken seven months just to get the correct diagnosis, she added.

The World Health Organization this week urged governments to prioritize understanding the long-term effects of infections. As the health effects linger, so does the fallout for cultural events. The pandemic has torpedoed the whirlwind of the glitzy Los Angeles parties that normally marks the start of the Hollywood awards season.

While the famous Sunset Strip is adorned with its usual giant "For Your Consideration" movie billboards, voters are watching nominated films from home, and journalists are interviewing actors on their laptops. Variety awards editor Tim Gray told AFP he had not been to a single in-person event for a film this year. "Everyone's just had to adapt," added The Hollywood Reporter's awards columnist Scott Feinberg. — AFP



Local

# Manpower authority official explains new Kuwait labor law amendments

Written notice, investigation required before an employee is penalized

By Nawara Fattahova

**KUWAIT:** Ministerial decree 27/2021 that was published last month in the official gazette Kuwait Al-Youm includes some changes and amendments to the labor law. Kuwait Times contacted the Public Authority for Manpower (PAM) for clarification of some of the new articles. The following questions were answered by Nasser Al-Hamidi, Head of the Legal Department at PAM.

**Kuwait Times:** What are the new amendments to the labor law in the new decree that are important to both the employer and the employee?

**Nasser Al-Hamidi:** Paragraph 3 of article 3 of law 109/2013 on the founding the Public Authority for Manpower mandated PAM to issue three types of regulations - the regulation of rules and procedures of issuing a work permit, regulation of transferring manpower from one employer to another, and the regulation of need assessment of workers.

The new decree 27/2021 was issued with the launch of PAM's modern electronic system, which includes providing online services through its website to ease work for both employers and employees. This decree includes more clarifications of the regulations for registering licenses at PAM and adding new types of licenses. It also details how to appoint the authorized signatory and how to cancel the signatory. The decree also includes detailed provisions for the final cancellation of work permits.

Also, more types of businesses of the first category of licenses were added, such as companies with government shares that are established according to the development plan laws. Furthermore, barns and veterinary activities licensed by the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources were added to the first category of licenses, in addition to commercial and investment real estate.

Professions such as barber were added to men's salons in the second category of licenses. Also, several restrictions were added to some businesses in the second category.

**Employer's death**

**KT:** Does paragraph 1 of article 3 means that if the employer passes away, the establishment or company will be closed? Which businesses does this article apply to?

**Hamidi:** Article 3 includes the conditions of registering business licenses at PAM. The first condition requires that all employers should be alive, which is a normal condition and is not related to closing the establishment. Article 3 mentions the conditions for business registration, while later events such as the death of the owner doesn't mean the closure of the establishment.

In this situation, article 50 of law 6/2010 is applied. This article states: In the event that the facility is sold, merged with others, or transferred by inheritance, donation or other legal action, the employment contract remains valid vis-a-vis the successor and under the same conditions as con-

tained therein. The obligations and rights of the previous employer towards the employees are transferred to the employer who replaced him.

**KT:** Is article 8 new? Why does this decision include working under government contracts?

**Hamidi:** Article 9 of labor law 6/2010 states: A public authority with legal personality and an attached budget shall be established (PAM), supervised by the minister of social affairs and labor, and will be in charge of the functions assigned to the ministry in this law, as well as expat labor recruitment according to employers' demands.

So PAM is in charge of all labor affairs in the private sector, whether the workers were employed based on government contracts and projects, employees in the oil sector, or employees in the private sector in other categories. PAM organizes regulations and procedures for issuing a work permit, renewing it or canceling it. This includes employees on government contracts and projects, whether these projects are longer than a year or a temporary project shorter than a year. This is highlighted in articles 7 to 10 of the fourth chapter on registering and canceling government contracts.

**Working till midnight**

**KT:** Why did article 23 include businesses that don't operate till midnight?

**Hamidi:** This article is not really new, as it is included in the labor law for the private sector



places that provide services only for women, mentioning some examples such as lingerie shops, women's salons, shops selling salon equipment and women's health clubs. PAM will not issue work permits for men to work in these institutions or similar institutions that provide services only for women. Sanctions will be applied on male employees, and inspectors regularly go on inspections in all areas. The same applies to women, who are not allowed to work in institutions that provide services only for men.

**Holding passports**

**KT:** Is article 38 new? And does it apply to all professions?

**Hamidi:** This article bans employers in the private sector and oil sector to hold the passports of the employees working there, which is in line with international criteria. It is also subject to inspection of international labor organizations. PAM will receive any complaint from an employee and will force the employer to return the passport to the employee.

**KT:** Are the articles 49 and 50 new?

**Hamidi:** Article 37 of the labor law bans employers from imposing penalties on employees unless an employee was given written notice about the accusation, the accusation is investigated, their defense is heard, and a record of it is filed in the employee's file. Of course, if the employee is absent from work, this will be one of the cases in which the worker breaches their duties stipulated in the work contract, which is an 'absconding case'.

This was the reason for imposing articles 49 and 50 - to provide employees preventive security from having the employer file absconding cases that may be malicious. Article 49 obliges the employer to post a copy of the absconding notice in a visible place at the workplace until the case is resolved, so the employee is aware of the case filed against them, as their absence from work is a serious issue that has serious consequences.

Article 50 obliges an employer who has filed an absconding case against an employee to visit the labor department before the employee returns to work to avoid any action against the employee, as PAM's staff should be made aware that the employee has returned to work. This provides better protection to the employee.

in my view

## Stress levels increase amid pandemic

By Abdulaziz Al-Bahar  
local@kuwaittimes.net

**"E**verything I had planned for my company had to be postponed for almost one full year," said Aysha Al-Mudhaf, the Managing Partner and Chief Financial Officer of the startup Circular Group. Like billions of people worldwide, Aysha has faced unprecedented challenges navigating the new normal of a world in the grips of the COVID-19. "It has been stressful at times as we have worked tirelessly to find a way to keep afloat while not even having launched yet."

To be sure, the pandemic has taken a psychological toll beyond the more-feared physiological one. A recent survey conducted via the program Qualtrics assesses the severity of that impact by analyzing levels of stress and anxiety in the general population. Out of 149 people surveyed across all sectors of the public, 93 responded. Most respondents were females (78.13 percent) between ages of 14-18 (5.88 percent), 19-25 (7.35 percent), 26-35 (26.47 percent), 36 and over (60.29 percent). The rest were male respondents (21.87 percent) between the ages of 14-18 (32 percent), 19-25 (20 percent), 26-35 (20 percent), 36 and over (28 percent). Stress levels focused on the mental health of individuals and their ability to achieve everyday routines without interruption. Anxiety levels measured the physical manifestations of stress levels. The results indicate that, while stress levels have increased over the past year due to the society-wide restrictions of movement, people have largely found ways to limit that stress through adaptation. "One thing that I've found that works," Aysha said, "is finding new hobbies and trying to be constantly active, instead of sitting at home which then leads to overthinking which can be a trigger for stress."

Respondents answered a series of online questions designed to produce metrics on the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), a 10 item questionnaire that assesses individual levels of stress by measuring how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives, and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) an inventory that consists of 21 items better known as anxiety symptoms. The majority of those surveyed, 55 percent, indicated that they have had moderate stress levels, with 39 percent experiencing low levels of stress. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents experienced low levels of anxiety, suggesting that the interruptions to everyday life have increased stress but not to runaway levels. People have mostly adapted to the shelter-in-place shutdowns and virtual commutes, but they are not completely at ease with it.

Anxiety levels also fluctuate in response to the personal events. One respondent reflected, "When someone close to you has the virus you start to worry and you stop working efficiently until you get the PCR with a negative result."

For people who have not been directly affected by the pandemic themselves or indirectly affected by having people close to them suffer, anxiety has not been a key issue. In fact, many of the people in this category have discovered positive aspects of the societal changes that have taken place since the outbreak.

Social isolation, which was initially hypothesized to lead to higher levels of anxiety, has seemingly played a minor role in the psychology of the general public. This can be attributed to the digital connection that has ensued. People spend more time on their device screens due to working on Zoom more often, this is especially prevalent with students who have to endure learning in front of their laptops for half of the day.

In addition, a lot of the open-ended responses at the end of the survey revealed that respondents were additionally stressed throughout the pandemic as they dealt with "challenges in online schooling," and "felt worried as well as stopped working efficiently" whenever they found out that "someone close has the virus."

Another factor that has capped stress and anxiety levels is a perceived end to the current conditions. "There will always be a light at the end of the tunnel," Mudhaf said. "Having a positive mindset leads to positive results."



## Holding employees' passports banned

(6/2010) in the women's labor section. Article 22 of the labor law states: Women are not allowed to work between 10:00 pm and 7:00 am, with the exception of hospitals, rehabilitation centers, private medical institutions and other institutions decided by the minister of social affair and labor. The employers in the abovementioned institutions are obliged to ensure security measures for them, in addition to their transportation to and from work.

Working hours during the holy month of Ramadan are also excluded from this article. The law authorizes the minister or PAM to issue a decision to exclude institutions that may be working during the period between 10:00 pm and 7:00 am. In fact, such decisions were issued previously, and the types of businesses in this article are not new and were not amended in the past few years.

**KT:** Some salesmen work in stores selling women's lingerie and similar outfits - does article 27/1 apply to them?

**Hamidi:** This article bans men from working in

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

Kuwait Times  
Established 1961  
The First Daily in the Arabian Gulf

KuwaitTimes f t i 94488888



THE LEADING INDEPENDENT  
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF  
ESTABLISHED 1961

Founder and Publisher  
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief  
ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432  
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7  
FAX : 24835620/1  
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163  
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125  
COMMERCIAL : 24835618  
P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.  
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com  
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

## Kuwaiti oil price down 93 cents to \$64.84 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went down by 93 cents to \$64.84 per barrel Friday after being at 65.77 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. At the international level, the price of the Brent crude went down by \$2.03 to \$61.50 per barrel, the same case with the West Texas Intermediate, which went down by 75 cents to \$66.13 pb.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's crude oil exports to Japan in January fell 55.0 percent from a year earlier to 4.45 million barrels, or 143,000 barrels per day (bpd), for the 10th straight month of decline, government data showed Friday. As Japan's fourth-biggest oil provider, Kuwait supplied 5.6 percent of the Asian nation's total crude imports, the Japanese Natural Resources and Energy Agency said in a preliminary report. Japan's overall imports of crude oil shrank 12.5 percent year-on-year to 2.58 million bpd, down for the 13th month in a row.

Shipments from the Middle East accounted for 93.5 percent of the total, up 0.1 percentage points from the year before. Saudi Arabia remained in the top spot, with imports from the kingdom jumping 10.0 percent from a year earlier to 1.18 million bpd, followed by the United Arab Emirates with 782,000 bpd, down 17.0 percent. Qatar ranked fourth with 200,000 bpd and Russia fifth with 74,000 bpd, respectively. Japan is the world's-third biggest oil consumer after China and the US. — KUNA

## Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti men ride horses with a national flag during celebrations marking the Gulf state's 60th Independence Day and the 30th anniversary of the end of the Gulf war with the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, in Kuwait City on February 25, 2021. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## Kuwait Embassies mark 60th National, 30th Liberation days

NEW DELHI/ROME/RABAT: Kuwait's Embassy in New Delhi celebrated the 60th National Day and the 30th Liberation Day late Friday. Due to the COVID-19 situation, the participation was limited to few officials from the Indian External Affairs Ministry led by Secretary Sanjay Bhattacharyya and several ambassadors from Arab Muslim and other countries in New Delhi. Kuwaiti Ambassador to India Jassem Al-Najim extended his heartfelt greetings to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti government and people. Najim added that the current year marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kuwait and India, and that the relations between the two friendly countries are progressing at a good pace in political, economic and cultural fields.

He also recalled efforts made to eradicate the pandemic and Indian support to Kuwait by sending medical teams in order to combat the coronavirus.

The Ambassador added that the embassy received several congratulatory messages from various Indian government agencies and members of the diplomatic corps in New Delhi on the occasion. President of India Ram Nath Kovind had sent a cable of congratulations to His Highness Sheikh Nawaf on the occasion of the National Day, and the Indian Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar, also sent a similar message to Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah.

### Source of peace

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti Ambassador to Italy Sheikh Azzam Mubarak Al-Sabah said, "Kuwait is the source of brotherhood and peace." The ambassador congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti people on the Kuwaiti 60th National Day and 30th Anniversary of Liberation. In a statement to the press, Sheikh Azzam affirmed, "This precious occasion for all of us represents a major milestone in the consolidation of national values of love, loyalty and giving to our homeland."

In the meantime, Kuwait's Ambassador to Morocco Abdulatif Al-Yahya on Friday congratulated the Kuwaiti leadership and the people on the advent of the country's national celebrations. Ambassador Yahya stressed the importance of this occasion in the



NEW DELHI: Kuwaiti Ambassador Jassem Al-Najim with Secretary Sanjay Bhattacharyya. —KUNA

hearts of the loyal Kuwaiti citizens, as it is a "defining foundational moment" in the history of Kuwait. Yahya underlined the responsibility entrusted to the young Kuwaiti generations in preserving the foundations of unity and solidarity to achieve growth and prosperity in all fields. He thanked Moroccans for participating in the Kuwaiti national holidays, noting, "if the circumstances of the pandemic prevented the Kuwaiti embassy in Rabat from organizing the national celebrations, this did not prevent dozens of Moroccan officials and citizens from congratulating us on national holidays." — KUNA

## FRONTLINE HEROES OF KUWAIT

### Student Art Competition 2021



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

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

Strategic Partner

Kuwait Times  
The First Daily in The Arabian Gulf

ZAIN

Sponsored by

HUAWEI

UAE  
75  
The Ministry of Education

## NBK's song 'Al-Sidra' attracts more than two million views

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) hosted a unique online event at its Headquarters and streamed it online via NBK social media channels to celebrate the occasion of Kuwait's Anniversary of Independence and the Anniversary of Liberation. During this event, NBK launched a special musical work presented as a commemorative gift to Kuwait, titled "Al-Sidra." The song attracted more than two million views on NBK YouTube channel since its launch. NBK has teamed up with youth Kuwaiti singers and musicians to produce this special event. Also, as part of the National Celebrations, NBK sponsored a photography competition organized by "Belmokhba" on social media channels for young talents. NBK will reward the winner a virtual learning course from the New York Academy of Filmmaking. Professional in the New York Academy of Filmmaking. Basma Al-Hasan, NBK Advertising Manager said, "This time has been exceptional for

everyone, and so it was our duty to celebrate our National days together in an exceptional and unique manner."

"NBK is committed to reflect the spirit of national unity and commitment and was one of the very first national organizations that supported the country's efforts in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. NBK highlighted the spirit of responsibility by making its resources available to shoulder the community and maintain the nation's wellbeing," she added. "While we must encourage social distancing, our message this year was to affirm that we will get through this pandemic together." NBK reinforced its position as a lead contributor to the development of the Kuwaiti society through its commitment to corporate social responsibility. This commitment became evident in the numerous social and philanthropic initiatives and national responsibilities including the special musical operetta "Hatha Hwa lKuwaiti," "Habibityi ya Kuwait" and a lot more.



Basma Al-Hasan



## Yas Island turns blue for Kuwait's 60th National Day



ABU DHABI: Yas Island, Abu Dhabi's premier leisure and entertainment hub, is celebrating Kuwait's 60th National Day as it lights up in blue. In commemoration of the special occasion, attractions across Yas Island illuminated

blue, including Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, Yas Waterworld Abu Dhabi, Warner Bros World Abu Dhabi, CLYMB Abu Dhabi, Yas Mall, Yas Plaza Hotels, as well as Etihad Arena and W Abu Dhabi - Yas Island.





Myanmar police fire rubber bullets as UN envoy breaks ranks

## By targeting schools, Nigerian kidnappers put country at risk

Page 6

Page 7



ALGIERS: Algerian anti-government protesters take part in a demonstration in the capital on Friday. —AFP

# Algeria anti-govt protesters hit streets

## Hirak pro-democracy movement gathers renewed momentum after year-long hiatus

**ALGIERS, Algeria:** Thousands of anti-government protesters took to the streets across Algeria on Friday, as the "Hirak" pro-democracy movement gathers renewed momentum after a year-long hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic. Despite a ban on gatherings over COVID-19, crowds rallied in several neighborhoods of the capital Algiers in the early afternoon after Friday prayers and marched toward the city center.

"It's awesome. It's like the big Friday Hirak protests," one demonstrator said. The Hirak protests were sparked in Feb 2019 over president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term, and the long-time leader was forced from power in April that year. Demonstrators kept up weekly protests after Bouteflika's resignation, demanding a sweeping overhaul of a ruling system in place since Algeria's independence from France in 1962.

They only suspended protests last March due to coronavirus restrictions, but calls have recently circulated on social media for a return to the streets. On Thursday, rallying cries online also included calls for everyone to wear masks at the protest, after many had not at a Monday demonstration to mark the second

anniversary of the Hirak protests that also drew thousands. Many people still went unmasked on Friday.

### Familiar slogans

Protesters were met by security forces with truncheons and fired tear gas when a crowd forced its way through a police barrier to reach the Grand Post Office, the main Algiers rallying point of the Hirak protests, footage posted on the Interligne news site showed. From the morning, police vans had taken up positions near main squares in the city center and roadblocks were set up on several major roads leading into the capital.

As if no time had passed since the last Friday demonstration in 2020, the crowds were full of the same flags and slogans. Cries rang out of "The people want the fall of the regime", "Free and democratic Algeria" and "Civil state, not military state"—referring to the military establishment that holds sway over Algerian politics. "Neither Islamist nor secular, but Hirakist," read a banner carried by protesters, with others shouting "peaceful", underlining the non-violent nature of the movement.

