

Friday Times

ISSUE NO: 18487

THULHIJJA 6, 1442 AH | FRIDAY, JULY 16, 2021

Powered by

VOLVO



42 dead in Germany as storms ravage Europe

See Page 10

Local



Kuwaiti coal artist finds inspiration in the middle of despair

By Nawara Fattahova

No art exhibitions were held last year in Kuwait due to the lockdown, while only a few small art exhibitions have been held this year. But artists are still creating artworks during the coronavirus pandemic.

Meet Kuwaiti artist Hanan Al-Ghareeb, who tried to turn the pandemic into a positive event with her drawings. "I'm still creating artworks. During the curfew, I had even more time, and I finished many beautiful pieces," she told Kuwait Times. Ghareeb draws using coal, which is not a common medium. Some excerpts:

Kuwait Times: How do you draw with coal?

Hanan Al-Ghareeb: This kind of drawing needs some special tools. These include pencils, coal powder, different kinds of coal pencils, brushes and special paper for coal drawing.

KT: Is this kind of art difficult?

Ghareeb: Although the material used in my drawing is very simple - coal - it requires creativity, high precision skills, fine detailing, accurate shading in the right place and evenly distributing the coal powder on the painting.

KT: How long does it take you to finish one piece?

Ghareeb: In the beginning, when I started my career in fine arts, the drawing time was much longer than today. I gained skills practicing this art, and one picture now takes me two to three days to finish.

KT: Where did you learn this art?

Ghareeb: My passion for this type of art made me search for art courses provided by certified teachers and artists, such as Mona Al-Hazim. I was also self-learning through the Internet, reading and searching for information to gain experience.

KT: Since when are you drawing?

Ghareeb: Since I was a child in preschool, I loved to draw with all kinds of colors and materials. When I grew up, I started focusing on drawing with coal.



KT: Do you only draw portraits?

Ghareeb: I'm able to draw in many styles of all art schools, including realism, surrealism, abstract, cubism and sensual. I can also execute these paintings with different kinds of colors, including oil colors, watercolors, pastels and acrylic. But drawing portraits with coal is my favorite and I find myself in it.

KT: In how many exhibitions have you participated?

Ghareeb: I have participated in many exhibitions. The most important ones include Kuwait Pearls Expo, Al-Rabia Expo, Gulf Group Artists Expo, Manarat Al-Arab Expo and others.

KT: Where did you study and where do you work?

Ghareeb: I graduated from Kuwait University with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. I'm also a certified trainer in this field. I also work as a kindergarten teacher.

KT: Is any of your family members an artist?

Ghareeb: I have noticed that all of my children have a passion for art. I hope they succeed in this field, and I will always support them.



Kuwaiti artist
Hanan Al-Ghareeb

Kuwait Times

ESTABLISHED 1961
THE FIRST DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

STAY CONNECTED



- Read Kuwait Times now on your phone for **FREE**
- Send Subscribe to **+965 944 88888**
- Enjoy the first daily paper in Kuwait on your phone

P.O. Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait

Tel: 24833199 - 24833358 - 24835616/7 | Fax: 24835620 - 24835621

E: info@kuwaittimes.net



Kuwait airport welcomes Eid travelers



KUWAIT: People stand in line to check in at the counter at Kuwait International Airport in Kuwait City yesterday. Kuwait has announced a nine-day Eid Al-Adha holiday, which many people have opted to spend on vacation outside the country to escape the Gulf state's scorching heat and after a year of flight disruption due to COVID-19 restrictions. Kuwait is only allowing people fully vaccinated against COVID-19 to travel.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Local



Local

Saudi hosts vaccinated pilgrims for second downsized hajj

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia will host another downsized hajj from Saturday, with only residents fully vaccinated against the coronavirus permitted and overseas Muslim pilgrims barred for a second year. The kingdom seeks to repeat last year's success that saw no virus outbreak during the five-day Muslim ritual. It is allowing 60,000 residents of Saudi Arabia to participate, higher than in 2020 but drastically lower than in normal times. People will begin to arrive on Saturday, a day before the start of rites. In 2019, some 2.5 million Muslims from around the world participated in the annual hajj — a key pillar of Islam that is a must for able-bodied Muslims at least once in their lifetime.

Earlier this month, the hajj ministry said it was working on the "highest levels of health precautions" in light of the pandemic and the emergence of new variants. Chosen from more than 558,000 applicants through an online vetting system, the event is confined to those who have been fully vaccinated and are aged 18-65 with no chronic illnesses, it said.

The pilgrimage, which typically packs large crowds into congested religious sites, is potentially a super-spreader of the virus. Aside from strict social distancing measures, the ministry said it will introduce a "smart hajj card" to allow contact-free access to camps, hotels and buses to ferry pilgrims around religious sites. The card system would also help track down any missing pilgrims, it added.

Authorities have deployed black-and-white robots to dispense bottles of sacred water from the Zamzam spring in Makkah's Grand Mosque, built around the Kaaba, the black cubic structure towards which Muslims around the world pray. The revered Black Stone in the Kaaba — which it is customary but not mandatory to touch dur-



MAKKAH: A combination of file pictures shows (left) few Muslim pilgrims praying on Mount Arafat, also known as Jabal al-Rahma (Mount of Mercy), southeast of the holy city of Makkah, during the climax of the Hajj pilgrimage amid the COVID-19 pandemic on July 30, 2020 and (right) pilgrims gathering on Mount Arafat early on August 20, 2018. — AFP

ing the pilgrimage — is expected to be kept out of reach.

'Frustration is growing'

Saudi Arabia has so far recorded more than 503,000 coronavirus infections, including over 8,000 deaths. More than 20 million vaccine doses against coronavirus have been administered in the country of over 34 million people.

The hajj went ahead last year on the smallest scale in modern history, with authorities initially saying only 1,000 pilgrims were allowed but local media saying up to 10,000 took part. No infections were reported as authorities set up

multiple health facilities, mobile clinics and ambulances to cater for the pilgrims, who were taken to the religious sites in small batches.

They were also given amenity kits that included sterilized pebbles for the "stoning of Satan" ritual, disinfectants, masks, a prayer rug and ihram, the traditional seamless white hajj garment, made from a bacteria-resistant material.

Hosting the hajj is a matter of prestige for Saudi rulers, for whom the custodianship of Islam's holiest sites is their most powerful source of political legitimacy. But barring overseas pilgrims has caused resentment and anguish among Muslims worldwide, who typically save for years

and then rebuilt by Abraham 4,000 years ago. Pilgrims next walk seven times between two stone spots in the mosque. They then move on to Mina, around five kilometers (three miles) away, ahead of the main rite of the pilgrimage at Mount Arafat.

Mount Arafat

The climax of the hajj is the gathering on Mount Arafat, about 10 kilometers (six miles) from Mina, where it is believed that the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) delivered his final sermon. Pilgrims assemble on the 70-metre-high (230-foot) hill and its surrounding plain for hours of prayers and Holy Quran recitals, staying there until the evening. After sunset they head to Muzdalifah, halfway between Arafat and Mina, where they gather several dozen pebbles so they can perform the symbolic "stoning of the devil".

'Stoning the devil'

The last major ritual of the hajj is back at Mina, where pilgrims throw seven stones at

to take part. "The Saudi government wants to play it completely safe by barring foreign pilgrims for the second consecutive year," Umar Karim, a visiting fellow at Britain's Royal United Services Institute, told AFP. "But frustration is growing across the Muslim world that could raise questions about the kingdom's role as the custodian of holy mosques and result in a reduction of its religious soft power. It also spells disaster for the hajj economy worldwide."

'Weigh on recovery'

The hajj and year-round umrah pilgrimages are usually a key revenue earner for the kingdom, not to mention airlines and travel agencies. In normal times, they together rake in some \$12 billion (10.3 billion euros) annually, keeping the economy humming in Makkah. But downsizing the rituals, which will run until Tuesday, the first day of post-Ramadan holidays, has hit government revenues and battered businesses that support hundreds of thousands of jobs in the holy city, from travel agents to street barbers and souvenir shops.

Makkah has seen a construction boom in recent years that added shopping malls, apartments and luxury hotels, some offering spectacular views of the sacred Kaaba. But most premises have seen fewer customers since the pandemic. "The Saudi government's confirmation that the hajj pilgrimage will be extremely limited this year will weigh on the kingdom's economic recovery," said Capital Economics, a research consultancy. "The government is clearly concerned that a larger hajj could spark a surge in COVID-19 cases and possibly risk importing new virus variants, which could force them to tighten restrictions that harm the economy." — AFP

each of three huge concrete walls representing Satan. The ritual is an emulation of Abraham's stoning of the devil at the three spots where it is said Satan tried to dissuade him from obeying God's order to sacrifice his son, Ishmael. After the first stoning, the Eid Al-Adha feast of sacrifice begins, marking the end of the hajj. Sheep are slaughtered, in reference to the lamb that God provided for sacrifice instead of Ishmael, in a ceremony that is held at the same time around the world. Men then shave their heads or trim their hair while women cut a fingertip-length off their locks. The pilgrims can then change back into normal clothing, returning to circumambulate the Kaaba and complete their stone-throwing rituals before heading home.

Four other pillars

The hajj is the last pillar of Islam. The four other essential pillars are: profession of the faith; daily prayers; alms-giving and fasting from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan. — AFP

The hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam

MAKKAH: The annual hajj pilgrimage, one of the five pillars of Islam, will start on Saturday with just 60,000 vaccinated Saudi residents allowed to take part this year because of the pandemic. For the second year in a row, Muslims from abroad have been excluded from the hajj, which drew 2.5 million pilgrims to Saudi Arabia in 2019 before the virus struck.

All Muslims are expected to complete the hajj to Makkah — from which non-Muslims are strictly banned — at least once in their lives if they have the means to do so. Believers converge on the holy city for several days of rituals in which they retrace the Prophet Mohammed's (PBUH) last pilgrimage. Here is a rundown of the ceremonies at what would usu-

ally be one of the largest religious gatherings in the world.

White garments

Pilgrims must first enter a state of purity, called ihram, which requires special dress and behavior. Men wear a seamless shroud-like white garment that emphasizes unity, regardless of social status or nationality. Women must wear loose dresses, also often white, exposing only their faces and hands. Pilgrims are not allowed to argue or bicker and are prohibited from wearing perfume, cutting their nails, or trimming their hair or beards.

Rituals begin

The first ritual requires walking seven times around the Kaaba, the large black cubic structure at the center of Makkah's Grand Mosque. Made from granite and draped in cloth, the Kaaba stands nearly 15 meters (50 feet) tall. Muslims turn towards the Kaaba to pray, no matter where they are in the world. The structure is said to have been first erected by Adam

1st



Kuwait Times
Established 1961

The First Daily in the Arabian Gulf



KuwaitTimes



KuwaitTimes



KuwaitTimes

Foreign Minister receives outgoing Senegalese envoy



KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah presents a commemorative plaque to the Ambassador of Senegal to Kuwait Abdou Lahad Mbacke. —KUNA photos



KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah receives the credentials of the new Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan.



KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah receives the credentials of the new Ambassador of Cyprus.



KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah receives the credentials of the new Ambassador of Bhutan.

KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received yesterday at the Foreign Ministry Diwan the Ambassador of Senegal to Kuwait Abdou Lahad Mbacke, on the occasion of ending his tenure. The Foreign Minister thanked him for the efforts and contributions to boost bilateral ties between both nations. Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr Ahmad received copies of credentials of the new ambassadors of Kyrgyzstan, Bhutan, and Cyprus. The Minister wished the new diplomats success in their missions, and further prosperity to Kuwait's bilateral ties with their nations. —KUNA

Zain recognizes 250 top students in partnership with Kuwait Food Bank

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, hosted a special ceremony to recognize and celebrate the academic excellence of top students in partnership with its strategic partner the Kuwait Food Bank. The event witnessed the honoring of 250 orphan students who are registered at the bank from across elementary, middle, and high school grades.

The ceremony, which saw the implementation of strict health measures, was held at the bank's headquarters in Qurtuba, and witnessed the attendance of Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti, Kuwait Food Bank's Vice Chairman Meshal Al-Ansari, as well as officials from Zain and the bank.

Commenting on the initiative, Khashti said: "I would like to congratulate our dear students for achieving excellence during such an unprecedented and challenging academic year. Their achievement only became reality because of their tremendous efforts, dedication, and hard work".

Khashti added: "We are pleased to continue supporting the var-



ious social and humanitarian programs hosted by our colleagues at the Kuwait Food Bank throughout the year. This collaboration is nothing short of a reflection of the great synergy between Kuwait's private sector companies and non-profit entities, something that ultimately serves the nation's humanitarian and social scenes".

Meanwhile, Ansari said: "I commend Zain's efforts in shouldering social initiatives such as this one, as these efforts contribute to achieving social sustainability goals. Today's ceremony recognizes the hard work and dedication of our students throughout the year in spite of the coronavirus pandemic. We are proud of them and encourage them to continue pursuing academic excellence in their next journey".

Ansari extended his gratitude to Zain's management for supporting this event, and wished the company all the best of luck in its noble efforts and endeavors to serve the community. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Zain collaborated with its strategic partner, the Kuwait Food Bank, to launch many humanitarian and charitable ini-

Kuwait seeks to adopt pro sport system

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Deputy Director General of the Public Authority for Sports for competitive sport Dr Saqer Al-Mulla introduced the general framework for full professional sport system. Speaking during a press conference on Wednesday, Mulla said this plan will improve the sports environment and guarantee athletes' rights, including health insurance, contract mechanism, transfer rules, athletes' care fund and athletes' association.



Dr Saqer Al-Mulla

He said the project that will be launched in September comes with a comprehensive strategy to make a qualitative move for Kuwait sports. He said the general framework of full professional sport includes four stages - the first is for preparation and evaluation, and includes seasonal fulltime dedication to the game for team and individual sports, following fulltime sports and the extent of complying with them in full.

The second stage is in two parts, starting with football, and includes the following incentives: Full salary from the sports authority, which is a motivating amount, as well as the job salary of the player. He said the second part covers the business that establishes sports teams, and includes the monthly salary, labor support and company salary. The third stage is related to other sports and national team athletes of individual sports according to certain rules. Mulla said the fourth stage is to get an integrated sports legislation that supports professional leagues, television broadcasting rights and advertisements. He expressed optimism towards the future of sports in Kuwait and hoped for a comprehensive move that includes all stages, starting with juniors in all games.



tiatives. The company recently delivered 'Machla' (food supplies) to underprivileged families in Kuwait to serve their needs throughout the Holy Month of Ramadan. This year, over 10,000 individuals benefited from the supplies provided by Zain in collaboration with the Kuwait Food Bank.

Last year, and as a contribution to support the enormous efforts exerted by the authorities at the start of the pandemic, Zain offered over 40,000 meals in collaboration with the Kuwait Food Bank, where a large number of the meals was distributed during the week dedicated by the Ministry of Health at Kuwait International Fairgrounds in Mishref to conduct tests for residents who recently entered the country. The meals were a contribution by the company to ease the long waiting times while in line. Many meals were also distributed at Kuwait International Airport's gates dedicated for residents who were returning back to their countries because of the crisis.

Local

MP says proposed KD 2,000 fee for over 60 expats 'too much'

Turaiji calls for raising 'rationally' residence fees

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji said yesterday that the proposed decision to impose a KD 2,000 annual fee on elderly expats is "exaggerated" and "illogical" and called on authorities to reconsider it.

Turaiji was commenting on reports which said that the Public Manpower Authority has decided to impose the expensive fee on expats over 60 years of age and who hold a higher secondary certificate or lower. The decision was reportedly taken but has not yet been issued and came following criticism of an earlier decision to stop the renewal of work permits

for that section of expats.

The lawmaker said the proposed decision does not achieve the objectives it has been taken for and also does not serve the official policy of amending the population structure, sharply tilted in favor of expats.

Turaiji said the decision will lead to raising prices of commodities and services and Kuwaiti citizens will bear its consequences, especially on the health front since the beneficiaries of the decision will be allowed to receive medical services at government health centers. He said that a number of those expats will not be able to pay the expensive fees although some

of them were born and have spent most of their lives in the country.

A large number of such expats, especially those who have businesses, will however be able to pay the fees but will seek to raise the prices of their commodities and services, he said.

Turaiji said the best solution is to introduce a health insurance scheme with reasonable cost for expats over 60 to receive medical care at private hospitals. The scheme can later be made mandatory for all expats. The lawmaker also said that charges on work permits and residencies for expats should be periodically increased but in a rational way.



MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji

Police detain man with 1.2 million Captagon pills

KUWAIT: Kuwait apprehended yesterday a drug dealer with 1.2 million Captagon pills, the Ministry of Interior said. The Drug Control General Department received information about a person with the possession of drugs, and immediately formed a search team, the ministry's security media and public relations department said in a press statement. The DCGD personnel ambushed the suspect and were able to find KD2 million (\$6.6 million) worth of drugs and was taken into custody. —KUNA



Kuwaiti medical supplies heading to Tunisia to counter COVID-19 spread

KUWAIT: Medical supplies and equipment donated by the State of Kuwait were flown to Tunisia to help the fellow Arab country counter the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) announced yesterday. Head of medical services at KRCS Manhal Al-Enezi said that the medical cargo included ventilators and other necessary equipment. The official affirmed that the Kuwaiti leadership and people would stand with the people of Tunisia in their fight against the dreaded coronavirus, noting that efforts to deliver medical supplies will be coordinated with the Tunisian Red Crescent. Enezi thanked the Defense and Foreign Ministries for facilitating delivery of relief package, saying that the KRCS was operating in line with His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's directives. —KUNA



Kuwaiti athletes look forward to making good record in Olympics

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti champions are aspiring to make good records in the upcoming Olympics in Tokyo due between July 23 and August 8. Lara Dashti and Abbas Qali will compete in swimming, Abdulrahman Al-Fadhel in rowing and Mohammad Al-Musawi in Karate. Dashti said she and her fellow citizen are well prepared for the event. The two Kuwaiti swim-

mers had taken part in external training camps, under supervision of the Italian coach Simon Tastaka. The 17-year-old Dashti, due to partake in the 50-m freestyle in the Tokyo 2020 competitions, said the intensive training greatly boosted her technical capabilities. Musawi said he had been qualified for the international contests, hoping to be among the top winners. Rower Fadhel said he was qualified for the top tournament after he made distinguished results in the latest Asian championship. Kuwait is partaking in the Olympics with 10 players. In addition to the four, the other contenders are the shooters Abdulrahman Al-Faihan, Mansour Al-Rashidi, Abdullah Turgi Al-Rashidi and Talal Turgi Al-Rashidi. In the field-and-track, the participating Kuwaiti champions are Yaaqoub Al-Yoha and Madhawi Al-Shemmari. —KUNA

Kuwait oil edges 36 cents higher to \$76.03 pb: KPC

KUWAIT: Kuwait crude oil edged 36 cents higher during Wednesday's trading sessions to reach \$76.03 per barrel (pb) compared with \$75.67 pb the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Brent crude, however, dropped

\$1.73 to \$74.76 pb and West Texas Intermediate plunged \$2.12 to \$73.13 pb. The OPEC basket of crudes went up 16 cents during trading sessions to close at \$75.29 per barrel (pb) on Wednesday, compared with \$75.13 on Tuesday, said the organization yesterday. The annual price of the OPEC basket in 2020 was at \$41.47 pb, OPEC Secretariat noted. OPEC Reference Basket (ORB) increased by 5.8 percent to hit \$76.63 last May, which is the higher level reached since May 2019, while the price averaged \$39.65 during the first five months of 2020, OPEC said in its latest report. The OPEC+ group of oil producers reaffirmed commitment, during a meeting in June, to a stable oil market that serves both the producers' and consumer's interest equally.

