

Friday Times

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Kuwait Times
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for the **COVID-19 vaccine**

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MoI extends grace period for residency violators

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Local

Photo of the Day



A seabird is seen in the waters near Souq Sharq. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Free Kuwait movement



IN MY VIEW

By Eid Al-Rashidi
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Before the discovery of oil, Kuwaiti people were a hardworking society of shipbuilders, pearl divers and animal herders. They all connected and traded to create a local economy between the desert and the sea. They were independent and free. They were supporting the government at the time and not the other way around.

Oil discovery in Kuwait brought wealth. But it has changed Kuwait society from independent merchants to dependent employees. This created a rent seeking society. This entitlement attitude will not change so long as we have oil revenue. The recent reduction in oil revenues over the past five years will lead to a slow change in society. It will create two sub-societies. People with access to oil wealth and others without it. Or to put it in another way: To be dependent or to be free.

The solution for Kuwait after oil is at the hands of its people, not appointed government officials or elected legislators. The new generation will face limited government

opportunities and dwindling wealth. Therefore, Kuwaitis will be better off when they take the entrepreneurial route. It will provide more economic gains for a wider segment of society. Most importantly, it will create more independent and free generations.

After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Kuwaiti refugees started lobbying foreign governments to support Kuwait's liberation. They used the two words "Free Kuwait" to remind people of what needed to be done. After Kuwait's liberation, young Kuwaitis used the two words as a symbol of freedom and independence. Meaning that I can do whatever I know because it is a free country. The meaning of the same words have changed overtime. Let's change it one more time.

The new generation will seek a new identity, a new mission and a new culture. Free Kuwait is the new culture. Future Kuwait will have a free economy. Free market with no monopoly. Policies that encourage business freedom. Free and independent citizens who can sustain and support themselves with no government handouts. It is a culture that we can create.

What we need is to buy from local entrepreneurs and not government enterprises. Next, more of us should take the less-traveled route and setup businesses. Lastly, the rest can invest in startup businesses to receive a share of the profits. This culture will create wealth that is not related

to government jobs.

When corporations get bigger, they create more profits and fewer jobs. Therefore, it makes sense to encourage small non-profits as well. The biggest employer in California is the University of California, a non-profit. The top employer in Ohio is Cleveland Clinic, a non-profit. The largest employer in Minnesota is Mayo Clinic, a non-profit as well.

Encouraging entrepreneurs to create endowments will create institutions that will provide better health services and education. But this time, it is a government-free approach. The end goal is to create sustainable jobs and a free society that can function into perpetuity and contribute to the world.

Join us by buying from Kuwaiti businesses, contributing to Kuwaiti foundations, and working for both. Anyone can be a Free Kuwaiti. Bedoons or foreigners can be Free Kuwaitis. To be one, you can set up a business using the two words. Or set up a non-profit with the same words. Or invest in a business with the two words. Or use a car decal with the two words. Or just tell the story to your friends. Let's create a movement that even Kuwaitis will want to join.

NOTE: Eid Al-Rashidi is managing partner at FGA Partners LLC, a private equity firm and a member of Kuwait Entrepreneurs Group, a small business advocacy group.

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Mourners carry the coffin of Jerges Shagra during his funeral in 1973 in Kuwait.



The gravesite of Jerges Shagra at a Sulaibikhat cemetery.

RETURNING HOME

Former [KT photographer](#) brings his father's remains to Syria after 48 years in Kuwait



Jerges Shagra died in 1973 and was buried in Kuwait.

By Ben Garcia

Former Kuwait Times photographer Joseph Shagra's long wait will be over when his father's remains will finally arrive in Aleppo today, almost 50 years after his burial in Kuwait. The exhumation of his father's remains took place Tuesday at a small graveyard near a residential area where Christians were previously buried. This cemetery is now closed, but is only a few meters away from the Sulaibikhat cemetery.

Shagra's father died in Kuwait in 1973, and since it was winter and snowy at that time in Aleppo, the family decided to bury him in Kuwait. Joseph and other members of the family continued to live and work in

Kuwait. But as years went by and most of his relatives went back to Syria, Shagra wanted his father's remains to be buried in Syria near his mother, who died a couple of decades ago in Damascus.

Joseph Shagra also returned to Syria, but before leaving Kuwait, he applied for the exhumation of his father's remains in 2017. "My plan was to send his remains back to Syria before I finally bid goodbye to Kuwait Times and my colleagues. At that time I was 64 and was planning to return for good to Syria with my family in 2018. Now I am 67 and am happy to hear the good news from my friend, who was assisting me when I left Kuwait in 2019," he said.

"For almost two years, I was hoping for the immediate permission for the exhumation, but it didn't happen, until I had to leave Kuwait. Thank God a Lebanese friend arranged everything for me, and I am waiting for my father's remains to arrive here in Syria this Friday," Shagra told Kuwait Times.

When he decided to end his contract with Kuwait Times as a photographer, he calculated his remaining days in Kuwait and thought maybe he could go home with the remains of his father. "In 2017 I did not get permission, but I appealed and applied again in 2018. I realized things wouldn't proceed quickly, so I requested Kuwait Times to extend my visa for another year. That extension also expired, and I couldn't stay in Kuwait without a visa and work, so I asked my friend to take charge and secure all the permits and documentation," he said.

"In 2019 I had to leave Kuwait without the remains of my dad. Thankfully, my friend promised to complete the job for me and I am happy my father's remains will finally be reunited with my mother's on Friday," he added.

His father, Jerges Shagra, came to Kuwait in 1953. By the early 1960s, most of Jerges' children including Joseph were in Kuwait. In 1973, his father died and his mother left Kuwait and went back to Syria. "Most of my brothers and

sisters were here. I was the youngest. When my father died, my mother took some of my siblings back to Syria because they wanted to stay in Aleppo. I remained in Kuwait because at that time I had a job and was helping my uncle in his small business," Shagra said.

"We were seven members of the family (five males and two females) and our life in Kuwait at that time was simple but happy. But as the saying goes, everything comes to an end. But I remained hopeful and stayed in Kuwait until my twilight years," he told Kuwait Times.

Joseph said the arrival of his dad's remains is a gift for him and his family, after he nearly died because of the coronavirus. "I was infected with the virus from December 15, 2020 to January 10, 2021. I have now recovered but my legs are still weak. My mother-in-law, who also caught the virus on the same day, didn't survive. Thank God I am okay, and I am praying for my mother-in-law's soul. This corona is really very serious and I pray for everyone to be spared from it," Shagra said.



The Shagra family.

Local



RECYCLING OLD TIRES

FOR A NEW LIFE



By Ben Garcia

The Rehaya tire dump is a constant source of fires and pollution in Kuwait. As part of efforts to reduce waste and promote the recycling of old tires, the Green Rubber Recycling Company, established in 2013, creates a variety of products utilizing old tires and the rubber components from them.

Located in Amghara, about 30 kilometers from Kuwait City, the tire recycling factory makes 100 percent recycled rubber tiling in brick or tile format for all types of locations, including children's play places, gyms and sports arenas, as well as fillings for gardens, farms and elsewhere.

Kuwait Times visited the factory facilities recently to learn more about the process of recycling in Kuwait. "We supply not only the local market but also international markets such as Europe and India," said Rajiv Sharma, who is the company's business development manager.

Vehicle tires include not only rubber, but steel, fiber and rubber crumb. Steel and fibers are separated out during the processing phase and the granules of rubber crumbs will be recycled into safety flooring. Tires have three distinct components - 80 percent rubber, 15 percent steel and 5 percent textile or fiber.

"We segregate the components before finally granulating the rubber. The steel we collect is taken by a steel factory in Kuwait and recycled and used; the cotton fiber is stored for termination. The crumb rubber from recycling one truck tire weighing about 50 kg can be converted into one square meter of safety tile with a thickness of 40 mm," Sharma explained.

More than one billion waste tires are generated across the planet annually, and it is estimated that four billion still exist in landfills and stockpiles. These monumental accumulations of unrecycled, non-biodegradable tires are not only increasingly and becoming a global environmen-

tal concern, but they also pose a grave danger due to their high flammability. By recycling tires, they are guaranteed safe disposal and engagement in a circular economy, and find a new life under our feet.



Rajiv Sharma



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Local

News in brief

Kuwait climbs on corruption index

KUWAIT: Kuwait's ranking improved by seven spots on Transparency International's annual 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, registering improvements made on tackling corruption in the country since 2019, Kuwait's Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha) said. Kuwait scored an additional two points climbing to 42 on the CPI, which ranks 180 countries on their respective corruption levels, with a score of 100 reflecting freedom from corruption and zero being highly corrupt. —KUNA

Trade in local wood banned

KUWAIT: The ministry of commerce and industry has prohibited the trade of locally-cut timber by companies and individuals, aiming to protect vegetation in the country. Minister of Commerce and Industry and State Minister for Economic Affairs Faisal Al-Medlej issued a ministerial decree confirming the decision, according to a press statement. The move bars the display, sale, marketing or export of locally-sourced timber unless prior approval is obtained from relevant authorities, with legal measures to be taken against those found in violation. —KUNA

Audi Bureau slams MoE spending

KUWAIT: The State Audit Bureau reported the ministry of education spent KD 64 million on digital learning platforms and preparation for students during the coronavirus pandemic. Since March 2020, however, only 5 percent of the country's 426,000 students and teachers have used the e-learning portal. The Audit Bureau report notes there are various irregularities in the ministry's handling of education during the pandemic: Teachers are not using the fingerprint system, salaries and other financial disbursements to employees have been made unlawfully, internal controls are lacking and management oversight is weak, reported Al-Rai Arabic daily. The education ministry has a budget of more than KD 11 million for the 2019/2020 academic year.

Warning against ATVs

KUWAIT: Ahmadi Security Directorate has placed several signs about the dangers of quad bikes and small cycles inside residential areas and on main roads and highways. Several awareness signs were placed in vital areas of Seaside Sabah Al-Ahmad, while the chalets area and Wafra farms will get the signs later. The directorate asked parents to cooperate in this regard by supervising their children and educating them about the dangers of riding quad bikes in residential areas.

Youths fight in park

KUWAIT: The interior ministry's relations and security information department said police responded to a report about a fight in an Adailiya park. When they arrived, they found an injured juvenile, who was taken to hospital by medics. The fight - between cousins - was over playing football in the park. Further legal action will be taken against both youths.

Kuwait loses to Iraq in friendly

BASRA: Kuwait's national football team lost 1-2 to Iraq in an international friendly on Wednesday as part of preparations for the resumption of the Asian Qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian Cup China 2023. The game took place at the Jidhe Al-Nakhlah Stadium in Basra.

The Iraqi team had the better start, but the Kuwaiti team was able to score the first goal of the match through Eid Al-Rashidi in the 24th minute of the game. In the beginning of the second half, Kuwait wasted many chances to score. In the last 10 minutes, Iraq's Mohammad Al-Dawoud was able to equalize due to lack of communication among Kuwaiti defenders. In the 88th minute, Ayman Hussain scored the winning goal for Iraq through the penalty spot.

The game was organized after an invitation from Iraqi Sports Minister Adnan Darjal to evaluate Iraq's readiness to host the upcoming 25th Gulf Cup in Basra. Kuwait will participate in



BASRA: Players vie for the ball during a friendly match between Kuwait and Iraq at the Jidhe Al-Nakhlah Stadium on Wednesday. —KUNA

the 2022 FIFA World Cup Asian qualifiers and the 2023 AFC Asian Cup in Group B with Australia, Jordan, China,

Taiwan and Nepal, while Iraq is in Group C, which includes Bahrain, Iran, Hong Kong and Cambodia. —KUNA

Jahra beat Shabab in volleyball league

KUWAIT: Jahra volleyball team defeated Al-Shabab by 3 games to 2 at the conclusion of the 9th round of the volleyball Premier League. Jahra has 12 points and is in fifth place, while Shabab with 9 points in the 6th and last place. The two teams will play with the second place winner of the first division. Those in the first and second place will then go to the Premier League, while the loser will drop to the first division.



Asian Shooting Championship begins virtually

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The first virtual Asian Shooting Championship will start today at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex, as Kuwait Shooting Federation is the organ-

izer. The tournament is under the patronage of President of Asian Shooting Confederation Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Hmoud Al-Sabah in the skeet, trap, 10m air pistol and rifle, with 22 countries participating.

Secretary General of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Obaid Al-Osaimi said official competitions will start at 10 am local time of each participating country. Competitions in the 10m air pistol for men and women will be held today, and the first day of skeet and trap shooting at 75 clay targets will be completed tomorrow.

The results of the 10m air rifle and finals of

the skeet and trap will be sent by each federation to the organizing committee in Kuwait, which will calculate the results and announce the top three winners.

Osaimi, who also chairs the planning and development committee at the ASC, said the organizing committee is keen on communicating with all participating federations through the technical control room where activities will be followed at various Asian shooting ranges in Asia. Osaimi thanked President of the Asian Shooting Federation Sheikh Salman for his efforts to improve the sport of shooting in Kuwait and Asia.

Local

Court jails Bangladeshi MP, Kuwaiti officials for 4 years

MP proposes restrictions on appointment of expats

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The criminal court yesterday sentenced Bangladeshi lawmaker Mohammed Shahid Islam and Kuwaiti Maj Gen Mazen Al-Jarrah, in addition to a former senior official and a businessman, to four years in jail and a hefty fine of KD 1.97 million over a major bribery scandal.

The rulings are not final and can be challenged before the appeals and cassation courts. A Syrian national was also sentenced to three years in jail in absentia in relation to the case.

But the court acquitted MP Saadoun Hammad and former MP Salah Khorshid of being involved in the case.

This was one of the biggest corruption cases to be handled by Kuwaiti courts. The Bangladeshi MP was arrested several months ago and confessed to offering large bribes to senior government officials including Jarrah, a member of the ruling family, to get his business done in violation of the law.

He was charged with trafficking in persons by recruiting Bangladeshi workers by charging them illegal fees, and for giving bribes to senior

officials and MPs to get his business done. The court however acquitted the convicts from the charge of trafficking in persons.

Meanwhile, MP Hisham Al-Saleh submitted a draft law calling to give priority of appointments in government jobs to Kuwaiti citizens, adding expats should be appointed in such jobs on a temporary basis and only when there are no Kuwaitis to take up those jobs.

The bill stipulates that government jobs should be given first to Kuwaitis, followed by children of Kuwaiti women married to foreign husbands, and then to stateless people known as

bedoons. Nationals of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states come next in priority. It stipulates that before appointing expats, the government must advertise the job vacancies, and if no Kuwaiti is available for the job, expats should be appointed on a temporary basis through a contract.

Secretary General of the National Assembly Allam Al-Kandari said yesterday he has tendered his resignation to Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem. He said that his resignation comes after the cancellation of an Amiri decree appointing senior officials for a period of four years only.

MoI extends grace period for illegal expats till March 2

KUWAIT: Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Al-Ali Al-Sabah on Wednesday issued a decision granting a new grace period to residency violators to help them adjust their status - from Feb 1 till March 2. Those who don't adjust their residency status during this period will be punished in line with the law, prevented from obtaining valid residency and deported, the ministry's security media department said in a statement. They also will not be allowed to come back to Kuwait, it added.

The decision comes a few days before an ongoing grace period was supposed to end on Jan 31. The decision gives more time to the violators to legalize their status to avoid any punishment and measures to be taken by the ministry after the end of this period, the ministry noted. The move aims to facilitate matters in light of the exceptional conditions due to the novel coronavirus crisis facing the country, it pointed out.

These conditions led to the suspension of flights and activities and the closure of the Public Authority for Manpower for two weeks, the ministry said. These factors prevented violators from adjusting their status, according to the statement. But response by residency violators has been underwhelming, as many prefer to remain in the country due to a variety of reasons, including the inability to pay fines or the airfare, uncertainty whether they will be able to return as issuance of new work permits is suspended and a lack of job opportunities in their home countries.

As inspection campaigns are no longer carried out, the number of residency violators in the country has reached a record of 180,000, Al-Rai Arabic daily reported earlier this month. This is an increase of 38 percent from five months ago, as very few expats have responded to repeated amnesties to allow violators to leave with the possibility of returning with new visas, the newspaper added. —Agencies

KRCS sends relief plane to Lebanon with medical supplies

KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) yesterday sent a relief plane to Lebanon loaded with medical equipment, medicines, sanitary supplies and blankets. In a statement to KUNA, KRCS Director of Emergency Management Yousef Al-Maraj said that this trip comes within a series of missions that the association is undertaking to provide aid to the Lebanese people.

Maraj expressed his appreciation to the Kuwaiti ministry of defense for providing the plane and the Kuwaiti ministry of foreign affairs for contributing to the success of this humanitarian mission. Moreover, he affirmed the association's keenness to participate in humanitarian efforts undertaken by Kuwait in light of the directives of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. —KUNA



KUWAIT: A relief plane headed to Lebanon is loaded with medical supplies donated by Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) yesterday. —KUNA

Kuwait reports 588 new COVID-19 cases, one death

KUWAIT: Kuwait announced 588 new coronavirus infections and one virus-related death yesterday, taking total cases to 163,450 and deaths to 958, the health ministry said. The number of people hospitalized with the virus stands at 6,105, with 46 of them in intensive care units, according to ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad. He said some 9,964 swab tests were conducted over the past day, taking the total to 1,500,913 tests.

The ministry earlier reported some 648 more people were cured of the virus over the past day, raising the total of those who have overcome the disease to 156,387. Sanad urged nationals and expatriates alike that abiding by health precautions, mainly by following social distancing rules, is the only way to halt the spread of the virus. —KUNA





Pakistan SC upholds acquittal in Daniel Pearl murder case

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Mosul's ruined Old City up for sale, but few buyers

Page 12



FORT WORTH, Texas: In this file US Navy handout image, an F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Lightning II, built by Lockheed Martin takes off for its first flight to test the aircraft's initial capability from the Joint Reserve Base, Fort Worth, Texas. US President Joe Biden's administration has temporarily frozen for review a massive package of F-35 jets to the United Arab Emirates and arms to Saudi Arabia, officials said on Wednesday. — AFP

Biden signals fresh look at Mideast policy

US reviews Gulf arms deals, warns China against 'expansionism'

WASHINGTON, DC: President Joe Biden's administration on Wednesday signaled a fresh look at US policy in the Middle East, announcing reviews of massive arms packages for the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia as well as envisioning a slow return to diplomacy with Iran.

On his first full day on the job, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that his top priorities would include addressing the catastrophe for civilians in Yemen, where US ally Saudi Arabia has been bombarding Iranian-linked Houthi rebels. "We've seen a campaign, led by Saudi Arabia, that has also contributed to what is by many estimates the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, and that's saying something," Blinken told a news conference.

"It's vitally important even in the midst of this crisis that we do everything we can to get humanitarian assistance to the people of Yemen, who are in desperate need," he said of the country where 80 percent of the 29 million people rely on aid to survive.

The State Department said it was temporarily pausing sales authorized by former president Donald Trump including munitions to Saudi Arabia and a \$23 billion package of cutting-edge F-35 jets to the United Arab Emirates. Blinken said that a review was rou-

line for any new administration to ensure that a sale "advances our strategic objectives."

The United Arab Emirates is to be the first Arab nation to receive the versatile stealth-capable fighter-jets after it agreed to recognize Israel—a normalization that Blinken said he supports.

