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# Central Bank protects clients against fraud

## Campaign launched to boost awareness about banking services, risks



KUWAIT: Central Bank of Kuwait officials hold a press conference during the launch of an awareness campaign yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait Yousef Al-Obeid yesterday affirmed the bank's long-standing policy of protecting clients from fraud and high-risk investments. Speaking at a news conference marking a campaign themed "Let's be aware", Obeid said the Central Bank's measures in this regard have drastically cut the number of such acts of deception.

Moreover, the Central Bank has protected banking institutions and individuals against high-risk investments such as suspicious transactions in digital currencies like bitcoin. Obeid added the Central Bank has a policy to educate the public against excessive consumption and guides them toward saving.

Obeid noted the campaign was supposed to launch last year, but global health conditions led it to be postponed until this year. He said the Central Bank has been launching several awareness campaigns in the belief in the importance of the role of the media in shaping knowledge among consumers.

Obeid said the campaign's objectives include strengthening basic principles and concepts in the banking field, facilitating customers to use banking services in the best way and enabling them to benefit from the services provided by banks, as

well as increasing the level of financial inclusion and promoting financial and economic stability.

He pointed out that the campaign will continue throughout the year and will include raising awareness of the mechanism of filing complaints about banking services, in addition to various bankcards, the most important steps to be followed to avoid exposure to fraud and awareness of risks.

Obeid said the campaign will also include awareness videos and press statements through many channels of communication, especially digital accounts, Kuwaiti banks' social media platforms and other points of communication with the public, ensuring the wide spread of the campaign's message and the public's interaction with it.

On Saturday, the Central Bank said Kuwaiti lenders will be allowed to distribute cash profits based on their 2020 financial results. "In light of the financial data of Kuwaiti banks, that showed strength and solid levels of capital adequacy, and due to not using their provisions during 2020, they can distribute dividends to shareholders in line with their results and net profits, in a way that doesn't affect the required capital adequacy," the Central Bank said in a statement. — KUNA

## Pollution linked to irreversible loss of eyesight

PARIS: Air pollution is likely to increase the risk of irreversible sight loss, according to the results of a long-term study published yesterday. Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the leading cause of blindness among over-50s in richer nations, with roughly 300 million people predicted to be affected by 2040. Known risk factors include age, smoking and genetic make-up.

Now researchers have drawn a link between AMD and air pollution, which is already known to carry a host of health risks including heart and lung disease. Writing in the British Journal of Ophthalmology, researchers analyzed data from more than 115,000 participants who reported no eye problems at the start of the study period in 2006.

Official data on traffic and levels of nitrous oxide and small particulate matter was used to calculate the annual average air pollution levels at the home addresses of the participants. They were asked to report formal diagnosis of AMD by a doctor and were tested on their sight performance several years later. In all, 1,286 participants were diagnosed with AMD at the end of the study period.

After accounting for other influencing factors including underlying health conditions and lifestyle, fine particulate matter exposure was associated with an eight-percent higher risk of an individual contracting AMD. "Overall, our findings suggest that ambient air pollution, especially fine (particulate matter) or those of combustion-related particles, may affect AMD risk," said the study authors. "Our findings add to the growing evidence of the damaging effects of ambient air pollution, even in the setting of relative low exposure."

The World Health Organization estimates air pollution is responsible for at least seven million deaths every year. Last week, a separate study estimated that reducing air pollution to WHO-recommended levels could prevent more than 50,000 deaths annually across Europe.

Continued on Page 2

## Delhi clashes overshadow army parade

NEW DELHI: Thousands of Indian farmers fought street battles with police across New Delhi yesterday as they took protests against agriculture reforms into the capital during a giant Republic Day military parade. Police laid on one of their biggest security operations in years in a bid to keep demonstrators away from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other government and military leaders.

But after barging through barricades on main roads into the city, convoys of farmers on tractors took over Delhi landmarks and debris-strewn streets were left in clouds of tear gas. One farmer was killed in what police said was an accident after his tractor overturned. Police said they suffered "many" casualties but gave no figures.

Continued on Page 2



NEW DELHI: Farmers stand on the ramparts of Red Fort as they protest against the central government's recent agricultural reforms yesterday. — AFP

## Lebanese fear poverty more than virus

TRIPOLI, Lebanon: Lebanon may be under a strict pandemic lockdown to stem raging coronavirus rates, but father-of-six Omar Qarhani is still working, desperate to support his family. "I'm not scared of corona - what scares me is being in need and poverty," the 38-year-old told AFP, selling vegetables on the side of a road in the northern port city of Tripoli.

Lebanon has imposed a round-the-clock curfew nationwide since January 14, barred non-essential workers from leaving their homes and restricted grocery shopping to deliveries. The drastic measures came after daily COVID cases suddenly shot up following gatherings during the holiday season, overwhelming hospitals.

The country has recorded over 280,000 coronavirus cases and more than 2,400 deaths stemming from the disease since the pandemic began. On paper, its COVID-19 restrictions are among the strictest in the world, but in reality grinding poverty is pushing many back onto the streets to eke out a living.

Standing beside his vegetable boxes in Tripoli,



TRIPOLI, Lebanon: Anti-government protesters push a dumpster during clashes following a demonstration against dire economic conditions in this northern Lebanese city on Monday. — AFP

Qarhani said he was already barely making ends meet after he gave up his job at a flower shop to sell fresh produce. "We need 70,000 Lebanese pounds a day to put food on the table, but this job only provides half," he said, implying he was earning less than \$8 a day at the market rate. Security forces have set up checkpoints across the country to check Lebanese are complying with measures in force until Feb 8 to protect the health sector from collapse. But many people in poorer areas have been forced to defy the rules and keep working, especially in the poverty-stricken city of Tripoli.

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## Pfizer or Sinopharm? 'Vaccine diplomacy' in the Middle East

JERUSALEM: Pfizer or Sinopharm? The US or China? In the Middle East and North Africa, novel coronavirus vaccine orders are driven by diplomatic and logistical considerations, reflecting Beijing's growing regional influence. In recent days, the Israeli government made documents public that showed the extent of its collaboration with US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer in its vaccination campaign, one of the largest in the world to date, with more than a quarter of its nine million inhabitants already vaccinated.

In return for swift delivery, Israel - with its vast digitized medical databases - is giving the company data on the efficacy and potential side effects of the vaccine based on indicators such as age and medical history. This extensive cooperation is no surprise given Israel is Washington's main strategic ally in the region. The Jewish state has also ordered millions of doses of the vaccine developed by fellow US firm Moderna, the least ordered vaccine in the region so far.

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## Local

# Amir, Crown Prince receive Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad

## Kuwait's Amir condoles with Saudi King on demise of Princess Tarfa



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. — Amiri Diwan and KUNA photos

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. His

Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah also received His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad at Bayan Palace.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a cable of condolences to the Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud over the passing of Princess

Tarfa bint Saud bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. His Highness the Amir extended his deepest sympathies over the loss, wishing the family solace in this time of grief. His Highness the Crown Prince

Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables to the Saudi King. — KUNA



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

## Editor-in-chief meets Information Minister



KUWAIT: Minister of Information and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi received Kuwait Times Editor-in-Chief Abd Al-Rahman Al-Alyan at the Ministry of

Information's building yesterday. The two sides discussed issues of mutual interest and ways to improve cooperation between Kuwait Times and the Ministry of Information.

## Foreign Minister meets Iranian Deputy FM

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Abbas Araghchi, at the Foreign Ministry yesterday. The meeting was attended by Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah, Kuwait's Ambassador to Iran Majdi Al-Dhefeeri, Assistant foreign minister for Deputy Foreign Minister's office Ayham Al-Omar, Assistant Foreign Minister for the Minister's office Saleh Al-Loughani and Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for the Minister's office Ahmad Al-Shuraim. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Abbas Araghchi. — KUNA

## GCC chief stresses importance of strategic relationship with Jordan

AMMAN: Secretary General of the Cooperation Council (GCC) Nayef Al-Hajraf stressed yesterday the importance of the strategic relationship that links GCC system with Jordan and the sincere desire to push cooperation efforts for benefit of both sides. In a statement at the conclusion of a one-day visit to Jordan, Hajraf said that Jordan

is very important to the GCC system, as this visit is to confirm this strategic relationship. Regarding his visit to the Kingdom, Hajraf said that the visit follows the GCC Summit which took place on January 5, 2021 in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, and its declaration which speaks in one of its articles about cooperation between GCC countries and Jordan, and

the council's keenness on the security and stability of Jordan and supporting development efforts in it, for the benefit of both sides.

On the meetings he had with Jordan's King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein, Prime Minister Dr Bisher Al-Khasawneh and the talks held with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, Hajraf said the meetings showed the importance of the strategic relations between GCC and Jordan and the existence of a sincere desire to push this relationship forward. The meeting of senior officials in the Council and Jordan that was held yesterday

had completed with number of steps aimed at activating the common themes between the two parties, he said, as it also focused on some priority issues, especially after COVID-19 pandemic, such as health and food security, agricultural, economic, and transport. Hajraf visited Jordan yesterday and met with Jordan's King, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, a day after the joint committee meetings of senior officials between the GCC countries and Jordan, which discussed the implementation of joint action plans within the framework of the strategic partnership between the two parties. — KUNA

## Pollution linked to irreversible...

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Yesterday's study was observational and so could not establish a causal link between air pollu-

tion and AMD.

But experts said it provided further evidence for the health risks of poor air quality. "The association of macular degeneration with smoking is well recognized, but this new finding of an environmental link related to atmospheric pollution will add further to the climate change debate," said Robert MacLaren, professor of ophthalmology at the University of Oxford. — AFP

## Delhi clashes overshadow...

Continued from Page 1

At the 400-year-old Red Fort, farmers put up their own emblem on the flagpole where India's tricolor normally flies on national days. They were chased out by security forces. Hundreds fought police outside the Delhi police headquarters. All over the city, security forces fired tear gas and staged baton charges. But the farmers also laid into police with branches and metal bars and hijacked buses that had been used to block their convoys.

As night fell, authorities cut Internet and phone links in the areas on the edge of Delhi where the farmers have set up their camps. The US embassy released a "security alert" warning American nationals to avoid trouble zones. Two months of protests against agricultural laws that deregulated produce markets have turned into the biggest challenge faced by Modi's Hindu nationalist government since it came to power six years ago.

The government had opposed the rally saying it would be a "national embarrassment" on Republic Day. Police allowed the demonstration if farmers waited until after the military parade and kept to a route away from central Delhi. But the security was breached while Modi and other dignitaries watched tanks and troops pass along the Rajpath boulevard while newly acquired Rafale fighter jets flew overhead.

Modi waved to crowds and was driven back to his residence barely 30 minutes before the fleets of tractors took over the center.

Tens of thousands of farmers have camped on the outskirts of the capital since November, protesting against the new laws which the government says will boost rural incomes. Union leaders say the legislation will give Indian conglomerates control of the agriculture industry - the bedrock of the economy - and end guaranteed prices for most farm produce.

"We are going to show the government that we mean business," said protester Nareesh Singh as he revved up his tractor and drove into a cloud of tear gas. Farmers' leaders say they have enough supplies to keep their protest camps going for a year. The leaders said the police had provoked the farmers into violence.

In a statement, police replied that they had to act after the farmers broke the conditions for the rally and took "the path of violence and destruction". "When you attack a peaceful protest, then difficulties for the government will surely increase," union leader Kawalpreet Singh Pannu told AFP. "This won't stop here. Our movement and message have only become stronger." He said a new protest would be held on Feb 1 outside parliament when the government announces its budget.

On one main road, people on rooftops threw petals on the tractor convoys. Elsewhere people cheered and applauded as farmers went past waving Indian flags and blowing horns. The Republic Day ceremonies went ahead despite security concerns. The parade was cut back this year because of the coronavirus pandemic, with the number of spectators reduced from 125,000 to 25,000. — AFP

## Lebanese fear poverty more...

Continued from Page 1

Tensions have risen, and dozens of protesters clashed with security forces in the city late Monday, although it was not immediately clear if the unrest was spontaneous or organized. Tripoli was already one of the country's poorest cities before the pandemic, and before a crippling economic crisis hit Lebanon in 2019.

Mohamed Al-Beirut, an anti-poverty activist in the city, said most of those ignoring the curfew were day laborers living from hand to mouth, earning barely \$2 a day. "If they don't work that day, they don't eat," he said. "Living conditions in Tripoli are bringing popular anger to a boil. What happened last night is just a prelude."

## Pfizer or Sinopharm? 'Vaccine diplomacy'...

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Other countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman, are also relying heavily on the Pfizer vaccine, developed by the US company in partnership with Germany's BioNTech. Iraq, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, on the other hand, hedged their bets by ordering from both Pfizer and Sinopharm, with the Chinese vaccine now deemed "completely safe" by the UAE.

For Yahia Zoubir, a specialist in relations between China and the Arab world, vaccine choice rests on considerations such as price and cold storage requirements - -70 degrees Celsius for Pfizer, but two to eight degrees Celsius for Sinopharm. But politics are never far away, says the professor at Kedge Business School in France. Since the start of the pandemic, the administration of former US president Donald Trump "closed in on itself, while China has deployed health diplomacy," he told AFP. "The Chinese

have been much more active and much more cooperative."

Beijing has exported millions of masks and gowns to the Middle East and North Africa and elsewhere, as well as providing respirators and holding online seminars with medical authorities in various countries. "Today, with the new silk road, there is also a health silk road," Zoubir said, referring to China's globe-spanning infrastructure push - the Belt and Road Initiative. "Health is becoming a part of China's foreign policy, allowing it to expand its circle of friends" in a region that accounts for half of Beijing's oil imports. According to Jonathan Fulton, a specialist in Chinese-Middle East relations at Zayed University in the UAE, "there is a lot of pressure on (US) allies and partners not to cooperate with China". Despite this, he added, as the US floundered in its own response to the pandemic, a "transition took place from China as a victim" to China as a supportive and "credible actor". With its Belt and Road project, Beijing is "looking to build a forward-looking Middle East presence" but not necessarily to replace the US, he said.

Sinopharm jabs also feature in the vaccine orders of other US allies in the region, like Egypt and Morocco. Analysts say collaboration could be aimed at ensuring Chinese vaccine production and distribution centers for the region and Africa are established in their territories. — AFP

Local

# Kuwait lists 505 new COVID-19 cases as infections on the rise

## Health Ministry announces three deaths, 537 recoveries in 24 hours

KUWAIT: Kuwait listed 505 new coronavirus infections and three virus-related deaths yesterday, to raise the total to 162,282 and 957 respectively, the health ministry said. The number of new cases have increased for the second straight day after the ministry announced 384 and 492 cases on Sunday and Monday respectively, while yesterday's three deaths is a slight increase from two deaths announced Monday and no deaths the day before.

Meanwhile, the ministry reported 537 recoveries yesterday, raising the total to 155,303. In comparison, Kuwait had announced 513 and 507 new recoveries on Sunday and Monday respectively. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood yesterday at 6,022 with 49 of them in intensive care units, according to ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad, who revealed that 8,426 swab tests were conducted over the same period, bringing the total to 1,479,530. Dr Sanad went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing, to help limit the spread of the virus.

Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Humoud Al-Sabah had briefed the Cabinet during its weekly meeting Monday about the latest developments concerning the novel coronavirus that has been spreading rapidly at the global level, as the

number of infections neared 100 million, with fatalities exceeding two million. The minister addressed his fellow executives about the local health status, namely counts of the casualties and the ministry's measures intended to contain the pandemic, as well as vaccination of the public with Pfizer-BioNTech as planned. The government

yesterday that no COVID-19 cases were detected among people who have already received their vaccines so far in Kuwait. In the meantime, the same paper reported quoting informed security sources that the process of inoculating 4,000 prisoners against the coronavirus will start soon. They said there is coordination at the highest level between reform establishments and the health ministry to account for the prisoners' numbers, prepare lists of their names and send them to the health ministry, which will decide the date of the inoculation.

Sources said the lists included the elderly and those with chronic diseases, who will be inoculated first, followed by the rest of the prisoners. Inoculation will take place at the prison hospital with supervision from health ministry specialists in coordination with prison doctors. Prisoners will not be allowed to leave the prison to be inoculated to avoid any security problems.

In other news, Director of air cargo at the Directorate General of Civil Aviation Abdullah Al-Rajhi said that 32 flights arrived to Kuwait and 33 departing the country on Sunday, the first day of operation under a new condition that limits the number of arrivals to 1,000 a day, excluding domestic helpers. Rajhi told Al-Anbaa Arabic daily that



No positive cases among vaccinated so far

called anew on both citizens and expatriates to remain vigilant, and take all necessary precautions against the virus.

No cases

In this regard, Al-Qabas Arabic daily reported



Kuwaiti falconer Fawaz Al-Noon.

## Kuwaiti falconers win at int'l tourney in Qatar

DOHA: Two Kuwaiti falconers won top places at the 12th Qatar International Falconry and Hunting Festival (Marmi), which began on Jan 3 and will continue until Jan 30, 2021. Fawaz Al-Noon and Ahmad Aba Al-Qlob placed amongst the top three

in the falconry competition, qualifying to the masters' category of the tournament. Noon, who came first and third in two categories, said that he was proud of the achievement. He affirmed that it was important to continue the tradition to falconry in the region, saying that such competition would highlight the importance of maintaining heritage and culture. Noon's compatriot Aba Al-Qlob came in second in his respective competition. Ten falconers qualified to the final rounds of the competition concluding next Saturday. The 12th Qatar International Falconry and Hunting Festival saw the participation of 40 falconers. — KUNA

## Kuwait oil prices to reach around \$60 pb in 2nd half: Expert

KUWAIT: An oil expert yesterday anticipated Kuwait oil prices to increase to \$60 per barrel (pb) in second half of this year as the world is projected to witness stability following coronavirus pandemic with provision of vaccines thus return of normal life. Mohammad Al-Shatti, addressing a virtual seminar about horizons of global economy and crude oil prices for 2021 organized by Kuwait's Oil Ministry, said return of normal aviation operations would also help improve prices. He said prices between \$70-80 pb were "relatively desirable" for the Arabian Gulf countries and achieve some balances in their budgets.

Improvement of oil prices, added Shatti, would primarily benefit the budgets of Arab Gulf countries which largely depend on oil as a major source of income. He therefore called for diversification of income and execution of immediate reforms because oil prices were affected by global political and health conditions. Shatti anticipated global economy to recover by over four percent in the second half of 2021, triggered by availability of

COVID-19 vaccines. Recovery of economy, he added, would encourage return of oil and gas investment coupled with optimism driven by a new US Administration. Initial estimates show that global oil stocks dropped by two million barrels per day (bpd) in December 2020, however it remained 11 percent higher than 2019, he said. "That is why the decision by OPEC+ and the Saudi initiative for further (production) cuts were key in creating positive atmospheres in oil markets," he said.

The future of oil markets will depend on reaching an effective COVID-19 cure by mid-2021, recovery of economy by over four percent, an increase of industrial and economic operations, commitment of OPEC+ in markets' stability and continuous drop of oil stocks, he said, which would transform the surplus into a deficit thus pushing prices to \$60 pb. Shatti added wide-spread use of COVID-19 vaccine would encourage recovery of aviation sector thus push prices to around \$70 pb. However, he warned that spread of coronavirus and failure by OPEC+ to abide by commitment would cause a constraint on oil prices to go down to \$45 pb. Sheikha Tamadher Khaled Al-Sabah, Director of Kuwait Oil Ministry's Public Relations Department, commended by saying that Saudi Arabia's decision to cut one million bpd in February and March as a "good gesture" to restore prices. She said provision of vaccines and the US stimulus packages would also improve prices. — KUNA

News in brief

Premier meets editors-in-chief

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah is set to host editors-in-chief of local newspapers in an open meeting at Seif Palace today. His Highness the Prime Minister last met with editors-in-chief on June 3, 2020, when he highlighted challenges facing Kuwait at the time, including the demographic imbalance and the need to achieve economic reform.