OPEC+ ministers stressed importance of the continuous positive contributions of the Declaration of Cooperation (DoC) in supporting the oil market's rebalance, which comes in accordance with the decisions taken by OPEC+. The ministerial meeting monitored the continuous improvement of the market's fundamentals, as the demand on oil showed clear signs of development and a drop in the Economic Cooperation Organization's (ECO) stock along with an economic recovery in most parts of the world, driven by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccinations. In its latest forecast, OPEC expected demand for its crude to be at 27.3 million barrels per day (bpd) this year with the raise of five million bpd in comparison to 2020. —KUNA



Taliban offer three-month ceasefire in return for prisoners' release

Lebanon's PM designate Saad Hariri says won't form govt



BAD NEUENHR-AHRWEILER, Germany: A man walks through floodwaters towards destroyed houses in Schuld yesterday. — AFP

42 killed in Germany floods

Many more missing as storms ravage Europe

MAYEN, Germany: Heavy rains and floods lashing western Europe have killed at least 42 people in Germany and left many more missing, as rising waters led several houses to collapse yesterday. Unusually heavy rains also inundated neighboring Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium, where at least four people were reported dead. Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) states were the worst hit in Germany by the deluge, which has caused rivers to burst their banks and threatens to bring down more homes.

At least 18 bodies were recovered in the region around the western town of Ahrweiler alone, a police spokesman told AFP. Local officials had earlier reported up to 70 people missing. Farther north, the district of Euskirchen in NRW reported 15 dead. Desperate residents sought refuge on the roofs of their homes as helicopters circled above to rescue them from the rising waters.

Pensioner Annemarie Mueller, 65, looking out at her flooded garden and garage from her balcony, said her town of Mayen had been completely unprepared for the destruction. "Where did all this rain come from? It's crazy," she told AFP. "It made such a loud noise and given how fast it came down we thought it would break the door down."

Chancellor Angela Merkel said she was "shocked" by the devastation and thanked the "tireless volunteers and emergency service workers" at the scene. NRW leader Armin Laschet, who is running to succeed Merkel in September elections, cancelled a

party meeting in Bavaria to survey the damage in his state, Germany's most populous. "We will stand by the towns and people who've been affected," Laschet, clad in rubber boots, told reporters in the town of Hagen.

'Go to higher floors'

Four of the dead were in the municipality of Schuld south of Bonn where six houses were swept away by floods, a police spokesman in the city of Koblenz said. Several other bodies were recovered from flooded cellars across the region. The environment ministry in Rhineland-Palatinate warned it expected floodwaters on the Rhine and Moselle rivers to rise with more rainfall. In NRW alone, 135,000 households were without power.

Emergency workers struggled to evacuate people in endangered buildings and two firemen were killed Wednesday in the line of duty in the towns of Altena and Werdohl. Police set up a crisis hotline for reporting missing loved ones and residents were asked to send in videos and photos that could help them in the search. Regional official Juergen Pfoehler urged people to stay home "and, if possible, go to higher floors" of their houses.

The German military deployed some 400 soldiers across the two affected states to assist in rescue efforts. In the city of Leverkusen, a power outage triggered by the storms led to the evacuation of a hospital with 468 patients. City authorities reported that after intensive care patients were moved to other facilities

overnight, the other wards would have to be cleared in the course of the day.

'Rarely experienced'

Belgium has also seen several days of heavy rain that has caused rivers in the French-speaking region of Wallonia to burst their banks. Four were reported dead. The provinces of Liege and Namur were especially affected, with the resort town of Spa completely flooded. In the town of Chaudfontaine, daily Le Soir reported that nearly 1,800 people had to evacuate.

The country's Infrabel rail network said it was suspending services in the southern half of the country, given the risks to travel. The southern Dutch province of Limburg, which is bordered by Germany and Belgium, also reported widespread damage with rising waters threatening to cut off the small city of Valkenburg west of Maastricht. Local news footage showed small rivers of water flowing through the scenic city center's streets and at least one old age home had been evacuated. Officials also closed off several roads including the busy A2 highway, while fears remained that water from heavy rains in Germany and Belgium would push up river levels as it reached the Netherlands. Meanwhile the Luxembourg government set up a crisis cell to respond to emergencies triggered by heavy rains overnight as Prime Minister Xavier Bettel reported "several homes" had been flooded and were "no longer inhabitable". — AFP

Lebanon's PM designate Saad Hariri says won't form govt

Political bickering among leaders blamed for country's cocktail of crises

BEIRUT: Lebanon's prime minister-designate Saad Hariri stepped down yesterday, saying he was unable to form a government, nine months after accepting the challenge and as the country sinks deeper into crisis. Donors remain adamant that a government must be formed before they can open credit lines, but political squabbling has repeatedly stymied efforts at compromise, leaving over half the population living below the global poverty line.

Hariri had been nominated for the post in October 2020, following a devastating explosion at Beirut port in August caused by unsafely stored fertilizer, that killed more than 200 people and forced the previous government to resign. "I met with the president, and we had (a) consultation on the issue of the government," Hariri said yesterday, referring to Lebanon's President Michel Aoun.

"There were amendments requested by the president, which I considered substantial in the line-up," Hariri added. "It is clear that the position (of Aoun) has not changed... and that we will not be able to agree," he said.

He noted that he had offered to spend more time trying to form a cabinet, but he had also been told by the president that "we will not be able to agree."

"That's why I apologized for (not) forming the government, and may God help the country," Hariri added.

Cocktail of crises

Hariri is the second candidate to fail at forming a government in less than 12 months amid political bickering between the country's leaders, who are widely blamed for the country's cocktail of crises. In a country where seats in government and parliament are distributed according to religious sects, Hariri's exit will further complicate the process of cabinet formation, as he is widely seen as the main representative of the country's Sunni Muslims. Despite mounting international pressure, led by former colonial power France, a deeply divided ruling class has failed to agree on a new cabinet line-up, with Hariri and Aoun trading blame for the hold up, despite mounting financial woes.

The international community, led by former colonial power France, has pledged millions of dollars in humanitarian aid since the port blast, pending the establishment of a government.

The Lebanese pound is trading on the black market at less than a tenth of its official value, and the country is struggling to import basic items including fuel and medicine. Hariri, who has previously led three governments in Lebanon, replaced Mustapha Adib, a relatively unknown diplomat.

Adib had been nominated in late August but threw in the towel nearly a month later, because of resistance he faced from political leaders over his proposed line up. Hariri's deci-



BEIRUT: In this file photo taken on October 22, 2020, then former Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri delivers a statement after the president named him to form a new cabinet, at the presidential palace in Baabda, east of the capital Beirut. — AFP

sion came as Lebanon prepares to mark the first anniversary of the August 4 explosion—it's worst peace-time tragedy—which many blame on negligence by political leaders. —AFP



BINNISH, Syria: An aerial view shows mourners burying the bodies of three children, who were killed in regime artillery shelling on the outskirts of Fuaa town, during a funeral procession at a cemetery in Binnish in Syria's rebel-held northwestern province of Idlib yesterday. —AFP

Regime shelling kills 9 civilians in NW Syria

BEIRUT: Shelling by Syrian regime forces yesterday killed nine civilians, including three children, in the Idlib region in the country's northwest, a war monitor reported. The deaths came amid an uptick in violations of a ceasefire deal that was brokered by Turkey and Russia in March 2020 and had since largely held. Since June, government forces have stepped up shelling of rebel groups dominating the Idlib region who in turn have responded by targeting regime positions in surrounding areas.

On Thursday, regime shelling on the outskirts of the north Idlib

town of Fuaa killed six civilians, including a child, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Most of the victims were quarry workers, the war monitor said. In a separate attack on the Idlib village of Iblin, more than 35 kilometers (22 miles) south from Fuaa, regime shelling killed three other people, including two children, it said. Earlier this month, regime shelling on southern Idlib killed nine people, including five members of the same family, in one of the deadliest violations of the truce. The Idlib region, which borders Turkey to the north and is home to more than three million people, is the last part of Syria controlled by rebel or jihadist groups. The Syrian regime, backed by Russia and Iran, has vowed to retake the area and the enclave has shrunk under pressure from successive deadly land and air offensives. Despite sporadic skirmishes along the ceasefire lines, the truce has largely held, averting a major assault that aid groups warned could cause suffering on a scale yet unseen in Syria's decade-old war. — AFP

Huge fires rage in western US, Canada

LOS ANGELES: More than a million acres of the western US and Canada were in flames on Wednesday as multiple blazes raged across the region, fueled by soaring temperatures and drought, and with little sign of letting up. Large areas of California were placed on red alert as several conflagrations continued to burn. The so-called River Fire had still not been brought under control as it burned near Yosemite National Park, officials said.

Firefighters were also concerned about the advance of the Dixie Fire, further to the north. While 2020 was the worst year for fires in California's modern history, 2021 may already be breaking that record. But it was in the neighboring state of Oregon that the fires were doing most damage. Whipped up by dry conditions and strengthening winds, the Bootleg Fire has already devoured more than 212,758 acres (86,000 hectares), the equivalent of 120,000 soccer fields, forcing many residents to evacuate the area. Forest fires are also gaining ground across the border in Canada. The west of the country, which suffered an unprecedented heat wave recently, has reported more than 35 new fires in the past two days, according to local authorities.

One of the main outbreaks covers more than 10,000 acres (40,000 hectares) and nearly 900 homes have been evacuated. Experts believe the heat wave has been worsened by global warming, and no improvement is expected in the coming days, meteorologists said. The west of North America is caught up in a devastating vicious circle: arid soil and parched vegetation in turn create conditions for higher temperatures, and higher temperatures, repeated heatwaves and reduced precipitation are an ideal combination for the development of fires. — AFP

International

‘We won’t back down’: Ethnic militias rush to Tigray border

Abiy vows to ‘repel’ attacks by Ethiopia’s enemies

ADIARKAY, Ethiopia: When war broke out last year in Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region, Solomon Alabachew acted fast, grabbing his Kalashnikov and rushing to the front with his fellow ethnic Amhara militia fighters. Their swift seizure of western Tigray—a stretch of land Amharas claim was stolen from them decades ago—stands as the greatest achievement of Solomon’s life, the 37-year-old told AFP this week.

That helps explain his current fury at resurgent ethnic Tigrayan rebels, who on Monday began a new push intended to kick the Amharas out again, jump-starting fresh violence in an already gruesome eight-month-old conflict.

Two days later, Solomon dusted off his firearm, threw on his green fatigues and raced north, ending up in the Amhara mountain town of Adi Arkay with thousands of other combatants awaiting orders to advance. They are part of a massive mobilization called for by top officials in the Amhara region, which has long been embroiled in bitter land disputes with Tigray, its northern neighbor. On Wednesday the Amhara government spokesman Gizachew Muluneh announced that regional special forces and militias would shift to “attack” mode to reverse the recent battlefield gains by the Tigrayan rebels. His statement appeared just hours after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, vowed to “repel” attacks by Ethiopia’s enemies.

‘We won’t back down’

The bellicose rhetoric came not a moment too soon for Solomon, who is itching to fight

again. “We came here to take the necessary measures, to annihilate and to pay sacrifice. All Amhara people, from top to bottom, have mobilized,” he said. “The people have been very patient with the government’s approach so far, but even if the orders (to attack) don’t come, we won’t back down.”

Abiy sent troops into Tigray last November, saying the move came in response to an assault on federal army camps ordered by the region’s ruling party, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). It was the bloody culmination of a long falling-out between the young, reform-minded leader who took power in 2018 and the party that dominated national politics for nearly three decades before that.

It also represented a golden opportunity for Amharas to retake land in both western and southern Tigray that, in their eyes, the TPLF illegally annexed back in the early 1990s. The United States has raised concerns about ethnic cleansing in western Tigray, where Amharan forces have been accused of expelling thousands of people. But the war took a stunning turn last month when the Tigray capital Mekele fell to the rebels and Abiy declared a unilateral ceasefire, pulling most federal troops from the region. Pressing their advantage, the rebels announced a new offensive this week, with a spokesman telling AFP it was intended to “liberate every square inch of Tigray”.

The spokesman, Getachew Reda, also claimed the rebels were already in control of Alamata, the biggest town in southern Tigray,



DEBARK, Ethiopia: Amhara militia recruits train in the town of Debark, northeast from the city of Gondar, Ethiopia, yesterday. The Amhara government’s spokesman, Gizachew Muluneh, announced regional special forces and militias would shift to “attack” mode to reverse Tigrayan rebels’ recent gains. — AFP

and would soon hold the western town of Mai-Tsebri, north of Adi Arkay.

‘Trying to terrorize our people’

Ethiopia’s army has not responded to requests for comment on losses and gains. But in an interview with AFP, the head of Amhara’s militia bureau, Colonel Bamlaku Abay, acknowledged some losses while asserting Getachew’s claims were overstated. “They have taken some places around Korem (a town in southern

Tigray) and around Mai-Tsebri. They took those places when the military withdrew,” Bamlaku said from his current base in Adi Arkay. He added, though, that he was “very sure” the Amhara militias would push the rebels back once they deployed en masse, saying they were motivated by historical claims to the land. “The TPLF is trying to terrorize our people and our land, but so far we have not responded,” he said. “We will prevail. We have the truth on our side. They don’t have the truth.” — AFP

Amnesty slams Libya and Europe for migrants ‘horror’

TRIPOLI: Amnesty International yesterday condemned the “horrific violations” being committed against migrants returned to Libya with the cooperation of European states after trying to cross the Mediterranean.

It said new evidence had emerged of “harrowing violations, including sexual violence, against men, women and children” intercepted at sea and forcibly returned to detention centers in the north African country. The rights group, in a report, condemned “the ongoing complicity of European states” for cooperating with the authorities in violence-strewn Libya. At the end of 2020, Libya’s Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration had “legitimized” abuses by taking over two detention centers run by militias from where hundreds of refugees and migrants had forcibly disappeared, it said.

It cited survivor testimony from one facility of guards subjecting women to sexual violence “in exchange for their release or for essentials such as clean water”. Amnesty urged Europe to “suspend cooperation on migration and border control with Libya”. Italy and the European Union have for

years financed, trained and provided aid to the coastguards to stop smugglers from taking migrants and refugees in flimsy boats across the Mediterranean to Europe.

Despite being plunged into chaos after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in 2011, Libya has become a favored springboard for migrants seeking a better life in Europe. UN agencies and non-government organizations operating in the Mediterranean regularly denounce European policies of forced return of migrants.

‘Hellscape of detention’

Diana Eltahawy, Amnesty’s deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa, called the rights group’s new report “horrifying”. It “sheds new light on the suffering of people intercepted at sea and returned to Libya, where they are immediately funneled into arbitrary detention and systematically subjected to torture, sexual violence, forced labor and other exploitation with total impunity”, she said. European nations “have shamefully continued to enable and assist Libyan coastguards in capturing people at sea and forcibly returning them to the hellscape of detention in Libya, despite knowing full well the horrors they will endure”, Eltahawy said.

Eltahawy said Libya’s detention network was “rotten to its core and must be dismantled”. Since the start of the summer, the number of crossings has increased as migrants take advantage of good weather, but the number of people lost at sea has also risen. Nearly 900 migrants have died this year trying to reach Europe from North Africa, according to the International Organization for Migration. —AFP

Algeria frees over 100 involved with protest movement

ALGIERS: Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune on Wednesday ordered the release of 101 detainees held for calling for or taking part in protests as part of the Hirak protest movement, according to a presidential statement. President Tebboune “decreed a pardon for 30 detainees sentenced definitively in cases of assembly and disturbing public order,” the statement said.

The Head of State “also decreed additional clemency measures in favor of 71 young prisoners convicted of the same acts who will be released to join their families, as of Wednesday evening”, the statement added. The mass release follows other measures that coincided with Independence Day on July 5. On July 4, President Tebboune agreed to release 18 young Hirak detainees, a traditional clemency measure on the eve of the independence anniversary celebrations.

The majority of them were young people arrested in the weeks leading up to legislative elections on June 12. Before Wednesday’s announcement, more than 300 people were in prison for acts related to Hirak and/or individual freedoms, according to the National Committee for the Liberation of Prisoners (CNLD). —AFP

International

Cuba lets travelers bring in food, meds duty-free

Havana restores Internet access after protests, but not social media

HAVANA: Travelers arriving in Cuba can now bring in food, medicine and other essentials without paying customs, the government said Wednesday in a concession to angry and unprecedented street protests. Prime Minister Manuel Marrero said in a televised address there would be no limit placed on these goods coming in and the change will be in effect until the end of the year.

Cubans took to the streets in droves on Sunday in an explosion of anger over economic hardship marked by shortages of food, electricity and other essentials. One of the protesters' demands was for people arriving in Cuba to be able to bring in food, medicine and personal hygiene items from abroad without paying customs duties.

One person has died and more than 100 were arrested, including independent journalists and opposition activists, since the anti-government protests broke out in the communist-ruled island over the worst economic crisis in decades. President Miguel Diaz-Canel, who appeared in the televised address with Marrero, reiterated his accusations against the United States, which he blames for the demonstrations.

But in his speech, the Cuban president took a more conciliatory tone. "We must also gain experience from the riots, we also have to make a critical analysis of our problems," he said. "Also perhaps it will be necessary to apologize to someone who, in the midst of the confusion that arises in events like this,

may have been confused, has been mistreated," he said, calling for "peace, harmony among Cubans and respect."

He added that Cubans must "overcome our disagreements between all of us. What we have to promote, even though we have different points of view on certain issues, is between all of us to try to find solutions." Under Cuban law, travelers arriving here can bring up to 10 kg of medicine tax-free. They can also bring in limited amounts of food and personal hygiene gear but must pay customs duties.

Starting Monday, the limits are lifted and so are the duties, Marrero said on TV. "This is a measure we are adopting until December 31. After that, we will assess things," he said. Cuba has blamed a half-century of US economic pressure for the economic crisis, but the downturn also comes amid strict measures against COVID-19 and a rise in virus cases. Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez on Tuesday said the United States had incited social unrest through a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #SOSCuba.

Cuban authorities restored Internet access on Wednesday following three days of interruptions. Access to social media and messaging apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter remained blocked on 3G and 4G, however. Social media is the only way Cubans can access independent media, while messaging apps are their main means of communicating amongst themselves. —AFP



HAVANA: Women use their phones in a street on Wednesday. —AFP

Bolsonaro in hospital, may need surgery

BRASILIA: Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro is suffering from an "intestinal obstruction", the government said on Wednesday, after the far-right leader was admitted to hospital due to persistent hiccups. The 66-year-old far-right leader had been complaining publicly since last week about suffering from the hiccups following a July 3 surgery on a dental implant.