Yousef Al-Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to Washington, said it had anticipated the review and defended the package as "a strong deterrent to aggression"—a veiled reference to Iran. "It also enables the UAE to take on more of the regional burden for collective security, freeing US assets for other global challenges, a long-time bipartisan US priority."

Lawmakers of Biden's Democratic Party had voiced misgivings over the deal, fearing it would set off an arms race, but failed to block the sale while Trump was in office. Annelle Sheline, research fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a Washington think tank critical of military intervention, said the review was "encouraging" and that it was a surprise that the UAE, not only Saudi Arabia, was affected. "It may reflect awareness by the Biden administration that although the UAE has conducted a skillful PR campaign, they are equally to blame for the misery in Yemen, and have in fact pursued

a more aggressive foreign policy than the Saudis have, such as in Libya," she said.

Call on Iran to act first

Blinken has already pledged to end military support for the Saudi campaign and to revisit the designation of the Houthi rebels as terrorists—a last-minute move by his predecessor Mike Pompeo that aid groups say will criminalize vital work, as the insurgents are a de facto government.

One week into the job, US President Joe Biden has sent a clear warning to Beijing against any expansionist intentions in East and Southeast Asia. In multiple calls and statements, he and his top security officials have underscored support for allies Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines, signalling Washington's rejection of China's disputed territorial claims in those areas.

On Wednesday, Biden told Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga that his administration is committed to defending Japan, including the Senkaku Islands, which are claimed both by Japan and China, which calls them the Diaoyu Islands. That stance was echoed by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who told Japanese counterpart Nobuo Kishi on Saturday that the contested islands were cov-

ered by the US-Japan Security Treaty.

Austin affirmed that the United States "remains opposed to any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea," according to a Pentagon statement on the call.

Meanwhile, three days into the Biden administration, State Department spokesman Ned Price warned China about menacing Taiwan after it repeatedly sent more than a dozen military fighters and bombers through the island's air defense zone. "We will stand with friends and allies to advance our shared prosperity security and values in the Indo-Pacific region—and that includes deepening our ties with Democratic Taiwan," Price said in a statement.

"Our commitment to Taiwan is rock-solid." And Secretary of State Antony Blinken told his Philippine counterpart on Wednesday that a mutual defense treaty obliging the US to defend the Philippines against attack in the Pacific also applied to the disputed South China Sea — something the Obama administration did not specify.

Those comments and others sought to emphasize that the new Biden administration will not deviate from the firm security stance towards China that it inherited from ex-president Donald Trump. — AFP

International

West Bank's settlers pressure Netanyahu ahead of March vote

Election could hinge on a battle for right-wing votes

GIVAT HAHISH, Palestinian Territories: Jewish settlers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank are demanding concessions from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ahead of a March general election which could hinge on a battle for right-wing votes. While most countries consider all Israeli settlements in the West Bank illegal, Israel broadly divides them into two categories: government-recognized settlements and so-called wildcat outposts. In the former, Israel aims to provide similar services—water, electricity and the like—as it does to citizens within its internationally agreed borders.

Wildcat settlements, often ramshackle collections of portacabins set up by hardline religious nationalists deep inside the West Bank, generally have no connection to the Israeli grid.

Some outposts have been given retrospective authorization in the past, particularly by Netanyahu-led governments. As another Israeli election nears, pro-settler groups are using tactics including a hunger strike outside Netanyahu's Jerusalem office to demand recognition for another 70 wildcat outposts, home to some 25,000 of the 650,000 settlers in east Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Yossi Dagan, an influential settler leader who staged a week-long protest fast outside the premier's office this month, insisted that distinguishing between types of settlements was "absurd". "There is no logical reason why 25,000 Israeli citizens do not have the same rights as others, it's not a political question, it's a question of social rights," he said.

Limited 'wobble room'

Dagan, head of a regional council for Israeli

settlements in the northern West Bank, fainted and was briefly hospitalized after speaking to AFP last week. He had launched his hunger strike as former US president Donald Trump was about to leave office—timing that experts suspect was far from coincidental.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since the Six-Day War of 1967.

Both Republican and Democratic US administrations have long opposed Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian territory. But Trump's staunchly pro-Israel administration broke with this policy, announcing in 2019 that it did not regard such activity as illegal.

Trump's four-year term saw an unprecedented boom in settlement construction and spared Netanyahu from Washington's traditional criticism in response to new West Bank housing projects.

President Joe Biden is set to restore Washington's opposition to settlements, so right-wing settlers are trying to use the window before Israel's next election to secure firm commitments from Netanyahu—who is desperate for their votes. "The settlers know that (with Biden in office) the government's wiggle room will not be as great as it was during Trump's tenure, so they need promises, not just statements of support" from Israeli politicians, said Denis Charbit, a political scientist at the Open University of Israel.

Hagit Ofan, who monitors settlements for the Israeli anti-occupation group Peace Now, said Biden's presidency and Israel's election results could impact both wildcat settlement recognition and broader questions around the "appropriation of Palestinian land".

of Action. Zarif said that as well as its unilateral withdrawal, the US had also imposed sanctions that "blocked food/medicine to Iranians" and "punished adherence" to a UN resolution. "Now, who should take 1st step? Never forget Trump's maximum failure," the foreign minister added, stressing Iran had "abided by the JCPOA" and had only taken "foreseen remedial measures".

Trump withdrew the US from JCPOA and imposed crippling sanctions on Iran in 2018, maintaining a policy of "maximum pressure" against the Islamic republic. Iran a year later responded by suspending its compliance with most key nuclear commitments in the deal, under which it was promised economic relief for limits on its nuclear program. On January 4, Iran announced it had stepped up its uranium enrichment process to 20 percent purity, far above the 3.67 percent level permitted by the deal, but far below the amount required for an atomic bomb.

Tehran has called on Washington to "unconditionally" lift sanctions imposed by Trump to salvage the nuclear deal. It has said it will return to full compliance once all parties to the accord fulfill their commitments to the agreement. — AFP



Matan Fingerhut, his wife Chagit, and their four children look on at their house in the wildcat outpost of Givat Hahish, near the Israeli settlement of Alon Shvut, south of the Palestinian city of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. —AFP

Battle for the right

Netanyahu partly owes his record as Israel's longest-serving premier, in power since 2009, to his status as the unchallenged leader of the Israeli right. But polls suggest the March election, Israel's fourth is less than two years, could swing against him. Gideon Saar, a leading right-winger with pro-settler credentials, defected from Netanyahu's Likud party last year, and polls suggest his breakaway party could win a solid chunk of seats in the parliament.

Surveys also suggest that the staunchly pro-settler Yemina party of Naftali Bennett, a former defense and economy minister, is on the rise.

Both Saar and Bennett have ruled out joining a Netanyahu-led coalition, which could complicate the premier's bid to forge a 61-seat majority—something he already failed to do after three recent elections when the Likud was united behind him. In Givat Hahish, a wildcat outpost near Bethlehem where some 40 families live in a mixture of mobile homes and permanent dwellings, father of four Matan Fingerhut declined to state his political preferences. But he made clear that he wants political recognition of Givat Hahish. "I like this place and I want to live here legally," said Fingerhut, who built his own house on a hill without Israeli government permission. — AFP

Iran dismisses US call to return to nuclear deal first

TEHRAN: Iran dismissed yesterday a call by the US for it to return to full compliance of a nuclear deal first, insisting it had only taken "remedial measures" since America's withdrawal.

The administration of new US President Joe Biden on Wednesday confirmed its willingness to return to the deal, which has been hanging by a thread since his predecessor Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from it in 2018. But Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who made the announcement, said the US would only return to the deal agreed with major powers in 2015 once Iran resumes its commitments. Iran's top diplomat, Mohammad Javad Zarif, on Thursday dismissed the demand.

"Reality check for @SecBlinken: The US violated (the) JCPOA," Zarif tweeted, referring to the accord by its formal name, the Joint Comprehensive Plan

Canadian lawmakers vote to grant citizenship to Saudi blogger

OTTAWA: Members of Canada's House of Commons on Wednesday unanimously voted to grant citizenship to Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, who has been imprisoned in his home country since 2012 and whose wife and three children live in Canada. The motion asks Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino to use his "discretionary power" to grant Canadian citizenship to Badawi, "in order to remedy a particular situation and unusual distress."

He was convicted in 2014 to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for "insulting Islam." He received 50 of those beatings in January 2015, but the rest of the sessions—which were to be carried out weekly—were suspended after a global outcry. Badawi, an outspoken defender of freedom of expression, had called for

the end of religious rule under Wahhabism—a rigid interpretation of Islam—in Saudi Arabia.

"Now that this is a formal request from the House, (Prime Minister) Justin Trudeau and Minister Marco Mendicino must act," Yves-Francois Blanchet, head of the separatist Bloc Quebecois party and sponsor of the bill, said after the vote. "Every day counts" for Badawi, "as his health is constantly in danger in prison," Blanchet said in a statement. Relations between Ottawa and Riyadh deteriorated in the summer of 2018 when the Canadian government called for the release of Saudi human rights activists, including Badawi's sister Samar Badawi. Badawi's wife and three children, who live in Quebec, have already received Canadian citizenship. —AFP

International

Mosul's ruined Old City up for sale, but few buyers

Pungent stench from still unrecovered bodies blankets entire neighborhood

MOSUL: Mosul's Old City still lies in ruins three years after intense fighting drove out Islamic State jihadists. With rebuilding unlikely and Iraq's economy in tailspin, homeowners are desperate to sell. But many who lived through the horrors of IS rule there are now unable to find buyers for their properties in what still resembles a warzone.

Piles of rubble block streets and collapsed buildings mar the shattered ancient city center once famous for its mosques, churches and synagogues and maze of historic streets. Entire neighborhoods remain blanketed by a pungent stench which locals say is caused by still unrecovered bodies, broken sewage systems and illegal trash dumps. Many family homes on the banks of the Tigris river have remained largely undamaged, but are still off limits because IS booby-trapped them. "For months, I've been trying to sell my home in the Old City because it's too damaged to live in," said 62-year-old Saad Gergis. "But no one wants to buy it because it's surrounded by homes emitting horrible smells." The Islamic State group, which ran a self-declared "caliphate" across vast parts of Syria and Iraq, captured Mosul in 2014 but was driven out by the Iraqi army in mid-2017 after months of gruelling street fighting.

Many Mosul residents long waited for compensation or rebuilding-in vain, as Iraq remains mired in political and economic crisis. Gergis finally scraped together what he could and bought a plot of land outside the city to build a new home for his wife and four

children. Until the house is ready, his family is living in a rented apartment across town, on the eastern outskirts of Mosul. Returning to his old neighborhood is difficult for Gergis, who lived for three years under brutal IS rule. "When I go back, I can see all the old horrors of IS: the killings, the explosions, the executions," he told AFP.

Waiting for state help

IS may have been defeated in Mosul, but Iraq is now struggling through its worst economic crisis in years, deepened by last year's collapse of oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic. The dinar currency has been devalued by 25 percent. "I bought my home well before the war at 60 million Iraqi dinars," around \$50,000 at the time, Gergis told AFP. "It's not even worth a quarter of that now. It's the same for all the houses of the Old City."

Mosul real estate agent Maher Al-Naqib said property prices have collapsed across a devastated city which has seen little government help. "The state has not paid for the damage, public services have not been restored, government buildings haven't reopened and bridges have not been rebuilt," he said. According to local authorities, Mosul has sent 90,000 requests for compensation to the central government, including 40,000 for the loss of a loved one and 50,000 for destroyed property.

But with dwindling state resources, Baghdad has compensated just 2,500 families. As a result, Naqib



A picture shows heavily damaged buildings in Iraq's northern city of Mosul. —AFP

said, the once expensive Old City has seen property prices "drop dramatically".

Flight to new suburbs

Many have turned their backs on Mosul's once beloved center. Naqib said its original residents have been flocking to his offices to enquire about buying land in the suburbs, which is cheaper and now fea-

tures better services.

On Mosul's outer edges, farmlands are being gradually replaced by residential complexes with neatly paved roads, reliable electricity and clean water. The new suburbs with names like Zayyuna, Fellah-2 and Jamiyati promise the normalcy and basic services that many Mosul residents have missed for most of the past decade. —AFP

UN inspection of oil tanker off Yemen delayed until March

UNITED NATIONS: A UN mission to inspect a long-abandoned fuel tanker off the coast of Yemen, which threatens to rupture and cause a massive oil spill, has been pushed to March, the body said Wednesday. "We've hit a few delays with international shipping that were beyond our control and had some back and forth on signing documents, which has now been resolved," UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters. "For now, we think we can get there by early March. From our side we are doing everything possible to stick to that timeline and deploy the mission," he said.

In November, Yemen's Houthi rebels confirmed they had given the green light for a mission to assess the FSO Safer fuel tanker, which the UN initially planned for late January or early February.

The Iran-backed Huthis—who control much of Yemen's north after a war that erupted in 2014—had previously denied access. Sticking to the new timeline "will depend on continuous facili-

tation by the Ansar Allah authorities," Dujarric said, using the official name of the Houthi movement. "We have communicated to the authorities our concern over several logistical issues that remain pending," he added. "We urgently need to resolve these issues in the next several days to avoid missing the window for timely deployment." The UN's announcement comes just two days after new US President Joe Biden's administration suspended his country's designation of the Huthis as a terrorist group until February 26.

Dujarric said the UN was reviewing the situation concerning the US terrorist designation "to ensure that non-staff contractors are not inadvertently exposed to legal risks by participating in the mission."

Humanitarian groups argue that they have no alternative but to deal with the Huthis, who amount to a government in much of Yemen, including the capital Sanaa.

The 45-year-old fuel vessel, abandoned near the western port of Hodeida since 2015, has 1.1 million barrels of crude on board, and a rupture or explosion would have disastrous environmental and humanitarian consequences. Apart from corrosion to the aging vessel, essential work to curb explosive gases in its storage tanks has been neglected. —AFP

UN: Clashes in Hodeida putting civilians at risk

HODEIDA, Yemen: The United Nations warned yesterday that thousands of Yemeni civilians were at risk in the western province of Hodeida after an increase in military clashes this month.

Since 2014, Yemen has been engulfed in a war between the internationally recognized government-supported by a Saudi-led military coalition and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels that has triggered a devastating humanitarian crisis. The latest clashes in the rebel-held Red Sea port city of Hodeida—the main gateway for food, fuel and humanitarian aid to the rest of the country—are the most violent since a truce negotiated in the area by the United Nations came into force in 2018.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement that "concern is increasing" with "thousands of civilians at risk". It added that preliminary reports showed that at least 700 people has been dis-

placed by the recent fighting and that "there have already been civilian casualties". At least eight civilians, mostly women and children, were killed last week, and many houses and farms damaged, the UN said.

"Indiscriminate attacks on residential areas are a breach of international humanitarian law and must stop immediately," said Auke Lootsma, the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Yemen. Two explosions rattled Hodeida city on Wednesday night, residents said. The Houthis have attacked to the south of the city where pro-government forces maintain positions, pro-government military sources said earlier this month. On January 18, military sources said that some 150 Yemeni pro-government soldiers and Houthi rebels had been killed in a week of fighting.

A Yemeni military source said yesterday that fighting between the warring sides has subsided slightly since then but that "intermittent clashes" were ongoing. "The parties must remember that they have a duty to take all necessary measures to protect civilians at all times and allow humanitarians to respond to the injured and displaced," the UN said. —AFP

International

Lebanese man dies of wounds as troops and protesters clash

US aid for Palestinian refugees won't cover shortfall: UN

TRIPOLI: A man died of his wounds yesterday in Lebanon after clashes between security forces and protesters angered by the combined impact of a severe economic crisis and a coronavirus lockdown.

Omar Tayba sustained a bullet wound late Wednesday when protests in the northern city of Tripoli turned violent for the third night running, his brother Ahmad told AFP.

"My brother was in Tripoli watching the protests when he was hit," he said. "He was transferred to hospital and died this morning. The 29-year-old man, who was employed in a bakery, became the first fatality-reported also by local media-of the protests that erupted earlier this week in Tripoli.

According to the National News Agency, a total of 226 people received treatment Wednesday night. Tripoli was already one of Lebanon's poorest areas before the coronavirus pandemic piled new misery onto a chronic economic crisis. Many of its residents have been left without an income since Lebanon imposed a full lockdown earlier this month in a bid to stem a surge in Covid-19 cases and prevent its hospitals from being overwhelmed.

A round-the-clock curfew is in force nationwide and grocery shopping is restricted to home deliveries-a service that is often unavailable in poorer areas. Authorities have extended the lockdown by two weeks to February 8.

The UN agency for Palestinian refugees expressed hope yesterday that the United States will resume its funding, but said it still would not



TRIPOLI: Lebanese mourners attend the funeral of Omar Tayba, who died during clashes between anti-government protestors and security forces the previous night, in the northern port city of Tripoli yesterday. — AFP

be enough to cover a shortfall. Under former president Donald Trump, the United States halted its support for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA. On Tuesday, Washington's interim UN envoy Richard Mills said President Joe Biden intends to "restore US assistance programs that support economic development and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people", without mentioning UNRWA.

"We welcome the Biden administration's decision to restore assistance to Palestinians and look forward to continuing conversation with them about resumption of aid to UNRWA," said the UN agency's spokeswoman, Tamara Alrifai. Alrifai said the "2021 financial year looks very difficult".

"While the overall budget will remain at \$806 million, same as 2020, the income forecast in the best estimates will lead to an expected shortfall equivalent to three months of operations. "We therefore expect a cashflow crisis as of March this year. More broadly, the expected deficit would be untenable and could lead to a financial collapse of the agency," Alrifai said. "Our financial forecast takes into consideration the expected re-engagement of the US administration, so we predict a bit more income than 2020 but this slightly improved income will not cover the huge liabilities that UNRWA already has." The agency had entered 2021 with liabilities of \$75 million from the last financial year, and its annual deficit was expected to reach \$200 million in the current year, she added.—AFP

Once-jailed Japarov sworn in as Kyrgyz president

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan: Populist Sadyr Japarov was sworn in as president of ex-Soviet Kyrgyzstan yesterday, completing a remarkable transformation from prisoner to president in just a few months. Japarov, 52, was serving jail time on hostage-taking charges before being freed during a political crisis over a parliamentary vote in October, beginning a dizzying rise to the top job.

He won a January 10 presidential election by a landslide with close to 80 percent of the vote.

Japarov yesterday swore to "preserve the integrity of the people and the security of the country" as he placed his hand on the Kyrgyz constitution, which is set to be overhauled in the coming months. Voters chose a presidential form of government over a parliamentary model in a referendum held in parallel to the presidential vote. A Kyrgyz cabinet official said Japarov would make his first foreign trip as president to Russia, where hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz live and work. Japarov called the exodus a "tragedy" at his

inauguration ceremony. "I, like all patriots of the country, dream that Kyrgyzstan will become economically developed, dynamic, strong and free," Japarov said.

"A country where human rights are observed, where there is a dictatorship of law, and youth look to the future with optimism." Japarov's "dictatorship of law" comment parrots the famous catchphrase of Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Yet Moscow has taken a dim view of political upheavals in the mountainous country of 6.5 million that looks to next-door China for loans and investment. Putin last year called the overthrow of the previous government a "misfortune" and chided Bishkek for seeking a political model based on Western democracies.

