

Friday Times

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Biden unveils sweeping COVID plan in first full day in office

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Local

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: This picture shows an overpass on Jamal Abdul Nasser Road near the Free Trade Zone. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

What's up, WhatsApp?



JUST KIDDIN', SERIOUSLY

By Sahar Moussa

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WhatsApp has informed its more than 2 billion users that they must agree to share their data with Facebook in order to keep using the service - and if they do not agree by Feb 8 (later pushed back to May 15), users will no longer be able to use the app. This threat provoked many people, because they felt that their privacy is being invaded.

Digital technology has improved communication, revolutionized the information industry and changed our lives immensely in every aspect, where nowadays everything is at our fingertips. Yes, we are better connected to each other, we have instant access to knowledge, which can lead to better education, and we are being more entertained, but at what cost?

There is definitely a price to pay for that gain. In our digital world, we are constantly being monitored and watched by huge companies. Any app that has access to our emails such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Google, Instagram, etc is spying on us. According to Jeff Seibert, a former executive Serial Tech Entrepreneur at Twitter, "Everything people are doing online is being watched, tracked and measured. Every single action you take is carefully monitored".

Therefore, does it really make any difference if we accept to share our data with Facebook or not? While we are naively sharing personal information for free with social media platforms, we are being dragged into a trap to gather our data for their own benefit. Data is like a goldmine for social media companies - because of it these tech giants companies are worth billions of dollars today.

Wait a minute - why should WhatsApp have the upper hand and have the right to take our data and share it? People have started questioning the honesty of WhatsApp and have flocked to rivals Telegram and Signal. After the backlash, WhatsApp delayed its data-sharing update. I think this is a victory for people who for long were hypnotized by these social media platforms and technology companies.

Where do we draw the line? I know that the EU did, when it fined Facebook \$120 million for providing incorrect and misleading information about its 2014 takeover of WhatsApp and the ability to link accounts between the services, according to AFP. That is why a WhatsApp spokesperson confirmed that there will be no changes to WhatsApp's data-sharing practices in Europe and the UK. Yes, they did draw the line.

Unfortunately, the new terms and conditions also mean that simply deleting the app will not prevent WhatsApp from retaining a user's private data. To ensure the service no longer continues to do this, users must instead use the in-app feature for deleting their accounts. The policy notes that even after using this delete feature, some data will remain with the company.

I believe that technology companies are going too far in invading people's privacy, but this time people somehow



woke up to a reality that these technology companies and social media platforms are hacking our brains through targeted ads and subliminal messages that can influence our mindset. This leads us to question what their hidden agenda truly is.

Are we heading to a world where privacy is becoming something precious? Are we being manipulated and brainwashed because they have our data, as data equals information and information equals power? Do social media companies use algorithms that encourage addiction to their platforms? Do they already have the power to shape our reality? All I am saying is that it is time to wake up and protect our privacy. Don't you think obliging us to give or share our data is a crime?

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PHOTO ESSAY

WILDFLOWERS of Kuwait

The yellow wildflowers known as Al-Nuwair can be found all over Kuwait these days. Though often most prominent in the spring, these pretty little flowers spring up in grassy lots, parks, roadsides and anywhere after even the slightest rain.





— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Local

'Well, at least you have the second semester to look forward to...'

By Ayah Al Mutairi

Do we really? Without a formal government-approved plan to gradually return to our previous educational circumstances, students are expected to non-sensibly "hope" that somehow we will end up in classrooms, with no prior preparations or a solid plan. Two cases seem to be possible: Either we do end up in school in the second semester and face a massive health hazard due to lack of preparation - or we continue to monotonously look at screens till the end of the year.

As a senior in high school, I can confidently state that both cases aren't ideal in terms of students, parents, teachers or any-



one in their right mind! Societal suicide is taking place while we are blindly following in acceptance to a lack of affirmative action takers! As cliched as it may sound, it truly is not too late. We can go back to our utopian learning environment, where our brain challenges its limits every day, instead of settling for the bare minimum to get the class over with. Online learning is not pushing us to our full potential, and as a generation that is forced to settle for the bare minimum, we will not be facing a slight bump on our road to success; rather, we might be facing a disastrous end to it.

It goes without saying that online learning has been draining students, teachers, counselors, parents, grandparents and the community as a whole. A dominant crowd being addressed when I say "draining" is elementary school kids. Yes, it is challenging intellectually for us high-schoolers to settle for less, and slowly see our brain activity decline, reflecting clearly on our school reports, but kindergartners and elementary kids have it much worse.

Children are at the core of their education; they are at the strong block that will set the foundation for the whole building. Their education solemnly depends on a set of building blocks that are accumulated at youth. Having them comprehend such a dense capacity of concepts through a screen is challenging, to say the least, keeping in mind working parents who have

to simultaneously keep up with and confirm their children's understanding of such dense concepts and work their jobs too.

Kuwait was undoubtedly a country in the lead worldwide in terms of budgeting and the availability of resources, so why aren't we in the lead in education? Our COVID-19 cases are relatively lower than our neighboring GCC countries, yet we have not seized the educational opportunity standing by, waiting to be implemented. BBS - Bahrain Bay School - serves as a leading example in managing COVID within the school premises. Hybrid systems, masks, sanitizations and several safety precautions have been triumphing unbelievably within the institution. There is no clear obstacle standing in our way to say that we can't do the same.

Ever since last February, it has been a guessing game for both school administrations and students on whether we are going to gain back the privilege of going to school physically. Our country surely succeeded in controlling COVID-19 at the beginning of the outbreak, but as time passed by, it has been proven that education falls drastically at the bottom of their list of concerns. Having 100 percent of the graduating class pass and move on to the next stage of their lives is fantastic, only if they earned it completely with a rigorous curriculum upheld. This surely wasn't the case last summer. Such carelessness and lack of planning and implementation is interpreted as blindly signing the death sentence to our country's future of bright minds, and we cannot stand by silently and let it happen.

We matter

By Lulwah Al Sabah

What grabs my attention towards this topic is that I am a young woman who lives in a very civilized society, which does not accept any act initiated by a woman. I always imagined myself living in this society in the '90s, and whenever I did I would think that I wouldn't have been able to make it and openly express my opinions. I would have been misjudged and misunderstood and even punished for saying what's on my mind.

Thankfully, in 2005 my great grandfather, Sheikh Jaber Al-Sabah, introduced the right for women to vote in the Kuwaiti society. This was a huge step in changing what women were perceived as during that time and what they have become in recent times. They are more educated, more independent and more aware of their rights, privileges and self-worth.

These days, it's a normal conversation when someone says "women's lives matter", but then, the listener responds with "no, lives of all gender matter." It's a misconception of the definition of "women's lives matter." The listener defines the term in a way that states "women's lives matter more than any other life", but the idea of women's lives matter isn't to look down on other genders' lives, or to indicate that it should be more important than the rest. It's just stating that women's lives are somewhat under-looked, and that there should be more awareness around the world with regards to this topic.

The only people who believe us are the survivors. The sad truth is that in this culture, people who are assaulted are treated as the accused not the abused. We deserve better. We all do. Women have been fighting to gain their rights for so many years, although men have several advantages that women cannot have. For example, there are women who only leave the house for work, or if they are told to go outside by their husbands. They never picked this lifestyle, this was decided for them by their family.

The lifestyle individuals have here isn't easy. Everyone, particularly women, has the right to equality. Women's rights permit women to be autonomous and equally



treated. The freedom to vote, fair wages, owning land and having a degree are among the most common privileges activists are fighting for.

I read somewhere that women in the US get paid less than men when they work in the same job, same hours and put in the same effort, but I don't get why. There hasn't been any study or credible information about how men are better than women at everything. Every gender has its specialties, but no one's better than the other at everything. So the thing I don't get is why don't we get our right to do what we want, dress how we wish and get what we deserve!

One way we could fix this crisis is by educating young girls and boys about this topic by inserting equality lessons into their curriculum. This may help educate boys and girls about equality and how violence must be eliminated, and teaching them how to respect the dignity of others.

When we say "women's rights", we do not imply that women are more relevant than men! This is about EQUALITY. Violence must be eliminated! Empowering young girls and educating children on how to respect the dignity of others... women's rights are HUMAN rights. Once we reform the way our society works, every individual's life will change, because society does not live inside us. We live inside society.

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Local

Defense Minister visits Kuwait Air Force bases

Sheikh Hamad recalls sacrifices on Operation Desert Storm anniversary



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah is seen during the tour. —Defense Ministry photos

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah yesterday visited the Nawaf Al-Ahmad Air Base and Ali Al-Salem Air Base, as part of an inspection tour of Kuwait Air Force. Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant General Khaled Al-Saleh Al-Sabah, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant General Fahad Abdulrahman Al-Nasser and several senior officers accompanied the minister in the visit.

On his arrival, Deputy Premier was received by Kuwait Air Force Commander Staff Brigadier General Bandar Al-Mezyen and a number of Kuwait Air Force officers. He welcomed the deputy premier and expressed his appreciation of this visit, which reflected Sheikh Hamad's keenness on his duties towards the ministry and Kuwait that will help all Kuwait Air Force per-

sonnel to provide maximum effort. Also during the tour, the deputy premier listened to a detailed presentation of Kuwait Air Force's duties and tasks that are related to supporting different Kuwait Army units.

Meanwhile, the minister conveyed His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's greetings and appreciation to all Kuwait Air Force personnel, as he also relayed salutes from His Highness Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, the Defense Ministry said in a press statement. Furthermore, the minister recalled the sacrifices of Kuwait Air Force personnel during Operation Desert Storm, which Kuwait had marked the 30th anniversary recently.

Kuwait FM attends Asia Cooperation Dialogue meeting

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah headed yesterday as Kuwait's delegation to the 17th Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) virtual ministerial meeting, a gathering aimed at bolstering ties on all possible domains among member states. During the meeting, overseen by Turkey, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad affirmed that Kuwait was eager to bolster economic and developmental cooperation amongst ACD members, adding that his country was interested boosting Asian coordination to tackle the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which crippled the world. He stressed that the State of Kuwait was eager to see the ACD succeed in its mission to achieve the aspirations of the Asian continent, saying that Asia had the resources and capabilities to move forward for the welfare of all.

Kuwait, which hosts the headquarters of the ACD, was the first country to hold the ACD ministerial meeting, indicated Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad, adding that the ACD continued to seek further collaboration thanks to the willingness of each member state. The ACD had succeeded in holding its first virtual meeting for chambers of commerce and industry of member states on January 20, a step displaying the importance of the entity, he noted. He went on to say that, the current meeting had provided a chance to the ACD to discuss the 2030 development vision of Thailand, adopted in the second meeting for the ACD as a measure to positively utilize resources of Asian nations. He concluded his speech via expressing gratitude towards Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and ACD Secretary General Dr Pornchai Danvivathana for hosting the 17th ACD Ministerial meeting and wished further success of the entity. —KUNA



Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah

Deputy Foreign Minister holds talks with Saudi envoy



KUWAIT: Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah meets Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Kuwait Prince Sultan bin Saad bin Mohamed Al Saud. —Foreign Ministry photo

KUWAIT: Kuwait Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah met Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Kuwait Prince Sultan bin Saad bin Mohamed Al Saud yesterday during which a number of aspects pertaining to bilateral relations were discussed. Additionally, the two officials discussed developments on the situations of regional and international spectrums. Kuwait's Assistant Foreign Minister for the Office of the Deputy Minister Ayham Al-Omar attended the meeting. — KUNA

Local

Kuwait reschedules coronavirus vaccination dates as shipment delayed

Health Ministry lists 570 new COVID-19 cases, zero deaths

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health announced yesterday rescheduling coronavirus vaccination appointments, as shipments from the manufacturing company Pfizer/BioNTech would be delayed for Kuwait and the whole world, because of the halt in factory's production to expand it. The company will not export the amount of vaccination agreed upon to the countries for a period of time, but the ministry will reschedule dates to ensure a continuous vaccination campaign, the ministry said in a press statement yesterday.

Meanwhile, Kuwait listed 570 new COVID-19 infections and no virus-related deaths yesterday, taking the total cases up to



Recoveries up by 406

159,834 as deaths remain unchanged at 951, the health ministry said. The number of coronavirus recoveries in Kuwait rose by 406 to 152,826, the health ministry said. In the meantime, the number of people hospitalized with the virus stood yesterday at 6,057, with 51 of them in intensive care units, according to ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad. He added that 10,712 swab tests were conducted over the same period, as the total number of swab tests reached 1,436,192. Dr Sanad went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing to limit the spread of the virus. —KUNA

Motorist killed on Artal Road

KUWAIT: A Kuwaiti man was killed and another was injured when the vehicle they were in flipped over on Artal Road. Police and paramedics responded to a call and found a man was dead and the other in critical condition, who was rushed to hospital. The body was recovered by forensics.

Drug possession

A Kuwaiti man driving under the influence was arrested with hashish. The suspect was pulled over as he was driving erratically, and the drugs were discovered with him. He was sent to the Drugs Control General Department for further legal action.

Man accuses ex

A Kuwaiti man accused his ex-wife of entering his apartment in his absence and stealing personal items and documents. The citizen lodged a complaint at a police station in Mubarak Al-Kabeer governorate. He told them that on his return home, he found the door open with no sign of a break-in. When he checked the apartment, he discovered some items were missing, adding that only his ex-wife has a duplicate of the door key.

—Translated by Kuwait Times from Al-Rai

Kuwait condemns in 'strongest terms' Baghdad attack

KUWAIT: Kuwait expressed its condemnation and denunciation in the strongest terms of two terrorist bombings that struck central Baghdad yesterday, which resulted in the killing and injury of dozens of innocent people. "This criminal and sinful attack, that targeted innocent citizens and the security and stability of brotherly Iraq, constitutes a violation of tolerant Islamic Sharia law and of all values and norms," read a foreign ministry statement. The ministry underlined Kuwait's solidarity with Iraq and support for Baghdad's efforts to maintain security and stability. It also expressed its sincere condolences and sincere sympathy to the families of the victims, wishing those injured a speedy recovery. —KUNA

Belgian ambassador visits tennis complex

KUWAIT: Ambassador of Belgium to Kuwait Leo Peeters visited the Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah International Tennis Complex at the invitation of President of Arab and Kuwait Tennis Federations Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah. The ambassador toured the tennis facilities in the complex, the most important of which is the Rafa Nadal Academy Kuwait, and indoor and outdoor courts. Peeters was impressed with what he saw, saying it was among the best tennis courts in the world. He lauded the efforts of investors that brought the project into existence. The ambassador thanked Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber for his invitation, adding that he will make more visits in the future.



KUWAIT: Ambassador of Belgium to Kuwait Leo Peeters with President of Arab and Kuwait Tennis Federations Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah.



Kuwait's trade surplus with Japan down 64% in Dec

TOKYO: Kuwait's trade surplus with Japan plummeted 64.0 percent from a year earlier to JPY 17.5 billion (\$170 million) in December, down for the ninth month in a row due to weak exports, government data showed yesterday. But Kuwait stayed in black ink with Japan for 12 years and 11 months, as exports still offset imports in value, the Finance Ministry said in a preliminary report. Kuwaiti overall exports to Japan tumbled 51.3 percent year-on-year to JPY 34.3 billion (\$332 million) for the ninth straight month of decline. Imports from Japan also declined 22.9 percent to JPY 16.8 billion (\$162 million), down for the eighth month. For the whole of 2020, Kuwait posted a trade surplus of JPY 336.7 billion (\$3.3 billion), down 40.3 percent from the previous year. Middle East's trade surplus with Japan fell 47.0 percent to JPY 312.8 billion (\$3.0 billion) last month, with Japan-bound exports from the region sliding 39.1 percent from a year earlier. Crude oil, refined products, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and other natural resources, which accounted for 93.9 percent of the region's total exports to Japan, dived 40.7 percent. The region's overall imports from Japan went down 18.6 percent on sluggish demand for automobiles, machinery and steel. The world's third-biggest economy posted a global surplus of JPY 751.0 billion (\$7.3 billion) in December, marking the sixth consecutive month of black ink. Exports grew 2.0 percent from the year before, buoyed by robust shipments to China, such as plastic materials and nonferrous metals. Imports fell 11.6 percent on falling energy prices, mainly crude oil and coal. China remained Japan's biggest trade partner, followed by the US. The trade data are measured on a customs-cleared basis before adjustment for seasonal factors. —KUNA



'Going home': Biden's surreal walk to the White House



BAGHDAD: A picture shows the scene of a twin suicide bombing on a bustling commercial street in the heart of Baghdad yesterday. — AFP

Baghdad suicide blasts leave 32 dead

Bloodiest attack in Iraq's capital since January 2018

BAGHDAD: A rare twin suicide bombing killed nearly 32 in central Baghdad yesterday, Iraqi state media said, the deadliest attack in the city in three years. At least 32 people were killed and another 73 wounded in the attack on a huge open-air market for second-hand clothes in the Iraqi capital's Tayaran Square.

The market had been teeming with people following nearly a year of restrictions imposed across the country in a bid to halt the spread of COVID-19. According to an interior ministry statement, the first suicide bomber rushed into the market, claiming to feel sick.

Once a crowd of people had gathered around him, he detonated his explosives. As people then flocked around the victims, a second attacker detonated his bomb, the ministry said. An AFP photographer at the scene said security forces had cordoned off the area, where blood-stained clothes were strewn about the muddy streets. Paramedics were working to remove casualties, and Iraq's health ministry said it had mobilized medics across the capital. Yesterday's attack was the bloodiest inci-

dent in Baghdad since January 2018, when a suicide bomber also in Tayaran Square killed more than 30 people. Suicide bombings had been commonplace in Baghdad during the sectarian bloodletting that followed the US-led invasion of 2003.

Later on, as the Islamic State group swept across much of Iraq, its jihadists also targeted the capital. But with the group's territorial defeat in late 2017, suicide bombings in the city became rare. Baghdad's notorious concrete blast walls were dismantled and checkpoints across the city removed.

Bloody lead-up to vote

Yesterday's attack comes as Iraqis prepare for an election, events which are often preceded by bombings and assassinations. The 2018 attack took place just a few months before Iraq's last round of parliamentary elections.

Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi had originally set this year's general election for June, nearly a year ahead of schedule, in response to widespread protests in 2019. But

authorities are in talks over rescheduling them to October in order to give electoral authorities more time to register voters and new parties.

Yesterday twin attack was not immediately claimed but suicide bombings have been used by ultra-conservative Islamist groups, most recently IS. The jihadist factions seized a third of Iraq in 2014 and was dangerously close to the capital, but a ferocious three-year fight by Iraqi troops pushed them back. Still, the group's sleeper cells have continued to operate in desert and mountain areas, typically targeting security forces or state infrastructure with low casualty attacks. Still, the US-led coalition that had been supporting Iraq's campaign against IS has significantly drawn down its troop levels over the past year, citing the increased capabilities of Iraqi troops.

The United States, which provides the bulk of the force, has 2,500 troops left in Iraq — down from 5,200 a year ago. They are mainly in charge of training, providing drone surveillance and carrying out air strikes while Iraqi security forces handle security in urban areas. — AFP

International

Wary EU eyes improved Turkey ties as FM visits

Ankara's gas exploration in disputed waters strains EU-Turkey ties

BRUSSELS: The EU's top diplomat yesterday welcomed Turkey's foreign minister as Brussels presses Ankara to make good on recent gestures from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to calm tensions. Mevlut Cavusoglu said he was in Brussels to hammer out details for a visit by EU chiefs Ursula von der Leyen and Charles Michel to Turkey following an invitation from Erdogan.