Bolsonaro was first taken to a military hospital in the capital Brasilia but was then flown in a Brazilian Air Force plane to Sao Paulo where he was admitted to the Vila Nova Star private hospital. There he underwent clinical, laboratory and imaging tests and was being kept in the hospital for the time being, doctors said. "He is in good spirits and feels well," the presidency had said earlier in the day.

Bolsonaro was examined in Brasilia by Antonio Macedo, who has operated on the president several times since he was stabbed in the abdomen in 2018 while on the campaign trail. The hospital said he would "initially" be given a "conservative clinical treatment". If it is confirmed he needs an operation, it would be the president's seventh surgery since he was stabbed by a former member of the Socialist and Freedom Party (PSOL), a group that broke away from the Workers' Party (PT) of former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who is eyeing a run against Bolsonaro next year.

"Yet another challenge, a consequence of the assassination attempt carried out by a former member of PSOL, the left-wing arm of the PT, to prevent the victory of millions of Brazilians that wanted change in Brazil," Bolsonaro wrote on Twitter. "A cruel attack not just against me but against democracy."

Speaking to a local radio station last week, Bolsonaro had said: "This happened to me before, maybe due to the medicine I'm taking,



BRASILIA: Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro is seen on a hospital bed on Wednesday. —AFP

I have hiccups 24 hours a day." On Tuesday night, a tired-looking Bolsonaro had complained to supporters outside his official residence in Brasilia about the problem. "People, my voice has gone. If I start talking a lot, the hiccups return... they already have," he said.

Bolsonaro also contracted COVID-19 last year, although his symptoms were mild and he did not need hospital treatment. His admission to hospital came after the Senate launched an investigation over his handling of the pandemic, the seriousness of which he repeatedly downplayed and which has cost almost 540,000 lives in Brazil. The investigation was extended by 90 days on Wednesday.

Bolsonaro is also being investigated by the public prosecutor for allegedly failing to act on an embezzlement tip-off regarding coronavirus vaccine purchases. The opposition is pushing for the chamber of deputies president to open impeachment proceedings against Bolsonaro. —AFP

EU mission experts meet Venezuela defense minister

CARACAS: European Union election experts met on Wednesday with Venezuela's defense minister and Supreme Court president, at a time when the opposition is demanding the release of a top leader accused of terrorism and treason. The EU representatives arrived in Venezuela a week ago to study the possibility of sending a mission to observe mayoral and gubernatorial elections in November, following an invitation from President Nicolas Maduro.

"Enjoyable meeting with the European Union's Electoral Exploratory Mission, on the eve of the next mega-elections that will take place in Venezuela," Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino tweeted. "We reiterated our democratic calling and the fundamental role the (armed forces) play in guaranteeing peace."

Venezuela's armed forces are the main authority backing Maduro's continued hold on power, despite pressure from the opposition and international sanctions. Earlier, the EU delegation met with the Supreme Court leadership. "Our goal is peace and respect for the will of the people," said court president Maikel Moreno in a statement released by the body, which is dominated by Maduro loyalists. The EU has not responded to AFP requests for comment on the meetings. —AFP

International

German Chancellor Merkel visits White House in swan song

Angela, Biden to discuss climate change, COVID-19 vaccine distribution

WASHINGTON: Chancellor Angela Merkel visits the White House in her diplomatic swan song yesterday, underlining how important the veteran German leader has been to the transatlantic relationship, but also highlighting the unanswered questions she leaves behind.

Merkel, who has dealt with four US presidents and is stepping down later this year, will meet President Joe Biden for an official working visit.

Starting with a breakfast at Vice President Kamala Harris's residence, before switching to the White House for one-on-one talks with Biden, and then an early dinner, the day is designed to "convey gratitude," a senior Biden administration official said.

The White House insists this is "very much a working visit," rather than a ceremonial farewell for the woman widely seen as Europe's steadiest leader during almost 16 years at the helm of the continent's biggest economy. She and Biden will discuss climate change, COVID-19 vaccine distribution, and the future of Afghanistan now that US, German and other foreign troops are leaving.

Jihadist threats in Africa's Sahel region are on the agenda, the administration official said. Reflecting Germany's pivotal role in NATO and transatlantic security, the two leaders were also set to discuss Russian "cyberattacks and territorial aggression," Ukraine's struggle against Russia and "countering China's rising influence."

French police fire tear gas as thousands protest against virus rules

PARIS: Police in Paris fired tear gas to disperse demonstrators on Wednesday, as 19,000 people protested throughout France over new coronavirus restrictions. Some of the protests began in the morning in Paris as the annual military parade for the traditional Bastille Day parade, watched by President Emmanuel Macron, was taking place along the famous Champs-Élysées.

The demonstrators are unhappy at the decision announced on Monday to oblige health workers to get vaccinated and bring in a vaccine health pass for most public places. Unvaccinated people would require, for example, a negative test result to enter restaurants. Since the announcement a record number of French people booked appointments for COVID-19 jabs.

"This is in the name of freedom" was the message from some of the protesters. In one area of the French capital police fired teargas to disperse the crowd. The declared protest route was not respected, the prefecture of police said in a tweet, deploring the "throwing of projectiles" and lighting of fires by the demonstrators.

Throughout Paris some 2,250 people protested, while other demonstrations took place in Toulouse, Bordeaux, Montpellier, Nantes and elsewhere. The French authorities put the total number of protesters at 19,000. The interior ministry said that there were altogether 53 different protests throughout France.

"Down with dictatorship", "down with the health pass" protesters chanted. One of them, Yann Fontaine, a 29-year-old notary's clerk from the Berry region in central France, said he had come to demonstrate in Paris arguing that the imposition of a health pass equalled "segregation".

"Macron plays on fears, it's revolting. I know people who will now get vaccinated just so that they can take their children to

Unresolved issues

However, Merkel is now out of time for resolving some of the pressing issues facing Europe and the United States. These include the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline which is set to funnel Russian natural gas to Germany.

Not only will it bypass Ukraine, leading to fears that Russia is deliberately weakening its neighbor's economy, but the project underscores European energy dependency on an increasingly hostile Moscow.

Despite strong criticism of the pipeline, Biden in May waived key US sanctions on Nord Stream 2 after concluding that it was too late to stop the project and that it was better to seek cooperation with Germany.

Biden "will raise his long standing concerns" yesterday, the official said, but clearly there is little in the way of movement that can be expected.

Biden has invited Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to the White House later this summer. However, Nord Stream 2 is one of the reasons why Zelensky is nervous about how much he can count on European support against the far more powerful Russians.

On the flip side, Germany's next leaders will no longer be able to be sure that whoever holds power in the United States after Biden won't revert to the extraordinary disruption of the Donald



WASHINGTON: US Vice President Kamala Harris (L) welcomes German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the vice president's residence at the Naval Observatory for a working breakfast, in Washington, DC, yesterday. — AFP

Trump era. "Trump's raging hostility forced Germany to examine the unhealthy aspects of its dependency on America," wrote Constanze Stelzenmuller, from the Brookings Institution think tank, in the Financial Times. — AFP



PARIS: A woman holds a placard reading in French "Never in my body the liquid of dictatorship shall enter" as she rallies in central Paris to protest against a governmental decision to impose COVID-19 tests for unvaccinated people who want to eat in restaurants. — AFP

the movies, not to protect others from serious forms of COVID," he said.

The French government on Tuesday defended its decision to impose COVID tests for unvaccinated people who want to eat in restaurants or take long-distance trips, as the country looks to avoid a surge in more contagious Delta cases.

"There isn't any vaccine obligation, this is maximum inducement," government spokesman Gabriel Attal said then. "I have a hard time understanding, in a country where 11 vaccines are already mandatory... that this could be seen as a dictatorship," he said, adding that after a year of studying the vaccines "the time of doubting is long past". The rules will be relaxed for teenagers who have only been able to get the jabs since mid-June—"Making summer hell is out of the question," Attal said.

According to an Elabe opinion poll published Tuesday, the new safety measures have a large majority of approval amongst French people. Around 35.5 million people—just over half of France's population—have received at least one vaccine dose so far. — AFP

Britain, Australia brace for UNESCO world heritage rulings

PARIS: The world heritage committee of the UN's cultural agency UNESCO begins debating Friday its list of World Heritage sites, with Australia and Britain furious over looming changes to the status of the Great Barrier Reef and Liverpool city.

Nearly 50 new sites could be added to the over 1,100 listed worldwide by UNESCO as World Heritage, during two weeks of online meetings hosted by China. The agenda is particularly heavy after last year's meeting was cancelled because of the Covid pandemic. The prestigious World Heritage label can be a boon for tourism while encouraging governments to protect cultural or environmental treasures, under the watchful eye of UNESCO advisers. But addition isn't permanent, and sites can also be stripped of their status or be warned they are at risk.

The agency's expert committee will be examining the state of conservation of around 250 sites, of which 53 are already on its "List of World Heritage in Danger"—a move meant to prod officials into taking corrective action. The at-risk list includes the historic waterfront and docks of Liverpool, the northwest England port city that played a key role in Britain's industrial revolution, and which risks outright deletion.

The so-called Maritime Mercantile City also saw the departure of millions of emigrants—as well as African slaves—to the United States and elsewhere, a history that forged what UNESCO deemed Liverpool's "distinctive character and unique spirit." But since 2012 the agency has locked horns with local officials over development that has seen extensive restorations but also new construction that UNESCO experts say is overwhelming the district. It has urged the city to limit building heights and reconsider a new stadium at the Bramley-Moore Dock, warning of "significant loss to its authenticity and integrity." — AFP

Court rules Polish judicial reform 'not compatible' with EU law

Warsaw, Brussels have been at loggerheads for years over reforms

LUXEMBOURG: The EU's Court of Justice yesterday ruled that a central part of Poland's judicial reforms was "not compatible" with the law, escalating a standoff that could trigger financial penalties. "Poland has failed to fulfil its obligations under EU law," the court said in its ruling on a contested reform concerning disciplinary cases involving judges in Poland.

"Where the court finds that there has been a failure to fulfil obligations, the member state concerned must take the measures necessary to rectify the situation," it said.

Warsaw and Brussels have been at loggerheads for years over reforms pushed through by the Polish government, which is led by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party.

The Polish law on reforming the judiciary, which came into force in February last year, prevents judges from referring questions of law to the European Court of Justice.

It set up a "disciplinary chamber" to oversee Polish judges, with the power to lift their immunity to expose them to criminal proceedings or cut their salaries.

The EU court ruling comes a day after the same court ordered Poland to cease all activities of the "disciplinary chamber". If Poland fails to comply, it could face financial

penalties.

Government spokesman Piotr Muller told public broadcaster TVP1 yesterday that with its rulings, the European court was "attempting to acquire the competences of the member states" on judicial matters.

"It's an attempt to give EU institutions competences beyond what they have been granted in the treaties," he said.

The government argues the reforms are necessary to tackle corruption and end Communist-era legacies in the judiciary.

But the European Commission says they undermine rule of law and has sought to bring Poland, as well as Hungary, back into line with what it sees as European democratic norms. Poland's Constitutional Court on Wednesday defied Brussels with its own ruling saying that any interim measures from the EU court against Poland's judicial reforms were "not in line" with the Polish constitution.

Government critics said that ruling constituted a departure from the EU's legal order, dubbing it a kind of "Polexit".

Former EU chief Donald Tusk, head of the opposition Civic Platform party, accused PiS of "leaving the EU". "Only we Poles can successfully oppose this," he tweeted. —AFP



GDNMEX: EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (R) welcomes Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (L) as he arrives for a bilateral meeting in Brussels. —AFP

Employers can ban headscarves in some cases

BERLIN: Employers can in principle ban staff from wearing headscarves in the workplace, an EU court ruled yesterday in two cases brought by Muslim women working in Germany. A ban on religious symbols such as headscarves "may be justified by the employer's need to present a neutral image towards customers or to prevent social disputes", the European Court of Justice said in a statement.

The employer must also show it is not discriminating between different beliefs and religions in its policy, the court said. The two women, a cashier in a chemist and a special needs carer, had taken their cases to German courts after being prohibited from wearing headscarves at work.

The German courts had then referred the cases to the ECJ for an interpretation of EU law. The woman working at the chemist had been employed there since 2002 and had initially not worn a headscarf, but had wanted to begin wearing one after returning from parental leave in 2014.

However, the chemist instructed her to come to work "without conspicuous, large-sized signs of any political, philosophical or religious beliefs", the ECJ said. The second woman was employed in 2016 as carer at a non-profit association and had initially worn a headscarf at work. She too went on parental leave, during which time the association issued a policy prohibiting the wearing of visible signs of political, ideological or religious conviction in the workplace for employees with customer contact. —AFP

Dutch crime reporter dies after shooting

THE HAGUE: Dutch crime reporter Peter R. de Vries, who was critically wounded after being shot in broad daylight in Amsterdam last week, has died in hospital, his family announced yesterday.

A prominent investigative journalist who had been involved in a court case against one of the country's most wanted drug barons, De Vries, 64, was shot at least five times as he exited a television studio nine days ago.

He was rushed to hospital where he had been fighting for his life since.

"Peter fought until the end, but he has lost the battle," his family said in a statement to the RTL commercial broadcaster.

"He was surrounded by the people who loved him when he died," they added, saying funeral arrangements have not yet been made. The attack on De Vries, who first won fame for his inside reporting on the 1983 kidnapping of Heineken millionaire Freddy Heineken, sparked widespread condemnation and concern for the safety of journalists in Europe.

"Deeply saddened by the news of Peter R. de Vries' passing," EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said. "Investigative journalists are vital to our democracies. We must do everything we can to protect them," she tweeted.

"Peter R. de Vries' death has touched me deeply," Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte added. "It's almost impossible to comprehend," Rutte said. De Vries' family praised him as a courageous father and husband.

"Peter lived by the courage of his convictions: 'On



AMSTERDAM: People bring flowers for murdered Dutch crime journalist Peter R. de Vries at the back of the Lange Leidsdwarstraat street in the center of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, yesterday. —AFP

bended knee is no way to be free." "We are incredibly proud of him, but at the same time inconsolable."

Suspects arrested

Two suspects were arrested shortly after the shooting and briefly appeared in court last Friday. The two men, identified by Dutch media as Polish national Kamil E. aged 35 and Delano G., 21, will remain in custody for another two weeks, said the Amsterdam District Court.

Police arrested the two suspects in a car near The Hague shortly after the shooting. Dutch media reports said Kamil E., a Polish citizen living in the small central Dutch town of Maurik, allegedly drove the getaway car, while Delano G., from Rotterdam, is believed to have pulled the trigger. —AFP

International

South Africa calls up army reserves in bid to crush looting

Around 72 people died and more than 1,200 arrested

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa mustered its army reserves yesterday in a bid to quell looting that has stoked fears of shortages and dealt a crippling blow to its already battered economy. "All reserve members are to report for duty at first light tomorrow morning 15 July 2021 at their respective units," army chief Lieutenant-General Lawrence Mbatia said in orders issued overnight as the unrest entered its sixth day.

Soldiers should "report ready with their necessary equipment," the defence ministry said in a statement. On Wednesday, the government said it would call out around 25,000 troops to tackle the emergency — 10 times the number that it initially deployed.

As relative calm returned to Johannesburg, Police Minister Bheki Cele hailed the boost from the military, saying he was confident it would "turn around the volatile situation in parts of KwaZulu-Natal" province, the epicentre of the unrest.

Stores and warehouses in the two provinces have been ransacked, devastating supply chains on which food, fuel and medicines depend in Africa's most industrialised economy. According to official figures, 72 people have died and more than 1,200 people have been arrested, while South Africa's consumer goods regulatory body estimates that more than 800 shops have been plundered.

Looting continued yesterday in KZN, but the situation was quieter in Johannesburg, where volunteers in the city's townships took part in cleanup operations, one of which was led by Environment Minister Barbara Creecy. At a cleanup at the Jabulani shopping centre in Soweto, community leader Musa Mbele-Radebe, 30, told AFP, "The use of the army is quite good, because our people are quite scared of the army compared to the police. "It only took four soldiers to control a situation of a thousand (people) that was gathering in this mall."

Zuma protest

The unrest began a day after former president Jacob Zuma—who commands support from some of the country's poor—began a 15-month jail term on July 8 for refusing to testify to a commission probing corruption under his tenure.

Protests quickly turned into looting as crowds pillaged shopping malls, hauling away goods as police stood by, seemingly powerless to act. As the crisis escalated, the armed forces on Monday said they were sending 2,500 troops to help restore order.

The figure was criticised by many as paltry, given that 70,000 soldiers were deployed last year to enforce a strict coronavirus lockdown. On Wednesday, Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula told parliament she had submitted a request for "plus or minus" 25,000 troops. The request came after President Cyril Ramaphosa told leaders of political parties that parts of the country "may soon be running short of basic provisions" following disruption to supply chains.

"The next big crisis will be the threat to food security in KZN, along with the supply of medication and fuel," said John Steenhuisen, head of the opposition Democratic Alliance. "Protecting these supply chains must be a priority of the... deployment." TV footage of the casual looting has deeply shocked many South Africans. Business confidence has been savaged at a time when the economy is already mired in unemployment, especially among young people.

Michael Sun, a DA safety and security official in Johannesburg, said he went on a tour of the city and saw a car dealer whose 50 vehicles were just burnt-out shells. "The devastation is really bad," he said. "Lots of the people are salvaging what they can get. Lots of the smaller businesses don't have insurance—they are struggling."

Locals have started forming vigilante groups to protect infrastruc-



ALEXANDRA, South Africa: People stand and watch at a food market as members of the South African Defence Force (SANDF) patrol their area in Alexandra township, Johannesburg yesterday. —AFP

ture in their neighbourhoods. Clashes have erupted in Durban between black South Africans and counterparts of Indian heritage. On Wednesday night, Cele visited Phoenix, a predominantly Indian community where 15 people have been killed in clashes. The hashtag #PhoenixMassacre was trending yesterday.

"The Indian nation here in KZN is the second largest outside of India," the new Zulu king, Misizulu Zulu, said in an appeal to his community on Wednesday. "We have lived in peace for many years alongside them. Therefore I ask: Let us be understanding and thoughtful towards each other." —AFP

Melbourne joins Sydney in lockdown, 12 million ordered to stay at home

MELBOURNE: Australia's bid to quash a fast-spreading coronavirus outbreak will see its second largest city lock down late yesterday, bringing the total number of Australians under stay-at-home orders to around 12 million. Melbourne and the rest of Victoria will join Sydney in a "hard and fast" lockdown, state premier Dan Andrews said, as Australia battles an outbreak of the Delta variant.

The largely COVID-free country has recorded nearly 1,000 cases of the strain nationwide in the last month. Andrews said he took the decision to return Melbourne to its fifth lockdown "with a heavy heart" but it was an "absolute necessity". "Nothing about this virus is fair," he said, describing how just 18 cases in Victoria had mixed with thousands of contacts who must now be traced and tested.