No fake certificates

KUWAIT: The Public Authority of the Disabled (PADA) denied rumors on social media about almost 2,000 fake disability certificates issued by it. In a statement yesterday, PADA called upon the public to always seek news from its official sources. PADA also warned it will take legal action against the publishers of these rumors and those who are spreading them, as such rumors create doubts about the work of PADA and other institutions that work for the disabled.

300 permits canceled a day

KUWAIT: Official figures indicate an acceleration in the departure of expats from Kuwait, as an average of 300 work permits are being cancelled daily for various reasons, which means 12 expats are exiting the Kuwait workforce per hour, Al-Rai Arabic daily reported yesterday. Statistics on the electronic services conducted through the manpower authority's systems from Jan 12-24 revealed the cancellation of 3,627 work permits in 13 days, 1,859 permits cancelled permanently, 230 due to the death of the worker and 1,538 due to the expiry of the residency permit abroad, while 39,913 permits were renewed of expat workers during the same period.

Partial bridge collapse

KUWAIT: A truck loaded with construction supplies rammed into foundations of a bridge on Kuwait's seventh ring road yesterday causing partial collapse of the causeway. The accident caused no casualties, the Public Authority for Roads and Transportation said in a statement. The authority indicated that it would bring persons responsible for the accident into account for damaging public properties.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed.

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## Local

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## Kuwait Food Bank launches campaign for 1,301 families

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Food and Relief Bank launched a project, in collaboration with General Secretariat of Awqaf, to provide food and supplies to about 1,301 deprived families, part of its role in alleviating suffering of all segments of society that need support during COVID-19 pandemic. In a press statement yesterday, Deputy Chairman of the Kuwait Food Bank Mishal Al-Ansari said that the project reflects the strategic cooperation between the General Secretariat of Endowments and Kuwait Food Bank in order to help needy families countrywide, as this is a continuation of its charitable pioneering role.

The project aims to provide food and basic food supplies through coupons to buy and distribute them to the target groups, also to establish the principle of social solidarity, along with cohesion among the nation's people while carrying a sincere message of aiding poor families, Al-Ansari added. The General Secretariat of Endowments and Kuwait Food Bank supports all charitable and voluntary activities, as well as efforts undertaken by the Bank to serve society, he underscored, saying success of these activities, campaigns and charitable projects benefit all parts of the country. —KUNA

## Photo of the Day



**KUWAIT:** Vehicles pass by a bridge under construction in Kuwait yesterday. —Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

## Indian embassy celebrates Republic Day

By Sajeev K Peter

**KUWAIT:** The Indian embassy in Kuwait yesterday celebrated India's 72nd Republic Day, one of the most significant days in India's national calendar. The celebrations were held in consonance with the COVID-19 health and safety guidelines.

The official program was held from 9:00 am at the embassy premises. Indian Ambassador Sibi George paid floral tributes to Mahatma Gandhi which was followed by unfurling of the national tricolor flag and singing of the Indian national anthem. On the occasion, the ambassador read out President of India's message to the nation.

In his address on the occasion, the ambassador extended greetings to all Indians in Kuwait. "Let's join our 1.3 billion brothers and sisters in India, millions of Indian diaspora abroad and billions of our friends across the world to celebrate this occasion," he said.

He thanked HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for hosting the large Indian community in Kuwait. He also thanked the government of Kuwait and Kuwaiti friends of India for their efforts and support in strengthening India-Kuwait relations.

"We in the embassy are fully conscious of the fact that some of our brothers and sisters continue to face an unprecedentedly difficult situation today due to the pan-



dem. I thank the many community members and various associations who individually and in coordination with Indian Community Support Group (ICSG) took several steps to help our brothers and sisters in need during the most difficult days of the pandemic," he said.

He saluted the doctors, nurses and medical professionals who made many sacrifices in Kuwait and all across the world to save lives. "I commend our students, schools, teachers and parents in facing the challenges with determination and adapting to the way education is now being digitally administered. I also thank our media friends who helped us to reach out to Indian community in Kuwait and



also to our Kuwaiti friends," he added. He invited the community in Kuwait to join hands with the embassy to celebrate the 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Kuwait and also the 75th anniversary of Indian Independence. The whole event was live-streamed on mission's social media handles. In the run-up to the Republic Day celebrations, the embassy had organized weekly online quiz competition for school students and general public.

## Zain esports to hold PUBG Mobile community tournament

**KUWAIT:** Following its recent entry into esports and gaming, and the completion of the FIFA 21 in December 2020, Zain Group, a leading telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa, announces its next esports tournament "Champions Squad", a Tencent approved PUBGM community event.

One of the world's most popular games, PUBG Mobile is an officially authorized combat and survival mobile game entertaining millions of gamers from all age groups. A social media campaign has been launched inviting PUBG Mobile gaming teams from across the MENA region to register on zainesports.com and qualify for the group stages. The qualifying rounds will be held 26 and 27 January that will determine the 24 qualified teams that will go on to play the 8 invited teams in the semi-finals and finals that will be held and livestreamed on Zain esports YouTube channel on 29 and 30 January as well as 5 and 6 February (7pm KSA).

Zain esports has signed up popular PUBG Mobile gaming influencers (Bayati and Rico) to promote and play in the competition as well as be the special guests on Zain esports Twitch channel Monday night show that was broadcasted on 25th January and will also be held on 1st and 8th February (8pm KSA).

Commenting on the upcoming Zain esports competition, Malek Hammoud, Zain Group Chief Investment and Digital Transformation Officer said, "PUBG Mobile is a phenomenal partnership fit for Zain as it is one of the fastest growing and most popular gaming events across the region. We are keen on filling the void of what the regional gaming community wants and are excited



by the many upcoming community esports tournaments we plan to hold in 2021."

Hammoud continued, "This gaming manifestation of Zain's digital lifestyle strategy is geared towards empowering society and driving socio-economic development by creating multiple opportunities for young people right across the Middle East. Regional amateur and professional gamers will also have the opportunity to win various prizes in a fair and competitive environment."

Zain esports plans to identify and foster local talent in numerous ways, including by creating a competition to select casters, analysts and commentators for Arabic commentary, as well as creating a conducive environment for esports content creators aiming to create popular influencers.

Zain Group aims to ensure that all its esports tournaments must be held in accordance with

UNICEF's guidelines to ensure Child Online Safety and prevent cyberbullying, hence creating a safe space for all interactions between the players.

Moreover, Zain esports will support and use local social media influencers to promote leagues among local gamers. Zain esports also plans to create an incubator creating opportunities for aspiring coders and producers to contribute technically to the Zain esports initiative on an ongoing basis.

Zain esports will hold a year-long calendar of large and exciting regional online esports tournaments comprised of multiple Flagship events as well as smaller, regular community tournaments with attractive prizes. To register for the PUBGM community tournament, please visit zainesports.com. Stay tuned for more on Zain esports online channels: Twitch, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

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Amid new hopes, Moscow, Tehran call for 'rescue' of Iran nuclear deal

## South Africa turns to temporary morgues as COVID deaths soar

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ROTTERDAM, Netherlands: Firefighters work to extinguish a fire on the Groene Hilledijk on Monday, after a second wave of riots in the Netherlands following the introduction of a coronavirus curfew over the weekend. —AFP

# Second night of Netherlands violence

## Biden touts herd immunity • Orders for Russia's Sputnik V vaccine gaining pace

**THE HAGUE, Netherlands:** The Netherlands has been hit by a second night of riots, as coronavirus curfew frustrations boiled over, even as US President Joe Biden said herd immunity could be achieved this year. With global infections fast approaching 100 million, any chance of such community-wide protection is heavily dependent on the rollout of inoculations.

But wrangles over distribution have emerged in recent days, with the European Union criticizing a delay in AstraZeneca's delivery of its shots, and Russia and China offering to step into the breach for less wealthy countries with their homegrown jabs. Netherlands Prime Minister Mark Rutte told reporters the weekend's street violence was "unacceptable. All normal people will regard this with horror".

On Monday night, protesters rampaged again in several cities following the introduction of a coronavirus curfew over the weekend. Riot police clashed with groups of demonstrators in Amsterdam and elsewhere, including the port city of Rotterdam, where people smashed shop windows, and police deployed a water cannon.

There was also unrest in Israel, where a bus was torched in one of many protests against virus restrictions in ultra-Orthodox districts, including Bnei Brak near Tel Aviv, and Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. And in Australia, thousands defied coronavirus rules yesterday to protest against the country's national day, held on the anniversary of British colonization that its Indigenous population brands "Invasion Day". Officially recognized as Australia Day, Jan 26 sees annual rallies drawing attention to the injustices faced by Indigenous people.

### Herd immunity

Away from anger on the streets, a note of optimism came from Biden, who said mass vaccinations would become available within months. "I feel confident that by summer we're going to be well on our way to heading toward herd immunity," the leader of the world's hardest-hit country said. But further challenges could be on the way for the new president as health authorities in Minnesota confirmed the first US case of a Brazilian variant.

Europe was dealing with a blow to its vaccination cam-

paign, after British-Swedish drugs company AstraZeneca warned it would not be able to meet promised targets on EU shipments - a week after US group Pfizer said it was also cutting delivery volumes. European Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides slammed the delay as unacceptable, vowing the body would "take any action required to protect its citizens and rights".

Orders for Russia's Sputnik V shot were gaining pace, with Mexico - where the coronavirus death toll has passed 150,000 - agreeing Monday to buy 24 million doses. Developers claim the jab is more than 90 percent effective, although the vaccine was registered before large-scale clinical trials and has yet to be approved by Mexico's health regulator.

And Ukraine - which could use jabs provided by UN scheme Covax, as well as China's CoronaVac - announced it would "soon" obtain a million doses to kick off a vaccination campaign. Thailand, which has escaped the worst ravages of the virus, will be producing its own supplies of the AstraZeneca vaccine, with Siam Bioscience having been granted the monopoly in the country. The company, which is

owned by the organization that manages the Thai royal family's multi-billion-dollar fortune, said it will make the jab under a "no profit, no loss" policy.

### 255 million jobs

The World Health Organization warned that the vaccine divide between rich and poor nations was worsening by the day, insisting the failure to distribute doses fairly could cost the global economy trillions of dollars. "Rich countries are rolling out vaccines, while the world's least-developed countries watch and wait," lamented WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The WHO said it needed \$26 billion this year for its program aimed at speeding up the development, procurement and equitable delivery of vaccines, treatments and tests to beat the coronavirus pandemic. The United Nations sounded a reminder that the virus is also taking a huge toll on global jobs. The International Labor Organization (ILO) said losses were equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs, or "approximately four times greater than the number lost during the 2009 global financial crisis". —AFP

## Secretive Vietnam congress begins under cloud of 'repression'

**HANOI:** Vietnam's secretive, twice-a-decade political transition kicked off yesterday, with the Communist Party poised to select its future leaders who will have to contend with an increasingly assertive China and ramped-up trade tensions with the United States. The country's party general secretary, as well as three other key leadership "pillars", are up for grabs at the congress in Hanoi, which is taking place largely behind closed doors, and will run until February 2. The lead-up to the congress has been marked by a relentless crackdown on dissent, according to rights groups, which say repression has escalated under the current leadership.

Nguyen Phu Trong, the Communist Party chief who has also served as president since 2018, is vying for another term as general secretary, analysts say, although he is not expected to continue holding both leadership posts simultaneously. But another stint in the top job for 76-year-old Trong - a pro-China conservative - would be a boost for his high-profile anti-corruption campaign that has swept through the party, police and armed forces.

"In the last five years there's been a recognizable increase in the repressiveness of the regime," said Jonathan London, a Vietnam expert at the Leiden Institute of Area Studies in the Netherlands. This "reflects Trong's agenda of disciplining the party and the country's population more

broadly". Roads were sealed off early yesterday morning around Hanoi's National Convention Centre, with a dense security presence keeping watch as delegates arrived for the opening ceremony.

### Economic opening, surviving with China

Another contender to remain in a key post is Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, who has focused on the country's economic growth and integration, securing a number of international trade deals. The 66-year-old - tipped by analysts to now take the presidency - has also steered the country's robust response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Regardless of who is chosen, the world should not expect major policy changes, said Murray Hiebert of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "I think they are roughly going to continue with economic opening - looking for more foreign, economic partners - and they're going to try to find ways to survive alongside China," he said, adding that they will also try to stand up to them in the South China Sea.

China has in recent years reinforced its claim to the contested waterway by building up small shoals and reefs into military bases - much to the displeasure of Hanoi, which also claims parts of the resource-rich sea. Trade tensions with the US will also be high on the priority list after Washington accused Hanoi of currency manipulation last month. Trong



HANOI: This handout photo taken yesterday shows Vietnam's President and Communist Party general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong addressing the opening session of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) 13th National Congress at the National Convention Centre in Hanoi. —AFP

yesterday alluded to these wider geopolitical issues, raising the party's need to "correctly and efficiently handle relations with bigger countries". "Fighting to protect the national sovereignty and territorial integrity remains a challenge," he said.

### Pandemic success, woes for dissidents

Despite the challenging international outlook, the new leadership will aim to leverage the economic and political advantage from its successful handling of the coronavirus epidemic, observers say. The country has recorded just over 1,500 cases and 35 deaths.

Highlighting Vietnam's growth of 2.9 per-

cent in a region pockmarked with economic contractions, Trong said yesterday Vietnam has been acknowledged "as a shining point...successfully containing the pandemic while recovering and developing the economy," said Trong. But that strong performance means "the government feel more confident in increasing the crackdown" on dissent, said Le Cong Dinh, a human rights activist. Three prominent journalists were jailed on anti-state charges earlier this month, while prisoners of conscience have doubled from 84 to 170 since the previous congress in 2016, according to Amnesty International. "They feel they can challenge any criticism," he said. —AFP

## As he calls for 'Made in America,' Biden prefers Swiss-made Rolex

**WASHINGTON:** Americans tend to notice everything about an incoming president at their inauguration, and thus Joe Biden's choice to wear a \$7,000 Rolex watch on the day he was sworn in did not pass without comment. Nor did the fact that the timepiece was made in Switzerland escape attention, as it marked one of the new president's first breaks with his predecessors, who chose watches a bit more quotidian and even manufac-

tured domestically - the type of industry Biden says he wants to promote.

Biden's stainless steel Rolex Datejust "is a far cry from the Everyman timepieces that every president not named Trump has worn conspicuously in recent decades," The New York Times wrote, referring to just-departed head of state Donald Trump. The new president is of course not the first to wear a Rolex, sharing the fashion preference with Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald Reagan.

But since the presidency of Bill Clinton, American leaders have tended towards more low-profile or patriotic timepieces. Clinton chose a Timex Ironman, but that won him no kudos from The Washington Post, which after his 1993 inauguration

described it as "a plastic digital watch thick as a brick and handsome as a hernia."

His successor George W. Bush was even more the penny pincher, wearing a Timex model costing less than \$50. Barack Obama, whom Biden served under as vice president from 2009 till 2017, went with American watchmakers like Detroit-based Shinola, or California's Jorg Gray.

Known for his taste in gold, Trump's wrist bore a Patek Philippe "Golden Ellipse," a Rolex or a Vacheron Constantin. Biden's fans on Twitter collectively rolled their eyes at the wristwatch ruckus, with Trump foe and former Star Trek actor George Takei tweeting "No (New York Times) we don't care what watch Joe Biden wore, like we never cared about Obama's tan suit." —AFP

## Berlin, AstraZeneca reject reports on COVID jab efficacy in elderly

**BERLIN:** Germany's health ministry yesterday joined AstraZeneca in rubbishing reports quoting unnamed government sources that claimed the British-Swedish company's COVID-19 vaccine showed little efficacy for people above 65. Handelsblatt economic daily had reported Monday that Berlin had estimated the efficacy of the jab among over-65s was just eight percent, citing unnamed sources. Separately, Bild daily quoted anonymous sources saying that Berlin did not expect the vaccine - developed with Oxford University and set to get the green light from the EU this week - would receive a license for use in the elderly. It quoted an efficacy rate of "less than 10 percent".

But Germany's health ministry said yesterday it "appears that two things have been mixed up in the reports." "Around eight percent of the volunteers in AstraZeneca's efficacy studies were around 56 and 69 years old and three to four percent are above 70 years old," said the ministry. "However, this does not mean that it is effective only in eight percent of older people," it added. The health ministry added that European regulator EMA will evaluate the effectiveness of the vaccine. "It has been known since the autumn that fewer older people were involved in AstraZeneca's first studies than in other manufacturers," it said.

### 'Completely incorrect'

The company had also rejected the German media reports as erroneous. "Reports that the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine efficacy is as low as eight percent in adults over 65 years are completely incorrect," the firm said in a statement late Monday. "In November, we published data in The Lancet demonstrating that older adults showed strong immune responses to the vaccine, with 100 percent of older adults generating spike-specific antibodies after the second dose," it added. German Health Minister Jens Spahn told public broadcaster ZDF that Berlin would wait to see the complete data from studies of the AstraZeneca vaccine before drawing any conclusions. —AFP

## International

## Amid new hopes, Moscow, Tehran call for 'rescue' of Iran nuclear deal

## Top diplomats hold first talks since Biden's election

MOSCOW: Moscow and Tehran called for the rescue of the Iran nuclear deal yesterday as their top diplomats held their first talks since Joe Biden's election raised hopes of Washington returning to the agreement. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said ahead of the talks in Moscow that "one of the most pressing topics is the task of rescuing the Joint Comprehensive Action Plan (JCPOA)". Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif thanked Moscow for its efforts to repair the JCPOA after the US exit in 2018 and for Russia's "constructive and principled" position on the deal.

Zarif urged unity between Moscow and Tehran "in order to save the JCPOA from the risks and fears that arose after the United States left this plan." The talks in Moscow come days after Zarif urged the United States to make the "fundamental choice" to lift sanctions and reverse the "failed policies" of the previous administration, which took a hard line on Tehran. He cautioned that any efforts from Washington to extract additional concessions would ultimately end in failure. "Iran wants the nuclear deal it made," Zarif wrote in an op-ed in the Foreign Affairs magazine.

The agreement was largely left in tatters after former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew and ordered officials to reimpose tough penalties against Tehran as part of his administration's "maximum pressure" policy. The deal was agreed in 2015 between Iran, the United States, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany.

**'Businesslike and pragmatic'**

It offered sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on Tehran's nuclear ambitions and guarantees it would not seek an atomic bomb. Iran maintains it has only pursued a civilian nuclear energy program. A new wave of US

sanctions have hit hard Iran's vital oil sector and its international banking ties, plunging the economy into a recession. But Tehran has signaled it could be willing to engage the new White House administration while rhetoric from officials in Moscow has suggested a change in tack in Washington from the Trump administration.