"It is very important to create a positive atmosphere and agenda but in order for that agenda to be sustainable we need concrete steps by both sides," he said at the start of talks with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell. Tensions between the EU and Turkey reached new levels last year after Ankara repeatedly sent a ship to search for gas deposits in disputed waters, angering the bloc and its member states Greece and Cyprus.

But, in the weeks after Turkey withdrew the vessel, the Oruc Reis, in November and Brussels announced plans to expand sanctions last month, both sides have softened their rhetoric. In an important move, Turkey and Greece agreed to hold exploratory talks on their maritime dispute in Istanbul on January 25, resuming consultations suspended in 2016.

Erdogan insisted he wants to "turn a new page" in Ankara's relations with Brussels in a phone call this month with EU Commission president von der Leyen. While the EU says the

signs coming from Turkey are positive it insists that Ankara needs to turn them into "concrete facts and actions".

The bloc has a raft of major issues with Turkey, including Ankara's role in the Syria, Libya and Nagorny Karabakh conflicts. But it was spiralling tensions in the eastern Mediterranean, during which gunboats from NATO allies Turkey and Greece collided, that threatened to strain ties to breaking point.

Greece and Cyprus, backed up by France, pressed for broad punitive measures against Turkey. EU leaders in December settled on expanding a sanctions blacklist of individuals involved in drilling in Cypriot waters that currently contains two Turkish energy company bosses. It remains unclear when new names will be formally be added, but an EU diplomat said there could be a provisional agreement on them at a meeting of the bloc's foreign ministers next week.

Two months to convince

More ominous for Ankara is that EU leaders also tasked Borrell to come up with options for tougher punishment before their next summit in March in case Ankara resumes what Brussels called its "unilateral actions and provocations". While France, Greece and Cyprus pushed hardest for a tough line on Turkey, others led by eco-



BRUSSELS: Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu (left) and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell sit at table for the start of a meeting at the EEAS in Brussels yesterday. —AFP

nom ic powerhouse Germany have been far keener for a more diplomatic approach.

Many are anxious to keep Ankara on side as the EU still relies on it to prevent refugees from Syria heading into the bloc under a shaky 2016 deal. Cavusoglu said that he and Borrell would discuss updating that agreement, as well as convening a multilateral conference on

the eastern Mediterranean.

He also said he would focus on long-term concessions demanded by Ankara — visa-free travel with the EU and modernizing a customs union between the two. Ankara's top diplomat is also set to meet European Council president Michel and NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg today. —AFP

For Swiss preschoolers, democracy is child's play

LAUSANNE, Switzerland: Rather than playing house or building blocks, a few dozen Swiss preschoolers line up to cast their ballots in a vote that will shape lives in the make-believe village where they call the shots. A "citizenship project" created by three private preschools in the western city of Lausanne aims to prepare children from a young age for participation in Switzerland's famed direct democracy featuring referendums on a wide range of issues every few months.

"The idea is for the children to learn democracy," Olivier Demadeleine, head of the Educalis group that runs the preschools, told AFP. "We feel it is important to learn the right reflexes from an early age." There has been a growing push in Switzerland for such efforts, but the Educalis project stands out because of the very young age of its participants. Once a week, around 35 three- and four-year-olds drawn from the three preschools gather at the group's "village" in a wooded area on the outskirts of the city.

Role play

Some of the children play roles like village chief, nurse or police officer, wearing homemade uniforms. "They take their roles very seriously," Demadeleine says as one of the "nurses", wearing a white T-shirt with a red cross over her snowsuit, rushes to the aid of a crying child who has fallen face-first into the snow. Days in the village are spent outdoors, regardless of the weather. Bundled up in colourful snowsuits, the children sit fidgeting on the steps awaiting the big event of the day: a referendum.

Eve L'Eplattenier, who heads two of the preschools, kneels in

the snow behind a table bearing a metal ballot box, and points to a white flag with a crest adorned with a large "E" billowing in the wind behind her.

"This is your new flag," she said, reminding the children of the first vote held in the village back in November, when they were asked to choose between two designs. As then, the children recently received an envelope in the post with voting material identical to what adults receive before each popular vote in the country. This time, the children were asked to decide how they would prefer to vote going forward: by placing an X next to drawings illustrating the current secret ballot vote system, or by a show of hands.

To help organize the voting, L'Eplattenier calls up two girls, Olivia and Layla, who are wearing hand-painted T-shirts on top of their snowsuits identifying them as the village chiefs. They hand out the sealed envelopes with the ballots the children had filled out at home, and each child manoeuvres one of the secret votes into the ballot box with mittened hands.

Next up: Should we scrap naps?

Afterwards, five children and three adults go into a small shelter usually used for meals that now sports a poster declaring it the "vote-counting office".

Seated around a large table, L'Eplattenier explains how to open each envelope and place the ballots in two piles. Then they carefully count each pile together: 19 votes for hand-raising and 17 in favor of continuing with secret balloting. "Hand-raising won," Layla tells the children gathered outside. A few appeared a bit disappointed that their choice had not won the day, but L'Eplattenier said helping them work through that frustration is part of the exercise. The next vote, set to take place in a few months, is expected to be on a recycling system for the village. —AFP

Libyans agree to hold constitutional referendum: Egypt

CAIRO: Libyan envoys at UN-backed talks in Egypt agreed Wednesday to hold a constitutional referendum before planned elections in the war-torn country later this year, Egypt's foreign ministry said. Egypt "welcomes the agreement reached today between the Libyan parties in Hurgada in the framework of the constitutional process... and appreciates the efforts that led to the agreement to hold a referendum on the draft constitution in view of the Libyan elections scheduled for December 24, 2021," the ministry said in a statement.

New talks will be held in Egypt next month with a view to settling the "road map for the referendum and elections", it added. Oil-rich Libya has been torn apart by civil war since the NATO-backed uprising that ousted long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, with an array of militias filling the vacuum and civilian bodies struggling to impose their authority.

The UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) is based in the capital, while a House of Representatives which does not recognize the Tripoli administration is based in the east. A fragile ceasefire between the two sides, agreed in Geneva last October, has largely held despite threats by eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar to resume fighting. In the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Hurgada, members of the commission drafting a future constitution met with delegations from the House of Representatives and the Tripoli-based High Council of State, which advises the GNA. —AFP

International

Rise of crown princes: Oman heir joins youthful Gulf royals

30-year-old Haitham part of a new generation of powerful young royals

MUSCAT: Oman, ruled by the legendary Sultan Qaboos for half a century until his death last year, now has an heir apparent aged just 30, part of a new generation of powerful young Gulf royals.

In a region long dominated by aging emirs and kings, the rise of a fresh crop of crown princes is stirring excitement among youthful populations in the Gulf states. Their roles are linked to ambitious reform programs designed to wean the countries off their dependence on oil and create diversified economies with more employment opportunities.

"There is a real appetite for 30-something leadership in several countries, including Oman's neighbors Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates," Elana DeLozier, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said. "Even if that person is not the top leader, having youth in senior positions brings hope that the desires of the young will be worked into policy." Oman's Dhi Yazan bin Haitham, a soft-spoken 30-year-old who currently serves as minister of culture, sports and youth, last week became the latest to join their ranks. He is the first royal in Oman's modern history to be designated heir apparent, setting a clear succession path after the uncertainty that surrounded Sultan Qaboos' death at the age of 79 with no appointed heir.

New visions

The transformation inside Gulf monarchies is best exemplified by Saudi Arabia, which since the middle of the last century has been ruled in turn by the sons of founder King Abdulaziz. Mohammed bin Salman, also known as MBS, the 33-year-old regarded as de facto leader since his appointment as crown prince in 2017, has introduced sweeping social and economic reforms that have made him popular among the youth in the kingdom. A bitter four-year diplomatic row between Saudi Arabia and Qatar was symbolically put to rest this month with a public embrace between Prince Mohammed and Qatar's young ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. The Qatari Amir was handed power by his father at the age of just 33 in 2013, after being groomed to take control of the desert nation that is to host the 2022 World Cup.

In Bahrain, 51-year-old Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa was appointed prime minister last November on the death of his great uncle, who had held the post since independence in 1971. And in Abu Dhabi, while not a youngster, 59-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, or MBZ, is seen as the most powerful force behind UAE policies.

Dubai's Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed has turned into a media sensation among young Emiratis with his health campaigns



MUSCAT: In this file photo taken on January 14, 2021 Omani Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth Dhi Yazan Bin Haitham attends the general assembly meeting of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) in the Omani capital Muscat on December 16, 2020. — AFP

and appetite for extreme sports.

Learning the ropes

Many Omanis—especially the younger generation—have welcomed the appointment of the heir, congratulating him on social media platforms. "They have confidence that he will most likely have plenty of time to learn the ropes given

that his father is only in his 60s," said DeLozier.

Sultan Qaboos transformed the former Arabian Peninsula backwater into a modern nation. He was succeeded by a cousin, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said, who was chosen at a meeting of Oman's royal family during which a sealed letter from Qaboos naming his preference was opened. —AFP

Cool welcome for Biden in Gulf amid uncertain Iran policy

DUBAI: Newspapers in Arab states of the Gulf yesterday gave a cautious welcome to new US President Joe Biden, amid uncertainty over whether he will seek to re-engage with regional rival Iran.

Leaders of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council — with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Oman — were quick to formally congratulate Biden, who was sworn into office Wednesday in a ceremony boycotted by his predecessor Donald Trump.

"Goodbye Trump, hello Biden," Saudi columnist Abdulrahman Al-Rashed wrote in the pan-Arab daily Asharq Al-Awsat. Like other Gulf commentators, he pointed to concerns over whether the new US administration's policies will mirror those of Barack Obama, for whom Biden served as vice president.

Biden is expected to re-adopt a less confrontational stance towards the Islamic republic, unlike Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" and high tensions. Trump "tied Iran's arms, destroying its financial and economic capabilities. Therefore, returning to the same point from which Obama left is almost impossible", Rashed said. —AFP

'Excessive' detentions on trial in Morocco

RABAT: Morocco's detention of thousands of suspects awaiting judicial proceedings has sparked a heated debate in the North African country, with even prison authorities criticizing its "excessive" use.

Rights groups have warned of the use of preventative detention against political opponents. As many as 39 percent of detainees in Morocco's jails at the end of 2019 — over 33,000 people—were awaiting trials or verdicts, according to an annual report by the chief prosecutor.

The report urged courts to rein in their use of the measure, saying it should only be applied in "exceptional" cases. It also called on lawmakers to provide "alternatives" to pre-trial detention by finally pushing through a reformed penal code, under discussion since 2016.

The prison service in July also criticized "excessive" incarceration of suspects awaiting trial, calling it an "exception that has almost become a rule" and saying it was contributing to overcrowding in the country's jails. But a coalition of 20 of the country's main rights groups said recently the policy was being "applied without balance, wisdom or foresight". In a statement, they called for an end to detentions before investigations and trials. They urged authorities to release "all victims" of the policy, highlighting the cases of journalists Omar Radi and Souleimane Raissouni, as well as Maati Monjib, a historian and rights activist. Their lawyer Mohamed Messaoudi told AFP that "nothing justifies keeping them in preventative detention". "They weren't caught committing any crime, and they pose no threat" to society, he said.

Their treatment "confirms their statements that they have been detained for their opinions." Radi, 34, has been in prison for six months over allegations of rape and spying. The rape investigation was completed in November, while the espionage probe, which authorities launched after Amnesty International



RABAT: A member of Morocco's security forces locks the entrance to a court in Sale near the capital Rabat in this file picture taken on May 16, 2019. —AFP

published a report claiming Radi's phone had been tapped, is ongoing.

Rabat has denied listening to Radi's calls. Monjib, 60, was arrested in a Rabat restaurant as part of a long-running money-laundering investigation on December 29. He says none of the accusations against him are new. But despite the investigation being opened as long ago as 2015, he has yet to appear before a judge.

Raissouni is chief editor of Arabic-language newspaper Akhbar AlYaoum and a longtime critic of the country's ruling elite. He has been detained for eight months over alleged sexual harassment. According to Messaoudi, who is also defending Raissouni, the investigation has been completed—but no trial date has been set. The Moroccan authorities say the judiciary is independent and strictly follows the rules. —AFP

International

French Muslims at odds over new anti-extremism charter

Three Islamic groups decide against signing the charter

PARIS: The head of France's main Muslim organization yesterday slammed a "unilateral" move by three Islamic groups not to sign up to an anti-extremism charter championed by President Emmanuel Macron. Macron wants French Muslim groups to sign up to the charter as he seeks to secure France's secular system in the wake of a spate of attacks blamed on Islamist radicals in 2020.

But the Committee for Coordination of Turkish Muslims in France (CCMTF) and the Milli Gorus Islamic Confederation (CMIG) — both catering to citizens of Turkish origin—as well as the Faith and Practice movement, announced late Wednesday that they would not be signing up to the charter.

"Through these repetitive actions, the groups... all risk being held responsible for this situation of division," said Mohamed Moussaoui, the president of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), the umbrella grouping for France's Muslim groups. This refusal "is not likely to provide reassurance... on the state of the representative bodies of the Muslim religion", he added.

A source close to the issue, who asked not to be named, said the three groups refusing to sign the charter were particularly concerned about the definition of foreign interference in religion and the definition of political Islam. The row comes at a time of severe diplomatic tensions between France and Turkey, whose President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly lambasted Macron's bid to crack down on radical Islam in the country.

The Milli Gorus, a pan-European movement for the Turkish diaspora, is seen as inspired by the ideas of late prime minister Necmettin Erbakan, re-



PARIS: Macron wants French Muslim groups to sign up to the charter as he seeks to secure France's secular system in the wake of a spate of attacks blamed on Islamist radicals in 2020.—AFP

garded as the father of political Islam in Turkey and Erdogan's mentor. "We believe that certain passages and formulations in the text submitted are likely to weaken the bonds of trust between the Muslims of France and the nation," the three groups said in a statement.

"Furthermore, some statements are prejudicial to the honour of Muslims, with an accusatory and marginalizing tone."

'Important clarification'

Five out of nine groups who make up the CFCM, a body set up almost 20 years ago to enable dialogue between the government and the Muslim community, have signed up to the charter after weeks of sometimes acrimonious debates. But the failure of the CFCM to so far show a totally

united front risks robbing the initiative of the consensus within the Muslim community that it is supposed to highlight. A government source however insisted that the groups' refusal would not weaken the process, adding that "the masks are coming off". "An important clarification is being made," the source said. The charter rejects "instrumentalising" Islam for political ends and affirms equality between men and women, while denouncing practices such as female circumcisions, forced marriages or "virginity certificates" for brides. Macron railed against the promotion of "political Islam" in France in November last year after a teacher was beheaded outside his school. The attack prompted a crackdown against extremist mosques and Islamist associations, along with a vigorous defense of French secularism. — AFP

Madrid building blast toll rises to 4

MADRID: The toll from a powerful explosion caused by a gas leak that gutted a building in a residential part of Madrid rose to four yesterday after a priest died from his injuries.

The 36-year-old, who was ordained a priest last June, was one of the 11 people who were injured during Wednesday's blast in the La Latina district. He died in hospital in the early hours yesterday, the Madrid archdiocese said in a statement. The building belonging to the Church of the Virgin de la Paloma and San Pedro el Real located next-door, was completely destroyed in the blast.

Two men who were walking in the street and a repairman who was fixing the building's boiler on the fifth floor when the blast occurred also died. Officials had originally reported that an 85-year-old woman had died but they later said the victim was a man.

A man who was initially reported as missing was later confirmed to be the repairman who died in the blast, a father of four, government repre-



sentative Jose Manuel Franco told radio Cadena Ser. Neighbors reported a strong smell of gas in the minutes before the blast, he added. Despite the force of the explosion, no one was hurt in the

elderly care home next door, nor in an adjacent school where tons of debris fell into the playground while the children were in class. At least 15 cars were destroyed in the area. — AFP

Africa records higher death rates during second wave

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia: Health systems in Africa hobbled by shortages of oxygen and other resources are struggling with Covid's "second wave," pushing the fatality rate above the global average, the continent's health watchdog said yesterday. Africa has so far recorded around 3.3 million cases of Covid-19 and nearly 82,000 deaths, according to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC). These figures represent small fractions of the global totals, but cases have increased by an average of 14 percent each week for the past month. Africa CDC director John Nkengasong told a press conference yesterday that the continent-wide case fatality rate was now 2.5 percent—above the global average of 2.2 percent.

That is a break from earlier in the pandemic, when death rates on the continent were on average lower than the rest of the world, Nkengasong said. "During the second wave we are beginning to see that reverse. So I think that is one of the remarkable characteristics of the second wave, which we must fight hard," Nkengasong said.—AFP

EU leaders mull border closure to fight virus variants

BRUSSELS: EU leaders grappled yesterday with the threat of new coronavirus variants as wary countries push for a closure of Europe's internal borders to stop the spread. The chiefs will hold a summit-by videolink to protect themselves from infection—"to raise political awareness on the seriousness of the situation with the new variants," an EU official said.

Virus mutations that emerged in Britain, South Africa and Brazil have alarmed EU authorities because of their increased infectivity, prompting bans or restrictions on travellers from those countries. But calls are increasing to shut the intra-EU borders in a coordinated manner and not to repeat the experience in March when several member states panicked and closed off their national borders unilaterally, triggering travel chaos.

That decision came to be seen as disastrous, disrupting the already stumbling European economy, and the leaders will work hard to find ways to thwart the variants while keeping factories and businesses running at capacity. —AFP

International

As pandemic worsens in US, Biden unveils ambitious COVID strategy

President to sign 10 executive orders to jumpstart national strategy

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden's administration unveiled a detailed COVID-19 roadmap yesterday to boost vaccinations and testing while centering scientific expertise, after the new US president warned during his inaugural speech the pandemic was entering its "deadliest period."

Officials said Biden would immediately sign 10 executive orders and other directives to jumpstart the national strategy, which experts said was sorely missing under his predecessor Donald Trump.

The US is the world's hardest-hit country with more than 405,000 deaths, and government models suggest the B.1.1.7 variant imported from Britain could supercharge the outbreak's trajectory in the coming months. "For almost a year now, Americans could not look to the federal government for any strategy, let alone a comprehensive approach to respond to COVID," Jeff Zients, a former management consultant who is Biden's new COVID-19 task force coordinator told reporters. "As president Biden steps into office today, that all changes," he added.

'Restoring trust'

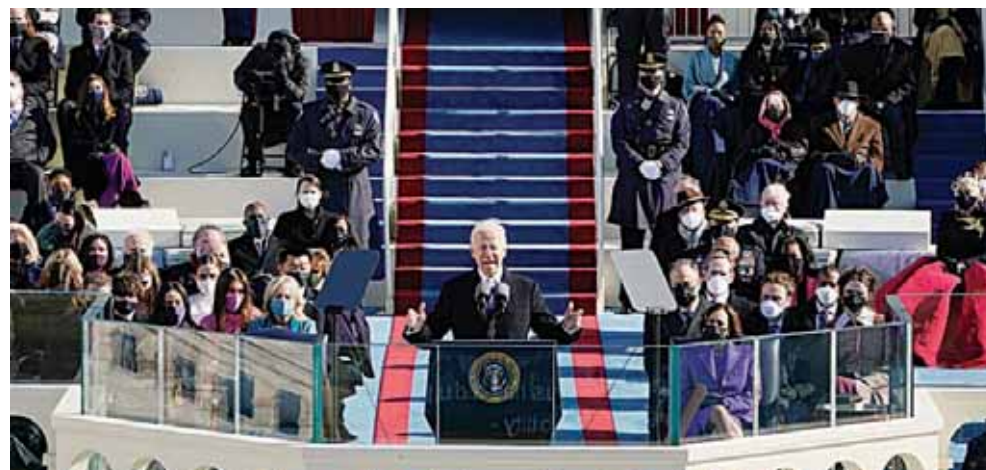
The plan has organized goals like restoring the trust of the American people, surging the vaccination campaign, and mitigating viral spread through aggressive masking and testing, while expanding the public health workforce. It also seeks to expand emergency relief and invoke emergency legislation to increase industrial production; safely reopen schools,

businesses and travel; protect the most vulnerable and advance racial equity; and restore US global leadership with future pandemic preparedness. The administration is seeking \$1.9 trillion from Congress for its plans, which includes \$20 billion for vaccines and \$50 billion for testing. Taken as a whole, the strategy amounts to a more closely coordinated approach than that of the previous administration, which sidelined key agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sought to censor recommendations by prominent scientists, and said individual states should do what seems right for them.