"You only get one chance to go hard and go fast," he said. "If you wait, if you hesitate, if you doubt, then you will always be looking back wishing you had done more earlier." The lockdown will begin shortly before midnight local time on Thursday and last five days. Australia's largest city, Sydney, is already in its fourth week of lockdown, after the virus spread from overseas aircraft workers to their local driver in mid-June. Sydney authorities said Thursday that the situation had "stabilised" — with 65 new cases reported in the last 24 hours. —AFP

Kenya arrests 'bloodthirsty vampire' over child killings

NAIROBI: Kenyan police were yesterday holding a man described as a "bloodthirsty vampire" accused of the grisly murders of at least 10 children. Masten Milimo Wanjala, 20, was arrested on Wednesday over the killing of two children whose bodies were found dumped in a forested area of the capital Nairobi.

But in a chilling confession, he admitted to the cold-blooded killing of at least 10 young teenagers, police said. They described his arrest as a major breakthrough in an investigation into a spate of disturbing child disappearances in Kenya — almost two a day in recent weeks, according to police. "Wanjala single-handedly massacred his victims in the most callous manner, sometimes through sucking blood from their veins before executing them," the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) said on Twitter late Wednesday, describing him as a "bloodthirsty vampire".

The murders, targeting 12- and 13-year-olds, stretch back five years. His victims were drugged and drained of their blood and some of them strangled, police said. Wanjala's arrest was splashed across Thursday's front pages of the main newspapers in Kenya, with some publishing pictures of the suspect in a blood-stained football jersey.

According to police, Wanjala's first victim was a 12-year-old girl he kidnapped five years ago in Machakos county east of Nairobi. The murder of his next victim in western Kenya sparked protests, with locals torching the house of the person they sus-



NAIROBI: A man poses with daily newspapers (*The Standard*, *Daily Nation*) which both carry headlines on a murderer involved in the deaths of at least 10 children in Nairobi yesterday. —AFP

pected killed the boy.

"In a nerve-wracking blow-by-blow account, the murderer recounted harrowing details of how he lured victims to his killer jaws before squeezing (the) dear life out of the innocent children," the DCI said on Twitter.

"Unbeknownst to some of the worried families, their children were long executed by the beast and their remains dumped in thicket. Others were submerged in sewer lines in the city and left to rot away," it added.

Police said he had demanded 30,000 Kenyan shillings (\$277/234 euros) from the parents of one teenage boy before killing him. The bodies of several children feared to have died at Wanjala's hands have yet to be found.

Wanjala was unapologetic over his actions and told detectives he derived "a lot of pleasure" from killing his victims. —AFP

International

Desperate search for oxygen in Myanmar as latest COVID wave hits

Volunteers step in to remove bodies of victims from their neighborhoods

YANGON: Residents across Myanmar's biggest city are defying a military curfew in a desperate search for oxygen to keep their loved ones breathing as a new coronavirus wave crashes over the coup-wracked country.

The spike in cases is the latest blow to Myanmar, already suffering from a February coup and a bloody crackdown on dissent that has killed over 900 people and gutted the economy. Hundreds queued across Yangon as the sun rose Wednesday in the hope of refilling blue oxygen cylinders to take home to family members stricken with the virus.

Some had brought chairs and prepared for a long wait. For others, it was too late. "My sister was suffering from COVID-19 for three days," Than Zaw Win, told AFP as he left one of the queues in the city of some 7 million. "In the first day, she was dizzy with low (blood) pressure... and she suffered a lot yesterday as she couldn't breathe well."

"But while I was queueing to fill oxygen this morning, my niece called me to go back home as my sister had died." Authorities logged over 7,000 new cases on Wednesday — compared with fewer than 50 per day in early May.

Millions in Yangon and the second city of Mandalay have been ordered to stay home, but the toll continues to rise and volunteer teams are stepping in to remove the bodies of victims from their neighborhoods. Ye Kyaw Moe, a sailor, said he slipped out at 3am — half an hour before the lifting of a military-imposed curfew — to get a place in the oxygen line. But when he arrived at a refill centre in Yangon there were already 14

others in front of him.

"I haven't slept for the whole night" he told AFP. "I also had to be careful to avoid the soldiers as we are still under martial law." The State Administration Council — as the junta calls itself — says there is no need for alarm. "Actually we have enough Oxygen," ran the headline in Tuesday's Global New Light of Myanmar, a state-backed newspaper.

"The people do not need to worry about it so much and should not spread the rumour," it quoted junta leader Min Aung Hlaing as saying. But Than Zaw Win disagreed. "She had no other diseases... There is no way my sister would have died if we had enough oxygen," he said.

'Through rain or sun'

Swathes of Myanmar were put under partial lockdown last year but enforcement was often lax in the developing nation, where many had to choose between following regulations and feeding their families. The new wave comes with the country reeling from post-coup violence, and with many medical workers joining a nationwide civil disobedience campaign against the military.

Infections are also seeping across Myanmar's porous borders — last week a cluster in the border city of Ruili helped push China's daily case-load to its highest in six months. Of the 57 cases reported nationwide, 12 were Myanmar nationals in Ruili, authorities said.

Vaccine rollouts have also been slow — only around 1.75 million people have been vaccinated in the country of 54 million, according to the junta. "The junta lacks the resources, the capa-



YANGON: Picture taken on July 14, 2021 shows people waiting to fill empty oxygen canisters at a location donating oxygen at no cost in Yangon, amid a surge in the number of COVID-19 cases. — AFP

bilities, and the legitimacy to bring this crisis under control," UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar Tom Andrews said Wednesday.

"The crisis... is particularly lethal because of the pervasive mistrust of the military junta." The spike is also compounding difficulties for already overstretched humanitarian workers. "Moving staff to where they can do the most good, moving aid to communities who need it, all becomes more challenging," a spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross in the country told AFP.

Myanmar is set to receive four million vaccine doses from China by the first week of August — too late for those fighting for breath. At another queue in Yangon, Aung Kyaw was hoping to get more oxygen for his wife.

The last time he wanted to fill up his 40-litre (10-gallon) cylinder, he was kept waiting for 24 hours, the 43-year-old said. Unlike others, he said he cannot afford to travel across the city looking for refill centres where the queues are shorter. "So I need to wait and queue here through rain or sun and the whole night too." — AFP

Indonesian ex-minister gets five years in baby lobster graft case

JAKARTA: Indonesia's former fisheries minister Edhy Prabowo was sentenced to five years in prison yesterday after he was convicted in a corruption case linked to baby lobster exports. Prabowo, 48, was among more than a dozen suspects arrested last year on charges that they took bribes for issuing permits to export the crustaceans.

The shipments were banned under Prabowo's predecessor due to sustainability concerns. "The defendant has been proven guilty of committing corruption," presiding judge Albertus Usada said yesterday as he passed sentence in a video hearing held due to COVID-19 restrictions.

"(Prabowo) did not set a good example as a public official." The Jakarta court also ordered Prabowo to pay more than 11 billion rupiah (\$758,000) in fines and restitution or face as much as two additional years in prison.

Graft remains a big problem in the Southeast Asian nation, where politicians are widely seen as among the



JAKARTA: Indonesia's former fisheries minister Edhy Prabowo sits in a detention vehicle following a verdict hearing in Jakarta yesterday, after being sentenced to five years in prison in a corruption case linked to baby lobster exports. — AFP

most corrupt public officials. In a separate case, Indonesia's former social affairs minister Juliari Batubara was awaiting sentencing on charges that he took \$1.2 million in bribes linked to food aid for those hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

Last year, Indonesia's former sports minister was jailed for seven years after being found guilty of taking some \$800,000 in bribes. — AFP

Singapore police probe karaoke bars after virus outbreak

SINGAPORE: Singapore police are investigating several karaoke bars for breaching coronavirus restrictions and have arrested 20 foreign women for alleged "vice-related activities" after an outbreak linked to the nightspots, authorities said.

The city-state has seen a spike in cases this week connected to the bars — including a 10-month high of local transmissions on Wednesday — and the number of infections in the cluster now stands at 87. A staple of Singapore nightlife, the karaoke bars typically have blacked-out windows and are frequented by foreign female "hostesses".

Police said in a statement late Wednesday they were investigating three nightspots for breaching virus measures by allegedly providing "hostessing services". Under current virus restrictions, the bars were only supposed to be operating in a limited fashion, providing food and drinks. Twenty women, aged 20 to 34, from South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, have been arrested for "suspected involvement in vice-related activities" at the bars, police said. The first reported infection in the cluster was a Vietnamese hostess on a short-term visitor pass to Singapore who had been to many of the bars, officials said. Another infection linked to the cluster was a passenger on a cruise, which was forced to return to Singapore earlier than scheduled Wednesday after the case was detected. — AFP

International

Taliban offer three-month ceasefire in return for prisoners' release

Pakistan guards use tear gas to disperse crowd at Afghan border

KABUL: The Taliban have offered a three-month ceasefire in exchange for the release of 7,000 insurgent prisoners, an Afghan government negotiator said yesterday, as the militant group continues a sweeping offensive across the country.

"It is a big demand," said Nader Nadery, a key member of the government team involved in peace talks with the Taliban, adding the insurgents also demanded the removal of their leaders' names from a United Nations blacklist. It was not immediately clear how the government would react to the ceasefire offer, which comes as the United States accelerates the pace of a troop withdrawal due to be finished by August 31.

Nadery's revelation came as Pakistan security forces used tear gas yesterday to disperse hundreds of people who tried to force their way across the border from Chaman to Spin Boldak in Afghanistan. The border was closed Wednesday by Pakistan officials after the Taliban seized Spin Boldak and raised insurgent flags above the town.

"An unruly mob of about 400 people tried to cross the gate forcefully. They threw stones, which forced us to use tear gas," said a security official on the Pakistan side. He said around 1,500 people had gathered at the border Wednesday waiting to cross.

Jumadad Khan, a senior government official in Chaman, said the situation was now "under control". An Afghan Taliban source told AFP that hundreds of people had also gathered on the Afghan side, hoping to travel in the other direction.

"We are talking to Pakistani authorities. A formal meeting to open the border is scheduled for today, and hopefully, it will open in a day or two," he said. The crossing provides direct access to Pakistan's Balochistan province—where the Taliban's top leadership has been based for decades—along with an unknown number of reserve fighters who regularly enter Afghanistan to help bolster their ranks.

A major highway leading from the border connects to Pakistan's commercial capital Karachi and its sprawling port on the Arabian Sea, which is considered a linchpin for Afghanistan's billion-dollar heroin trade that has provided a crucial source of revenue for the Taliban's war chest over the years.

'Ceasefire to consolidate power'

Spin Boldak was the latest in a string of border crossings and dry ports seized by the insurgents in recent weeks as they look to choke off revenues much-needed by Kabul while also filling their own coffers. "The bazaar is closed and traders are scared that the situation will turn bad," Mohammad Rasoul, a trader in Spin Boldak, told AFP by phone.

"They fear that their products will be looted. There are scores of opportunists waiting to loot." Muska Dastageer, a lecturer at the American University of Afghanistan, said the Taliban ceasefire offer was a likely attempt by them to consolidate the positions they have gained so swiftly in recent weeks.

"A ceasefire now would effectively prohibit ANDSF from retaking the crucial border points which Taliban have captured recently," she



CHAMAN, BALOCHISTAN: Pakistani border guards cordon off the area as stranded people gather near a border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan in Chaman yesterday. — AFP

tweeted, referring to Afghan forces. "I think the timing of this ceasefire offer has more to do with their wish to consolidate power over these areas."

At least one Kabul resident said the Taliban could not be trusted. "Last year the government released 5,000 Taliban prisoners but their release did not bring peace," Ahmad Jawed told AFP. "Instead most of them are now fighting

government forces.

"Now they are asking for 7,000 prisoners to be released. That is a big number." Authorities last year released more than 5,000 Taliban prisoners to help kick start peace talks in Doha, but negotiations have so far failed to reach any political settlement, and the latest offensives suggest the insurgents are now set on a military victory. — AFP

Hong Kong journalist union says press freedoms 'in tatters'

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's press freedoms are "in tatters" as China remoulds the once outspoken business hub in its own authoritarian image, the city's main journalist union said yesterday, adding it feared "fake news" laws were on their way.

"The past year is definitely the worst year so far for press freedom," Ronson Chan, chairman of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA), said as the union published its annual report.

The report referenced a cascade of events impacting the press since China imposed a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong last summer to stamp out dissent after huge and often violent democracy protests the year before.

Authors pointed to the jailing of pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai and the freezing of his Apple Daily newspaper's assets—a move which led to the Beijing-critical tabloid's closure.

More than 1,000 people, including 700 journalists, lost their jobs while Lai and multiple Apple Daily executives are currently behind bars, charged with trying to undermine China's national security.

The HKJA's report also accused authorities of turning the city's public broadcaster RTHK into "a government propaganda apparatus" by sacking critical staff and cancelling current affairs shows. Accessing public databases was also becoming harder, the report warned, highlighting how one RTHK journalist was convicted for using vehicle licence plates for an investigation into a violent attack on democracy supporters by government loyalists.

The government has also sought to restrict journalists from accessing the identities of company owners on the city's registry, a move criticised by financial transparency groups.

"Suppression from the authorities is felt across different forms of media," the report warned. "Freedoms have seriously deteriorated under a repressive government."

Chan said he feared further legislation was now in the works to restrict the media.

Top officials and pro-Beijing lawmakers in Hong Kong have called for "fake news" laws, something activists fear will be used against coverage authorities dislike.

"There are already many knives hanging over journalists' heads like laws against sedition and incitement so we do not need one more named a fake news law," Chan said.

Hong Kong has plunged down an annual press freedom ranking by Reporters Without Borders, from 18th place in 2002 to 80th this year. Mainland China languishes at 177th out of 180, above only Turkmenistan, North Korea and Eritrea.

Multiple international media companies have regional head-



HONG KONG: Chairperson of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) Ronson Chan (L) and Chris Yeung, chief editor of the annual report, pose during a press conference for the release of the organisation's annual report "Freedom in Tatters" in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

quarters in Hong Kong, attracted to the business-friendly regulations and free speech provisions written into the city's mini-constitution. But many local and international outlets are questioning whether they have a future there. — AFP

LIFESTYLE

FRIDAY, JULY 16, 2021

www.kuwaittimes.net

**Britney Spears
wins right to new
lawyer in battle
to remove dad**

See Page 24

.....
Spanish influencer Marta Lozano arrives for the screening of the film 'A Felesegem Tortenete' (The Story Of My Wife) at the 74th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France.—AFP
.....

Lifestyle | Features

CASABLANCA HIP-HOP
COMES TO CANNES

Nabil Ayouch says he can barely believe his movie, "Casablanca Beats", is the first Moroccan film in almost 60 years to compete for the Palme d'Or at Cannes. It is as if "I was a child and I've passed a bakery with a lovely chocolate éclair in the window that I've never been allowed to have-and now finally I can," the director told AFP.

His is only the second Moroccan film ever chosen for the official selection at Cannes, after Abdelaziz Ramdani's "Ames et rythmes" back in 1962. "Casablanca Beats"-the French-Moroccan director's seventh feature-is about young people seeking an outlet through hip hop. "They have so many stories to tell but not the tools to do it," said Ayouch, 52. It is set in Sidi Moumen, a rundown district made infamous in 2003 after a group of radicalised local youth carried out suicide bombings in the city, killing 33 people. Ayouch is not new to the neighborhood.

His 2012 film "Horses of God", inspired by a novel by Moroccan painter and author Mahi Binebine, followed two brothers from their childhood up to the day they decide to become suicide bombers, and used non-professional actors from the district. He also shot scenes from his indie hit "Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets" there more than a decade earlier.



Nabil Ayouch, a French-Moroccan television and film director, producer, and writer poses for a picture in Casablanca. — AFP

In 2014, Ayouch founded the Stars Cultural Centre in the deprived district, offering music, dance and other classes. The filmmaker said the centre provided the idea-and much of the cast-for the fictional "Casablanca Beats". "I attended some workshops and it was really incredible to see them dancing, and to listen to their lyrics," he recalled. "I wanted the whole world to hear what they have to say."

'Affront to moral values'

The participation of "Casablanca Beats" at the Cannes festival, which runs until

Saturday, has been widely welcomed in Morocco. That's in sharp contrast to his earlier film "Much Loved", a candid take on prostitution in the country that triggered anger online and even death threats. The film was shown at Cannes in 2015 but banned at home, where authorities deemed it damaged the country's image as well as being "an affront to moral values and Moroccan women".

"The 'Much Loved' episode isn't totally forgotten, but the wounds have largely healed and my determination is intact," said Ayouch. "I want my films to travel but my natural audience is the Moroccan public," he added. "Those who say I ride on the back of others' misery don't watch my films." The director grew up in the working-class Paris suburb of Sarcelles, falling in love with the films of Charlie Chaplin and Terrence Malick through the cinema club of his local youth center. In the late 1990s, at the age of 30, he moved permanently to Morocco and founded his production company. "It's thanks to cinema that I've been able to go find Morocco," he told AFP. "I want to show it in all its generosity, diversity and contradictions." — AFP



Spike Lee

He's gotta have it: Spike Lee's Cannes cash-in

US director Spike Lee raised eyebrows at the Cannes Wednesday when he put signed film festival merchandise up for sale on his personal website. The legendary "Do The Right Thing" director is the first black person ever to head the jury at the world's biggest film festival. He has cut a dash with his own very personal sense of style on the red carpet, sporting a tricolor beret to mark France's Bastille Day on Wednesday. However, the Brooklyn-based filmmaker was called out for putting signed 1.50-euro festival postcards up for sale on his Instagram page for \$100.

Photographer Samina Seyed, who has more than 42,000 followers on the app, said: "Dear Spike, I know that your signature is priceless... but \$100 dollars for your name on a postcard?" Lee adorns festival posters all over the French Riviera resort, and also features on massive billboards promoting luxury Montblanc pens. He has also collaborated with Louis Vuitton for his Cannes wardrobe. His website urges his fans to buy the postcards to "celebrate the first black president of the jury in the festival's 74-year history". It also says he is the first living person ever to appear on Cannes' official poster. Lee, 64, has spent much of the festival supporting black and minority artists and attended an early morning motivational breakfast for migrants making a new life in France. AFP contacted both the festival and Lee for comment but received no immediate comment. — AFP

Celine Dion biopic powered by love at Cannes

A biopic of Celine Dion offered some light relief from the usual gritty art-house fare at Cannes. "Aline: The Voice of Love" is one of the least pretentious music biopics in memory, presenting Dion as a gawky nerd who nonetheless sailed from child stardom to become the stadium-filling queen of soft rock. The film-makers said they tweaked the star's name to Aline Dieu to give them some wriggle room over the details of her story, though it hews closely to Dion's real life and songs. "Otherwise we would have a brother complaining that his jumper in 1988 was blue not red," joked Valerie Lemerrier, who directs and stars in the film, at a news conference Wednesday.