Joe Biden's pick for secretary of state, Anthony Blinken, said at a Senate confirmation hearing this month that Trump's policies had made Iran "more dangerous". While Blinken confirmed Biden's desire for Washington to return to the nuclear agreement, both sides have said the other must return to full compliance before the accord is implemented again. Since the deal began unraveling with the US exit, Russia and European signatories have advocated efforts to salvage the accord and cautioned Iran against bolstering its nuclear enrichment. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov in December urged Iran to take "maximum responsibility" after Tehran announced plans to install advanced centrifuges in its main nuclear enrichment plant. The ministry earlier this month blamed Iran's departure from norms of the nuclear deal on "systematic crude violations" by the United States and praised the Islamic republic for its stated willingness to rejoin its obligations.

Moscow appears cautiously optimistic over the fate of the deal under the new White House administration after its arms negotiator described Washington's position as "businesslike and pragmatic". "It means there is a chance to move forward," Mikhail Ulyanov told state-run television last week. But time is running out for signatories to restore the nuclear deal and bring all parties back on track. Legislation passed by Iran's parliament in December requires Tehran to boost uranium enrichment and limit UN inspections if sanctions are not removed by February. — AFP



MOSCOW: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov meets with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif in Moscow yesterday. — AFP



PARIS: French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin speaks during a session of questions to the government at the National Assembly in Paris. — AFP

## France aims to shut down far-right anti-immigrant group

PARIS: French authorities are looking at shutting down a far-right extremist group that has staged several attempts to forcibly block migrants from entering the country by crossing the Alps or the Pyrenees mountains, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said yesterday. Darmanin, who has also led a recent crackdown on extremist Muslim organizations, said he was "outraged by the efforts by Generation Identitaire activists to undermine the republic." Last week, around 30 members of Generation Identitaire (Generation Identity) gathered at the Col de Portillon pass on the border of France and Spain in what they termed a surveillance operation to "defend Europe." It was the latest of several mountain patrols in recent years, often involving the building of fences at key crossing points, that have led to skirmishes with migrants and activists.

"If there is enough evidence, I will not hesitate to advise closing it down," Darmanin told a press conference. Several lawmakers in southern France have called on the government to shut down Generation Identitaire, but it is the first time Darmanin has publicly condemned the group's actions. In August 2019, the group's leader and two other activists were handed six-month prison sentences after they set up a blockade in the French Alps and rented two helicopters to search for migrants. In response, a group of around 100 rights activists escorted some 30 migrants into France, sparking scuffles with police. Generation Identitaire was accused of vigilantism and the three GI members were charged with trying to pass themselves off as police officers, though an appeals court overturned that ruling last December. The French government has promised to tighten immigration and asylum laws in response to the huge influx of people trying to reach Europe from Africa, the Middle East and Asia since 2015. — AFP

## Trump-supporting 'My Pillow Guy' suspended from Twitter

WASHINGTON: A high-profile Donald Trump supporter who backed the former president's claims of electoral fraud has been permanently suspended from Twitter, the social media giant said Monday night, the latest in a series of bans of prominent right-wingers and conspiracy theorists. Photographs this month of Mike Lindell, CEO of the pillow manufacturer My Pillow, appeared to show the 59-year-old businessman carrying documents into the White House suggesting Trump could

declare martial law after what he claimed was widespread vote rigging.

Lindell, known as the "My Pillow Guy," also has political ambitions of his own and is considering a run for governor of Minnesota, Politico reported. A Twitter spokesperson confirmed Lindell's suspension, and said action was taken after "repeated violations of our Civic Integrity Policy." It was unclear what tweets had led to the ban. The Civic Integrity Policy attempts to moderate misinformation and disinformation on the

platform, specifically around elections. Lindell's suspension is the latest in a series of high-profile social media bans and lockouts in the wake of a January 6 riot at the US Capitol, in which armed right-wing protesters sought to overturn November's vote.

It follows Trump's own ban on January 8, along with tens of thousands of followers of a conspiracy theory known as QAnon, which claims, without credible evidence, that the former president is engaged in a battle against a global cult of Satan-worshipping pedophiles. Newly elected Republican congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene was also hit with a 12-hour suspension last week. Greene-a Trump supporter who has also promoted QAnon-had tweeted claims of alleged election fraud in her home state Georgia, leading to her most recent suspension. — AFP

## What's next for Italy after PM Conte's resignation?

ROME: Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's resignation has triggered what Italians call a government crisis "in the dark"—meaning it has no obvious solution. Italian politics is yet again entering uncharted waters, but this time in the middle of a coronavirus pandemic that has killed more than 85,000 people and sparked a devastating recession. Here are some of the possible ways out of the impasse.

**Conte III**

The crisis was triggered two weeks ago by ex-premier Matteo Renzi's decision to quit the ruling center-left coalition, depriving Conte of a solid parliamentary majority. Conte is now expected to seek from President Sergio Mattarella another mandate to lead what would be his third consecutive government since the 2018 general elections. To succeed, he would need to bring Renzi's Italia Viva party back on board, along with the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) and the center-left Democratic Party (PD) — Conte's main backers.

The PD has called for a new Conte government with a "wide parliamentary basis", code for enlarging the coalition to include centrists currently in the

**Technocrats in charge**

If the outgoing ruling coalition cannot be glued back together, Mattarella will likely ask a non-partisan figure to form a so-called national unity government. Centrist backbenchers and ex-premier Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia party might back it, while far-right opposition leaders Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni are unlikely to.

Such a government would be expected to pull Italy through the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic and finalize the country's application for European Union recovery funds, due by late April. Italy is eligible for some 220 billion euros (\$267 billion) in



ROME: A handout picture shows Quirinale general secretary Ugo Zampetti reading the official communication of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's resignation after a meeting at the Presidential Quirinale palace in Rome yesterday. — AFP

loans and grants from Brussels, a massive cash boost crucial to its future prospects.

**New elections**

The current parliamentary term ends in March 2023, but Mattarella can call snap elections if the political crisis proves intractable—except during a six-month window starting from July. Under the constitution, parliament cannot be dissolved in the last six months of a sitting president's term, and Mattarella's seven-year mandate ends in January 2022. Current opinion polls suggest general elections would hand victory to a right-wing opposition bloc including Salvini's League, Meloni's Brothers of Italy and Berlusconi's Forza Italia. — AFP

**News in brief****Tornado leaves several injured**

WASHINGTON: A tornado has left several people critically injured and serious damage in Alabama, US media said yesterday. The storm, which hit the town of Fultondale late Monday night, caused "significant damage," the National Weather Service (NWS) tweeted. At least five people have been hospitalized with critical injuries, Fultondale Police Chief D.P. Smith told local news media AL.com. "It looks like a bomb went off," local pastor's son Sam Moeber, 18, told the outlet. — AFP

**There is no COVID in Tajikistan**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan: Tajikistan's authoritarian leader Emomali Rakhmonov said yesterday that the coronavirus pandemic had ended in his impoverished Central Asian country but warned citizens to remain vigilant. The poorest country in the former Soviet Union has officially recorded just over a dozen new coronavirus cases and no deaths since the start of the year, but health experts have cast doubt over the statistics and testing is not widespread. Official data has for more than two weeks shown 13,308 infections with 90 deaths and 13,218 recoveries—figures that suggest no active cases. — AFP

**Greece bans large gatherings**

ATHENS: Greek police yesterday announced a ban on large gatherings for a week for public health reasons, ahead of expected protests on a number of issues. "All public gatherings of over 100 people (are restricted) until February 1," the police said in a statement. Student groups have been demonstrating for weeks against plans to introduce a special police force to guard universities. Another protest on the issue is to be held yesterday. — AFP

**Russia in 'energetic' talks with US**

MOSCOW: Russia and the United States are holding "energetic" discussions over the extension of a key nuclear accord that expires next week, the Kremlin said yesterday. The New START treaty, signed in 2010, caps to 1,550 the number of nuclear warheads that can be deployed by Moscow and Washington, who control the world's largest nuclear arsenals. Negotiations to extend the treaty stalled as US President Donald Trump's administration insisted that China should join the deal, despite Beijing flatly rejecting the idea. — AFP

## International

# South Africa turns to temporary morgues as COVID deaths soar

## Ramaphosa blasts vaccine hoarding at Davos forum

**JOHANNESBURG:** The cold hits you first. Then comes the smell. Inside a refrigerated shipping container are 17 plastic-wrapped corpses, each bearing a yellow label reading "highly contagious." The 12-metre (40-foot) steel box has been installed at Johannesburg morgue to help it cope with a rising tide of COVID deaths. The container can store up to 40 corpses, keeping them at a constant zero degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit). "We have seen an increase of around 40 percent (in corpses) across the country," said spokesman Marius du Plessis of AVBOB, a leading funeral and burial service provider in the country.

South Africa is the continent's worst-hit country in the pandemic, with more than 1.4 million coronavirus cases and 40,800 deaths. It was already struggling to beat back infections when they surged to unprecedented levels this month after scientists detected a new virus variant widely believed to be more contagious. To help store the influx of bodies and ensure COVID-19 victims are separated from others, AVBOB has distributed 22 containers normally used

for transporting goods to its 250 South African morgues.

### Quick turnover

At a funeral home in the administrative capital Pretoria, an undertaker ties a third layer of plastic around a corpse sent that morning from a coronavirus hospital ward. Only the feet, arms and head can be distinguished of the tightly wrapped bundle lying on a stainless steel table, surrounded by white-tiled walls. The body must be buried soon. "COVID bodies can be kept for seven days maximum," facility manager Naomi Van der Heever said.

The surrounding refrigerated rooms are almost full, with 200 bodies waiting to be buried or cremated. More than half succumbed to the virus. "They have to go quick, it's protocol," said Van der Heever. "With turnover, we have avoided full capacity."

### Coffins in demand

Coffin makers are also feeling the strain. "I can't take any more orders," repeats the secretary of Johannesburg manufacturer Enzo Wood every time she

answers the phone. More than 100 workers have been laboring non-stop since the early morning, spraying sawdust across the factory floor. The noise is deafening as machines turn relentlessly for eight hours a day, churning out dozens of wooden planks. It then takes only 20 minutes to assemble a coffin.

### Vaccine nationalism

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa yesterday lashed "vaccine nationalism," accusing rich countries of bulk-buying coronavirus vaccines and hoarding them to the detriment of others. Addressing the all-virtual 2021 World Economic Forum (WEF), Ramaphosa said low- and middle-income countries were being shouldered aside by wealthier nations able to acquire "up to four times what their population needs." "We are concerned about vaccine nationalism," he warned.

"Rich countries in the world are holding on to these vaccines and we are saying: release the excess vaccines that you have ordered and hoarded." Ramaphosa's comments coincides with growing concerns that bilateral deals



JOHANNESBURG, Gauteng: A worker builds a wood coffin at the Enzo Wood Designs manufacturing facility in Johannesburg, South Africa. —AFP

between wealthier governments and coronavirus vaccine manufacturers could hike prices and limit supply in some regions.

The World Health Organization (WHO) had already warned against "vaccine nationalism" and "price gouging" last year, before a successful jab

was found. WHO head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus this month told rich countries not to "cut the queue" and called on those which had ordered excess doses to hand them over to its Covax vaccine-sharing facility. —AFP

## Myanmar army raises prospect of coup after voter-fraud claims

**NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar:** Myanmar's powerful military yesterday raised the spectre of staging a coup as it ramped up demands for an investigation into alleged voter fraud during last year's election, swept by Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling party. The National League for Democracy (NLD) won November's poll in a landslide, but has been much criticized by rights groups for its disenfranchisement of voters in conflict-racked regions. The military-aligned opposition disputed the results, while the army has for weeks alleged widespread voter irregularities, claiming to have found 8.6 million cases of fraud.

Military spokesman Major General Zaw Min Tun yesterday renewed calls for the country's embattled election commission to provide final voter lists for cross-checking—a demand that so far has not been met. "Not resolving

this in line with the law means this is a political crisis," he told reporters in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw. Zaw Min Tun added that military chief Min Aung Hlaing—arguably Myanmar's most powerful individual—has already pointed out "dishonesty and unfairness" during the election.

When pressed on the possibility of a coup, the spokesman refused to be drawn, but did not rule it out. "We do not say the Tatmadaw will take power. We do not say it will not as well," said the spokesman, using the Burmese name for the military.

"What we can say is we will follow current existing laws, including the constitution." The polls in November were the second openly contested elections since Myanmar emerged in 2011 after nearly 50 years of junta rule.

But the military still holds an outsized role in the country's politics,



NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar: Myanmar's military spokesperson Brigadier-General Zaw Min Tun speaks during a press briefing at the Defense Service Museum in Naypyidaw yesterday. —AFP

retaining control over key ministries thanks to a junta-scripted constitution which dictates an uneasy power-sharing agreement with de facto leader Suu Kyi. She has not publicly responded to allegations of voter

fraud but NLD spokesman Myo Nyunt said yesterday a coup was not allowed under the current constitution. "We will move forward peacefully according to the law," he told AFP. —AFP

## Nepali climbers return home on top of the world after K2 triumph

**KATHMANDU, Nepal:** Nepali mountaineers who conquered one of the world's most treacherous peaks returned home to a rapturous welcome yesterday, with cheering supporters hailing their first-ever winter summit of K2 as a triumph for their Himalayan nation. Their ascent in mid-January of the world's second-highest mountain—the notoriously challenging 8,611-metre (28,251-foot) "savage mountain" of Pakistan—shone a much-deserved spotlight on their own climbing prowess.

A band played patriotic songs as the team arrived in Kathmandu, while well-wishers held out flowers and waved national flags. "This is not just our success—it is for all Nepalis, so that our future generations can look back and be proud about achievements of Nepali climbers," one of the 10 summiters, Mingma Gyalje Sherpa, told AFP. Kami Rita Sherpa, who has climbed Everest a record 24 times, said the recognition was long overdue.

"The Western climbers did not set the records without the help of Sherpas," he told AFP in Kathmandu. "All the routes are set by us, the food is cooked by us, their loads are carried by our brothers—they haven't done it alone." To reflect their immense pride in making the achievement in their country's name, the team sang the Nepali anthem, with their distinctive national flag fluttering in one of their hands, as they neared K2's savage summit.

### Invisible climbers

Since the first British teams set their sights on



KATHMANDU, Madhyamanchal: Nepali climbers pose for pictures along with officials as they arrived at the Tribhuvan International airport after becoming the first to summit Pakistan's K2 Mountain in winter, in Kathmandu yesterday. —AFP

summitting Everest in the 1920s, Nepali climbers—mostly from the Sherpa ethnic group—have been by their side. But they did not aspire to reach for the heavens—among Nepal's poorest communities, they risked life and limb to help foreign climbers achieve their life-long ambitions because they needed to feed their families. Ang Tharkay, who was part of the successful 1950 French expedition to Annapurna—the first recorded ascent of a peak above 8,000 meters—refused to be part of the summit team.

For him, being part of the record books was less important than running the risk of losing his fingers and toes to frostbite, which would jeopardize his livelihood. The industry has since grown into a

lucrative sector, attracting hundreds of foreign climbers each year and bringing in millions of dollars in revenue for the government.

An experienced guide can make up to US\$10,000—many times the country's average annual income—for several months of hazardous work. The risks remain high despite the commercialization of the sector, with Nepalis hired by foreign climbers making up a quarter of deaths on Himalayan mountains, according to the authoritative Himalayan Database. In 2014, an avalanche killed 16 Nepalis who were hauling gear up Everest, triggering an unprecedented shutdown of the season and demands for better compensation and benefits. —AFP

risk groups among the first to get the job, produced by China's Sinovac.

Officials had earlier said they would focus on inoculating the 18–59 year old working population instead of prioritizing the elderly, like many countries are doing. But the health ministry later said some 25 million seniors would be targeted after doctors and other front-line workers if testing shows the Sinovac jab is safe for older people. This month, Indonesian President Joko Widodo received the country's first COVID-19 jab on live television along with his health minister, several senior officials, as well as business and religious leaders. Tests in hard-hit Brazil showed the Sinovac jab was highly effective in staving off moderate to serious virus cases. But overall, it was only about 50 percent effective in preventing patients from contracting the disease. Muslim-majority Indonesia's top religious body also approved the vaccine as halal—meaning permissible under Islam—in a move that could help convince wary citizens. —AFP

## Indonesia passes one million coronavirus cases

**JAKARTA:** Indonesia passed more than one million COVID-19 cases yesterday, as the archipelago launches one of the world's biggest vaccine drives to clamp down on a soaring infection rate. The Southeast Asian nation of nearly 270 million has recorded 1,012,350 virus cases and almost 29,000 deaths, according to official data. But low testing rates mean the crisis is believed to be much bigger than those figures suggest.

Some hospitals are on the brink of collapse as they are overwhelmed with patients in one of Asia's worst-hit nations, public health experts warn. "I think

## Philippines' Duterte tells children to stay home and watch TV

**MANILA:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has reimposed a ban on children aged 10 to 14 leaving home, telling them to watch TV instead, as the country battles an outbreak of a new coronavirus strain. Stay-at-home orders for all children and the elderly have been kept in place across most of the country since the start of the pandemic—even as the economy reopened after crippling lockdowns and restrictions. "Go back to your homes... and besides they're good just with the TV. They can glue their attention to the TV the whole day," said Duterte.

While many parents have flouted the rules, allowing their children to play in parks or on the street, the measure has prevented families visiting shopping malls, which are the centers of community life and consumer spending. Classrooms also have remained closed. The prolonged restriction on movement has been blamed for hampering the country's recovery from its first recession in three decades. Last Friday, the government's coronavirus task force announced children aged 10 to 14 would be allowed outside again from February.

But Duterte overturned the decision late Monday, saying he did not want to risk youngsters catching the more contagious British strain of the virus that has so far infected 17 people in the country, including three children. "I'm just afraid because this new strain strikes young children," he said. Just hours before Duterte spoke, Trade Secretary Ramon Lopez said Monday that allowing children outside again would help spur consumer demand and revive businesses battered by anti-virus measures. —AFP

## 'I feel like I am reborn': Rescued Chinese miners speak of relief

**BEIJING:** Two Chinese miners who were dramatically rescued after being trapped underground for two weeks described yesterday their joy and relief at being free. Eleven men out of a group of 22 were pulled out alive by rescue workers on Sunday after a January 10 mine blast in east China's Shandong province entombed them hundreds of meters underground. "I feel like I am reborn," one of the miners, surnamed Du, was quoted as saying by state broadcaster CGTN yesterday, wearing pajamas as he spoke to reporters from his hospital bed. "We had no food to eat for the first nine days," he added. "There are no words to describe the feeling (of being rescued). So relieved."

Du was part of a group of 11 miners who first made managed to make contact with rescuers on January 17 by sending up a note through a long shaft drilled down into the rock. They were then sent food and medicine and phones to communicate. "We knew clearly how hard it was to drill that deep. We were trapped nearly 600 meters below ground. It was a daunting task," another survivor surnamed Wang told CGTN. "We are so happy." One of the first group died last week of head injuries sustained from the explosion, while a further nine workers found in a different part of the mine were confirmed dead on Monday, according to local officials.

Rescue teams are searching for one further miner, who remains unaccounted for. The survivors are currently all in "stable" condition and receiving hospital treatment, local officials said Monday. "We comforted each other with encouraging words. That's how we pulled through," said Du from his hospital bed, adding that some of the group were "pessimistic, while others were hopeful." —AFP

# Business

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 27, 2021

## Pandemic to slash \$22 trillion off global GDP 2020-25: IMF

### World economy on stronger footing, but uncertainty high

WASHINGTON: The global economy is expected to see a strong rebound this year but the coronavirus crisis is causing severe damage, IMF chief economist Gita Gopinath said yesterday. "Now at \$22 trillion, the projected cumulative output loss over 2020 to 2025, relative to the pre-pandemic projected levels remains substantial," Gopinath told reporters.