Some of the measures were already announced in recent days, including recommending that the eligibility criteria for vaccine priority groups be widened and simplified in order to increase the rate of shots being injected. As it stands, the federal government has overseen the allocation of 35.9 million doses to states, of which 16.5 million have been used-or 46 percent. The figure is well below targets set by the Trump administration, but the administration rate has been steadily ticking up in recent days.

Vaccine blitz

New White House vaccines coordinator Bechara Chouair restated the administration's intention to bring online thousands of federal vaccination centers as well as the mobilization of thousands more workers to help. These plans would bring the financial and logistical clout of the



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Joe Biden speaks after being sworn in as the 46th President of the US during the 59th Presidential Inauguration at the US Capitol in Washington, Wednesday. —AFP

federal government in the fight against the virus-again, an element that had largely been missing. The administration will also continue the policy of rolling out vaccine doses for Pfizer and Moderna's two-shot regimes as soon as they become available. The Trump team had initially set aside the booster as reserve, but later changed course after running low on supply.

Executive orders would also be advanced to establish a pandemic testing board, to boost research efforts into treatments, and create a Health Equity Task Force. This group, headed by Yale associate professor Marcella Nunez-Smith, will advise the president on allocating resources and funding in communities affected by inequities linked to race, geography and disability. —AFP

In departure from Trump era, US hails WHO virus response

GENEVA: In a dramatic about-turn, the new US administration yesterday thanked the World Health Organization for leading the global pandemic response and vowed to remain a member state.

"Under trying circumstances, this organization has rallied the scientific and research and development community to accelerate vaccines, therapies and diagnostics," top US scientist Anthony Fauci, who has been named President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser, told a meeting of the WHO's executive board.

The WHO, he said, had "relentlessly worked with nations in their fight against COVID-19." His comments marked a clear departure from the harsh criticism dealt to the WHO by former US president Donald Trump, who had begun withdrawing his country from the organization.

But on his first day in office Wednesday, Biden reversed that decision. In a letter sent to United Nations chief Antonio Guterres, Biden announced he was retracting Trump's July 6 notification that the United States intended to withdraw from the UN health agency in 12 months' time.

"The United States intends to remain a member of the World Health Organization," Biden wrote. —AFP

Harris's Indian family counts on her becoming president

NEW DELHI: Kamala Harris's Indian family huddled around a television to watch her inauguration as US vice-president, but they plan on being there in person in four years if she becomes America's number one. The first female, Black and south Asian vice-president in US history was born in California but her mother took her on several trips to India as a child, and her links to the country have set its 1.3 billion people abuzz.

"I wish she does such a damn good job, four years later she will automatically get a Democratic nomination and win the presidency," said Harris's uncle Gopalan Balachandran. Balachandran could not be in Washington to see Harris sworn in on Wednesday because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"It would have been nice to have been there," the uncle told AFP, but he hopes to travel to the United States at a later date if he can secure a vaccination.

US media reports have spoken of a possible deal under which President Joe Biden, 78, will serve only one term, leaving Harris a clear run to the Democratic Party's candidacy in the next election.

Balachandran's daughter, Sharada Balachandran Orihuela, an English professor at the University of Maryland, was at the ceremony and was pictured with Harris. Hours before the event, Harris, 56, posted a video on Twitter in which she credited the women who have inspired her, including her late mother Shyamala



SILIGURI: Newspapers featuring front-page news on US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are seen at a newspaper stand in Siliguri yesterday. —AFP

Gopalan, a breast cancer specialist who was born in India.

"She (Kamala) did everything on her own. If anybody, her beacon was her mother," Balachandran said.

Celebrations for the inauguration were held in the family's ancestral village, Thulasendrapuram, in Tamil Nadu state, with firecrackers set off and people clapping and cheering as Harris took the oath.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Harris, calling her swearing-in a "historic occasion". Modi said he was "looking forward to interacting with her to make India-USA relations more robust. The India-USA partnership is beneficial for our planet." —AFP

International

World leaders congratulate Biden

Global leaders looking forward to working with president's team

PARIS: World leaders said they were looking forward to working with Joe Biden, the Democrat sworn in as US president yesterday after four turbulent years under Donald Trump.

European Union

Charles Michel, president of the European Council, tweeted congratulations to Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, adding: "It's time to bring back conviction & common sense and rejuvenate our EU-US relationship." European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "Europe is ready for a fresh start."

Iran

President Hassan Rouhani hailed the departure of "tyrant" Trump, Tehran having repeatedly called on Washington to lift sanctions imposed over its nuclear drive. "We expect (the Biden administration) to return to law and to commitments, and try in the next four years, if they can, to remove the stains of the past four years," said Rouhani. Biden's administration wants the United States back in the landmark Iran nuclear accord, from which Trump withdrew, provided Tehran returns to strict compliance.

Israel

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged Biden to strengthen the long-standing alliance between the two countries. "I look forward to working with you to further strengthen the US-Israel alliance, to continue expanding peace between Israel and the Arab world and to confront common challenges, chief among them the threat posed by Iran," Netanyahu said in a video.

NATO

"The bond between North America and Europe is the bedrock of our security, and a strong NATO is good for both North America and Europe," said NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg. "NATO Allies need to stand together to address the security con-

Taiwan invited to US inauguration for first time since 1979

TAIPEI: Taiwan's de facto ambassador to the US was formally invited to President Joe Biden's inauguration in what Taipei said yesterday was a precedent-setting first since Washington switched recognition to Beijing in 1979.

Hsiao Bi-khim, Taipei's envoy, posted a video of herself at Wednesday's inauguration saying she was "honored to represent the people and government of Taiwan here at the inauguration of President Biden and Vice President Harris". "Democracy is our common language and freedom is our common objective," she added.

Taipei's foreign ministry said it was the first time in decades that a Taiwanese envoy had been "formally invited" by the inauguration's organizing committee while the ruling Democratic Progressive Party described it as "a new breakthrough in 42 years".

Taiwan split from China at the end of a civil war in 1949. Its 23 million people live under the constant threat of invasion by the mainland, whose leaders view the island as their territory and have vowed to one day take it. Beijing balks at any official contacts with Taiwan and tries to keep the island diplomatically isolated.

Washington recognized Beijing over Taipei during the administration of President Jimmy Carter. But the US remains democratic Taiwan's most important unofficial ally and is bound by an act of Congress to sell the island weapons to defend itself. Since 1979 US presidencies generally trod a cautious diplomatic path

sequences of the rise of China, the threat of terrorism, including in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a more assertive Russia."

The Vatican

Pope Francis urged Biden to promote "reconciliation and peace" around the world. "At a time when the grave crises facing our human family call for far-sighted and united responses, I pray that your decisions will be guided by a concern for building a society marked by authentic justice and freedom," the pope said.

Russia

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia would seek "good relations with the United States", while a foreign ministry statement said they expected a "more constructive" approach to upcoming arms control talks. The US and Russia are to discuss extending the landmark 2010 New START nuclear weapons accord shortly after Biden's swearing in.

Germany

Chancellor Angela Merkel said she was looking forward to a "new chapter of German-American friendship and cooperation". "Warmest congratulations on your inauguration, @POTUS Joe Biden and @VP Kamala Harris—a true celebration of American democracy," Merkel was quoted as saying in a tweet posted by her spokesman Steffen Seibert.

France

French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted: "Best wishes on this most significant day for the American people! 'We are together. We will be stronger to face the challenges of our time. Stronger to build our future. Stronger to protect our planet. Welcome back to the Paris Agreement!'" Macron wrote in English.

He was referring to the 2015 international accord committing all nations to cut carbon emissions to limit global warming, but which

on Taiwan in a bid to avoid angering Beijing as well as discourage Taipei from ever formally declaring independence.

'A subtle, meaningful gesture'

But that changed dramatically under President Donald Trump who embraced warmer ties with the island as he feuded with China on issues like trade and national security. Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen secured an unprecedented phone call with Trump after his 2016 election win, a move that infuriated Beijing.

Trump also ramped up arms sales and diplomatic contacts, while one of his administration's last foreign policy acts was to lift restrictions that limited how US officials interacted with their Taiwanese counterparts. Biden's Taiwan policy is less clear cut for now, but Hsiao's presence at the inauguration hints at a continuation of his predecessor's precedent-setting changes.

Kharis Templeman, an Taiwan-based expert at the Hoover Institution, described it as "a subtle gesture but a meaningful one". In a tweet to Biden after his oath of office, President Tsai said Taiwan "stands ready to work with you as a global force for good".

China has swung more authoritarian and belligerent under President Xi Jinping, with Beijing's fighter jets buzzing Taiwan at a record rate last year. Protecting the island from an invasion became one of the few issues to receive broad bipartisan support during the polarized Trump years, and politicians on both sides of the aisle have called on Biden to be more proactive in maintaining Taiwan's freedoms.

Jim Risch, the Republican chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, welcomed Hsiao's invitation to the inauguration. "I commend the new administration for this invitation and encourage them to build upon the progress made on US-Taiwan relations to reflect the challenges and geopolitical realities we face," he wrote on Twitter. — AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: Former US President George W. Bush, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, former US President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama arrive at the inauguration of US President-elect Joe Biden on the West Front of the US Capitol on Wednesday in Washington, DC. —AFP

the United States under Trump formally quit in November last year.

Britain

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has faced criticism over his close relationship with Trump, said he was looking forward to "working closely" with Biden. "In our fight against COVID and across climate change, defense, security and in promoting and defending democracy, our goals are the same and our nations will work hand in hand to achieve them," he said. Queen Elizabeth II sent a private message to Biden before he was sworn in, Buckingham Palace said, without revealing the contents of the message. — AFP

News in brief

Moon: 'America is back'

SEOUL: South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who brokered the talks process between Donald Trump and the North's leader Kim Jong Un, yesterday congratulated Joe Biden on his inauguration as US president, tweeting: "America is back." The relationship between treaty allies Seoul and Washington was at times deeply strained under Trump, who repeatedly excoriated the South for not paying enough towards the US troop presence in the country, demanding billions of dollars more. In his first year in power, Trump raised widespread alarm in the South by engaging in personal insults and threats of war with Kim—at one point accusing the pro-engagement Moon of "appeasement". —AFP

Mexico hails halt to wall construction

MEXICO CITY: Mexico on Wednesday hailed US President Joe Biden's order to halt construction of Donald Trump's wall along the US-Mexican border, as well as his other immigration-linked reforms. "Mexico welcomes the end of the construction of the wall, the immigration initiative in favor of DACA and a path to dual citizenship," Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard wrote on Twitter. He was referring to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program to regularize the immigration status of young people who arrived illegally as children, which Trump tried to shut down. The Republican sparked anger during his 2016 election campaign when he branded Mexican migrants "rapists" and drug dealers, and vowed to build a wall across the southern US border. — AFP

International

'Going home': Biden's surreal walk to the White House

25,000 National Guard troops outnumber revelers on inauguration day

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden held his wife Jill's hand as they strode up their new home's driveway Wednesday—which was the only normal thing about the day he became the president of the United States. Washington was under unprecedented security lockdown, cheering crowds absent because of America's out-of-control COVID outbreak and Donald Trump had only left the White House hours before.

Biden's armored black limousine had deposited him at the end of his new street-Pennsylvania Avenue—after his swearing in and a visit to Arlington National Cemetery to pay respects to US military war dead. But he popped the surreality of the moment with a quip as he made the short walk to the White House with Jill, followed closely by Vice President Kamala Harris and her family.

"It feels like I'm going home," the president told an NBC News reporter, who was among the dozens of journalists recording each step from a grandstand. The sound of military marching bands was still hanging in the air while a group of Secret Service agents in long coats scanned the scene.

Until shortly before his arrival, red dump trucks with "God Bless America" emblazoned on their sides served as security barriers to Pennsylvania Avenue. It betrayed the overwhelming security machine for Biden's extraordinary day, including miles of metal barriers, thousands of masked security forces and a dystopian-looking Washington that would normally be primed to

Biden's first foreign leader call will be to Trudeau

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's first call to a foreign leader will be to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said—with the fate of the controversial Keystone XL pipeline on the agenda. "His first foreign leader call will be on Friday with Prime Minister Trudeau," Psaki told reporters at her first White House briefing.

She said they would discuss their "important relationship," and the Biden administration's decision to halt further construction of the Keystone XL oil pipeline between Canada and the United States. Trudeau said he was "disappointed" by the move, which came shortly after Biden took office.

"While we welcome the president's commitment to fight climate change, we are disappointed but acknowledge the President's decision to fulfill his election campaign promise on Keystone XL," Trudeau said in a statement. "I look forward to working with President Biden

party on Inauguration Day.

The lockdown meant the contingent of roughly 25,000 National Guard troops far outnumbered revelers. "This looks like the entrance to a military base... during war," said 42-year-old Joe Brunner from New York City, as he stood across from a checkpoint guarded by armed troops and military vehicles in central Washington.

"The atmosphere is very strange, it is very un-American", said 36-year-old Jason Sheffield, adding the security zone and heavy police presence "is unethical to freedom" and "very scary."

For most Americans, the inauguration was watched on social media and TV. Streets were nearly empty and many businesses in downtown Washington were boarded up, some due to the pandemic and others because of recent violent protests.

In recent years, tens of thousands of people have been close enough to the inauguration ceremony to see the president take the oath of office at the great domed Capitol building that hosts Congress.

The crowd has been massively pared down due to virus contagion concerns—normally 200,000 passes would be distributed among lawmakers to hand out to their constituents. This year it was one ticket for each of the 535 members of Congress and one guest each.

On top of that, Donald Trump's supporters attacked the Capitol building two weeks ago to try to undo Biden's election win, prompting extra heavy security. The number of National Guard

to reduce pollution, combat climate change, fight COVID-19, create middle class jobs, and build back better by supporting a sustainable economic recovery for everyone."

TC Energy, the Canadian company behind the pipeline, suspended construction of the partially completed oil conduit earlier Wednesday, saying the move would mean thousands of lost jobs. "The decision would overturn an unprecedented, comprehensive regulatory process that lasted more than a decade and repeatedly concluded the pipeline would transport much needed energy in an environmentally responsible way while enhancing North American energy security," it said.

Canadian regulators approved the project in 2010 but it was blocked by president Barack Obama in 2015 due to environmental concerns—a decision that his successor Donald Trump reversed in 2017.

While Ottawa has always supported the project, environmental groups and indigenous groups have steadfastly cried foul. The 1,210-mile (1,947-kilometer) pipeline, starting in 2023, was to transport up to 830,000 barrels of oil per day from the Alberta oil sands to Nebraska and then through an existing system to refineries in coastal Texas. —AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Joe Biden (right) and First Lady Jill Biden arrive at the White House in Washington, DC, on Wednesday. — AFP

troops—which is on top of thousands of police officers—is about three times the roughly 8,000 on hand for Trump's inauguration.

Those troops would, outside a pandemic year, be guarding crowds on the Capitol grounds and many thousands more packing the roughly 700-acre (280-hectare) National Mall.

The 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama, America's first Black president, drew an esti-

mated 450,000 spectators to the Mall. Yet some people defied the warnings and strolled the carless streets to see what they could of America's handover of power.

"I think today is kind of joyous," said downtown Washington resident Sheila Callahan. "As soon as Trump's helicopter took off from the White House, people (in her neighborhood) were up on the roof cheering." —AFP

Biden to roll back Trump policies, remake US role in climate crisis

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden committed the United States to rejoining the Paris climate accord, blocked an oil pipeline project and froze Arctic drilling in a raft of executive orders signed hours after taking office Wednesday. But for the Democrat who has pledged to roll back four years of environmental harm done by his predecessor Donald Trump, that's just the start.

Experts say that Biden will have to rebuild the credibility the US lost in the eyes of the international community, by setting concrete goals for emissions reductions on the path to net zero by 2050. Next, he'll need to realize his \$2 trillion climate plan, which would place green action at the heart of the economy and its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, while ensuring a long term shift that can't be rapidly undone under a future Republican president.

"I think it's important that the US shows that

it means business at home," David Waskow of the World Resources Institute told AFP. The WRI is advocating for the US to set a 45-50 percent reduction in total greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels.

Biden has also said he will convene the leaders of major economies for a climate summit within 100 days of his inauguration. Among the executive orders Wednesday, the Biden administration submitted a letter to the UN that formally triggers a 30-day process to reenter the Paris climate agreement.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the action and the prospect of "the leadership of United States in accelerating global efforts towards net zero" emissions, calling on the president to adopt an "ambitious" plan to fight global warming.

French President Emmanuel Macron lauded Biden's decision to return to the accord, telling him "welcome back" in a congratulatory message. Biden also scrapped the Keystone XL pipeline connecting the Alberta oil sands to coastal refineries in Texas—a move that threatens to strain ties with Canada. Still, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who had pressed Biden to reverse his decision on the pipeline, vowed to "work together to advance climate action and clean economic growth." —AFP

International

China calls for 'better angels' to prevail in reset with Biden's US

A corrosive period of Sino-US diplomacy under Trump ends

BEIJING: China yesterday congratulated US President Joe Biden on his inauguration and called for a reset in relations between Beijing and Washington after a corrosive period of diplomacy under Donald Trump. Beijing also welcomed news that the US would rejoin the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accord, as Biden tried to immediately pivot his office back to a key role in global leadership.

The ever-antagonistic Trump harangued China over trade, rights, the origins of the COVID-19 virus, tech and defense supremacy, prompting angry near-daily jousts between both countries' diplomats. The new US president is expected to remain tough on the superpower rival but soften the tone and commit to international cooperation after Trump's divisive "America First" approach.

"With cooperation from both sides, the better angels in China-US relations will beat the evil forces," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a press briefing. She said Biden had used the word "unity" several times in his inauguration speech, and that it was "precisely what is needed currently in US-China relations".

"The recent period has indeed been especially difficult," she added. Beijing laid into "clown-like" Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the final hours of his tenure, before sanc-

tioning him and more than two dozen advisors and ex-officials in the former president's administration.

The officials and their family members will be prohibited from entering mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau, the foreign ministry said. "Over the past few years the Trump administration, especially Pompeo, has buried too many mines in US-China relations that need to be eliminated, burned too many bridges that need to be built, and destroyed too many roads that need to be repaired," said Hua yesterday.

Taiwan tensions

There were still signs of tension on the horizon, however, as it emerged that a representative of the self-ruled island of Taiwan was formally invited to the US inauguration for the first time since 1979. Beijing balks at any official contacts with Taiwan and tries to keep the island diplomatically isolated.