While it takes a very relaxed, low-drama approach to its subject, the film does include one striking directorial decision by having Lemerrier play Dion from the age of 12 right through to adulthood, with the help of some photo-shopping. But there was never any suggestion that the film would do anything but fawn over the star. "We were never

going to give her the second degree," said Lemerrier. "Celine is someone that I admire a lot, that never bores me. Whatever she does, it's always amusing, interesting-she's captivating." The film has been delayed by the pandemic, having been set for release before Christmas, and now due in cinemas this November. Lemerrier was philosophical: "If we hadn't had this delay, we wouldn't be here in Cannes... and hey, it gave me some time to tidy up my house."

'Character and humor'

The actress said she did not feel the need to meet the real Dion, having so immersed herself in her performances and TV appearances. "Celine hasn't seen the

film, and I don't think I'll rush to show her either. She's lost people close to her and I think she's someone who needs to keep looking forward in order to keep going," Lemerrier said. She was referring to the death of Dion's husband, Rene Angelil, who was 20 years her senior. Their out-of-the-ordinary love story is central to the film. Lemerrier added: "I've dreamed since the start of the moment when she sees it and I hope she likes it and sees the care all of us took to showcase her character, her humor." She will be hoping that Dion takes a more favorable attitude than some reviewers. —AFP



Celine Dion

Virus-hit star **Lea Seydoux** pulls out of Cannes

French star Lea Seydoux was forced to pull out of the Cannes film festival Wednesday after coming down with the virus despite being fully vaccinated. The actress, who is in three films running for the festival's Palme d'Or top prize, had already missed the star-studded premiere of Wes Anderson's "The French Dispatch". Seydoux plays the prison guard muse and model of a criminally insane artist (Benicio del Toro) in Anderson's sparkling piece of whimsy which was adored by the critics.

The Bond star tested positive for the virus last week but was asymptomatic. She was taking daily PCR tests in the hope that she

would make the screening of one of the four films she is appearing in at the world's biggest movie gathering. "Sadly, I have to self-quarantine in Paris and won't be able to attend this year," she said in a statement. "I wish I could celebrate the return of cinema to my favorite festival, but it is in everyone's best interest to err on the side of caution and do my part to keep everyone safe and healthy," she told Variety, the film industry bible.

She was also due to walk the red carpet on Wednesday for Hungarian Ildiko Enyedi's "The Story of My Wife" and Arnaud Desplechin's "Deception", which are both in the main competition. Seydoux, who shared the Palme d'Or

in 2013 for her daring performance in "Blue is the Warmest Color", was also to lend her star power to the premiere of Bruno Dumont's "France", where she plays a newsreader who wants to escape the limelight.

Thousands of industry movers and shakers from outside the European Union—including those who have been fully vaccinated—have been tested daily before being allowed into the Palais des Festival, where the premieres are mainly held. With up to 3,000 tests a day being done, festival organizers say only a handful of people have tested positive. —AFP



In this file photo French actress Lea Seydoux poses during a photocall for the film "Oh Mercy! (Roubaix, une Lumiere)" at the 72nd edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. — AFP

Lights, action, Luxembourg: Cinema's crush on Vicky Krieps

Vicky Krieps from tiny Luxembourg is headed for the big time, with a busy schedule of blockbusters in the pipeline and two official selections at the Cannes film festival. Since acting opposite movie monument Daniel Day-Lewis in "Phantom Thread" in 2017, Krieps and her trademark, lightly German-accented delivery has become one of the hottest properties in the film world. She will soon be in multiplexes with "Old", the new mystery thriller from

"Sixth Sense" director M. Night Shyamalan, and will also star in Netflix drama "Beckett" alongside John David Washington, and "The Survivor", a biographical drama by Barry Levinson.

In the meantime, she is at the ongoing Cannes festival with two films, including one by French director Mia Hansen-Love, who teamed her up with British star Tim Roth in "Bergman Island". The film tells the story of a couple, both movie directors, looking for inspiration on the remote Swedish island of Faro where film giant Ingmar Bergman did much of his key work. Krieps' character has no problem taking on her more established husband, played by Roth, just as she did with Day-Lewis. Her character, Chris, even takes aim at Bergman, calmly observing that he could only concentrate on his films because there were women to look after his children. "In the end, what makes somebody a monument? It's a construction of society, an idea about who is important and who is

not important, and who is famous and who is not famous," Krieps told AFP in an interview. "If there's one thing I can say about myself is that I am free of that."

"Bergman Island" is among 24 films vying for the Cannes top prize, the Palme d'Or. "I had seen Vicky Krieps in 'Phantom Thread' and I was blown away," director Hansen-Love told AFP. "There is something radiant about her, but also a great, intelligent simplicity. She has no mannerisms, there's something very understated about her," she said. Tim Roth said after filming with Krieps that she has "an unusual presence" and was always willing to take risks. "You can be an unusual presence and not get it done. She gets it done. She's got the chops," he told AFP.

Krieps also plays the lead in "Hold Me Tight" by Frenchman Mathieu Amalric, which is appearing in the festival's Premiere category. Krieps, who has one German parent and one from Luxembourg, makes no big

deal about speaking several languages fluently. "I grew up like this and to me words are only words," she said. "To me language is just a vehicle. I change vehicles."

And despite her strong female roles she does not define her work as specifically feminist. "Feminism to me is just being who we are. I hope one day we arrive in a world where we are all who we are," she said. Krieps attributes some of her success in "Phantom Thread" to her character's refusal to use seduction to win over the famous fashion designer played by Day-Lewis. That choice, she said, upended expectations that "in a movie set in the 50s, a love relationship, a man-woman dynamic", seduction would be "the usual thing". "I was a nobody, not famous or especially good at what I do, just being me, and not seducing as a woman. I think that gave so much strength to Alma, my character," she said. —AFP



(From left) French actress Juliette Benveniste, French actress Anne-Sophie Bowen-Chatet, Luxembourg actress Vicky Krieps, French actor and director Mathieu Amalric, actor Arieh Worthhalter, actor Sacha Ardilly and actor Aurele Grzesik arrive for the screening of the film "Serre-moi Fort" (Hold Me Tight) at the 74th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. — AFP

Lifestyle | Feature



In this file photo Spanish actor, director and producer Antonio Banderas (center) walks past a cab, flanked by a crew member during the filming of the action thriller, *The Enforcer*, in the streets of Thessaloniki. — AFP



Film crew members work during the filming of the action thriller, *The Enforcer*, starring Spanish actor, film director and producer Antonio Banderas.

HOLLYWOOD FLURRY LIFTS GREEK FILM INDUSTRY HOPES

A burly man in a buzz-cut crosses a busy street, nearly running into a passing cab. Nearby, two Miami police officers monitor a bustling crowd beside their squad car. The man is Spanish actor Antonio Banderas and standing in for the Magic City is Greece's northern metropolis Thessaloniki where Millennium Media, producers of "The Expendables" series, are shooting their latest action flick. Banderas' new outing, "The Enforcer", is one of several high-profile shoots taking shape in the midst of an uncharacteristic flurry for Greece's film industry, which reopened from a pandemic lockdown just in May.

The busy summer schedule includes Bond star Daniel Craig in the sequel to the surprise 2019 murder mystery hit "Knives Out" under director Rian Johnson, and David Cronenberg's sci-fi whodunit "Crimes of the Future", starring Viggo Mortensen. Disney+ had earlier shot scenes in Athens for "Greek Freak", a biopic about Giannis Antetokounmpo's early years as the son of poor Nigerian immigrants before catapulting to NBA basketball stardom, while Netflix wrapped "Beckett", an action thriller starring Denzel Washington's son John David.

'Crash test'

Veteran Greek producer Panos Papahadzis said this season's film wave is a "crash test" for the local industry after years in the doldrums. "For 20 years we have been calling on the state... to turn Greece into a film-friendly country," Papahadzis, whose company Argonauts is co-producing "Crimes of the Future", told AFP. "There have never been (as many productions filming simultaneously) in the history of Greek cinema," adds Vasiliki Diagouma, communication and PR manager at the Greek national center of audiovisual media and communication (EKOME).

Greece has a long history of missing out on foreign films—even Greek-themed ones—for reasons including "bureaucracy and a lack of knowledge among decision-makers," Diagouma said. "Five years ago, it would be inconceivable to shut down entire areas for film shoots," added Papahadzis. In 2004, the year Athens hosted the Olympic Games, the Homeric epic *Troy* was filmed in Malta and Mexico, while Morocco scooped Oliver Stone's *Alexander*. Later sword-and-sandal films were shot in Hungary and Bulgaria. "Forty percent of tourists choose destinations they have seen in movies," noted Papahadzis.

The final insult came in 2016 when an Athens riot scene set for Matt Damon's *Jason Bourne* spy thriller was shot in Spain. A year later, the Greek government introduced a law to attract foreign productions with cash incentives. Foreign films, TV series, documentaries, animations, and digital games made on Greek territory are now entitled to a rebate of 40 percent

of eligible expenses—including travel, fuel, and leading cast fees. The scheme took a while to take hold. But in the past two years, nearly 150 projects including more than 70 international productions have signed up for a combined investment of over 180 million euros (\$210 million), according to EKOME. "We may be late-comers to the game, but we have adopted the best practises in the industry," Diagouma said. "We are one of the few countries to offer (such a broad rebate)."

'Low-paid workers'

The sailing has not all been smooth. In an open letter last month, the union of Greek cinema and TV technicians complained that the Banderas movie, produced by Millennium-owned Nu Boyana Studios in Bulgaria, was leaving "minimal" benefits in Greece. "Not a single professional cinema technician taxed in Greece is working on the movie," the union said in a letter to state officials.

Nu Boyana Studios "is getting a Greek tax rebate whilst leaving minimal tax (earnings) in Greece," it added. Liberal *Kathimerini* daily wrote that "almost all specialist jobs" in the movie had been staffed by "low-paid Balkan workers". Asked about the issue, Diagouma insisted that the projects vetted by EKOME "leave behind not just money, but also expertise, good cooperation and professional connections". "When one person is employed, this creates jobs for another 15 people. People are earning a living, this is very important for our country especially after 10 years of crisis," she said.

Nu Boyana has also pledged to create a film studio in Thessaloniki, but the project has been held up by the pandemic. Arthouse actor Alexandros Logothetis has just returned from shooting a TV series in Ireland. He says the differences with the Greek industry couldn't be greater. "Almost the entire film crew was Irish. Whereas with the Banderas movie in Thessaloniki, the crews were brought in from abroad... this is a mistake. There should be safeguards and specific quotas for Greek labour," Logothetis said. Diagouma argues that even though Greece's second city is not specifically mentioned in "The Enforcer", "there is no better promotion for tourism in Thessaloniki... all it takes is a single tweet by Banderas." Banderas obliged on July 7. "Shooting in #Thessaloniki. Quiet on set!" the 60-year-old tweeted alongside a picture of himself enveloping film director Richard Hughes in a bear hug. — AFP



Members of the public attend next to US flags the filming of the action thriller, *The Enforcer*, starring Spanish actor, director and producer Antonio Banderas.



In this file photo French artist Christian Boltanski poses in front of a work by English artist Richard Long during the presentation of the exhibition "On the road" in Santiago de Compostela. — AFP

French artist Christian Boltanski dies aged 76

Christian Boltanski, one of France's top contemporary artists whose multimedia works probed the meaning of mortality and memory, has died aged 76, a former museum director told AFP on Sunday. "He was sick. He was a private man who hid things as long as he could," said Bernard Blistene, former director of the Pompidou museum which hosted an exhibition of Boltanski's work last year. Boltanski, whose death in Paris's Cochin hospital was first reported by Le Monde newspaper, often mixed banal daily objects with photographs, videos and sculpture, while at other times creating monumental installations.

His self-described works of "naive psycho-analysis" include the recorded heartbeats of thousands of people on a remote Japanese island, a moving walkway with pictures of hundreds of children, and stacks of biscuit boxes bearing the names of dead people. Boltanski made headlines in 2010 when he agreed to offer 24-hour video footage of his studio in Paris for the rest of his life to an Australian collector, in return for regular payments. The ultimate price paid by the collector, David Walsh, who made his fortune in gambling, was to be determined by the amount of time Boltanski lived. Under the macabre deal, if Boltanski lived for more than eight years, then Walsh would have paid more than they estimated the work was worth.

"He has assured me that I will die before the eight years is up, because he never loses. He's probably right," Boltanski told AFP at the time. "I don't look after myself very well. But I'm going to try to survive." Walsh told The New York Times he hoped Boltanski would die in his studio. Blistene called the passing of the artist "a major loss". "Above all he loved transmission between people by their stories, their memories. He will remain one of the biggest storytellers of his time. He was an incredible inventor," he told AFP.

Marked by the Holocaust

The son of a converted Jewish doctor of Ukrainian origin and a Catholic French mother, Boltanski was born on September 6, 1944, as

Europe reeled from the Nazi Holocaust. During the World War II German occupation of France, Boltanski's polio-ridden mother hid his father under the floorboards of their apartment and pretended that the couple had divorced. Boltanski's childhood was haunted by stories of family friends who had survived the Holocaust, a theme which would later greatly influence his work.

Brought up with the fear of separation, he slept for many years in the same bedroom as his parents with his two brothers. Describing himself to France Culture as an "extremely strange... very peculiar" child, he left school at the age of 13 unable to express himself. He found his calling while experimenting with clay and paint, and soon began producing huge canvases. He held his first exhibition in May 1968 at the age of 23, but after making some 200 works, he abandoned the paintbrush for good and went on to concentrate on new art forms, starting with short films.

Clocking the seconds

In 1968, he published his first book, detailing memories of his childhood from 1944 to 1950. His big international breakthrough came in 1971 with the "Album of Family D", the first of a series of works that used patchworks made up of photographs of people. In "Inventories" he described the treasure trove hidden in the bottom drawers of anonymous people. After the death of his parents in the mid-1980s, his work became darker. In "Personnes" in 2010, he presented visitors to the Grand Palais in Paris with great piles of clothes and switched off the heating in the vast building, a meditation on the Nazi death camps.

An exhibition at the Marian Goodman gallery in Paris in 2015 featured hologram images of himself as a young and old man, with the words "arrival" and "departure" illuminated on the walls, as well as a clock that counted the number of seconds of his life. We was married to fellow contemporary artist Annette Messager. The couple decided not to have children. — AFP

Christian Boltanski: Five key works

Christian Boltanski, one of France's top contemporary artists, was famous for his thought-provocative, monumental installations across the globe, from Paris museums to remote Japanese islands. After his death at the age of 76, we look at five key works:

'The Reserve of Dead Swiss' (1990)

Forty photographs of faces without names—the succession of grainy images lined the walls of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Nagoya, Japan, where the exhibition first appeared. It went on to travel around the world, with the photographs often shown stuck on stacks of rusted tin boxes. Gleaned by Boltanski from the obituary pages of a provincial Swiss newspaper, none of the people in the photos had been identified, and for the display Boltanski blurred the faces, making features indistinct.

"I suppose part of the work is also about the simple fascination of seeing somebody who is handsome and imagining his ashes," Boltanski said about the work.

'Lost: New York Projects' (1995)

In a series of installations at various venues across New York, Boltanski explored his fascination with the relationship we develop with objects, amassing a vast array of apparently banal items. In "Lost Property", for example, Boltanski collected about 5,000 pieces from the lost property holding at Grand Central Station and exhibited them in the Incoming Train Room. In doing so he sought to turn the spotlight on how people invested meaning in material things, and an object that was lost, like a set of house keys, could become hauntingly evocative when on display.

'Les Archives du Coeur' (2008)

On the tiny island of Teshima in Japan,

Boltanski installed a permanent exhibition housing the recorded heartbeats of about 60,000 people. "In all cultures, a heartbeat means to be human, to be alive", Boltanski told Japanese media. "For me it is very important to try to preserve somebody. But I know it is not possible." Visitors today can leave a recording of their own heartbeat to add to what is an ever-growing archive.

'Personnes' (2010)

Described by The Guardian as Boltanski's "most profound installation yet", visitors to the huge and icy cold hall of the Grand Palais in Paris were faced with great piles of clothes. The exhibition, a meditation on the Nazi death camps, toured the world and details were different depending on the venue, reflecting a characteristic in Boltanski's shows as live performances.

'The Life of C.B.' (2010)

Not his own work, but a project he consented to, Boltanski was the central character, and would be 24/7 until his death, at the initiative of David Walsh, an Australian art collector. Walsh approached Boltanski in 2009, proposing to pay him an ongoing monthly fee for the right to film the artist constantly via cameras installed in his Paris studio. Visitors to Walsh's museum in Tasmania could watch the live feed and the project brought Boltanski mischievous delight, providing another musing on the spectre of death in our lives how we deal with this. "To die is normal," Boltanski said in 2016. "I love life, but there is no reason to hide the truth: you look at a baby and you know it is going to die." — AFP

Meghan Markle to make animated adventure series for Netflix

Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex and wife of Britain's Prince Harry, is to produce an animated adventure series for Netflix about a 12-year-old girl who is inspired by historical female figures, her production company said Wednesday. The couple signed a deal to produce content for the popular streaming platform after quitting their royal duties in Britain. The animated series, the first to be announced by Archewell Productions, the company the couple formed together and which is named after their son Archie, is to be called "Pearl."

"Like many girls her age, our heroine Pearl is on a journey of self-discovery as she tries to overcome life's daily challenges," Meghan said in a statement. "I'm thrilled that Archewell Productions, partnered with the powerhouse platform of Netflix, and these incredible producers, will together bring you this new animated series, which celebrates extraordinary women throughout history." Last year, the couple announced the company would create a documentary series about the Invictus Games for wounded servicemen and women, which Prince Harry has long championed.

Meghan will be an executive producer for "Pearl," alongside several others including Carolyn Soper, director of the animated movie "Sherlock Gnomes" and Liz Garbus, a US film maker whose work includes "Lost Girls," as well as David Furnish, a Canadian filmmaker and husband of Elton John. Earlier this year, Meghan published an illustrated children's book called "The Bench," which started out as a Father's Day poem for Prince Harry. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Britney Spears wins right to new lawyer in battle to remove dad

An emotional Britney Spears scored a victory in her bid to end her father's control of her affairs Wednesday, as a judge ruled she could appoint her own lawyer to help end a guardianship that the pop superstar slammed as "cruelty." Spears phoned back into a Los Angeles court, three weeks after her first explosive testimony in which she pleaded with a judge to free her from the years-long conservatorship ramped up worldwide interest in the case. During Wednesday's hearing, Judge Brenda Penny accepted the resignation of Spears' previous attorney and signaled she would accept the 39-year-old's new choice, Mathew Rosengart, to represent her.

Rosengart told AFP on the sidelines of the hearing that he would file a petition "as soon as possible" to remove Jamie Spears as the conservator and suggested the singer's father should simply step down. "We will be filing a petition as soon as possible to move Mr Spears, subject to our formal retention," said Rosengart, a former federal prosecutor who has represented Steven Spielberg and Sean Penn. "Why is Mr Spears not voluntarily stepping down?" Rosengart asked. "He does not belong in this conservatorship anymore. And we believe he should voluntarily step down immediately."