Optimism that new vaccines will bring the pandemic under control and allow economic activity to resume, coupled with stimulus in major economies, has boosted the growth forecast this year to 5.5 percent, she said.

However, the Washington-based crisis lender warned the outlook is beset by "extraordinary uncertainty," and governments will need to continue to act to prevent lasting damage after COVID-19 caused the worst peacetime economic crisis since the Great Depression. The upgrade in growth after the 3.5 percent worldwide contraction in 2020 reflects "expectations of a vaccine-powered strengthening of activity later in the year and additional policy support in a few

large economies," including the United States and Japan, the IMF said in its latest World Economic Outlook (WEO).

Those developments create "a stronger starting point for the 2021-22 global outlook than envisaged in the previous forecast." However, "much remains to be done on the health and economic policy fronts to limit persistent damage from the severe contraction of 2020 and ensure a sustained recovery."

Surging infections in some countries—including new COVID-19 variants—that led to renewed lockdowns, as well as logistical problems with vaccine distribution, pose "important counterpoints to the favorable news," the report said. And even with the growth, many economies will not recover to their pre-pandemic levels this year, the IMF said.

#### Stronger growth

The fund urged governments to continue to provide support "until the recovery is firmly underway." In the United States, which approved another large stimulus package at the end of December, the fund expects growth to

be a full two points higher than previously projected at 5.5 percent, which would be the strongest rate since 1984. And newly installed President Joe Biden is pushing for a massive \$1.9 trillion rescue plan that would provide support to families, businesses and struggling state and local governments.

Japan, too, benefits from another aid package approved in December, and the IMF raised the 2021 growth forecast by eight tenths to 3.1 percent. Those stimulus measures also provide "favorable spillovers to trading partners," the report said. The IMF expects China's economy to grow 8.8 percent, slightly slower than the October forecast, while India will surge 11.5 percent, fully 2.7 points higher than previously expected.

#### Recovery setbacks

In Europe, however, where governments have ordered new lockdowns and even curfews amid surging cases—as well as a new, more infectious variant—the IMF slashed growth forecasts. The euro area growth estimate was cut a full point to 4.2 percent, with significant down-



WASHINGTON, DC: In this file photo Gita Gopinath, the Chief Economist of the International Monetary Fund, speaks with AFP outside of their headquarters in Washington, DC. — AFP

grades for Germany, France, Spain and Italy. While the IMF noted that London's last-minute deal on its exit from the

European Union prevented a key risk to the outlook, the fund cut the forecast for Britain as well. — AFP

## Senate confirms Yellen as first female treasury secy

WASHINGTON: The US Senate on Monday voted by a wide margin to confirm Janet Yellen as the first woman to lead the Treasury Department, giving her a key role in Congress negotiations over a huge Covid-19 economic relief package. Yellen is not new to the role of trailblazer, as she also was the first woman to lead the Federal Reserve, from 2014 to 2018, and previously the White House Council of Economic Advisors.

Her immediate job in the first weeks of the new administration will be to help win Congress approval for President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion rescue package to secure US economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. That will entail convincing skeptical lawmakers that the benefit of more spending outweighs concerns about the country's soaring debt level.

"Neither the President-elect, nor I, propose this relief package without an appreciation for the country's debt burden," Yellen told the Senate Finance Committee at her confirmation hearing last week. "But right now, with interest rates at historic lows, the smartest thing we can do is act big."

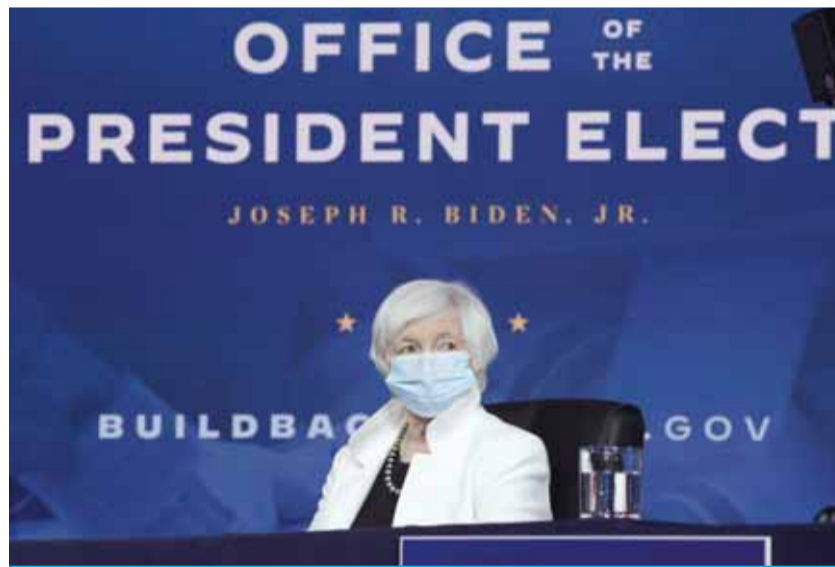
Earlier Monday, Biden said that while he would prefer bipartisan support for his stimulus plan, time is of the essence. "If we don't invest now,

we're going to lose so much altitude in terms of our employment base and our economic growth, it's going to be harder to re-establish it," he said. "We can afford to do it now. As a matter of fact... we can't afford not to invest now."

#### Senate battle

But Democrats control the Senate only with the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Kamala Harris, so getting the package through may require support from Republicans. Democratic senator Ron Wyden, chairman of the Finance Committee, called Yellen an "exceptional economist" who is "supremely qualified" to lead the Treasury at a critical time. And even Kentucky senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican minority leader, supported Yellen's nomination, despite opposition from more than a dozen members of his party.

But McConnell has steadfastly expressed skepticism about large aid packages and favored more limited steps. Yellen also will have a role in enforcing trade rules, and repairing relations after the multi-front trade wars pursued by former president Donald Trump. In the most contentious relations with China, Yellen last week pledged to use all available tools to address "China's abusive



In this file photo taken on December 1, 2020 US Secretary of the Treasury nominee Janet Yellen looks on during an event to name President-elect Joe Biden's economic team at the Queen Theater in Wilmington, Delaware. — AFP

unfair and illegal practices" that undermine the US economy. She said Beijing has been "undercutting American companies" with a series of policies, including illegal subsidies, dumping of products, theft of intellectual property and barriers to US goods. But while Yellen agreed that "China is clearly, our most important strategic competitor," unlike Trump, she stressed that it will be important "to work with our allies" to combat the challenge.

Biden is having to push Congress for funding while simultaneously get-

ting his government confirmed-Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin won Senate approval Friday—and bracing for turmoil from Trump's impeachment trial. The Senate voted on confirmation of Antony Blinken, Biden's choice for secretary of state, yesterday before senators are sworn in as jurors in the trial. The House of Representatives presented a single article of impeachment to the Senate on Monday accusing Trump of inciting the storming of the Capitol, setting in motion the first-ever impeachment trial of a former president. — AFP

## EU chief invites US to work on big tech regulation

BRUSSELS: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen yesterday urged the United States under President Joe Biden to work with Brussels on regulating the tech giants. "Together, we could create a digital economy rulebook that is valid worldwide: from data protection and privacy to the security of critical infrastructure," she said in a videolink address to the World Economic Forum.

"A body of rules based on our values: Human rights and pluralism, inclusion and the protection of privacy." The EU in December unveiled landmark draft legislation aimed at curbing the power of the internet behemoths that could shake up the way Silicon Valley can operate in the 27-nation bloc.

The move comes as big tech companies are facing increasing scrutiny around the globe, including in the United States, where Google and Facebook are facing antitrust suits. Regulators worldwide are pushing to rein in the ability of firms to dominate markets and are pushing to make them more accountable for content published online. "The business model of online platforms has an impact not only on free and fair competition, but also on our democracies, our security and on the quality of our information," von der Leyen said. — AFP

## UK jobless rate hits 5.0% on virus fallout

LONDON: Britain's unemployment rate hit 5.0 percent at the end of 2020, the highest level for more than four-and-a-half years, as coronavirus lockdowns destroyed jobs, official data showed yesterday.

The rate for the three months to the end of November compares with 4.9 percent in the quarter to October, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. At 5.0 percent, the figure is 1.2 percentage points above the same period a year earlier, to reach the highest level since April 2016, the ONS added. "This crisis has gone on far longer than any of us hoped and every job lost as a result is a tragedy," finance minister Rishi Sunak said.

Analysts expect unemployment to surge further when the UK government's furlough scheme paying the bulk of wages for millions of private-sector workers stops at the end of April. ONS head of economic statistics Sam Beckett noted that job "vacancies, which were rising in summer and early autumn, have been falling in the last couple of months". The ONS added that between February last year, ahead of Britain's first lockdown, and December, the number of



LONDON: Britain's unemployment rate hit 5.0 percent at the end of 2020, the highest level for more than four-and-a-half years, as coronavirus lockdowns destroyed jobs, official data showed yesterday.

payroll employees dived by 828,000.

The data comes one day after administrators for collapsed UK department store chain Debenhams said it planned to shut all its outlets, costing around 12,000 jobs. While Debenhams had struggled with fierce online competition long before the coronavirus pandemic, Britain's bricks-and-mortar retailers are in turmoil after a series of lockdowns. It is far from clear when Prime Minister Boris Johnson will lift the current lockdown, with suggestions that it may not occur until around Easter.

The UK government is meanwhile faced

with growing pressure to detail a strategy to reopen schools in England, following a backlash from lawmakers about reports they could remain closed for months.

As for unemployment, "the labor market will probably continue to weaken over the rest of this year, especially once the furlough scheme finishes", Capital Economics analyst Thomas Pugh said. Financial researchers, the EY ITEM Club, predicted that the unemployment rate could shoot up to 7.0 percent by the middle of the year, though that would still represent a better outcome than first expected. — AFP

## Amazon to expand tech hub in Boston with 3,000 new jobs

WASHINGTON: Amazon announced plans yesterday to expand its technology hub in the Boston area, creating some 3,000 jobs in the next few years. The Boston hub will add teams working on the Alexa digital assistant, robotics, Amazon Pharmacy and the giant's web services unit.

The company, which already employs some 3,700 people in the Boston area, has leased a new 17-story office tower which is part of the Boston Seaport project. Set for completion in 2024, the complex will include a community dog park, retail space and a new performing arts center.

Rohit Prasad, vice president and head scientist for Alexa at Amazon, said the new hub will expand research and development for the artificial intelligence system. "Much of the technology that makes Alexa smarter every day is invented in Boston," Prasad said. "Our teams here play a key role in driving Amazon's innovations."

Amazon's workforce has been surging in recent years and includes some 800,000 in the United States, as the company expands its e-commerce, web services, streaming and other projects while at the same time drawing heightened scrutiny from antitrust enforcers. — AFP



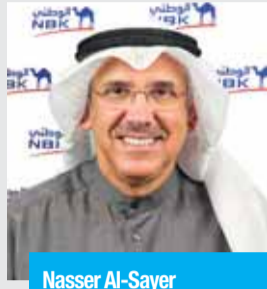


Business

# NBK reports 2020 net profit of KD 246.3 million

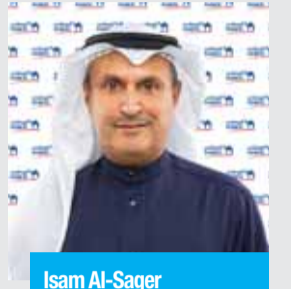
Total assets grew by 1.5% on annual basis to reach KD 29.7 billion

- NBK performed well in a challenging year; demonstrating prudent risk management and reaffirming the Bank's solid financial position
- Diversification strategy proved to play a vital role in mitigating risks and further diversifying our income streams
- NBK's healthy profitability and solid capital base provided flexibility allowing for a sustained dividend policy
- NBK boosted its capital with the issuance of Tier-2 KD-bonds & Tier 2 USD-notes
- We are well-prepared and positioned for different recovery scenarios, thanks to the flexible operational model and strong financial position



Nasser Al-Sayer

- The Bank has delivered good performance in 2020; a testimony to our dynamic business model and strategy, as well as our ability to adapt to the adverse operating conditions
- The Group is moving rapidly to diversify its income streams, stringently monitor cost and to grow organically in key markets, mainly Egypt and KSA
- We have good reason to be confident in our future as result of the strategic investments in our employees, operations and digital platforms supported by strong and healthy balance sheet



Isam Al-Sager

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) posted a net profit of KD 246.3 million (\$812.3 million) for the year ended 31 December 2020, compared to KD 401.3 million (\$1.3 billion) for the same period last year; dropping by 38.6 percent year-on-year.

As of end of December 2020, NBK's total assets grew by 1.5 percent on annual basis, to reach KD 29.7 billion (\$98.0 billion), while customer loans and advances grew by 5.7 percent compared to the same period last year, to reach KD 17.5 billion (\$57.7 billion) while customers' deposits grew by 7.4 percent to reach KD 17.1 billion (\$56.4 billion).

NBK's Board of Directors has proposed the distribution of a cash dividend of 20 fils per share, representing 55.6 percent of net profit, in addition to 5 percent bonus shares (5 shares for every 100 shares). The cash dividend and bonus shares, if approved by the shareholders' general assembly, shall be payable to the shareholders after obtaining the necessary regulatory approvals. Earnings per share (EPS) stood at 32 fils, as compared to 57 fils in 2019, while shareholders' equity stood at KD 3.2 billion (\$10.5 billion).

Commenting on the Bank's results, Nasser Al-Sayer, The Chairman of the Board of Directors of National Bank of Kuwait, said: "In a profoundly challenging year, NBK performed well and we are pleased with the results achieved by the Group in light of exceptionally challenging operating conditions. This demonstrates the strength and resilience of our business model, the positive impact of our digital strategy and the dedication of our employees in performing their duties in such critical times."

"The year 2020 was characterized by unprece-

dent challenges combined with a high level of uncertainty. NBK held up well in the face of extraordinary market conditions and clearly demonstrated its governance and prudent risk management. Furthermore, NBK reaffirmed its solid financial position alongside its commitment to supporting clients and the communities in which it operates."

"Besides the growth in Islamic banking through our subsidiary, Boubyan Bank, remaining an important driver for earnings diversification, our international operations proved to play a vital role in mitigating risks and further diversifying our income streams," Al-Sayer added: "The solid profits of the Bank and its strong capital base provided enough flexibility allowing for a sustained dividend policy despite the operational challenges. Throughout the year 2020, NBK boosted its capital levels by issuing KD subordinated Tier 2 bonds along with USD Tier 2 notes. The issuances being oversubscribed by 1.5x and 3.6x respectively were a testament to NBK's strong credit profile."

"Today, our main focus is to strength our operations in our international markets, leveraging the loyalty of our customers, while building a digitally driven culture to be fully prepared for the future."

"Looking ahead, and although uncertainty continues to dominate the global macro scene, NBK is very well-prepared and positioned for different recovery scenarios, thanks to our flexible operational model and strong financial position." Al-Sayer concluded by extending his sincere appreciation to NBK employees for their devotion and commitment in supporting the bank's customers with all their financial needs during these challenging times.

### Dynamic business model

On his part, Isam Al-Sager, NBK Group CEO said: "Our 2020 profits is testimony to our dynamic business model and strategy, as well as our ability to adapt promptly to the adverse operating conditions that the pandemic imposed on us."

Al-Sager highlighted that "the Bank has delivered good performance in 2020 considering the unprecedented operating environment that prevailed following the outbreak of COVID 19, along with the drop in oil prices and low interest rates." "The partial and full lockdown of activities that was introduced to limit the spread of the virus weighed heavily on businesses leading to a drop in transaction volumes. Our profitability was also negatively impacted by an increase in provisions that is mostly precautionary in nature as we maintain a conservative approach to risk", Al-Sager pointed.

Al-Sager also highlighted that looking ahead, "The Group is moving rapidly to enhance fees and commission income streams and will stringently monitor costs, and this discipline has already enabled us to maintain operating expenses at an appropriate level. Moreover, NBK's regional focus will be to grow organically in key markets, in particular Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where in the case of the former both the retail and wholesale markets offer compelling opportunities, while in KSA the Group's wealth management proposition has strong momentum."

Concluding his statements, Al-Sager said: "As we turn our attention to 2021, we have good reason to be confident in our future. We have created a strong position for ourselves through the strategic invest-

ments in our employees, operations and digital platforms". In parallel, supported by a strong balance sheet, healthy asset quality and comfortable liquidity levels, we will be able to withstand the current crisis, and continue to deliver on our commitment towards all our stakeholders and returning to profitable growth".

### Performance and operating highlights

- Net operating income of KD 842.5 million (USD 2.8 billion) for the year ended 31 December 2020, decreasing by 5.9 percent compared to the same period in 2019
- Total assets grew by 1.5 percent year-on-year as of end of December 2020, to KD 29.7 billion (USD 98.0 billion).
- Total loans and advances grew by 5.7 percent year-on-year to KD 17.5 billion (USD 57.7 billion).
- Customer deposits increased by 7.4 percent year-on-year to KD 17.1 billion (USD 56.4 billion),
- Strong asset quality metrics, with NPL/gross loans ratio at 1.72 percent and an NPL coverage ratio of 220.0 percent
- Robust Capital Adequacy Ratio of 18.4 percent, comfortably in excess of regulatory requirements

## LatAm newspapers bet on digital subscriptions

MEXICO CITY: Facing a major slump in printed newspaper sales and advertising revenue, Latin America's press is fighting for survival-and increasingly betting on paid digital subscriptions as readers turn to the internet.

The decline in advertising dollars has been exacerbated by the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, as well as its impact on potential readers' salaries and their ability to pay for content. As a result, dailies have been pitched into a battle with social networks for clicks, shares and likes that some experts say has put credibility at stake.

It is a dilemma that media worldwide are grappling with as the decades-old model of print advertising funding large payrolls and low newspaper prices is swept away by online platforms. "Big traditional media had structures that were often inefficient, sustained by an extremely successful and profitable business that is now finished," said Diego Salazar, a Peruvian journalist and author of a book on the decline of the journalism business. Last year, plunging demand forced El Salvador's Diario Colatino to move to a digital-only format.

The one-third of its workers who kept their jobs saw their salaries cut in half. "It's the worst crisis in 130 years," said the newspaper's manager, Francisco Valencia. With newsrooms shrinking as major cost cuts lead to layoffs, newspapers are seeking to persuade readers that it is worth paying for quality journalism, even online. "In Latin America, there are people who want and need quality information and who can pay for it. I'm optimistic," said Jan Martinez Ahrens, director of the Americas at Spanish daily El Pais.

But Diego Morales, a 49-year-old Mexican computer scientist, is among those who see payment barriers as bad news. "By charging us, they limit access to information," said Morales, who regularly reads the news but does not plan to subscribe to the digital editions.