Hsiao Bi-khim, Taipei's envoy, posted a video of herself at Wednesday's inauguration saying she was "honoured to represent the people and government of Taiwan here at the inauguration of President Biden and Vice President Harris". "Democracy is our common language and freedom is our common objective," she added.

Washington recognized Beijing over Taipei



BEIJING: The front page of a Chinese newspaper showing the picture of the inauguration of US President Joe Biden, the 46th US President, at a newsstand in Beijing yesterday. —AFP

during the administration of President Jimmy Carter. But the US remains democratic Taiwan's most important unofficial ally and is bound by an act of Congress to sell the island weapons to defend itself. Hua warned yesterday that China wanted the US to "cautiously and appropriately handle Taiwan issues to prevent harm to US-

China relations."

Protecting the island from a Chinese invasion became one of the few issues to receive broad bipartisan support during the polarized Trump years, and politicians on both sides of the aisle have called on Biden to be more proactive in maintaining Taiwan's freedoms. — AFP

Nepali climbers overcame 'treacherous' conditions to make history on K2

SHIGAR, Pakistan: Nepali climbers who made history at the weekend by becoming the first to summit the world's second-highest mountain in winter told Wednesday how they battled hurricane-force winds and freezing temperatures to achieve the record. The triumphant 10-man team was plucked from Base Camp on the 8,611-metre (28,251-feet) K2 — known as the "savage mountain"—by a Pakistan Army helicopter and flown to the Shigar Valley, a gateway to the mighty Karakoram range.

Wearing traditional woolen hats and festooned with garlands, the climbers were received as heroes on the first leg of their journey back home. "This winter we came here with the hope that we were going to make this happen," said Nirmal Purja, one of the leading members of the team and a former Gurkha and British special forces soldier. "The weather conditions were really, really horrendous, the temperature was up to minus 65 degrees Celsius (minus 85 degrees Fahrenheit) — there were hurricane (strength winds) but 10 climbers from Nepal managed to make it happen."

One of the climbers told AFP how he almost missed out on making history, briefly giving up in the tough conditions. "At camp four I had actually quit, but when I made the radio call... he didn't answer," Mingma Gyalje, known as Mingma G, who had attempted the record last year, told AFP. "I couldn't leave my team alone like that so when he didn't answer, I decided to try again.

"Normally when someone doesn't answer a call you feel offended, but in this case I am thankful." Despite being famed for their climbing expertise, there has never before been a Nepali



This handout photo taken on January 16, 2021 and released by Seven Summit Treks, shows Nepali mountaineer Sona Sherpa (right) Galje Sherpa (left) and Chhang Dawa Sherpa, Nepali expedition manager and team leader, posing for pictures after reaching the summit of Mt K2, which is the second highest mountain in the world, at the Base Camp of the winter expedition in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of northern Pakistan. —AFP

climber on a first winter ascent of a peak higher than 8,000 meters. Nepali guides—usually ethnic Sherpas from the valleys around Mount Everest—are considered the backbone of the climbing industry in the Himalayas for bearing huge risks to carry equipment and food, fix ropes, and repair ladders. —AFP

Production 'not affected' by fire at India vaccine plant

MUMBAI: A fire broke out yesterday at India's Serum Institute, the world's largest maker of vaccines, but a company source said production of drugs to prevent coronavirus was not affected. The Serum Institute is producing millions of doses of the Covishield coronavirus vaccine, developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University, for India and many other countries.

Local TV channels showed thick clouds of grey smoke billowing from the sprawling site in Pune, in western India. "It is not going to affect production of the Covid-19 vaccine," a source at the Serum Institute told AFP, adding that the blaze was at a new plant under construction.

An official at the local fire station told AFP that six or seven firetrucks had reached the site, spread over 100 acres (40 hectares). Three people were reported to have been rescued from the blaze, with another unaccounted for. "Thick smoke is hampering the work of bringing the fire under control," the fire brigade told NDTV. The complex where the fire broke out is a few minutes drive from the facility where the coronavirus vaccines are produced, reports said.

Eight or nine buildings are under construction at the complex to enhance its manufacturing capability, NDTV reported. Serum Institute—founded in 1966 by Cyrus Poonawalla—is the world's largest vaccine manufacturer by volume, producing 1.5 billion doses a year even before the coronavirus pandemic. It makes vaccines against polio, diphtheria, tetanus, hepatitis B, measles, mumps and rubella, which are exported to more than 170 countries. — AFP

International

Mongolian PM quits after protests over COVID-19 mother's treatment

Ukhnaa resigns after TV footage on woman ignites public anger

ULAANBAATAR, Mongolia: Mongolia's prime minister resigned yesterday following protests and public outrage over the treatment of a coronavirus patient and her newborn baby. Landlocked Mongolia reported just a handful of COVID-19 cases last year after imposing strict border controls, but in November its first domestic transmissions caused a new wave of lockdowns and restrictions.

Anger mounted this week after TV footage showed a woman who appeared to have recently given birth being moved to an infectious disease center wearing only hospital pyjamas and plastic slippers, despite temperatures dipping to minus 25 degrees Celsius.

After protests outside government buildings on Wednesday, the Mongolian politician apologized on behalf of the government and said he would stand down immediately. "Unfortunately, we made mistake during relocating that mother," admitted Prime Minister Khurelsukh Ukhnaa yesterday. "It

was heartbreaking to see how she was treated."

"As a prime minister, I must take the responsibility." The video of the woman in an ambulance clutching her baby prompted fierce criticism, particularly as Mongolian tradition dictates new mothers should avoid the cold weather and cold food for the first month after birth. On Wednesday around 5,000 mostly young protesters gathered in a square opposite government buildings in the capital Ulaanbaatar, some carrying wrapped up bundles to represent babies.

Uztiibayar Purevsuren, 30, held a banner reading "resign" and said she was there to complain about "incompetent doctors".

The vice prime minister—also head of the national emergency commission handling the pandemic—had already resigned on Wednesday evening, followed by the minister of health. The head of the hospital and disease center in the middle of the row also resigned.

Political instability has been a constant problem for the young Central Asian democracy, which passed its first constitution in 1992 after decades of Communist rule. The outgoing prime minister had already survived a parliament vote to sack him in 2018 over a corruption scandal that implicated high-level politicians in a state fund embezzlement scheme—a year after his predecessor was sacked over allegations of corruption.

As the prime minister stands down, President Battulga Khaltmaa remains in place as head of state. But Khurelsukh has previously said he intends to stand for president in upcoming elections this year, and in his resignation speech he said he had "lost faith" in Battulga as head of state.

'Voices heard'

This week's row is the latest clash over the government's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak as anger simmers over Mongolian nationals stuck overseas after the country closed its borders.

"I don't think Mongolians will die of COVID-19, instead they will die of poverty and hunger," said 20-year-old student Odbayar Lkhagvadorj. "We are here to make our voice heard," said Batzul Batenkh, a 21-year-old mining worker.

Restrictions on movement between provinces have been imposed since November, leaving about 80,000 people stranded in the capital. Many have complained of waiting weeks for virus tests to allow them to return to their homes or of having to sleep in their cars with hotels closed due to lockdowns.

Officials were forced to apologize when a 58-year-old woman died in December after being refused entry to a hospital because she did not have a negative COVID-19 test result. Since March, Mongolia has only allowed citizens to enter the country on chartered flights and required 21 days of quarantine in centralized facilities, followed by two weeks of further isolation at home. There have been 1,584 coronavirus cases in the country so far. — AFP



ULAANBAATAR: A protester carrying a 2-month-old baby while another holds a sign urging officials of the national emergency commission to resign, during a rally at Sukhbaatar square in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. —AFP

Wuhan bustles a year after world's first COVID lockdown

WUHAN: Barriers still enclose Wuhan's notorious seafood market—one of the few immediate reminders the city was once the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic that has transformed the world. Otherwise, the new normal in the central Chinese city of 11 million is much like the old reality; cars buzz down highways, sidewalks bustle with shoppers, and public transport and parks are busy.

On Saturday, the city where COVID-19 was first detected in late 2019 marks one year since it was locked down to crush the outbreak. It was the first—and one of the most severe—coronavirus quarantines in the world, with transport to and from the

city sealed off on January 23. Seventy-six days of fear and panic followed before the virus scourge was brought under control.

Today, hospitals and pharmacies are empty of Covid-19 patients, the panic-slicked days of last year banished. The city has bounced back and is eager to move on from being known as ground zero of the deadly virus. No official commemorations of Wuhan's first lockdown are planned.

But vestiges of that nightmarish period are still visible. The boards blocking off the Huanan seafood market in the center of the city serve as an eerie marker of the first known cluster of cases be-

fore the virus billowed out of control, spilling beyond China's borders and claiming more than two million lives across the world. And while the streets are full again, protective face masks remain a common sight—a reminder of tight measures still in place across much of the country as fears rise over a number of local outbreaks.

China had largely brought the virus under control until a sharp uptick in cases in the past few weeks, which prompted fresh lockdowns, travel restrictions and multiple rounds of mass testing. After a handful of cases were detected in Beijing in recent days, authorities banned 1.6 million residents from leaving the capital. — AFP

Japanese court upholds ban on dual citizenship

TOKYO: A Japanese court upheld a ban on dual citizenship yesterday, rejecting a suit that challenged the measure's constitutionality and sought damages for those affected. Japan is one of around 50 countries internationally, including China and South Korea, that only permits its citizens to hold one nationality. Under current rules, Japanese people who acquire another passport are asked to relinquish their Japanese citizenship, but in 2018 eight plaintiffs started legal proceedings, arguing the rule was unconstitutional.

One of them, Hitoshi Nogawa, has told reporters that being forced to give up his nationality was a "painful experience." "I obtained Swiss nationality because my job requires it, but I'm emotionally attached to Japan and this is the foundation of my identity," the Asahi Shimbun newspaper quoted him as saying. The plaintiffs are six people who have already obtained Swiss or Liechtenstein citizenship, and two who want to obtain foreign citizenship without losing their Japanese passports, local media said. They argued that the rule was a violation of the constitution's right to pursue happiness and protection of equality under the law.

But on Thursday, the Tokyo district court rejected their suit and request for damages, a spokesman said, upholding the constitutionality of the rule. The government argued there was no national interest in permitting multiple citizenships, Kyodo news agency reported.

The issue was thrust into the spotlight with the rise to fame of tennis star Naomi Osaka, who was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Haitian father but raised in the United States.

Osaka had dual citizenship but under Japanese law was technically required to choose one nationality when she turned 22, though authorities in Japan have been known to turn a blind eye to dual nationals in some circumstances. The 23-year-old announced in 2019 that she would be renouncing her US citizenship. — AFP

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US Singer Lady Gaga sings the US National Anthem during the 59th Presidential Inauguration. — AFP

Lady Gaga, JLo offer rare Washington fashion moment

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LADY GAGA, JLO OFFER RARE WASHINGTON FASHION MOMENT



US singer Lady Gaga (center) arrives to perform the National Anthem as President-elect Joe Biden (left) and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris (right) watch during the 59th Presidential Inauguration at the US Capitol in Washington, DC. —AFP photos



President-elect Joe Biden greets singer Lady Gaga as she arrives to perform "The Star-Spangled Banner" during his inauguration.



Jennifer Lopez arrives to sing during the 59th inaugural ceremony.



Lady Gaga arrives for the inauguration of US President-elect Joe Biden.



USA singer Jennifer Lopez performs during the 59th Presidential Inauguration.



Jennifer Lopez and former New York Yankee Alex Rodriguez depart the inauguration of US President Joe Biden.

Joe Biden's inauguration offered the American capital city a rare occasion for glamour, with Lady Gaga leading the way in a billowing ball gown and enormous dove brooch as she belted out a classic rendition of the US national anthem. The long-sleeved gown featured a fitted navy drop-waist bodice with a demure mock neck collar, a look completed with a voluminous scarlet skirt that ensured she kept her Covid-friendly distance.

"My intention is to acknowledge our past, be healing for our present, and passionate for a future where we work together lovingly. I will sing to the hearts of all people who live on this land," Gaga tweeted ahead of her performance. Daniel Roseberry, the Schiaparelli designer behind the dress, said in a statement to *The New York Times* that "as an American living in Paris, this ensemble is a love letter to the country I miss so dearly and to a performer whose artistry I have so long admired."

Following Gaga's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner," Jennifer Lopez took the stage wearing Chanel, performing Woody Guthrie's classic "This Land Is Your Land", a tune with a socialist bent that the folk legend is said to have written in response to the more nationalistic "God Bless America." Bronx-raised with Puerto Rican roots, Lopez finished with "America The Beautiful," adding in a line from the national Pledge of Allegiance in Spanish: "Con libertad y justicia para todos" ("With liberty and justice for all").

Sporting a white pantsuit ensemble with a ruffle collar, Lopez also shouted "Let's get loud!" during her performance, a nod to

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her turn-of-the-millennium signature hit, delighting social media. Garth Brooks, in a black jacket and cowboy hat with baggy blue jeans, sang "Amazing Grace." And the youngest inaugural poet ever, Amanda Gorman, wore a sleek canary yellow coat, gold hoop earrings and a bright red headband to recite her moving work "The Hill We Climb."

Biden in Ralph, Bernie goes practical chic

Prior to the swearing-in performances celebrating the 46th president, the Capitol was a parade of jewel tones as VIPs arrived in their winter finest for the inauguration. Kamala Harris, the boundary-breaking new vice president, along with new first lady Jill Biden, both wore American designers, as did Biden and the second gentleman Doug Emhoff. President Biden and Emhoff both went classic in America's legacy designer Ralph Lauren, with Biden in a lavender tie.

Lauren's designs are favorites of Washington politicians. He also dressed Melania Trump during her husband's 2017 inauguration, with the former first lady wearing a sky blue dress coat ensemble. Biden's wife Jill arrived in a look from the small house Markarian, whose young designer Alexandra O'Neill crafted an ocean blue tweed dress with a hint of shimmer and a matching coat that featured dark blue lapels, with a coordinating mask and gloves.

The New York designer has dressed a number of stars, including Laura Dern and Lizzo, despite establishing her fashion house just four years ago. "It is an incredible honor to dress Dr. Biden today," O'Neill said to AFP. "I am so humbled to be even a small part of American history." Harris selected two up-and-coming Black designers, wearing a bright purple midi dress and matching coat by Christopher John Rogers, walking in heels by Sergio Hudson. The 2020 CFDA American Emerging Designer of the Year, Rogers is a rising American star partial to color-drenched looks with artful tailoring.

During her husband's twin terms, former first lady Michelle Obama also routinely spotlighted American designers, often young and from diverse backgrounds. And on Wednesday Obama also highlighted Hudson's work, stunning in a seventies-esque gold-belted, wide-legged turtleneck pantsuit and matching coat. The most recent former first lady Melania Trump, in contrast, generally favored European couturiers, in particular Italian designers including Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci and Prada.

Not everyone leaned into the glitz, however: one senator went viral by dressing as if the inauguration were but one stop on his long to-do list. Bernie Sanders, the democratic socialist former presidential candidate and incoming Senate budget committee chairman, wore his meme-famous parka made by Burton, the snowboarding company based in the Vermont capital of Burlington. He also charmed the internet with his practical oversized knit mittens, a gift from a Vermont teacher who said they are made from repurposed wool sweaters and lined with fleece manufactured from recycled plastic bottles. "Vermont jacket, Vermont gloves, Vermont common sense!" his wife Jane



(From left) Doug Emhoff, US Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, incoming US First Lady Jill Biden, US President-elect Joe Biden arrive for the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th US President at the US Capitol in Washington, DC.



Former US First Lady Michelle Obama (right) and Former US President Barack Obama arrive for the inauguration of Joe Biden.



Garth Brooks performs at the inauguration for President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.



Senator Bernie Sanders attends the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden.



Amanda Gorman walks after she recited a poem during the inauguration of US President-elect Joe Biden.



Lady Gaga sings the National Anthem during the inauguration of Joe Biden.



US singer Jennifer Lopez performs during the inauguration of Joe Biden.

Springsteen, Katy Perry boost Biden at inauguration concert



This screen grab courtesy of [bideninaugural.org](https://www.bideninaugural.org) shows singer Katy Perry perform during the “Celebrating America” inaugural program.



This screen grab courtesy of [bideninaugural.org](https://www.bideninaugural.org) shows John Legend performing during the “Celebrating America” inaugural program.

Fireworks burst over the White House Wednesday for a star-studded night of socially distanced music celebrating America’s new President Joe Biden, a pandemic-era special that replaced the traditional bevy of balls. A-listers made a valiant effort to keep up the energy at the mostly virtual, pre-produced show dubbed “Celebrating America.” Among the few live artists was opener Bruce Springsteen, a man strumming his guitar in solitude, save for Abraham Lincoln in his neoclassical sanctuary. Clad in jeans, a black peacoat and three discreet gold hoops in his ears, America’s dad played “Land of Hope and Dreams” to launch the special event hosted by actor Tom Hanks set at the Lincoln Memorial.

Biden and his family bopped before a TV screen in their new Washington home, as pop star Demi Lovato got an assist from healthcare workers nationwide to sing the late Bill Withers’ “Lovely Day.” R&B singer John Legend delivered a funky, soulful live rendition of Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good,” and Katy Perry closed out the evening with her smash “Firework,” a light show bursting out behind the Washington Memorial as Biden and his wife Jill watched from the balcony. “It was so special for me to celebrate with the nation in front of the memorial,” tweeted Legend following his performance. “AND I loved honoring the late great Nina Simone, my constant source of musical inspiration.”

‘New beginning’

Veteran and incoming presidents along with campaigning hopefuls have long sought to lean on star power and song to bolster their images. Along with the celebrities, Biden also got a bump from his predecessors: Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton delivered a video message to the incoming US leader and the country they each presided over. “It’s a new beginning,” said Clinton. “Everybody needs to get off their high horse, and reach out to their friends and neighbors, and try to make it possible.”

This screen grab courtesy of [bideninaugural.org](https://www.bideninaugural.org) shows singer Katy Perry perform.

The primetime special also featured performances from stars including Yo-Yo Ma, Jon Bon Jovi and Justin Timberlake with Ant Clemons-while Puerto Rican artists Luis Fonsi and Ozuna brought back the megahit “Despacito.” “To some a presidential inauguration is a tradition, an act that marks the commitment of a new four-year term,” Hanks said. “Yet, in truth, inauguration day is nothing more than the swearing in of the next national leaders, and this day is about witnessing the permanence of our American ideal.” Both Biden and Kamala Harris also made an appearance at the memorial, with the latter saying the moment “embodies our character as a nation.” “It demonstrates who we are, even in dark times, we not only dream, we do,” the first woman vice president said. “We not only see what has been, we see what can be. We shoot for the moon, and then we plant our flag on it.”—AFP



This screen grab courtesy of bideninaugural.org shows singer Demi Lovato perform during the “Celebrating America” inaugural program.



This screen grab courtesy of bideninaugural.org shows actor Tom Hanks during the “Celebrating America” inaugural program.



This screen grab courtesy of bideninaugural.org shows Justin Timberlake performing from Memphis during the “Celebrating America” inaugural program.



This screen grab courtesy of bideninaugural.org shows singer Bruce Springsteen perform.



This screen grab courtesy of bideninaugural.org shows cellist Yo-Yo Ma performing.



This screen grab courtesy of bideninaugural.org shows singer Jon Bon Jovi performing.

Poet Amanda Gorman, age 22, hails democracy at Biden inaugural

Poet Amanda Gorman on Wednesday became a sudden star at age 22 at President Joe Biden’s inauguration as she recited verse inspired by the Capitol attack, touching on how democracy “can never be permanently defeated.” Gorman was the youngest poet to recite at an inauguration, a role first given to Robert Frost by John F. Kennedy in 1961, after First Lady Jill Biden saw one of Gorman’s readings and invited her to participate at the Capitol steps.