"We will not go backwards," called out a group of women on the margins of the march in Algiers, before the demonstrations broke up calmly in the late afternoon. Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune - elected in Dec 2019 on a very low turnout in a poll boycotted by the protest movement - has made several bids to head off renewed rallies.

On the eve of the Hirak anniversary on Monday, he announced a limited government reshuffle and signed a decree dissolving parliament, clearing the way for early elections, though no date has yet been set. In another gesture of appeasement last week, he announced pardons that have led so far to the release of dozens of pro-democracy activists, including journalist Khaled Drareni, who has become a symbol of the struggle for a free press.

### 'Determination and commitment'

Hirak supporters were unimpressed by his call for early polls and the reshuffle, seeing the new government as little different from the one Bouteflika headed for two decades. "You have stirred in our hearts a

revolution that can only be extinguished with your departure," demonstrators chanted on Friday. For Algerian League for Human Rights vice-president Said Salhi, the new march "confirms the irreversible return and willingness to continue the Hirak with the same determination and commitment to the demands, including... a genuine change of the system."

Outside the capital, rallies were also held in the cities of Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou in the northeastern Kabylie region, as well as in eastern Bordj Bou Arreridj and northwestern Oran, where human rights activist and academic Kaddour Chouicha was arrested, according to prisoners' rights group CNLD. He was released later in the day.

Salhi said in a Facebook post nearly 500 people had been arrested across the country, of which the majority were later released. Amnesty International this week accused the Algerian authorities of a coordinated strategy to silence critics, based on an investigation it carried out on the cases of 73 activists who were "arbitrarily arrested" and prosecuted. —AFP

## Negev Bedouin: Israel's vaccine blind spot

**TEL ARAD:** Deep in the Negev desert, Bedouin residents of a village deemed illegal by Israel say more houses have been demolished than people vaccinated, despite the Jewish state's world-beating coronavirus inoculation drive. "No one is vaccinated here," said Adnan Al-Abari, a maintenance worker at the school in Tel Arad. Israel is a global leader in coronavirus vaccinations per capita, having administered both recommended jabs of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to roughly a third of its nine million citizens.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said authorities are on track to fully inoculate the entire over-16 population by the end of next month. But in the "illegal" Bedouin villages in the arid Negev desert of southern Israel, the vaccination rate is around two percent, according to official data. Tel Arad residents say they have not been visited by a single health worker since the pandemic began. But demolition orders have continued to arrive, targeting houses built without impossible-to-obtain permits. "Here there are more houses destroyed than people vaccinated by Israel," Abari said.

### 'It does not exist'

Bedouin have lived in the Negev desert for generations, but under Israeli rule have become marginalized and often live in poverty. The Jewish state's effort to transfer Bedouin to recognized towns has fuelled tensions. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel says Tel Arad, which has no electricity or running water, is just one of dozens of unrecognized Bedouin villages in the region.

"Everything that currently exists in the village is



NEGEV: A woman collects firewood in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Tel Arad, which has no electricity or running water, in the Negev desert on Feb 24, 2021. —AFP

illegal and cannot be legalized because the law alleges that it does not exist," the association said. "Residents of the unrecognized villages cannot receive building permits, and the structures in the villages are accordingly designated as 'unauthorized,'" it added.

Abari said that a neighbor's house was recently torn down, reduced to a pile of dust and twisted metal. "Look at this house," he said, pointing to a separate canary-yellow cottage he said had also received a recent demolition notice. "It will be demolished next month." The father of five told AFP that Israel had not sent "anyone to explain the (coronavirus) crisis or to help us."

Tel Arad, where goats scour the rocky hillside for blades of grass, does not have reliable Internet access, making pandemic coping strategies like remote schooling impossible. Abari said his 12-year-old son Youssef had not had a lesson in more than a year. Yet the demolitions have continued.

Patchy web access hasn't stopped anti-vaccine conspiracy theories spreading via WhatsApp, text message or word of mouth. In Tel Arad, many fear that the jab will alter their genes, make them sterile or even contain a microchip allowing Israeli security services to track their movements. —AFP

## Once ravaged by IS, Iraq's Sinjar caught in new tug-of-war

**BAGHDAD:** Nearly six years since Iraq's Sinjar region was recaptured from jihadists, a tangled web of geopolitical tensions risks sparking a new conflict that could prolong the dire situation of minority Yazidis. The Islamic State group overran Sinjar in 2014 and pursued a brutal, months-long campaign of massacres, enslavement and rape against Yazidis in what the UN has said could amount to genocide.

Sinjar is wedged between Turkey to the north and Syria to the west, making it a highly strategic zone long coveted by both the central government in Baghdad and autonomous Kurdish authorities of the north. The tensions have terrified the few Yazidis who returned to their ruined towns, only to face the specter of a new displacement.

"We're living in the middle of so many different threats," said one of them, 46-year-old Faisal Saleh. "Sinjar's people are terrified that clashes will break out," he told AFP as he drove from his hometown in Sinjar into the adjacent Kurdish region to rent an apartment in case he needed to flee an escalation.

Sinjar was retaken from IS in 2015 by fighters from the autonomous Kurdistan region's Peshmerga and from Syrian Kurdish units, backed by the US-led coalition. Iran-backed units from within the Iraqi Hashed al-Shaabi network of militias also took surrounding territory. This fractious patchwork of forces delayed Sinjar's revival: The federal government had barely any presence there and international aid groups were wary of investing.

In an effort to kick-start reconstruction and get displaced Yazidis home, the Sinjar Agreement reached in October stipulated that the only arms in the area should be those of the federal government. But it has yet to be implemented.

had no access to a phone.

"My daughter has been charged in two cases, which is a travesty in its own right. This is not normal," Taghreed Zahran, Solafa's mother and carer for the couple's son Khaled, told AFP. "I want this nightmare to end. We want to wake up and live our lives. What we're going through is surreal," she added, choking back tears.

Amnesty International has said Magdy was forced to undergo a pelvic examination which led to heavy bleeding and that she was strip-searched as well as violently beaten by prison guards. "My heart breaks for her all the

### 'Explosion at any time'

"The reality on the ground is stronger than let go of the influence they've earned there," said Yassin Tah, an analyst based in the region. "Sinjar today is a zone that brings together all the conflicting agendas and rival parties of the region. "It's in a very complicated and tense situation - and that could lead to an explosion at any time," he told AFP.

On the one hand, the autonomous Kurdish regional government (KRG) claims Sinjar is within its zone of control. The KRG is irked by the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a rival faction operating in north Iraq for decades and whose Syrian branch helped fight IS in Sinjar. The PKK's role also infuriates Ankara, which calls it a "terrorist" group for its decades-long insurgency in Turkey and has crossed into Iraq to bomb the PKK. "Turkey is watching Sinjar - and it's seeing the PKK grow more powerful there," said Tah, the analyst.

In January, Ankara upped the ante, bombing a mountainous region close to Sinjar and hinting it could invade. "We may come there overnight, all of a sudden," warned President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan's veiled threat, in turn, gave an excuse to pro-Iran Hashed factions to insist on staying in Sinjar. The Hashed swiftly announced sending new fighters to Sinjar while one of its hardline members, Asaib Ahl al-Haq said it would "block any aggressive behavior" by Turkey.

Tah said the quick mobilization was an effort to defend the Hashed's crucial smuggling route between Iraq and Syria, which crosses through Sinjar. A top Iraqi military official in Nineveh province, where Sinjar is located, even admitted the rivalries, saying Turkey, armed groups and rival Kurds were all trying to "secure their interests via Sinjar". Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi has rushed to defuse the tensions, with a top official in his office telling AFP there was ongoing contact with Turkey to try to hold off an incursion. —AFP

## Egypt detainees languish in jail with 'no end in sight'

**CAIRO:** Already faced with the prospect of spending several years in overcrowded and often violent jails, Egypt's political prisoners are often charged with crimes they

allegedly committed while behind bars. In a practice dubbed by the country's legal and activist community as "recycling" or "rotation", inmates can end up in detention indefinitely - even after a court has ordered their release.

Solafa Magdy, 33, a journalist, and her husband Hossam El-Sayed, a photojournalist, were arrested in November 2019 from a cafe in an upmarket Cairo suburb along with a mutual friend. All three were charged with joining a terror group and publishing false news. In August last year, Magdy was slapped with new charges of misusing social media while in custody, although she

time," Zahran said, bemoaning the open-ended system of pre-trial detentions that keeps people behind bars for years. "How is it that a mother enters prison and her son is seven years old, then when she's supposedly freed he'll be a teenager?"

Rights groups estimate about 60,000 political prisoners are being held in Egyptian jails, in a crackdown on dissent. Mai El-Sadany, legal director at Washington-based think-tank Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, sees the trend of extended pre-trial detention as "a punitive measure" by security forces to silence opposition. —AFP



## International

# By targeting schools, Nigerian kidnappers put country at risk

## \$11 million paid to kidnappers between January 2016 and March 2020

LAGOS, Nigeria: Jihadists in northeastern Nigeria have long outraged the world with mass abductions of schoolchildren but now armed gangs in search of income are using the same tactic in other parts of the country, sparking warnings that no school is safe. More than 300 schoolgirls were snatched from dormitories by gunmen in the middle of the night in northwestern Zamfara state on Friday, in the third known mass kidnapping of students since December. Until lately, such attacks were the hallmark of jihadists who have waged a decade-long insurgency in the northeast, and where the kidnap of 276 girls in Chibok in 2014 sparked global outrage.

But mass abductions of civilians—including schoolchildren—for ransom are now on the rise in northwest and central Nigeria. “The easiest way to get money from the government is now to kidnap schoolchildren,” warned Idayat Hassan, director of the Abuja-based Centre for Democracy and Development think tank, after the abduction of 27 students last week in Kagara in the central Niger state.

### ‘Blackmail by bandits’

“When kidnappers see they are not being sanctioned, that they are given amnesty in a grand ceremony, it becomes a good opportunity for them,” said Yan St-Pierre, consultant with the Berlin-based Modern Security Consulting Group. He referred to the case of a gang leader behind the kidnapping of more than 300 schoolboys in northwestern Katsina state in December. He gave himself up, with officials

saying they had struck an amnesty deal and denying a ransom was paid. But “whatever the government says”, St-Pierre argued, “ransoms are paid, whether it is by families of victims or the authorities”. “The government wants to avoid a second Chibok and so they do everything they can to facilitate the release of those kidnapped.”

President Muhammadu Buhari insisted in a statement on Friday that the government would not “succumb to blackmail by bandits... in the expectations of huge ransom payments”. One of the problems is that there is a lack of coherent strategy, said Nnamdi Obasi, Senior Analyst for Nigeria for the International Crisis Group (ICG). “The president talks about crushing armed groups but then some governors call for dialogue and amnesty,” he said. Another problem is that kidnapping for ransom is already a widespread national problem, with businessmen, officials and ordinary citizens snatched from the streets by criminals hunting for ransom money.

At least \$11 million was paid to kidnappers between January 2016 and March 2020, according to SB Morgen, a Lagos-based geopolitical research consultancy. Organized gangs in the northwest could be receiving kidnap money from other parts of the country, Obasi said, enabling them to purchase weapons and vehicles to stage large-scale attacks and mass kidnappings.

### Jihadist infiltration

Northwestern Nigeria has been wracked by years



CHIBOK, Nigeria: In this file photo taken on April 12, 2019 Musa Maina holds a picture of her kidnapped daughter, Hauwa, in Chibok. — AFP

of insecurity involving armed groups from rival communities who clash over land and resources. “No one has an accurate count of these groups,” Obasi said, but they “have grown in numerical strength”. Another key factor to the groups’ increased capabilities has been the “availability and cross-border flow of arms from Libya and other countries experiencing violence”, analyst Chitra Nagarajan pointed out.

The Nigerian military deployed to the area in

2016 and a peace deal with bandits was signed in 2019 but attacks have continued. Security analysts have further warned of possible infiltration by jihadists from the northeast-Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province. While links between jihadists and the northwest remain uncertain, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau said his group were behind the abduction of 334 students from a school in Katsina state in December. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Colombia launches ‘elite force’

BOGOTA, Colombia: Colombia on Friday launched a 7,000-strong elite force to fight rebels financed by drug trafficking and other illegal activities, and which allegedly operate across borders. Surrounded by helicopters, tanks and hundreds of soldiers at the Tolima military base in central Colombia, President Ivan Duque described the launch as “historic”. The force, he said, will be tasked with “subduing, beating and subjecting the structures of drug trafficking and the... threats linked to the illegal exploitation of minerals, trafficking of species, of persons and, of course, to any transnational form of terrorism.” —AFP

#### New York mayor demands inquiry

NEW YORK: New York City’s mayor on Thursday joined a growing chorus of politicians calling for an investigation into sexual harassment allegations made against Governor Andrew Cuomo. Lindsey Boylan, a former aide to Cuomo, accused the governor of sexually harassing her when she worked for his administration from 2015 to 2018 in a blog post published Wednesday. She says Cuomo kissed her on the mouth without consent, suggested they played strip poker during a flight and went “out of his way to touch me on my lower back, arms and legs.” Cuomo’s office said in a statement that Boylan’s “claims of inappropriate behavior are quite simply false.” —AFP

#### Call to stop demolitions

UNITED NATIONS: The United Nations and European members of the Security Council on Friday called on Israel to stop demolitions of Bedouin settlements in the Jordan Valley, and for humanitarian access to the community living in Humsa Al-Baqia. In a joint statement at the end of a monthly session of the Security Council on the conflict in the Middle East, Estonia, France, Ireland, Norway and Britain said they were “deeply concerned at the recent repeated demolitions and confiscation of items, including of EU and donor funded structures carried out by Israeli authorities at Humsa Al-Baqia in the Jordan Valley.” —AFP

#### Trump will seek revenge

WASHINGTON: Former US president Donald Trump has signaled he will seek revenge on fellow Republicans who voted to impeach him last month, and he followed through Friday, endorsing an ex-aide against an Ohio congressman. Trump threw his “complete and total” support behind Max Miller, a 2020 deputy campaign manager and White House advisor challenging Representative Anthony Gonzalez, one of 10 Republicans who voted to impeach Trump after the deadly January 6 riot at the US Capitol. —AFP

#### 60 fighters killed in Marib clashes

ABU DHABI: More than 60 fighters were killed in clashes in Yemen Friday between Iran-backed Houthi rebels and government forces in the strategic northern province of Marib, government sources said. Earlier this month, the Houthis resumed a push to capture Marib city, 120 kilometers east of the rebel-held capital Sanaa. The city lies close to some of Yemen’s richest oil fields and its capture would be a major prize for the rebels. Friday’s dead included at least 27 pro-government forces and 34 Houthi rebels, a government source told AFP, adding it was the “most violent” day of clashes since fighting erupted on February 8. —AFP

## Prince Harry: British press were ‘destroying my mental health’

NEW YORK: Britain’s Prince Harry said in a rare one-on-one interview that he left royal life because the British press was “destroying” his mental health, and revealed he watches “The Crown.” Harry gave an intimate insight into his young family’s new life in Los Angeles during an open-top bus tour of the city with “The Late Late Show” host James Corden. “We all know what the British press can be like, and it was destroying my mental health,” said Harry, who relocated to the United States with wife Meghan Markle last year. “I was, like, this is toxic. So I did what any husband and what any father would do. I need to get my family out of here.”

Harry and Markle’s shock announcement in January 2020 that they were stepping back from royal duties rocked Britain’s royal family, with British newspapers dubbing it “Mexit.” Earlier this month,

Buckingham Palace announced that the couple had permanently quit royal duties following a one-year review of the new arrangement. Queen Elizabeth II ordered the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, as they are formally known, to relinquish their honorary titles and patronages. “It was never walking away,” Harry, 36, told Corden. “It was stepping back rather than stepping down. It was a really difficult environment.”

Harry has long had a difficult relationship with Britain’s tabloids, blaming press intrusion for contributing to his mother Princess Diana’s death in a car crash in 1997. Earlier this month, Markle won a high-profile privacy claim against Associated Newspapers for publishing a private letter that she wrote to her estranged father. Harry said he was “more comfortable” with the portrayal of the royal family in the hit Netflix series “The Crown” than he is with newspaper stories written



LONDON: In this file photo (From left) Britain’s Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, Britain’s Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II, Britain’s Meghan, Duchess of Sussex and Britain’s Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, stand on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to watch a military fly-past to mark the centenary of the Royal Air Force (RAF). — AFP

about him and his family. “They don’t pretend to be news. It’s fictional,” Harry said of the show.

“It’s loosely based on the truth. Of course, it’s not strictly accurate, but it gives you a rough idea about what that lifestyle, what the pressures of putting duty and service above family and everything else, what can come from that,” Harry, who remains sixth in line

to the throne, revealed that he would like to see actor Damian Lewis play him in future series. The prince admitted during the relaxed chat that it was the first time he had ever been on an open-top bus. Harry and Corden visited the house from hit 1990s US TV series “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.” They voice-called Markle, who referred to Harry as “Haz.” —AFP

## Hunger drives displaced Mozambicans to risk going home for food

PEMBA, Mozambique: Brutal jihadist violence forced them to flee their homes, but now hunger has driven some in Mozambique to risk their lives by sneaking back to their old residences to gather food or even resume farming. Nearly 670,000 people have been displaced by an extremist insurgency that has raged for three years in northern Mozambique. Some have moved in with host families, some are living in temporary shelters, while others have resettled in newly-created safe villages. But a critical lack of food has led to a brave few returning to their old homes to forage for whatever they can. Lal Dady said that one day he left his new home in the Metuge resettlement camp to scour his granaries in Quissanga, a district in Cabo Delgado province where the Islamists are waging their bloody campaign.

“I got chestnuts and other food products to feed my family,” said the 22-year-old father of one. Some are even more daring. Mussa Cesar, 43, confessed that he goes back to Quissanga—an eight-hour walk-to work on his old farmland. “I have been going to Quissanga for my field. I stay there around three days, cultivating and then come back,” he said, sitting under a tree and playing a traditional draughts game with friends. “And I bring back manioc for my family here,” he said. “We just don’t do the fishing, because we are afraid.”