The new constitution is likely to grant the head of state sweeping new powers when it is passed and reverse the single-term limit imposed on presidents after a bloody uprising ousted the country's second leader in 2010. Two of Japarov's



BISHKEK: Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov reviews a parade following his inauguration ceremony in Bishkek yesterday. — AFP

vote challengers Abdil Segizbayev and Kursan Asanov were detained by law enforcement earlier this week, raising fears that Japarov's reign will continue the cycle of revenge and selective justice that has defined local politics.

Segizbayev, who was serving as national security chief at the time of Japarov's arrest in 2017, was detained over charges of abuse of office. Asanov, who proclaimed himself acting interior minister during the same unrest that propelled Japarov to power, has been detained for his alleged role in seizing the ministry building during demonstrations.—AFP

Russia detains Navalny allies after apartment raids

MOSCOW: Several allies of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny were taken into custody early yesterday after police raided their apartments and offices ahead of planned demonstrations. The searches were connected to a criminal probe launched by the interior ministry over alleged violations of coronavirus restrictions during protests last week, Navalny's aides said. The opposition has called for fresh demonstrations on Sunday to demand freedom for Navalny, who was arrested on his return from Germany where he had been covering from a poisoning attack.

Navalny's lawyers intend to appeal against his arrest later yesterday. Ivan Zhdanov, the head of Navalny's FBK Anti-Corruption Foundation, said prominent aide Lyubov Sobol and Navalny's brother Oleg were detained for 48 hours as suspects.

Sobol's lawyer Vladimir Voronin said both she and Oleg Navalny were questioned by police during the night. Searches were also carried out at the flat of Navalny's wife Yulia, and in the office of FBK, Navalny's organization, which is known for its investigations into the wealth of Russia's elites.

Police also arrived at the home of Navalny's doctor Anastasia Vasilyeva, who was also detained for 48 hours. In a video posted on Twitter by Vasilyeva's press secretary, the doctor is playing Beethoven on the piano as people in uniform arrive at the door.

According to Mediazona, a news website that focuses on opposition detentions, police carried out at least 18 searches on Wednesday.

'Real counterweight'

Tens of thousands of Russians across the country rallied last weekend in support of Navalny, who is awaiting a trial that could see him imprisoned for several years on charges of violating a 2014 suspended sentence. Officials have also threatened to fine social media including Instagram, Twitter and TikTok for failing to delete posts urging young people to join illegal rallies. Protests in Russia are banned if they are not approved by the authorities, as are calls for people under 18 to join in. President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters yesterday that the state did not want social networks to become "platforms to announce illegal protests".

The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said it had launched a probe against Leonid Volkov, the head of Navalny's regional network, for persuading young people to protest. The opposition plans to hold more rallies on Sunday, which in Moscow will take place outside the headquarters of the FSB, the security agency that Navalny says targeted him in the near-fatal poisoning attack. —AFP

International

UK's Johnson visits Scotland as independence support mounts

PM praises UK's collective response to coronavirus

LONDON: Prime Minister Boris Johnson headed to Scotland yesterday to praise the United Kingdom's collective response to coronavirus, in a bid to counter record support for independence. Johnson wants to highlight the British government's role in Scotland tackling the pandemic, from deploying the army to help roll out vaccines to providing additional financial support. The visit comes with polling indicating that Scots overwhelmingly think First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), has done a better job at handling the crisis than Johnson.

Twenty consecutive polls have suggested majority support for independence, and the SNP has published an 11-point "roadmap to a referendum" as well as a newly-formed "independence task-force". Johnson has insisted the last independence referendum in 2014, which saw Scots back staying in the UK by 55 to 45 percent, was a once-in-a-generation vote and repeatedly rejected calls for him to allow another vote.

As well as the backdrop of the independence issue, Johnson faces another row with Sturgeon, who has questioned if his trip breaches coronavirus lockdown rules. Sturgeon said she was "not ecstatic" about the visit, adding that leaders should stick to the same rules as the general public about making only essential journeys.

"People like me and Boris Johnson have to be in work for reasons people understand, but we don't

have to travel across the UK. We have a duty to lead by example," she said Wednesday. Johnson's Downing Street office hit back, insisting it was "a fundamental role of the PM to be the physical representative of the UK government" and that it was "right that he's visible and accessible for communities and businesses and the public".

Senior minister Michael Gove, a Scot who chairs a weekly sub-cabinet meeting on preserving the UK, added that the visit would garner valuable insight about the government's pandemic response.

"It's also important the prime minister hears from those on the frontline what is going well and what needs to improve," he told Sky News.

'Benefits of cooperation'

The devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are responsible for their own health policies, and the pandemic has thrust local leaders and their administrations into the spotlight more than usual. With each administration dictating their response, they have often pitted themselves against London, which sets policy for England, and provided a glimpse into how independence could operate.

Despite similarly grim case counts and virus mortality rates to the rest of Britain, Sturgeon has won praise for her handling of the crisis and performances in daily press conferences. In contrast, Johnson has been vehemently criticized for repeatedly reacting too slowly as the crisis has evolved,



LONDON: A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking part in the weekly Prime Minister's Questions, in a hybrid, socially distanced session at the House of Commons in London on Wednesday. —AFP

and Britain now has one of the highest death tolls globally. However during his visit, he will stress that the UK government has provided pivotal support, in particular in emergency response and testing, alongside the vaccine drive and funding.

"The great benefits of cooperation across the whole of the UK have never been clearer than since the beginning of this pandemic," Johnson will say,

according to his office. The SNP said the trip was evidence of a "prime minister in panic" and accused him of "mimicking Donald Trump's explicit attempts to block democracy". "The longer Boris Johnson reads from the Trump playbook of democracy denial, the more support for Scottish independence will grow," SNP deputy leader Keith Brown said. —AFP

Germany plans travel halt from virus variant countries

BERLIN: Germany is banning most travellers from countries hardest hit by coronavirus variants, the interior minister said yesterday, to stop the strains from reversing recent progress on lowering infections. "At the moment within the government, we are coordinating towards the aim of refusing inbound travel from mutation areas," said Horst Seehofer.

"We are concentrating these travel restrictions on mutation areas, that are at the moment Britain, Portugal, South Africa and Brazil." The emergence of new virus variants in Britain, Brazil and South Africa, deemed more infectious than the original strain, has fuelled concern at a time when many nations are struggling to rein in the pandemic. Portugal, which has strong air links with Brazil, has also recently reported high infection numbers after coming through the first wave of the virus relatively unscathed. Seehofer said talks were ongoing to decide which category of travellers might be granted exemptions. These would likely include returning Germans as well as those who work in freight, as cargo flights should not be disrupted. Further, with fast-moving infection developments, officials are also looking at how to define what would qualify as a "mutation area". —AFP

San Francisco to scrub Lincoln, Washington from 44 schools

SAN FRANCISCO: Presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are no longer in favor in San Francisco, where the school board has voted to change the name of 44 schools it says bear the monikers of people associated with racism, slavery or colonization. The move, which has sparked much controversy locally, dates back to the creation of a commission in May 2018 to revise the names of public schools, long before statues of Christopher Columbus or figures from the US' Confederate south were toppled by anti-racism protesters in the wake of George Floyd's police killing.

The commission created a list of 44 schools to be renamed, such as that bearing the name of Spanish missionary Junipero Serra. Among them are schools named for presidents Washington and Thomas Jefferson,

both of whom owned slaves, as well as Francis Scott Key, the author of the US national anthem. Surprisingly, Abraham Lincoln—the symbol of the abolition of slavery in the US—is also under fire, accused by some of having played a role in the massacre of Native American tribes.

Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, 87, is also on the list, which the school board approved in a six-to-one vote. The commission accuses her of replacing a vandalized Confederate flag that flew among approximately 20 others in front of San Francisco's city hall, while she was mayor in the 1980s. The flag, which originated in the pro-slavery south during the US Civil War, has become a symbol of racial discrimination and white supremacy. The decision to rename schools has sparked sharp criticism, including from the current mayor of San Francisco, London Breed. Breed, who is the city's first Black, female mayor, criticized the school board's decision to focus its energy on renaming schools at a moment when the education system is facing an uphill battle to reopen amid the coronavirus pandemic as well as hardships associated with virtual homeschooling. —AFP

Facebook backs away from heated political talk

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook is seeking to "turn down the temperature" on its sprawling platform by reducing the kind of divisive and inflammatory political talk it has long hosted. Facebook has been pounded with criticism that it not only hasn't done enough to curb misinformation and vitriol on its network, but that its algorithm actually tended to encourage such posts because of the attention they grab.

The social media giant will no longer recommend politics-themed groups to users, Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg said Wednesday, making perma-

nent a measure put in place during the combative US election won by President Joe Biden. The Silicon Valley-based internet giant is also working on ways to reduce the amount of political content served up in users' news feeds by its automated systems.

"We're still going to enable people to engage in political groups and discussions if they want to," Zuckerberg said. But he added the decision to reduce political content in users' main news feeds is part of a push "to turn down the temperature and discourage divisive conversation."

The social media giant has long been a fertile ground for users to tangle over opposing views or surround themselves with those who agree emphatically. "But one of the top pieces of feedback that we are hearing from our community right now is that people don't want politics and fighting to take over their experience on our services," Zuckerberg said in an earnings call. —AFP

International

Hazaras fear for the future as foreign troops exit Afghanistan

In face of Taliban attacks, Hazaras were forced to take up arms

BAMIYAN, Afghanistan: The choice was straightforward for Hamidullah Asadi, a member of Afghanistan's minority Hazara community—wait for the next deadly attack or join a growing militia in the mountains. After spending months recovering from grave injuries inflicted by an Islamic State (IS) suicide bomber, he was ready to fight.

"We were forced to take up arms," said Asadi, now a spokesman for the Resistance for Justice Movement—a band of Hazara fighters based in the country's rugged, snow-capped central highlands.

"Our expectations of those who were supposed to defend us were not met." Afghan security forces are struggling to hold off an increasingly powerful Taliban as international troops withdraw from the country, with peace talks between the warring sides slow-moving.

Fearing the government will collapse and the country descend again into civil war, Hazaras are starting to prepare for the worst. Comprising roughly 10 to 20 percent of Afghanistan's 38-million population, Hazaras have long been persecuted for their largely Shiite faith by Sunni hardliners in a country wracked by deep ethnic divisions.

Asadi was a student at Kabul University in 2016 when he narrowly survived twin suicide blasts at a rally that killed over 80 people and marked the beginning of a new wave of violence targeting the Hazaras, including assaults claimed

by the Islamic State group. He says he is now one of thousands of armed fighters ready to be mobilized by a single call from their commander, Abdul Ghani Alipur, a popular Hazara figure with a Robin Hood reputation. The militia boasts of patrolling roads and launching brazen raids on Taliban areas to abduct the relatives of militants, later used as bargaining chips to release Hazara hostages.

The growth of the militia and similar armed outfits are increasingly problematic for the Afghan government, which is wary of allowing independent fighting forces to build up, but also fears a crackdown would ignite confrontation with the communities that support them.

Easy targets

The Hazaras have had few allies in Afghanistan over the generations and their distinct Asiatic features make them easy targets of hardline Sunnis. During the country's vicious civil war in the 1990s, they were mercilessly shelled in factional fighting and later massacred in the thousands amid the Taliban's ruthless conquest of the country. Few groups, however, have taken as much advantage of the new order established after the overthrow of Taliban rule.

The Hazaras flocked to enrol their children in schools—including their daughters—and entered the political arena in unprecedented numbers.

But those achievements remain fragile. The



KABUL: In this photo taken on January 14, 2021, Hazara men and women arrive to offer prayers for their relatives, members of the 'Enlightenment Movement', buried in a graveyard on the outskirts of Kabul. — AFP

group has increasingly taken the brunt of rising violence as IS suicide bombers attacked their mosques, schools, rallies and hospitals in western Kabul's Hazara enclave of Dasht-e-Barchi, killing hundreds. The Taliban have also kidnapped and killed Hazaras travelling on the country's perilous roads with near impunity. "Even with the presence of the US troops or NATO troops in Afghanistan, they were already vulnerable," said Sima Samar,

a leading activist and former head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

Some Hazaras have fled the capital for the provinces, including Bamiyan—the Hazara homeland long considered one of Afghanistan's safest enclaves. Murad Ali Haidari hoped the move would shield his family from the violence; instead, Haidari's son was killed in one of two bombings in the region in November. —AFP

Indian farmers scrap march on parliament

NEW DELHI: Indian farmer unions have scrapped next week's planned march on parliament against new agricultural laws, as rifts emerge after violent protests in New Delhi left one person dead and almost 400 police injured. Thousands of farmers running riot on tractors on Tuesday was a major embarrassment for the government, but also for the 42 unions representing the farmers, who have mostly condemned the violence.

Late Wednesday their main umbrella group said that the planned march on parliament on February 1 — when the government presents the budget—had been pushed back, although nationwide rallies were still planned on Sunday. Farmers have been camped outside New Delhi for two months demanding that the new laws be scrapped, because they fear they will leave them at the mercy of big corporations.

Two roads blocked by the protestors for weeks were cleared late Wednesday as two unions withdrew from the protest, each blaming other groups for Tuesday's events.

"I am so ashamed and sad about (Tuesday) that I announce an end to our 58-day-long sit-in protest at this (Delhi) border," one union leader, Bhanu Pratap Singh, announced on Wednesday.

Another protest camp on the outskirts of the Indian capital was also cleared overnight, with local police denying claims that they had emptied the site using force. At another site, Ghazipur, there was an increased police presence yesterday. The main protest camp at the Singhu border crossing remained packed with pro-



NEW DELHI: Farmers listen to a speaker during a protest against the central government's recent agricultural reforms, at the Delhi-Haryana state border in Singhu on Wednesday. —AFP

testors, although some have left and the mood was somber. "Yes, many people left as they were disappointed about Tuesday but we are still here, and hope they will be back," Baljinder Singh, 32, from the northern state of Punjab, told AFP on Wednesday.

"It was a minor blip. The government planned it and changed the direction of our tractor march, and they intentionally directed us towards the city centre," Baljinder added. Delhi police have signalled a tough line, saying they are studying footage and using face-recognition technology to identify and arrest those involved in the violence. On Wednesday police commissioner SN Shrivastava said that the farmer unions, having promised that Tuesday's tractor rallies would stick to agreed routes, had "backstabbed" the authorities. —AFP

Foreigners without face masks punished with push-ups in Bali

DENPASER: Foreigners caught not wearing face masks on the Indonesian resort island of Bali are being subject to an unusual punishment: push-ups. Video footage circulating on social media this week shows tourists in T-shirts and shorts being made to do the exercise in sweltering tropical heat as masked security officials stood over them. Bali authorities made wearing a face mask in public mandatory last year as Indonesia battled a raging COVID-19 outbreak. In recent days, however, scores of foreigners have been caught without face coverings, said security official Gusti Agung Ketut Suryanegara. More than 70 people paid a fine of 100,000 rupiah (\$7), but about 30 others said they did not have the cash. Instead, they were ordered to do push-ups.

Those not carrying a mask had to do up to 50, while those who were wearing one improperly were punished with 15. "At first, they would claim that they didn't know the regulation," Suryanegara told AFP. "Then they said they forgot, or that the mask was wet or damaged."

Some Indonesians on the island, which is a pocket of Hinduism in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, have also been hit with the unusual punishment. Bali's authorities have also warned that foreigners who break virus regulations could be thrown out of the country, although so far there have no reports of anyone being deported for failing to wear a mask. The island, which has been hammered by the epidemic, remains officially closed to overseas tourists but is home to many long-term residents from abroad. —AFP

International

Myanmar army chief's rhetoric fuels fears of a military coup

Army alleges widespread voter irregularities in Nov election

YANGON: Myanmar's army chief has raised the prospect of scrapping the country's constitution as fears swirl about a possible coup by the military over electoral fraud concerns.

The army has for weeks alleged widespread voter irregularities in November's election, which Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) won in a landslide. The civilian administration has been in an uneasy power-sharing agreement with the army generals since Myanmar's first democratic elections in 2015, as dictated by a 2008 junta-authored constitution.

An army spokesman on Tuesday refused to rule out the possibility of the military seizing total power to deal with what he called a political crisis. And yesterday General Min Aung Hlaing—arguably Myanmar's most powerful individual—appeared to echo that sentiment in a speech published in the military-run Myawady newspaper. The army chief said the 2008 constitution was “the mother law for all laws” and should be respected. But he warned that in certain circumstances it could be “necessary to revoke the constitution”.

The comments follow repeated demands by the army for Myanmar's election commission to release final voter lists from the November polls, a demand that has not been met. The military says the lists are required to cross-check for irregularities. It alleges there were 8.6 million

cases of voter fraud nationwide.

The polls were only the second democratic elections Myanmar has had since emerging in 2011 from a nearly five-decade military dictatorship. Long a popular figure in Myanmar, Suu Kyi's run for power in historic 2015 elections was curbed by several constitutional provisions.

One provision barred any citizen married to a foreigner from becoming president. Suu Kyi, who married a British citizen, sidestepped that rule after the 2015 election win by becoming state counsellor—a de facto leadership role created by her government. The NLD also then pushed for changes to the constitution in their first term, a process that has made little progress. Political analyst Soe Myint Aung said the army saw “major loopholes (in the constitution) that has caused its detriment”. “The coup rhetoric is not merely a bluff or empty threat,” he said.

Even if it does not orchestrate a “fully fledged” takeover of power, “it is likely the military will take some action unless the (election commission) and the government redress the election-related grievances.” Suu Kyi has made no direct comment on the military's polling complaints.

The last time the country saw its constitution revoked was in 1962 and 1988 — both when the military seized power and reinstated a junta government. — AFP



In this file photo, Myanmar military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing arrives for the oath taking ceremony of newly appointed Myanmar President Win Myint in the parliament in Naypyidaw. — AFP

Hundreds of Rohingya missing from Indonesian camp

JAKARTA: Hundreds of Rohingya are missing from a refugee camp in Indonesia and are believed to have been trafficked to neighboring Malaysia, officials and sources said yesterday.

Just 112 refugees remain at the makeshift camp in Lhokseumawe on Indonesia's northern coast this week, well down from the almost 400 that arrived between June and September last year. Neither local authorities nor the UN could account for the whereabouts of the refugees from the stateless Muslim minority from Myanmar, who are feared to have enlisted traffickers to help them cross the Malacca strait into Malaysia.

“We don't know yet where they went,” said Ridwan Jalil, head of the Rohingya taskforce in Lhokseumawe. “But they'll escape if they can find any hole to leave because that is their goal.”

A Myanmar military crackdown in 2017, which UN investigators said amounted to genocide, forced 750,000 Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh's southeast coastal district of Cox's Bazar, where many ended up in sprawling refugee camps. Thousands have since paid smugglers to get them out of Bangladesh, enduring harrowing, months-long sea journeys punctuated by illness, beatings by traffickers and near-starvation rations to reach Indonesia and Malaysia.

At least 18 Rohingya from the Lhokseumawe camp and over a dozen suspected traffickers were recently caught by police sev-



The deserted refugee camp is seen in Lhokseumawe, Aceh province on Wednesday after several hundred Rohingya refugees left the camp. — AFP

eral hundred kilometers south, in Medan city, a frequent staging point for illegal crossings into Malaysia. Relatively affluent Muslim-majority Malaysia is the main destination for Rohingya fleeing refugee camps. More than 100,000 now live on the margins of society there, registered as refugees but not allowed to work, forcing the men into illegal construction and other low-paid jobs.