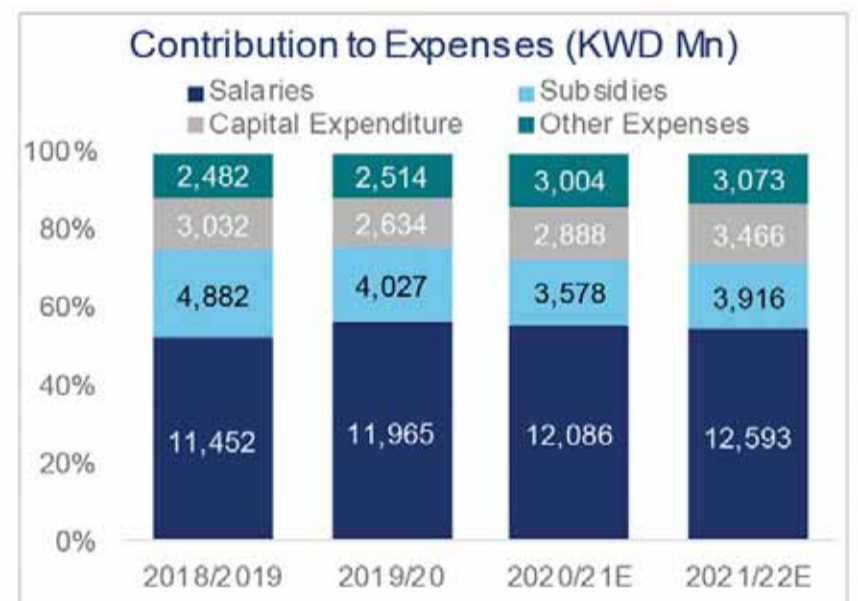
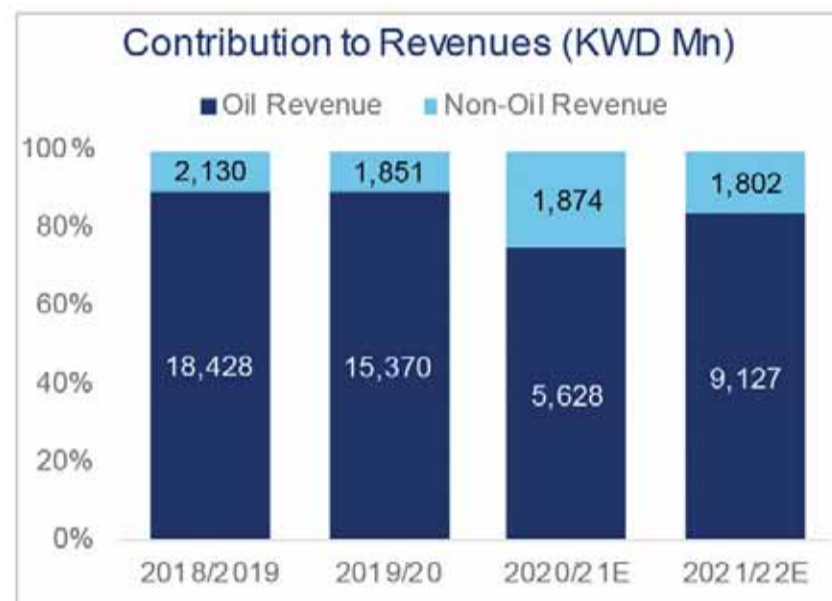
### 'Truthful, verifiable'

Eduardo Garcés, general manager of Colombia's El Espectador, which launched its subscription model in 2018, believes that audiences will gradually get used to paying for quality news "as they already do for music and entertainment." A survey by the private organization Luminare-carried out in mid-2020 in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico-found that 13 percent of the digital news readers polled already pay for a subscription.

Although low, this figure shows a greater willingness to pay than in some European countries, according to the study, which nevertheless found that nine out of 10 non-subscribers see no reason to pay. The challenge is to persuade readers that "information that is carefully gathered, truthful, verifiable and well-presented is valuable," said Mario Dorantes, deputy director of content at Mexican newspaper El Universal.

The flip side is that even some traditional media have turned to sex, sensationalism and the recycling of viral videos from social networks to lure readers. "In the race for clicks," said Salazar, "many of these media have seen their prestige suffer."—AFP

### KAMCO Economic Report



## Kuwait deficit to shrink next fiscal year on expected higher oil prices

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Finance unveiled the draft budget for 2021/2022 with a 13.8 percent decline in forecasted deficits of KD 12.1 billion (\$40.0 billion) as compared to an expected deficit of KD 14.0 billion (\$46.2 billion) for the current year 2020/2021. The budget assumes no transfers to the Future Generation Fund (FGF) for the current year and for 2021/2022 after the law introduced last year which said that would be no transfers to the FGF in years of deficits. Both revenues and expenditures are expected to increase next year with a revenue target of KD 10.9 billion vs. expenditure of KD 23.0 billion.

In terms of revenues, oil would continue to account for the bulk of state revenues next year. Total oil revenue is expected to reach KD 9.1 billion next year as compared to KD 5.6 billion estimated for the current fiscal year. The share of oil revenues is expected to increase from 75 percent in the current fiscal year to 83.5 percent in 2021/22. On the other hand, non-oil revenues are expected to decline by 3.8 percent next fiscal year to KD 1.8 billion as compared to KD 1.87 billion expected in 2020/21 resulting in a decline in its share from 25.0

percent in the current fiscal year to 16.5 percent in 2021/22.

On the expenditure side, planned spending is expected to increase for the second consecutive year. Total expenses in 2021/22 is expected to reach KD 23.0 billion led by higher spending in all off the expense components. Capital expenditure is expected to see a big boost next year with planned spending of KD 3.5 billion as compared to KD 2.9 billion in 2020/21, a y-o-y increase of 20 percent. This compares to an increase of 9.6 percent expected in 2020/21 as compared to final accounts published for the year 2019/20. Salaries are also expected to increase next year by 4.2 percent as compared to an increase of 1.0 percent expected in the current fiscal year.

The estimates for 2020/21 clearly shows the impact of COVID-19 on states finances. Total revenues during 2020/21 is expected to have plunged 56.4 percent solely led by 63.4 percent expected decline in oil revenues, whereas non-oil revenues are expected to increase marginally by 1.3 percent to KD 1.87 billion from KD 1.85 billion during the last fiscal year. Oil revenues are expected to come

in at KD 5.6 billion vs KD 15.4 billion in 2019/20 mainly due to the decline in oil prices during the year coupled with curbs on production as part of the OPEC+ agreement.

### Higher oil price to offset lower projected production

The budget for 2021/22 is based on an oil price of \$45/b while the budget for the current fiscal year is based on an oil prices of \$30/b. Based on the expected revenues and expenditure, the state would require a breakeven oil price of \$90/b to balance the budget, according to S&P Global Platts. Kuwait crude grade averaged at \$39.5/b during the current fiscal year (Apr-2020 - Jan-2021), significantly above the budget price of crude for the year. As a result, oil revenue for the current year is expected to be higher than the budgeted revenues and deficits are expected to be lower than the \$14.0 billion forecasted in the budget document. For 2021/22, Brent crude is expected to average at \$54.1/b, according to Bloomberg estimates, that we believe would once again leave significant room for higher actual revenues and lower deficits in the next fiscal year.

In terms of crude oil production, the 2021/22 budget is based on an oil production of 2.425 mb/d as against current production level of 2.295 mb/d, based on direct communication data in OPEC's monthly oil market report. The current production is in line with the additional OPEC+ cuts announced since May-2020 resulting in a spare capacity of 0.81 mb/d. For the 2020/21 budget, oil production is assumed to be at 2.5 mb/d vs. an average production of 2.339 mb/d during the first nine months of fiscal year 2020/21. The lower-than-budgeted oil production is expected to result in a smaller-than-expected oil revenue for the current and the next fiscal years. As a result, this would offset some of the gains expected on account of higher-than-budgeted oil prices.



## Business

# Gulf Bank enhances customer experience through 3-year digital transformation plan

## Bank's updated digital systems to offer better services during economic uncertainty

**KUWAIT:** As part of its commitment to providing unparalleled levels of customer service, Gulf Bank wrapped up 2020 with tremendous digital achievements and information technology (IT) enhancements. The new updates were implemented in part as a response to the challenges imposed by the pandemic, which saw Gulf Bank launching a rapid response effort that granted customers a premier banking experience while preserving the safety of both staff and customers.

Throughout the year, the bank introduced several initiatives and launched innovative technological systems that serviced both the Bank and its customers during the most challenging parts of the year. The year's digital updates and developments serve as the perfect foundation on which to launch the Bank's overarching digital transformation process, which is part of Gulf Bank's immediate strategy for the next three years.

The new initiatives enhance the digital experience for all customer segments of the Bank - including individuals, larger businesses, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) - and facilitate the financial banking operations of each segment. On Gulf Bank's ongoing digital transformation, Dari Al-Bader, General Manager of Corporate Affairs at Gulf Bank, said: "We started working on Gulf Bank's updated strategy about a year ago, launching a complete digital transformation of the Bank's operations in a way that facilitates daily operations for both customers and the Bank's various internal departments. As part of our commitment to elevating Gulf Bank's service levels to rival those of leading banks around the world, we were able to introduce new features while continuing to enhance security levels. In response to the challenges imposed by the pandemic, we are also proud to have been able to expedite and launch several technological initiatives this year."

Al-Bader added, "Throughout the year, we achieved several digital milestones and implemented major updates that all our customers - from individuals to larger businesses and SMEs - benefited from. In pursuit of granting our clients the highest levels of customer satisfaction, we are proud to continue to work toward our vision of digital excellence."

### Digital services & enhancements for all customers

Visit Gulf Bank app  
In 2020, Gulf Bank launched "Visit Gulf Bank," a

mobile application allowing customers to book appointments to visit their nearest branch. The app aimed to reduce wait times and make the process of visiting a branch more convenient, especially in light of the restrictions imposed by the coronavirus pandemic. The app is currently available to download for all Gulf Bank clients on both iOS and Android devices. Gulf Bank customers can book their appointments through the app and specify their preferred date, time and branch, granting them a smoother and faster branch visit.

### Bulk cash deposit machines

During the year, Gulf Bank provided deposit machines that facilitated the depositing process for customers by allowing them to deposit large sums of cash in one transaction. The new service was provided around-the-clock for added customer convenience.

### Gulf Bank app on the Huawei App Gallery

In addition to iOS and Android operating systems (which support smartphones from Apple, Samsung and others), the Gulf Bank app is also now available to download for Huawei smartphone users. Gulf Bank customers with Huawei phones can now download the Bank's newest version of the Gulf Bank app, available on the Huawei App Gallery.

### Personal data updated digitally

With Gulf Bank, customers can also update their personal data through Gulf Bank's Online and Mobile Banking services without the need to visit a branch. The ability to update personal information online can come in handy for customers, enabling them to quickly regain access to their accounts in the event that they are required to update their personal information.

### Additional self-service operations

As part of its commitment to granting customers a seamless banking experience, Gulf Bank has activated more self-services that customers can conduct through Gulf Bank's Online and Mobile Banking. These self-services include certificate requests, and the ability to unlock accounts and access cards.

### Digital services for larger businesses & SMEs

Exclusive loans during the pandemic  
To counter the effects of the pandemic, Gulf Bank offered special loans for various larger enterprises and

SMEs which required loans to finance and sustain their operations. In light of pandemic restrictions, Gulf Bank launched a completely digital loan application process - from application, to assessment, to approval, and to the disbursement of the required funds.

### International banking operations using Kuwaiti dinars

During the year, Gulf Bank launched a new service, which allowed businesses to initiate international bank transfers in Kuwaiti Dinars. With this service, customers can transfer Kuwaiti dinars to their international beneficiary account.

### Google reCAPTCHA system

Gulf Bank also implemented the Google Recaptcha system, an online operating system that allows web hosts to distinguish between human and automated access to websites. As an added security measure for digital portals, the system verifies that the user is human and mitigates the risks imposed by malicious software.

### Self-service activation

Among the many services provided by Gulf Bank to enterprises of all sizes was the ability to self-activate the Online Banking portal through a single-use password (OTP). In that way, customers were relieved of the need to visit a branch or request assistance from the Customer Contact Center.

### OTP for all transactions

In the interest of cybersecurity, Gulf Bank also enabled the use of a single-use password (OTP) for all banking transactions that are processed through Gulf Bank's digital banking platform, including Online and Mobile Banking services.

### Enhanced bank transfer feature

For an enhanced digital experience, Gulf Bank added the Arabic language function to the transfer request form, which is available on Gulf Bank's website and application. To further ease the transfer process, Gulf Bank also provided a country-specific "Purpose" selection under the "Payment Transfer" screen for international transfers to the United Arab Emirates.

### Launch of new "Al-Raed" Fund

Gulf Bank launched the "Al-Raed" digital invest-

ment portfolio to enable companies to benefit from Gulf Bank's extensive experience in managing investments. The new service was especially helpful given the challenging circumstances experienced throughout the year, during which many businesses faced disruptions. The service provided companies with feasible investment opportunities that granted them cash liquidity and access to projects that were not only highly feasible, but also astutely and professionally managed.



Dari Al-Bader

### Salary status updates available online

The bank facilitated the process of checking on the status of ministry and public sector salaries by publishing the latest updates on the Gulf Bank website as soon as salaries were disbursed to clients. The immediate status updates saved clients the need to search for updates elsewhere or contact Gulf Bank's Customer Contact Center.

### Request letters of credit & bank guarantees online

As part of its corporate credit facilities, Gulf Bank provides letters of guarantee for business activities that require a Bank Guarantee, and letters of credit that facilitate trading activities and help secure payment of receivables. Due to the importance of these non-cash facilities, Gulf Bank made it possible for businesses to apply for them online, with end-to-end processing of international and domestic letters via SWIFT.

### Self-activation of online users

To further enhance the digital banking experience, Gulf Bank also made it possible for clients to activate and unlock user names using the Bank's online portal. The updated service aims to facilitate the digital banking experience for businesses, allowing them to grant immediate access to employees and accountants who need to access the business bank account, without the need to notify or visit a branch.

## UK supermarkets caught in plastic packaging: Study

**LONDON:** Britain's major supermarket chains remain big users of plastic packaging that blights the environment, despite efforts to cut down, according to a study published yesterday. The nation's top ten supermarkets produced almost 900,000 tons of plastic packaging in 2019, according to research from pressure groups Greenpeace UK and the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA).

That was 1.6 percent less than in 2018. "We had hoped to see a much sharper downwards trajectory as strategies and targets bear fruit," said EIA senior campaigner Christina Dixon in its latest annual report based on supermarkets' own data.

"Instead, we are looking at a relatively static picture which represents a drop in the ocean of tackling plastic pollution. The sector urgently needs to pick up the pace of plastic reduction," the EIA insisted.

Many supermarkets are tackling the use of plastic packaging in their own branded products-but much remains to be done about packaging of products by third-party companies, the report noted.

"We would like to see supermarkets increasingly taking the fight to the big manufacturers and compelling them in turn to drive down their own plastic footprints," Dixon said. The research also showed that more than 1.58 billion plastic shopping bags were sold in 2019, up by 4.5 percent from 2018, despite their intended multiple use. The total equates to 57 so-called "bags for life" per British household during the year. —AFP

## GE upbeat on 2021 after profitable 2020

**NEW YORK:** General Electric scored higher fourth-quarter orders in key industrial segments as it reported a profitable 2020 and eyes further improvement in 2021, according to results yesterday.

The industrial giant, which has been in turnaround mode following losses the prior three years, projected a jump in adjusted profit margins in 2021 on anticipated improvement in the macroeconomy with widespread use of coronavirus vaccines. "Over the past year our team proved resilient, and momentum is growing across our businesses," Chief Executive Lawrence Culp said.

"We are in leading positions to capture opportunities in the energy transition, precision health, and the future of flight." In the fourth quarter, GE reported \$2.4 billion in profits, more than four times the level in the year-ago period, reflecting the benefits of cost-cutting initiatives.

GE reported earnings of \$5.2 billion for all of 2020, compared with a loss of \$5.4 billion the prior year. The latest batch of quarterly results included a jump in orders in the power segment to \$5.6 billion, which was above the level in the third quarter as well as the 2019 fourth quarter. —AFP

## stc participates in cyber security live discussion

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced its participation in the Gulf University for Science and Technology's (GUST) discussion under the Brilliant Minds program (Staying Safe Online) on cyber security held for students and followers through a live session on the university's official Instagram account. Delivering the informative session, General Manager of Cyber Security at stc, Eng Issa Al-Suwait, simplified the concepts behind cyber security to the audience, while addressing the cyber risks and challenges individuals may encounter. The initiative falls under stc's corporate social responsibility (CSR) agenda and builds on the Company's strategy to enable digital transformation in Kuwait.

stc issued a statement highlighting that as cyber security attacks become more advanced, targeted, and diverse, individuals and enterprises should be well educated on how to protect themselves and identify possible cyber threats. The session, delivered by Al-Suwait, focused on informing viewers on the different types of common attacks that occur in the digital world today, the local and

## Ogilvy names Fox as CEO MENA; Patou in new global role

**KUWAIT:** Ogilvy yesterday announced that David Fox will assume the role of the Chief Executive Officer for Meme Ogilvy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, effective March 1, 2021. Based in Dubai, Fox will lead the creative and strategic regional agency powerhouse that counts 11 agencies in 9 countries.

The move to a new regional position follows six and a half years for Fox as CEO of Ogilvy Australia, having previously spent ten years in global client roles with Ogilvy in London. Fox's predecessor and long-serving senior Ogilvy executive Patou Nuytemans, has been promoted to the position of Global Chief Growth Officer, Growth & Innovation for the global creative network.

EMEA CEO, Ogilvy, Paul O'Donnell said: "I'm delighted our dedication to thoughtful, long-term succession planning has positioned us to appoint such a strong and capable leader as David to lead MENA for Ogilvy. David will be an excellent CEO in the region, building on his track record of achieving outstanding business results; his strong oversight of the development of Ogilvy Australia's digitally led creative strategy; plus his strong values-led leadership." O'Donnell continued: "I thank Patou for her exceptional leadership in MENA. In the last three and a half years, she has led Meme Ogilvy from strength to strength - financially, operationally and reputationally, transforming the regional network to an integrated, efficient, modern marketing agency with an unparalleled new business

global overview on the matter, as well as tips and recommendations to consider when using connected devices or internet services. On the importance of taking necessary precaution measures to protect data, Al Suwait discussed some of the available online tools designed to safeguard valuable information, in addition to precautionary tips to avoid unauthorized access. Unlike individual users, businesses require advanced methods of protection and constant monitoring to maintain high security levels. Based on that, he elaborated on some of the innovative methods to protect customers against cyber-attacks and the techniques hackers may use to penetrate the firewalls of businesses and private accounts.

Participating in the informative discussion falls under one of the key pillars of stc's CSR agenda, which focuses on educating the public, especially students and youth, on various topics that can provide them with valuable knowledge they can apply in their daily lives. Cyber security has become a widely popular topic and an essential factor to consider when enabling digital transformation as it provides the means to protect online data shared by users daily across multiple platforms. As a telecom operator and digital solutions provider, stc places great emphasis on informing the public of the different methods and tools available to protect online data from cyber-attacks.

Chief Technology Officer at stc, Eng Fahad Al Ali, said, "Cyber security attacks are evolving at a rapid pace, targeting end users through ransomware, social engineering and blackmail attacks. With the growing demand for online services,

users are exposing valuable and sensitive information through different online platforms that they rely on daily. It is important that users consider and apply the necessary means to protect their data and take extra precautionary measures to ensure that they are not exposing their information to those who might unethically leverage on it.

He added, "This initiative, organized by GUST, allowed us to showcase some of the different methods that hackers may use to gain access to valuable and private data. It also allowed us to inform the followers about the different techniques they can individually apply to protect themselves against such acts. We find it crucial to ensure that individuals are well educated on how they can secure their data through simple practices that would make it more difficult for cyber-attacks to succeed."