## Eritrean troops killed ‘hundreds’ in Ethiopia massacre: Amnesty

NAIROBI, Kenya: Eritrean soldiers fighting across the border in Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region killed hundreds of civilians in a massacre in a likely crime against humanity, Amnesty International said Friday. The rights watchdog spoke to survivors of the atrocities and used satellite images to piece together bloody events that unfolded last November in the ancient town of Axum, a UNESCO World Heritage site. “The evidence is compelling and points to a chilling conclusion. Ethiopian and Eritrean troops carried out multiple war crimes in their offensive to



PAQUITEQUETE, Mozambique: Adolescents look on in Paquitequete, a neighborhood of Pemba City where thousands of people have been displaced in the last year as a result of attacks by armed forces. —AFP

take control of Axum,” said Amnesty’s Deprose Muchena. “Above and beyond that, Eritrean troops went on a rampage and systematically killed hundreds of civilians in cold blood, which appears to constitute crimes against humanity.”

UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet said she was concerned “by reports indicating the participation of Eritrean troops in the conflict in Tigray alongside the Ethiopian army, and allegations of their implication in cases of serious human rights violations.” But Eritrean Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel attacked Amnesty for what it called “a fallacious report.” “Eritrea is outraged and categorically rejects the preposterous accusations leveled against it,” he said on Twitter. Tigray has been the theatre of fighting since early November 2020, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced military operations against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), accusing them of attacking federal army camps.

He declared victory after pro-government troops took the regional capital Mekele in late November, although the TPLF vowed to fight on, and clashes have persisted in the region. The presence of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia in the Tigray conflict has been widely documented but has been denied by both countries. Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a brutal border war in 1998-2000, back when the TPLF dominated the government in Addis Ababa. Tensions eased after Abiy initiating a rapprochement, a policy that helped him to win the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, but Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and the TPLF remain bitter enemies. Amnesty said it had spoken to 41 survivors and witnesses who said that on November 19, Ethiopian and Eritrean military forces took control of Axum “in a large-scale offensive, killing and displacing civilians with indiscriminate shelling and shooting.” —AFP



## International

# Myanmar police fire rubber bullets on protesters as UN envoy breaks ranks

## 20 protesters arrested, three journalists detained

**YANGON:** Myanmar police fired rubber bullets to disperse protesters in Yangon yesterday, after the country's ambassador to the United Nations broke ranks to make an emotional plea for action against the military junta. The country has been shaken by a wave of protests since a coup toppled civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1. Authorities have ramped up the use of force to suppress dissent, deploying tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets to disperse some protests. Live rounds have been used in isolated cases.

In Myanmar's biggest city Yangon yesterday, police used rubber bullets to disperse a demonstration at Myaynigone junction, the site of an hours-long standoff the day before. "What are the police doing? They are protecting a crazy dictator," the protesters chanted as they were chased away by the police. Hundreds of ethnic Mon protesters had gathered there to commemorate Mon National Day and protest the coup, joined by other minority groups. They scattered into residential streets and started building makeshift barricades out of barbed wire and tables to stop the police. Many wore hard hats and gas masks, wielding homemade shields for protection.

At least 20 protesters were arrested, a police official confirmed. Local reporters broadcast the chaotic scenes live on Facebook, including the moments when the shots rang out, which AFP reporters on the ground also witnessed. "We will try to find another way to protest-of course, we are afraid of their crackdown," said protester Moe Moe, 23, who used a pseudonym. "We want to fight until we win." At least three journalists were among those detained, including an Associated Press photographer, a video journalist from Myanmar Now, and a photographer from the Myanmar Pressphoto Agency.

At nearby Hledan junction several rounds of stun grenades were fired, according to AFP reporters, and a police source said more than 140 people had been arrested. Another protest near a shopping center in nearby Tamwe Township was broken up

by police. "I don't know where she is taken," said Aye Myint Kyi, a distraught mother of one shopper, adding that she reached her daughter briefly on the phone. "She answered she was being taken," she told AFP, crying. "The police don't answer anything too... she was unjustly arrested."

### 'This revolution must win'

Similar scenes of chaos played out across Myanmar as demonstrators entered their fourth week of daily protests against the junta. In the central city of Monywa a rally had barely started before police moved in on demonstrators, said a medic with a local emergency rescue team. Medic Htwe Aung Zin said his team had been "sent a man who was severely injured in his leg from the police crackdown," adding that they treated 10 others with minor injuries. He declined to say what kind of bullets caused the man's injury. Another medic—who did not give their name—told AFP that a woman had been sent to the intensive care unit after sustaining injuries during the crackdown. Local media Monywa Gazette also announced on its official Facebook that CEO Kyaw Kyaw Win was beaten by plainclothes police and arrested while he was broadcasting a live video.

The crackdowns came after Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations broke ranks and made an emotional plea Friday to the international community. "We need... the strongest possible action from the international community to immediately end the military coup, to stop oppressing the innocent people, to return the state power to the people, and to restore the democracy," Kyaw Moe Tun told the UN General Assembly. Briefly speaking in Burmese, he pleaded with his "brothers and sisters" to keep fighting to end military rule. "This revolution must win," he said, flashing the three-finger salute that has become a symbol of resistance against the junta. His appeal broke with the current rulers of Myanmar and was met with applause in the chamber.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia, the former colonial power and PNG's biggest aid donor, lamented the loss of "a towering figure in the history of Papua New Guinea".

"He was a vital partner who staunchly defended Papua New Guinea's independence, but always appreciated Australia's unstinting commitment to his country," he said. Somare's passing represents the end of an era for the staggeringly diverse nation, which has more than 800 languages and a myriad of tribal groups and struggles with some of the highest levels of poverty in the Asia-Pacific region. "He's been a major figure, he's an iconic figure in Papua New Guinea politics," Sinclair Dinnen, a Pacific expert from the Australian National University in Canberra told AFP. "He has a status that nobody else has. He is seen as the father of independence. Some would attribute his influence to having held this very difficult country together over the post-independence period."

### Father of the nation

Bright, educated and articulate, Somare was marked from the beginning of his political career as someone to watch, emerging as a leader of a new generation that would take power after the country won independence. Born to a policeman and his wife in Rabaul on April 9, 1936, Somare grew up in a village in East Sepik, where he is expected to be laid to rest in the coming days.

Facebook the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

The 53-year-old, a crocodile farmer and a writer known for his satirical style, was charged with spreading rumors and conducting "anti-state activities". Protesters have called his death a "custodial murder" after he was denied bail six times in 10 months. "Mushtaq Ahmed's death was not a normal death. We'll say it was a murder," said Manisha Chakraborty, a protester with a left wing group. Demonstrators were set to march to the office of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina carrying a coffin later yesterday.

Facing international questions on the case, authorities have ordered a probe into Ahmed's death, senior government official S.M. Tarikul Islam told AFP. "We formed a committee to probe whether there was negligence by jail officials or procedures in his treatment," Islam said. Thirteen ambassadors from countries including the United States, France, Britain, Canada and Germany have expressed "grave concern". "We call on the government of Bangladesh to conduct a swift, transparent and independent inquiry into the full circumstances of Mr Mushtaq Ahmed's death," the ambassadors said in a statement released late Friday.

They said their countries would be following up over "wider concerns about the provisions and implementation of the DSA, as well as questions

after himself," the tweet said. The post prompted an angry backlash in India, where people mistook the Twitter account with that of another Tom Holland—the 24-year-old British star of the "Spider-Man" series of Marvel movies—whose handle is @TomHolland1996. Soon the hashtag #BoycottSpiderMan started trending in the country of 1.3 billion people.

"This is India's internal matter. We will teach you a lesson of lifetime. #boycottspiderman," said one user in response to the historian's tweet. "You conspirator, conspiring against global leader (Modi). You just wait, Delhi police is coming for you," said another. The actor has been active on Twitter this week, teasing fans with possible titles for the newest film in the series. The #BoycottSpiderMan hashtag then gained further traction as Twitter users mocked others for



YANGON: Police charge on protesters as they crack down on demonstrations against the military coup in Yangon yesterday. —AFP

### Mass arrests

The junta has justified its seizure of power by alleging widespread electoral fraud in the November elections, which Suu Kyi's party won in a landslide, and promised fresh polls in a year. Army chief General Min Aung Hlaing now holds unchecked power in Myanmar—effectively halting the country's 10-year experiment with democracy. Suu Kyi, who has not been publicly seen since she was detained, now faces two charges for having unregistered walkie-talkies in her residence and breaking coronavirus rules.

While the Nobel laureate is expected to have a hearing on Monday, her lawyer has still not been able to make contact with her. More than 770 people have been arrested, charged and sentenced since the coup, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group, with some 680 still behind bars. At least five people have been killed since the putsch—four of them from injuries sustained at anti-coup demonstrations that saw security forces open fire on protesters. The military has said one police officer has died while attempting to quell a protest.—AFP

## PNG 'father of the nation' Somare dies at 84

**PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea:** Papua New Guinea's first prime minister and "father of the nation" Sir Michael Somare died on Friday after what his family described as a brief battle with cancer. He was 84. Known across the country simply as "The Chief", Somare led Papua New Guinea at independence from Australia in 1975 and was prime minister for a total of 17 years, during three separate terms. "Our nation honors this Great Leader," Prime Minister James Marape said in a statement, calling for "a week of silence, peace and calm" to pay respect to "this one person whom our country owes much". "He is unmatched by anyone of us who comes after him."

Somare was only diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in early February and was admitted to hospital a week ago, his daughter Betha Somare said in a statement. For decades, Somare was the dominant political figure in the mountainous island nation and his death is expected to unleash an emotional outpouring. He only stepped back from politics in 2017, after 49 years as a member of parliament.

## Anger brews over prison death of Bangladesh writer

**DHAKA, Bangladesh:** Hundreds of people in Bangladesh took part yesterday in a second day of demonstrations sparked by the death of a writer at a high security prison in a case that has drawn international concern. Protesters marched at the University of Dhaka chanting slogans condemning the government's treatment of Mushtaq Ahmed as well as other dissident writers, journalists and activists. Another protest was staged at the National Press Club.

Demonstrators demanded the scrapping of Bangladesh's hardline Digital Security Act (DSA) under which Ahmed was imprisoned. The law has been used to crack down on dissent since it was enacted in 2018. Security forces clashed with students in Dhaka on Friday night. Police said six people were arrested while activists said at least 30 were injured. Ahmed collapsed and died at Kashimpur High Security Prison late Thursday. He was first detained in May after criticizing on

## Spider-Man star caught in Indian Twitter storm mix-up

**NEW DELHI:** "Spider-Man" star Tom Holland was grappling with an angry Twitter storm in India on Friday in a case of mistaken cyber identity. A historian with the Twitter handle @holland\_tom tweeted a post mocking Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday after a huge cricket stadium was renamed after him. "I'm a huge admirer of the modesty Modi showed in naming the world's largest cricket stadium



OSLO: In this file photo Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare addresses the Climate and Forest Conference in Oslo. —AFP

A talented student, he became a school teacher and later a state radio broadcaster before moving into politics. Mixing with like-minded activists in Port Moresby while studying at Administrative College, Somare helped found the nationalistic Papua New Guinea Union Party (PANGU) in 1967 before winning election to parliament in 1968. After several years as opposition leader, he became chief minister in 1972 after forming a coalition government with Julius Chan, and later prime minister in 1975.—AFP



DHAKA: Activists hold placards during a demonstration demanding the repeal of the Digital Security Act, in Dhaka yesterday following the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed in jail. —AFP

about its compatibility with Bangladesh's obligations under international human rights laws and standards." Rights groups have also raised concerns about the case. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called for "a swift, transparent and independent investigation", while PEN America said authorities should drop charges against Kabir Kishore, a cartoonist who was detained along with Ahmed.—AFP

their misdirected vitriol.

Historian Holland later apologized, tweeting: "Oh dear—I seem single-handedly to have destroyed prospects for the next Spider-Man in India." "I should have remembered that with great power comes great responsibility," he said, echoing a famous Spider-Man quote. Tongue-in-cheek, he added: "Just for the record, & to save Marvel's profits in India, I freely acknowledge that Narendra Modi is a man of immense humility, and that his naming the world's largest cricket stadium after himself is in no way quite hilariously immodest." The stadium in Ahmedabad in Gujarat state was renamed on Wednesday from Motera to Narendra Modi. The 110,000-seat venue was the pet project of Modi who was the state's chief minister before becoming India's prime minister in 2014.—AFP

### News in brief

#### Bangladesh vaccinates sex workers

**DHAKA, Bangladesh:** Bangladesh has begun administering coronavirus vaccines to sex workers from the country's largest brothel, a vast warren of shacks home to around 1,900 prostitutes. The South Asian nation has so far vaccinated nearly three million people aged 40 or above with the AstraZeneca jab, but has scrapped the age restriction for sex workers at the town of Daulatdia in the country's west. "At least 100 sex workers have already got the anti-COVID-19 jabs," Asif Mahmud, health chief in Daulatdia, told AFP.—AFP

#### Haiti prison breakout leaves 25 dead

**PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti:** More than 200 prisoners were on the run in Haiti on Friday, a day after they escaped from jail in a violent breakout that left 25 people dead including the prison director, officials said. About 400 inmates fled on Thursday, with AFP photographs showing at least three dead bodies lying outside the prison and some captured prisoners under armed guard in the back of a truck. "Twenty-five people died including six prisoners and Divisional Inspector Paul Hector Joseph who was in charge of the prison," Secretary of Communication Frantz Exantus said of the mass escape from the jail in the suburbs of capital Port-au-Prince.—AFP

#### India, China discuss troop pullback

**NEW DELHI:** India and China's foreign ministers have discussed further de-escalating tensions at a disputed border after a pullback of troops in response to a deadly clash last year, New Delhi and Beijing said Friday. The nuclear-armed neighbors fought a border war in 1962 and last June their worst skirmish in decades left 20 Indian troops and four Chinese dead on the inhospitable frontier between Ladakh and Tibet, the Line of Actual Control. Both sides have sent thousands of extra troops and military hardware to the area since the clash. But India said the two countries had completed a "disengagement" of troops and tanks from one part of the disputed zone around the high-altitude Pangong Tso lake, following nine rounds of military talks.—AFP

#### Sri Lanka ends forced cremations

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka on Friday ended forced cremations of people who have died of coronavirus, after visiting Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan urged Colombo to respect the funeral rites of the island's minority Muslims. The government first banned burials in April over concerns—which experts said were baseless—by influential Buddhist monks that the practice could contaminate groundwater and spread the virus. The policy was decreed by members of the South Asian nation's Muslim community who constitute 10 percent of the 21 million population.—AFP

#### Auckland back in lockdown

**WELLINGTON, New Zealand:** Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern ordered New Zealand's largest city back into lockdown yesterday as COVID-19 cases continued to be detected in the community. The latest restrictions in Auckland will last at least seven days and come less than two weeks after a three-day shutdown in the city. Ardern said a new coronavirus case confirmed yesterday could not be directly connected to other positive tests over the last two weeks, although a school in South Auckland was a common link. From today morning the city's 1.7 million residents must stay at home except for essential shopping and work. Schools and non-essential shops will close, and entry in and out of the city will be restricted.—AFP



# Business

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2021

## \$1.9tn COVID plan clears US House

### American incomes surge in January due to pandemic aid

WASHINGTON: The US House passed an enormous, \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package early yesterday, hailed by Democrats as a critical step in funneling new funding toward vaccinations, overburdened local governments, and millions of families devastated by the pandemic. Four days after the Covid-19 death toll surpassed 500,000 in the United States, the sprawling measure backed by President Joe Biden and seen as a moral imperative by many now heads to the Senate for consideration next week.

"After 12 months of death and despair, the American recovery begins tonight," congressman Brendan Boyle told the House chamber shortly before lawmakers approved the package on an rare post-midnight vote of 219 to 212. No Republicans voted for the bill. The sharply partisan result comes weeks after Biden's Jan 20 inauguration, when he called for unity in the face of a once-in-a-century health crisis.

The package cleared the House despite a major setback for Democrats, when a key Senate official ruled Thursday that the final version of the bill cannot include a minimum wage hike. Biden had campaigned extensively on raising the national minimum wage to \$15 an hour, from a rate of \$7.25 that has stood since 2009.

He aimed to include it in the rescue plan, which directly provides \$1,400 checks to most Americans and allots billions of dollars to boost vaccine delivery, help schools re-open and fund state and local governments. It extends unemployment benefits, set to expire mid-March, by about six months, as well as a moratorium on evictions for millions of people struggling to pay rent.

The bill is on track to be the second largest US stimulus ever, after the \$2 trillion package Donald Trump signed last March to fight the pandemic's devastating spread. Even as the Senate parliamentarian ruled against including the minimum wage language in the bill as written under budget reconciliation rules,

Democrats kept the provision, highlighting their "fight for 15" as a top party priority.

"We will not rest until we pass the \$15 minimum wage," Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said. Even without the wage hike, she said the bill was critical and it would be "catastrophic" if it does not become law. "The American people need to know that their government is there for them," she told the chamber. "As President Biden has said, help is on the way."

#### 'Dead of night'

Republicans fumed over the bill's historically high cost - and the optics of holding such a consequential vote in predawn hours. "Democrats are so embarrassed by all the non-COVID waste in this bill that they are jamming it through in the dead of night," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said. The measure is "bloated," partisan and "unfocused", with the majority of funding going to projects not directly related to fighting the pandemic, McCarthy said.