Some Rohingya men in Malaysia pay smugglers to bring over their families, or new brides from arranged marriages. The refugees in Indonesia were repeatedly asked to stay in the camp, the UN's refugee agency said. — AFP

India eases curbs further as COVID cases tumble

NEW DELHI: India has further eased coronavirus restrictions, bucking the trend in many other countries as the huge Asian nation's infection and death numbers fall sharply.

Government figures yesterday showed that, in the previous 24 hours, 123 people died from the virus in India, with 11,666 new infections. By comparison, the United States has posted daily death counts of more than 4,000 in recent weeks, while Britain and Brazil have seen daily totals of well over 1,000.

In September, at the peak of the outbreak in India, the country of 1.3 billion people was recording almost 100,000 new cases and more than 1,000 deaths per day. Addressing the gradual reopening, Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla said: “The number of active cases in the country have been declining steadily over the past four months.” But he noted the “need for maintaining caution and strict surveillance”.

India imposed one of the world's toughest lockdowns last March. But with the economy one of the worst hit worldwide, India has gradually relaxed rules, allowing most economic activity and even its famously lavish weddings to resume—albeit with numbers capped. Recent months have seen mass religious festivals, and the new guidelines announced late Wednesday included opening swimming pools and allowing more than 50 percent capacity in cinemas. Experts warned though that India could see another wave of infections and that it could be hit by new variants of the virus, as has happened in Brazil, Britain and South Africa. — AFP

International

Pakistan SC upholds acquittal in Daniel Pearl murder case

Pearl's family calls ruling 'a travesty of justice', seeks US intervention

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Supreme Court yesterday dismissed a series of appeals against the acquittal of the British-born militant convicted of masterminding the kidnap and murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl, paving the way for his release along with three others.

"The court has come out to say that there is no offense that he has committed in this case," Mahmood Sheikh, who represented accused Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, told AFP. "The court has said he should be released forthwith," the lawyer added.

The ruling follows an international outcry last year when a lower court acquitted the 47-year-old of murder and reduced his conviction to a lesser charge of kidnapping—overturning his death sentence and ordering his release after almost two decades in prison. The lower court's move sparked a series of petitions against the acquittal, including from Pearl's family.

The Supreme Court rejected the petitions in a split decision yesterday. Pearl was the South Asia bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal when he was abducted in Karachi in January 2002 while researching a story about Islamist militants. Nearly a month later, after a string of ransom demands were made, a graphic video showing his decapitation was delivered to the US consulate. Sheikh, a British-born jihadist who once studied at the London School of Economics and had been involved in previous kidnappings of foreigners, was arrested days after Pearl's abduction and later sentenced to death by hanging. Lawyers for Pearl's family have argued that Sheikh played a crucial role in organizing the abduction and detention of the journalist, before

ordering his captors to kill him.

Defense lawyers, however, say he was a scapegoat and sentenced on insufficient evidence. Sheikh and the three other men convicted of involvement in the kidnapping have been held under emergency orders by the Sindh provincial government, which has argued that they are a danger to the public.

'Travesty of justice'

There was no word on when they will be released following yesterday's decision. Pearl's family called the latest ruling "a travesty of justice" and pleaded for US intervention in the case. "The release of these killers puts in danger journalists everywhere and the people of Pakistan. We urge the US government to take all necessary actions under the law to correct this injustice," the family said in a statement.

In a statement last month, the then-US acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen said Washington "stands ready to take custody of Omar Sheikh to stand trial here" after labelling the acquittal "an affront to terrorism victims everywhere". In January 2011, a report released by the Pearl Project at Georgetown University following an investigation into his death made chilling revelations, claiming that the wrong men were convicted for Pearl's murder.

The investigation, led by Pearl's friend and former Wall Street Journal colleague Asra Nomani, and a Georgetown University professor, claimed the reporter was murdered by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the September 11, 2001 attacks, not Sheikh. — AFP



This undated file photo released by the Washington Post shows Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl at an undisclosed location with a copy of Pakistan's English language newspaper Dawn. —AFP

New Zealand urges Australia to 'show respect' to China

WELLINGTON: A senior New Zealand minister advised Australia to adopt his country's softly-softly approach to China yesterday, a rare public disagreement between the neighbors on how to deal with a more assertive Beijing. The comments—which closely echo Chinese government complaints—are likely to anger Canberra, while exposing the different approaches towards China by New Zealand and its "Five Eyes" intelligence partners Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain.

Pointing to Wellington's recent success in trade talks with China, Trade Minister Damien O'Connor urged Australia to show more "respect" to Beijing. "I can't speak for Australia and the way it runs its diplomatic relationships, but clearly if they were to follow us and show respect, I guess a little more diplomacy from time to time and be cautious with wording, then they too could hopefully be in a similar situation," he said. Australia's foreign ministry did not respond to a request for comment on O'Connor's advice. New Zealand's cautious approach has been reflected in its reluctance to sign joint statements from Five Eyes partners criticizing China's crackdown on the Hong Kong democracy movement, including the recent arrests of activists in the city.

New Zealand officials have also been careful not to directly question China's growing influence in the Pacific, unlike their US and Australian counterparts. Critics say Wellington's China policy puts economic benefit above democratic values, something the New Zealand government has denied. "We've always been able to raise issues of concern," O'Connor told CNBC on Wednesday in the wake of a free trade upgrade that took more than four years to negotiate. — AFP

Omar Sheikh: From private schoolboy to militant kidnapper

ISLAMABAD: Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the militant who spent over 18 years behind bars for masterminding the abduction and slaying of US reporter Daniel Pearl, traded privilege and scholarship for a life of jihad, kidnappings, and ultimately a prison cell.

Born in London in 1973 to a prosperous Pakistani garment merchant, Omar was given the best education, including enrolment at a private primary school in London, a stint at Lahore's prestigious Aitchison College, and a brief tenure at the London School of Economics (LSE). He abandoned his comfortable Western upbringing after just a year at LSE, reportedly travelling to Bosnia during the brutal Balkans war in the early 1990s, where his jihadist zeal sprouted after coming into contact with Pakistani militants. The former boxer and arm wrestling enthusiast is believed to have returned to Pakistan to spend several months in a militant training camp, and travelled to the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir to fight Indian forces.

In India he carried out his first kidnapping, abducting an American and three British tourists in 1994. Indian police captured him in a shootout, initially thinking he was one of the British hostages because of his clipped accent and Western bearing. He was jailed in New Delhi, but never charged. In prison he met Pakistani jihadist Maulana Masood Azhar, who went on to found the hardline Kashmir militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed. New Delhi freed both Azhar and Omar in 1999 when the hijackers of an Indian Airlines plane demanded his release in exchange for their hostages. Omar returned to Lahore to live with his family, marrying in November 2000.

Omar came into contact with Pearl, the Wall Street Journal's



In this file photo, police escort British-born Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh in Karachi. — AFP

South Asia bureau chief, when he was delving into the murky underworld of Pakistani militant groups after the September 11 attacks and in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan. The two exchanged several emails, according to police, as Pearl sought introductions to militant leaders. In their correspondence Omar presented himself as a warm, family-oriented man—all part of a ploy to lure Pearl to a trap that ultimately led to his abduction during a reporting trip in Karachi in January 2002. Omar was arrested in February 2002 while Pearl was still missing, and boasted to a Karachi court that the journalist was already dead. — AFP

International

WHO China mission set to begin as US demands 'robust' origin probe

EU, Britain kick up row over vaccine

WUHAN: World Health Organization experts emerged from quarantine in China yesterday to begin a long-awaited investigation into the origins of the devastating coronavirus pandemic, which has shown no signs of slowing down. Global infections have shot past 100 million and governments are scrambling to get their hands on scarce vaccine doses, with a bitter row erupting between the European Union and Britain over the supply of AstraZeneca shots.

Beijing has so far frustrated international efforts to track the origins of the virus, which has killed more than 2.1 million people globally, and only recently allowed the WHO team into China after repeated delays. The experts left their Wuhan quarantine hotel in a bus, wearing masks and peering at the media crowded outside, but it was not confirmed when they will get to start their investigation in the ground-zero city, or what they will be allowed to see.

China has sought to deflect blame for the massive global human and economic toll by suggesting—without proof—that the virus emerged somewhere else. It has also been enraged by calls led by the United States and Australia for an independent probe. “It’s imperative that we get to the bottom of the early days of the pandemic in China, and we’ve been supportive of an international investigation that we feel should be robust and clear,” White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Wednesday. She also expressed concern about the “misinformation” from “some sources in China”.

Beijing shot back Thursday, warning against “political interference” in the WHO mission. Relatives of those who died in Wuhan have accused Chinese authorities of deleting their social media group and putting pressure on them to keep quiet, apparently to avoid any embarrassment during the WHO probe.

EU-Britain vaccine row

The pandemic has surged despite many nations kicking off mass vaccination programs, and one major issue in recent weeks has been demand for jabs far outstripping supply. With cases surging

across Europe, the EU has demanded that AstraZeneca make up for delays by supplying doses from its factories in the UK. But Britain has told the firm to honor its delivery promises too as it tries to accelerate its program, even using historic sites such as the Salisbury Cathedral and Lord’s cricket ground as vaccination centers. AstraZeneca has said there is simply not enough to go around.

At least 90 million doses of that vaccine, which AstraZeneca developed with the University of Oxford, will be produced in Japan, government spokesman Katsunobu Kato said yesterday, but local media said they may not be distributed until May. Pfizer, which developed its successful vaccine with BioNTech, has revised higher its production target for this year from 1.3 billion doses to two billion. While part of that is down to increased production, it is also impacted by a change in how the firm counts doses—after initially saying each vial contained five, the pharma giant now says six shots can be extracted.

Olympics doubts

Vaccines are considered critical to eventually defeating COVID-19, which has continued to re-

emerge even in nations where it was brought under control. New Zealand confirmed two new cases of the more virulent South African strain yesterday, days after an initial case that ended a run of more than two months without community transmission. The Pacific nation topped a list published yesterday by the Lowy Institute, a top Australian think tank, assessing almost 100 countries on how they managed the pandemic. Brazil was ranked the worst, at number 98, with Mexico, Colombia, Iran and the United States also near the bottom.

Vietnam, which made the top 10, yesterday reported its first community transmission in nearly two months. The lack of success globally in containing the pandemic sparked doubts about whether the delayed Tokyo Olympics can be held at all this year. The head of the International Olympic Committee insisted it was committed to holding the Games, but admitted for the first time that fans may be barred. “This I cannot tell you,” Thomas Bach said, when asked if fans would be able to attend. “Our priority is to ensure safe Olympic Games and we will do whatever is needed to organize safe Olympic Games.” — AFP



WUHAN: Members of the World Health Organization (WHO) team investigating the origins of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic leave The Jade Hotel on a bus after completing their quarantine in Wuhan, China’s central Hubei province yesterday. — AFP

Indonesian gay couple whipped for Sharia-banned sex

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia: A gay couple were flogged in Indonesia’s conservative Aceh province yesterday, justice officials said, in a public spectacle lambasted by human rights groups. The two men were whipped nearly 80 times each for having gay sex, which is outlawed in Aceh province under local Islamic law.

The pair, who were not identified, winced in pain and pleaded for the whipping to stop, as a masked sharia officer beat their backs with a rattan

stick. The punishment was briefly halted and the men, both in their twenties, were allowed a drink of water before it continued.

The mother of one man fainted at the sight of her son being whipped. “Islamic sharia enforcement is final, no matter who it is, and even visitors must respect local norms,” public order official Heru Triwijanarko said. The men were arrested in November at a rental home where a landlord found them half-naked in their room. Gay sex is not ille-

gal elsewhere in Indonesia and Aceh is the only region in the world’s biggest Muslim nation that imposes the sharia law.

In Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra island, public flogging is a common punishment for a range of offences that include gambling, drinking alcohol and adultery. Four others were whipped between 17 and 40 times on the same day over allegations they drank alcohol or met with members of the opposite sex. Human rights groups slam public caning as cruel, and Indonesia’s President Joko Widodo has called for it to end.

But it has strong support among Aceh’s population. The region started using religious law after it was granted special autonomy in 2001, an attempt by the central government to quell a long-running separatist insurgency. — AFP

Vietnam reports first virus outbreak in nearly two months

HANOI: Vietnam recorded its first coronavirus outbreak in almost two months yesterday, with more than 80 new cases reported as authorities began testing tens of thousands of people to contain the spread. The infections were detected in northern Vietnam, with one cluster linked to a case of the more contagious coronavirus variant first spotted in Britain.

The figure was a new daily record for the communist nation, which has been widely praised for its handling of the pandemic—recording just over 1,500 cases before the new cluster and only 35 deaths. The latest outbreak in the provinces of Hai Duong and Quang Ninh is “more complicated and serious” than anything Vietnam has dealt with before, Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam said.

“We aim to isolate and fight the outbreak to prevent its spread as quickly as possible.”

In Hai Duong province, the cases are thought to be linked to a factory worker who tested positive for the virus when she landed in the Japanese city of Osaka. She was found to have the British variant. The town where the factory is located has been closed off, while medical workers are rushing to test tens of thousands of people in the area. In Quang Ninh, which is on the border with China, one of those infected is a security official at Van Don airport, where international passengers have been arriving before being sent into mandatory quarantine. The airport has been shut while passenger vehicles are banned from leaving or entering the province.

The outbreak comes at a sensitive time for Vietnam. Its twice-in-a-decade Communist Party congress began on Tuesday to select new leadership. A long Lunar New Year break will follow in February, when millions of people are expected to travel to see their families.

Vietnam last recorded a community transmission case of the virus in December. It has kept virus numbers low thanks to mass quarantines, extensive contact-tracing and strict controls on movement. Most inbound commercial flights have been suspended since March but Vietnamese citizens stuck abroad and some foreigners have been allowed to enter. — AFP

Friday Times

Lifestyle

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Japanese doll maker Kyugetsu displays "hina" dolls of US President Joe Biden and US Vice President Kamala Harris attached with a face mask at the company's showroom in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

**Cannes Film Festival
postponed to July due to virus**

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Danish author Sara Omar: **Breaking taboos for Muslim women**

Born amid the horrors of war in Iraqi Kurdistan, Danish author Sara Omar now uses her voice to denounce violence inflicted on women in the name of reactionary Islam, a “calling” that has left her living under police protection. “I broke the taboo. I talk about the things you are not supposed to talk about. If I don’t do this, who will?” the 34-year-old tells AFP in an interview in Copenhagen. Her first novel “Dead Washer” sold more than 100,000 copies in Denmark when it was published in 2017, a literary feat in the country of 5.8 million where it was hailed as the “MeToo of Muslim women.” It has since been translated into several languages, including Norwegian, Swedish and French.

In her writing and when she speaks out publicly, Omar describes abuse inflicted on women and children behind closed doors—rapes, beatings, female genital mutilation and so-called honor crimes. Her depictions have angered a small fringe in Muslim societies and required her to now live under 24-hour police protection.

‘Given me a voice’

Her bestseller tells the story of a girl named Frmesk, which means “tear” in Kurdish. It follows her from her birth in Sulaymaniah, Kurdistan, in 1986 — just like Omar—to a hospital bed in Denmark in 2016 where she meets a medical student, also a young Kurdish woman, who dreams of breaking free from her overly controlling father but doesn’t dare. Omar says that many Muslim women—especially in the Nordic countries, where they often find themselves caught between the liberalism of their adopted country and their parents’ conservative values—have approached her to thank her for bringing their sufferings to life through Frmesk.

“My books have started a very quiet movement among women, especially women of Muslim background in Scandinavia, because they identify themselves with the topics and the characters in the novels,” Omar says. “A reaction that affected



Danish author Sara Omar poses during a photo session on the premises of the Danish newspaper Politiken, which is also her publisher, in Copenhagen. —AFP

me, and touched me in a way that I started crying, was from a woman between 45 and 50 years old. She came to me and she whispered in my ear: ‘Thank you for giving me a voice.’” As combative as her protagonist, Omar now refuses to speak about

her personal life, “due to her security situation and since her words can bring about severe consequences,” according to her assistant.

A ‘calling’

What is known from earlier interviews is this: After several years in refugee camps, Omar came to Denmark at the age of 15, like Frmesk. They also share a distinctive look—a streak of white in their jet-black hair. Omar has previously revealed that she has been married, is “the mother of a murdered girl” and began writing Frmesk’s story while in a psychiatric ward after several suicide attempts. For her, writing books is not “a dream.” “I see it as a calling, because I have sacrificed everything for it,” she says with a fiery look in her eye, which gives way to a melancholic smile as she refers to her security situation.

While she calls herself an “agnostic Muslim”, the author is not out to criticize Islam as such and says her message is universal. “Any monotheistic religion has a dark side and a light side. Islam also has this dark side but it is still up to interpretation. It’s all about who is holding the book,” she says. In a country preoccupied with immigrants who don’t assimilate and which is still recovering from the explosive Mohammed cartoons scandal, Omar’s ardent defense of freedom of speech has been warmly welcomed in Denmark. “As long as we have other people who are threatening authors and people fighting for the right to use words... then we have a problem,” she says.

Omar isn’t done telling Frmesk’s story. A sequel was published in 2019, “Shadow Dancer”, it too the recipient of literary prizes in Denmark. “I’m not finished with Frmesk’s story because I think she’s more than an abused child and an oppressed woman. She’s more than that. She’s a fighter and I need to write the rest of the story,” she says. Omar is currently studying for a Masters in Political Science, and is translating her own books into Kurdish and Arabic, which she plans to publish at her own expense to avoid any censorship.—AFP

BOTTICELLI ‘MASTERPIECE’ EXPECTED TO TOP \$80M AT SOTHEBY’S SALE

A portrait by Italian renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli is expected to sell for more than \$80 million when it goes up for auction at Sotheby’s in New York yesterday. “Young Man Holding a Roundel,” believed to have been painted in the 1470s or 1480s, is considered one of Botticelli’s finest portraits and is the highlight of Sotheby’s Masters Week sale. “This Botticelli is so much more spectacular in every way than anything we’ve seen coming to the market,” Christopher Apostle, Sotheby’s senior vice president, told AFP. The 23-inch by 15.5-inch (58-centimeter by 39-centimeter) painting shows a man in his late teenage years with long golden hair sitting holding a disc featuring a bearded saint.

The roundel, which depicts the saint with his right hand raised, is an original 14th-century artwork attributed to Siene painter Bartolommeo Bulgarini. Art historians suspect the Botticelli depicts a nobleman proudly showing off the earlier artwork. “This image symbolizes and exemplifies the Renaissance in Florence. We haven’t seen anything like it in my lifetime,” said Apostle, describing it as “a masterpiece.” The portrait was handed down through several generations of an aristocratic family in Wales for around 200 years. Art scholars were unaware of the paint-

ing’s existence until it first appeared on the market in the early 20th century. “Portrait of a Young Man Holding a Roundel” has spent much of the last 40 years on public display since its current owner acquired it in 1982 for just 810,000 pounds (\$1.1 million at 2021 rates). It has appeared at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery in London and elsewhere. Sotheby’s says a sale of over \$80 million would establish the work as one of the most significant portraits to have ever sold at auction. The previous record for a Botticelli was set in 2013 when “Madonna and Child with Young Saint John the Baptist” sold for \$10.4 million.