Spears, speaking to the court again via telephone, was at turns angry and upset and used the occasional expletive as she said she wanted to "press charges" against her father. "I'm angry and I will go there," the singer said, even telling the court at one point she thought "they were trying to kill me." "If the court doesn't see this as abuse... I don't know what is," said Spears, calling for "investigations" and a restraining order against her father. Following the judge's ruling, Spears posted a video of herself performing cartwheels on Instagram, with the caption: "Coming along, folks ... com-

ing along!!!!!! New with real representation today ... I feel GRATITUDE and BLESSED!!!!!" She signed her post with the phrase adopted by her loyal fans: "#FreeBritney."

Twists and turns

Spears, who rocketed to fame in her teens, suffered a highly public 2007 breakdown when the shaven-headed star attacked a paparazzo's car at a gas station. The following year, a California court placed her under a unique legal guardianship largely governed by her father, Jamie. Spears swiftly returned to performing after that, released three albums, appeared on various television shows and even took up a Las Vegas residency. But in January 2019, she abruptly announced she was suspending her performances until further notice.

And then last month, the singer made an impassioned plea for her situation to change, alleging that she had been prevented from having a contraceptive IUD removed, despite wanting more children, and forcefully put on medication that made her feel "drunk."

Spears said she had been made to perform shows under threat of lawsuit, and that she was not even allowed to get changed in privacy or drive her own car.

After that testimony Samuel Ingham, the lawyer appointed by court following her breakdown, asked to step down from his role. So, too, did the financial management company that was set to assume joint control of Spears' estate with her father Jamie, who remains in place. Penny accepted both those resignations Wednesday. Spears' longtime manager Larry Rudolph has also quit. Spears has lots of public support, from fans chanting outside the courtroom who greeted the news of her replacement lawyer with raucous cheers to her musical peers Christina Aguilera and Madonna. —AFP



Supporters of pop star Britney Spears participate in a #FreeBritney rally at the Lincoln memorial in Washington, DC. — AFP



An undated handout picture shows a dress rehearsal of the opera *The Life & Death of Alexandre Litvinenko* at Grange Park Opera in West Horsley. — AFP photos

'Polonium, polonium': UK theatre stages Litvinenko opera

A chorus in medical scrubs intones "polonium, polonium" as an opera about the poisoned Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko premieres in a British theatre yesterday. The former Russian security agent died in 2006 after drinking tea laced with the radioactive isotope Polonium-210 at a London hotel. As he lay dying in hospital, he pointed the finger at Russian President Vladimir Putin. Delayed for a year by virus restrictions, British composer Anthony Bolton's opera "The Life & Death of Alexander Litvinenko", will be staged at Grange Park Opera in Surrey, southwest of London. Tickets have sold out for the opening night, the company's website said.

The 71-year-old composer has said he was inspired by a biography of Litvinenko written by the former FSB office's widow Marina and friend Alex Goldfarb. At a dress rehearsal, Bolton told AFP he was shocked by the details of Litvinenko's suffering. "He lived 25 days or so, deteriorating with his body being eaten from the inside out. So I was very moved by that," he said. "It was then this inspiration (came), that it had the ingredients for an opera."

In the play, Litvinenko is seen lying in a hospital bed with his hair having fallen out because of the radiation poisoning. Marina Litvinenko, 59, told AFP the opera was "fully based" on the biography she co-wrote. "It's very emotional because I see not only my story, I can listen to music. And this altogether makes a very strong feeling," she said.

'Putin-approved' killing

"It looks like justice for me," she added, since the opera names "the people who committed this crime, who killed my husband. These people are killers." The opera includes

a character representing Putin, although he is named only as "the head of the KGB". A British public inquiry in 2016 concluded that Putin had "probably approved" Litvinenko's killing, which it said was likely to have been FSB-directed. Two Russians, Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun, were identified by British police as prime suspects after they both met Litvinenko at a central London hotel. But attempts to extradite them have failed.

Now a nationalist MP, Lugovoi said that "the fact that a political show, behind which stand the British secret services, has finally been turned into a theatrical, operatic show, says a lot". He added he was "unlikely" to watch the opera in full. "I definitely won't lose any sleep over a British director seeing me as an operatic villain," he told AFP in Moscow. The Litvinenko poisoning frayed diplomatic ties between London and Moscow. They were further eroded by the attempted murder in 2018 of ex-Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury, southwest England, using a weapons-grade nerve agent Novichok. —AFP



Australian tenor Adrian Dwyer in the role of Alexandre Litvinenko during a dress rehearsal of the opera *The Life & Death*.

Lockdown deaths of animals in Bangladesh pet shops spark outcry

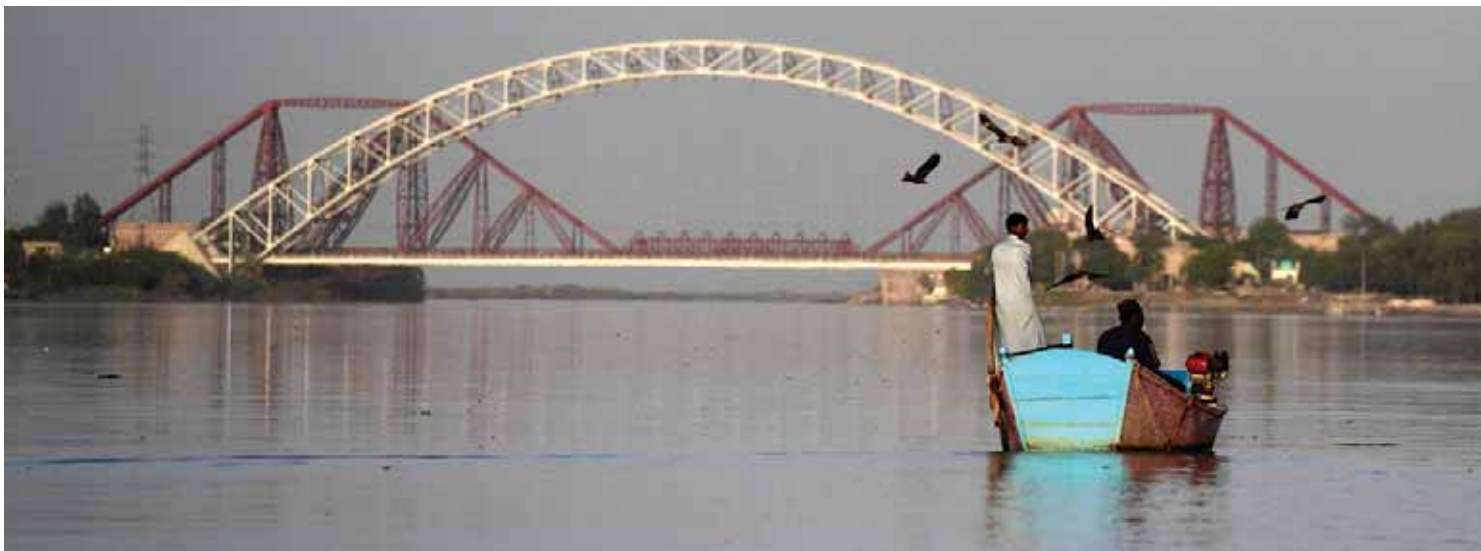
Hundreds of animals have died in Dhaka's biggest pet market after stores were forced to close during Bangladesh's coronavirus lockdown, leaving owners desperate and rights activists angry. "We need to keep the doors open so the animals don't suffocate," shop owner Mohammad Polash explained to AFP. About 400 birds and dozens of dogs, cats, rabbits, rats and guinea pigs have died since the market shut on July 1, according to Rahman Shikder, a spokesman for the Katabon market's store owners association. "At least 20 percent of our animals have died," he added.

After the deaths made national headlines, the government on Wednesday ordered police to let the pet market's 75 tiny shops open their doors for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. Animal rights activists have accused the shops of keeping pets in hazardous conditions. "Places like Katabon should not exist in the first place," the head of animal rights group Obhoyaronno, Rubaiya Ahmad, told AFP. "The animals there were already kept in extremely inhumane conditions and it's no surprise they met such horrible deaths," she added.



A shopkeeper feeds birds inside a closed pet shop in Dhaka. — AFP

"Wherever animals are kept in confinement, they will always be the first to pay the heaviest price in such unusual circumstances." Police were patrolling Katabon when AFP visited on Wednesday. Some officers gave shopkeepers a warning for opening outside of the permitted times. "Police would fine us if we open our shutters," owner Bappi Khan said. Despite an official death toll now above 17,000 — but widely believed to be at least five times higher — Bangladesh has allowed some lockdown limits to be lifted for Eid Al-Adha, the country's second-biggest religious festival. — AFP



In this photograph, Ghulam Akbar (right), a local fisherman and volunteer of the Indus river dolphins rescue team, sits on a boat during a monitoring routine along the Indus river near Pakistan's southern Sindh province city of Sukkur. — AFP photos

Foe to friend: Fishermen join fight to save endangered Pakistan dolphin

Freshwater dolphins are flourishing in a stretch of Pakistan's main river after a helping hand from fishermen mobilized to defend a rare species driven to near-extinction. Identifiable by their saw-like beaks, Indus River dolphins once swam from the Himalayas to the Arabian sea, but now mostly cluster in a 180-kilometre (110-mile) length of the waterway in southern Sindh province. A glimpse of a dolphin cutting through muddy water to gasp for air is a regular sight along the mighty river, but most villagers nearby were unaware their neighbors were on the brink of extinction.

"We had to explain that it was a unique species only found in the Indus and nowhere else," Abdul Jabbar, who gave up fishing for a job on the dolphin rescue team, told AFP on the banks of Dadu Canal, which he patrols by motorbike. Decades of uncontrolled fishing and habitat loss caused by pollution and man-made dams saw the dolphin population plummet to around 1,200 at the turn of the

century. They are classed as an endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which says their numbers have fallen by more than 50 percent since the 1940s.

Dolphin hotline

In a bid to turn around the fortunes of the mammals, Pakistani wildlife officials began a painstaking door-to-door awareness campaign with the local fishing community on the riverbanks and arterial canals. They offered advice on dolphin-friendly nets and warned against harmful and illegal poison-fishing-the practice of using chemicals to kill small fish used for poultry feed. The World Wide Fund for Nature also offered up one million rupees (\$6,300) worth of loans, encouraging fishermen to set up alternative businesses.

With the help of the provincial wildlife department, they established a dolphin monitoring network of 100 volunteers and a handful of paid staff, and a 24-hour phone helpline

for villagers to call if they see a dolphin in distress. Jabbar's commitment is now boundless. He recently missed the birth of his child when a dolphin became trapped in one of the river's canals. "The doctors were preparing for the caesarean and I needed to be with my wife. But when the call came, I rushed that night to rescue the dolphin," he told AFP. The latest survey, from 2017, showed numbers had rebounded to about 1,800 and wildlife officials expect the population has increased further since.

Diminishing territory

Local legend has it that the first Indus River dolphin was once a woman, transformed by a curse from a holy man angry that she forgot to feed him one day. Previous generations believed the dolphins-known locally as bullen-were cursed. They have evolved to be functionally blind, allowing for a sharpened sense of sonar as they cut through the muddy waters of the river hunting for prey. Harmful fishing practices are not the only hazards facing dolphins. Every January, when water levels are at their lowest, the floodgates to canals are shut for cleaning, creating pools and lagoons that become death traps for stranded marine life.

Wildlife Department official Adnan Hamid Khan told AFP that the recent steady rise in dolphins had been a "success story". "But with a larger population comes food shortages, decreased range of movement-their breeding ground and territory has shrunk." Indus River dolphins first came under threat during British colonial rule when dams were built to control the waterway's flow, and later from the discharge of hazardous chemicals when factories sprung up along its banks. — AFP



A dolphin swims along the Indus river near Pakistan's southern Sindh province city of Sukkur.



Ghulam Akbar (left) stands on a boat during a monitoring routine.

Lifestyle | Features



(From left) Chef Nicolas Maire and flavorists Liliana Favaron and Mark Rubin taste vegetal steak at the headquarters of Swiss group Firmenich, one of the world's leading flavor manufacturers, in Satigny near Geneva. — AFP photos

AI beefs up veggie burgers as market booms

Have a beef with beef? A burgeoning veggie burger industry is using artificial intelligence to propose alternatives. Swiss group Firmenich, one of the world's leading flavor manufacturers, says recreating the sensation of beef relies not only on flavor, texture and color, but also on how it responds to cooking and the way it feels in the mouth. "Finding a protein that resembles meat from a vegetable protein is highly complex," Emmanuel Butstraen, head of Firmenich's flavors unit, told AFP at the company's headquarters in Satigny outside Geneva.



Chef Nicolas Maire prepares a vegetal burger at the headquarters of Swiss group Firmenich, one of the world's leading flavor manufacturers.

One of the toughest challenges is avoiding an unpleasant aftertaste. Pea proteins tend to release bitterness, which the taste buds are quick to pick up, Butstraen noted. Vegetable proteins can give off hints of green apples or pears, an aftertaste of beans, astringency or even a feeling of dryness, said Jerome Barra, the company's innovation director. To mask these flavors or compensate for them with oth-

er tastes, the aromatics experts can call on a vast library of ingredients. Barra likened the computer-logged database to "a piano with 5,000 keys", from which the flavors can be composed.

Barbecue flavor

"Artificial intelligence can generate millions of possibilities," Barra said. He said the algorithms can generate not only a wide range of flavor combinations but also factor in shifting consumer preferences, along with technical or regulatory constraints. They filter down the combination of ingredients from which the experts can create flavors, he said. Only then are they road-tested in the kitchen with a chef. The algorithms can propose multiple combinations that the human expert aromatics might not have conceived.

AI has notably enabled Firmenich to develop an aroma that replicates the specific flavor of barbecued meat, with the algorithms helping to pin down similar flavors in the plant world. "Plant-based food is a very important shift in consumption," said Firmenich chief executive Gilbert Ghostine. "I see this trend growing stronger and stronger in future," he said, pointing to meat and dairy alternatives among the nutrition trends with the highest growth potential. According to a study by the Credit Suisse bank, the market for meat and dairy alternatives is already worth around \$14 billion globally, will reach \$143 billion by 2030 — and \$1.4 trillion by 2050. With the rise of flexitarian diets and concerns over meat's carbon footprint, the market for vegetarian alternatives is booming under the influence of US start-ups such as Beyond Meat or Impossible Foods, as well as industry giants such as Nestle or Unilever, which have jumped on the bandwagon. "Steaks, cutlets and other vegetable burgers are highly processed foods whose value depends on their ingredients, which vary from one product to another," Muriel Jaquet, dietician for the Swiss Nutrition Society, told AFP. —AFP

Purists unimpressed by modern twists to 200-year-old Mexican dish

For purists of the iconic Mexican dish "chile en nogada," new ingredients and even ice cream, tortilla chip and pizza versions have them up in arms as the recipe associated with Mexican independence turns 200 years old. The celebrated fare traditionally uses around 30 ingredients, not least the poblano chile-grown mainly in the central state of Puebla—which is stuffed and covered in walnut sauce. "The chile contains seasonal fruits such as pear, Creole peach and panchera apple, which is different due to its hard texture," said Olga Mendez, a member of a committee formed in Puebla to mark the bicentennial. "They are combined with almonds, raisins, cinnamon, cumin, oregano and brown sugar, and ground pork and beef are added."

The dish was born in what is known as Puebla's "convent kitchen"—where Spanish nuns and their indigenous helpers created legendary recipes combining ingredients from both traditions. "It's a representative, iconic, elegant, Creole dish. We're proud of it," said Mendez, who also heads a restaurant union in Puebla. With its red, white and green ingredients, the dish represents the Mexican flag. The stuffed chile, often coated in an egg batter, is covered in a white walnut sauce and decorated with green parsley and red pomegranate seeds. According to historical accounts, the dish was served to Agustin de Iturbide, the first ruler of independent Mexico, when he passed through Puebla after signing the Treaty of Cordoba establishing independence from Spain on August 24, 1821. It is traditionally eaten between July and September—the ideal harvest season for pomegranates, walnuts and poblano chiles.

Reinventing a classic

Traditionalists are worried that the original ingredients are being replaced, partly due to the use of poblano chile seeds from China that are cheaper but yield less spicy peppers. The innovators defend their efforts to give the classic dish a modern-day twist. "I didn't invent it. I just transformed it," said Gerardo Morales, an artisan ice cream maker in Atlixco, Puebla,

whose version has the same red, white and green colors as the original dish. "The ice cream has everything that a chile en nogada has: pomegranate, parsley, walnut, pear, panchera apple, pork," he said. "Now we are in a time in which we have to innovate, not destroy," Morales said.



View of a "chile en nogada" dish (Chile "Poblano" with walnut sauce) served in its ice cream version, in Puebla, Mexico.

There is also a chile en nogada version of chilaquiles—a popular breakfast dish of tortilla chips bathed in salsa-cooked up by Lulu Reyes and her husband Gerardo Castillo at their restaurant La Birula in Atlixco. "It is nothing more than chile en nogada, but presented differently," Reyes said. In Mexico City, meanwhile, some restaurants offer vegetarian and vegan versions of the iconic dish. Mendez accepts that some change is inevitable, but she draws the line at a sauce made from pine nuts instead of walnuts, or using other types of meat in the filling. Not to mention the hamburger or pizza versions of chile en nogada that some have tried to create. "We should value the dish that has given us a place in Mexican gastronomy," she said. Restaurateurs hope to serve up a record 3.5 million chiles en nogada for the 200th anniversary, in a welcome boost to Puebla's pandemic-ravaged tourism industry. — AFP



View of the ingredients (apples, pears, walnuts, poblano peppers, platano macho) needed to cook "chile en nogada" (Chile "Poblano" with walnut sauce), in Puebla, Mexico. — AFP photos

'Resort bubbles' as Mauritius reopens to vaccinated sun-seekers

Taxi driver George Lepoigner says he can't wait for the tourists to start flocking back to the sun-soaked beaches of Mauritius. The Indian Ocean island nation opened up its doors to international travel yesterday, after long months of isolation because of the coronavirus pandemic. But there is a catch—only vaccinated holidaymakers with a negative PCR test will be allowed in, and even then they will have to be confined to "resort bubbles" for a 14-day quarantine. "Without tourists in the country, we do not have foreign currencies flowing in. We do not have the funds to keep us going," Lepoigner, 55, said. "It is a tragedy," the father of two added.

The global coronavirus crisis has battered the economy in Mauritius, a paradise holiday destination known for its pristine beaches, turquoise waters and coral reefs. Before the pandemic hit in March 2020, the tourism and hospitality industry raked in about 24 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and employed nearly a quarter of the workforce. But in the last financial year, the Mauritian economy shrank by 15 percent, so the country is desperate for tourists to return.