Gorman said that she had been writing a few lines a day but stayed awake at night out of a compulsion to complete her inauguration poem, “The Hill We Climb,” following the January 6 ransacking of the Capitol by supporters of then president Donald Trump who hoped to undo Biden’s victory. “We’ve seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it / Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy,” she recited. “And this effort very nearly succeeded / But while democracy can be periodically delayed, / It can never be permanently defeated.”

Gorman, who graduated from Harvard University last year, was the first to hold the role of national youth poet laureate by the Library of Congress and earlier held a similar honor in Los Angeles, where she has started a non-profit group to promote



American poet Amanda Gorman reads a poem during the 59th inaugural ceremony on the West Front of the US Capitol in Washington, DC. — AFP photos

literacy. She has previously written about the struggle for racial equality and the #MeToo movement against sexual assault.

Showing both composure and joy as she took the podium moments after Biden, Gorman opened her reading by speaking of how “We the successors of a country and a time where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president—only to find herself reciting for one.” Among her previous works, Gorman wrote “Tyrants Fear the Poet” to address the 2017 white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia—an episode that Biden said motivated him to challenge Trump, who had said the crowd included “very fine people on both sides.”



Amanda Gorman, center, takes a photo with former president Barack Obama and Michelle Obama prior to the 59th Presidential Inauguration.

In an interview with National Public Radio, Gorman said that she grew up with a speech impediment in which she could not pronounce certain letters—a trait she shares with Biden, who has been open about his struggles with stuttering. Her reading triggered loud applause at the inauguration and an avalanche of praise on social media. “I have never been prouder to see another young woman rise!” tweeted daytime television queen Oprah Winfrey, drawing a parallel to another celebrated writer, the late Maya Angelou, who read at Bill Clinton’s first inauguration. Joanne Liu, the former president of Doctors Without Borders, called Gorman’s recitation “the most inspiring 5:43 minutes for the longest time.” —AFP

Butterflies create jet propulsion with a clap of their wings

The whimsical, wafting flight of butterflies may not give the impression of top aerodynamic performance, but research published on Wednesday suggests their large flexible wings could be perfectly designed to give them a burst of jet propulsion. Scientists at Lund University in Sweden set out to verify a decades-old theory that insects “clap” their wings together, squeezing out the air between with such force that it thrusts them forward.

In their aerodynamic analysis of free-flying butterflies published in the journal *Interface*, they showed that the clap function does generate a jet of air propulsion.

But they also found that the butterflies perform this move “in a far more advanced way than we ever realized”, said co-author Per Henningsson, a professor in the department of biology at Lund University.

At the moment the wings beat together they “were not just two flat surfaces slam-

ming together”, he told AFP. Instead, they form a “pocket” shape believed to trap more air. When the researchers recreated this using mechanical wings, they found that those with butterfly-like flexibility that form this pocket at the moment of impact were 22 percent more effective in the amount of force created and 28 percent more efficient in the amount of energy used compared with rigid wings. The team suggested that their findings could have uses for drones that use clapping wing propulsion.

Predator evasion

Henningsson said the “dramatic improvement” in performance came as a surprise. “This is the type of finding that is the most exciting for a scientist—the ones you didn’t really expect,” he said. Butterfly wings “although conventionally considered aerodynamically inefficient” might be particularly good at forming this pocket shape, he



This handout picture shows a Silver-washed fritillary butterfly close to the Lund University field station Stensoffa, outside Lund, in Southern Sweden. — AFP

added, suggesting they may have evolved to enhance clap propulsion as a way to evade predators that might spot them as they take off. “To minimize the risk of capture, butterflies typically take off very fast and suddenly and many of them fly in an erratic and unpredictable manner,” he said.

“If indeed the clap is improved dramatically by the cupped shape of the wings this would allow a butterfly to take off faster and avoid being captured better, and hence you can imagine a strong selective pressure on this feature.” The study suggested other

creatures-like fish or frogs—may also have developed clapping propulsion using cupped wings, fins or feet. Henningsson said while the theory of the wing clap has been around since the 1970s, studies on butterfly flight had often relied on tethered butterflies or used simulations. But improvements in technology to measure flow meant the authors were able to observe the creatures in natural flight. — AFP

Dead whale, one of Med’s largest, found off Italy

The carcass of a huge whale has been recovered from the waters off southern Italy, the coastguard said Wednesday, calling it “probably one of the largest” ever found in the Mediterranean. The dead mammal was spotted in the sea on Sunday near the popular tourist destination of Sorrento by coastguard divers who were first alerted to the presence of a smaller whale, which has since disappeared into the sea. The coast-

guard said it recovered the carcass overnight Tuesday and then towed the whale from Sorrento by sea to the port of Naples, where it will be analyzed by marine biologists and other experts looking for a cause of death.

Whale carcass washes up on Bali beach

The rotting carcass of a nearly 14-metre (46-foot) whale washed up Wednesday on Bali beach popular with tourists. The conser-

vation agency said it was investigating the death of the giant creature, which was first spotted in shallow waters near Batu Belig beach, north of Seminyak. Curious onlookers gathered around the carcass but the strong smell of decay put many off, said one local. Bali conservation official Prawono Meruanto said the creature could be a Bryde’s whale, and that its carcass was later buried at the beach using an excavator. In July, ten

smaller whales were found dead on a beach in Indonesia’s East Nusa Tenggara province. Locals managed to get one surviving member of the pod back into the water alive. Cross-currents off beaches pose a danger to whales as they can get caught between reefs close to shore. — AFP



A photo shows the carcass of a huge dead whale (left) in the port of the Sorrento, south of Naples, as it’s being towed away by the Italian Coast Guards towards the port of Naples, where the cause of death will be studied. — AFP photos



This handout photo shows workers on an excavator preparing to bury the carcass of a giant 13-metre whale washed up on Batu Belig beach, on Indonesia’s holiday island of Bali.

Catnip leaves kitties feline groovy, wards off mosquitoes

Catnip is known to hold a special place in the hearts of felines, who often respond by rubbing their face and head in the plant, rolling around on the ground, then zoning out in a state of intoxicated repose. But the biological mechanisms by which it works its magic, and whether it confers any additional benefits to cats, had remained unanswered questions until now. An international team of researchers published a study in *Science Advances* on Wednesday, finding that catnip and silver vine, an even more potent herb found in the mountains of Japan and China, ward off mosquitoes.



To test whether the feline responses to the substance were governed by the brain's opioid system, they took blood samples to check beta-Endorphin levels five minutes before and after they were exposed to the nepetalactol. Elevated endorphin concentrations occurred only after exposure to nepetalactol, and not the control substance. When the researchers gave the cats naloxone, a drug that inhibits the effects of opioids, the cats no longer wanted to rub themselves against the nepetalactol.

Naloxone is commonly used in humans to treat an overdose of opioids. But unlike opioids, the scientists think the response to nepetalactol is "non-addictive," because it works by triggering an increase in endorphins that are already produced by the body. Drugs like morphine, on the other hand, stimulate the brain's opioid receptors directly, not indirectly. Finally, they tested whether silver vine leaves repelled *Aedes albopictus* mosquitoes when cats rubbed against the plant. —AFP

They also identified nepetalactol as the main compound of silver vine responsible for inducing an euphoric state, and discovered that it activates the brain's opioid reward system. The substance is similar to nepetalactone, the key psychoactive compound in catnip. Masao Miyazaki, a professor at Japan's Iwate University, who was the senior author of the paper, told AFP the team had applied for a patent to develop an insect repellent based on their findings.

The team began by testing how 25 lab cats, 30 feral cats, and several big cats including an Amur leopard, two jaguars and two Eurasian lynx responded to filter paper soaked with nepetalactol. The felines all spent more time with nepetalactol infused paper than they did with plain filter paper that was used as a control. By contrast, dogs and lab mice showed no interest in the nepetalactol-containing paper. Next, they tested how 12 cats responded to all the known bioactive compounds of silver vine, confirming that nepetalactol was the most potent of the substances.

Satellite images to aid elephant conservation from space

Conservationists have started using satellite imagery to count elephants from space, a technique that British experts hope will help protect threatened populations in Africa. Researchers at the University of Oxford and the University of Bath said the use of algorithms, machine learning and satellite technology could replace current techniques used to count elephants—a critical aspect of conservation.

"The population of African elephants has plummeted over the last century due to poaching, retaliatory killing from crop raiding and habitat fragmentation," Oxford said in a statement.

"To conserve them requires knowledge of where they are, and how many there are: accurate monitoring is vital." Currently, the most common technique for surveying elephant populations in savannah environments is aerial counts from manned aircraft. The academics said aerial surveyors can get exhausted, and are sometimes hindered by poor visibility. "Satellite monitoring is an unobtrusive technique requiring no ground presence, thus eliminating the risk of disturbing species or of concern for human safety during data collection," they added. "A process that would formerly have taken months can be completed in a matter of hours."

The scientists first developed the techniques at South Africa's Addo Elephant National Park. The images, from a satellite orbiting 600 kilometers (some 370 miles)

How the male mantis keeps its head

A male Springbok praying mantis looking for a hook up does not have to worry about a female stealing his heart away. There is, however, a very good change she'll bite his head off, and he knows it. Indeed, 60 percent of sexual encounters between Springboks—one of nearly 2,000 mantis species across the globe—end in males being eaten as snack. "Males play Russian roulette whenever they encounter cannibalistic females," explained Nathan Burke, an entomologist at the University of Auckland and an expert on mantis mating rituals.

All male mantises show extreme caution when approaching a prospective partner. Hard to blame them. But whereas most will sneak up from behind or distract the female with a tasty morsel, the Springbok has an entirely different—and previously unreported—strategy for staying alive, according to findings published Wednesday in *Biology Letters*. "Under threat of cannibalistic attack, males try to subdue females by pinning them down in violent struggles," said Burke, co-author with colleague Gregory Holwell of the study. Males who win the lovers' tussle are far more likely to succeed in consummating the relationship, "which suggests that wrestling is both a mating tactic and a survival tactic," he added.

The key to victory, according to gladiatorial experiments with 52 pairs of mantises, was striking first. If the male was quicker to the draw and grabbed the female with its serrated raptorial forelegs, he stood a 78 percent chance of escaping unscathed. And when, in addition, the male inflicted a serious but non-fatal wound to the abdomen, he kept his head



every time. "I was very surprised to discover that males injure females while trying to subdue them for mating," said Burke. "Nothing like that has ever been observed in mantises before." If the female grasped first, however, males were always killed and devoured.

Asexual reproduction

Overall, males came out top more than half the time in these jousts, which lasted 13 seconds on average. Winning the match did not automatically lead to mating—coupling followed only two-thirds of the time, and even then the male wound up in the female's stomach half the time. The bright green Springbok mantis, aka *Miomantis caffra*, is native to southern Africa, but has spread to New Zealand, southern Europe and California, probably through the pet trade. The nutrients gained when a female praying mantis eats her suitor benefit her offspring as they grow. Sexual cannibalism—when the female of a species consumes the male during or after mating—is also known among spiders, such as the black widow, and scorpions.

Typically smaller males do what they can to avoid getting gobbled up, including playing dead. But female Springbok mantises have another trick up their spiky sleeve: the ability to reproduce asexually, or without any help from males. "They can produce clones of themselves if they don't mate," said Burke. —AFP

above the Earth, could survey upward of 5,000 square kilometers (nearly 2,000 square miles) of land in one pass, captured in a matter of minutes. The scientists trained the algorithm to recognize only adults among a dataset of 1,000 elephants in the park and

then found it was also able to identify calves. They hope such conservation technologies will be embraced as a matter of urgency to protect the world's biodiversity. —AFP



In this file photo an elephant sits in water in the Okavango Delta near the Nxaraga village in the outskirts of Maun. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Egyptian satirist Bassem Youssef, banished voice of Arab Spring

Egyptian star satirist Bassem Youssef had his country in stitches during the Arab Spring, but a decade later the politicians may well think they have had the last laugh. Youssef, 46, now lives in the United States, unable to return home for fear of arrest, while in Egypt the government has a tighter grip than ever on political and cultural life. "I'm enjoying my life in America," Youssef said in a video chat, adding wryly that "maybe the one thing I miss about Egypt is the mangos".



Egyptian star satirist Bassem Youssef poses for a picture at the studios of the Saudi-owned television station Asharq, in the Gulf emirate of Dubai, where he has been filming his new show "Ask Bassem". — AFP

Youssef, originally a heart surgeon, rose to fame as a YouTuber and became a wildly popular TV host, mercilessly poking fun at presidents, generals and imams. Dubbed the "Jon Stewart of Egypt"—and at times collaborating with the US comedian whom he called his idol—Youssef pushed free speech to the very limits. One show guest-starring Stewart showed goons in dark sunglasses march the American satirist onto stage with a black hood over his head, accused of being "a foreign spy", and ended with Stewart's overthrow of Youssef as the show's host.

"I get in trouble," quipped Stewart, then the host of Comedy Central's "The Daily Show", "but nowhere near what happens to you". Youssef fled Egypt in 2014 after his TV show was suspended over his mocking of then presidential candidate field marshal Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, now the head of state. Today, he lives in California and has built a new career as a standup comedian, author and podcaster, but his reflections on Egypt

are bitter-sweet. "I don't want to even say that I'm an exile. I have passed that," said Youssef, who was unable to attend his father's funeral. "When you always tell yourself you're exiled, in your mind you're thinking about when you're going to go back. I don't think about that anymore."

'Peculiar times'

Youssef made his unlikely career change from cardiologist to comedy star with YouTube clips filmed from his laundry room. They captured the popular mood in the heady days of the Arab Spring when people power ousted a string of autocrats across North Africa and the Middle East. After protesters toppled Egypt's long-time president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, Youssef went on to host the blockbuster late-night show "El Bernameg" (The Program), beloved beyond Egypt for its biting satire and taboo-busting humour.

But his last major show was taken off the air in 2014 after a sketch poked fun at Sisi, whose government has since jailed thousands of activists, artists, journalists, lawyers, academics and politicians. Youssef reflected that "a huge part of the success of El Bernameg was the circumstances that it came out of. And you cannot replicate that because these circumstances are not there anymore. "In the end, nothing will ever be as successful. No other show will come with 40 million people weekly. And we have to all, including me, live with that."

Youssef has since authored books including "Revolution for Dummies" and reached out to over 15 million followers across his social media accounts. He has appeared on Stephen Colbert's "Late Show" and performed as a stand-up comedian, often drawing parallels between ex-US president Donald Trump and Arab world strongmen. "When I'm in America, my show is about me as an immigrant... living in these peculiar times," he said.

Youssef still thinks of home, and the turmoil that brought him to fame. "You can't be really done with your home country because you're still an Egyptian. It's part of you," he said. Despite Egypt's return to autocratic rule, he said, the legacy of the Arab Spring lives on and "the impact is still there". "It kind of broke a long-lasting, traditional way of thinking," he said. "You can see it and you can feel it with the younger generations, with the way they feel about politics, religion, everything."—AFP

HIT TV SERIES: RISE OF THE FRENCH NEW WAVE

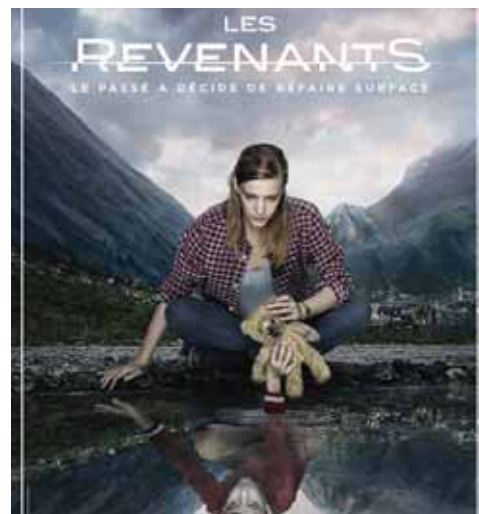
Netflix's "Lupin" is the latest in a string of high-end French series to become runaway international hits. Once rubished for its lack of original drama, French series have transplanted Nordic Noir as the new streaming favorites, outshining top US and British shows. Here are the key series of the new French Wave:

'Les Revenants'

The spooky series often called "The Returned" won a best drama Emmy for its first season in 2013. Its deeply original story about recently dead people who reappear apparently alive and well in an alpine village both freaked and intrigued audiences with its mix of horror and surreal suspense.

'Engrenages'

The gritty police drama sometimes translated as "Spiral" has explored corruption, migration and racism in its eight seasons so far. It won a second best series Emmy for producers Canal+ — the French HBO-in 2015.



'The Bureau'

The five seasons of the stylish spy thriller set in France's foreign secret service starring the country's most famous Mathieu-Kassovitz and Amalric-have been universally acclaimed. With plots uncannily echoing real world events, it has been among the most downloaded series in the US and Canada and one of Canal+'s best performing series ever. Its success also helped kick-start the hilarious spoof, "A Very Secret Service", featuring fantastically sexist and chauvinist French spooks from the 1960s, which has been snapped up by Amazon.

'Fais pas ci, fais pa ca'

The mockumentary-style sitcom about two very different Paris families changed



the face of French public TV with its first season in 2007. Its title means "Don't do this, don't do that" and is drawn from a classic 1960s song—the series' title music—about nagging parents by French singer Jacques Dutronc. US network ABC quickly snapped up the rights to an American version before rivals CBS broadcast "Modern Family" in 2009. Fans were quick to point out similarities between the two shows, but that has not stopped the French show being sold all over the world.

'Call My Agent!'

Created by Fanny Herrero, who also wrote "Fais pas ci, fais pa ca", the series about a Paris talent agency has been a comedy sensation, featuring cameos from top French and Hollywood stars sending themselves up as the spoilt tantrum-throwing brats we hope they might be. Picked up by Netflix from France 2, it has also launched its stars Camille Cottin, the hard-nosed lesbian agent Andrea, and love-crossed secretary Laure Calamy into the big time.

'Parlement'

The black comedy set in the European Parliament was France's lockdown hit, with a parade of national stereotypes worthy of an Asterix comic and some fantastic performances. Shot in English, French and German, and with a killer Brexit subplot, a second season is already on the way.

'Lupin'

The Netflix series starring Omar Sy as a modern take on France's beloved gentleman thief, Arsene Lupin, has been an instant hit. In its first few weeks it has outperformed the much talked about "Bridgerton" and "The Queen's Gambit" and is soon to hit 70 million views.

'OVNI(s)'

The latest offering from the Canal+ hit factory is a pitch-perfect comedy set among the investigators of the very real French agency that investigated UFOs in the 1970s. Whether the real GEPAN had a pet pink flamingo is of course a state secret.—AFP



Photo shows fried cannabis leaves and minced meat with ingredients.



Photo shows meat on bread with cannabis leaves laid out with ingredients.



Chefs prepare cannabis leaves for consumption.

Haute cuisine: Thai hospital rolls out cannabis-laced menu

From spicy “happy” salads to soups sprinkled with cannabis shoots and deep-fried marijuana leaves—a Thai hospital restaurant has rolled out a weed-inspired menu which has curious customers flocking to sample its euphoria-inducing offerings. Since becoming the first Southeast Asian country to legalize medical mari-

leaves, stems and roots in food.

This marks a return to Thailand’s culinary past, said doctor Pakakrong Kwankhao, who heads the Centre of Evidence-based Thai Traditional and Herbal Medicine in Chao Phya Abhaibhubejhr Hospital. “Putting cannabis leaves in the food is our culture,” she told AFP Friday. “In the past

juana leaves and fries them to golden crispness, while another sprinkles them in a wok of minced meat with chili.