Al Ali concluded by saying, "On behalf of stc, I would like to thank GUST for hosting this discussion that will shed light on some of the cyber security practices available today to protect end users from attacks or unauthorized access to valuable information. At stc, we strive to maintain the integrity, confidentiality, and availability (ICA) of data for our customers, business partners and the general public."



Fahad Al Ali



David Fox



Patou Nuytemans

speed and at scale, and to be the partner of choice for MENA's formidable brands."

Nuytemans, continued: "I must thank my Meme Ogilvy colleagues and our clients for a fantastic journey and for their deep and warm friendships. And I am delighted that in my global role I will get the chance to continue to work with many of them to deliver on the growth ambitions in the region."

Patou will continue to be based in the MENA region, before a planned move later in the year. Before her move to Dubai, Patou combined her role of EMEA Chief Digital Officer with that of CEO Ogilvy & Social.Lab Brussels, managing the network roll-out as well as the Brussels Center of Excellence of this leading-edge social media performance capability that was acquired under her leadership and became the fastest growing offer of Ogilvy globally. As Chief Digital Officer, a role she had for over 15 years, she developed and implemented the strategy that transformed Ogilvy into a digital-age agency group and led numerous digital transformation projects for some of the world's leading brands.

## Business

# Boubyan Bank records operating profits of KD 93 million in 2020

**KUWAIT:** Boubyan Bank has announced operating profits of KD 93 million for the year 2020 with an earnings per share of 9.66 fils. Additionally the Bank is recommending to distribute 5 percent in bonus shares despite the exceptional situation the world and Kuwait are going through due to the unprecedented repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the globe, leading to the halt of almost all aspects of our daily lives.

The bank continued its prudent approach by allocating KD 59 million in provisions, thereby ending the year with a net profit of KD 34.4 million. The bank's Chairman, Abdulaziz Abdullah Al-Shaya commented: "Thanks to Almighty Allah, we built upon our experiences over the past years, and managed to deal professionally with the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic by continuing to record profits, and we hope for a full resumption of normal work activity across all economic sectors in Kuwait."

"Of course, we had to allocate additional precautionary provisions to support the bank's financial position, and to bolster our ability to face any future repercussions of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, which is normal as a result of this unprecedented crisis: a first in modern times," he added.

Al-Shaya referred to the growth of the total consolidated assets of Boubyan Bank Group by 21 percent in the 2020 year to reach KD 6.4 billion. This was achieved through Boubyan Bank's acquisition of Bank of London and The Middle East "BLME" during Q1 of this year in addition to the growth in the consumer and corporate finance portfolios in Kuwait by 14 percent and 11 percent respectively.

Moreover, the total of customer deposits grew by 17 percent to reach KD 5.1 billion, while the financing portfolio grew by 26 percent to reach KD 4.8 billion, and operating income grew by 15 percent to reach KD 167 million. Speaking of the bank's market shares, the bank's share of local financing increased to exceed 10 percent, while Boubyan Bank's share of retail finance grew to approximately 14 percent, thereby positioning Boubyan Bank in the third place among local banks in terms of the market share of the domestic financing portfolio.

Al-Shaya went on to explain: "Despite the robustness of the bank's financial position, the adequacy of its capital, the growth of its business volumes and operating profits, the bank has decided not to distribute cash dividends for this year in order to strengthen the bank's balance sheet, taking into consideration the exceptional circumstances the international and local economy are going through due to the COVID-19 pandemic which we have not fully overcome yet."

**How Boubyan Bank dealt with the crisis**  
Boubyan Bank's Vice-Chairman &



Abdulaziz Abdullah Al-Shaya

**Al-Shaya: Allocation of additional provisions bolsters the bank's financial position against any future repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis**

Group Chief Executive Officer, Adel Abdul Wahab Al-Majed stated: "During the crisis, the bank's human resources demonstrated that they were able to face the difficulties and the risks caused by COVID-19, and this ability manifested itself when the bank continued performing in the best manner, without failing to serve customers owing to the skills of our staff who worked throughout the crisis."

Al-Majed highlighted some of the most significant initiatives of the bank during the crisis, starting with the bank's contribution to the KD 10 million fund established by the Central Bank of Kuwait, and co-funded by Kuwaiti banks, to support the government's efforts to fight the Covid-19 outbreak.

Furthermore, the bank dedicated its resources in implementing the resolution of deferring all the installments of financing and credit cards for all customers in addition to deferring the installments of SMEs without charging any additional profits or other charges. Al-Majed went on to add: "During this crisis, we reaped the fruit of our investment in our digital banking services. Since the beginning of the crisis, we noticed the growing usage of our digital banking services by our customers whether through the bank's website or the bank's mobile App." In April 2020, the bank started supporting applications for concessional financing announced by CBK as a part of the stimulus package to support corporate & SMEs' customers impacted by the ongoing crisis.

Al-Majed thanked all entities that managed the crisis, especially front liners,

and additionally thanked CBK for the measures taken by it, which mitigated the severity of the crisis.

#### Excellence in retail banking services

As per Boubyan Bank's efforts over the past years to be the leader in digital banking services, the bank excelled during the COVID-19 pandemic in maintaining seamless provision of banking services and products while ensuring customer satisfaction in addition to exceeding market expectations in this field. Consumer preference grew with regard to our digital banking offerings amid the pandemic. The pandemic encouraged customers to rely on digital technology including digital means of communication and chatbots, therefore, the bank's strategy in digital banking services relies on our passion to make our customers the central focus in all of our activities.

Over the past year, Boubyan expanded its branches' network and remodeled its customer services across the country by refining its processes to ensure swift and smooth customer services based on our understanding of the banking services needed by customers.

The bank further expanded its Boubyan Direct network by providing 38 devices operating 24/7 allowing customers to deal face to face with the bank's agents to offer them integrated banking services such as discussing financing and credit options in addition to opening accounts and performing transactions which may not be easily performed digitally. Moreover, the Banks' network of 249 ATMs are well distributed to offer our usual services in addition to issuing new debit cards, while enabling customers to perform their banking transactions.

#### Corporate and mega projects

Despite the crisis caused by the outbreak of coronavirus, the Corporate Banking Group maintained a balanced growth in its corporate financing portfolio within the range of 11 percent despite the tough competition in corporate financing during the past year, ultimately increasing its market share to 9 percent approximately. The extended financing was diversified across key productive sectors such as oil, energy, service, industrial and real estate sectors in addition to representing a key and effective contribution to a number of mega projects benefiting the national economy. This was achieved by attracting new customers coupled with the bank's existing customers without compromising the quality of the finance portfolio through the continued application of the Bank's prudent credit policy.

The group was keen to adopt the latest technological advancements in banking services provided to this important sector by adding various services to the



Adel Abdul Wahab Al-Majed

**Al-Majed: Our human resources weathered the COVID-19 storm while offering the best customer service experience**

Boubyan Corporate App and the corporate online banking services, while adding new products and allocating exclusive branches to provide all banking services to the corporate segment.

#### Well-deserved achievements

Al-Majed referred to some of the major achievements in 2020 which included Boubyan Bank's success in its regional and international offering of its debut unsecured sukuk under the umbrella of a sukuk program with total bids amounting to USD 4.6 billion approximately, i.e., the issuance was oversubscribed by more than six-fold over the targeted amount (\$750 million), with the sukuk being subsequently listed on the Irish Stock Exchange. During Q1 of this year, Boubyan Bank announced its acquisition of additional shares in BLME, amounting to 45.25 percent approximately. Accordingly, total holding grew to approximately 71 percent of BLME's ordinary issued shares after adding the shares already owned by Boubyan Bank Group.

Al-Majed stressed: "Increasing our shareholding in BLME will help us develop its business and grow both banks. Following the completion of the acquisition, Boubyan Bank's intention is for BLME to continue to work as an independent bank as a part of Boubyan Bank Group."

Moreover, Al-Majed mentioned that excavation and construction operations are well underway on the new head office building of the bank, which is expected to be welcoming Boubyan's employees within 4 years, God willing. The building will be

erected over 4,000 m<sup>2</sup> and will be an artistic icon inspired by the logo of the bank.

#### Several awards

Furthermore, Boubyan Bank continued to top the pyramid of customer service in Kuwait, supported by earning two awards from Service Hero, the international consumer-driven customer satisfaction index. The bank received the First Place Award in Customer Service as a Country Winner for the fifth time in addition to being named the Best Islamic Bank in Customer Service for the tenth year in a row since 2010. Additionally, the bank received the Decade's Award for the best Islamic bank.

The bank was also named the World's Best Islamic Digital Bank for the sixth consecutive year and the 2019's Best Islamic Bank in Customer Service for the fourth consecutive year in addition to being named the Best Islamic Bank in Kuwait by The Banker.

#### Our HR and our CSR

Despite the COVID-19 crisis, the bank continued to support the national cadres, thereby maintaining its leadership as the top private sector institution with a national manpower percentage of 76.5 percent. At the same time, the bank continued to attract female cadres to the bank, and now female employees account for 26 percent of the total workforce of the bank.

The bank continued its social activities as a delegation of Boubyan Bank's senior management, accompanied by Boubyan Bank's Team of Volunteers, visited the General Department of Civil Defense and Kuwait International Airport, Terminal 4, in coordination with Kuwait Red Crescent to thank them and thank all volunteers for their efforts. This visit was a part of an initiative by Boubyan Bank and its volunteers to show appreciation for the most important entities standing at the front lines to fight the coronavirus risk. Boubyan Bank did not forget about supporting our brothers in Lebanon amid the disaster that afflicted them last August as a result of the explosion that rocked Downtown Beirut, following which the bank made a financial donation to Kuwait Red Crescent to help with the various relief and reconstruction efforts in Lebanon.

In response to the constant calls from competent authorities to stay at home, Boubyan Bank continued organizing many events and activities through social media platforms and other online platforms.

Additionally, the bank broadcasted many awareness messages about how to fight COVID-19 and the relevant prevention measures via the bank's social media platforms as well as holding many weekly competitions, thereby creating a bond between the bank and its followers across its social medial platforms.

## S Korea posts worst growth in two decades

**SEOUL:** South Korea recorded its worst growth in more than two decades in 2020, the central bank said yesterday, but it is expected to be among the best-performing OECD economies in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The country's gross domestic product contracted 1.0 percent in 2020 from a year earlier, the Bank of Korea said, citing weak private spending and exports.

It marks the worst annual growth since 1998, when the South Korean economy shrank 5.1 percent in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. Still, South Korea is expected to be among the countries in the OECD group of developed economies least affected by the pandemic in 2020.

In the fourth quarter of 2020, the South's economy—the world's 12th-largest—grew 1.1 percent from the previous quarter, data showed, marking a second consecutive quarter of growth amid the pandemic. The central bank said exports expanded 5.2 percent in the fourth quarter from three months earlier, offsetting a slump in private consumption due to toughened social distancing rules in recent weeks.

South Korea has shown signs of recovery from the virus downturn and the central bank in November forecast the economy to grow 3 percent in 2021. The South has largely contained its coronavirus outbreak—while the pandemic has killed more than two million people worldwide—with widespread testing and contact-tracing. But authorities tightened social distancing rules late last year after case numbers began to rise. — AFP

## Denmark to pay billions for mink industry

**COPENHAGEN:** Denmark has said it could pay out more than 19 billion Danish kroner (\$3.1 billion, 2.6 billion euros) to its mink farmers after it closed down the industry over coronavirus fears.

Denmark was the world's largest exporter of mink fur but culled all 15 million of its mink population last year after some were found to be carrying a mutated virus variant, and later banned mink breeding until 1 January 2022. The support scheme announced late on Monday includes reimbursements to the country's roughly 1,000 mink

farmers for the cull, as well as support for them to change their businesses.

Mink breeders and related businesses now have "a good opportunity to move on", said agriculture minister Rasmus Prehn after a cross-party deal was sealed. "Mink breeders have made a great sacrifice for public health and the common good." In November last year, Denmark said the "Cluster 5" mutation carried by mink had been wiped out, and they were the only animal confirmed to be able to contract it and pass it to humans.

The process, however, was mired in scandal from the start. Once culling had begun, questions arose about whether the government had the legal basis to kill the animals away from the area where the mutated strain had been detected. The issue led to the resignation of the previous agriculture minister. — AFP

## Hyundai Motor's Q4 net profit jumps 78%

**SEOUL:** South Korean automaker Hyundai Motor defied the coronavirus pandemic to post a surprise 78 percent surge in fourth-quarter profits yesterday, as robust domestic sales offset weak overseas demand. Net profit in the October-December period jumped to 1.38 trillion won (\$1.24 billion) from 772 billion won a year earlier, Hyundai, which along with its affiliate Kia is among the world's top 10 automakers, said in a statement.

Domestic sales in the final three months rose five percent, driven by its luxury Genesis line, while foreign sales dropped by 6.6 percent, the company said. "Robust sales of SUV models and Genesis luxury models as well as declining incentives helped lift revenue in the fourth quarter despite an adverse

economic environment," it said.

Full-year profits came to 2.12 trillion won, down 33.5 percent from 2019, demonstrating the financial toll the pandemic has taken on global carmakers. GM, Toyota and Fiat Chrysler all reported double-digit declines in US sales last year. And total US auto sales for 2020 are projected to drop 15.3 percent to 14.4 million, making it the worst year for the industry since at least 2012, according to a December forecast from Cox Automotive.

Going into 2021, Hyundai said it will focus on "future business strategies" by producing electric and hydrogen-powered vehicles and aim for an up to 15 percent increase in revenue.

The firm has already rolled out fully-electric cars including the Ioniq and the



**BARCELONA:** A picture of a mink is displayed on a cross during a protest against fur trade, called by the international non-profit animal rights organization AnimaNaturalis at Sant Jaume Square in Barcelona. — AFP



**SEOUL:** In this file photo, a logo of Hyundai Motor is seen on a glass door at its branch in Seoul. — AFP

Kona Electric as it seeks to win a slice of the growing market. Reports this month that it was in talks with Apple to form a partnership to manufacture all-electric cars prompted its shares to spike nearly 20 percent.

Hyundai said it had received requests to co-operate on self-driving electric cars from various companies, but did not confirm it was in discussions with Apple. Hyundai Motor shares closed 3.27 percent down yesterday. — AFP



## CHIC ABAYAS ON THE CATWALK IN RARE SAUDI FASHION SHOW

Donning chic neck-to-toe abayas, models saunter in high heels around a swimming pool in a glitter-filled fashion show staged in the unlikelyst of places: Saudi Arabia. Haute couture displays are rare in the deeply conservative Muslim kingdom and have usually been restricted to women or avoided female models altogether—one even displayed dresses dangling from drones. But a private event in Riyadh last weekend—which showcased a new collection of abayas, a billowy, figure-concealing robe—opened up to a small but mixed-gender audience at a time when social restrictions are slowly being eased in the country.

Draped in shimmering embellishments, half a dozen models, most of them Saudi or of Saudi origin, displayed the collection that sought to redefine the abaya as a stylish overcoat suitable not just for Muslims but for women everywhere. “The stigma around the abaya and the hijab around the world—I wanted to change that,” said Saudi Princess Safia Hussein Guerras, a former model who designed the collection in collaboration with Belgian designer Christophe Beaufays. “If I bring it to a level of chicness and acceptance... maybe our generation will (fully) embrace the abaya.” While many see the abaya, which has been obligatory public wear for Saudi women for decades, as a symbol of chastity and piety, feminists generally view it as a symbol of oppression. The dress code was once fanatically enforced in the kingdom by the now-defanged religious police.

### ‘Fashionable’

In 2018, de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—who has spearheaded a sweeping modernization drive—said during an interview with broadcaster CBS that the robe was not mandatory in Islam, hinting the dress code may be relaxed. But while it was announced the following year that it was not obligatory

for foreigners, Saudi women are still required to wear the garment in public. In a brewing cultural rebellion, however, the once all-black garment is now repurposed in bright colors and many women leave their cloaks open at the front.

Despite the risk of riling arch-conservatives, a handful of bold Saudi women have taken the rebellion a step further—they have stopped wearing the abaya. But Princess Safia, 50, said she hoped to make the garment “fashionable”, a crossover between tradition and modernity that blends Arab motifs and patterns with contemporary fabrics. The designs would appeal to women from different cultures and religions who share views on “modesty and ele-

gance”, said Beaufays, who is based in the kingdom and works for Jeddah-based Lomar which designs traditional “thobes” for men.

### Liberalization drive

The fashion show, unthinkable in the kingdom barely four years ago, was organized at the residence of the Belgian ambassador to Saudi Arabia. It comes amid Prince Mohammed’s contentious drive to shake off his country’s ultra-conservative image by allowing cinemas, mixed-gender concerts and sporting extravaganzas. But despite the liberalization drive, organizing the event appeared to be mired in government red tape.

Two sources close to the organizers told AFP that Saudi authorities initially refused to grant the Belgian embassy permission to host the show. There was no public comment from authorities or the Belgian embassy. After heated diplomatic wrangling, the show was eventually allowed to proceed, the sources said. The event toasted the stylish abayas, which Princess Safia says will go on sale in the kingdom.

There was however hardly an abaya in sight in the audience, which was restricted to roughly three dozen people amid the coronavirus pandemic, including Saudi royal family members, diplomats and social media influencers. Despite the small crowd, the show marked progress compared to previous fashion events. In April 2018, Jean Paul Gaultier and Roberto Cavalli headlined the kingdom’s first ever Arab Fashion Week—a women-only event that barred not only men but also cameras. And in June 2018, a video of dresses floating in the air, suspended from drones, at a fashion show in the Red Sea city of Jeddah went viral on social media. It was ridiculed widely as a “ghost show”, with comments online peppered with ghost emojis. — AFP



## In Miyazaki’s shadow: Son Goro breaks out into 3D animation

Studio Ghibli, home of the masters of Japanese animated film, has decided to take the plunge into 3D under the direction of founder Hayao Miyazaki’s son Goro—though he is far from ready to put away his coloured pencils. With the same smiling round face and the same taste for the fantastical as his father, the 54-year-old is coming out of the shadows with “Earwig and the Witch”, due to go online as part of the Gerardmer Fantasy Film Festival kicking off on Wednesday. The film, originally scheduled to premiere at the 2020 Cannes Film Festival and launched instead at the Lumiere event in Lyon, is the story of an impish orphan girl adopted by a witch and befriended by a black cat.

It has the unmistakable Miyazaki imprint, but fans of Hayao Miyazaki stand-outs like “My Neighbor Totoro” and “Howl’s Moving Castle” may be thrown off balance by the colder effect of 3D. For a studio acclaimed for the visual harmony of its creations, the leap is a gamble, Goro admits, aware of the risk of disappointing a fan base going back more than 30 years. Even so, he says his perfectionist 80-year-old father, sometimes called the Japanese Walt Disney for the power of his imagination, has given him a “free rein”. “He hardly commented at all during the production,” Goro told AFP in an interview.

“He stopped by regularly to check on it (but) given the technological differences with traditional animation, he had no frame of reference. It’s not his medium.”

### ‘Neighborhood workshop’

The move into 3D is by no means “entering into some kind of competition” with the American animated film giants with their vast technical and financial resources, Goro says. “You could liken big American productions to Tesla electric cars, while what we are trying to do is create an electrically assisted bike for getting around town,” he says, noting: “There are landscapes that you can see only thanks to this slower pace of a bicycle.”

Despite Studio Ghibli’s international fame, “we are neither a big studio nor a

big company, more like a neighborhood workshop, a little creative place,” he says. “I don’t think we can plan on a generational change as people expect.” While computer graphics offer “a new possibility for the future”, traditionalists can rest assured that “drawing on paper, the traditional animation like my father’s, will continue at the studio,” says the creator of “Tales from Earthsea” (2006) and “From up on Poppy Hill” (2011).