Rembrandt

The sale would rank alongside Gustav Klimt’s “Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer II,” which sold for \$87.9 million in 2006 and Vincent Van Gogh’s “Portrait of Dr Gachet,” which fetched \$82.5 million in 1990. The auction house says “Young Man Holding a Roundel” is as significant as Botticelli’s “Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder” and “Portrait of Giuliano de’ Medici.” Botticelli, who lived from the 1440s to 1510, is one of the most celebrated painters of the early Renaissance period, but only about a dozen examples of his work survive



In this file photo a Sotheby’s employee poses for a photograph with the artwork “Young Man Holding a Roundel” by Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli. —AFP

today. His best-known works are “The Birth of Venus” and “Primavera.”

“I think we underestimate how groundbreaking he was,” said Apostle. The Sotheby’s sale, which is virtual and starts at 10:00 am (1500 GMT), is also selling one of Rembrandt’s 136 biblical paintings. The Dutch painter’s “Abraham and the Angels” is expected to go for between \$20 million and \$30 million. It has been in private collections for 150 years and last sold at auction in 1848, for a mere \$64. —AFP

Cannes Film Festival postponed to July due to virus

The Cannes Film Festival has been rescheduled for July 6 to 17 — postponed by around two months due to the ongoing virus crisis, organizers said on Wednesday. The delay looked increasingly likely in recent weeks, with infection rates still high in France and talk of another lockdown looming. “As announced last autumn, the Festival de Cannes reserved the right to change its dates depending on how the global health situation developed,” the organizers said in a statement. “Initially scheduled from 11 to 22 May 2021, the Festival will therefore now take place from Tuesday 6 to Saturday 17 July 2021.”

It is another sign of uncertainty for an industry battered by a year of shuttered cinemas, delayed openings and cancelled productions, with many unsure about when the glitz of the red carpet will return to its full pomp. The festival was cancelled entirely last year for the first time since the Second World War, with just a small online presentation from its official selection in October. The postponement sets up a “potential confrontation” with its rival European festival in Venice, scheduled for September, said The Hollywood Reporter, “as the two events compete for the world premieres and red carpet star power.”

“The move, while expected, will have a domino effect across the festival circuit. The Venice Film Festival is scheduled to kick off on Sept. 1. Cannes’ new dates mean there will be less than a month between Europe’s number one and number two festivals,” the industry magazine wrote.

The Venice festival managed to go ahead last year under strict health restrictions, taking advantage of a lull in infection rates over the summer. But the continent’s other major cinema event—the Berlin Film Festival—announced last month that it was delaying its industry segment from February to an online version in March, and would postpone its public screenings to June. —AFP



Animal Crossing



Among Us



Ring Fit Adventure

Pandemic boosts variety of video games

You're stuck in lockdown but that doesn't mean you can't visit a tropical island, a space station or have games night with your friends—certain video games have filled the need of the world's confined for a bit of distraction, adventure and socializing and achieved unexpected success during the pandemic.

Animal Crossing

No adversaries or competition in "Animal Crossing: New Horizons" which came out in March for Nintendo's Switch console. Instead players explore an island, collecting fruit and making tools and furniture, trading with others, as the seasons slowly change. This version of the game certainly hit the spot with players hungry for a bit of light-hearted diversion. It powered to the top of the sales charts in the United States in March 2020, and was among top sellers in other countries as well. It was the number two title in Europe for 2020 overall, according to GfK.

"The smashing success of Animal Crossing is explained by two factors: one is an underlying trend towards family games and the other is the short-term factor of the confinement," said

Nicolas Vignolles, head of the association of French video game publisher association SELL. He said parents suddenly confronted with being confined with their children looked to video games to find options for family entertainment, and that "Animal Crossing was an ideal game for parent-child interaction."

Nintendo's chief in France, Philippe Lavoue, has acknowledged the firm's lucky timing of releasing the game just as many people were needing an escape. "But we were happy to have helped confined people feel less lonely and to escape mentally," he told the French newspaper Le Figaro.

Among Us

The success of "Among Us" in 2020 was a big surprise for the industry as the title drew little attention when was originally released in 2018. But its developers at US studio InnerSloth kept refining their concept, which paid off when some prominent game streamers on Twitch began to play it on the platform in mid-2020. By November the game had half a billion players, according to Superdata, which monitors the gaming industry.

The online multiplayer game takes place on

a space ship. Most people are crewmates but several are imposters who are out to kill or at least block crewmates from carrying out their assigned tasks. Lively debates take place as crewmates seek to unmask the imposters. The game's popularity has even seen US lawmakers join in matches broadcast on Twitch in an effort to reach young voters last year.

For French game publisher Nicolas Vignolles it is the exchanges between players that explains the game's popularity. "Among Us at the intersection of social networking and video games," he said, noting that nearly one in two gamers in France say that video games help them create social relationships. "That didn't exist before... This underlying trend has accelerated with confinement," said Vignolles.

Ring Fit Adventure

If working out and playing video games are usually two contradictory activities, "Ring Fit Adventure" brings them together. The game works with the Switch console, whose controllers are slotted into a Pilates ring and a leg strap. Once equipped, players can fight against monsters or be guided through fitness routines by the television. The closure of gyms along

with lockdowns fuelled a spike in sales, leading to shortages last year after consumers snapped up four million units between October 2019 and July 2020.

FIFA 2021

The halt to many football matches and the postponement of the Euro championship may have sparked interest among fans to play virtually. According to GfK, FIFA 2021 from Electronic Arts was the best-selling video game in 2020.

Board and card games

If chess boards and Uno cards graced the tables of many households more frequently during lockdowns, their video games versions did as well. A sign of that is a collection of classic board games for Switch was among the top sellers for the console in France last year, Nintendo told Le Figaro. "The big lesson of confinement was that video games have broken definitively the stereotype of a game that can cause people to withdraw and become isolated," said Nicolas Vignolles. "They were an incredibly effective antidote to isolation." —AFP

Nintendo 'Joycon-Drift' provokes EU complaint



Japanese video game maker Nintendo will face an EU-wide complaint for premature wear of a joystick controller, French and EU consumer groups said Wednesday. The French consumer protection group UFC-Que Choisir said it would join a complaint launched by The European Consumer Organization (BEUC) against recurring problems with the Nintendo Switch console. The glitch has been dubbed "Joycon-drift".

It causes characters to move without the controller being touched and has occurred in Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, and Slovenia, a BEUC statement said. Around 25,000 players have reported being bothered by the problem, it added. Que Choisir, which tests widely-used consumer products, said premature wear of electronic circuits and the lack of an effective seal were to blame for the problem. "A worrisome quantity of debris and dust" was able to collect inside the joystick, it added. "According to consumer testimonies, in 88 percent of cases, the game controllers broke within the first two years of use," the BEUC statement said. It called for a pan-European investigation and urged that Nintendo "be obliged to urgently address the premature failures of its product". Meanwhile, the defective controllers should be repaired free of charge and consumers should be informed about their limited lifespan, it added. Nintendo has sold more than 68 million of the units worldwide, BEUC said. —AFP



Palestinian farmer Atta Jaber carries giant turnips that he harvested from his land across in the West Bank town of Hebron. —AFP



This picture shows a view of Aswan from the Old Cataract Hotel overlooking the Nile River in Egypt's southern city of Aswan. —AFP photos



A view of the deck of the Nile steam ship "PS Sudan".



This picture shows a view of the deck of the Nile steam ship "PS Sudan".

Nile cruiser that inspired Agatha Christie sails on despite virus

More than a century after it first cruised the glittering waters of the Nile, the Steam Ship Sudan draws tourists following the trail of legendary crime novelist Agatha Christie. The SS Sudan, which towers over the traditional wooden sailing boats in Egypt's southern city of Aswan, inspired the British author sometimes dubbed the "Queen of Crime" to pen one of her most famous works in 1937, "Death on the Nile". The whodunnit tells the story of Christie's famous Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, investigating murder among the well-heeled travellers as they cruise the Nile.

"Agatha Christie's trip aboard the steamer, the atmosphere and its route... inspired her to begin writing the first chapters," said Amir Attia, the cruise ship's director. Built for the Egyptian royal family in 1885 and transformed into a cruise liner in 1921, the SS Sudan hosted the novelist with her second husband, archaeologist Max Mallowan, in 1933.

Two-year waiting list

Among the ship's 23 rooms and suites, Attia says the writer's room is still "the most popular". Passengers are whisked away on

Christie's original itinerary, stopping at the same ancient archaeological sites, albeit with a difference—the liner now runs on diesel and solar power instead of coal. A staff of 67 keeps the vessel shipshape, and a luxury eight-day trip also including stays in two historic hotels sets travellers back around \$4,000, but there is a long waiting list to stay in the Christie cabin. "There are booking requests for up to two years in advance," he said.

While Egypt's key tourism industry has been hit hard by Covid-19 restrictions—with revenues slashed by more than a fifth from 2019-2020 — the ship's staff are insistent the pandemic will



This picture shows the steam ship "PS Sudan" cruising along the Nile river by Egypt's southern city of Aswan.



A view of the bathroom at the suite where British crime fiction writer Dame Agatha Christie is believed to have stayed.



A view of the suite where British crime fiction writer Dame Agatha Christie is believed to have stayed while writing her 1937 novel "Death on the Nile".



This picture shows the steam ship “PS Sudan” anchored at a dock in the Nile river.



A Nile view of the Old Cataract Hotel overlooking the river in Egypt’s southern city of Aswan.

not sink the historic vessel. “My product is unique,” Attia said. “Egypt as a tourist destination will never die down.” The SS Sudan has faced crises before. It was left to rot for decades after World War II, but was rescued and refitted in 1991, before being abandoned and then repaired a second time in 2000.

Last year the boat was initially stuck in port-but it started operating as soon as rules allowed. “The SS Sudan was the first cruise ship to re-open for business in October,” Attia said. “We immediately got so many reservations... that we had to knock a few back because we’re overbooked.”

Hollywood treatment

Staff hope that Christie’s story can work its magic again to draw new visitors. A big-budget film version-directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh, along with Hollywood stars Annette Bening, Russell Brand and Gal Gadot-is due for release in late 2021, a followup to the 2017 Christie adaption, “Murder on the Orient Express”. The last stop on the cruise is the Old Cataract Hotel, which over the years has hosted guests ranging from Britain’s Winston Churchill to Egyptian Nobel Prize for Literature winner, Naguib Mahfouz, said Selim Shawer, the hotel manager.

The hotel too has a small exhibition dedicated to Christie, including the rocking chair and desk where she wrote. “It is an attraction in itself for fans of Hercule Poirot,” said Shawer. “Even people who are not staying in our hotel come to take photos with the chair.”— AFP



A view of the lobby of the Old Cataract Hotel.



An employee of the Old Cataract Hotel stands through the door of the suite where British crime fiction writer Dame Agatha Christie is believed to have stayed while writing her 1937 novel “Death on the Nile”.



A view of the lobby of the Nile steam ship “PS Sudan”.



A view of the garden of the Old Cataract Hotel overlooking the Nile river in Egypt’s southern city of Aswan.



A view of the suite where British crime fiction writer Dame Agatha Christie is believed to have stayed while writing her 1937 novel “Death on the Nile”.



US model Christy Turlington presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones for the Fendi's Spring-Summer 2021 collection during the Paris Haute Couture Fashion Week, in Paris. — AFP photos



British model Kate Moss presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.

AT FENDI, **KIM JONES** BRINGS VIRGINIA WOOLF CHIC TO PARIS

Kim Jones' debut collection for Fendi as a womenswear designer tapped the bohemian, literary world of Virginia Woolf on Wednesday, bringing bookish glamour to his first haute couture runway show. The celebrated British menswear talent, a veteran of Dior and Louis Vuitton, has

taken up the mantle of Karl Lagerfeld, who died in 2019 after more than 50 years at the helm of the Italian brand. Fendi, part of the LVMH group, named Jones last September, in a move expected to inject a strong dose of British cool into the brand known for its Roman flair and unapologetic use of fur.



British models Kate Moss (left) and her daughter Lila Grace Moss present creations of British designer Kim Jones.



British model Cara Delevingne presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



A model presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.

Lifestyle | Fashion



British model Naomi Campbell presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



US actress Demi Moore presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



A model presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



British model Adwoa Aboah presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.

Wednesday's show, held live at the Palais Brongniart in Paris but with only a virtual audience, featured supermodel Kate Moss and her daughter Lila Grace. The A-list line-up also included Demi Moore, Naomi Campbell, Christy Turlington, Cara Delevingne and Bella Hadid, who sauntered down the elaborate, modern runway, pausing to pose in glassed-in garden enclosures. The Spring/Summer 2021 collection

channeled the early 20th century-flowing capes, high collars and elaborate embroidery-with an added modern vibe. Jones said he was inspired by the Bloomsbury Group, the collective of London writers and intellectuals who included the modernist Woolf, for a collection in which "exquisite femininity and masculine androgyny appear as fluid choices rather than innate realities".



Italian jewelry designer Delfina Delettrez Fendi presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



A model presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.

Lifestyle | Fashion



US model Bella Hadid presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



Former actress and model Farida Khelifa presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



A model presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.

Both male and female models—some holding books—showcased the womenswear collection, marked by plunging black satin décolletages, elaborate beading and elongated silhouettes. A diaphanous grey silk tunic paired with tight python boots combined the ethereal with the animal, as the high Victorian collar of a gown in damask rose showed off bare shoulders in a daring combination. In his show notes, Jones quoted Woolf’s “Orlando”. “Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than to merely keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us.”

He paid tribute to his predecessor, with monograms taken from Lagerfeld’s final collection beaded onto boots, as well as to the Fendi family. Also among the models were Leonetta and Delfina Fendi, the daughters of Silvia Venturini Fendi, the granddaughter of the brand’s founders who still heads up the menswear and accessories lines. — AFP



A model presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



A model presents a creation of British designer Kim Jones.



A model wearing a creation of French fashion designer Charles de Vilmorin poses in Paris. — AFP photos



A Chinese ice swimmer pushes the ice as he swims in a frozen river on a cold winter day in Beijing.

New kid on Paris fashion block sparks **YSL comparisons**

Just 24-years-old, Charles de Vilmorin pulled no punches as he launched himself into the rarefied world of haute couture on Wednesday. There was nothing understated about the young star's inaugural appearance at Paris Fashion, as he presented a wildly colorful collection full of hand-painted butterflies and rainbows alongside extravagant kimonos and slightly sinister clowns. "The guiding line of this collection is the notion of liberty. I created it in an instinctive manner. I wanted a result that was raw, that got straight to the point," he told AFP.

Dressed for the interview in a black roll-

neck, De Vilmorin is already picking up comparisons to Yves Saint Laurent—which, unsurprisingly, "doesn't bother me at all", he says. Given the bold, almost anarchic designs on display, it is also perhaps unsurprising to hear that he owes his inclusion in fashion week to Jean Paul Gaultier. "I didn't necessarily correspond (to their criteria) in terms of seniority and all that, but it's Jean Paul Gaultier who decided to sponsor me," he said. "It's proof that haute couture is in a process of evolution, pushing forwards, and reviewing its characteristics. That can only be positive."

Gaultier himself hung up his scissors a

year ago after half a century of catwalk bombast. It was a few months later that De Vilmorin launched his own label with a line of colorful bomber jackets, just as France was deep in its first lockdown. Less than a year later, he has made it into the strictly regimented haute couture calendar with the pandemic still raging. That has led to the catwalk being cordoned off and replaced with online short films—a first for the young designer, but not far beyond the comfort zone for someone who has built much of his brand through Instagram. "I don't really know what normal times are like," he told AFP. He said the different circumstances dictated the designs. "It's not the same to film a piece of clothing than to have it presented a meter away from real people," he said.

Bold and dramatic

Born to an art teacher mother and fashion-obsessed financier father, De Vilmorin hand paints most of his designs with acrylic paints and Chinese dyes. Bold, primary colors and large brushstrokes define his style. His friend and muse 22-year-old Anaelle Postollec wears an emblematic piece in the short film—all exaggerated shoulders, balloon busts, thigh-high boots and stiletto heels. "Charles dares to throw himself in at the deep end," said Postollec.

"It resonates with the moment, it carries a message of something new and better that is on the way. "I love the drama, the big shapes," she told AFP. "It's almost theatre, something quite strange, a dream that's turned into a nightmare." — AFP



Kids Page

Word Search

Breakfast Favorites

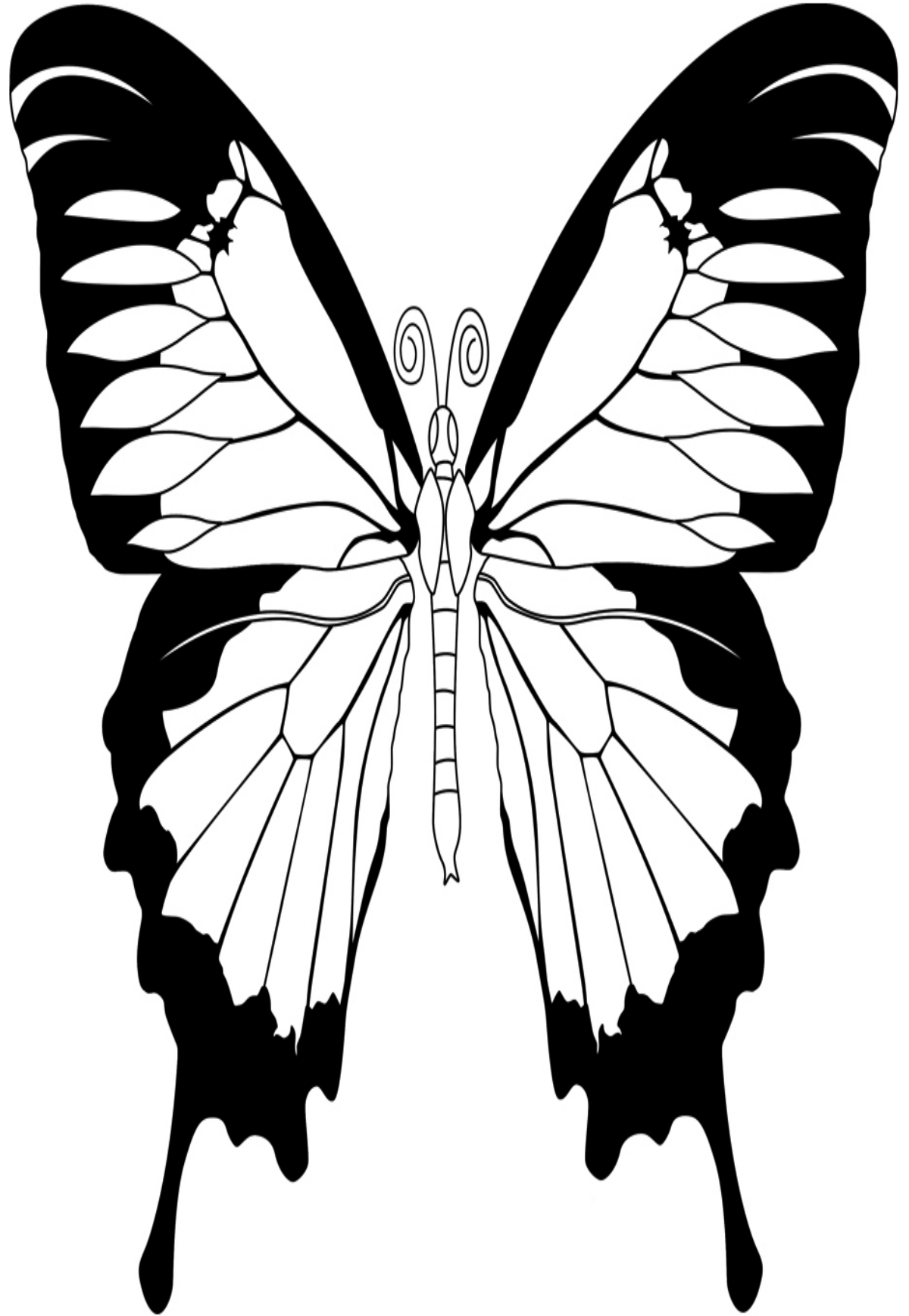
DIRECTIONS: Find and circle the vocabulary words in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.