He and fellow Republicans accused Democrats of using a pandemic to push forward a liberal wish list. The package "just throws out money without accountability", McCarthy added. Over in the 100-member Senate, the rules of so-called reconciliation relate to budgetary bills that are allowed to bypass Republican filibuster efforts and pass with just a simple majority, rather than the typical 60 votes.

The parliamentarian concluded that the wage hike does not meet the standard, and since there is no Republican support for the bill in the evenly split Senate, the measure will be taken out in order for COVID relief to pass. Progressives like Senator Bernie Sanders cried foul, insisting that the "archaic and undemocratic" rules prevent Congress from passing much-needed legislation sought by a majority of Americans. Biden however made clear through a spokesperson that he respects the decision but "urges Congress to move quickly to pass the



WASHINGTON: Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi speaks during a press conference with other House Democratic leaders about COVID-19 financial relief and minimum wage on Capitol Hill on Friday. — AFP

American Rescue Plan," and would work with lawmakers to get it over the finish line.

Meanwhile, an injection of pandemic aid filled Americans' wallets last month, though spending rose modestly, according to government data released Friday, giving a boost to the economy as it claws its way back from recession. A key inflation measure in the data showed prices also are starting to bounce back from the depths of the crisis, which could add to investor's fears about rising borrowing costs amid the recovery.

The \$900 billion COVID-19 stimulus package approved in late December sent \$600 checks to

nearly all US workers and extended extra unemployment payments for those who lost their jobs. As the checks started to roll in, personal incomes surged by 10 percent - the second biggest increase on record since the start of this data report began in 1959 - the Commerce Department said. "The increase in personal income in January was more than accounted for by an increase in government social benefits to persons as payments were made to individuals from federal COVID-19 pandemic response programs," the report said. "Unemployment insurance also increased, reflecting an increase in pandemic unemployment compensation." — AFP

## India exits recession with 0.4% Q4 growth

NEW DELHI: India's economy grew 0.4 percent year-on-year in the final quarter of 2020, official data showed Friday, ending its first recession since independence as easing coronavirus restrictions sparked a modest recovery. The country has struggled to claw back lost ground after a stringent, months-long lockdown caused the labor market to collapse and the economy to contract by nearly a quarter between April and June.

India entered a "technical recession" last year for the first time since gaining independence in 1947 after registering two successive quarters of contraction. The government now estimates annual GDP will fall eight percent in 2020-21. The latest figures, which fell shy of the expectations of a Bloomberg survey of economists pegging growth at 0.5 percent, will nonetheless bring some cheer to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's beleaguered government.

Key sectors such as construction and manufacturing showed an improvement compared to the same quarter last year,



AMRITSAR: A craftsman makes chairs along the roadside yesterday. — AFP

Friday's data revealed. And in January, car sales in the bellwether automobile sector increased by more than 11 percent compared to a year earlier, according to industry figures. Restrictions have been relaxed as coronavirus infections have slowed in the country of 1.3 billion in recent weeks, allowing economic activity to resume.

But the government still faces the tough task of creating enough jobs for India's overwhelmingly young population, as millions of migrant workers make their way

back to cities, reversing a massive exodus sparked by the lockdown.

"We can't say we are completely out of the woods," Mumbai-based economist Ashutosh Datar told AFP. "The real test would be what happens next financial year. Today's number is not a major surprise." The government has forecast economic growth of 11 percent in the 2021-22 financial year, in line with the International Monetary Fund's prediction of 11.5 percent. — AFP

## Birkenstock steps into big league with new luxury owners

BERLIN: Germany's unabashedly frumpy but comfortable flat sandal maker Birkenstock stepped into the luxury league on Friday, with an LVMH-backed company and the French group's billionaire owner snapping up the iconic brand. No details were given about the sum paid by LVMH-linked equity firm L Catterton and Bernard Arnault's family holding fund Financiere Agache, but analysts have put the price tag at around \$4.9 billion (\$4.9 billion).

"For the next 250 years we need partners sharing the same strategic and long-term vision as the Birkenstock family," brothers Christian and Alex Birkenstock said in a statement. The new co-owners "bring both a deep understanding of the details of a manufacturing business that is all about quality and a respect for brands with a long heritage like ours," said the two brothers, who will retain a stake in the company.

The ownership switch marks a water-



BERLIN: The logo of the German sandals and shoes maker Birkenstock is pictured on a window at the company's store on Friday. — AFP

shed for the company which was founded in 1774 to make orthopedic shoes. By 1897, Konrad Birkenstock had made the first flexible sole fitting the contours of the feet. The company remained in family hands and the flat sandals were given an international boost when they were brought to the United States in the 1960s. They were quickly adopted by hippies who took to their no-frills comfort but also saw their utilitarian look as an anti-fashion badge.

But it was when supermodel Kate Moss donned them for a fashion shoot in

1990s that ended the 'unfashionable' association of the brand with sock-and-sandal wearing Germans. Soon, the wide-strapped sandals with cork and latex soles became standard footwear for Hollywood stars. And brands from Paco Rabanne and Valentino to Celine have customized their versions of Birkenstocks, even putting them on runways. Actress Frances McDormand padded on stage at the Oscars in Feb 2019 in a yellow pair - vindicating the idea that footwear does not need to be painful to be glamorous. — AFP

## I choose you! Pokemon turns 25

TOKYO: Twenty-five years after Pokemon first began delighting children and adults alike, the phenomenon is still capturing hearts, with smartphone craze Pokemon Go enjoying record success in virus-hit 2020. The augmented-reality game raked in \$1 billion in just the first 10 months of last year - its most lucrative yet - according to market tracker Sensor Tower, and experts see no sign that interest is flagging as the world's highest-grossing media franchise evolves.

"The characters themselves are so appealing, and the mechanics of the actual video and card games are so well executed that it has this very timeless quality," said Brian Ashcraft, an author who writes about Japanese pop culture. Dan Ryan, a 29-year-old who works in London's finance sector, has been a fan nearly his whole life and is not shy about his hobby, even with colleagues.

"They know I disappear every Thursday to go and play Pokemon cards, they see me come in with my Pikachu jacket, and they see my Pokemon mugs," he told AFP. He admits he spends "too much money" on rare Pokemon cards, whose prices have boomed as virus lockdowns push people towards indoor pursuits, with some in mint condition going for over \$500,000 in recent weeks.

Pokemon is inspired by the childhood tradition of collecting bugs - popular during Japan's hot and humid summer holidays - and part of its enduring appeal is its simple goal: To

catch them all. Hundreds of round-eyed "pocket monsters" inspired by everything from mice to dragons can be caught and trained to full strength in battles. The winning concept has sold countless toys, film tickets and more than 30 billion Pokemon cards since the first black-and-white Game Boy titles were released in Japan in 1996.

#### 'Pika-pika'

Atsuko Nishida, who designed the electric mouse Pikachu, once said she modelled it on a round Japanese sweet called a daifuku. Her fellow designers, who had asked Nishida to draw a cute monster, liked the creature and urged her to make it even more adorable. "I thought it would be nice to have it store electricity in its cheek pouches. At the time I was really into squirrels, (which) store food in their cheeks," she told a Japanese newspaper.

The character's signature pronunciation "pika-pika" - meaning shiny and sparkly in Japanese - only added to the bright yellow creature's powers of attraction. For ZoeTwoDots, a Pokemon Go vlogger and livestreamer with nearly 200,000 YouTube subscribers, a childhood obsession has become her full-time job. The 27-year-old Australian finds other fans mostly supportive, "which I think is incredibly rare, especially because gaming has that toxic stereotype".

Her favorite Pokemon? "Togepi. It's just a happy little egg. It's quite literally, nothing can bother this." The game's nature imagery, varied characters and focus on building a collection are central to its success, said Jason Bainbridge, executive dean of the University of Canberra's arts and design faculty, who has written extensively about Pokemon. But there have also been controversies along the way. — AFP



YOKOHAMA: In this file photo taken on Aug 7, 2016, performers dressed as Pikachu, the popular animation Pokemon series character, perform in the Pikachu parade. — AFP



## Business

# Hi, Robot: Japan android pets ease virus isolation

## 'More chatty than a pet, but less work than a lover'

**TOKYO:** Nami Hamaura says she feels less lonely working from home thanks to her singing companion Charlie, one of a new generation of cute and clever Japanese robots whose sales are booming in the pandemic. Smart home assistants such as Amazon's Alexa have found success worldwide, but tech firms in Japan are reporting huge demand for more humanlike alternatives, as people seek solace during coronavirus isolation.

"I felt my circle became very small," said 23-year-old Hamaura, a recent graduate who has worked almost entirely remotely since April 2020. With socializing limited, life in her first job at a Tokyo trading company was nothing like she had imagined. So she adopted Charlie, a mug-sized robot with a round head, red nose and flashing bowtie, who converses with its owner in song.

Yamaha, which makes Charlie, describes it as "more chatty than a pet, but less work than a lover". "He is there for me to chat with as someone other than family, or friends on social networks, or a boss I needed to produce a report for," Hamaura told AFP. She is a pre-launch test customer for Charlie, which Yamaha plans to release later this year. "Charlie, tell me something interesting," she asks while typing at her dining table. "Well, well... balloons burst when you spray lemon juice!" he replies, cheerfully tilting his head to each side.

### 'Every object has a soul'

Sharp said sales of its small humanoid Robohon were up 30 percent in the three months to September 2020 compared with a year earlier. "Not only families with children, but also seniors in their 60s and 70s" are snapping up Robohon, which talks,



**TOKYO:** In this picture taken on Feb 4, 2021 communication robot Charlie is pictured in Nami Hamaura's apartment.

dances and is also a working phone, a Sharp spokesman told AFP. But the adorable android - first released in 2016 and only available in Japan - does not come cheap, with regular models priced between \$820 and \$2,250.

Charlie and Robohon are part of a new wave of robot companions pioneered by firms such as Sony with its robot dog Aibo, on sale since 1999, and SoftBank's friendly Pepper, which hit shelves in 2015. "Many Japanese people accept the idea that every object has a soul," said Shunsuke Aoki, CEO of robot firm Yukai Engineering. "They want a robot to have a character, like a friend, family or a pet - not a mechanical function like a dishwasher."

Yukai's robots include Qoobo, a fluffy pillow with a mechanical tail that wiggles like a real pet. They will soon release their latest home assistant "Bocco emo",



**KAWASAKI:** Diners interact with Lovot robots in a cafe on Dec 20, 2020. — AFP photos

which looks like a miniature snowman and allows families to leave and send voice messages through their phones. Kaori Takahashi, 32, bought a Yukai robot-building kit for her six-year-old son to keep him occupied during the pandemic.

Robots feel normal in everyday life because they are in so many Japanese children's films and cartoons, she said. "I grew up watching anime shows 'The Astro Boy Essays' and 'Doraemon', which both feature robots, and my children love them too."

### 'Heartwarming feeling'

Studies have shown that therapeutic robot pets designed in Japan, such as fluffy mechanical seals, can bring comfort to dementia patients. But the makers of Lovot - a robot the size of a small toddler, with big round eyes and penguin-like wings that



**TOKYO:** Shunsuke Aoki, CEO of Yukai Engineering, hugs robotic cushion Qoobo at a studio on Dec 8, 2020.

flutter up and down - think everyone can benefit from a bot that just wants to be loved. It has more than 50 sensors and an internal heating system, making it warm to touch, which it reacts to with squeaks of joy.

Manufacturer Groove X said monthly sales shot up more than tenfold after the coronavirus hit Japan. A single Lovot costs around \$2,800, plus fees for maintenance and software - but those without deep pockets can visit the "Lovot Cafe" near Tokyo instead. One customer there, 64-year-old Yoshiko Nakagawa, called out to one of the robots fondly by name, as if to a grandson. During Japan's virus state of emergency, the capital became "stark and empty", she said. "We need time to heal ourselves after this bleak period. If I had one of these babies at home, the heartwarming feeling would probably do the trick." — AFP

## Self-made S Korean billionaires promise to give half away

**SEOUL:** Two self-made South Korean billionaires have pledged in as many weeks to give away half their fortunes - a rarity in a country where business is dominated by family-controlled conglomerates and charity often begins and ends at home. Kim Beom-su, the founder of South Korea's biggest messaging app KakaoTalk, announced this month he will donate more than half his estimated \$9.6 billion assets to try to "solve social issues".

Shortly afterwards, Kim Bong-jin of food-delivery app Woowa Brothers and his wife, Bomi Sul, became the first South Koreans to sign the Giving Pledge. The philanthropic initiative was set up by Bill and Melinda Gates, alongside Warren Buffett, for billionaires to give away at least half their wealth. Both Kims contrast with most of South Korea's ultra-wealthy, who are largely descendants of the founders of the chaebol, the sprawling, usually family-run conglomerates that powered the country's post-war boom and still dominate the economy.

Unlike the chaebol heirs who inherited their wealth, power and connections, the two Kims were born to working-class families. In his Giving Pledge statement, Kim of Woowa Brothers described his "humble beginning" on a small island. His parents ran a small restaurant, where he slept at night, and as a teenager he gave up his dream of attending an art high school, enrolling instead in a cheaper vocational school.

Wealth, he said, had value when it was used for "the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society". Rather than keeping the entirety

of their fortune, Kim and his wife said in their statement: "We are certain that this pledge is the greatest inheritance that we could provide for our children." Neither of the billionaire Kims has so far provided a precise timeline for their pledged donations, or detailed the recipient organizations.

### Tech industry

More than 200 super-wealthy from around the world have signed the Giving Pledge, according to its website. But it has previously been criticized for not being legally binding, and it acknowledges it is only a "moral commitment". It has struggled to make headway in East Asia, listing only a handful of donors from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and none from Japan.

Like many East Asian societies, South Korea remains largely family-oriented, with financial ties extending well into adulthood as parents help finance higher education and housing, and little sense of obligation to give to non-relatives. South Korea ranks 57th in the Charities Aid Foundation's most recent World Giving Index - with Japan at 107 and China at 126.

Public philanthropy has a limited history among super-wealthy South Koreans, while the chaebols' founding families often maintain their grip through complex webs of cross-holdings between subsidiaries. "When the country was just reeling from the war, the priority was survival, not philanthropy, and working with your own family members was seen as the most efficient way of running a business," Jangwoo Lee, a business administration



Kim Beom-su



Kim Bong-jin

professor at Kyungpook National University, told AFP.

But both Kim Beom-su and Kim Bong-jin have been at the forefront of South Korea's social media and mobile tech industries boom, each founding their company in 2010 and rapidly accumulating a fortune. Kakao's flagship messaging application is installed on more than 90 percent of phones in the country. Woowa owns South Korea's biggest food delivery app, with more than 10 million monthly users - around 20 percent of the population.

The children of Kakao's Kim have been appointed to positions in his holding company, but professor Lee said chaebol-style succession was effectively obsolete for such firms. "Family-oriented management strategies may have worked for manufacturing businesses, but we have now entered an era where newly emerging enterprises do not really benefit from such ways," he said. "These are creative and unpredictable industries, and they need specialists, not family members, in leadership in order to thrive." That could give their owners more flexibility with their assets.

According to the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies, most dona-

tions under the Giving Pledge have gone to private foundations controlled by donors' relatives, or donor-advised funds, enabling the givers to "retain significant managerial control over millions of philanthropic dollars" while generating "hefty tax reductions". South Korean law also offers donors some tax benefits, depending on the beneficiaries and how giving is structured.

Some chaebol families have engaged in high-profile philanthropy. Hyundai Motor's honorary chairman Chung Mong-Koo endowed an eponymous foundation with his personal assets and the Samsung group - South Korea's biggest conglomerate - founded the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, home to an extensive collection of antiquities and modern works.

But critics say South Korea is becoming an increasingly unequal society. Kakao's Kim was among those who grew up poor. Neither of his parents attended high school, and they took multiple blue-collar jobs to make ends meet, leaving him to be cared for mostly by his grandmother. All eight members of the family shared a single room, and later he sometimes could not afford to buy lunch as a student at the prestigious Seoul National University. — AFP

## Flood-prone Miami to spend billions tackling sea level rise

**MIAMI:** The US city of Miami is to invest billions of dollars to tackle its vulnerability to rising sea levels, a reality that already affects the daily lives of residents used to constant flooding. Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine-Cava said Friday she will protect communities hardest hit by rising sea levels, which eat away at beaches and leave residents particularly vulnerable to flooding during hurricane season.

"We must continue to focus on restoration, preservation and protection of this sacred space," she told a news conference. "And so we will be together investing billions of dollars... in our infrastructure so that we can lift this community and others that are so affected by sea level rise," she added. She cited "adaptation action areas" as a first priority to be studied, which would include raising low-lying roads, and waterproofing and converting southern Florida's widely used septic tanks into sewage systems.

The area, with extensive wetlands and sitting on porous stone that acts like a sponge, makes the state one of the most at risk from rising sea levels. The problem is so visible that, during the summer rainy season, it is common to see Miamians kayaking along flooded avenues and cars sunk up to their windows.



**MIAMI BEACH:** The Arkup luxury floating villa is docked at Star Island on Feb 5, 2021. — AFP

The city of Miami Beach - which is part of Miami-Dade County - invested millions of dollars in raising the level of many of its streets in 2016. And some private entrepreneurs have proposed creative, if expensive, ways to adapt to the challenge. For example, Miami residents are used to seeing a houseboat that often docks near the port, although it has also appeared in other waters around Biscayne Bay. It is valued at \$5.5 million and adjusts to rising sea levels.