"We are preparing for a gradual and sustained recovery of the sector, aiming at 650,000 tourists over the next 12 months," Finance Minister Renganaden Padayachy said in June. He said the government would give the tourism authority 420 million Mauritian rupees (8.3 million euros, \$9.7 million) to promote the island in key markets such as China, Europe and South Africa. But with a full reopening to international travellers only planned from October 1, hoteliers will have to wait for business to bounce back.

Le Mauricien newspaper reported that 600 tourists were expected to land yesterday on three flights from Europe and Dubai. They'll be able to use their resort's facilities and beach—but not the spa, and cannot explore the islands until after the two-week quarantine.

Gilbert Espitalier-Noel, CEO of New Mauritius Hotels, which owns a string of resorts, says glumly that he doesn't expect a recovery until the last quarter of the year. The hotel group's revenue plunged in the nine months to March 2021 to 940 million rupees from 7.6 billion a year earlier. "While we have taken steps to minimize expenses, through pay cuts, voluntary retirements and keeping capital and operating expenditure at a minimum, the upkeep of the hotels remains significant," he said, adding that the company had applied for a state-funded subsidy to stay afloat. The effects of the pandemic have not been limited to the tourism sector, spilling out into other areas of the economy including transport, agriculture, retail and support services. —AFP



Senegalese scrabble player Issakha Marie Diallo sits in front of her board while playing Scrabble in a classroom at School 23 in Guediawaye, a suburb of Dakar. — AFP photos



Senegalese scrabble player Baye Ndiaye sits in front of his board while playing Scrabble in a classroom at School 23 in Guediawaye.

Senegal Scrabble junkies back at the board after virus hiatus

“Wesh, “wesh”, “wads”, “ska”, “fol”... the hunt was on for that elusive word in French that would ratchet up the bonus points and unlock the top prize. Dozens of Scrabble players jostled in leafy schoolgrounds late last month in Senegal's capital, delighted and relieved to be able to compete in real life for the first time in months. It is hard to underestimate the popularity of Scrabble in this West African nation. Senegal has produced several global champions in the French-language version of the word game and its national squad has several times been crowned champions of Africa. But the onset of the coronavirus pandemic was disastrous for the hobby. Restrictions forced Scrabble clubs to close across the country and players had to get their fix on mobile phones or tablet computers.

"Scrabble was in the doldrums," says veteran player Madicke Fall, 65. Despite an uptick in coronavirus cases, players have started meeting in person again. Many Senegalese scrabblers who first met online gathered at the event in the town of Bambilor, about 40 kilometers outside (25 miles) outside Dakar. Thirty-two players put their name down for the competition but 52 turned up, sending Malick Ndiagne, president of Senegalese Scrabble Federation, into a panicked search for more boards.

Unlike English, the 'W' and 'K' are the rarest letters in French. In Scrabble, their tiles carry the most points and are the most coveted by top players—but also carry more risk in point deductions if they cannot be used. "The in-person game is more difficult," he told AFP, explaining that players cannot sneak looks at

dictionaries during supervised competitions.

'My wife makes fun'

Ahmed Kane, a Dakar shopkeeper, sipped sugary tea in the shade of the trees on the school grounds. He has won several tournaments online, but this time he was knocked out during the quarter finals. "Scrabble enables me to speak and learn French better," he says, explaining the game's appeal. He speaks Senegal's dominant language, Wolof, with friends and family. French—despite being the official language—is only mastered by a minority of Senegalese people. But the nation of 16 million people has nonetheless produced luminaries of the game.

Senegal's Ndongo Samba Sylla is famously a three-time world doubles champion, winning most recently in 2016. He also carried home the world blitz title in 2002 — a version of the game in which competitors have just a few minutes' thinking time for each move. In May, Senegal finished fourth to winning Cameroon in the 2021 Scrabble championship for French-speaking Africa. In a country where, according to the World Bank, around 40 percent of the population live below the poverty line, few are attracted to Scrabble because of financial rewards.

Cheikh Anta Dianka, who won the tournament held at the school, received a small amount of cash and few dictionaries in winnings. At a similar tournament the following week, competitor Mohammed Sy, 40, told AFP, "Scrabble brings in almost nothing". "Sometimes my wife makes fun of me and says she prefers fishing to Scrabble," he said with a smile. "At least a fisherman brings home fish." — AFP



Senegalese scrabble players Issakha Marie Diallo (left), Abdoulaye Sylla (right), Mouhamed Sy (second right) and champion Mouhamed Niang (center) sit in front of their boards while playing Scrabble.

Kids Page

Word Search

Pretty Princess

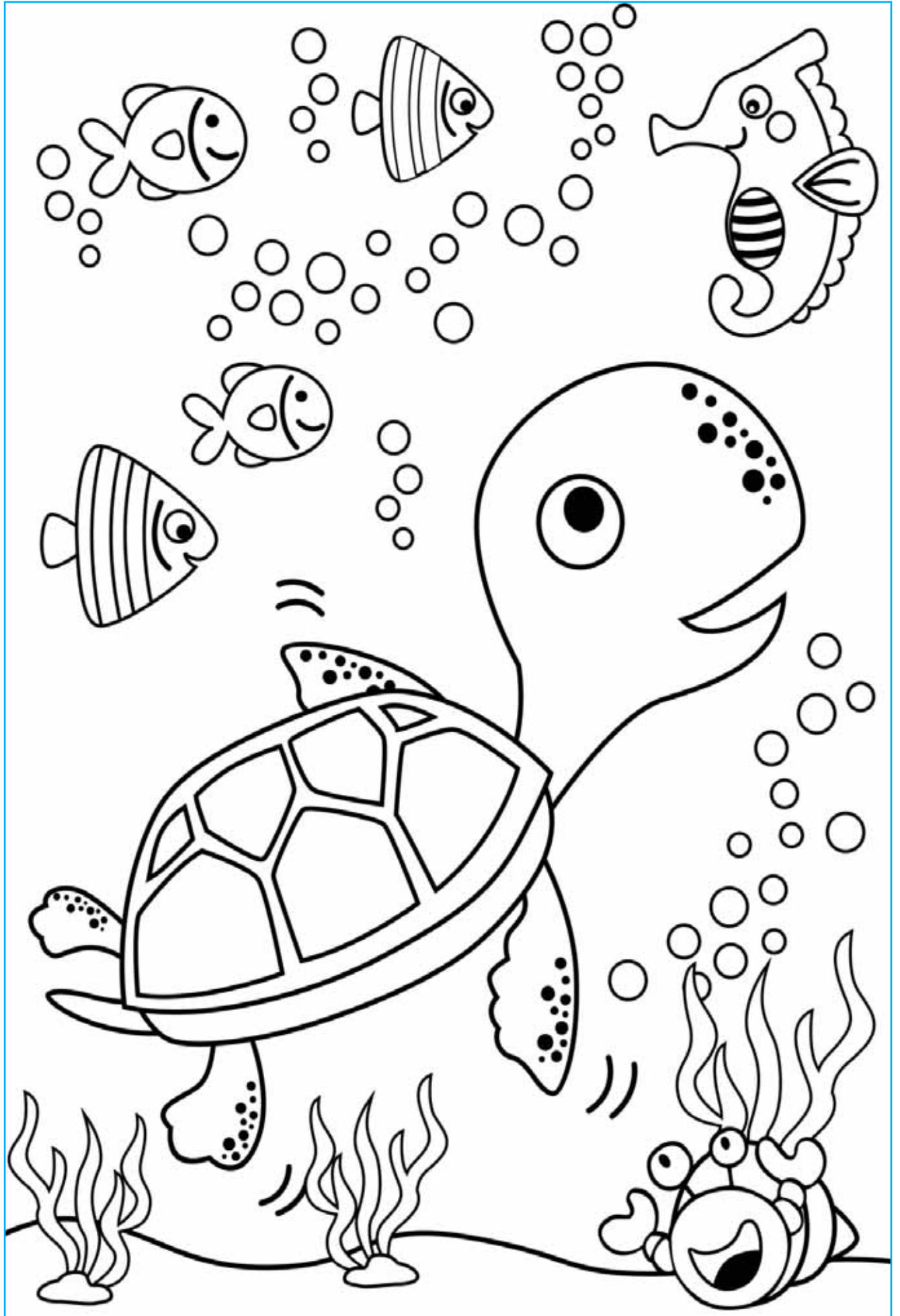
Word Search

- BALL
- BEAUTIFUL
- CARRIAGE
- CASTLE
- DAUGHTER
- DIAMONDS
- FROG
- GOWN
- HEIR
- HORSE
- JESTER
- KING
- KNIGHT

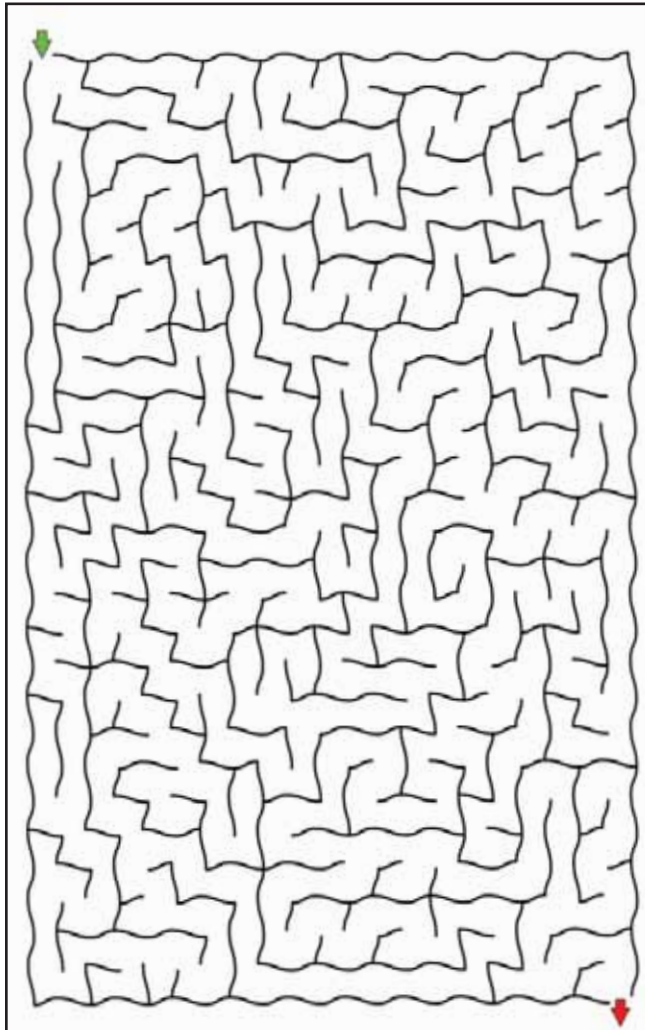


- | | |
|-----------------|---------|
| LADY-IN-WAITING | RULER |
| MOAT | SLIPPER |
| MONARCHY | THRONE |
| NOBLEWOMAN | TIARA |
| PRINCE | TOWER |
| PRINCESS | UNICORN |
| QUEEN | WAND |
| ROYALTY | WEALTHY |

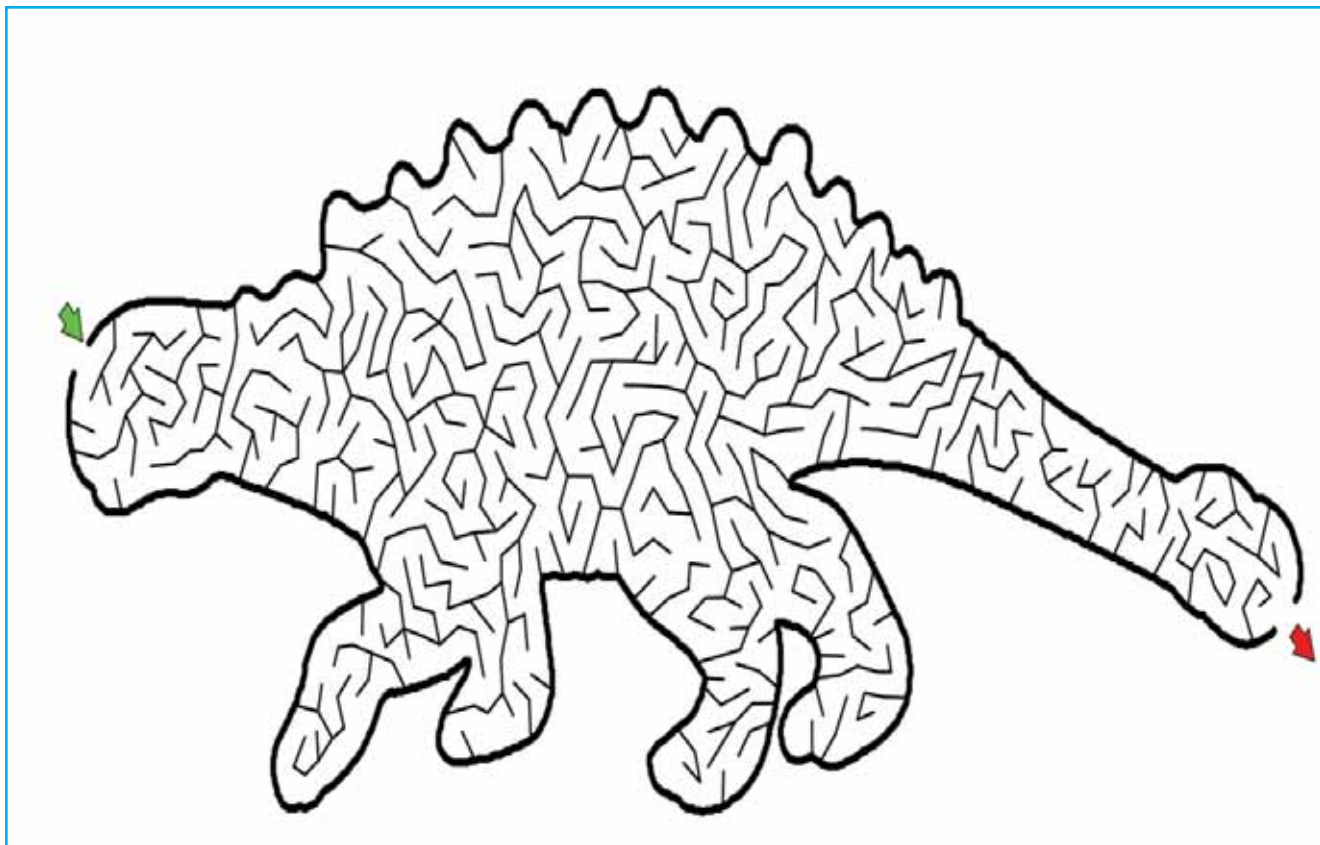
Color It



Kids Mazes



Find the way



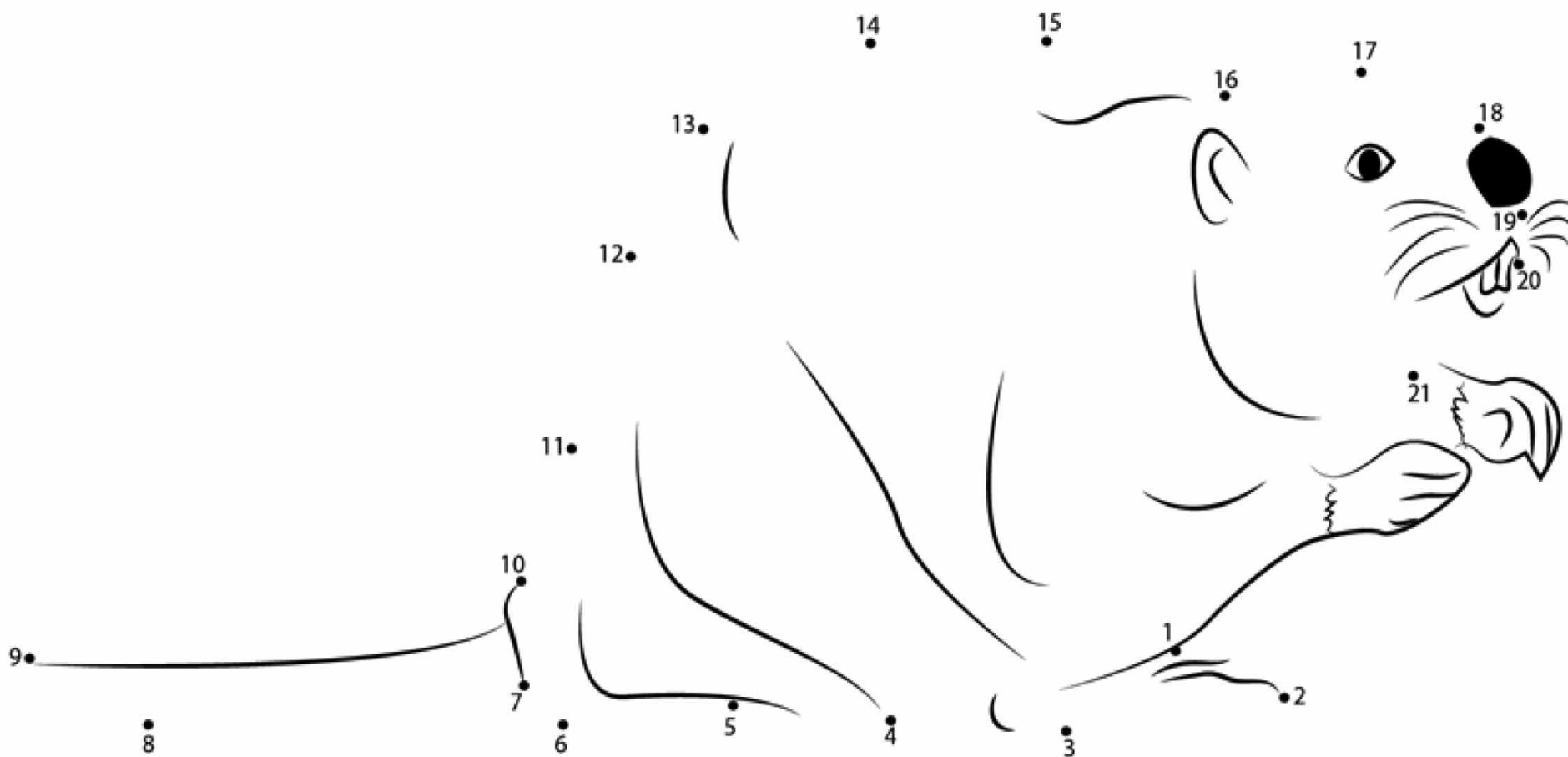
Word Scramble

Insects Word Scramble

All of the scrambled words below are names of insects you have probably heard about. Can you put the letters in the right order to spell the 19 different insect names correctly?

OUTMQISO	
BTLTEUVFR	
MTHO	
LEEBET	
CCIDAA	
ELYFSRHO	
PAWS	
ITKSCGBU	
AVGPRNI NMATSI	
EBE	
ALFE	
LNFOAYGRD	
AGDBLYU	
PSESHRAQPOR	
EIRETTM	
COOCHRKAC	
NAT	
RIEKCTC	
YLF	

Join the dots



Business

FRIDAY, JULY 16, 2021

31 China growth slows to 7.9% in Q2 in COVID recovery**32** US Fed chief says stimulus to continue despite high inflation**34** Kamco Invest successfully exits Planet Pharmacies

WTO meets to net fisheries deal

Okonjo-Iweala optimistic about a 'historic' agreement

GENEVA, Switzerland: The World Trade Organization kicked off a ministerial meeting yesterday aimed at breathing life into drawn-out negotiations towards banning subsidies that favor overfishing, but numerous sticking points remain.