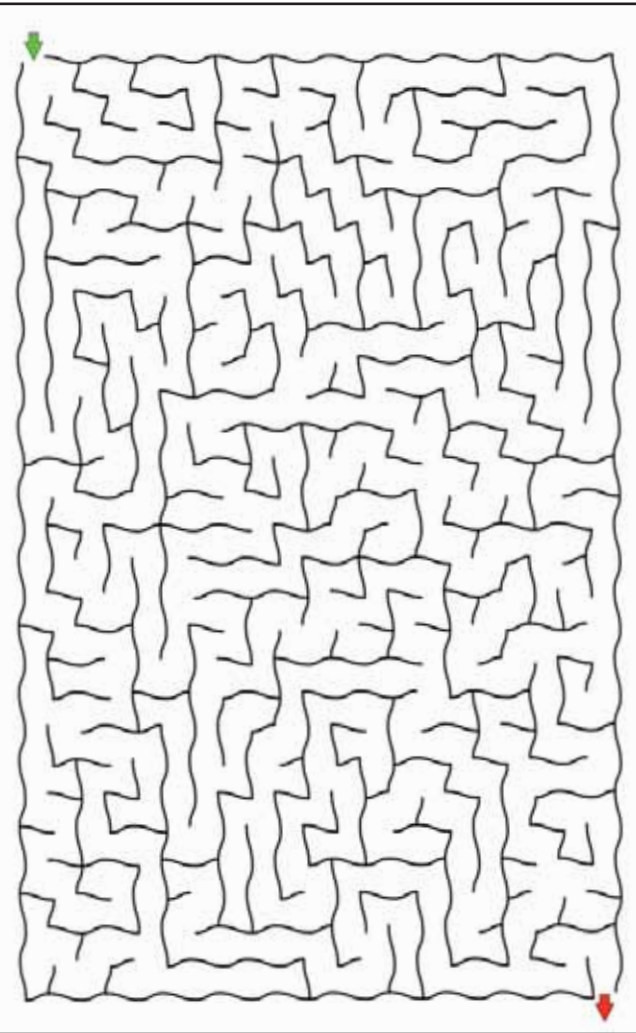
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| BAGEL | DANISH | OATMEAL |
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| BREAD | EGGS BENEDICT | ORANGE JUICE |
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| COCOA | GRITS | SMOOTHIE |
| COFFEE | HASH BROWNS | TEA |
| COLD PIZZA | HONEY | TOAST |
| CREPES | JAM | WAFFLES |



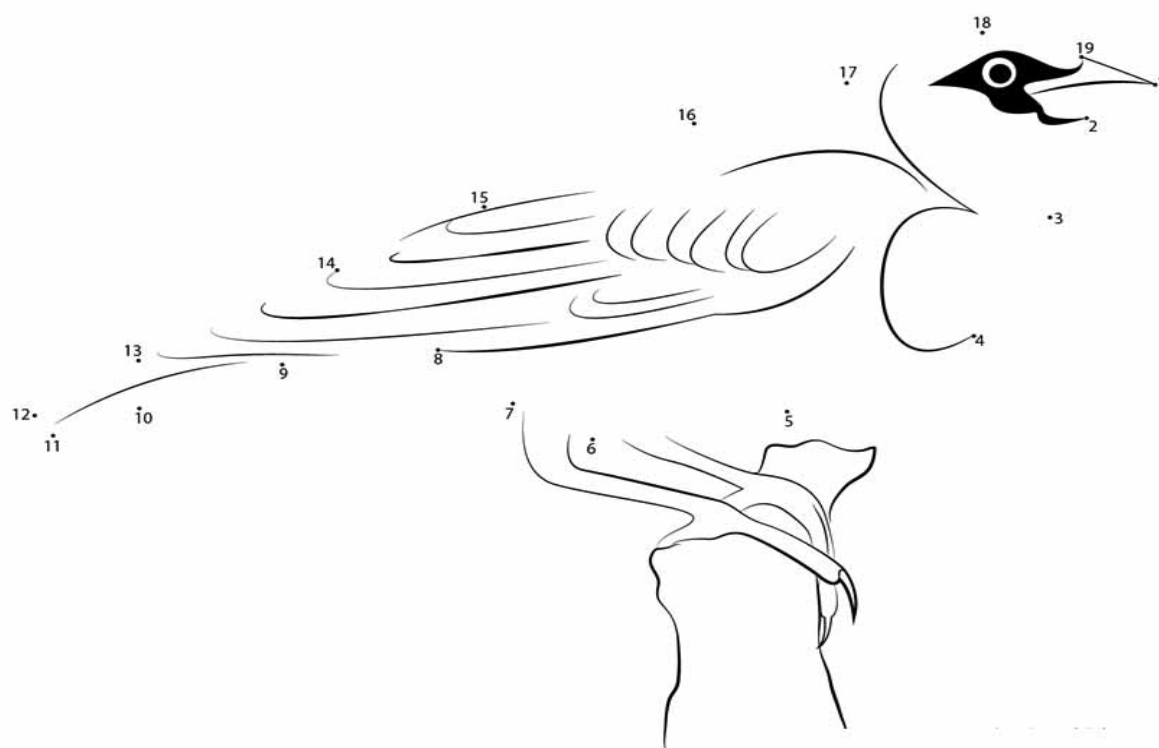
Color It



Kids Mazes



Join the dots



Word Scramble

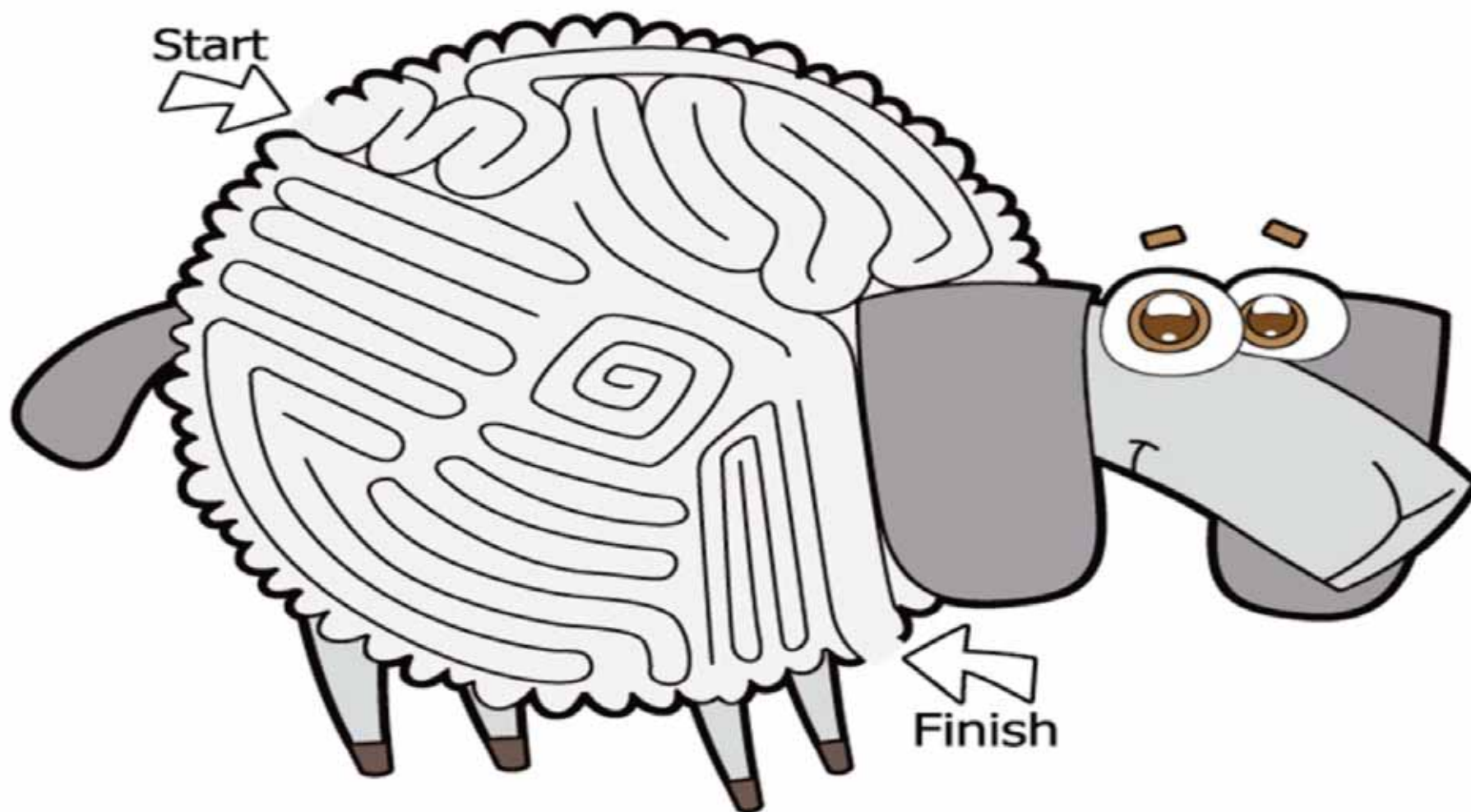


Computer Terms Word Scramble

Help! The school computer had its memory scrambled and we need your help to get things back in order. Can you unscramble the computer terms and write the correct word on each line?

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SAEHRC	_____	UADOLP	_____
LLCORS	_____	NTERPRI	_____
BOKEDYRA	_____	IONC	_____
UNMSAERE	_____	SOTWRFEA	_____
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EVRSER	_____	SOEUM	_____
FOTN	_____	RSDAWSPO	_____
MONORIT	_____	EACCH	_____
EENSRC	_____	YEAGBTIG	_____
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Find the way



CLINIC PAGE



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Nicaragua rescues two endangered jaguar cubs

MASAYA, Nicaragua: When a post on social media exposed animal traffickers who planned to illegally sell two young jaguars abroad, Nicaragua zookeeper Eduardo Sacasa had a narrow chance to save the cubs. The poachers—who had already killed the young cats' mother—were caught red-handed and agreed to hand the animals over, but under one condition.

They demanded Sacasa, director of Nicaragua's National Zoo, meet them in the Daukura region and pick up the cubs without bringing any authorities along. So

Sacasa flew to the Caribbean city of Bilwi, and then, with the help of four guides, traveled first by car and then up a river by boat to a village to meet the poachers and save the baby jaguars—one of the most endangered species in Nicaragua.

"It's our passion to save these little animals that are in danger of extinction, they're killing them," he told AFP upon return to the capital city of Managua with the felines, a female and a three-month-old male. "They're thin, they (the poachers) gave them cowhide to eat," Sacasa lamented. "They were going to sell them to a

Chinese citizen after taking them to Honduras."

He explained that lately there have been wild animals roaming through human communities after hurricanes Eta and Iota in November destroyed their habitats. The nervous little green-eyed predators on Wednesday arrived at the zoo south of Managua, where they will spend the next few days getting dewormed and undergoing medical examinations. According to Sacasa, jaguars are among the most endangered species in Nicaragua, along with the tapir. — AFP



A jaguar cub is seen at the National Zoo in Masaya, Nicaragua on Wednesday after its arrival from the Duarka community in Tawira, Bilwi, in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. — AFP

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Stars

STAR TRACK

**Aries (March 21-April 19)**

Now that you've earned your place in the world after all your hard work, Aries, you might take some time to pursue your own interests. This could involve writing or publishing, going back to school to get an advanced degree, or taking a trip around the world. You have the time and energy to think about all your different options, so don't feel you have to rush.

**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

Money that has come your way unexpectedly might have you thinking in terms of expanding your personal interests and holdings, Taurus. You might consider trying some new investments, particularly property. There's no need to rush to make a decision, however. You have all the time in the world to consider different options - and have some fun while you do it.

**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**

You may feel so confident that you could be thinking in terms of starting a new enterprise, Gemini. Partnerships are especially likely to succeed now. You could also grow closer to those who mean the most to you - family, friends, romantic partners. If you aren't currently romantically involved, you might be soon. Your new sense of self-confidence should pull more people into your circle.

**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**

Recent successes haven't made you feel you can rest on your laurels, Cancer. Rather, you're more likely to work harder. Today you might spend a lot of time considering different options for improving your socioeconomic status. Among them might be enterprises connected with the planet. Business and romantic partners could inspire you.

**Leo (July 23-August 22)**

This is likely a day when you want to reflect on your successes. As your professional success continues to skyrocket, your sense of self-confidence follows suit. So do your relationships with family, friends, children, and romantic partners. Your mind is especially sharp, Leo, and your personal innovations should continue to progress. Life is good and likely to stay that way for a while.

**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**

Surprising developments in your life might bring a lot of visitors and much happiness to your home. You could host a party or other sort of gathering. This is likely to keep you very busy throughout the day, Virgo, but you will have fun all the same. Don't let shop talk interfere with times like this. This is the time to relax and enjoy your good fortune. Use it to your advantage.

**Libra (September 23-October 22)**

Some wonderful new developments could take place in your community, Libra. You might meet some new people who move in nearby. New businesses could also arrive and give a whole new look to the area. You could spend a lot of time visiting others to learn about what's happening. You might also consider fixing up your home, as recent success has made that possible.

**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**

A high level of self-confidence and optimism should stay with you throughout the day, Scorpio. Your energy is good, as is your enthusiasm. The success and good fortune that have been coming your way are likely to stay with you. You may have just been blessed with more money and happiness. Of course, this feeling is also likely to attract more friends. Make the most of it!

**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**

Happiness is the mood of the day, Sagittarius, as you enjoy the fruits of all your hard work over the past few years. You're able to pursue a few things that you've never been able to before. You're likely surrounded by old and new friends, and romance is blossoming. You probably also look especially attractive now. If all this sounds too good to be true, wake up! It's happening!

**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**

All the success and good fortune you've enjoyed over the past several months may have freed you from the grind enough to concentrate on spiritual or artistic interests. There may be a few surprises in store for you, Capricorn. You may meet some new people who share your interests. What you learn from them could improve your progress. You might embark on a new course of study.

**Aquarius (January 20- February 18)**

The company of good friends, perhaps at a group activity or festival of some kind, contributes to a powerful feeling of good health, good fortune, and happiness, Aquarius. You will probably want to spend a lot of time outdoors today. Sports might appeal to you. There will be a few minor accidents - dropping things, spilling drinks - but in all, this should be a satisfying day.

**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**

Continued success and good fortune regarding finances could have you flying high right now, Pisces. You're probably glowing with self-confidence and may well be surrounded by good friends. There might even be some public acclaim. A few minor mishaps might occur today, but they certainly won't put a damper on the mood. Expect to have a wonderful day!

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Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
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Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
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Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
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Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
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Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
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Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
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Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
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Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
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Business

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34 Samsung Electronics profit spikes on pandemic-driven demand



35 GCC bond yields dropped in 4Q20 amid rising oil prices



36 Cathay Pacific shares fall as bond sale announced to stem cash crisis



Toyota overtakes VW as top-selling automaker

Hyundai Motor's Q4 net profit jumps 78%

TOKYO: Japan's Toyota reclaimed the title of world's top-selling automaker in 2020, according to data released by the firm yesterday, pushing Volkswagen into second place for the first time in five years. Toyota said it had sold 9.53 million vehicles around the world last year, overtaking the 9.3 million sales made by its German rival.

The Japanese giant took the lead despite a decline in global sales of more than 10 percent as the auto industry suffered the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. "Despite the COVID-19 pandemic... Toyota was able to continue corporate activities through comprehensive implementation of various infection prevention measures, and by working together with partners including suppliers and dealers," it said in a statement. That was still better than the more than 15 percent drop in sales Volkswagen announced earlier this month.

Toyota said it had benefited from a jump in sales in China, which were up over 10 percent year-on-year, and a better-than-expected performance globally in the October-December quarter.

The last time Toyota held the top spot was in 2015, with VW edging it out in the following years. "Toyota's recent strategy of pursuing quality over quantity has... satisfied consumers", especially in North America and China, Koichi Sugimoto, an auto analyst at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley Securities, told AFP.

"Improved ties with the Chinese government, partly thanks to China's interest in Toyota's green tech as well as brand-building in the Chinese market by Japanese car-makers in general, also contributed" to sales growth, Sugimoto said.

Meanwhile, South Korean automaker Hyundai Motor defied the coronavirus pandemic to post a surprise 78 percent surge in fourth-quarter profits, as robust domes-



In this file photo taken on November 6, 2020, a staff member stands in a Toyota showroom in Tokyo. Japan's Toyota reclaimed the title of world's top-selling automaker in 2020, according to data released by the firm yesterday, pushing Volkswagen into second place for the first time in five years. — AFP

tic 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 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. — AFP

Business

Samsung Electronics profit spikes on pandemic-driven demand

Tech giant to invest \$17bn to build a chip plant in US

SEOUL: Samsung Electronics, the world's biggest smartphone and memory chip maker reported fourth-quarter net profits up by more than a quarter year-on-year yesterday, with coronavirus-driven working from home boosting demand for devices powered by its chips. But the figures were below market expectations according to Bloomberg News, and the company warned of persisting uncertainties over the pandemic, and lower profits in Q1 2021 due to falling prices.

Samsung Electronics is the flagship subsidiary of the giant Samsung group, by far the largest of the family-controlled empires known as chaebols that dominate business in South Korea, the world's 12th-largest economy. The conglomerate is crucial to the South's economic health—its overall turnover is equivalent to a fifth of the national gross domestic product.

Samsung Electronics said profits rose 26.4 percent in October to December on a year earlier to 6.61 trillion won (\$5.97 billion), led by display and memory chip businesses.

"Although challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic continue, company-wide efforts to ensure a stable supply of products and services globally helped Samsung's fourth-quarter results," the firm said in an earnings report. The coronavirus has wreaked havoc with the world economy, with lockdowns and travel bans imposed around the globe for many months. But the pandemic—which has killed more than two million people worldwide—has also seen many tech companies boom, including Samsung.

"It's true that Samsung's sales increased year-on-year due to the spread of the so-called 'new normal', which led to a surge in demand for electronics," said Jene Park, an analyst at market observer Counterpoint Research. Operating profit rose 26.4 percent

to 9.05 trillion won, while sales were also up 2.8 percent at 61.55 trillion won.