The question of succeeding the master who founded Studio Ghibli in 1985 and won the 2003 Oscar for best animated film with “Spirited Away” has not been settled. Some talented creators have died, while others have founded their own studios.

Goro marvels at his father’s “still intact capacity for imagination” and predicts he could still be at work for another decade. Eight years after his last work “The Wind Rises”, the older Miyazaki is still working on “pretty touching project”, Goro says, without elaborating. Hayao Miyazaki “has got into the habit of retiring only to change his mind a fair number of times in the past,” Goro says. “I may retire before him!” — AFP



In this picture Japanese director Goro Miyazaki poses at the Studio Ghibli headquarters in Koganei. — AFP

## FRENCH DIRECTOR BESSON MADE ‘ASSISTED WITNESS’ IN RAPE CASE

French film director Luc Besson is to be treated as an assisted witness in the court case over allegations that he raped an actress, a judge ruled Monday. The case is the second brought against the “Fifth Element” director by the Dutch-Belgian actress Sand Van Roy, who has accused Besson, 60, of repeatedly raping her over a two-year period. In France, assisted witness status indicates that a judge considers there is some evidence to suggest culpability, but not enough to charge the suspect. The person can be charged at a later date if further evidence emerges against them.

Van Roy initially filed a rape claim against Besson in May 2018, a day after meeting him at the Bristol luxury hotel in Paris. Two months later the actress, who had minor roles in Besson’s “Taxi 5” and “Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets”, accused him of raping and sexually assaulting her on other occasions. Prosecutors dropped the case in February 2019 citing lack of evidence, but a new investigation was opened the following October after Van Roy brought fresh charges. Besson’s lawyer Thierry

Marembert hailed Monday’s decision, saying it “has just confirmed once again that the accusations against Luc Besson are baseless”.

Van Roy is one of nine women who have said they were assaulted or harassed by Besson. Like Hollywood, French cinema has grappled over the past few years with “Me Too” allegations of sexual assault by powerful men in the film establishment. France’s equivalent of



In this file photo French director Luc Besson poses as he arrives for the screening of the film “The Last Face” at the 69th Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. — AFP

the Oscars, the Cesar awards, were hit by controversy last year after Roman Polanski-wanted in the US for the statutory rape of a 13-year-old girl in 1977 — won best director and best adapted screenplay. French actress Adele Haenel, who has said she was sexually harassed by the director of her first film when she was 12, walked out of the ceremony, shouting “Shame”. — AFP

## Lifestyle | Features



A photo shows the Antiquarium museum during its reopening at the archaeological site of Pompeii, near Naples. — AFP photos



A photo shows copies of casts of a young slave and an adult, at the Antiquarium museum.



A photo shows a general view of the archaeological site of Pompeii.

## POMPEII SHOWS OFF TREASURES, SORCERER'S MAGIC CHARMS

Decades worth of archaeological finds went on public display Monday in Pompeii, shedding further light on the ancient Roman city destroyed by a volcanic eruption nearly 2,000 years ago. One is a sorcerer's toolbox including dozens of amulets, rings, statuettes and other good luck charms made of ivory, bronze, glazed ceramics and amber—that were clearly not enough to protect the city from doom.

"It's one of the most peculiar things we found during our excavations: amulets we found in a box in a house... which seem to belong to a woman-or a man, perhaps—who used magic," said Massimo Osanna, the director of the Pompeii archaeological park near Naples in southern Italy. He was speaking at the inauguration of the Antiquarium, a refurbished museum housing bronze statues, frescoes, gold and silver jewels as well as the haunting casts of those killed when Vesuvius erupted in October 79 AD. "You have some of the most important objects uncovered here since the 19th century. So really, this Antiquarium takes you through the centuries of Pompeii's history, up until the fateful day of the eruption," Osanna told AFP.

The room that chronicles the last days of the city is "the most poignant part (of the exhibition)," the Italian archaeologist added. The plaster casts of the dead, including small children, were made by

filling voids left by their bodies in the calcified layers of ash.

### Strong stench of wine

Osanna has headed the Pompeii park since 2014 and overseen a major conservation project, mostly funded by the

habits of the ancient Romans.

A team found duck bone fragments as well as the remains of pigs, goats, fish and snails in earthenware pots, one of which "gave off a very strong stench of wine", archaeologist Teresa Virtuoso said. The frescoes decorating the site

popular tourist destination after the Colosseum and Roman forum complex and the Uffizi Galleries in Florence. But, like most other cultural sites in Italy, it has been mostly shut in recent months due to the coronavirus pandemic. It reopened on January 18 but has admitted fewer

save for the journalists who came for the museum opening and the usual presence of archaeologists, restorers, guardians and unemployed tourist guides. Its current state is surreal, but Osanna said it was nevertheless a great time to visit. "It is almost as if you can



A visitor walks by amulets at the Antiquarium museum during its reopening.



Restorers work in the new area of the 'Thermopolium' at the archaeological site of Pompeii.

European Union, which revitalized a UNESCO world heritage site formerly plagued by neglect and building collapses. Last month, archaeologists announced the unique discovery of a thermopolium, a fast-food bar. It had surviving polychrome decorations and traces of food and wine that offered an unprecedented glimpse of the snacking

included electioneering slogans and graffiti, scribbled over the image of a dog, in which a man—presumed to be a former slave—was accused of practicing sex with dogs.

### 'Reduced to silence'

In 2019, Pompeii had more than 3.9 million visitors, making it Italy's third most

than 100 visitors per day, compared to a pre-COVID-19 average of around 8,000.

"We've lost 80 percent of our visitors, and this also means 80 percent of our ticket revenues," Osanna said, adding that the site had to rely on generous subsidies from the Italian culture ministry to keep going. On Monday, the vast archaeological park looked deserted,

see Pompeii's inner soul, its spirit," he said. "This is an abandoned city, and seeing it empty of tourists perhaps makes you think harder about the dreadful catastrophe that forever ended life here and reduced to silence a place that was bustling." — AFP



(From left to right) TikTok influencers Tommaso Donadoni, Alessia Lanza, Yusuf Panseri, Simone Berliani and Marco Bonetti play music in the "Defhouse", a TikTok influencers incubator in Milan.



(From left to right, top-bottom) TikTok influencers Yusuf Panseri, Simone Berliani, Davide Moccia, Alessia Lanza, Tommaso Donadoni, Florin Vitan and Marco Bonetti pose in the "Defhouse", a TikTok influencers incubator in Milan.

## Italian TikTok influencers live the high life in Milan

With dreams of the big screen but internet in their veins, eight young Italian influencers are racking up followers as they spend their days in a Milan TikTok luxury loft. Aged between 16 and 20, they sing, dance and put against the backdrop of the duplex set up by content creator Defhouse as a star academy for the virtual world. The 500-square-metre (5,340-square-foot) brightly painted loft has bay windows, a huge terrace and a jacuzzi—the perfect backdrop for short videos shared on the TikTok app. Between them they boast 16 million followers, drawn by the dances, comedy and lip-synching accessed on the popular platform, although their address remains a closely guarded secret.

### Is it talent?

TikTok, owned by the Chinese group ByteDance, has experienced a worldwide boom, driven by long coronavirus quarantines. In Italy, its stars are becoming more and more familiar. "People recognize me when I walk through the streets of Milan," said Simone Berliani, a 20-year-old former business management student whose TikTok subscribers have doubled to 2.7 million since October, when Defhouse launched.

Berliani says he sees the incubator as a springboard for a future career, hope-

fully as an actor. Defhouse's founder, 44-year-old Luca Casadei, told AFP he was initially skeptical over TikTok's offerings. "At first I was not at all convinced. Moving your lips to music tunes without even singing didn't seem to me to require any talent," said Casadei, who launched the careers of many Italian online personalities through his Web Stars Channel. In Los Angeles, the concept had already been tested with Hype House and other so-called "content houses" where influencers live together in a creative hub, churning out content for Generation Z—those born in the late 1990s until about 2010.

But Casadei said he wanted to take the idea one step further, with an academy. "The young people of the TikTok generation know nothing about politics, they don't inform themselves, they have the attention span of a goldfish," he said. All the influencers live on site—although the youngest still go to school—where they receive training in a variety of areas potentially of use in their videos, whether music and culture, politics and current affairs, diction, or even good manners.

### Show Me the Money

Brands—Herno, Vodafone and Pioneer, to name a few—enter contracts with Web

Stars Channel, the production house, who in turn pay a cut to Defhouse's influencers. "This has nothing to do with TV shopping shows. It's about creative people in the digital world imbued with the philosophy of a brand, in a natural and playful way," Casadei said. Casadei said he initially expected it would take three years to break even, with rent alone costing 500 euros (\$608) a day. It happened after three months. Despite the money to be made, some recognize success in the virtual world is ephemeral. "One day you hit the stars, and the next day you're at the bottom," said Alessia Lanza, 20, who counts 1.4 million followers.

TikTok faces scrutiny in Italy after the recent death of a 10-year-old girl, who allegedly took part in a "blackout challenge" on the platform. Authorities have temporarily blocked access to TikTok for users who cannot definitively prove their age. Under TikTok's terms and conditions, users must be at least 13. As one Defhouse influencer, Jasmin Zangarelli, 17, explained: "Social networks are a nice thing, if you use them well." — AFP



(From left to right) TikTok influencers Marco Bonetti and Davide Moccia perform a video in the "Defhouse", a TikTok influencers incubator in Milan.

## SPOTIFY TESTS AUDIOBOOKS OF CLASSICS INCLUDING 'PERSUASION,' 'FRANKENSTEIN'

Streaming giant Spotify is extending its foray into audiobooks, dropping nine new public-domain classics narrated by celebrities including Hilary Swank and Forest Whitaker. The platform known best for its music has used podcasts to drive growth since 2019, and recently began bolstering its audiobook selection. A Spotify spokesperson told AFP the launch is part of "tests in an effort to improve our user experience." "Some of those tests end up paving the path for our broader user experience and others serve only as an important learning," the spokesperson for the Swedish company said, without elaborating.

In May 2020 Spotify released an audio version of "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," the first volume in the beloved series. Daniel Radcliffe—who played the bespectacled wizard on film—was among the celebrities who read chapters. And in August, the group began recruiting a head of audiobooks, a sign of ambition in the market dominated by the Amazon-owned Audible. The nine available titles include Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein"—narrated by David Dobrik, the memoir "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave" read by Whitaker, and Jane Austen's "Persuasion" recorded by Cynthia Erivo. Swank read Kate Chopin's "The Awakening."

The books are broken up by chapter into episodes and are available for free globally. Because the works are in the public domain, Spotify does not need to pay to license them before recording their own versions. The platform has also uploaded an audio analysis series entitled "Sitting with the Classics," hosted by Harvard literature professor Glenda Carpio. — AFP

## Sports

# Europe's top clubs face two billion euro coronavirus hit

## Barcelona remains at top of revenue table despite falling income

LONDON: The coronavirus pandemic could cost Europe's 20 highest-earning football clubs over two billion euros (\$2.4 billion, £1.4 billion), according to forecasts from financial experts Deloitte. Deloitte's latest Football Money League report shows that revenues of the top 20 clubs analyzed fell by 1.1 billion euros in the 2019/20 season due to closed stadiums and television rebates.

Some of that revenue will be recouped in the accounts for the 2020/21 season. The financial year at most clubs ends on June 30, meaning some prize money and broadcast income for domestic leagues and European competitions that completed beyond that date is not included in last season's figures.

However, the ongoing effects of the virus will make an even bigger dent on club finances in 2020/21 with stadia largely shut to supporters across the continent for the entire season so far and

little sign of restrictions being eased. Even as the games have gone on behind closed doors, broadcasters have been compensated for a disruption to the original schedule and the lack of atmosphere produced by empty stadiums. Rebates for Europe's 'top five' leagues in England, Spain, Germany, France and Italy, and UEFA's Champions League and Europa League competitions already total almost 1.2 billion euros.

"We usually release our money league and talk about the growth in revenue but of course football is not immune to the COVID-19 pandemic," said Tim Bridge of Deloitte's Sports Business Group. "The revenue that's been missed out on is driven by the lack of fans in the stadium, the lack of interaction on a matchday — fans spending in the club shop and buying food and drink — and there is an element that relates to revenue that broadcasters



ELCHE: Barcelona's Spanish midfielder Riqui Puig (center) celebrates his goal with teammates during the Spanish league football match between Elche CF and FC Barcelona at the Martinez Valero stadium in Elche on January 24, 2021. — AFP

### Deloitte Football Money League table (last year's position in brackets):

1 (1): Barcelona (ESP), 715.1 million euros	11 (11): Arsenal (ENG), 388 million euros
2 (2): Real Madrid (ESP), 714.9 million euros	12 (12): Borussia Dortmund (GER), 365.7 million euros
3 (4): Bayern Munich (GER), 634.1 million euros	13 (13): Atletico Madrid (ESP), 331.8 million euros
4 (3): Manchester United (ENG), 580.4 million euros	14 (14): Inter Milan (ITA), 291.5 million euros
5 (7): Liverpool (ENG), 558.6 million euros	15 (N/A): Zenit Saint-Petersburg (RUS), 236.5 million euros
6 (6): Manchester City (ENG), 549.2 million euros	16 (15): Schalke 04 (GER), 222.8 million euros
7 (5): Paris Saint-Germain (FRA), 540.6 million euros	17 (19): Everton (ENG), 212 million euros
8 (9): Chelsea (ENG), 469.7 million euros	18 (17): Lyon (FRA), 180.7 million euros
9 (8): Tottenham Hotspur (ENG), 445.7 million euros	19 (20): Napoli (ITA), 176.3 million euros
10 (10): Juventus (ITA), 397.9 million euros	20 (N/A): Eintracht Frankfurt (GER), 174 million euros

have either clawed back or deferred to next year."

Spanish giants Barcelona maintained their position at the top of the revenue table despite their income falling 15 percent to 715 million euros. However, the Catalans are still mired in an economic crisis due to spiraling debts of 1.2 billion euros according to accounts released by the club on Monday. Real Madrid remain second, just 200,000 euros behind Barca's revenue.

Bayern Munich leapfrogged Manchester United into third due to the latter missing out on Champions League football last season. In fourth, United are still the highest-ranking English club

among seven Premier League sides — also featuring Liverpool, Manchester City, Chelsea, Tottenham Hotspur, Arsenal and Everton — in the top 20.

Zenit Saint-Petersburg are the only club outside the top five leagues among the list. The impact of the pandemic has seen some of the biggest clubs push through competition reform to guarantee bigger revenues. Speculation has mounted over a breakaway European Super League, but last week FIFA and UEFA warned any players that took part in such a competition would risk being banned from major international tournaments such as the World Cup. — AFP

## Kuwait Tennis Federation hails training resumption

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: President of Kuwait Tennis Federation Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah met Kuwait's national team players in the presence of Rafa Nadal Academy Kuwait General Manager Martijn Belgraver and Head Coach Nuno Marques at the Kuwait Tennis Federation's premises at Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah International Tennis Complex.

The meeting was also attended by KTF Secretary General Faleh Al-Otaibi, Treasurer Ali Saleem Al-Daihani and a number of players, along with national team coaches Mohammad Al-Ghareeb, Abdullah Maqdis and Mohammad Siddiq. Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber welcomed the players who came to the tennis complex for the first time, and expressed

his pleasure towards the resumption of training and return of sports in general.

He thanked the tripartite committee of the Public Authority for Sport, health ministry and the Olympic committee for approving the resumption of training for juniors and youth, while all precautionary measures are being observed to prevent the coronavirus from spreading. Sheikh Ahmad also reviewed the federation's schedule for the next period, and said although the Kuwait Open was postponed, KTF plans to hold three championships in February for players of all ages, under-18 and under-16.

Sheikh Ahmad asked all players to exert their best efforts and benefit from the academy's coaches. He said the federation plans to organize several international events such as futures and challengers when health



KUWAIT: President of Kuwait Tennis Federation Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah (center) speaks during a meeting with Kuwait's national team players.

conditions improve, and asked players to prepare well to represent Kuwait as best as they can.

Meanwhile, Belgraver said the academy is ready to train national team players and presented the training programs the academy will hold for players in order to elevate their levels in all aspects -physical, techni-

cal and mental. Marques said the technical teams worked hard to train national team players during the past period, adding he is happy to start training youth and juniors. The coach said it is important to determine the players' levels as a first step - programs and training plans will then be determined.

## Salmiya, Qadsiya win in Kuwait Premier League

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The first round of the Kuwait Premier League was a mixed bag. Some teams appeared in good shape and had prepared well or maintained the level they had during the preliminary stage, while others seemed to be mired in confusion, not knowing what to do.

The match between Kuwait and Arabi ended in a 1-1 draw. The match started with Kuwait attempting to attack deep in an attempt to breach Arabi's defense, but nothing materialized until the 40th minute when Faisal Zayed scored. Arabi had a good start, with their new player Udai Al-Dabbagh having an opportunity in the 20th minute, but he squandered it. Arabi's defense is not as it should be and the manager was not sure which formation is the best. The second half saw a more active Arabi team that had more possession of the ball, but nothing much happened until the 85th minute when 18-year-old Salman Al-Awadhi scored to equalize.

The match between Salmiya and Kazma saw

Salmiya dominate the match most of the time and ended winning 2-1. The first half saw intense attacks by Salmiya, until Mubarak Al-Funaini converted a pass in the 15th minute. The referee had to consult VAR to confirm a penalty for Salmiya in the 37th minute. In the second half, Kazma played with 10 men after Hamid Marios was red-carded. Kazma's Talal Tareq was able to score in the 66th minute.

Nasr defeated Shabab 1-0, with Ahmad Al-Reyahi scoring for his team in the 70th minute. The match was exciting as both teams seemed hungry for the three points. The referee disallowed a second goal for Reyahi in the 90th minute and the match ended in favor of Nasr.

Sahel started the stc Premier League by defeating Khaitan 3-1 after being down 0-1. Khaitan scored its sole goal in the 21st minute from the penalty spot, but it did not take long for Sahel to equalize in the 25th minute, also from the penalty spot. Sahel went ahead in the 28th minute when Ahmad Abdelghafour scored an own goal, while Sahel scored a third in the 85th minute.

Qadsiya defeated Fahaheel 4-1 in a fast-paced match as Seif Al-Hashan scored an early goal in the 2nd minute. This gave Qadsiya more confidence as Lucas scored a second goal following Fahaheel's Hussein Dashti's mistake. Fahaheel meanwhile tried their best to score but failed, with Hashan scoring his team's third goal after receiving a pass from Udai Al-Saifi, who scored the fourth goal in the 93rd minute.

this season. "The attitude was very good. The players I brought from the bench come with the intention of bringing something to the team, so overall I think it was a good squad performance and a good result," Mourinho told BT Sport.

Gareth Bale was given a rare start in his second spell at Spurs by Mourinho, but the on-loan Real Madrid winger missed three big chances early on to give the visitors the lead. Instead, Tottenham were forced to come from behind when Fred Onyedina swept home at the far post on 25 minutes.