There are very small amounts of THC in fresh plants, but to avoid over-consumption, the restaurant has a five-leaf maximum limit per customer, said Pakakrong. “If they have low tolerance, then they may choose the dish with just a half-leaf,” she said, warning that those who are pregnant or with certain health problems should avoid the weed-infused menu. As for other interested foodies, “recent research found that this small amount can improve mood, focus and also creativity,” the doctor said. She added that the restaurant hopes to expand its budding menu to include western fare.

For now, it draws a crowd during lunch, with diners snapping selfies while growing increasingly mirthful with each passing hour. “Are we laughing because of what we’ve eaten? I don’t think completely anyway,” said customer Thierry Martino, a French jewelry designer. “The cannabis leaf which (the dish) is cooked with gives a little bit of bitterness,” he said, adding that his meal was “excellent”. Arsala Chaocharoen says she’s eating in the same way ancient Thais used to dine. “They’ve put the cannabis leaves in my noodle soup and this is actually an old traditional knowledge of Thais,” said the 32-year-old pharmacist, before digging into her “joyfully happy spicy salad”—a dish of corn-battered leaves served with chili sauce. — AFP



This photo shows a customer picking up food at the Abhaibhubejhr Day Spa, next to Chao Phraya Aphaiphubet Hospital in Prachinburi, where a restaurant serves cannabis leaf dishes. — AFP photos

juana in 2018, Thailand has ploughed ahead on the extraction, distillation and marketing of cannabis oil-eager to capitalize on the multibillion-dollar industry. The plant itself was finally removed from the kingdom’s narcotics list last month, which means licensed providers-like hospitals-can now use its

before cannabis was banned... we put small amounts as seasoning herbs and we also use it as an herbal remedy.” Last week, the hospital’s wellness center, which has a restaurant, introduced a new menu of Thai dishes offering a different sort of kick. In the restaurant’s bustling kitchen, a cook batters mari-



A worker examining cannabis plants in a crop being grown in Prachinburi Province.



A chef fries cannabis leaves in batter.



Customers eat Thai dishes with cannabis leaves.

Kids Page

Word Search



Ancient Civilizations

- AKKADIA
- ARAB EMPIRE
- ASSYRIA
- AZTEC
- BABYLON
- BYZANTINE
- CELTS
- CHINA
- EGYPT
- ETRUSCAN
- FRANKS
- HUNS
- INCAS
- INDIA
- JAPAN
- MAYANS
- MONGOLS



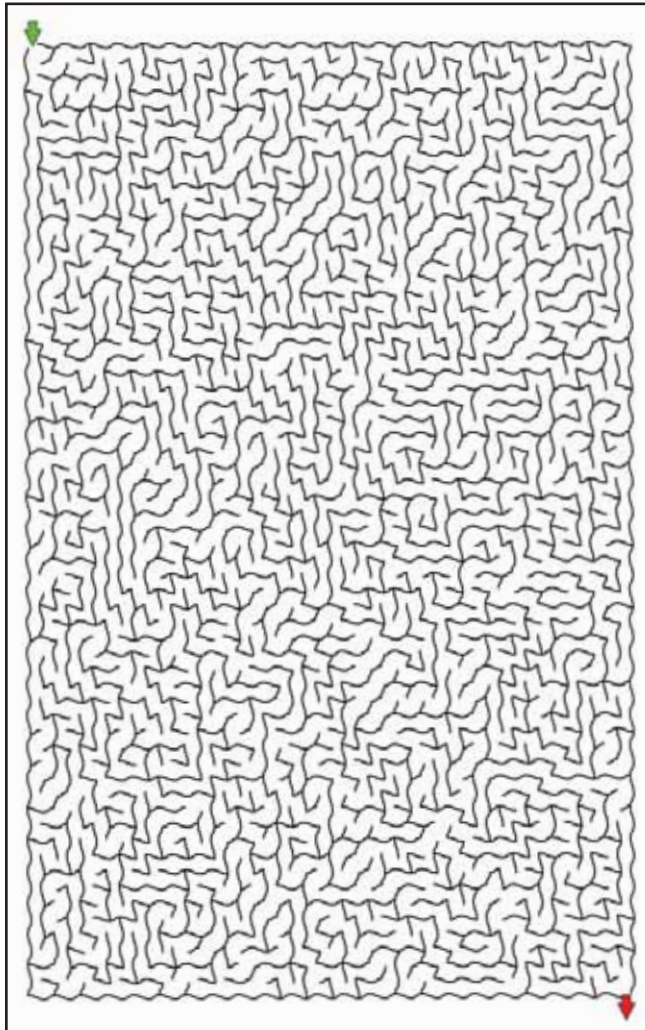
- OTTOMAN EMPIRE
- PERSIA
- ROMAN EMPIRE
- VIKINGS



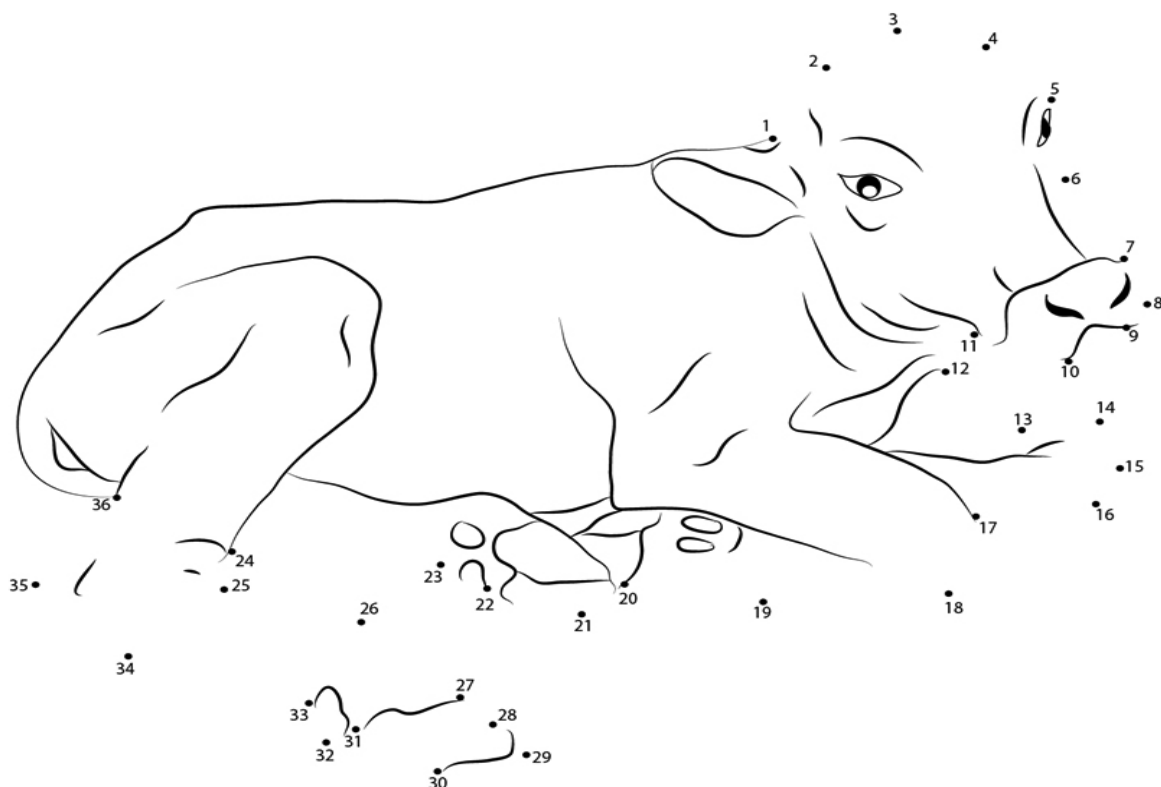
Color It



Kids Mazes



Join the dots



Word Scramble

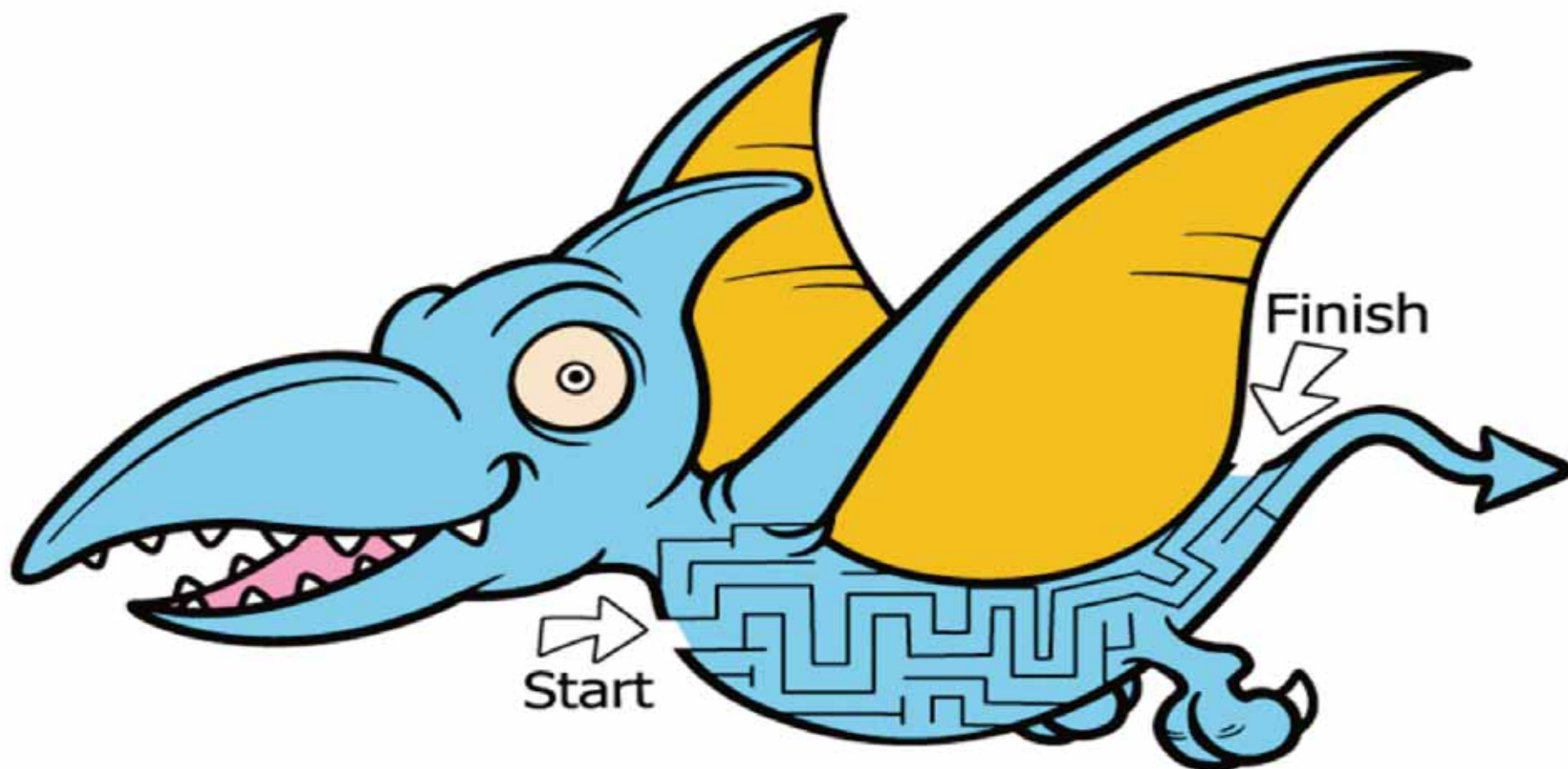


Veterans Day Word Scramble

On November 11th of each year, Americans honor their citizens who have served in the armed forces. Can you unscramble the Veterans Day vocabulary words? Watch out! One of them is made up of two words.

| | | | |
|----------|-------|----------|-------|
| ADEML | _____ | OPTIART | _____ |
| CEEVIRS | _____ | AYODLHE | _____ |
| EERANVT | _____ | SHATKN | _____ |
| RTEITUB | _____ | IACFRERO | _____ |
| AGOUOCR | _____ | STYHIOR | _____ |
| OREH | _____ | IEMANR | _____ |
| PADRAE | _____ | RAVBE | _____ |
| OOHRN | _____ | ACEEP | _____ |
| RPEID | _____ | VVAN | _____ |
| MILMEARO | _____ | SELORIDS | _____ |
| RMLYIITA | _____ | MERVONEB | _____ |
| YTUD | _____ | TCOMBA | _____ |

Find the way



CLINIC PAGE



Kuwait Times

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Friday, January 22, 2021

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- ◆ Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of Canada
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Health & Science

Friday, January 22, 2021

Study hints at way to halt decline as we age

TOKYO: The march of time can be unkind to the human body but new research hints at a cause-and possible solution-for some of the ailments and decline that often come with age.

Scientists have long known that cognitive decline as we get older and specific age-related diseases including Alzheimer's are linked to inflammation, but they are still uncovering precisely why and how this is the case. Research published in the journal Nature pinpoints the role of a messenger hormone found in much higher levels in older people and mice than their younger counterparts.

When the hormone was blocked in older mice,

they were able to perform as well as more youthful rodents in tests of their memory and navigation. The researchers found that higher levels of the hormone affected the metabolism of immune cells called macrophages, prompting them to store energy rather than consume it.

That effectively starved the cells, sending them into a damaging inflammatory hyperdrive associated with age-related cognitive decline and several age-related diseases. The hormone, prostaglandin E2 (PGE2), "is a major regulator of all types of inflammation, both good and bad, and its effect depends on the receptor that is activated," the study's senior author Katrin Andreasson

said. "In this study, we identified the EP2 receptor... as the receptor that leads to energy depletion and maladaptive inflammation," added Andreasson, a professor of neurology at Stanford University.

Having isolated the role played by PGE2, Andreasson and her team then set out to see if there was a way to counteract its negative effects. They administered to mice two experimental compounds that can block the EP2 receptor and found it reversed the metabolic problems seen in older macrophages-restoring their more youthful behavior and preventing destructive inflammatory activity. They found similar effects in mice that

were genetically modified with deletions of the EP2 receptor.

'Very excited'

Older mice that received the compounds or had the receptor deleted from their genes performed as well as young mice when tested for navigation and spatial memory, both of which deteriorate with ageing and diseases like Alzheimer's. "Our study suggests that the development of maladaptive inflammation and cognitive decline in ageing may not be a static or permanent condition, but rather that it can be reversed," the study says. — AFP

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- Faculty member of (BEST).
- Member of Kuwait Surgical Association.

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| Chest Hospital | 24849400 |
| Farwaniya Hospital | 24892010 |
| Adan Hospital | 23940620 |
| Ibn Sina Hospital | 24840300 |
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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Rather cold with moderate to fresh north westerly wind with speed of 20 - 50 km/h causing rising dust and some scattered clouds will appear.

BY NIGHT: Very cold with light to moderate freshening over costal areas north westerly wind with speed of 15 - 50 km/h with a chance for frost forming in agriculture and desert areas.

| WEATHER WARNING | | | Fresh wind | |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------|--------------------------------|--|
| STATION | MAX. EXP. | MIN. REC. | SFC. CHART 21/01/2021 0000 UTC | |
| KUWAIT CITY | 17 °C | 12 °C | | |
| KUWAIT AIRPORT | 17 °C | 12 °C | | |
| ABDALY | 15 °C | 07 °C | | |
| BUBYAN | 18 °C | 10 °C | | |
| JAHRA | 16 °C | 11 °C | | |
| FAILAKA ISLAND | - °C | - °C | | |
| SALMIYAH | 18 °C | 13 °C | | |
| AHMADI | - °C | - °C | | |
| NUWAISIB | 17 °C | 13 °C | | |
| WAFRA | 16 °C | 11 °C | | |
| SALMY | 15 °C | 07 °C | | |

4 DAYS FORECAST

| DAY | DATE | WEATHER | Temperatures | | Wind Direction | Wind Speed |
|----------|-------|--|--------------|-------|----------------|--------------|
| | | | MAX. | MIN. | | |
| Friday | 01/22 | Rather cold | 15 °C | 05 °C | NW | 15 - 45 km/h |
| Saturday | 01/23 | Rather cold and Partly cloudy with a chance for frost forming in agriculture and desert areas at | 17 °C | 03 °C | NW | 12 - 32 km/h |
| Sunday | 01/24 | Rather cold and Partly cloudy with a chance for frost forming in agriculture and desert areas at | 18 °C | 03 °C | NW | 10 - 32 km/h |
| Monday | 01/25 | Fair | 21 °C | 07 °C | NW-VRB | 08 - 28 km/h |

PRAYER TIMES

| | |
|---------|-------|
| Fajr | 05:19 |
| Sunrise | 06:42 |
| Zuhr | 11:59 |
| Asr | 14:57 |
| Sunset | 17:17 |
| Isha | 18:37 |

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

| | |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| MAX. Temp. | 22 °C |
| MIN. Temp. | 09 °C |
| MAX. RH | 72 % |
| MIN. RH | 32 % |
| MAX. Wind | S 53 km/h |
| TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR. | 0 mm |

Business

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Asian job distributor faces challenges

High temperatures, remote islands an obstacle for Zuellig Pharma

SINGAPORE: From keeping coronavirus vaccines cold in tropical temperatures to ensuring they reach remote islands, a top drug distributor is gearing up for major challenges in shipping shots across Asia. Only a few countries in the region, which has generally not been as badly affected by COVID-19 as many parts of the West, have started inoculation drives in earnest.

But campaigns are expected to be ratcheted up in the coming months and distributors will face a major test. One of Asia's biggest is Zuellig Pharma, which has about 85 warehouses across the region that can store vaccines at ultra-cold temperatures and a well-developed distribution network. Of paramount importance is "cold chain storage" - ensuring vaccines are kept at low temperatures while being produced, flown overseas, stored in warehouses and sent to hospitals and doctors' offices.

"Cold chain storage for vaccines is extremely important first and foremost for patient safety," Tom Vanmolkot, the company's executive vice president for distribution and client services, told AFP. "We cannot administer vaccines that have been outside of the cold chain," he added, during a visit to their warehouse in Singapore, one of the few Asian countries that has started its inoculation campaign.

This is particularly tricky in some countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Cambodia where



SINGAPORE: This photograph taken on Wednesday shows the quality control and packing of pharmaceutical products inside the cold storage at the Zuellig Pharma facility. — AFP

temperatures often soar above 30 degrees Celsius. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine needs to be stored at minus 70 degrees Celsius and once thawed for use can be kept at two to eight degrees Celsius for five days. Meanwhile, US firm Moderna's shot is stored at minus 20 degrees Celsius and those of Chinese company Sinovac at two to eight degrees.

Biggest challenge
Zuellig Pharma, which has its

regional headquarters in Singapore, has developed special boxes to transport the vaccines and keep them cool, which contain devices that record the temperature and ensure the "cold chain" is not broken. They have fleets of vehicles for transportation and are working with governments to make sure they reach their destinations on time.

But the geography of some countries - such as Indonesia and the Philippines which are vast, poor archipelagic nations - can make it

tough to distribute jabs while ensuring they remain effective. The two countries have "thousands of islands-we need to make sure that those vaccines get to those islands as well," Vanmolkot said.

Handling COVID-19 vaccines is the company's biggest challenge so far because of the volume of doses needed and the duration of the pandemic, he said. Distributing flu vaccines every year also involves shipping a large number of inoculations in a short space of time. But this

usually takes a few weeks, while the distribution of COVID-19 shots will take months, he said.