"It looks like a house, but technically it's a boat," said Nicolas Derouin, co-founder and managing director of Arkup, the Miami-based company that created this floating "villa" with a drop-down terrace over the sea. The house, covered with a roof of solar panels, remains stable thanks to four hydraulic pillars that fix it to an underwater bed. The Environmental Protection Agency says the sea level could rise by 30 cm to 120 cm over the coming century. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Drought hits Taiwan chipmakers

**TAIPEI:** Taiwan's drive to plug a global shortage of microchips has hit a snag - a lack of water for its foundries caused by a drought. Semiconductor shortages, caused by supply chain priorities changing because of the coronavirus pandemic, have forced some major manufacturers to suspend production lines. Taiwan has said it will try to ramp up production of chips but worsening water shortages could hamper its plans. Under tougher restrictions imposed from Thursday, factories and industrial zones have to cut water use by up to 11 percent in some central and southern parts of the island. — AFP

#### Pineapple ban sparks rebuke

**TAIPEI:** Taipei slammed a sudden Chinese ban on Taiwanese pineapples, describing the move on Friday as "economic intimidation" and likening it to recent tariffs Beijing slapped on Australian wine. The trade to China is worth around \$50 million, and is Taiwan's largest export market. Beijing announced the ban Friday morning after saying it "found pests in pineapples imported from Taiwan", and said the rules were in line with mainland "regulations". But the island's ruling Democratic Progressive Party accused Beijing's of "ambushing" Taiwan with a politically driven ban, which comes in March 1. — AFP

#### Scottish salmon farmers flounder

**LONDON:** Scotland's salmon farmers have been slapped with huge costs due to bureaucracy and delays following Britain's departure from the European single market, an industry body said on Friday. The Scottish Salmon Producers Organization (SSPO) said the end of the post-Brexit transition period on Dec 31 had cost its members at least £11 million. Sales amounting to 1,500 tons of product have been lost, while extra paperwork has pushed up overheads - and also caused confusion. Scotland's salmon fishing industry, which supports 10,000 jobs across 3,600 companies, lost £200,000 in January alone to costs unrelated to production like export documents and administrative costs. — AFP

#### Brazil unemployment dips

**RIO DE JANEIRO:** Brazil's unemployment rate dipped in the fourth quarter, but set an annual record in 2020 with a monthly average of 13.5 percent as the coronavirus pandemic battered Latin America's biggest economy, officials said Friday. The jobless rate was 13.9 percent for the period from October to December, said the national statistics institute, IBGE, which measures the indicator in sliding three-month intervals. — AFP

#### Robinhood facing inquiries

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Stock trading app Robinhood on Friday confirmed it is cooperating with inquiries from US regulators into its decision to temporarily throttle purchases of shares in companies such as GameStop during frenzied trading in January. The free brokerage platform is facing inquiries from federal financial regulators, state attorneys general and the US Congress, according to a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission. — AFP



## Business

# G20 advances on digital tax after US drops key obstacle

## Yellen's announcement suggests deal by mid-2021 is now possible

**MILAN:** The G20 looked closer to an agreement Friday on a global digital tax after a change of heart from the United States removed a key stumbling block in the discussions. Under previous president Donald Trump, the US had insisted on a so-called safe harbor clause that would have effectively allowed big tech companies to comply voluntarily with a digital tax, blocking progress on a deal.

But in a videoconference with G20 colleagues, new US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said her country "will engage robustly" in the talks and "is no longer advocating for 'safe harbor'...." a Treasury official told AFP. A global digital tax would target US Internet giants such as Amazon, Facebook and Google, which have long been accused of exploiting loopholes to minimize their tax bills.

Negotiations on the issue, held under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have been deadlocked, with the United States and European Union on opposing sides of the argument. Yellen's announcement suggests that a deal by mid-2021, as pledged by a G20 summit in Saudi Arabia last year, is now possible, the French and German finance ministers both said. Italian Economy Minister Daniele Franco - whose country holds the G20 presidency - said a deal could "hopefully" be struck at a July 9-10 meeting of G20 finance ministers and central bank chiefs in Venice.

### Vaccines and debt problems

Friday's video conference had a broader purpose of aligning G20 countries' plans to relaunch their economies after the coronavirus pandemic and to limit the harm to the worst-off nations shut out of the race for vaccines. On Thursday, Washington urged wealthy G20 countries to launch

a truly global, coordinated vaccination campaign. "Without access to vaccines, low-income countries in particular will experience further tragic loss of life and needlessly delay their economic recoveries," Yellen wrote in an open letter to her G20 finance counterparts.

Yellen also signalled openness to issuing new so-called Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to less developed countries, reversing another Trump position. Several G20 countries have already suggested the move, after the financial instruments - which can be exchanged for US dollars, euros, Chinese renminbi, Japanese yen or British pounds - proved their worth as crisis firefighting tools in 2009.

But Italy's Franco said there was no substantive progress on this front. He also signalled there was no decision on a further extension of a moratorium on debt interest payments for the poorest countries, currently set to expire on June 30. According to World Bank President David Malpass, the moratorium has so far been less effective than hoped, because the private sector and the China Development Bank have not come on board. So far just 46 of the 73 eligible countries have delayed debt interest payments worth a total of \$5.7 billion.

### Threat of 'Great Divergence'

The debt question concerns minuscule amounts compared with the \$14 trillion mobilized by G20 countries to reboot their own pandemic-hit economies. The recovery "from the worst recession since World War II" will be "long and uncertain", IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva warned in an interview with Italy's La Stampa newspaper. "The prospects for recovery are diverging dangerously across countries", against the backdrop of "a slow rollout of vaccines even as new mutations are



ROME: Italy's Economy Minister Daniele Franco prepares for the streamed G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting on Friday. —AFP

spreading", she said.

"So, my deepest concern is that the Great Lockdown of 2020 could morph into a Great Divergence in 2021 and beyond," Georgieva added. The IMF has forecast a 5.5 percent rebound in worldwide GDP this year, followed by 4.2 percent growth in 2022. The G20 gathering also covered international finance issues, because even though

markets have proved resilient through the health crisis, borrowing costs have risen sharply since early February.

The European Central Bank (ECB), however, issued a reassuring message Friday, as its executive board member Isabel Schnabel said it could broaden its support for the economy in case of a sharp rise in interest rates. —AFP

## Burgan Bank 'mega hit' offer on Apple AirPods Max from Best Al-Yousifi

**KUWAIT:** Burgan Bank's prepaid and credit cardholders can now benefit from the exclusive monthly 'Mega Hit Offer' through its partnership with Best Al-Yousifi, the leading electronics store in Kuwait. The bank's valued customers will be given the chance to purchase the latest Apple AirPods Max for a special discounted price on Sunday, February 28, 2021.

The offer provides limited quantities of the highly demanded headset and is valid for 24 hours only. Customers can benefit from the 'Mega Hit Offer' while making other purchases only through the Best Al-Yousifi website or mobile application. As the only bank in Kuwait to provide this special offer, the selected product's price can also be viewed on Burgan Bank's social media platforms on the same day of the offer.

## TikTok agrees \$92m deal to settle US privacy lawsuits

**SAN FRANCISCO:** TikTok has agreed to pay \$92 million in a deal to settle a cluster of US class-action lawsuits accusing the video-snippet sharing platform of invading the privacy of young users. A legal filing Friday in federal court in the state of Illinois urged a judge to approve the settlement, which includes TikTok being more transparent about data gathering and better training employees about user privacy. The litigation combined 21 class-action cases taking aim at TikTok and its China-based parent company ByteDance. "The TikTok app infiltrates its users' devices and extracts a broad array of private data including biometric data and content that defendants use to track and profile TikTok users for the purpose of, among other things, ad targeting and profit," Illinois attorneys said in a filing.

Attorneys estimated in a filing that the settlement would apply to 89 million TikTok users in the United States, with most of them eligible for pay-outs of 96 cents each if they all filed claims for settlement money. TikTok software identified users' faces to let people apply special effects to videos, but also gleaned insights about age, gender and race for content recommendation and other features, legal filings contended.

Attorneys also accused TikTok of sending or storing data in China where its parent company is based. TikTok has denied any misuse of data, saying it only uses anonymous markers to detect where faces are and left that data on users' devices, according to legal paperwork. Attorneys told the judge that ByteDance had been motivated to settle due to pressure by US officials to sell TikTok.

The administration of US President Joe Biden has reportedly shelved a plan by his predecessor Donald Trump to require the sale of TikTok to US tech giant Oracle with Walmart as a retail partner. Trump had aimed executive orders at TikTok and other Chinese online services allegedly posing security risks because of ties to the Beijing government.

A Trump administration move to ban downloads of TikTok had been stalled amid legal challenges. TikTok, the wildly popular app with an estimated 100 million US users, has repeatedly defended itself against allegations of data transfers to the Chinese government, saying it stores user information on servers in the United States and Singapore. —AFP

## Colombia apiarists say avocado buzz is killing bees

**ARMENIA, Colombia:** For the second time in two years, Gildardo Urrego is scooping up piles of dead bees after an invisible evil invaded his hives in north-west Colombia, wreaking havoc among his swarms. Urrego has no proof, but he suspects the culprit is pesticides which have been fuelling a commercial avocado and citrus boom in the country.

Hundreds of hives have been killed off in Colombia in recent years, and some investigations have pointed to fipronil, an insecticide banned for use on crops in Europe and restricted in the United States and China. It is used to control all manner of insects, including ants and ticks, and has been blamed for several bee massacres around the world.

Urrego's apiary in Colombia's Antioquia Department produces honey flavored with pollen from nearby passion fruit orchards. In 2019, he lost 10 of his 19 hives. This time, he said, a third of his 12 hives were wiped out - a loss of some 160,000 of the industrious little pollinators. "There is a theory that, yes, this is due to poisoning, there are some crops around here that perhaps have not managed their agrochemicals well and so this area was affected," he told AFP.

In recent years, bees in North America, Europe, Russia, South America and elsewhere have started dying off from "colony collapse disorder", a mysterious scourge blamed partly on pesticides along with mites, viruses and fungi. The UN warns that nearly half of insect pollinators, particularly bees and butterflies, risk global extinction.

## Myanmar civil servant strikes start to bite

**YANGON:** Public hospitals are deserted. Government offices left dark. And the trains don't leave the stations. Despite risks to their lives and livelihoods, many Myanmar civil servants are refusing to work for the junta, as a growing civil disobedience movement seeks to thwart the generals by paralyzing the bureaucracy.

"The military needs to prove that they can manage the country well as a government. But if we... the civil servants don't work, their plan to take power will fail," Thida, a public university lecturer who asked to use a pseudonym, told AFP Monday as cities were brought to a standstill by the largest strike yet. In the three weeks since the coup, Thida has refused to teach her online classes. She joined the nationwide walkouts kicked off by medical workers, many of whom are now in hiding to evade arrest.

From the capital to seaside ports, work stoppages in the private sector have hollowed out offices and factories and forced many bank branches shut. But it is the civil servants' swelling ranks within the resistance that has the junta particularly rattled. Without them, it is unable to collect taxes, send out elec-

tricity bills, test the population for COVID-19 or simply keep the country running. The specter of a financial crisis - already brewing because of the pandemic downturn and a decline in foreign investment - looms large.

### Cracks starting to show

It remains unclear how many of the roughly one million public sector workers are participating. One crowdsourced survey found members of all 24 government ministries are now involved, while the UN special rapporteur on Myanmar has estimated three-quarters of the civil servants are on strike. Their absence is beginning to bite.

Nearly one-third of the nation's hospitals are no longer functioning, coup leader Min Aung Hlaing said this week. Decrying medical professionals' failure to fulfill their duties, he hinted that working doctors and teachers would soon receive cash rewards, according to remarks reported by state media Tuesday.

One doctor told AFP that staff shortages meant his hospital has had to turn away new patients. Medical "cover teams" have formed to provide emergency treatment to protesters under fire from rubber bullets and live ammunition. Paper pushing in government departments has all but halted, according to local media reports, and around the country clerks, drivers and administrators have been dismissed over their absence.

### Free fertilization

About 1.4 billion jobs and three-quarters of all crops around the world, according to a 2016 study, depend on pollinators, mainly bees, which provide free fertilization services worth billions of dollars. Some 300 km south of Antioquia, in the Quindio Department, Abdon Salazar has no qualms pointing the finger at fipronil as he counts his losses.

"Over the last two years, we have calculated more than 80 million dead bees," he said as he walked among the 300 vibrating hives of his business Apicola Oro (Golden Beekeeping). "We are talking some 800 hives, 100,000 bees per hive, it is a very large quantity, an alarming quantity." Salazar and other beekeepers in the region are increasingly having to clear out mounds of dead bees from their apiaries which are surrounded by avocado and citrus plantations in an exceptionally fertile and biodiverse part of the world.

### Toxic neighbors

In Quindio, hive collapse has coincided with the expansion of monoculture in recent decades, according to Faber Sabogal, president of the Asoproabejas beekeepers' organization. According to the local government, five multinational companies bought large tracts of land in the region between 2016 and 2019 to profit from the growing global appetite for Hass avocados.

Exports skyrocketed from 1.7 tons in 2014 to 44.5 tons in 2019, and this year, Colombia became the largest supplier of the creamy, green delicacy to Europe. But bees are the collateral damage, becoming contaminated as they buzz through pesticide-treated plantations looking for food, say beekeepers. "They bring this poison to the hive and kill everyone else," said Salazar.

### Economic impediments

Asoproabejas members have videotaped



SANTA FE DE ANTIOQUIA, Colombia: Beekeeper Gildardo Urrego shows poisoned bees at his apiary on Jan 31, 2021. —AFP

dozens of mass bee die-offs in several regions of Colombia, mainly in the west. Last year, the state-owned Colombian Agricultural Institute (ICA) was notified by beekeepers of 256 suspected hive poisonings in Quindio alone. Some 10 million insects were lost. ICA regional manager Jorge Garcia said the body examined samples from six apiaries and found that "the fipronil molecule is one of the causes of mortality." The alert was raised with ICA headquarters in Bogota, which is working on a suspension order, he told AFP.

Withdrawing the poison altogether has been difficult "because the companies producing agrochemicals will be affected economically," said Salazar.

Maria Latorre, spokeswoman for Colombia's agrochemical union, said a fipronil ban would provoke "a very negative situation for the productive structure" of the 33 crops that rely on it. The body denies that fipronil is harmful to bees, but said it would welcome a "review" of its use "on crops that have had incidents". —AFP



MANDALAY, Myanmar: Protesters wear traditional hats with the words "Freedom from fear" during a demonstration against the military coup on Friday. —AFP

"The military didn't anticipate that a large part of the civil service would walk out and leave them without a state apparatus," said an analyst who asked to remain anonymous as the junta has detained more than 700 of its critics. "The impact of the movement doesn't necessarily depend on all of the bureaucracy participating, but on key parts paralyzing the military's ability to collect revenue and distribute it across the state machinery."

The Myanmar Economic Bank (MEB), which distributes government salaries and pensions, has been hobbled by walkouts, but state media said it was

a "baseless rumor" that compensation would not be forthcoming.

### Pressure campaign

In a sign of the generals' growing uneasiness, official media outlets have printed near-daily summonses for civil servants to return or face legal action, while overnight arrests have targeted civil disobedience movement participants. Hotlines allow members of the public to report anyone encouraging such action. "All civil servants from ministries who are participating in the civil disobedience movement are getting pressure," the MEB staffer said. —AFP



# Classifieds

Sunday, February 28, 2021

**Kuwait Times**  
 THE FIRST COPY ON THE ARABIAN GULF  
  
 Now you can browse  
[www.kuwaittimes.net](http://www.kuwaittimes.net)  
 e-mail: info@kuwaittimes.net



Tel: (+965) 161 Ext: 66819 - 66817  
 Fax: (+965) 24348714  
[www.met.gov.kw](http://www.met.gov.kw)

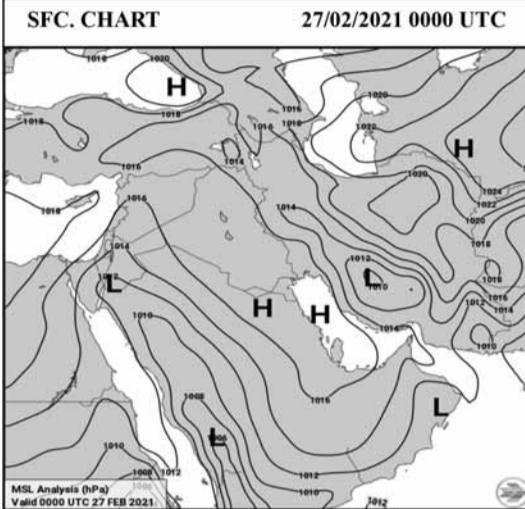
## Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

**BY DAY:** Fair with light to moderate north westerly wind with speed of 08 - 32 km/h .

**BY NIGHT:** Cold with light variable wind to light to moderate north westerly wind with speed of 06 - 26 km/h .

**WEATHER WARNING** No Current Warnings

STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	23 °C	15 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	23 °C	08 °C
ABDALY	24 °C	08 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	24 °C	11 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	- °C	- °C
SALMIYAH	21 °C	15 °C
AHMADI	20 °C	15 °C
NUWAISIB	22 °C	09 °C
WAFRA	24 °C	10 °C
SALMY	22 °C	08 °C



DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Sunday	02/28	Fair and Clouds will increase gradually	23 °C	08 °C	VRB-SE	08 - 28 km/h
Monday	03/01	Fair and Partly cloudy with a chance for scattered light rain and a chance for fog forming	22 °C	12 °C	E-SE	08 - 38 km/h
Tuesday	03/02	Warm and Visibility will improve gradually	25 °C	10 °C	VRB	06 - 20 km/h
Wednesday	03/03	Warm	26 °C	08 °C	VRB	06 - 20 km/h

PRAYER TIMES	
Fajr	04:57
Sunrise	06:16
Zuhr	12:01
Asr	15:18
Sunset	17:46
Isha	19:03

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT	
MAX. Temp.	22 °C
MIN. Temp.	05 °C
MAX. RH	84 %
MIN. RH	31 %
MAX. Wind	N 39 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

All times are local time unless otherwise stated. UP:0

## Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

## Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khalidiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