Even so, Samsung noted that profits fell from the previous quarter due to weaker memory prices and sluggish consumer product sales, as well as higher marketing costs and appreciation by the Korean won. The trend was likely to continue, it said, with profitability in the memory business affected by won strength "and costs associated with new production lines, despite solid demand from mobile products and data centers". It expected a recovery in overall global demand in 2021, but warned that "uncertainties persist over the possibility of recurring COVID-19 waves". For the full year, net profit jumped 21.5 percent to 26.41 trillion won, on sales of 236.81 trillion won, up 2.8 percent. Samsung Electronics shares closed down 2.22 percent yesterday.

Jailed boss

The global chip-manufacturing industry is expected to see record revenue this year, with the stay-at-home economy persisting because of the pandemic, according to Taipei-based market tracker TrendForce.

Samsung has aggressively stepped up its investments in semiconductors in recent years. As its latest investment, the tech giant is considering spending as much as \$17 billion to build a chip plant in Arizona, Texas or New York, the Wall Street Journal reported last week. If confirmed, it would be the biggest investment by Samsung in the absence of its de facto leader Lee Jae-yong.

Lee was sentenced last week to two and a half years in jail in a retrial over a sprawling corruption scandal that brought down former president Park Geun-hye. That ruling cast further uncertainty



SEOUL: A woman walks past an advertisement for the Samsung Galaxy S21 smartphone at a Samsung Electronics store in Seoul yesterday after the company reported its fourth-quarter net profits up by more than a quarter year-on-year. —AFP

over Samsung after the burial of late chairman Lee Kun-hee, who turned Samsung Electronics into a global powerhouse, in October. Experts say a leadership vacuum could hamper the firm's decision-making on future large-scale investments, which have been key to its rise. Kim Dae-jong, a business professor at Sejong University, said: "Samsung is a very important company for South Korea and the imprisonment of its leader is disadvantageous." — AFP

Philippine economy shrinks record 9.5% in 2020

MANILA: The Philippine economy shrank a record 9.5 percent last year, official data showed yesterday, after coronavirus measures devastated the retail and tourism sectors while a series of natural disasters wrecked crops. But Acting Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick Chua said the outlook for this year was "encouraging" as measures introduced to contain the virus are eased further and the country prepares for a vaccination drive.

"We will see more economic activity in the months ahead," Chua said. "This will lead to a strong recovery before the end of the year when the government will have rolled out enough vaccines against Covid-19 for a majority of our people." Gross domestic product shrank for four straight quarters in 2020, the Philippine Statistics Authority said.

The full-year figure was the worst since records began in 1946 and ended more than two decades of annual growth. Accommodation and food services were among the sectors hardest hit by lockdowns and other measures that left millions jobless. A series of typhoons and a volcanic eruption in the natural disaster-prone country also destroyed cash crops.

Chua warned a more robust recovery was being hampered by stay-at-home orders for children, which were preventing families visiting shopping malls—the centers of community life and consumer spending in the Philippines. Earlier this week President Rodrigo Duterte overturned a decision by his coronavirus task force to lift the restriction on children aged 10 to 14. — AFP

EasyJet says revenues slump almost 90%

LONDON: British no-frills airline EasyJet said yesterday that revenues collapsed by almost 90 percent in its first quarter as coronavirus ravaged travel demand, warning that second quarter capacity will be slashed. Revenues nosedived 88 percent to £165 million (\$226 million, 187 million euros) in the three months to December 31 compared with the prior year, after it flew just 18 percent of its schedule as a result of Covid-19 lockdown measures.

Capacity in the group's second quarter to March would be about 10 percent below the year-earlier level due to ongoing restrictions, EasyJet added in a statement. The airline, which is based in Luton north of London, also confirmed that 1,400 jobs had already been axed under its previously-announced restructuring. On a more upbeat note however, the carrier said it was planning for a surge in pent-up demand when virus travel restrictions are lifted—and as vaccinations are rolled out.

"Our performance in the period was in line with management expectations, despite more stringent restrictions coming into place," Chief Executive Johan Lundgren said.

"We have taken the right actions to emerge leaner with a reduced cost base and the retrenchment of legacy carriers at key airports will provide additional opportunities for EasyJet."

He added: "The key to unlocking travel is going to be the vaccination programs combined with governments progressively removing restrictions when it is safe to. "And in the meantime, our flexible industry-leading policies mean that customers can make plans and book with confidence."



In this file photo, airplanes of British low-cost carrier EasyJet are parked at Berlin's new Berlin - Brandenburg Airport (BER) in Schoenefeld, southeast of Berlin. — AFP

In November, EasyJet posted the first annual pre-tax loss in its 25-year history on the virus fallout, while the airline is axing up to 4,500 jobs or almost one third of its staff.

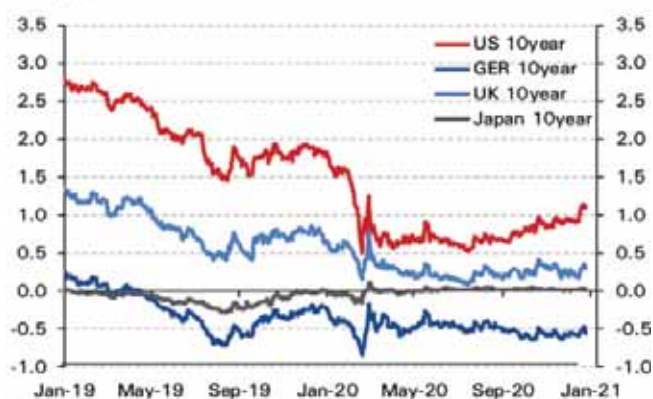
The Covid-19 health crisis that has decimated demand for global air travel and sparked heavy losses, job cuts, bankruptcies and massive state rescue plans in the sector. — AFP

NBK ECONOMIC REPORT

GCC bond yields dropped in 4Q20 amid rising oil prices

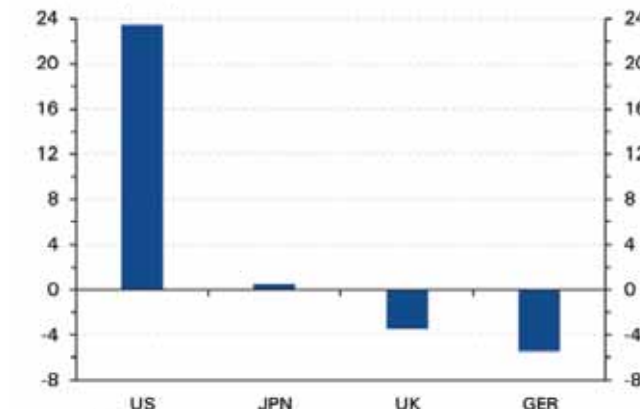
US treasury yields surge in 4Q20 amid vaccine rollout, economic outlook

▶ Chart 1: Global benchmark yields (%)



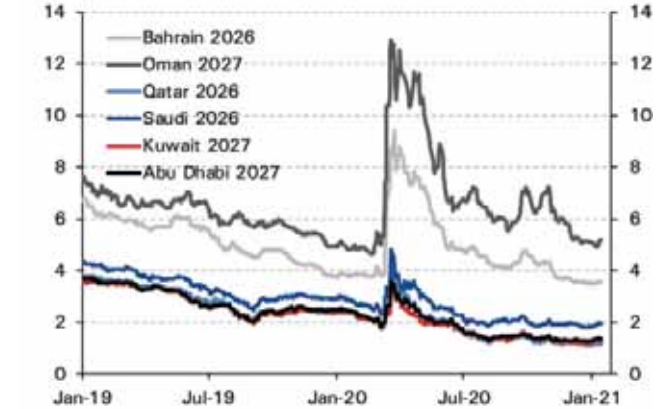
Source: Refinitiv, as of November 5

▶ Chart 2: Change in global 10-year yields (q/q) (basis points)



Source: Refinitiv

▶ Chart 3: Medium-term GCC sovereign yields (%)



Source: Refinitiv, as of November 5

KUWAIT: The US 10-year treasury yield rose considerably in 4Q20, partially reversing the steep decline seen since the onset of the pandemic in 1Q20. The higher yield came on the back of an improved economic outlook, especially after the rollout of vaccines in December, a high volume of bond offerings amid the need for ongoing fiscal support, and perhaps also rising inflation expectations as stronger economic recovery prospects became more apparent. In contrast, EU and UK benchmark yields trended downwards, weighed down by renewed mobility and business restrictions, raising the odds of a double-dip recession and denting sentiment.

Meanwhile, GCC medium term sovereign bond yield spreads over US treasuries tightened, reflecting the continued improvement of regional economies (oil prices increased by 26 percent in 4Q) from the twin shocks of low oil prices and the pandemic-induced slowdowns. 2020 was an exceptional year for regional issuances, as governments sought to finance their budget deficits, which have been negatively impacted by the effects of the recession and lower oil prices. GCC sovereign dollar and local currency-denominated issuances reached over \$100 billion in 2020, roughly in line with the elevated levels of 2019. We expect regional debt issuances to remain robust in 2021 on continuing budget deficits and relatively low yields.

Global yield movements diverge

The divergence of European and US yields in 4Q can be explained by a notable progress in the US economic scene, including ongoing fiscal support and the rollout of vaccines, although the latter has been slower than planned. Meanwhile, Europe faces the threat of a double-dip recession given more widespread and stricter lockdowns compared with the US. The US 10-year treasury yield rose by 23 bps q/q to reach 0.91 percent by the end of December, and climbed to 1.13 percent as of 11 January 2021, the highest level since March 2020, while German Bund and UK gilt yields fell by 5.5 and 3.5 bps q/q, respectively.

Looking ahead, EU and UK yield declines could reverse course if the virus situation materially improves, lockdowns are eased, or vaccination rates pick up, which would help the eco-

omic recovery to regain traction and the ECB's bond purchasing to taper. Also of note is the debut 17 billion Euro sale of bonds by the EU in October 2020 as part of The European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE), oversubscribed by nearly 14 times. With additional issuances planned in 2021 by the EU, some suggest that this could siphon demand for conventional European bonds and thus lessen the downwards pressure on yields. On the other hand, German debt could remain attractive as a hedge against future EU instability given its strong domestic economy.

In the US, a sustained rise in yields will also depend on the strength of the economic recovery especially under the Biden administration which is expected to adopt a more stringent policy on COVID-19, though it could be capped by the risk from the ongoing high virus infection rates. In contrast, further fiscal stimulus measures by the Biden administration will likely drive yields higher as well as a stronger expected vaccination campaign. However, it remains to be seen how much the Fed will allow an increase in long-term yields, and whether it will intervene to keep these rates in check by ramping up its asset purchasing.

GCC yields decrease

GCC medium term sovereign bond yields continued to trend downwards in 4Q20 thanks to a lower risk environment arising from higher oil prices. Further downward pressure on yields stems from the ongoing strong foreign investor demand, especially if the region's riskiness continues to be perceived as improving by global investors, and given the yield differential backdrop with global markets. Signs of a possible end to the Qatar embargo (which materialized in January) may have also contributed to lower yields. Declines in GCC yields were led by Oman (-211 q/q) and Bahrain (-111 bps q/q), partly due to a much higher increase than peers earlier in the year as well as good progress on economic reforms in Oman, leading to a reduced risk profile for the sovereign. Meanwhile, sovereign yields in Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, which were significantly lower than in Oman/Bahrain going into Q4, saw much

lower declines of 37, 32, 26 and 22 bps, respectively.

Looking ahead, the direction of future GCC yield movements is clouded with uncertainty surrounding several key factors, including oil prices, reform momentum, geopolitics, and virus/vaccine developments. Factors that may weigh down on yields include consistently higher oil prices, good progress on much needed reforms, the absence of adverse geopolitical developments, and lower new virus cases. On the other hand, yields could rise should the same factors move in the opposite direction, signaling a deterioration of conditions. Yield declines could also be curbed due to the narrowing spread between US yields and regional ones, especially in the case of Qatar, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi yields which have reached multi-year lows, limiting the potential for further declines, as demand for GCC debt could divert to other bond markets with more favorable risk-return profiles.

GCC issuance remains strong

Regional issuances were strong in 2020, exceeding \$100 billion and roughly in line with 2019 levels. The 4th quarter of 2020 saw the issuance of about \$15 billion, dominated by sovereign paper and led by Saudi Arabia with \$8.3 billion, bringing the total GCC outstanding debt to around \$575 billion as of the end of the year. The strong level of issuances were driven by a high need for financing amid mounting fiscal pressures due to lower oil prices and the pandemic induced economic slowdown, encouraged also by a relatively low cost of borrowing.

We expect GCC issuance to remain robust in 2021 to plug continuing holes in public finances due to slow economic activity, a continued need for public spending until the pandemic is contained, and oil prices likely remaining below fiscal breakeven prices. Given record low interest rates, GCC countries would rather rely on borrowing than drawing down their reserves, which are presumably fetching a higher rate of return. In Kuwait, where the debt market now is virtually non-existent, passing the debt law would reactivate the debt market and build a market driven yield curve. However, approval of the debt law does not seem near at this time given the parliament's opposition and the recent resignation of the cabinet.

Business

Cathay Pacific shares fall as bond sale announced to stem cash crisis

Airline stock tumbles 9.7% as HK announces new quarantine measures

HONG KONG: Shares in Hong Kong's marquee carrier Cathay Pacific plunged yesterday after the struggling airline unveiled a HK\$6.7 billion (US\$870 million) bond sale to try to stem its rampant cash burn. The firm's stock tumbled 9.7 percent as the market closed in Hong Kong, days after it warned new quarantine measures planned for passenger and cargo crew arriving in Hong Kong would further dent its finances.

Cathay Pacific yesterday said it would offer five-year bonds maturing in February 2026 that could also be converted into shares at a 30 percent premium above the previous day's close.

Like all major airlines, Cathay Pacific has seen its business evaporate during the coronavirus pandemic but the Hong Kong carrier is especially vulnerable because it has no domestic market to fall back on. It has been burning through cash at a rate of up to HK\$1.5 billion a month but executives fear this will spike if Hong Kong authorities make good on stricter quarantine controls for aircrew.

Currently, most arrivals into the city must quarantine in dedicated hotels for three weeks, although aircrew and other vital logistic jobs have exemptions. But leaders have announced plans to enforce a two-week

quarantine on all aircrew on long-distance cargo and passenger flights.

On Monday, Cathay Pacific said those measures would increase its cash burn by HK\$300-400 million a month and force it to cut its already limited flight capacity by almost two-thirds. The airline raised \$5 billion last summer including a \$3.5 billion bailout from the Hong Kong government—to stay afloat during the pandemic. At the time, analysts said that money should last some 15 months.

But yesterday's bond announcement shows the airline is still hemorrhaging revenue at a time when the global travel industry remains on its knees even as coronavirus vaccines are rolled out.

Once one of Asia's largest operators, Cathay Pacific closed its Cathay Dragon subsidiary last year and made about 6,000 staff redundant in a bid to save cash. Passenger numbers have been some 98 percent below pre-pandemic levels since last April.

In December, what would once have been peak season, it flew just 1,290 passengers every day with most flights that were just 18 percent full. But even before the pandemic, the carrier was in a tight spot. Months of huge and disruptive democracy protests in 2019 led to a plunge



A Cathay Pacific passenger plane preparing to take off from Hong Kong's international airport. — AFP

in customers, especially from the lucrative mainland Chinese market.

The airline also found itself punished by authorities in Beijing because some of its employ-

ees joined or voiced support for the protests.

By the time the pandemic hit at the start of 2020, Hong Kong was already in recession and Cathay Pacific in the red. — AFP

Singapore launches new self-driving bus trial

SINGAPORE: Singapore has moved a step closer to a driverless public transport network with the launch of a new trial of self-driving buses. Orderly and high-tech, the Asian city-state has become a testbed for self-driving vehicles and has developed home-grown technology while inviting foreign companies to trial their own.

In a three-month trial launched this week, passengers can book a bus ride through an app that takes them around Singapore's Science Park, a high-tech business hub, during off-peak hours. The charge is just Sg\$0.20 (\$0.15). It is not the first self-driving bus trial in the city but is the first to charge a fee. Singapore's first trial of self-driving buses came in 2015, while a trial of driverless road sweepers was launched earlier this year.

Despite the technology on the buses, a driver is still at the wheel to take control if necessary and must drive the bus manually along part of the route. Khor Jing Qian, a 23-year-old student who took the bus to attend a scholarship interview on Wednesday, said the journey, which took about 10 minutes, was "convenient and easy". "It was unnatural to see the bus driver not driving, but I've heard of these kinds of technologies, I've seen them before, so I think this is quite an innovative thing and definitely the way forward," he told AFP. The shuttles are also operating in another area of the city on a fixed schedule as part of the same trial, according to a statement from the Ministry of Trade and Industry.—AFP

Big eurozone banks face loans risk: ECB

FRANKFURT: The eurozone's big banks have successfully weathered the coronavirus crisis so far but could now be exposed to major losses on their loan portfolios, the European Central Bank said yesterday. The ECB said that "deteriorating economic conditions" due to the coronavirus outbreak "slowed the pace of the ongoing reduction in non-performing loans".

In addition, there was "also an embedded level of distress in loan books that is not yet fully evident". Combined with "the phasing-out of several support measures in 2021", this exposure increases the "risk of cliff effects" and the ECB advised banks to follow guidance on precautionary steps. The ECB said that compared to the global financial crisis of 2008-09, euro area banks began 2020 with "significantly higher capital levels and far greater resilience to economic deterioration".

Unprecedented measures by governments have helped to shield companies and workers as well as the banking sector, averting a "pandemic-induced shock", it said. The central bank called banks' capital buffers "ample" up to the third quarter of last year but warned that "significant uncertainties remain in the short- to medium-term". This would require "vigilance" as well as "continued supervisory challenges in several critical areas, relating in particular to the risk of a sudden increase in non-performing loans".

It said that in the face of greater risk of default, it was encouraging "appropriately prudent approaches" with "a considerably higher number of recommendations to banks". ECB chief Christine Lagarde warned last week that the pandemic still poses "serious risks" to the eurozone economy as concerns grow about new virus variants and sluggish vaccina-

tion campaigns.

Under Lagarde, the ECB took unprecedented steps last year to cushion the eurozone economy from the impact of COVID-19. Its biggest weapon is a pandemic emergency bond-buying scheme, known as PEPP, that was in December topped up by 500 billion euros (\$606 billion) to reach a total envelope of 1.85 trillion euros. The scheme was also extended to March 2022.

The bank has also offered ultra-cheap bank loans and held interest rates at historic lows to bolster the economy. Meanwhile, Spain's Bankia said yesterday its 2020 net profit plummeted by nearly 60 percent after setting aside more than half a billion euros to cope with the fallout from the coronavirus crisis. The bank, which is in the process of merging with its larger rival CaixaBank to create Spain's biggest domestic lender, said profits fell 57.6 percent to 230 million euros (\$278 million) last year.

The bank said it had set aside 505 million euros to strengthen solvency against an increase in bad loans due to the economic fallout of the pandemic. "The aim of these extraordinary provisions was to further strengthen the bank's balance sheet," Bankia said.

Most of Europe's banks have taken similar steps in recent months as fears grow that many individuals and businesses will be unable to repay their loans due to soaring unemployment and bankruptcies caused by the economic crisis. In the fourth quarter, the bank posted a net profit of 50 million euros, well above the 32 million euros forecast by analysts.