One of the immediate challenges Zuellig Pharma faces is uncertainty. They don't know what shots will be approved in different places, when they will arrive and in what volume. "So we are preparing ourselves for something that is big, that has to go fast - but we don't know exactly what those volumes are and the temperature ranges," said Vanmolkot. — AFP

Business

ECB govs meet as COVID woes weigh on eurozone

Unprecedented steps have been taken to cushion economic blow

FRANKFURT: European Central Bank governors met yesterday to take stock of their monetary stimulus efforts as more infectious strains of the coronavirus and stricter shutdowns cloud the economic outlook. Policymakers were expected to stop short of taking fresh action after ramping up their pandemic support for the eurozone last month.

But observers will be scrutinizing ECB chief Christine Lagarde's words for hints of concern about the virus resurgence and the recent strength of the euro against the dollar. The Frankfurt institution "will want to stay on the sidelines for as long as possible," ING bank economist Carsten Brzeski said. "The short-term path of the eurozone economy will be determined by the virus, vaccines, lockdowns, and fiscal stimulus, not additional monetary stimulus."

The emergence of more contagious virus variants in Britain and South Africa has fueled fears of a possible surge in outbreaks, at a time when many countries are already struggling to bring down COVID-19 cases. Europe's top economy Germany this week extended its partial lockdown until February 14, while France and Spain have tightened evening curfews.

A sluggish start to vaccination drives in the European Union is also expected to drag on the recovery in the first quarter of 2021. The ECB in December forecast 3.9 percent growth for 2021, after an estimated contraction of 7.3 percent in 2020. Lagarde recently said she had "no reasons to believe our forecast is wrong at this point".

But it would become "a concern", she said, if member states had to extend their shutdowns beyond March.

Unprecedented

Under former French finance minister Lagarde, the ECB has taken unprecedented steps to cushion the economic blow from the pandemic in the 19-nation euro area, and stressed it stands ready to do more as needed. Its main tool is a massive pandemic emergency bond-buying scheme, known as PEPP, that was bulked up last month to total 1.85 trillion euros (\$2.2 trillion).

The scheme, aimed at keeping borrowing costs low to encourage spending and investment, was also prolonged until March 2022. Also in December, the ECB announced more ultra-cheap loans for banks, with rates getting more attractive the more they lend on to the real economy. Interest rates were likely to hold steady at record lows yesterday, observers said, and no tweaks are expected to the ECB's pre-pandemic purchases of government and corporate bonds to the tune of €20 billion a month.

As with PEPP, the purchases are meant to keep credit flowing in a bid to bolster growth and drive up inflation. But eurozone inflation has stayed stubbornly low for years and even turned negative in 2020.

'Close attention'

By the ECB's own estimates, price growth will gradually inch up to 1.4 percent by 2023, still far



FRANKFURT: This file photo taken on March 24, 2020 shows the sun setting behind the headquarters of the European Central Bank (ECB) and the city skyline. — AFP

off the bank's target of just under two percent. In December, inflation stood at minus 0.3 percent. Analysts say inflation could bound higher later this year, powered by pent-up consumer demand once lockdowns start easing, particularly in travel and dining out. But any boost is likely to be short-lived, they cautioned.

Complicating the ECB's efforts is the appreciation of the euro, which has risen by more than 10 percent against the greenback since late February. "The currency remains a concern for the ECB as it could add to deflationary pressures

and hurt the recovery," said HSBC economist Fabio Balboni. A stronger euro makes imports cheaper, keeping the lid on consumer prices, while exports become less competitive, hurting growth prospects. Minutes of the last ECB meeting showed that the 25-member governing council was paying "close attention" to the exchange rate. Nevertheless "the euro has not reached a level where the ECB would step in," said Berenberg bank analyst Florian Hense. "An interest rate cut in response to a stronger euro still seems like a very long shot." —AFP

News in brief

Israel, UAE agree energy deal

JERUSALEM: Israeli and Emirati companies have signed an inaugural agreement on renewable energy, officials said Wednesday. The principal corporate signatories of the energy agreement are Abu Dhabi-based Masdar and EDF Renewables Israel. "These are the first fruits of the Abraham accords in the energy sector," said Israel's Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz on Twitter, predicting the collaboration would allow his country to become a global leader in solar energy within six years. Muhammad Jamil Al-Ramhi, head of Masdar, lauded a "new era of cooperation" in clean energy ventures between the two countries. — AFP

World Bank to fund Lebanon jobs

WASHINGTON: The World Bank announced yesterday it will put \$34 million into a program to provide coronavirus vaccines for more than two million people in Lebanon, which is experiencing a major surge in COVID-19 cases. "This is the first World Bank-financed operation to fund the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines," the Washington-based institution said in a statement. Under the World Bank plan, the vaccines would arrive by early February. The \$34 million is being reallocated under the existing Lebanon Health Resilience Project, funded by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. — AFP

Amazon offers to help with COVID vaccine effort

SAN FRANCISCO: Tech colossus Amazon on Wednesday offered to put its vast operation to work helping President Joe Biden get 100 million Americans vaccinated against COVID-19 in the next 100 days. Chief of Amazon's worldwide consumer business Dave Clark sent a letter to Biden urging that its workers get vaccinated as early as possible and offering to put the company's resources to work in the broader vaccination effort.

Amazon is the second largest employer in the US with more than 800,000 employees, most of whom are "essential workers" who can't do their jobs from home, according to a copy of the letter obtained by AFP. The e-commerce giant has seen business boom during the pandemic as people staying home to avoid risk of getting COVID-19 resorted to shopping online and having items delivered.

"We are committed to assisting your administration's vaccination efforts as we work together to protect our employees and continue to provide essential services during the pandemic," read the letter. Amazon has agreements in place with a health care provider to administer vaccines on-site at its facilities, including fulfillment centers, data centers, and Whole Foods Market grocery stores, according to Clark.

"We are prepared to move quickly once vaccines are avail-



NEW YORK: This file photo shows the Amazon logo at the 855,000-sq-ft Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island on Feb 5, 2019. —AFP

able," Clark said in the letter. "Our scale allows us to make a meaningful impact immediately in the fight against COVID-19, and we stand ready to assist you in this effort."

Uber has also offered logistical assistance. Chief executive Dara Khosrowshahi last month urged US states to make sure rideshare drivers get quick access to COVID-19 vaccines so they can help with broader distribution plans. Biden's top pandemic advisor Anthony Fauci said this week the new president's goal of seeing 100 million doses of coronavirus vaccine injected within his first 100 days in office is "absolutely" achievable. — AFP

Business

Google signs deal on copyright payments to French press

Accord signed with APIG involves 'neighboring rights'

PARIS: Google and French newspapers said yesterday they had signed an agreement aimed at opening the way to digital copyright payments from the online giant after months of heated negotiations. The accord signed with the APIG alliance of French dailies involves "neighboring rights", which call for payment for showing news content with Internet searches, a joint statement said.

It said the agreement sets a framework for Google to negotiate individual license agreements with newspapers on the payments and will give papers access to its new News Showcase program, which sees it pay publishers for a selection of enriched content. Payments are to be calculated individually and will be based on criteria including Internet viewing figures and the amount of information published. The deal covers papers that carry "political and general news", the statement said.

APIG head Pierre Louette, who is also CEO of the Les Echos of the Le Parisien newspaper group, said the deal amounts to the

"effective recognition of neighboring rights for the press and the start of their remuneration by digital platforms for the use of their publications online". Google France chief Sebastien Missoffe called the deal proof of a "commitment" that opens up "new perspectives".

The statement included no information about the monetary value involved, and both APIG and Google declined to give financial details when contacted by AFP. News outlets struggling with dwindling print subscriptions have long seethed at Google's failure to give them a cut of the millions it makes from ads displayed alongside news search results. The COVID-19 crisis has hurt sales even further.

A Paris appeals court ruled in October that the US giant had to continue to negotiate with French news publishers over a new European law on neighboring rights. France was the first country in the EU to enact the law but Google initially refused to comply, saying media groups already benefited by receiving millions of

visits to their websites.

Google also said at the time it had decided to lower the search engine visibility of papers that refused to make headlines, article extracts and thumbnails available in Google searches without remuneration. In November, Google said it had reached individual agreements with a number of flagship publications, such as Le Monde, Le Figaro, Liberation and L'Express.

But other newspapers remained without an accord - as did news agencies including Agence France-Presse (AFP) - and negotiations continued. "I am delighted that the recognition of neighboring rights is becoming a reality for the first time in Europe and now that the first step - always the most difficult one - has been taken, we expect Google to keep up its momentum and extend this recognition to other eligible players, including news agencies," said AFP Chief Executive Fabrice Fries. Talks between Google and the print magazine association SEPM, meanwhile, have stalled so far. —AFP

News in brief

Norway ready to save Norwegian

OSLO: The Norwegian state said yesterday it was ready to offer aid to Norwegian Air, after the ailing low-cost airline presented a new plan to survive its COVID-induced crisis. The low-cost airline presented a series of proposals on Jan 14, including an end to its long-haul flights in favor of a refocusing on Europe, and a massive debt reduction target coupled with raising new capital. The government was asked to support the plan and has now signaled its willingness, on condition that private investors "do their part". —AFP

United lost \$7.1bn in 2020

NEW YORK: United Airlines on Wednesday reported it took a hefty loss in 2020 following the devastating hit COVID-19 did to travel, but the carrier eyed a partial recovery in 2021. United reported an annual loss of \$7.1 billion compared with profits of \$3.0 billion in 2019. The big US carrier said it expects 2021 to be a "transition" year thanks to coronavirus vaccines as it pledged to exceed pre-COVID profit margins by 2023. Revenues for last year fell 64.5 percent to \$15.4 billion, the latest bruising data for a US airline after travel slowed to a trickle in March at the height of coronavirus restrictions before recovering partly later in the year. —AFP

US homebuilding surges

WASHINGTON: The housing market remained a bright spot in the US economy at the close of 2020 as home construction jumped again, according to government data yesterday. Home sales were strong even before the pandemic struck early last year and have remained robust amid record low interest rates, while builders have struggled to keep up as prices have risen. Homebuilding projects started last month jumped 5.8 percent compared to November, rising to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.67 million units, the Commerce Department reported, far more than economists had expected. —AFP

Unemployment data underscores economic crisis awaiting Biden



NEW YORK: In this photo taken on Jan 8, 2021, a person walks into a check cashing store in downtown Brooklyn. —AFP

WASHINGTON: The United States saw 900,000 new filings for unemployment benefits last week, the Labor Department said yesterday, a massive number that shows the economy remains far from healed as President Joe Biden takes office. The seasonally adjusted figure for the week ended Jan 16 was worse than expected and just 26,000 less than the previous week's downwardly revised level.

It was also still well above the single worst week of the 2008-2010 global financial crisis, during which Biden served as vice president under Barack Obama. Adding to the toll were 423,734 new filings made under a program for self-employed people not normally eligible for benefits, while as of the week of Jan 2, the Labor Department said nearly 16 million people were receiving some form of aid from the government - a figure that's expected to rise.

"Layoffs are ongoing at an elevated pace, reflecting the impact of containment measures," Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said in an analysis.

"Conditions are unlikely to improve until infections can be curbed, and the economy can reopen more completely."

New jobless filings skyrocketed after states and cities restricted business across the US when Covid-19 broke out in March, and though they've come down from the millions reported each week as businesses shed employees en masse, they remain at very high levels. The unemployment rate has seen a similar trajectory, shooting up to 14.7 percent in April but declining in subsequent months to its current 6.7 percent.

Biden has proposed a \$1.9 trillion spending measure aimed both at revitalizing the economy and improving the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines, but Lydia Boussour of Oxford Economics warned the country is in for rough times to come. "Fiscal stimulus prospects, along with broader vaccine diffusion, are pointing to a brightening labor market outlook but with the pandemic still raging, claims are poised to remain elevated in the near-term," she said. —AFP

ABK announces final winners of Talabat draw



KUWAIT: Al Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced the names of the final 18 winners for the month of January who, won their 'spend back' on Talabat, when paying with their ABK credit or prepaid cards. The draw took place on Jan 7, 2021 under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The lucky winners of the 2nd and final draw are:

Abdullah Fadhel AlHathran
Naji Dhaifallah Mnayea
Bader Hamad Abdullah
Abdullah Sulaiman Ali
Mohammad Abdullah Al Mahmid
Talal Bader Mubarak
Ali Salem Altarfi
Abdulaziz Mohamad Alraees
Farah Marwan Al Eissa
Reem Eid AlFazran
Ibrahim Abdullah Al Sayed Omar
Khaled Waleed AlDuwaisan
Abner Preston Fernandes
Mohammad Ahmad AlTahaw
Faisal Eid Falah
Anwar Ali Marafie
Hamad Abdulaziz Al Qatami
Fahad Salem Al Sabah

Business

In Gabonese city, the two faces of a mining boom

Wealth, comfort for a few contrasts with poverty, want for many

MOANDA, Gabon: Mipoko marveled at the new spigots as she filled containers with water and loaded them onto a creaking wheelbarrow. The taps have been installed for the public by COMILOG, a mining giant that has extracted manganese in the Gabonese city of Moanda for decades. “They’ve changed our lives!” the 12-year-old enthused. Next to her, Germain Ndoulouga, a 38-year-old unemployed man, grumbled: “It would be great if only COMILOG gave us jobs.”

COMILOG has transformed what was once a village of some 500 residents into a city of around 60,000. But it is one where wealth and comfort for a few contrasts with poverty and want for many, and where basic infrastructure is widely lacking. Working for COMILOG, the Gabonese subsidiary of the French mining and metallurgy group Eramet, is Ndoulouga’s dream. “When you join COMILOG, your status changes in your family, in the city and in the whole society,” he said.

COMILOG - an acronym for Compagnie Minière de l’Ogooué - says the mine straddles 25 percent of the global reserves of the mineral used in the manufacture of steel as well as in batteries. Eramet is the world’s second-biggest producer of high-grade manganese. Since 2018, COMILOG has touted its investment plan for the local community, but the gap remains between its 2,000 or so employees and the rest of the population.

Unemployment reached 25 percent in 2017, the last official figure available in the region including Moanda, which lies 700 km east of the Gabonese capital Libreville. Sumptuous villas dot the verdant hill overlooking the city, and around 200 high-level employees enjoy a company gym, restaurant and even a cinema - a form of entertainment that has vanished from Libreville.

Guards protect the privileged community, in which the position of the houses is determined by the employees’ rank in the company. COMILOG pays for amenities such as electricity, plumbing and even gardening. Even rank-and-file employees working for COMILOG enjoy benefits such as free care at the company hospital and free education at schools equipped with cutting-edge computers.

Since COMILOG began exploiting Moanda’s manganese in 1962 - two years after Gabon’s independence from France - the municipality has grown apace, but its infrastructure has lagged far behind. Neighborhoods on the periphery often lack water or electricity. “We don’t even have public (water) pumps,” said single mother Huguette, wearing a football jersey. The 19-year-old raises her daughter in a wooden shack at the end of a pot-holed road.

Even in the city center, the bumpy red dirt roads are dotted with potholes and lined with rubbish. The Moanda hospital, unlike COMILOG’s, is in a dire state, unclean and with-



MOANDA, Gabon: A man crosses a stream in a less advantaged district of this town on Nov 27, 2020. — AFP

out air conditioning or mosquito nets. In one hall, patients lie on a dozen mattresses, with children sleeping on mats beside them. “When it’s full, you have to walk over patients when you do

your rounds,” one nurse said. “And you have to fill bottles with water to wash your hands.” The toilets are out of order, so patients must use the great outdoors. — AFP

News in brief

Unilever to pay decent salaries

LONDON: British consumer goods giant Unilever pledged yesterday to pay workers in its supply chain a decent wage by the end of the decade, warning that the coronavirus pandemic has deepened social inequality. The firm, which has experienced strong demand for its hand cleaners and household cleaning products during the pandemic, said it will seek to ensure that “everyone... who directly provides goods and services to the company earns at least a living wage or income, by 2030”. “The two biggest threats that the world currently faces are climate change and social inequality,” Chief Executive Alan Jope said in a statement. —AFP

WeChat users claim surveillance

SAN FRANCISCO: California WeChat users sued its parent company Tencent on Wednesday, saying the mobile app is used for spying on and censoring users for the Chinese government. US-based nonprofit Citizen Power Initiatives for China (CPIFC) filed the suit in Silicon Valley, joined by a half-dozen California residents in urging a state court to order Tencent to change its ways and pay damages. Tencent’s relationship with the Chinese government enables it to keep competition out of the market while honing its algorithm to better censor or mine user data, the suit argued. — AFP

Rich nations ‘hugely exaggerate’ climate finance

PARIS: Rich countries have over-reported finance to help countries adapt to the impacts of climate change by \$20 billion over the last decade, leaving at-risk communities drastically underfunded, a new analysis showed yesterday. Under the 2015 Paris climate deal, countries are required to boost funding to hard-hit governments, evenly split between cash to mitigate global warming and to help them adapt to future climate impacts.

Developed countries promised to provide \$50 billion in annual finance for adaptation by 2020. But official OECD figures show that in 2018 donors committed just \$16.8 billion. The true figure, according to an analysis by green group CARE International, is in fact far lower: Just \$9.7 billion. CARE and its partner organizations in Africa and southeast Asia assessed 112 climate adaptation projects funded by 25 donor nations equivalent to 13 percent of total global adaptation finance between 2013-2017.

They found that the funding for adaptation in these projects had been over reported by 42 percent. Applying that figure to remaining projects, CARE said that adaptation finance had been over-reported by \$20 billion during the same period. It said several countries and donors had overblown their adaptation grants by including finance for construction projects such as housing and roads not related to the climate at all. “The world’s poorest people are not responsible for the climate crisis yet are hardest hit,” said John Nordbo of CARE Denmark.

“Not only have rich nations let the Global South down by failing to deliver enough adaptation finance, but they have tried to give the impression that they are providing more than they do.” The assessment showed that Japan had over-reported its climate adaptation finance by more than \$1.3 billion, including more than \$400 million on projects such as a “Friendship Bridge” and an expressway in Vietnam.

It also accused France of mislabeling \$90 million provided for a local governance scheme in the Philippines as climate adaptation finance, even though only five percent of that project’s budget is earmarked for that objective.

‘Can’t afford inaccuracy’

The Paris deal aims to limit warming above pre-industrial levels to “well below” two degrees Celsius. With just 1C of warming so far, a string of climate-linked disasters have battered developing economies, which often face interminable waits for reconstruction funding. The United Nations last week said countries were falling short of their Paris pledges by failing to fund vulnerable nations’ climate fight.

It said the true cost of adaptation - reducing the fallout among communities and increasing their capacity to deal with climate-related disasters such as floods and drought - was currently around \$70 billion annually. But that figure could swell as high as \$300 billion a year by the end of the decade, it said. CARE also raised concern that many development projects ostensibly meant to help climate-vulnerable states adapt were financed in the form of loans rather than outright grants. In projects assessed in Ghana and Ethiopia, for example, 28 percent and 50 percent of total contributions respectively were provided as loans, the analysis found. — AFP

Sports

Cancellation fears cloud Tokyo Olympics with 6 months to go

IOC chief says Games will go ahead, 'no plan B'

TOKYO: When the Tokyo Olympics were postponed last year, officials promised they would open in 2021 as proof of mankind's triumph over the coronavirus. But six months before the rescheduled start, victory over the virus remains distant, and fears are growing rapidly that the Games may not take place at all. Publicly, organizers are still adamant the Games can go ahead, and say they can be held safely even if the virus is not under control by the time the flame is lit on July 23.