## CHANGE OF NAME

I, Arya Ajeshkumar D/o Indran, holder of Indian Passport no. K5996244, issued at Cochin (Kerala, India) on 20/03/2013 and presently residing at Kuwait do hereby change my name from Arya Ajeshkumar to Arya Indran with immediate effect. **(C 5765) 28-2-2021**

## Airlines

Kuwait Airways	171
Jazeera Airways	177
Turkish Airlines	1884918
FlyDubai	22414400
Qatar Airways	22423888
KLM	22425747
Royal Jordanian	
22418064/5/6	
British Airways	22425635
Air France	22430224
Emirates	22921555
Air India	22456700
Air India EXPRESS	22438185/4
Sri Lanka Airlines	22424444
Egypt Air	22421578
Swiss Air	22421516
Saudia	22426306
Middle East Airlines	22423073
Lufthansa	22422493
PIA	22421044
Bangladesh Airlines	22452977/8
Oman Air	22958787
Turkish Airlines	22453820/1

**EMERGENCY 112**

## Word Search

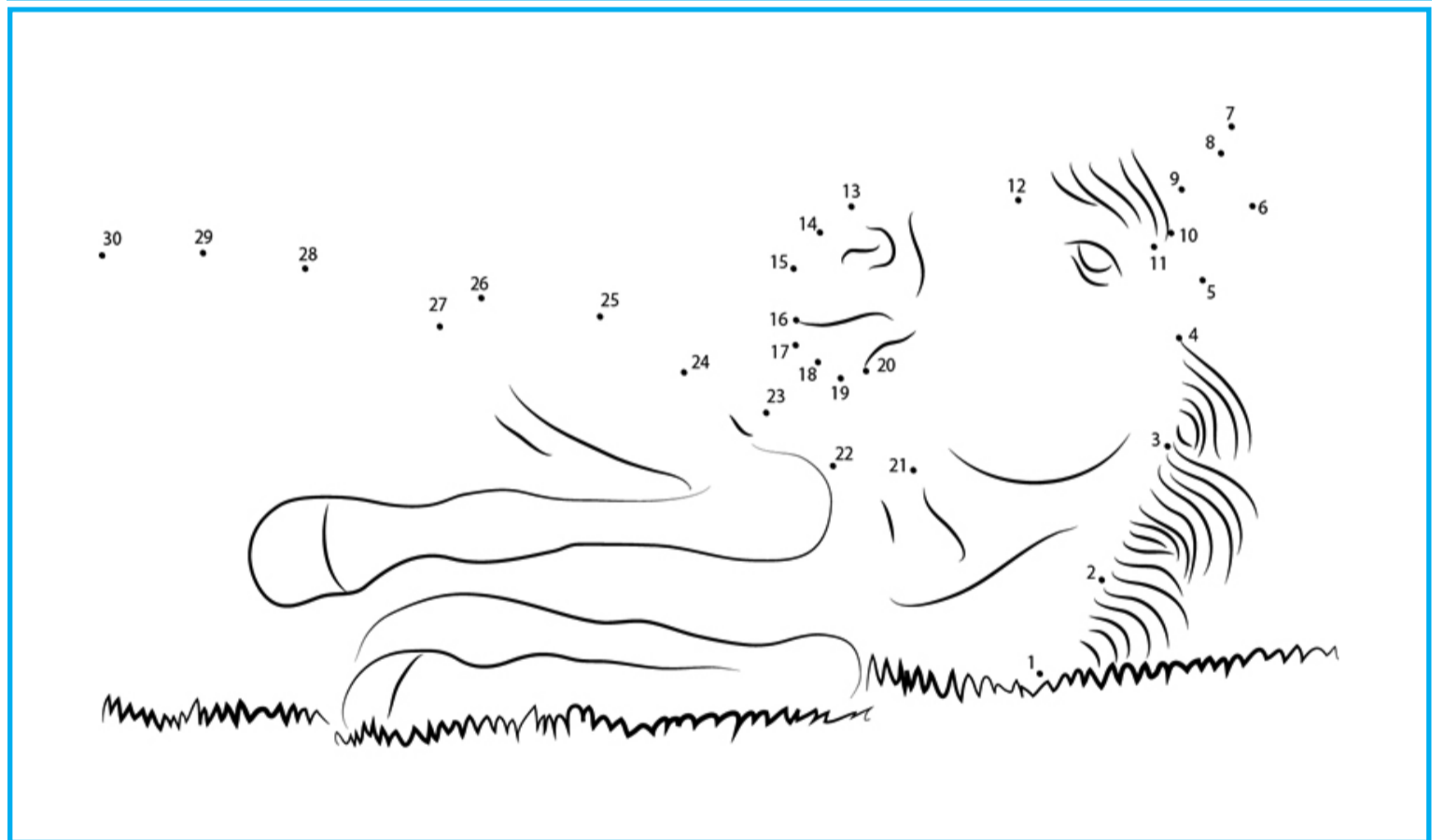
### Famous Authors

DIRECTIONS: Find and circle the famous authors' last names in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.



- ANGELOU, Mays
- AUSTEN, Jane
- CHRISTIE, Agatha
- DICKENS, Charles
- DICKENSON, Emily
- FAULKNER, William
- FITZGERALD, F. Scott
- HEMINGWAY, Ernest
- JOYCE, James
- KAFKA, Franz
- KEROUAC, Jack
- KING, Stephen
- MAILER, Norman
- MELVILLE, Herman
- ORWELL, George
- ROWLING, J. K.
- SHAKESPEARE, William
- SHAW, George Bernard
- STEINBECK, John
- TOLSTOY, Leo
- TWAIN, Mark
- VERNE, Jules
- VONNEGUT, Kurt
- WILDE, Oscar
- WOOLF, Virginia

## Join the Dots



## STAR TRACK

 <p><b>Aries (March 21-April 19)</b>                      You might feel more energetic than you have in a long time, Aries. The day's planetary aspects offer a powerful energy that will increase your mental acuity and physical strength, and this can really help you tackle and finish any tasks that have been piling up. If you manage to accomplish so much that you have time to spare, help others lighten their load. Tend to your own first, however.</p>	 <p><b>Cancer (June 21-July 22)</b>                      Cancer, if there's something interesting that you want to try, go for it. Adventure brings excitement, creative flow, and energy, and these are essential to you. Yours is a highly artistic nature. Continual stimulation is required to keep your psyche healthy. Experience something new today. Even if it's just a walk to a place you've never been, it will give you the adrenaline you need.</p>	 <p><b>Libra (September 23-October 22)</b>                      Today may be an excellent time to take a second shot at something that didn't work out the first time, Libra. Falling flat on your face can damage your confidence and self-esteem. But failure and rejection are parts of life, and they really do add character. By going back into the ring, you ensure that the character you're adding to is courageous, and through perseverance, successful.</p>	 <p><b>Capricorn (December 22-January 19)</b>                      Don't worry about being productive today, Capricorn. Thanks to the high energy provided by the planetary aspects, it might be one of the most efficient days you've had for a long time. Dig in your heels and go, go, go. Things will be accomplished in no time flat, with some to spare at that. If you have a creative hobby, enjoy working on it. You will find it rewarding.</p>
 <p><b>Taurus (April 20-May 20)</b>                      If there's something you want to take on, Taurus, today's the day. The celestial aspects will see an increase in physical and mental strength that can work wonders for you. Put any insecurity or lack of confidence in the trash, and take the steps you need to tackle your project or goal. You have the ability to make sound judgments, so put your trust in this talent. Take steps to get what you want.</p>	 <p><b>Leo (July 23-August 22)</b>                      Today's energy will help you take steps toward getting things in order, Leo. Tackle the drawers, closets, storage rooms, and cabinets. Organization is a good activity for today. Creating order brings a sense of peace and personal control. Mental organization like goal setting, budgeting, or scheduling will add to this feeling. Sift through and clean out as many corners as you can.</p>	 <p><b>Scorpio (October 23-November 21)</b>                      Your ability to find innovative approaches to tasks may serve you well today, Scorpio. Today is full of added energy and mental acuity. You will find that most things come easily. With detail-oriented projects, take extra time to think of the possibilities. Try to see things from all angles. There may be far more choices than you thought. Make the most of this by jotting down your random ideas.</p>	 <p><b>Aquarius (January 20- February 18)</b>                      Expect an added boost to your physical energy today, Aquarius. It's an excellent day to clean out closets and storage rooms. Some exercise like biking or walking will be most enjoyable. It may also prove to be well worth your while to sit down and look at your goals. Are you where you wanted to be at this stage of your life? Are there changes that need to be made? Exercise both your brain and body.</p>
 <p><b>Gemini (May 21-June 20)</b>                      If you've been feeling sluggish lately, Gemini, today will see a surge in energy that will greatly increase your creativity and physical strength. Seize the opportunity to get into the fresh air for a sports activity or long walk. Exercise can direct your physical energy and give your mind a chance to clear. Don't be surprised if you discover more clarity and focus afterward. Make the most of it.</p>	 <p><b>Virgo (August 23-September 22)</b>                      The energy of the day makes you ready for almost anything, Virgo. Given your sometimes radical approach to whatever you do, you may need to rein yourself in. You also have a humanitarian approach to life. If the pursuit of your wants hurts others, it could create serious internal conflict. With this high energy, think your plans through before taking action to remain true to your values.</p>	 <p><b>Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)</b>                      If long-overdue work has piled up, Sagittarius, today is the day to dig in. Added strength and mental acuity are in the air, and the projects that you couldn't get to before will be readily accomplished. Make the most of the energy provided by the planetary aspects. Don't put anything off. If you procrastinate, the pile will just get bigger. Do what needs to be done and you will feel great afterward.</p>	 <p><b>Pisces (February 19-March 20)</b>                      If certain projects or tasks have seemed difficult to finish, take advantage of the energy provided by today's planetary aspects. This energy will give you all the zip you need, Pisces. It's a good time to meet with others to discuss important matters. Your communication and cooperation skills will be increased. You can make decisions much more quickly than usual. Have a productive day!</p>





People look at the entrance of the Giralda Bar in Seville where an Islamic 12th-century bathhouse was uncovered during renovations works. — AFP photos



These pictures show the ceiling of the Giralda Bar.



These pictures show a wall at the Giralda Bar.



These picture show the ceiling of the Giralda Bar.



## Inside a bar in Seville, a hidden 12th-century hammam is found

They had only just begun renovating the bar in Seville when they made a startling discovery: the building housed a perfectly preserved 12th-century hammam, its walls covered with beautiful paintings. What tipped them off was a star-shaped skylight that emerged within the first few blows of a hammer when the work first began inside Giralda, a bar in the heart of this southern Spanish city. The discovery was "completely unexpected", explained Alvaro Jimenez, the archaeologist assigned to monitor all such renovation works undertaken near Seville's Cathedral, a protected area. In total, they uncovered 88 skylights, star-shaped and octagonal, in the roof of this Moorish-styled bar with tiled walls that takes its name from La Giralda-once the minaret of the Great Mosque that now serves as the Cathedral's bell tower.

And there was more to follow, with workers uncovering beautiful artworks on the walls of the room, which measures

200 square meters, as well as the former hammam's warm, hot and cold rooms. More than 800 years old, the thermal baths along with their artwork, sculptures and wall fittings were perfectly preserved. That was thanks to the work of an early 20th-century architect called Vicente Traver who carefully hid it away when installing two extra floors.

### A living museum

"We thought the architect had destroyed it but we realize now he saved it," Jimenez told AFP. "He saved what he found and preserved it for the future." Conquered by the Almohad dynasty in 1147, Seville was one of the two capitals of their empire alongside Marrakesh, in what is now Morocco. "Seville Cathedral is built on the remains of the Almohad Aljama mosque, the construction of which began in 1172, and which was inaugurated in 1198 with the completion



This picture shows the counter of the Giralda Bar.

of the minaret, La Giralda," he said. "The baths are located in the southern part of the city that the Almohads transformed into their political, religious and economic center."

Now visible above the bar's existing

tiles are ornate walls and engraved white arches. The bar, which will reopen soon, has been transformed into a living museum, completely restyled to reflect its history: a place to reflect on the Islamic artwork and architecture, as the city's resi-

dents would have done eight centuries ago. — AFP



This picture shows the ceiling of the Giralda Bar.



A health worker receives her first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine developed by China's Sinopharm company at the Hospital del Nino in La Paz. — AFP

## Late for my job: 88-year-old caught going 191 km/h in France

An 88-year-old man caught speeding at a breakneck 191 kilometers per hour on a French country road told officers that he was late for his COVID-19 vaccine appointment, police said. The speed limit on the road where he was picked up on Thursday is 110 kilometers per hour, police in the eastern French Bas-Rhin region said on Facebook. The driver, a local, "gave as a reason for his speeding that he was late for his anti-COVID vaccine", it said.

Officers confiscated the man's driving license and impounded his car. "For everyone's safety, let's comply with speed limits, even after more than 60 years with a driving license," the post said. Since January, France has given residents over 75 priority in its vaccination program. The strategy is showing results, Prime Minister Jean Castex said on Thursday, with the rate of new infections among over 80-year-olds falling.—AFP

## Canadian wants no presents, just COVID vaccine for 94th birthday

All a Canadian woman wants for her 94th birthday is a COVID-19 vaccine, according to a handwritten sign outside her home in Toronto. "I am 94 today! No gifts, just the vaccine please," it reads. Nina Rockett's daughter Margot made and hung the banner at her mother's house in Canada's largest metropolis when she turned one year older on February 24, amid mounting frustrations with the relatively slow pace of Canada's vaccine rollout. Canada has ordered or reserved more than 400 million doses of vaccine from seven suppliers, and started inoculating its citizens in December 2020 with the first authorized



Nina Rockett's daughter Margot showed her frustration over the government's slow rollout of vaccine by making and hanging the banner outside her mother's house on the birthday. — Frank Gunn

candidates made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. A third one developed by AstraZeneca was approved on Friday.

But the nation, with no vaccine production capacity of its own, hit a bump in the past month with shortages and delivery delays linked to European manufacturing issues. So far less than three percent of Canada's population of 38 million has received at least one shot. "It was the night before my mother's birthday and I realized she is turning 94 and she has no vaccine," Margot said in an interview with AFP. She lamented "a lot of broken promises" and a lack of firm information from doctors, public health officials and governments. Each of Canada's 10 provinces is responsible for administering vaccines purchased in bulk and distributed by the federal government. "What is happening here is terrible, is shameful," she said.

"I was fed up and I thought I just want the world to know that she is 94 and she is worthy of having the vaccine-and she wants it." As she spoke, the sounds of a passing car honking its horn broke the uneasy quiet of the neighborhood in a city that has been in a pandemic lockdown since December 26. It's been two days of "horns honking, thumbs up, (passersby) yelling I support you" and sharing stories of being unable to see their isolated elderly parents or grandparents for fear of unwittingly passing on the novel coronavirus to them, Margot Rockett said.

"I think everybody should hang a banner like this outside their door or window or balcony" to raise awareness of the plight of the elderly in Canada over the past year, she commented. As of Friday, Canada has reported more than 858,000 cases of the coronavirus and 21,865 fatalities. The bulk of them have been in Ontario and Quebec provinces where more than nine out of 10 COVID-19 deaths were people aged 60 years or older. — AFP



This recent undated handout photo shows "Baarak", a wild sheep who was found wandering the wilderness of the Australian bush with a huge 35-kilogram of fleece. — AFP photos



## Aussie sheep sheds huge coat after years on the lam

A wild sheep found wandering the wilderness of the Australian bush has been sheared of a huge 35-kilogram coat after an estimated five years of unchecked growth. Struggling under a filthy fleece caked with years of mud and tangled debris, Baarak was spotted in a Victorian state forest and taken to an animal rescue sanctuary north of Melbourne, the group said on Facebook earlier this month. "I couldn't believe there was actually a sheep alive

under all of that wool," Pam Ahern, founder of Edgar's Mission Farm Sanctuary, told Nine News. The sheep's matted coat had been growing uncut for close to five years, Ahern estimated.

"I think he has been a cheeky little rascal of a young lamb who's just wandered off and never came back." Unshorn sheep struggle to walk under the immense weight of their wool, and without a haircut at least once a year most will not last long in the wild, particularly in Australia's often harsh and dry summers. Despite Baarak's hefty locks, he falls short of the world record held by a late compatriot, Chris, who made headlines when he was shorn of a 41-kilogram mane in 2015. Baarak's transformation from hulking mass to fresh faced has nevertheless given him a new fleece of life, with his overhaul racking up millions of views on TikTok. — AFP



## Lifestyle | Features

# Sacha Baron Cohen: Outrageous comedian with serious point, and two Globes nods

From a tracksuited rapper to a bumbling Kazakh TV reporter in a green tankini, Sacha Baron Cohen has made his name with outrageous characters who expose real people's prejudices and hypocrisy. On Sunday, Baron Cohen's wild portrayal of the journalist Borat could win him a Golden Globe—but he could also take home a statuette for his work in a more serious role, as US political activist Abbie Hoffman in "The Trial of the Chicago 7". The characters created by the versatile 49-year-old British comedian are a world away from his upbringing in London as the son of an accountant who ran a family business of clothing stores. After attending private schools, he studied history at the University of Cambridge, where his cousin, Simon, is a professor and prominent researcher into autism.

During his time at university, Baron Cohen joined the Footlights theatre group that launched stars such as Hugh Laurie and members of Monty Python. His big break came performing sketches on the Paramount Comedy Channel, where he developed the character Ali G—a wannabe gangsta rapper from a nondescript town west of London. "Da Ali G Show", which followed on Britain's Channel Four in 2000, saw him ask increasingly shocking questions of unsuspecting politicians and other establishment figures.