Japhet Tanganga and Moussa Sissoko struck the crossbar as chances continued to come and go for Mourinho's men until Bale made amends for his earlier misses by equalizing in first-half stoppage time. Tottenham host Liverpool in the Premier League on Thursday, but Mourinho held nothing in reserve as he tries to end the club's 13-year wait for a trophy by sending on Kane, Son

Live		Matches on TV
		(Local Timings)
ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE		
Burnley v Aston Villa	beIN Sports HD 3	21:00
Chelsea v Wolverhampton Wanderers	beIN Sports HD 1	21:00
Brighton & Hove Albion v Fulham	beIN Sports HD 4	22:30
Everton v Leicester City	beIN Sports HD 3	23:15
Manchester United v Sheffield United	beIN Sports HD 1	23:15
ITALIAN CUP		
Atalanta v SS Lazio	beIN Sports	19:45
Juventus FC v spal	beIN Sports	22:45
FRENCH LEAGUE		
Lorient v FCO Dijon	beIN Sports HD 10	23:00

and Ndombele after the break.

An extra 30 minutes were the last thing Spurs needed and they finally made the breakthrough when Harry Winks curled home from the edge of the area after Kane had been denied by Ryan Allsop. Ndombele has been a player transformed in recent weeks after a difficult first season in England following his move from Lyon for Tottenham's club record fee.

The Frenchman tapped home Son's pass to make it 3-1 and then showed stunning footwork to bamboozle the Wycombe defence and fire in at the near post in stoppage time. "He's very creative. He's one of these players that can break the balance," added Mourinho on Ndombele starting to deliver on his 60 million euros (\$73 million, £53 million) price tag. "On top of that, if he can score a goal for us that's even better." Spurs will face Everton away in the last 16 next month. — AFP

## Tuchel set to accept massive Chelsea challenge

LONDON: Thomas Tuchel is set to be the next high-profile coach to become Chelsea manager several years after he first spoke with them about the job. The 47-year-old German will be the 15th change of manager since Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich bought the club in 2003 and replaces Frank Lampard.

Tuchel follows some noteworthy predecessors in Jose Mourinho and Carlo Ancelotti, who have also fallen foul of Abramovich in the past — the former fired a season after delivering the domestic double. Lampard discovered how sentiment is not part of Abramovich's DNA as he dispensed with the club's record goalscorer after just 18 months in charge.

The enigmatic Russian did break with tradition in commenting on the sacking which rather sugar-coated the brutality of the firing. "This was a very difficult decision for the club, not least because I have an excellent personal relationship with Frank and I have the utmost respect for him," said Abramovich. "He is a man of great integrity and has the highest of work ethics."

Whilst Lampard expressed his disappointment Tuchel's task will be to get the best out of the £200 million (\$300 million) of talent that was brought in in the close season. Tuchel is well versed in the school of hard knocks of being a manager having been sent packing at the end of December months after guiding Paris Saint Germain to the Champions League final.

His falling out with PSG sporting director Leonardo played a large part in that and his habit of fractious relations with his employers does not bode well. Primordial will be maintaining good relations with the all-powerful director Marina Zhanovskaia if he too is not to suffer the same fate as his predecessors.

"Tuchel will be exposed to exactly the same rules as Frank," said Lampard's former England team-mate Gary Neville. "We'll be talking about him being let go in the next 18 months to two years, I'm pretty sure of that."

### 'Brutality of modern football'

Tuchel's ambition has always been to manage a Premier League club like fellow German and also a former Borussia Dortmund coach Jurgen Klopp. He did hold talks with Chelsea over replacing Antonio Conte after he left Dortmund in 2017 but whilst he impressed Zhanovskaia he ended up at PSG.

Lampard had declared himself to be a fighter last Friday but his words fell on deaf ears in the boardroom as they fired him the day after a FA Cup win over Championship side Luton. "I am disappointed not to have had the time this season to take the club forward and bring it to the next level," said Lampard.

However, despite a fourth placed finish last season with a largely young side other statistics point to why Abramovich decided to cut him loose. Lampard's Premier League points-per-game average of 1.67 is the lowest for any Chelsea manager since Abramovich arrived at Stamford Bridge in 2003. Tuchel will be hard-pressed to have any impact prior to the Premier League game with Wolves on Wednesday but he will at least have a firsthand view of his players. — AFP

## Late show sees Spurs past Wycombe, into FA Cup fifth round

HIGH WYCOMBE: Tottenham left it late to see off Championship strugglers Wycombe 4-1 with three goals in the final four minutes to reach the FA Cup fifth round on Monday. Jose Mourinho took the chance to leave Harry Kane, Son Heung-min and Tanguy Ndombele on the bench with Spurs facing a brutal schedule across four competitions in the coming months.

But all three were needed in the second-half to get past a Wycombe side that have won just three times in 23 games in the second-tier Championship

## Sports

# Sports face vaccine dilemma ahead of Olympics, Euros

## 'Extremely tough' precautions for non-vaccinated athletes

PARIS: As Olympic organizers deny reports that the Tokyo Games this summer will be postponed again, they, and other sports bodies, are wrestling with the issue of vaccinating participants for COVID-19 at international events. On Monday, Denis Masseglia, the president of the French National Olympic Committee, said there was no choice but to vaccinate and that "holding the Games is at stake."

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) officially has been more cautious ahead of the Tokyo Games, scheduled for July 23 to August 8. It encourages the vaccination of athletes but says it cannot impose inoculation. IOC president Thomas Bach has said there would be "neither a vaccine obligation nor a priority to athletes" for this summer's Olympics. Bach cannot impose tests "for legal reasons", said Masseglia.

The Games will be on agenda of the IOC Executive Board today. "For those who do not wish to be vaccinated, it is important to know that the precautions for participation will be extremely tough," said Masseglia in a video press conference, warning of "quarantine of a fortnight" and "tests in the mornings and evenings."

While vaccination programs are kicking into gear around the globe, they are still focusing on those facing the highest risk, so the question of whether elite athletes should be a priority is, for now, awkward. "This is not an issue about the Olympics, it is about an issue of how we use a scarce resource to try and combat what has obviously been one of the most devastating health crises of our time," said World Health Organization senior advisor Bruce Aylward. There is also the question of the impact of international visitors. In Japan, which reportedly plans to start mass vaccinations in May, a quarter of the population is over 65 and 12.5 percent are over 75.

### 'Comprehensive measures'

The Olympics are not the only event facing these dilemmas in an international sports calendar filled with rescheduled events. After a handful of people on three chartered flights taking tennis players to Melbourne ahead of next month's Australian Open

returned positive COVID-19 tests, the local authorities ordered everyone on board into 14-day quarantine. Some 72 players remain in lockdown.

Turkmenistan, which claims to have no COVID-19 cases, said last week it plans to vaccinate foreign athletes competing in Davis Cup qualifying and at the Track Cycling World Championships in October. The Central Asian state said it would provide the vaccines for free and give athletes the choice of which type they want.

Japan is trying to balance safety against compulsory vaccination. "We are considering comprehensive measures to hold a safe and secure games, even without making vaccines a condition," Katsunobu Kato, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, told a press conference last week. Tokyo organizers say their Games has cost 1.64 trillion yen (\$15.9 billion). Bach has called the Games a "light at the end of the tunnel" for humanity and some in the industry argue they should go ahead.

Football's European championships, which like the Olympics were due to take place last year, are scheduled in June and July. No decision has yet been made about vaccinations and there is debate about whether to stick to the plan to play matches in 12 countries. "It's too soon to take a decision," a UEFA spokesman said, adding that the subject would come under "consideration for the medical protocol of the Euro".

### 'Not high risk'

Athletes and sports administrators have offered contrasting opinions. "We're fairly young, fit people who would not be considered high risk for COVID," British Paralympic cyclist Neil Fachie told the BBC. "The last thing you want to do is take a vaccine away from someone who needs it far more. Should we get offered the vaccine then I imagine I would take it, but there's definitely a question mark of am I really deserving or not?"

That view is shared by fencer Max Hartung who doubles up as chairman of the German Olympic Committee's Athletes' Commission. "No athlete will tell someone who has a higher health risk that their sport is more important than some-



TOKYO: A pedestrian walks past a traffic sign next to an official Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games banner hanging on the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building on January 22, 2021. —AFP

one else's life," said Hartung.

Steve Solomon, a 400-metre runner who is captain of Australia's Olympic team, summed up the dilemmas. "My preference would be to get vaccinated before I go to Japan, certainly," Solomon told The Guardian. "If I am not vaccinated by then, I will still go... I firmly believe that the vaccine needs to be given first to those parts of the population that are most vulnerable to the coronavirus. Athletes are not part of that population."

Former marathon world record holder Paul Tergat, now the head of the Kenyan Olympic committee, agrees. "We want everyone going to Tokyo to get vaccinated early enough for them to be

reassured," he said. "The sooner, the better."

Masseglia pointed out that the situation would have changed by the summer. "It's out of the question that athletes should be given priority over other categories of population, but between now and the Games we can assume that it is possible to have them vaccinated without penalizing other people," he said.

In Russia, the sports ministry told AFP that the plan to "vaccinate athletes of national teams" would be a priority for those "preparing to participate" in the Olympics. In theory, Russia's 'national teams' are banned from Tokyo. The ministry said, however, that the vaccination program would be "voluntary". —AFP

## Will they, won't they? Key questions for troubled Olympics

TOKYO: The world's ongoing coronavirus crisis and plunging public support in Japan have raised fears that the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, postponed last year and now due to start in July, may be cancelled. As Japanese and International Olympic Committee officials insist the Games will go ahead, here are the major questions surrounding cancellation:

### What are officials saying?

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said Friday he was "determined" to hold the Games this July, while a government spokesman dismissed a report claiming officials see cancellation as inevitable.

International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach said last week there was "no reason whatsoever" for the event not to go ahead, but also admitted it may involve fewer fans, or even be held behind closed doors.

Decisions on whether to allow overseas fans, and how full venues will be, are set to be taken in the coming months.

### What do athletes think?

Athlete pressure was seen as a driving force behind last year's postponement, with the Australian and Canadian Olympic committees pulling their teams out days before the decision was made. This time, Australia, Canada and the United States have come out in support of the Games, and Greek pole vault champion Katerina Stefanidi — who led calls for

last year's postponement — has said she would prefer it to be held with no fans than not at all.

Top US gymnast Simone Biles said the decision had to be based on "what's safe for the world", but added she was "hoping the Olympics can be put on, even if it means we're in a bubble". But Japanese gymnastics star Kohei Uchimura sounded a note of caution, saying the event "can't be held if the athletes and the people don't feel the same way".

### What would cancellation cost?

Tokyo 2020's latest budget was revealed as 1.64 trillion yen (\$15.8 billion) in December — up 294 billion yen (\$2.8 billion) because of costs linked to the delay and virus countermeasures. There are suggestions the final price-tag may be significantly higher, possibly making the event the most expensive Summer Olympics in history.

Calculating the cost of cancellation is complicated, especially as running the Games only accounts for about 0.1 percent of Japan's GDP. Tomoaki Iwai, a political science professor at Nihon University, said cancellation could have a "tremendous economic impact" at a time when coronavirus is already a major headwind.

"The tourism sector and related businesses would see huge damage," he said. But other analysts argue tourism and spending linked to the Games is not that significant, meaning a cancellation would not necessarily involve massive losses.

dows in my room that is barely 15 square meters (160 square feet)," she said, in comments published on Monday. "It's obvious that the only thing I breathe in is the virus. I have asked for cleaning products, like a vacuum cleaner, but they haven't given me anything."

Tournament organizers previously said they were providing exercise equipment for players, many of whom turned their rooms into makeshift gyms and have been hitting balls against hotel walls. But Badosa said she had been waiting five days for training equipment to be sent to her room. "I feel abandoned because I don't have the material to train with, that I asked for five days ago," she said. "They don't inform me about the type of virus I have, even though after three days it is known. No information about the tournament."

Some players, including men's world number one Novak Djokovic, who is quarantining in Adelaide, have taken issue with the lockdown arrangements.



TOKYO: In this file photo taken on January 13, 2021 the National Stadium, main venue for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games is pictured from Shibuya Sky observation deck, in Tokyo. —AFP

### How would Japan's government react?

Suga, who has only been in office since September, has seen his approval ratings nosedive over his handling of the coronavirus. The greater Tokyo region and several other parts of the country are under a state of emergency until February 7, but the government has been accused of waiting too long to impose the measure and of mixed messaging.

Polls show around 80 percent of the public oppose holding the Games this year, so a cancellation might not be all bad news for Suga politically. "It would strike me that the political risks of holding the Games and having them result in a new outbreak are greater than admitting that the risks are too great and working with the IOC to find some alternative plan that is more

suitable," said Tobias Harris, a Japan analyst at Teneo Intelligence.

### What would it mean for Olympic sports?

The IOC has vast reserves that have allowed it to cope with postponement, but experts say cancellation would have disastrous consequences for individual sports. Many national and international sporting federations would find themselves in financial danger, with some relying on IOC payouts to survive.

Athletes who have trained for years to appear on the Olympic stage would find their hopes dashed, with many unsure whether they'll be able to qualify for the next Games, Paris 2024. Cancellation would also deal a blow to the Olympics' image in an era when fewer cities have been coming forward to host the costly Games. —AFP



MELBOURNE: A cleaner wipes down the net after a player's practise session in Melbourne on January 25, 2021, with players allowed to train while serving quarantine for two weeks ahead of the Australian Open tennis tournament. —AFP

Badosa was one of 72 players confined to their hotel rooms for 14 days on arrival after positive cases were detected

on their flights to Australia. Other players were allowed out to train for five hours a day. —AFP

### News in brief

#### 'Athletes will be vaccinated'

LONDON: Mo Farah said yesterday he will get the chance for a fifth Olympic gold medal later this year despite the coronavirus pandemic as the Tokyo Games will go ahead and athletes have been told they will be vaccinated. The 37-year-old Somalia-born British track legend added he will treat the 10,000 meters as just "another race." There has been speculation the Games already postponed from last year would be cancelled due to a resurgence of the virus globally. However, International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach and the Japanese government have stood firm saying the Games will go ahead as planned. They are due to run from July 23 to August 8. —AFP

#### Italy avoids ban

ROME: Italy's government yesterday pushed through a decree guaranteeing the independence of the national Olympic Committee (CONI) to offset the threat of a ban from the Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Executive Committee meets in Lausanne today with Italy facing sanctions for not respecting national sporting body CONI's independence. "The Council of Ministers has approved the decree which guarantees the autonomy of CONI," sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora announced. "Now the last word is up to the Parliament to make it law." The emergency decree was approved shortly before the resignation of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. Global governing body the IOC, which warned Rome in the summer of 2019 of the risks of government interference in the management of CONI, puts great emphasis on the independence of national Olympic committees, a key element of its Olympic Charter. —AFP

#### Florida offers to host Olympics

MIAMI: Florida's chief financial officer on Monday told the International Olympic Committee that the state would be happy to host the Olympics Games amid speculation that current hosts Japan may back out. Jimmy Patronis sent a letter to Thomas Bach, the head of the IOC, "to encourage you to consider relocating the 2021 Olympics from Tokyo, Japan to the United States of America, and more specifically to Florida." The letter, signed by Patronis and posted online, cited the supposed strength of state's vaccination roll-out, its economic re-opening and sports events it has hosted during the pandemic, as well as the fact that its theme parks, including Disney World, are open for business. But Florida has struggled badly in the coronavirus pandemic, with over 25,000 deaths so far in the state as the US death toll nears 420,000. "Whatever precautions are required let's figure it out and get it done," Patronis said. —AFP

## COVID-infected tennis star slams 'pitiful' quarantine

MELBOURNE: A Spanish tennis player who attracted criticism for hitting out at coronavirus quarantine rules and then testing positive has complained she is being forced to endure "pitiful" conditions ahead of the Australian Open.

World number 67 Paula Badosa told Spanish newspaper Marca she felt abandoned in a small Melbourne hotel room after being diagnosed with the virus. The 23-year-old was among several players who complained about their quarantine ahead of the delayed, season-opening Grand Slam, before apologizing on Twitter last week.

But in a new salvo Badosa, who was moved to a different hotel after testing positive, told Marca the Melbourne quarantine was one of the worst experiences of her career. "I don't have win-

## Harden leads Nets over Heat

LeBron sparks Lakers • Pistons upset Sixers • Nuggets beat Mavs

**LOS ANGELES:** James Harden believes the best is yet to come after producing a late burst of scoring to lead the Brooklyn Nets to a 98-85 victory over the Miami Heat on Monday. Harden — who joined the Nets in a blockbuster trade from Houston earlier this month — produced a dazzling burst of fourth-quarter scoring as Brooklyn finally overpowered an under-strength Miami team.

The 2018 NBA Most Valuable Player poured on 16 of his 20 points in the final period to lead the Brooklyn scoring alongside Kevin Durant, who also had 20. Harden and Durant's contributions in the fourth quarter proved decisive, with the duo making a succession of three-pointers as Brooklyn reeled off 15 unanswered points.

Kyrie Irving had 16 points, while Joe Harris finished with 12 and DeAndre Jordan 11. The victory improved the Nets' season record to 11-8 in the Eastern Conference. But it was Harden who caught the eye with his game-changing late cameo that swung the contest in Brooklyn's favor.

"I was in a role for eight years (in Houston) where I was controlling the ball, dominating the ball," Harden said. "Now it's a different experience for me but it's still great. It's still basketball at the end of the day. It's fun. Once we get a rhythm and flow it will be a lot easier for us."

**'One of the greatest'**

Nets coach Steve Nash showered praise on Brooklyn's star new recruit. "He was great," Nash said of Harden. "We're starting to see a glimpse of the things he

can do scoring the ball. He's one of the greatest offensive players to ever play the game. He's so effective manipulating the defense that he's a positive even when he's not scoring."

Brooklyn are also starting to see the best of Durant, who delivered another consistent performance in the latest chapter in his return after a year-long injury absence. Durant has now scored 20 points or more in 14 straight games. "Man, I feel good," Durant said. "Mentally I feel like I'm still catching up to the speed of the game, but physically I feel solid. I just try to come out there and produce, and rely on the work that I put in."

Elsewhere on Monday, LeBron James conjured another virtuoso performance for the Los Angeles Lakers in a 115-108 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers in Ohio. James finished with 46 points, eight rebounds and six assists to subdue his former club.

"It always feels great to get a win, especially in the purple and gold," James said afterwards. "I'm just trying to build my game where I can beat them at all facets, from the perimeter, from the mid-range, from the low posts. Just trying to be dominant where I can keep the defense off-balance and I was able to do that tonight."

**'Pretty awesome'**

Lakers coach Frank Vogel was left marveling at another ageless performance from the 36-year-old James. "Pretty awesome just to see that he can still turn it up like that," Vogel said. "Obviously, he want-



**BROOKLYN:** Kevin Durant #7, James Harden #13, and Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets look on during the game against the Miami Heat on Monday at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York. — AFP

to win against his former team here. One of those nights for the ages from him."

Anthony Davis finished with 17 points for the Lakers, while Dennis Schroder and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope had 10 points apiece. The win nudged the Lakers back into first place in the Western Conference

standings, with 14 wins and four defeats. The Los Angeles Clippers, who play in Atlanta on Tuesday, are second on 13-4.

Elsewhere on Monday, the lowly Detroit Pistons upset the Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia 76ers 119-104 with the help of a 28-point haul from Delon Wright. The Pistons, bottom of

the East on 4-13, romped to a blowout win with Jerami Grant also adding 25 points.

In Dallas, meanwhile, Denver Nuggets guard Jamal Murray was ejected after appearing to hit the Mavericks' Tim Hardaway Jr in the groin in an off-the-ball incident in the third quarter. The Nuggets went on to win 117-113. — AFP



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