"It's precisely because we're in this situation that we need to remember the value of the Olympics - that humankind can coexist peacefully through sport," Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiko Muto told AFP. However, with much of the world still paralyzed by COVID-19, and Tokyo under a state of emergency, the doubting voices are growing louder. Former London 2012 deputy chairman Keith Mills this week said he thought the Games looked "unlikely" to happen, while British Olympics legend Matthew Pinsent said it was "ludicrous" to go ahead. The long path to Tokyo's second Summer Games has been littered with obstacles, from bid bribery allegations to fears over the summer heat. But none has loomed as large as the pandemic, which last March forced the first peacetime postponement in modern Games history.

Public disenchantment

In Japan, whose emergency measures cover greater Tokyo and other parts of the country, public disenchantment is rising. A poll this month

found 80 percent of respondents opposed hosting the event this year, with 35 percent favoring outright cancellation and 45 percent calling for further postponement. The Australian Open tennis Grand Slam has underlined the complexity of organizing international sport in the pandemic, with major problems bringing in players and keeping them Covid-free.

"It's been really eye-opening here in Melbourne to see and hear the amount of logistical challenges and the scale of trying to organize just a tennis event in the current situation," said Gordon Reid, the British wheelchair tennis player and Paralympic gold-medallist. "You've got to multiply that by a thousand when it comes to the Olympics and Paralympics because they are on another scale." In an interview with Kyodo News published yesterday, International Olympic Committee boss Thomas Bach said the Games will go ahead this summer and there is "no plan B". Tokyo 2020 chiefs say another postponement is "absolutely impossible", meaning the Games will be cancelled if they cannot be held this year. They are pushing ahead with a raft of coronavirus countermeasures intended to ensure a safe Games, even without vaccines which remain non-mandatory for athletes.

A 53-page interim report released in December outlines measures including a ban on supporters cheering, regular testing for athletes and limited stays at the Olympic village. Much is still undecided though, including a decision on how many spectators will be allowed - if any.

team. They play some very good cricket," he told reporters. "We have to be at our absolute best. But that's an exciting prospect for us, a great opportunity for us, it's a great way to aid our development as a side. And we will be going there fully expecting to try and win that series. But we have got a lot of hard work to do before we get there. We got a big Test match here."

Root's 228 was crucial to winning the opening Test by seven wickets but England's bowlers twice bowled out the hosts in Galle. The shuffling of their veteran fast bowlers was the only change made to the team for the second Test. But it is the return of Stokes and Archer for the India series that excites Root. The two key players are expected to be announced in the Test squad for India to be revealed Thursday.

"You speak to any side in the world, those two guys coming back into it would give the squad a huge boost and it's certainly the case for us," said Root. "We are excited to see them back in and around the squad. Hopefully they are full of energy and ready to go when they get here." —AFP



TOKYO: In this file photo taken on Sept 10, 2013 Tokyo Governor Naoki Inose, Tokyo 2020 bid committee members and Tokyo metropolitan assembly members open an ornamental ball to celebrate winning the right to host the 2020 Olympic Games at Tokyo city hall. —AFP

Clock is ticking

The coronavirus has taken a considerable financial toll, with some studies rating Tokyo as the most expensive Summer Olympics yet. Anti-virus measures and other delay-related costs have added 294 billion yen (\$2.8 billion) to the price tag, which has ballooned to at least 1.64 trillion yen (\$15.8 billion). Efforts to reduce costs by cutting back on athlete welcome ceremonies and other trimmings have produced only minimal savings, though organisers say they have managed

to keep all domestic sponsors on board.

Meanwhile many athletes are still sweating on qualification, with several events outstanding. Disruption to training and competition schedules is also causing huge uncertainty. However, plans to start the nationwide torch relay in March remain on course, with social distancing measures set to be enforced. Japan is now desperately hoping it does not lose another Olympics - following the cancellation of the 1940 Summer and Winter Games because of war. —AFP

Archer, Stokes to give England 'huge boost' against India

COLOMBO: Ben Stokes and Jofra Archer's return to England duty for their India tour next month will be a major boost to the side as they seek a crucial series win over the world's top Test nation, captain Joe Root said yesterday. Stokes and Archer have missed England's recent matches in Sri Lanka as the squad was rotated to allow players to rest during the coronavirus pandemic.

England lead the two-match series 1-0 going into the final Test today in Galle. England have called back fast bowler James Anderson and will rest Stuart Broad for the clash. England then go on to India - who have been boosted by their historic Test win in Australia this week - for a series including four Tests. Root was optimistic despite India's sensational 2-1 win.

"I expect India to be full of confidence and in their own conditions they are a very good

Chinese racer on brink of F1 says 'last step hardest'

SHANGHAI: Zhou Guanyu played with toy cars as a little boy and dreamed of being China's first Formula One driver. Now 21, he is within touching distance of making that a reality. The Shanghai native, who tested for Renault last year, is widely touted as destined to make the move onto the Formula One grid, which would have far-reaching implications for the sport in China.

"When I was four or five I was already really into toy cars. I was always getting cars for birthday presents," Zhou, who uses the English name "Joe" and currently races in F2, told AFP. "Then one day I just went to indoor karting when I was seven-and-a-half years old and that was the first time actually me driving a proper go-kart. "The first time I tried it, I absolutely loved it." Zhou speaks good English with a hint of a Yorkshire accent, having moved to the northern English city of Sheffield in 2012 where his karting team was based. "I didn't speak great English at that time because the English lessons you study

in school (in China) are completely different to actually speaking to a real person or real life," he said. "So everything for me was blank, I had no idea and lessons for me were really difficult to understand."

Zhou, who is temporarily back in Shanghai from Britain, caught Ferrari's attention and was with their famed driving academy from 2014 to 2018. He joined the Renault Sport Academy in 2019 and was named a development driver for their F1 team. Last year he was promoted to drive in the post-season young drivers' test in Abu Dhabi, where he shared the garage with one of his idols, two-time world champion Fernando Alonso.

Many experts say it is only a matter of time until Zhou steps up to Formula One. But first he needs more F2 success to accrue enough points for his Super License, a requirement to drive at the highest level.

"That's my dream so I wouldn't say exactly the time when it will happen. But I would say definitely I'm the closest ever to get into Formula One as a Chinese driver. But the last step is the hardest because as well as the Super License you need to have the opportunities or seat available to jump in."

A seat did come up for the 2021 season at Renault, now rebranded Alpine F1 Team, but that was filled by Alonso. Zhou said his experience of testing alongside the 39-year-old Spaniard in December in Abu Dhabi had been invaluable on the road to securing a Formula One seat. —AFP

Sports

Pogba fires Man Utd back to Premier League summit

Villa boss Smith fumes as Man City extend hot streak

LONDON: Paul Pogba produced a moment of magic as Manchester United came from behind to beat Fulham 2-1 and reclaim the Premier League lead on Wednesday, ending Manchester City's short stay at the top. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's in-form team started the match third in the table after 24 hours of chopping and changing at the summit. The win sent the Red Devils two points clear and equaled the club record of 17 Premier League away games without defeat set by the treble-winning side of 1999.

United were forced to dig deep after Ademola Lookman punished them for an untidy start before Edinson Cavani pulled them level with a poacher's goal later in the first half. Pogba - back in the starting line-up in recent weeks after a spell on the periphery of Solskjaer's team - put United in front with a stunning left-foot curling effort from outside the area in the second half. United have now won seven Premier League games after going behind this season.

United were punished in the fifth minute when Lookman sprang the offside trap, collecting a ball over the top from Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa. The forward had time to pick his spot and gave

Manchester United goalkeeper David de Gea no chance, striking the ball into the bottom corner with his right foot. The away side settled and were level in the 21st minute through Cavani, moments after Bruno Fernandes had hit the inside of the post.

Fulham goalkeeper Alphonse Areola failed to hold a Fernandes cross from the left, spilling the ball into the path of the veteran Uruguayan, who made no mistake with a left-footed finish from close range. The increasingly influential Fernandes tested Areola from distance as United began to flex their muscles without creating many clear-cut chances. Fulham made a bright start to the second period as United again struggled to find openings.

Meanwhile, Aston Villa manager Dean Smith launched a furious blast at the officials after Bernardo Silva's controversial late goal inspired Manchester City's 2-0 win on Wednesday. Pep Guardiola's side found it hard work to pierce Villa's stubborn defense at the rain-lashed Etihad Stadium. Silva finally made the breakthrough in the 79th minute with his first Premier League goal since July.

Smith was sent to the stands after a furious complaint that Rodri should have been given off-



LONDON: Manchester United's French midfielder Paul Pogba celebrates scoring their second goal during the English Premier League match between Fulham and Manchester United at Craven Cottage on Wednesday. —AFP

side in the build-up to Silva's goal. Ilkay Gundogan's penalty ensured City made it nine successive wins in all competitions as they extended their unbeaten run to 16 matches. After the match, the Pro-

fessional Game Match Officials organization issued a statement explaining that, by the letter of the law, Rodri had not gained an advantage because Villa's Tyrone Mings played the ball first. —AFP

Breakaway Super League 'will not be recognized' by FIFA

LAUSANNE, Switzerland: FIFA has gone on the offensive amid ongoing speculation about a European Super League, insisting that any breakaway by leading clubs "would not be recognized by either FIFA or the respective confederation" while players would risk being banned from the World Cup and other major tournaments if involved.

"Any club or player involved in such a competition would as a consequence not be allowed to participate in any competition organized by FIFA or their respective confederation," said Thursday's statement, signed by FIFA president Gianni Infantino along with the heads of all six continental confederations including UEFA. The statement was a response to what it called "recent media speculation" about a breakaway by some of the world's richest clubs.

In October, outgoing Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu dropped a bombshell in a statement announcing his resignation, as he also claimed the club had accepted a proposal to play in "a future European Super League". That followed reports in the UK that negotiations were nearing conclusion for the creation of a "European Premier League" of 18 clubs, backed by \$6 billion of financing from major banks. However, those reports came with discussions still ongoing about the future format of the UEFA Champions League, the world's most lucrative and prestigious club competition. Meanwhile FIFA remains focused on plans for an expanded, 24-team Club World Cup, championed by Infantino. —AFP

Zidane has players' backing after Real cup humiliation

MADRID: Zinedine Zidane insisted his players still believe in him after Real Madrid suffered an embarrassing defeat by third-tier side Alcoyano in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday. La Liga's reigning champions lost 2-1 to Alcoyano, who scored a remarkable winner in extra-time after having a man sent off. Real Madrid have now won only once in their last five games, with an extraordinary loss heaping more pressure on Zidane.

Asked if he still had the backing of the players, Zidane said: "Yes I believe so, you have to ask them. We've done good things this season, apart from the last four games. Now we have La Liga and the Champions League and we have to work. Whether my message gets through, you have to ask them, I can't answer that." Zidane took responsibility for the defeat. "I'm the coach, it's my fault," he said. "I am responsible, the players have tried but well, we're out." Zidane rotated his starting line-up but a team that included the likes of Marcelo, Isco, Casemiro and Vinicius Junior should have had enough to beat opponents sitting fourth in their division in Segunda B.

And when Zidane threw on the likes of Eden Hazard, Karim Benzema and Toni Kroos as substitutes to put the game to bed, the opposite happened, as Alcoyano, a man down, scored the winner, Juanan diverting in at the near post to pull off an incredible upset. Alcoyano have not graced Spain's top flight since 1951 and their El Collao stadium holds less than 5,000 spectators. The only shame here was their fans were not able to see it.

Real take lead

They were comfortable in the first period but Madrid scored with their first chance on the stroke of half-time as Marcelo's delivery to the back post found a diving Eder Militao, who headed in. But Madrid still laboured in the second half, even after Benzema replaced Mariano Diaz, and Alcoyano equalised in the 82nd minute, a corner flicked on by Ramon Lopez to the back post, where the sleeping Vinicius allowed Jose Solbes a simple finish.

Lucas Vazquez went close with a late header and then Madrid could have had a penalty when Angel booted Militao in a scramble in the box. But without VAR to check, Alcoyano survived. Hazard, Marco Asensio and Kroos all came on for extra-time while Ramon Lopez went off, a late challenge on Casemiro earning him a second yellow card and leaving his team to play the final 11 minutes with 10 men. Lopez sat watching with his head in his hands, fearing presumably what he assumed would be a Madrid winner. Instead, his team did it without him, Ali Dikate's cross poked home by Juanan at the front post to complete an astonishing victory. Real Sociedad made lighter work of their tie against Cordoba, winning 2-0 thanks to two goals from Willian Jose, the Brazilian striker who is set to join Wolves on loan until the end of the season. Willian Jose left a welcome farewell gift by scoring twice in the second half to put Real Sociedad safely through to the last 16. —AFP



Zinedine Zidane

Sports

Pirlo wins first trophy as Juve beat Napoli in Super Cup

Ronaldo scores his 20th goal of the season

REGGIO EMILIA, Italy: Andrea Pirlo won his first trophy as a coach on Wednesday as Juventus beat Napoli 2-0 in the Italian Super Cup. Cristiano Ronaldo blasted in his 20th goal of the season following a corner on 64 minutes in Reggio Emilia, before Napoli captain Lorenzo Insigne missed a penalty and Alvaro Morata added a second deep into injury time. Pirlo, 41, clinched his first silverware five months after taking over at his former club where he won four league titles.

“Winning a first title (as a coach) is a great joy, different from that felt as a player, it’s even more beautiful,” said Pirlo, who lifted the trophy three times as a player with Juventus and AC Milan. Juventus won the annual trophy, played between the league champions and Italian Cup holders, for the ninth time, having finished runners-up last year to Lazio. “This trophy is very important because it can give us confidence for the rest of our season,” said Ronaldo.

Juventus sit fifth in the league, 10 points behind leaders AC Milan, after losing 2-0 to second-placed Inter Milan last weekend. “The Scudetto is possible, Milan and Inter are very strong, but there are still a lot of games to be played and we can still do it,” added Ronaldo. It was the first meeting between Pirlo and Napoli coach Gennaro Gattuso, who won the 2006 World Cup together and spent a decade as AC Milan teammates, winning two Serie A titles and

two Champions League crowns together.

‘Sorry for Gattuso’

They have not faced off this season after Napoli refused to travel to Turin for their October league match because of coronavirus cases – a fixture which has still to be played. “I’m sorry for Gennaro Gattuso, but we wanted to react after the defeat against Inter Milan,” said Pirlo. “We bet a lot on the pride of the players, we wanted to show that we were a team.”

Juventus received a boost hours before kickoff with Juan Cuadrado recovering from coronavirus and starting for the first time in two weeks. Napoli had the best chance of the first half in the Mapei Stadium, with Juve keeper Wojciech Szczesny demonstrating quick reflexes to save Hirving Lozano’s diving header just before the half-hour mark.

Federico Bernardeschi came off the bench after the break in place of Federico Chiesa and immediately had an impact. Juventus piled on the pressure after an hour when Ronaldo was sent through on goal and defender Kostas Manolas almost deflected the ball into his own net. But the five-time Ballon d’Or winner made the most of the resulting corner, with the ball bouncing off Tiemoue Bakayoko and into the path of the unmarked Portuguese forward to fire in his 20th goal of the season.



REGGIO EMILIA, Italy: Juventus’ Italian defender Giorgio Chiellini lifts the winners’ trophy to celebrate with teammates after Juventus won the Italian Super Cup football match against Napoli on Wednesday at Mapei stadium. —AFP

Napoli had a chance to equalize from the spot after Weston McKennie fouled Dries Mertens, but Insigne wasted the opportunity by dragging a woeful effort wide. Szczesny pulled off another late save before a last-gasp Morata goal sealed victory. “We all lost together, not because of Lorenzo’s penalty. Let’s move on,” said

Gattuso, 43, whose side beat Juventus in last season’s Italian Cup. “In the first half there was a bit of fear. I don’t remember Juve’s serious chances today. “We could have done better, but the match is very similar to the one seven months ago. In fact, we suffered more seven months ago than today.” —AFP

Sexton’s Cavaliers spoil debut of Brooklyn Big Three

LOS ANGELES: Collin Sexton scored a game-high 42 points as the Cleveland Cavaliers overcame a James Harden triple double and spoiled the debut of the Brooklyn Nets’ Big Three with a 147-135 double overtime victory. Wednesday’s marathon contest was supposed to showcase the Nets’ star trio of Harden, Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving playing together for the first time together.

Irving finished with 37 points, Harden had a triple double of 21 points, 10 rebounds and 12 assists and Durant tallied a team-high 38 points and 12 rebounds, but it wasn’t enough as the Cavaliers had seven players in double-figure scoring at the Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse arena in Cleveland. Turkey’s Cedi Osman scored 25 points, and Taurean Prince came off the bench to notch 17 as the Cavaliers bench outscored the Nets reserves 44-10.

“We seemed a little lost at times, which is natural because we haven’t played together. So there’s a little indecision,” Nets coach Steve Nash said. “We started the game turning the ball over, we had seven or eight in the first quarter. We cleaned it up and got ourselves back in the game, but obviously we have to defend better. We’re just getting a feel for each other and this is a process that’s gonna take the entire year.”

Irving missed seven games for undisclosed purposes but was slapped with a \$50,000 fine by the league while he was out for violating the league’s COVID-19 safety rules. Irving was punished

after video surfaced showing him attending a family birthday event without wearing a face mask. Brooklyn had won five of seven games without Irving and this was just their third loss since January 5.

“We will have good nights, we will have great nights, but it is how we galvanize this group together and how we sacrifice and compromise for the greater good,” Irving said. “That still remains to be seen, obviously one game is out the way, but I am excited for what’s to come.” Sexton hit the game-tying three-pointer with 1.2 seconds left in the first overtime period and scored 15 of his 42 in the second extra session.

Sexton set the tone for Cleveland in the second overtime, hitting a free throw early and then draining a three pointer with three minutes left to give the Cavs a 134-127 lead. Sexton nailed his fifth and final three pointer with 89 seconds left to make it 142-131 as the Cavaliers dominated down the stretch.

Sexton surpassed his previous career high of 41, set in March 2020 against Boston, by scoring 31 points after halftime. He shot 16 of 29 from the field overall after missing the previous five games with an ankle injury. Durant missed a potential game winner at the buzzer in the first overtime as he, Irving and Harden all played the final 18 minutes of the game but couldn’t get the job done. “It felt right, felt perfect, felt like we belong together,” Durant said.

Elsewhere, Kristaps Porzingis collected 27 points and 13 rebounds and Trey Burke came off the bench to score 22 points to lift the Dallas Mavericks to a 124-112 victory over the host Indiana Pacers. Tim Hardaway finished with 19 points in the win. On Monday, Hardaway missed all 12 of his shooting attempts in a loss to the Toronto Raptors.

Luka Doncic recorded his 30th career triple-double with 13 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists for the Mavericks, who snapped



CLEVELAND, Ohio: Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets runs into Collin Sexton #2 of the Cleveland Cavaliers at Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse on Wednesday. —AFP

a season-high three-game losing streak. Malcolm Brogdon scored 26 points, Domantas Sabonis added 25 and Jeremy Lamb had 10 in his first game since sustaining a torn ACL in Toronto 11 months ago. In other games, Joel Embiid scored 42 points and grabbed 10 rebounds to lift the host Philadelphia 76ers past the Boston Celtics 117-109 and Cole Anthony’s three-pointer at the buzzer capped an Orlando Magic rally in their 97-96 win over the Minnesota Timberwolves. — AFP



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