Over the year, Bankia said it had granted 11 billion euros in credit to companies in the form of state-guaranteed loans under a program unveiled by the government of Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez to counter the effects of the pandemic. It also granted repayment moratoriums for 49,000 mortgages and 61,500 consumer loans. —AFP

Sports

Tokyo Olympics organizers say Games on 'solid ground'

Bach says IOC 'committed', admits fans may be barred

TOKYO: Tokyo Olympics organizers said yesterday they were encouraged by the support of IOC chief Thomas Bach and felt on "solid ground" to hold the virus-postponed event, despite growing debate over its feasibility. International Olympic Committee head Bach briefed organizers in Tokyo on his discussions with other groups involved in this summer's Games, including athletes, Tokyo 2020 President Yoshiro Mori said.

"He confirmed everybody's intention, and there were no questioning voices or opposition from anyone or anywhere. Everybody had a strong feeling that they want to go to the Tokyo Games," Mori said. "We are still on solid ground and have been pushing in that direction. Bach gave us his strong stance, and we are thankful for that."

Bach said Wednesday that organizers were committed to holding the Tokyo Games safely this year, but admitted for the first time that fans may not be allowed to attend in person. Doubts have soared about the Games - due to start on July 23 - as the pandemic continues to paralyze many countries and with large parts of Japan, including Tokyo, under a state of emergency.

Tokyo's first Olympic test event this year, an

artistic swimming competition scheduled for March, was postponed on Thursday for two months because of travel restrictions. But despite falling public support in Japan, the United States, Australia and Canada have all backed the Games, as have several top athletes.

"One year ago, there was a certain mood. Now it's completely different. Many voices are being raised, wanting to go to Tokyo as soon as possible," said Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto, who also spoke to Bach yesterday. "During the athletes' committee, there was an atmosphere - 'Even if there are various circumstances, let's make a new Olympics by themselves by overcoming the circumstances.' (Bach) told us that he was so moved," he said.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has also told the IOC that China will support the organization for the Games to go ahead, Muto added. Bach said on a visit to Tokyo in November that he was "very, very confident" of holding the Olympics in front of fans, but on Wednesday conceded that they would now take place behind closed doors. "This I cannot tell you," he said when asked if fans would be able to attend. "Our priority is to ensure safe Olympic Games." —AFP



TOKYO: Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games Organizing Committee (TOGOC) president Yoshiro Mori (left) and CEO Toshiro Muto speak to the media after their video conference with IOC president Thomas Bach yesterday. —AFP

Tennis stars eye freedom ahead of bumper week

MELBOURNE: The world's top tennis stars are set to emerge from a grueling two weeks stuck in their hotel rooms over coming days as they race to get match fit before their coronavirus-disrupted season resumes in Australia. Seventeen charter flights jettied the cream of the sport into Melbourne and Adelaide this month ahead of the delayed Australian Open, with everyone on board whisked into 14 days of mandatory quarantine.

The plan was to allow them five hours a day to practice outside, and many have enjoyed the privilege. But eight positive COVID-19 cases from the more than 1,000 players, coaches and officials who arrived in largely virus-free Australia threw preparations for others into disarray. Seventy-two players have been confined to their Melbourne rooms 24 hours a day, forced to strike balls against mattresses and exercise as best they can, sparking complaints about the tough conditions. But the ordeal is ending, with the first players expected to taste freedom on Thursday evening, and others let out gradually depending on when their flights touched down. A bumper six ATP and WTA tournaments await them beginning on Sunday, all at Melbourne Park and squeezed into a week to make up for lost time in the lead-up the season-opening Grand Slam on February 8.

Spanish great Rafael Nadal, who is gunning to win a 21st Slam title, moving him past the injured Roger Federer, said he felt "privileged" to play at all given the devastation wrought by the pandemic globally. "It's a different situation than usual, it's much more sad for everyone," he told CNN this week. —AFP

Yasir helps Pak foil South Africa fight in first Test

KARACHI: Pakistan's spinners Yasir Shah and Nauman Ali grabbed three wickets in the space of ten runs to halt South Africa's fightback on the third day of the first Test in Karachi yesterday. When it looked like South Africa would end the day at parity after wiping out Pakistan's big 158-run first innings lead, Yasir struck twice and Nauman once to leave the tourists on 187-4 at close.

Nightwatchman Keshav Maharaj was unbeaten on two and skipper Quinton de Kock was yet to score, as South Africa now lead by 29 runs with six second innings wickets in hand. Earlier, Pakistan scored 378 to take a crucial lead over South Africa's first innings total of 220. Opener Aiden Markram, who scored a polished 74 for his 8th fifty, added 127 for the second wickets with Rassie van der Dussen who scored a solid 64.

But Yasir, with figures of 3-53, changed the scenario by dismissing Dussen caught and then trapped Faf du Plessis leg-before for ten, while Nauman had Markram caught by a close-in fielder to trigger a three wicket collapse in 33 balls. Markram, dropped on 27 by Pakistan skipper Babar Azam off spinner Yasir, also had a leg-before decision overturned on four.

Dussen also had a leg-before decision overturned on 56. Markram hit ten boundaries and Dussen five. Both Yasir and Nauman will be major threats for South Africa on a fourth day National stadium pitch which produced 14 wickets on day one, four on the second and six on the third. South Africa were off to a confident start with Markram and Dean Elgar defying Pakistan's attack, and were 37 without loss at lunch.



KARACHI: Pakistan's Abid Ali tries to field the ball played by South Africa's Rassie van der Dussen during the third day of the first cricket Test match between Pakistan and South Africa at the National Stadium yesterday. —AFP

Elgar, in visible discomfort after being hit on the left hand by a rising delivery from pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi, was caught by diving wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan off Yasir for 29. In the morning Pakistan's tail added 70 runs to frustrate South Africa, who were looking for quick wickets.

South Africa's pace spearhead Kagiso Rabada bowled Hasan Ali for 21 to reach 200 wickets in his 44th Test. Rabada, 25, is the eighth South African to take 200 or more Test wickets. Pakistan were 323-9 at that point, but Yasir and Nauman added 55 valuable runs for the final wicket. Yasir, who scored a Test century in Australia in 2019, hit a six and four fours in his 38 not out, while debutant Nauman scored three boundaries before falling for 24. Rabada with 3-70 and spinner Maharaj, who took 3-90, were the pick of the South African bowlers. —AFP

Sports

Harris, 76ers hand Lakers first road defeat of NBA season

Brooklyn Nets escape with overtime victory over Hawks

LOS ANGELES: Tobias Harris drove in the final dagger as the Philadelphia 76ers thwarted a late Los Angeles Lakers rally to hand the reigning NBA champions their first road defeat of the season - 107-106. In a bruising heavyweight clash, the Eastern Conference leading Sixers made a statement against the league-leading Lakers. "Some people think we haven't played anybody," Harris said. "For us, we wanted to go against the champs. We wanted to see where we're at."

Joel Embiid scored 28 points, Ben Simmons notched a triple-double of 17 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists and Harris, fed by Seth Curry, sealed the victory with a pull-up jump shot with three seconds remaining. The Lakers, who had won a franchise-best 10 road games to start the season, nearly kept the streak alive despite trailing by 14 points in the fourth quarter.

The Lakers, down by 12 with 3:07 remaining, produced a 13-0 scoring run launched by Alex Caruso's finger-roll layup. After three-pointers from Caruso, Dennis Schroder and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, Anthony Davis gave the Lakers a 106-105 lead on a layup set up by LeBron James. After a timeout, Philadelphia inbounded the ball with 11.2 seconds remaining. They got the ball to Harris, who drove left and fired.

Davis' desperation heave from halfcourt as time expired was never close. James, coming off a 46-point performance at Cleveland on Monday, led the Lakers with 34 points, Davis added 23 and Schroder had 16. Cameroonian center Embiid got an injury scare in the third quarter, when he came down hard on the small of his back after he was pushed by James as he rose for a dunk.

James was assessed a flagrant foul and Embiid, who missed the 76ers' previous game with back tightness, gingerly tested himself after he rose but stayed in the game. "That's a very dangerous play,"

Embiid said. "I guarantee if that was me I would have probably been ejected from the game."

89 points for Nets 'Big 3'

The Brooklyn Nets, with a big night from their big three, escaped with a 132-128 overtime victory over the Hawks in Atlanta. Kevin Durant scored 32 points, James Harden added a double-double of 31 points and 15 assists with eight rebounds and Kyrie Irving added 26 points for Brooklyn, who won their third straight.

Trae Young led the Hawks with 28 points and 14 assists. Cam Reddish scored 24 points off the bench for Atlanta, including a driving layup that tied the score at 118-118 with less than 30 seconds left in regulation. Brooklyn jumped to a 127-121 lead midway through overtime, buoyed by Jeff Green's three-pointer and a dunk from Durant. A Durant three-pointer made it 129-123 with 1:25 remaining and the Nets held on to win a close game that featured 21 lead changes, with neither team leading by more than seven.

Giannis Antetokounmpo pressed their pursuit of the 76ers lead in the East with a 115-108 victory over the Toronto Raptors. Two-time reigning NBA MVP Antetokounmpo fueled the Bucks with 24 points, 18 rebounds and nine assists. Norman Powell scored 26 points and Kyle Lowry added 21 for the Raptors. Indiana forward Damontas Sabonis delivered a triple-double of 22 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists as the Pacers beat the Hornets in Charlotte 116-106. Sabonis was doubtful to start the game with a bruised left knee, but he showed no sign of trouble as he connected on nine of 10 shots from the floor, including two of three from three-point range. Doug McDermott led the Pacers with 28 points off the bench. Malcolm Brogdon added 25 points and Justin Holiday had 19 for Indiana.

Elsewhere, Brandon Ingram and Zion Williamson scored 32 points



PHILADELPHIA: Joel Embiid #21 of the Philadelphia 76ers tries to drive past Montrezl Harrell #15 of the Los Angeles Lakers during the fourth quarter at Wells Fargo Center on Wednesday. —AFP

each as the New Orleans Pelicans overcame a 47-point performance by Bradley Beal to defeat the Washington Wizards 124-106. Ingram and Williamson scored 30 points in a game for the first time as Ingram tied a career-high by making seven three-pointers.

Eric Bledsoe scored 18 for the Pelicans, who started a five-game homestand with just their second win in 10 games. Also, Rudy Gobert finished with 29 points and 20 rebounds, and Jordan Clarkson scored 31 points as the Utah Jazz rolled over the Dallas Mavericks 116-104 for their 10th consecutive win. —AFP

Bestaven wins dramatic Vendee Globe race

LES SABLES-D'OLONNE, France: France's Yannick Bestaven won the Vendee Globe round-the-world solo yacht race yesterday after a dramatic finish when one of his rivals hit a fishing trawler in the home stretch. The 48-year-old, in Maitre CoQ IV, was the third across the line, nearly eight hours behind the leader, but won because of his 10hr 15min time bonus for helping rescue a competitor off the Cape of Good Hope.

Charlie Dalin (Apivia) was the first to finish in 80 days, six hours, 15 minutes and 47 seconds, followed by fellow Frenchman Louis Burton in Bureau Vallee 2, but they were placed second and third owing to Bestaven's time bonus. Bestaven's win, in his second attempt after he lasted just 30 hours in 2008, caps an eventful race when he rushed to the aid of Kevin Escoffier, whose yacht sank in heavy seas.

The race then developed into an unusually tight affair in the closing stages, with Dalin heading a five-way sprint to the line at Les Sables d'Olonne. "I feel like I'm living a dream, hallucinating," said Bestaven, who was greeted by a fireworks display. "We go from total solitude to this, to this party, to these lights. This result is beyond my expectations. After struggling as we struggled, a victory with Maitre CoQ IV is a dream!" —AFP

Intanon downs Sindhu

BANGKOK: Former world number one Ratchanok Intanon landed a crucial victory over Indian star PV Sindhu at badminton's World Tour Finals in Bangkok yesterday. It was a double victory for Thailand's hopes, as 13th-seed Pornpawee Chochuwong also booked a semi-final spot after a shock win over Taiwanese top-ranked Tai Tzu-ying. Intanon trailed for most of the first game against Sindhu, but showed a ballerina's footwork and killer instinct to take it 21-18.

The 25-year-old Thai claimed the match taking the second game 21-13. "I just want to keep going and focus on winning, point-by-point," Intanon said afterwards. "It wasn't my day," said Sindhu. "Losing the first game made the difference. My timing was a bit off, so a bit disappointed." Both players were coming off an initial loss in the round-robin tournament: Tai beat Sindhu, the Rio Olympics silver medalist, in a three-game thriller on Wednesday. Chochuwong upset fifth seed Intanon in three games on Wednesday. Yesterday, Chochuwong, 22, went into her match having never won a game against Tai in previous encounters, but won 21-17, 21-11 in 37 minutes.

Earlier, Carolina Marin - looking for a hat-trick of titles - marched towards a swift victory over Canada's tenth-ranked Michelle Li 21-16, 21-13. "I think I keep getting better and better," Marin said. In the men's singles, Taiwan's 12th-ranked Wang Tzu-wei was victorious over India's 14th-seed Srikanth Kidambi in a three-game match that lasted 78 minutes, finishing 19-21, 21-9, 21-19. The delayed 2020 season finale is the third tournament behind closed doors in three weeks in Bangkok, as badminton resumes after months of coronavirus cancellations. The top eight players in all singles and doubles disciplines are contesting this week's tournament, but China and Japan are absent because of coronavirus problems. Despite the strict biosecurity arrangements, four people inside the tournament "bubble" have tested positive, including two players who were forced to withdraw. —AFP



BANGKOK: Thailand's Ratchanok Intanon hits a shot against India's PV Sindhu during their women's singles match at the World Tour Finals badminton tournament yesterday. —AFP

Sports

Man Utd title hopes hit by Sheffield United defeat

Tuchel's Chelsea reign starts with Wolves stalemate

LONDON: Manchester United's Premier League title hopes suffered a huge blow on Wednesday with a 2-1 defeat by bottom side Sheffield United as Chelsea started the Thomas Tuchel era with a goalless draw against Wolves. The shock result at Old Trafford leaves Pep Guardiola's Manchester City a point clear at the top with a game in hand and looking increasingly hot favourites to win a third title in four years. Elsewhere on a busy night of midweek action, Leicester drew 1-1 with Everton, Burnley beat Aston Villa 3-2 and Brighton drew 0-0 with Fulham.

Manchester United started their match against Sheffield United on a high after an FA Cup win against Liverpool on Sunday but they were sloppy and uninspired from the kick-off. The Blades broke the deadlock midway through the first half when Kean Bryan rose to glance home John Fleck's corner after David de Gea failed to punch clear.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men were level in the 64th minute when an outswinging corner from Alex Telles was met with a thumping header by Harry Maguire. But Sheffield United were back in front again 10 minutes later when United failed to clear and Oliver Burke's strike went in off the underside of the bar after taking a wicked deflection off Axel Tuanzebe.

The Blades had just five points to show from their first 19 games - the worst haul in Premier

League history - and had not won at Old Trafford since 1973. Solskjaer said his side were lacking an "X factor" as they slipped to their first league defeat since Nov 1.

He blamed the referee for two mistakes - for missing a foul on De Gea for Sheffield United's opening goal - and for ruling out an Anthony Martial goal after adjudging that Maguire had committed a foul. "Two wrong decisions, that's how it is, it's that kind of season, inconsistent and the referee missed those two," he told the BBC.

Tuchel era

Earlier, former Paris Saint-Germain boss Tuchel took charge at Stamford Bridge against misfiring Wolves less than 24 hours after replacing the sacked Frank Lampard. Club owner Roman Abramovich handed the 47-year-old a brief to revive the fortunes of a team that had lost five of their previous eight Premier League games. Chelsea struggled to make an impression against Nuno Espirito Santo's men, whose form has nose-dived after forward Raul Jimenez fractured his skull in late November.

The home side dominated territory and possession, but created few clear-cut chances and the visitors had opportunities to leave with all three points. But Tuchel did not appear downhearted despite the flat display. "I was very happy performance-wise," he said. "Unfortu-



MANCHESTER: Sheffield United's Scottish striker Oliver Burke shoots to score their second goal against Manchester United at Old Trafford on Wednesday. — AFP

nately we couldn't score. If we take care of our performance like this the results will come."

The draw lifted Chelsea to eighth spot, five points behind fourth-placed West Ham but Tuchel knows time is not on his side, with more

than half of the season gone. He admitted he had not yet been able to properly assess his squad. "It was today totally unfair because I had no explanation for anybody on the side why they didn't play," he said. "Every day will help." —AFP

Ozil flatly rules out Germany comeback

ISTANBUL: Former Arsenal midfielder Mesut Ozil flatly ruled out a comeback for Germany on Wednesday as he signed a three-and-a-half contract with his favorite Turkish side Fenerbahce. "I wish the German national team success, but I will never play for them again," the 32-year-old attacking midfielder told reporters in fluent Turkish at his official unveiling in Istanbul.

Ozil was one of the stars of Germany's 2014 World Cup winning side and won three FA Cups for Arsenal. But he was heavily criticized in Germany when he posed for a photograph with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the eve of the 2018 World Cup. Erdogan was also the best man at the player's wedding in Turkey.

Ozil, who has Turkish roots, complained of being subjected to "racist" attacks and quit the national team in anger following Germany's first-round exit from the tournament. He barely appeared for Arsenal - where he was the highest-paid player on a reported £350,000 (\$480,000) a week - after slamming China's treatment of the Uighur Muslim population in Xinjiang in 2019. Arsenal initially distanced itself from Ozil's remarks.

Ozil will wear the number 67 jersey for Fenerbahce - the first two digits of the postal code of his family's native Zonguldak province in Turkey. Fenerbahce president Ali Koc said Ozil should be ready in time for the club's big Istanbul derby against eternal rivals Galatasaray on Feb 6. Ozil will officially earn three million euros a season - a fraction of the salary he drew at Arsenal and before that Real Madrid.

Fenerbahce and Turkey's other big clubs have been crippled



ISTANBUL: German midfielder Mesut Ozil poses with his jersey after signing his new three-and-a-half year contract with Turkish football club Fenerbahce on Wednesday. —AFP

by debt after taking on big contracts that became unsustainable because of the country's economic problems. The club launch a donation campaign among its supporters this week to help pay Ozil's wages. — AFP

Messi scores as Barca come from behind to beat Rayo

MADRID: Lionel Messi marked his return from suspension with a goal in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday as Barcelona survived a scare against Rayo Vallecano to reach the quarter-finals. With Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid already out, another upset looked on the cards when Fran Garcia gave Rayo a surprise lead at Vallecas early in the second half. But Messi tapped in Antoine Griezmann's pass to equalize before turning creator, sending Jordi Alba through, with Frenkie de Jong at the back post to seal a 2-1 victory.

Rayo sit fourth in Segunda, Spain's second tier, after being relegated from the top flight in 2019, with their fans and players at loggerheads with the club's president Raul Martin Presa amid the club's decline. A victory over Barcelona, 30-time winners of the competition and now strong favorites to make it 31, would have delivered a brief boost to morale, even if this compelling cup tie never had the tension it deserved without the ground's usually raucous fans.

Still, Barcelona coach Ronald Koeman will be relieved to have made it to the quarter-finals and to see Messi on target again, the Argentinian taking his tally for the season to 15 goals. Messi had sat out the previous two games suspended after being sent off in the Spanish Super Cup final defeat by Athletic Bilbao but looked refreshed and ultimately made the difference again. — AFP



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