The show also featured Borat, a naive Kazakh visitor to Britain who displays unthinking homophobia, anti-Semitism

and sexism, and Bruno, a flamboyantly gay Austrian fashionista. The show made Baron Cohen a household name. Later series were aired on HBO in the United States. Prince William even revealed that he and brother Harry taught their great-grandmother, the Queen Mum, to imitate Ali G by clicking her fingers and saying his classic "Respec". One interviewee was Donald Trump, who said last year of Baron Cohen: "That's a phony guy. And I don't find him funny."

## Cannes mankini

Ali G got his own film—"Ali G Indahouse" (2002)—as did Borat (2006), and later Bruno (2009). To promote "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan", he posed on the beach at the Cannes film festival in a green tankini that left little to the imagination. Along with an infamous nude fight scene, it showed Borat in cringe-making encounters with ordinary Americans. At a rodeo, he called for then-president George W. Bush to "drink the blood of every single man, woman and child of Iraq", to cheers from the crowd.

The New York Times said the film's comedy was "as pitiless as its social satire, and as brainy". It topped box offices in Britain and the United States. Baron Cohen, who is Jewish and uses Hebrew for Borat, won a Golden Globe for best actor, and the film grossed more



In this file photo British actor Sacha Baron Cohen (left) poses with actor Ken Davitian (right) at the 64th Annual Golden Globe Awards in Beverly Hills, California. — AFP photos



In this file photo actor Sacha Baron Cohen and his wife actress Isla Fisher arrive for the 77th annual Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California.

than \$260 million worldwide. But the depiction of Kazakhstan as backward infuriated the Central Asian state, which banned the film's release. Baron Cohen told Rolling Stone magazine the joke was "on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist". Kazakhstan relented and last year even used Borat's "Very nice!" catchphrase in a tourism campaign.

## 'Never again'

The follow-up, "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm", unfurls against the tense backdrop of Trump's re-election campaign and the coronavirus pandemic. In one scene at a gun rights rally, Baron

Cohen—disguised as a bluegrass singer—encouraged people to sing along to lyrics about injecting former president Barack Obama and others with the "Wuhan flu". He ended up fleeing when his cover was blown. "We were surrounded by a bunch of people, an angry mob with guns," he told NPR, and vowed not to work undercover again. "I can't do this again... at some point, your luck runs out."

The film also shows Trump's lawyer and ex-New York mayor Rudy Giuliani apparently reaching into his trousers in a hotel room, after being interviewed by Borat's daughter. Giuliani, oblivious to the hidden cameras, insisted he was tucking in his shirt. Baron Cohen told NPR he

revived Borat in a bid to somehow influence the 2020 presidential election—against Trump. "We felt we had to do something, we felt democracy was in real danger," he said. The film was released on Amazon Prime Video last year. In addition to Baron Cohen's acting nomination, it is up for Golden Globes for best musical or comedy film, and best actress for Maria Bakalova.

## 'Weapons-grade offensiveness'

In 2018, he was nominated for a Golden Globe as best actor for his US satirical series "Who is America?" Baron Cohen, whose 2012 film "The Dictator" was described as offering "weapons-grade offensiveness", has also acted in non-comedy films including "Les Misérables". In 2019 he was nominated for best actor at the Golden Globes for playing a top Mossad agent in the Netflix series "The Spy." Baron Cohen rarely gives interviews out of character and is reticent about his personal life. "Some people love being recognized and getting the attention. I don't love it," he told NPR. He is married to actress Isla Fisher. The couple have said they bonded over studying at clown school. They have three children. In 2015, the couple donated \$1 million to help Syrian refugees. — AFP



In this file photo Welsh actor Anthony Hopkins attends the AFI FEST gala screening of "The Two Popes" at TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. — AFP photos



In this file photo British actress Olivia Colman poses in the press room with the award for Best Performance by an Actress in A Television Series - Drama for "The Crown".



In this file photo Steven Yeun attends the 2020 Sundance Film Festival - "Minari" Premiere at Library Center Theater in Park City, Utah.

## Lady Gaga's dogs safely returned

Lady Gaga's two French bulldogs which were stolen at gunpoint in Hollywood have been safely returned, Los Angeles police said on Friday. Koji and Gustav were seized after an employee walking them was shot and wounded Wednesday night, and the attackers escaped in a vehicle. "Both of Lady Gaga's dogs have been turned in to a local police station, and they have been safely reunited with Lady Gaga representatives," Los Angeles Police Department tweeted. A woman had found the dogs and reached out to the singer's staff to return them.



In this file photo Lead Actress nominee for "A Star is Born" and Original Song nominee for "Shallow" from "A Star is Born" singer/songwriter Lady Gaga arrives for the 91st Oscars Nominees Luncheon at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills. — AFP

"The woman's identity and the location the dogs were found will remain confidential due to the active criminal investigation and for her safety," LAPD said. The "Poker Face" singer had offered a \$500,000 reward for the safe return of the two dogs. "My heart is sick and I am praying my family will be whole again with an act of kindness. I will pay \$500,000 for their safe return," she wrote on Instagram. "If you bought or found them unknowingly, the reward is the same." Lady Gaga's dog walker Ryan Fischer was shot and hospitalized in the incident, which is being investigated by the Los Angeles Police Department's robbery-homicide division. "I continue to love you Ryan Fischer, you risked your life to fight for our family. You're forever a hero," Lady Gaga said. Two suspects had got out of a vehicle and demanded Fischer hand over the pets at gunpoint. — AFP



In this file photo shows singer Tina Turner poses on the red carpet for the fashion show by designer Giorgio Armani at the 798 art complex in Beijing. — AFP

## Tina Turner doc, lockdown films headline virtual Berlin fest

The world premiere of a documentary about music legend Tina Turner and an "impressive" pack of pandemic-era movies will take the spotlight at an all-virtual Berlin film festival starting tomorrow. With theatres shuttered due to the coronavirus outbreak, Europe's first major cinema showcase of the year was pushed back by a month, put online and divided into two parts as the movie industry struggles to find its feet. The Berlinale, now in its 71st year, will hold the competition for its Golden Bear top prize March 1-5 virtually for critics, reporters and rights buyers.

For the second stage, organizers hope to invite stars and screen the films for the general public in June, mainly at open-air cinemas. Last year's event, one of the last before the pandemic, sold more than 330,000 tickets. The festival has also gone "gender neutral" with its acting awards—best actress and best actor prizes are history, replaced with best lead and supporting performance. Industry watchers say that despite severe restrictions on making and screening movies, the Berlinale has managed to pull together an exciting lineup. "I'm pleasantly surprised that they were able to get what looks like a pretty impressive collection of solid movies together for this festival," Scott Roxborough, European bureau chief for The Hollywood Reporter, told AFP.

## 'Uncertain times'

One of the hottest titles is "Tina", a star-studded HBO documentary about the queen of rock'n'roll by Oscar winners Dan Lindsay and T.J. Martin ("Undeclared") to be released on March 27. The film features never-before-seen concert footage, interviews with the 81-year-old superstar and recollections from the likes of Angela Bassett and Oprah Winfrey. Directors including Emmy winner Maria Schrader ("Unorthodox"), German-Spanish actor Daniel Bruehl ("Rush") and France's Celine Sciamma ("Portrait of a Lady on Fire") will be premiering new work in competition.

All 15 contenders for the top prizes to be awarded on Friday are films that were made or in post-production during the pandemic. Berlinale artistic director Carlo Chatrian said the selection captures "the uncertain times we are experiencing". Bruehl, who starred in the bittersweet German comedy "Good Bye, Lenin!" and is now part of the Captain America franchise, will make his directorial debut with "Next Door", a black comedy about gentrification. — AFP

## Five things to watch for at the Golden Globes

There will be no red carpet or star-studded audience today at the Golden Globes, but much remains at stake at the first major Hollywood awards show of the year. Millions of viewers are expected to tune in for the ceremony honoring the best in film and television, but what should you be watching for? Here is our quick guide to the event, which will take place in Beverly Hills, California and New York:

### Netflix? And still...

This time last year, Netflix was the envy of Hollywood, placing copious bottles of champagne on ice ahead of the Globes. An overwhelming 34 nominations appeared certain to signal the streamer's official coming-of-age in Tinseltown with a deluge of wins. But the ceremony didn't follow the script, and Netflix ended the night with a paltry two wins.

So will this be the year the giant entertainment disruptor truly marks its newfound dominance? With a staggering 42 nods across television and film categories this time, the odds look even more favorable. But after last year's near-washout, who knows?

## So who are the people who decide on the Golden Globes winners?

While the Golden Globes are watched by millions of film fans around the world, the 90-odd people who decide who wins the coveted awards largely remain in the shadows. The membership of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA) is minuscule when compared to the nearly 10,000 members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which hands out the Oscars.

### Colman/Cohen: Double double?

One of Netflix's rare wins last year was for Olivia Colman, whose star turn as Britain's Queen Elizabeth in "The Crown" proved irresistible to Globes voters. That wasn't entirely surprising—Colman has never lost a Golden Globe, having converted previous nods for "The Favorite" in 2019 and "The Night Manager" in 2017. This year she can go one better, with dual nominations for another season of "The Crown," and best drama film contender "The Father." If she succeeds, she may not be the night's only double winner. A fellow Brit, Sacha Baron Cohen, is a strong contender for two very different film acting roles, with "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm" and "The Trial of the Chicago 7."

### Eighth time lucky for Hopkins?

Colman's "The Father" co-star, the legendary Anthony Hopkins, is a serious awards contender every time he appears on the big screen. Surprisingly though, he has never won a competitive Golden Globe, despite being nominated on seven previous occasions dating back to 1979, and even earning a lifetime achievement award. When he won an Oscar in 1992 for his terrifying turn in "The Silence of the Lambs," Globes voters somehow plumped for Nick Nolte in "The Prince of Tides." If the Hollywood Foreign Press Association chooses to right that wrong this year, they will crown the 83-year-old Hopkins as their oldest ever best actor. Standing in Hopkins' way is Black Panther himself: the late Chadwick Boseman.

### 'Minari': The new 'Parasite'?

In recent years, few Globes categories have stoked more controversy than best foreign language film. American immigrant stories such as "The Farewell"

(2019) have repeatedly been barred from the "main" best film award categories because half or more of the script was not in English. Critics have pointed out that the rule did not seem to apply to previous heavyweight contenders such as Quentin Tarantino's multi-lingual "Inglourious Basterds."

This year, "Minari" is the subject of much hand-wringing, with "Farewell" director Lulu Wang tweeting that she has "not seen a more American film" than the acclaimed Korean immigrant family drama. Of course, being in the foreign language section at last year's Globes did not harm South Korea's "Parasite," which went on to win the biggest prize of all—the best picture Oscar. Can "Minari" repeat the trick?

### The Globes go 'bi-coastal'

With the pandemic raging, and Los Angeles still under tight restrictions, this year's Globes were always likely to be a remote ceremony—especially after the team behind September's Emmys pulled off a near-flawless award show from an empty theater. But organizers sprung a surprise by announcing that returning co-hosts Tina Fey and Amy Poehler will anchor a "bi-coastal" ceremony from New York and Los Angeles.

The move should allow more high-profile guests to present awards in person—including Big Apple-based Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones—even if the nominees have to stay home. With the Oscars now planning to broadcast from multiple locations, the Academy will be watching closely to see if Fey and Poehler can strike up their usual rapport from opposite sides of the country. — AFP

access to exclusive press conferences and screenings.

Studios are keen to ensure that HFPA members have seen their films and television shows—sometimes under rather luxurious conditions, according to some involved who have spoken on the issue on condition of anonymity. Most HFPA members are correspondents who work regularly for well-known media outlets, such as France's Le Figaro, Spain's El Pais, or Britain's Daily Mail. But the group's reputation lost some luster when it was revealed that a small minority of members didn't work at all that often—one was a former Russian body-builder who did some acting in B-list films, while another was the widow of an actor who wrote on occasion for Tahitian media.

And some major media organizations including France's Le Monde newspaper and The Times of London lashed out when their correspondents were denied entry into the HFPA. The group has also been criti-

cized for its lack of diversity, with a Los Angeles Times report this week revealing the HFPA does not have a single Black member. "So many crazy things about the @goldenglobes and the Hollywood Foreign press but this is awful," said Judd Apatow, one of several prominent showbiz celebrities circulating the hashtag #timesup-globes. The HFPA released a statement recognizing that "we need to bring in Black members, as well as members from other underrepresented backgrounds."

The association has had its share of scandals. When Pia Zadora won a Golden Globe in 1982 for what was widely seen as a dismal performance in incest drama "Butterfly," many cried foul and suggested her then-husband, an Israeli billionaire businessman, had bought the voters by inviting them to Las Vegas for a screening. — AFP



## Photo of the Day



Domen Skofic climbs the Trbovlje Chimney in Trbovlje, Slovenia. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

# Heat cool off red-hot Jazz, Celtics snap losing streak

## Raptors beat Rockets without six members of coaching staff

LOS ANGELES: Jimmy Butler scored a season high 33 points as the Miami Heat beat the NBA-leading Utah Jazz 124-116 on Friday to extend their winning streak to five games. Butler also added 10 rebounds and eight assists to lead giant-killers Miami, who have toppled the NBA's two most recent champions in the past week — the Toronto Raptors and the defending champion Los Angeles Lakers. "I don't want to say that we're good yet," Butler said. "We've got so much more that we can be better at. Myself, anybody, I don't want us to get complacent and think that we're cool."

Goran Dragic scored 26 points, center Bam Adebayo had 19 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists in the win. "We just tried to take away their easy shots," Dragic said. "And we did." Donovan Mitchell shot 11-of-26 from the field and finished with 30 points for the Jazz, who dropped to 26-7 overall but still have the best record in the NBA.

The Jazz also got 17 points from Bojan Bogdanovic as well as 15 points and 12 rebounds from Rudy Gobert. They missed their last seven shots and were three-for-16 from the floor in the final eight minutes.

"We just made a lot of mistakes, had too many breakdowns on both ends," Jazz coach Quin Snyder said. Utah beat Miami 112-94 in Utah earlier this month in the only previous meeting between the teams this season.

### Celtics snap streak

In Tampa, Kyle Lowry recorded a triple double as the Toronto Raptors beat the Houston Rockets 122-111 despite missing six members of their coaching staff, including head coach Nick Nurse. The Raptors announced just prior to the game that the six would be unavailable for the NBA contest because of COVID-19 health and safety protocols. Toronto forward Pascal Siakam also sat out the game due to the same protocols.

The 53-year-old Nurse, who is the reigning league coach of the year, is in his third season as Toronto's head coach. Assistant coach Sergio Scariolo took charge of the Raptors bench against the Rockets. The Raptors led by eight points at the half, had a 23-point lead at one stage in the third and took a 15-point lead into the final quarter.

Lowry finished with 20 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists to post his 16th career triple-double as a Raptor. Victor Oladipo had 27 points and John Wall had 21 points and 12 assists for the Rockets, who lost their 10th straight game. Eric Gordon had 17 points and P.J. Tucker and Danuel House each scored 11 points.

Elsewhere, Kemba Walker scored a season-high 32 points as the Boston Celtics recovered from a slow start to defeat the Indiana Pacers 118-112. Daniel Theis had 17 points and Jaylen Brown 15 as the Celtics snapped a three-game losing streak, winning for just the fourth time in their last 12 games. "We had a slow start, but we stuck together. That was the best part about it. The only way you can get out of struggles is by doing it together," said Walker. — AFP



TAMPA: Acting Head Coach Sergio Scariolo and Norman Powell #24 of the Toronto Raptors talk during the game against the Houston Rockets on Friday at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Florida. — AFP

## LeBron James to Ibrahimovic: 'I am the wrong guy to go at'

LOS ANGELES: Four-time NBA champion LeBron James hit back at Swedish soccer star Zlatan Ibrahimovic on Friday, saying there is no reason why he cannot have just as big an impact off the basketball court as he does on it. James has been a force for social change in America, focusing much of his attention on police brutality and racial injustice against African Americans.

He was outspoken about the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin last summer, against Donald Trump, and he worked with other NBA stars to try and get Black people out to vote during the recent US election that brought Joe Biden to power. "I am kind of the wrong guy to go at because I do my homework," said James after the Los Angeles Lakers 102-93 win over the Portland Trail Blazers on Friday night.

James was responding to Ibrahimovic's comments earlier this week that athletes should "stay out" of politics, mentioning James by name and calling him out over his political activism. "(LeBron) is phenomenal at what he's doing, but I don't like when people have some kind of status, they go and do politics at the same time," Ibrahimovic said.

Speaking in an interview for UEFA for Discovery+

in Sweden, the outspoken striker said it is a "mistake" when athletes step out of their lane. "I don't do politics... That is the first mistake people do when they become famous and they become in a certain status. Stay out of it. Just do what you do best because it doesn't look good," Ibrahimovic said.

James helped found the More Than a Vote organization which boosted voter turnout in Black areas. The group organized more than 40,000 volunteers to work at the polls during the November federal election. James says winning championships is one thing but inspiring and empowering people and bringing Americans together is just as rewarding.

"At the end of the day I would never shut up about

things that are wrong. I preach about my people and I preach about equality, social injustice, racism, voter suppression. Things that go on in our community," James said. "There is no way I would ever just stick to sports. I know how powerful my voice is."

James said he likes to think he is the start of something much bigger in sports. "You see young guys speaking about things they feel is unjust," he said. "For a long time we heard, 'as athletes you should be thankful to be able to throw a ball, dribble a ball, swing a baseball bat. You shouldn't be able to speak about anything else.' That is not the case anymore. It won't be the case for a long time." — AFP



LOS ANGELES: In this file photo taken on Friday LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers smiles as he warms up before the game against the Portland Trail Blazers at Staples Center in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

## Tiger Woods in 'good spirits'

LOS ANGELES: Tiger Woods is recovering and in "good spirits" after a second day of treatment at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center following his horrific rollover solo car smash that left him with serious leg injuries. The golf superstar was transferred to Cedars-Sinai on Wednesday night after undergoing emergency surgery the day before at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center to repair compound fractures sustained in each leg in addition to a shattered ankle. "Tiger and his family want to thank you all for the wonderful support and messages they have received over the past few days," said a statement on Woods' Twitter account. "We will not have any further updates at this time. Thank you for your continued privacy."

The 15-time major champion Woods was driving alone Tuesday morning in a south Los Angeles suburb when his SUV hit the center median, crossed into the opposing lane, struck a tree and then rolled over several times. Friday's statement did not go into detail about what type of follow up treatment Woods is receiving at Cedars-Sinai which is located about 15 kilometers (nine miles) west of Los Angeles and is renowned for treating Hollywood's rich and famous. Woods' surgery included the insertion of a rod into Woods' shin bone and the use of "a combination of screws and pins" to stabilize his foot and ankle. Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said on Wednesday that Woods wouldn't face charges related to the crash. "This remains an accident. Accident is not a crime. They do happen, unfortunately," he said. Woods has won the second most major championships in history behind Jack Nicklaus' 18. He has 82 PGA Tour victories which is tied with Sam Snead for the all-time record. — AFP



BROOKLYN: Kevin Durant #7 of the Brooklyn Nets looks on during the game against the Sacramento Kings on February 23, 2021 at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York. — AFP

## Durant out through NBA All-Star break

NEW YORK: Brooklyn Nets star forward Kevin Durant will remain sidelined through the NBA All-Star break with a left hamstring strain, the team said Friday. Durant has missed six games with the injury, the Nets originally saying on February 14 that he would be sidelined for at least two.

Coach Steve Nash had predicted this week that he would return before the All-Star break begins on March 5, but an MRI exam prompted them to revise his return timeline. "The latest images provided a clearer picture of the hamstring and while we are confident that Durant will return at full strength, this extra recovery time will allow him to perform at the level at which he has been playing this season once he returns," the Nets said in a statement.

Durant, who is averaging 29 points, 7.3 rebounds and 5.3 assists, will be re-assessed following the All-Star break, which runs from March 5-10. Durant had been slated to captain one of the All-Star teams against a team led by Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James.

Shortly after the Nets' announcement, NBA commissioner Adam Silver named Indiana Pacers forward Domantas Sabonis to take his place in the All-Star Game on March 7 in Atlanta. Sabonis set a Pacers franchise record by opening the season with 16 consecutive double-doubles.

He ranks second in the NBA this season overall with 24 double-doubles and had three triple-doubles. Despite the honor of an All-Star nod, many players have said they would have preferred to have the break without the game this year in view of the short offseason and continuing complications posed by the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP



## Sports

# Solskjaer wary of Chelsea challenge in battle for top four

## Chelsea still unbeaten in eight matches under Tuchel

LONDON: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer believes the race for the Premier League top four will go down to the wire as Manchester United prepare to face Thomas Tuchel's revitalized Chelsea tonight. United were knocked off top spot by Manchester City on January 26 and a run of just two wins in six top-flight matches means they are now 10 points behind their rivals.

Second-placed United head to the Etihad Stadium for a Manchester derby clash on March 7 but before then they have back-to-back fixtures away to London clubs, with tonight match against Chelsea followed by Wednesday's game with Crystal Palace. "We've got Chelsea just behind us, we've got City away in front of us," said Solskjaer. "Of course we can't let them run further away if we have ambitions of catching them and we can't give Chelsea too much hope to catch us either."

Solskjaer believes United are over their recent wobble ahead of the match at Stamford Bridge, where Tuchel has made an impressive impact since succeeding Frank Lampard last month. The Blues have yet to lose under the German and can halve the six-point gap to United on Sunday as the race for Champions League qualification spots heats up.

"You can see the results, you can see the stats, the possession they've had, they keep teams away from their own goal, keep the possession," Solskjaer said. "He's (Tuchel) done really well. It's never easy coming into a season halfway through so he must be pleased as well. Hopefully we can stop that run. That's my job now."

The Norwegian predicted a tense battle for

Champions League places with a third of the season still to go. City, United, Leicester and West Ham are currently in the top four but a clutch of teams, including Chelsea and champions Liverpool, harbor ambitions of dislodging them.

"I don't think the positions will be decided early," said Solskjaer. "With this season as well, it's unpredictable. We've seen teams going through bad phases then a run and then who knows what's going to happen with injuries, with how players react to the circumstances."

Like Solskjaer, Tuchel is well aware of the significance of United's visit to west London. Chelsea are unbeaten in eight matches under Tuchel and enjoyed the most impressive result of his reign in midweek when they won 1-0 at Atletico Madrid in the Champions League last 16 first leg.

But Tuchel knows Chelsea's hopes of securing a top four finish will be dented if United take all three points this weekend. "Hopefully we can win, this is what we go for," Tuchel said. "We know that it is a big challenge because of their unbeaten away record so far. They are a strong team away, they can defend very compact and they are very good in transition. Whoever plays it will be a big challenge to defend all this, to defend counter-attacks. The implications are huge. If we get a win out of this game, it is huge and if they get a win, it is huge for them to increase the difference between us."

This will be the third time Tuchel has faced Solskjaer this season after his former club Paris Saint Germain met United twice in the Champions



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Norwegian manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (left) watches from the touchline during the UEFA Europa League Round of 32, 2nd leg football match between Manchester United and Real Sociedad at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on Thursday. — AFP

League group stage. "It helps that you know the style, strengths, weaknesses and it helps you to prepare but we won't show pictures from these games to help the team," Tuchel said. "We will focus on the

last four weeks as always but to have a clear picture from the last two fixtures gives a pretty good impression on the style they want to play, the spaces where they want to hurt us." — AFP

## Milan's Zlatan to face old club Man United in Europa League last 16

PARIS: Zlatan Ibrahimovic will take on his old club Manchester United after they were paired with his current team AC Milan in the last 16 of the Europa League in Friday's draw in Nyon. Milan and Ibrahimovic will do battle with United, who beat Real Sociedad 4-0 on aggregate in the previous round, in a two-legged encounter after the seven-time European champions squeezed past Red Star Belgrade on away goals on Thursday.

Veteran forward Ibrahimovic won the 2017 edition of the Europa League with Premier League giants United in a two-year spell at the club. He was a big success in particular during his first season at United, where he won over fans with his goals and exciting play before a serious knee injury suffered in their Europa League last eight tie with Anderlecht ended his 2016-17 campaign.

"I've been so impressed, I've got to say, by how his career has gone," United coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer told the club's website. "He had a career-threatening injury when he was here but came back from that and went to MLS, then came back to Milan and has really lifted them. They're on the up and have done really well this season. It's one of the those draws again that you feel could be a Champions League game. It's good for us to have these games to look forward to." Milan, a club which despite its illustrious history had long been in the doldrums, have been revitalized since Ibrahimovic's return in December 2019.

### Zlatan firing Milan's revival

They are currently battling for their first Italian league title since 2011, when the Swede was leading the Milan line for a team featuring the likes of Clarence Seedorf, Thiago Silva and Andrea Pirlo. The Swede has been in fine form this season for a Milan team in which he is the only real star name, scoring 14 Serie A goals



MILAN: This combination of file photographs shows Manchester United's English striker Marcus Rashford (left) and AC Milan's Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic. — AFP

in 13 appearances at the ripe old age of 39. United will be considered favorites for the tie however, even though they play at home first as they sit second in the Premier League having lost just once in the English top flight since the start of November.

Milan meanwhile have surrendered top spot in Serie A to neighbors Inter Milan after a run of three defeats in five league matches which has Stefano Pioli's side looking over their shoulder at a host of rivals for a place in the Champions League. They are without a win in four matches in all competitions thanks to straight league defeats at the hands of Spezia and Inter and the two draws with Red Star

of Portas Consulting, a British firm which specializes in sport.

Italy were the center of the football planet in the 1980s and 1990s, in the days when Argentina great Diego Maradona played at Napoli. The sum paid for Spezia, a reported 25 million euros (\$30 million), is a "good example" of the current devaluation of Italian football, compared to other European or MLS clubs, according to Jordan Gardner, an American investor



FLORENCE: In this file photo taken on August 24, 2019 Fiorentina's owner, Italian billionaire businessman Rocco Comisso holds a fans' scarf prior to the Italian Serie A football match Fiorentina vs Napoli on August 24, 2019 at the Artemio-Franchi stadium in Florence. — AFP

## US investors bet on Serie A's return to glory days

ROME: Parma and Spezia have become the most recent Italian clubs to pass into US ownership with more than a quarter of Serie A outfits now in the hands of north American owners. Their bet? Growth in TV rights and the modernization of ageing stadiums fuelling a new era of Italian football.

Two top flight games this weekend will be derbies between US-owned teams — Roma versus AC Milan and Spezia against Parma. If foreign investment has long been part of the Premier League with only four clubs still British-owned, the phenomenon is more recent in Italy.

The harsh economic reality of the coronavirus pandemic has made clubs more open to potential investors, experts told AFP. Roma's US-era began a decade ago with James Pallotta, who sold on to another American businessman Dan Friedkin last summer.

Former European giants AC Milan are also flying the US flag since passing into the hands of the Elliott Management group in 2018 after the club's Chinese owners defaulted on a debt to the hedge fund. Fiorentina have been owned by Italian-born US businessman Rocco Comisso since 2019, while this season the Krause group became the majority shareholder in Parma, and financier Robert Platek and his family purchased promoted Spezia in February.

Canadian Joey Saputo has owned Bologna since 2014. This North American interest is based on an economic bet, the awakening of the "sleeping giant" that would be Serie A, according to Patrick Massey

which saw them through to the last 16.

Ajax will fancy their chances against Switzerland's Young Boys after the four-time European champions eliminated Ligue 1 leaders Lille on Thursday. Granada were rewarded for making the last 16 in their first ever European campaign with a tie against Norway's Molde, while Roma coach Paulo Fonseca will be reunited with his old team Shakhtar Donetsk. United's fellow Premier League teams Tottenham Hotspur and Arsenal will face Dinamo Zagreb and Olympiakos respectively. Rangers take on Slavia Prague after dumping out Royal Antwerp 9-5 on aggregate. — AFP

who has worked with several European clubs, and now owns Danish side FC Helsingor.

### TV rights growth

Andrea Sartori, head of the sport sector at audit firm KPMG believes investors are counting on a future increase in television rights for the Italian league which are "very far from those of the Premier League or La Liga, in particular internationally". The allocation of rights for the next three seasons is underway in Italy.

Liga Serie A expect a certain stability for broadcasting in Italy, 970 million euros per year currently, but hopes for an increase overseas (370 million euros). The other expected growth area is the country's outdated stadiums, with just a few in the ownership of their club such as Juventus, Udinese, Sassuolo and Atalanta. This dream of renovated or even new sports facilities, to increase ticket sales and generate additional income, seems to be shared by all clubs under the American banner. In Milan as in Rome, the project of a new stadium has existed for years.

In Florence, Comisso has been talking about a completely restored stadium since arriving, despite recently stating he has given up because of administrative difficulties. Despite Parma's risk of relegation to Serie B, new boss Kyle Krause this week confirmed his ambition to renovate the old Tardini stadium.

American interest is not limited to the top flight, Serie B clubs such as Venice or Pisa, or even lower league sides like Catania and Campobasso are concerned. The primary motivation remains to position themselves in a growing sport in the United States, with the prospect of the 2026 World Cup being hosted in North America. But Massey believes the tourist attraction of certain Italian cities also explains investments in lower divisions. Such is the case of Venice, which in addition to its worldwide fame, can also count this season on a team vying for a return to Serie A after nearly two decades and a series of bankruptcies. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Frankfurt's run ended

BERLIN: Eintracht Frankfurt's 11-match unbeaten run came to an end on Friday, a 2-1 defeat at Werder Bremen coming just a week after they had stunned Bayern Munich. Andre Silva gave fourth-placed Frankfurt a ninth-minute lead with his 19th Bundesliga goal of the season. Only Bayern's Robert Lewandowski with 26 goals has had a more prolific season. Bremen, who started the match in 12th place after going three games without a win, leveled in the 47th minute through Czech star Theodor Gebre Selassie although the goal needed to be cleared by VAR. Rising American star Josh Sargent sealed the three points just after the hour mark. Despite the defeat, Frankfurt remain fourth and in the Champions League spots but are seven points behind leaders Bayern who have a game in hand. — AFP

#### Giggs' bail extended

LONDON: Wales manager Ryan Giggs had his bail extended on Friday after he was arrested on suspicion of assault. Former Manchester United star Giggs was arrested and later bailed in November after a row with Public Relations worker Kate Greville. Police were seen parked outside Giggs' home in Worsley, Greater Manchester, in November following reports of a disturbance involving the 47-year-old and his "on-off girlfriend" Greville. Giggs denied all allegations of assault made against him and is co-operating with the police investigations. He missed Wales' Nations League fixtures following his arrest and Robert Page was put in caretaker charge. — AFP

#### Marseille's new coach

MARSEILLE: Marseille have appointed Jorge Sampaoli as their new coach, the troubled French club's American owner Frank McCourt announced in a statement on Friday. Sampaoli, a much-travelled Argentine, replaces Andre Villas-Boas who was suspended on February 2. McCourt, who promised "profound changes" at the club, also replaced president Jacques-Henri Eyraud, who has become a target of fan discontent, with sporting director Pablo Longoria. McCourt said Eyraud would be joining the club's supervisory board. Marseille, second when last season was cut short, are seventh this season, 20 points behind leaders Lille. Sampaoli's arrival had been expected since he requested the termination of his contract with Brazilian club Atletico Mineiro on February 22. He was in charge as they beat Palmeiras 2-0 on Thursday in their final match of the season to finish third in the table. — AFP

#### Bale 'happier than ever'

LONDON: Jose Mourinho claims Gareth Bale is "happier than ever" as the Tottenham forward tries to salvage his troubled second spell at the Premier League club. Bale has been dogged by fitness problems and poor form since returning to Tottenham on a season-long loan from Real Madrid. But the Wales captain is starting to show signs of his old self after shining in the Europa League matches against Wolfsburg recently. He could make a rare Premier League start against Burnley today after Tottenham boss Mourinho said he is playing with freedom again after the difficult end to his spell in Madrid, where he won the Champions League four times but was frozen out by boss Zinedine Zidane. — AFP



## Stones sends Man City 13 points clear

**MANCHESTER:** Manchester City moved 13 points clear at the top of the Premier League yesterday as John Stones sealed a 2-1 win against West Ham that made it 20 successive victories in all competitions for the leaders.

Pep Guardiola's side are closing in on their third Premier League in four seasons thanks to priceless contributions from their in-form center-backs. Ruben Dias, imperious since signing from Benfica in September, put City ahead with his first goal for the club. Michail Antonio equalized for West Ham just before half-time, but the revitalized Stones bagged the winner with a fine strike after the break. City are enjoying the longest ever winning streak by an English top-flight team, with 14 of those 20 victories coming in the league to leave their title rivals trailing in their wake.

They are unbeaten in 27 games across all competitions, one match shy of their longest run without defeat under Guardiola in 2017. Second placed Manchester United and third placed Leicester can close the gap back to 10 points if they beat Chelsea and Arsenal respectively today.

But it is hard to imagine anyone catching City over the last 12 games of the season. They survived a stern test from fourth placed West Ham and home games against Wolves and Manchester United next week offer a chance to put the title within touching distance.

Ominously for the rest of the league, Sergio Aguero returned to the City starting line-up for the first time in four months, making just his 11th appearance this season due to injury and illness. Once he gets his sharpness back, City's record goalscorer will provide a boost to their bid to win an unprecedented quadruple. West Ham had won seven of their previous nine league games, but even they couldn't halt City's relentless march to the title.

### Tasty dish

Hammers boss David Moyes compared Guardiola to celebrity chef Heston Blumenthal this week for the way City's manager successfully cooks up winning teams from unlikely ingredients. Guardiola was at it again as he concocted a tasty dish with seven changes to the team that beat



**MANCHESTER:** Manchester City's English defender John Stones (center) celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and West Ham United at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, yesterday. — AFP

Borussia Monchengladbach in the Champions League last 16 first leg.

After half an hour without a single shot, Dias put City in front from their first incisive attack. Kevin De Bruyne was the catalyst with a sublime driven cross that picked out Dias's run to the far post, where the center-back powered his header past Darren Randolph.

There was an unusual lack of cohesion in the City defense at times and Antonio nearly exploited their vulnerability when he met Jesse Lingard's

cross with a shot that clipped the outside of the post. It was a warning that City failed to heed and they were punished in the 43rd minute.

Aguero surrendered possession in midfield, leaving City's back four exposed, and the ball was quickly worked wide to Vladimir Coufal as he surged away from the out of position Oleksandr Zinchenko. Coufal's cross was diverted goalwards by Lingard before Antonio applied the finishing touch from virtually on the line.

Having conceded a league goal at home for the

first time since December, City took a while to shake off the shock. But Guardiola's men have too much quality to be subdued for long and they sealed the points in the 68th minute.

Zinchenko found Riyad Mahrez on the left and the Algerian's dazzling footwork left Ben Johnson bewildered as he flashed over a cross that Stones met with a superb finish from 12 yards. Issa Diop nearly provided a sting in the tale when the West Ham defender headed just wide in the final seconds of stoppage-time. — AFP



Kuwait Times  
Established 1961

The First Daily in the Arabian Gulf

**REGISTER TODAY**  
for the **COVID-19 vaccine**

Free for all residents of Kuwait. To register visit:

**[www.moh.gov.kw](http://www.moh.gov.kw)**

**STEP 1:** Click on COVID-19 VACCINE REGISTRATION **STEP 2:** FILL OUT BASIC INFORMATION **STEP 3:** SUBMIT FORM

The COVID-19 vaccine is safe, effective and approved by Kuwait's Ministry of Health