Before the meeting, WTO chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala voiced cautious optimism that trade ministers from the organization's 164 member states could finally move towards clinching a "historic" agreement after 20 years of negotiations. "While no one expects a miracle, the meeting represents a golden opportunity to bring the negotiations within striking distance of a deal," she said in an editorial published Wednesday in Project Syndicate. "A failure to do so would jeopardize the ocean's biodiversity and the sustainability of the fish stocks on which so many depend for food and income."

The talks aim to ban subsidies that contribute to illegal and unregulated fishing, as well as to overfishing, threatening the sustainability of fish stocks and the industry. While fishing should in theory be held in check by the environment, with low fish stocks pushing up costs, subsidies can keep unprofitable fleets at sea.

It is widely agreed that action is needed to protect a crucial resource that millions of people depend on for their livelihoods. In 2017, the Food and Agriculture Organization estimated that one third of global fish stocks were overfished.

Global fisheries subsidies are meanwhile estimated at between \$14 billion and \$54 billion a year, according to the WTO. But two decades of negotiations have stumbled over a range of issues, including a UN demand that developing countries and the poorest nations receive special treatment.

After missing the last UN deadline to reach an agreement by December 2020, talks have intensified in recent months however.

'Historic'

Okonjo-Iweala, who took the reins of the global trade body in March, has made clinching the long-awaited fisheries deal by the end of this year a priority. Yesterday's meeting, which took place virtually due to COVID restrictions, focused on a draft text presented in May by Colombian ambassador Santiago Wills, who chairs the WTO fisheries subsidies negotiations.

Okonjo-Iweala voiced optimism that "marathon discussions" on the text, which according to Wills proposes "compromise language" in a range of areas, would succeed. "We are on the cusp of forging an agreement at the WTO that is historic in more ways than one," she said, stressing that a deal would also show that "members can come together and act on issues of the global commons."

Reaching any kind of an agreement at the WTO can be hard, because all decisions require a consensus among all member



In this file photo taken on July 9, 2021 two bluefin tuna fish are extracted with a crane after being fished by divers in a purse seine at the Balfego fishing company's aquaculture facility on the open sea off the coast of L'Atmella de Mar. —AFP

states. But observers said there had been a clear boost in momentum towards finding a deal. "We have never had more political attention on the issue, (nor) the degree of political attention from a director general, and the degree of commitment from WTO members to really advanced this text," Alice Tipping of the International Institute for Sustainable Development told reporters in Geneva.

Special treatment?

But a number of sticking points remain and NGOs warn against rushing to the finish line at any cost. "It's critical that WTO members do not sacrifice environmental outcomes for the sake of speed when negotiating a fisheries subsidies agreement," Isabel Jarrett of The Pew Charitable Trusts told AFP. One of the main stumbling blocks has been a UN demand that developing countries and the poorest nations receive so-called special and differ-

ential treatment, or SDT. While special treatment for the poorest countries is widely accepted, demands from some self-identified developing countries to be exempt from subsidy constraints has proved difficult to swallow.

Many of the major fishing nations are considered developing countries by WTO, including China, which has one of the world's biggest fishing fleets. An EU official told reporters this week that a declaration from China that it was prepared to assume "full commitments without claiming SDT" would be "very helpful" to the talks. There is also disagreement over how broad the fisheries deal should be.

There appears to be consensus around excluding fish-farming and continental fishing from subsidy constraints. But some developing countries are calling for fuel subsidies, including through tax deduction schemes like those widely used in the EU, to be included in the deal—something the bloc flatly rejects. — AFP

Business

China growth slows to 7.9% in Q2 in COVID recovery

Consumers still lack the confidence to splurge

BEIJING: China's sharp economic rebound from last year's pandemic slowdown lost steam in the second quarter, official data showed yesterday, with consumers lacking the confidence to splurge.

The world's second-largest economy has staged a rapid recovery from last year's slump caused by the coronavirus pandemic, but its pace is easing with manufacturing slowing and consumer demand not picking up as quickly as expected. China's GDP growth came in at 7.9 percent on-year in the April to June period, said the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) — a significant drop from the 18.3 percent surge in the first three months.

An AFP poll of analysts tipped gross domestic product growth at 7.7 percent, with economists noting that China's economy has been expanding more slowly since the start of the year as the pandemic drags on globally. China's economy continued to "recover steadily" in the first half of 2021, said NBS spokeswoman Liu Aihua, although she cautioned that "there are many external uncertainties, and domestic economic recovery is uneven".

"Efforts are still needed to consolidate the foundation for stable recovery and development," she added. The earlier spike was largely skewed by the low base of comparison with last year, owing to large parts of the country being locked down to prevent the virus spread.

But the latest figures suggest China should still be on track to meet its growth target of more than 6 percent for the year.

UK job vacancies soar as economy reopens slowly

LONDON: Britain's unemployment is falling as the nation's COVID-hit economy reopens-but vacancies are soaring as businesses struggle to recruit sufficient staff, official data showed yesterday. The unemployment rate dipped to 4.8 percent in the three months to the end of May, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. That was down from 5.0 percent in the three months to February, the ONS added. Unemployment remains 0.9 percentage points higher than its pre-pandemic level.

But the labor market has picked up since March as a result of the economy's phased reopening, with England set to fully exit lockdown next Monday. The ONS added that the number of employees on payrolls soared by a record 356,000 in June.

Vacancies

"As we approach the final stages of reopening the economy, I look forward to seeing more people back at work and the economy continuing to rebound," said British finance minister Rishi Sunak.

"We are bouncing back," he added. However, sectors like hospitality have faced difficulty recruiting staff, impacted also by Brexit since the start of the year. Job vacancies jumped to 862,000 between April and June, rising by 77,500 from the first quarter.

The number of vacancies is now above its pre-pandemic level from early 2020, and stands at a three-year peak. "The labor market is continuing to recover, with the number of employees on payroll up again strongly in June," said ONS director of economic statistics Darren Morgan.

Muted demand

On a quarterly basis, China's growth grew by 1.3 percent, up from 0.4 percent in the previous quarter. But this is among the weakest quarterly growth since rates were first published in 2010, noted Capital Economics. Surging raw material costs and shipping disruptions are weighing on manufacturers, with factory activity also bogged down by supply shortages of semiconductors-used to make a range of goods from electronics to vehicles.

In June, industrial output rose 8.3 percent and retail sales grew 12.1 percent on-year, both edging down from the month before. Domestic demand "remained muted" in the second quarter, said Louis Kuijs, head of Asia economics at Oxford Economics.

But he predicted "household consumption should be supported by rising vaccination and corporate investment by the recovery in profits." The urban unemployment rate was 5 percent, unchanged from May, authorities said. There are fears unemployment might be much higher due to large numbers of people working in the informal economy.

China was the only major economy to expand in all of 2020, and it is expected to enter a new phase of post-pandemic recovery. It has largely controlled its domestic coronavirus outbreaks with a mix of strict border controls, rapid lockdowns when cases are detected, and contact tracing. But these strict and inflexible measures have also created challenges, including a shipping container backlog caused by a coronavirus outbreak among port workers earlier this year.

Premier Li Keqiang warned this week that small and medium

However, "the number of job vacancies continued to rise very strongly".

"The biggest sector driving this was hospitality, followed by wholesaling and retailing," he added.

The UK economy is set to fully reopen on Monday with the lifting of pandemic curbs in England following a speedy vaccine drive.

Nissan self-isolation

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), a powerful business lobby, said soaring vacancies were a sign of recovering demand in Britain's COVID-battered economy.

It added that staff shortages had been sparked only partly by employees self-isolating owing to spiking COVID infections. "Vacancies exceeding pre-COVID levels is a further sign of demand returning and employers creating jobs," said CBI official Matthew Percival.

"Yet businesses' ability to meet this demand, and support the recovery, is being challenged by staff shortages. "As COVID cases rise, firms are facing the double difficulty of hiring workers and more employees self-isolating."

In a separate development, Japanese carmaker Nissan revealed that some of its workers were now self-isolating from its vast factory in the northeastern English city of Sunderland. "Production in certain areas of the plant has been adjusted as we manage a number of staff being required to self-isolate following close contact with COVID-19," a company spokesman told AFP.

"The wellbeing of our team is our number one priority and we remain confident in the rigorous safety controls we have on site." The Financial Times reported that more than 700 Nissan workers were absent. Economists meanwhile expect the UK unemployment rate to jump once the government ends its costly furlough scheme at the end of September.

Under furlough, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's administration has paid the bulk of private sector wages since the start of the pandemic. —AFP



NANTONG, China: An employee works at a textile factory in Nantong, in China's eastern Jiangsu province yesterday. —AFP

are facing difficulties due to higher costs caused by rising prices of bulk commodities, state media reported. The government should support smaller companies, he said. In an unexpected move, China's central bank also cut the amount of cash banks need to hold in reserve last week, releasing around one trillion yuan (\$154.6 billion) in liquidity that could boost lending. —AFP

Facebook petitions for recusal of FTC chief, joining Amazon

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook on Wednesday filed a formal request calling for the recusal of Federal Trade Commission chair Lina Khan in any antitrust action against the social media giant, arguing that she is biased and cannot rule impartially. The move follows a similar request from Amazon last month in anticipation of a wave of antitrust enforcement action against Big Tech firms from the regulatory agency under its new leader appointed by President Joe Biden. In its petition to the FTC, Facebook said Khan "has consistently made public statements not only accusing Facebook of conduct that merits disapproval but specifically expressing her belief that the conduct meets the elements of an antitrust offense."

Facebook cited Khan's academic writings, her work for the activist Open Markets Institute and a congressional panel which conducted a broad antitrust review, as well as her public statements and comments on Twitter. These actions "would lead any disinterested observer to conclude that she has prejudged Facebook's alleged antitrust liability," Facebook's attorneys argued, adding that under judicial precedent, "that appearance of prejudgment requires her immediate recusal from any involvement in the antitrust litigation against Facebook." —AFP



Lina Khan

Business

US Fed chief says stimulus to continue despite high inflation

Rate will decline once supply bottlenecks are resolved: Powell

WASHINGTON: Even as US inflation has hit the highest rate in over a decade, the central bank is sticking to its guns, and will continue to provide stimulus until the economy has fully recovered, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said.

Powell acknowledged that the inflation spike was stronger than the Fed was hoping to see, and will remain “elevated” in coming months, but he again expressed confidence the rate will decline once supply bottlenecks and other temporary issues are resolved.

And he reassured lawmakers that the central bank has the tools to deal with inflation and will react quickly if needed. However, the world’s largest economy still has “a long way to go” to return to full employment following the COVID-19 pandemic, Powell said in his semi-annual testimony to Congress.

The Fed “will ensure that monetary policy will continue to deliver powerful support to the economy until the recovery is complete,” he said. The US central bank cut the benchmark lending rate to zero at the start of the pandemic and implemented a massive bond-buying program to provide liquidity to the economy. As businesses have reopened amid the widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines, inflation has surged, with the annual consumer price index (CPI) hitting 5.4 percent in June, the highest since August 2008.

Wholesale prices also are soaring, with the producer price index jumping to 7.3 percent in the 12 months ended in June, the highest since the Labor Department began measuring in November 2010, according to data released Wednesday. But Powell and other Fed officials have stuck to their argument that the rapid price increases have been driven mostly by temporary issues related to the struggles to reopen the economy following the pandemic shutdowns, and are not a reason to pull back on stimulus efforts.

Many private economists agree, saying inflation peaked in June, but Powell nonetheless faced numerous questions about prices from members of the House Financial Services Committee.

Moderating inflation

While the inflation jump was higher than officials expected, Powell said it has been “consistent” with the dynamic the Fed has highlighted, and comes largely “from a small group of goods and services that are directly tied to the reopening of the economy,” such as cars and airline fares, he told lawmakers.

The spike was driven by a “perfect storm” of high demand and low supply, he said, pointing to issues including a global semiconductor shortage that has hindered auto production. He said those factors “should partially reverse as the effects of the bottlenecks unwind.”

Powell stressed that the Fed can deal with price increases and will act if there are signs of “troublingly high inflation,” but policymakers will not react to short-term increases, since that would mean slowing the pace of the overall recovery.

Too much stimulus?

Central bankers have pledged to maintain their stimulus until inflation holds above their two percent goal and the labor market has recovered, but Powell said “reaching the standard of ‘substantial further progress’ is still a ways off.” Asked in the hearing to describe what progress the Fed is looking for, he said it was “very difficult to be precise” because there are multiple factors to consider.

He noted that low wage workers, African Americans and Hispanics were hardest hit by the pandemic job losses and “still have the most ground left to regain.”

Some Republicans argued that generous unemployment benefits may be keeping workers on the sidelines, but Powell said any impact will be short-lived since the extra aid expires in September. Fed officials have begun to discuss when they will start to taper the \$120 billion in bond purchases they are making each month, and Powell again pledged to give advance notice before making any changes.



WASHINGTON: In this file photo US Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell gives a press briefing. —AFP

Stock markets gave hesitant approval to Powell’s testimony, with the S&P 500 and Dow finishing higher but the Nasdaq falling. Republicans lawmakers pressed the Fed chief—without success—to link rising inflation to both massive government spending during the pandemic and the \$3.5 trillion budget Democrats have proposed that includes infrastructure spending President Joe Biden is pushing for.

Powell repeatedly dodged efforts to be drawn into the political debate, but said, “I do think it’s clear that investments in good infrastructure can add to economic potential, provided the money is well spent.” —AFP

Huawei continues its Eid Al-Adha promotion

KUWAIT: Huawei Consumer Business Group announced that Eid Al-Adha offers will continue until July 31, 2021, which will apply to a range of selected products in all its showrooms and authorized retail outlets, so that everyone can benefit from the offers and celebrate this Eid in a different and distinctive way. Huawei offers consumers in Kuwait variety of Bundles at imaginary prices, including Huawei MateBook D14 + Huawei Watch Fit Bundle, Huawei MatePad (Wifi) + Huawei Scale 3 Bundle, Huawei Nova7i + Huawei FreeBuds 4i Bundle and Huawei Y7a + Huawei Watch GT2 Pro (Black) Bundle offers.

And because Huawei cares about sports and fitness lovers, it has provided them with great Bundles, including the Huawei Band 6 + Huawei FreeLace Pro Bundle, Huawei FreeBuds 4i + Huawei Watch Fit Bundle, Huawei GT2 Pro (Black) + Huawei FreeBuds Pro Bundle, and Huawei FreeBuds 4i + Case with 4 colors bundle offers. Also, Huawei will have a Flash Sale offers on the selection of accessories including Huawei BodyFat Scale, Huawei AM6 Bluetooth Headphone, Huawei PowerBank 1000MAh, and Huawei Bluetooth Mini Speaker (CM510).

Huawei Consumer Business Group also announced the provision of exclusive offers at competitive prices by entering its website only, where consumers will get discounts on some products including Laptops like Huawei MateBook X Pro, Huawei MateBook X and wearable products like Huawei Watch GT2e, Huawei FreeBuds 3i, Huawei FreeBuds 3 and Huawei Band 4 Pro. Celebrate Eid on the Huawei way and give gifts to your family or yourself at exceptional prices that increase the fun of Eid, hurry up to one of the points of sale or the website to purchase.

Italy reaches deal with EU on Alitalia successor

ROME: Italy has struck a deal with the European Commission over the creation of a new airline to replace its beleaguered national airline Alitalia, the economy ministry said yesterday.

Italia Trasporto Aereo (ITA), the new Italian flag carrier, “will be fully operational from October 15”, after Rome reached a “constructive and balanced solution” with Brussels, a ministry statement said.

The new airline had initially been expected to launch in August to benefit from the peak tourism season, but months of talks with the Commission dragged on even after a preliminary deal in May. The Commission, charged with policing state aid in the EU, needs to give the go-ahead to Italy’s 3.0 billion euro (\$3.6 billion) bailout of Alitalia, its former flag carrier. The Commission has insisted that the new airline mark a rupture with Alitalia, and not only by changing the name.

The new airline will have a fleet half the size of its predecessor, ground operations will be spun off and airport slots ceded. The accord will “guarantee the discontinuity necessary to comply with European regulations,” and open the way for a planned capital hike for ITA, the ministry said Thursday, without giving any figures. The deal is expected to result in job losses.

As things stand, over 11,000 people work for Alitalia, from



pilots to maintenance and ground staff.

Economic Development Minister Giancarlo Giorgetti said ITA would hire around 2,800 people in 2021 and another 5,750 people in 2022. Loss-making Alitalia, whose financial condition worsened under the coronavirus pandemic, had already been placed under state administration in 2017.

Italy struggled in vain to find an outside investor to take it over, before eventually deciding to seek approval for a new bailout. —AFP

Business

Boubyan Bank records KD 21.5m in net profits for first half of 2021

Bank's operating profits for H1 surpassed KD 50m at a growth rate of 15%

KUWAIT: Boubyan Bank has announced KD 50 million in operating profits for the first half of this year, while continuing to allocate provisions amounting to KD 28 million, thereby achieving KD 21.5 million in net profits at a growth rate of 25 percent compared with the past year, while the earning per share amounting to 6 fils. Boubyan Bank's Vice-Chairman & Group Chief Executive Officer, Adel Al-Majed stated: "Thanks to Almighty Allah, we managed to achieve positive levels of operating and net profits despite the ongoing repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its clear effect on the banking industry."

"In spite of the exceptional circumstances we are going through, Boubyan Bank has shown its ability to weather this storm and to continue providing the highest levels of customer service while maintaining flexibility in incorporating our services and products via our various digital channels to make the lives of our customers much easier", he added.

Al-Majed, who is also the Chairman of the Bank of London and the Middle East "BLME", stated that the announcement of Boubyan Bank's profits coincided with the launch of NOMO Bank, as the world's first Islamic international Digital Bank through the UK-based Bank of London and the Middle East "BLME", a member of Boubyan Bank's Group, which will operate subject to the laws of the UK's financial regulatory authorities. "This new bank is a demonstration of Boubyan Bank's strategy in action through international expansion after affirming our domestic position, and follows in the path of our plans to expand our digital banking services," he added. Al-Majed, who is the Chairman of Kuwait Banking Association as well, went on to add: "We hope that all the economic sectors in Kuwait return to work normally in light of the efforts exerted by the various bodies in Kuwait to vaccinate the majority of Kuwaitis and expatriates in order to pave the way for the reopening of all sectors and the gradual return to normal life." Al-Majed highlighted the most significant numbers recorded by the bank during the first half of this year where the total of customers' deposits grew by 15 percent to reach KD 5.4 billion, while the financing portfolio grew by 12 percent to reach KD 5.2 billion, and operating income grew by 17 percent to reach KD 92.6 million.

Speaking of the bank's market shares, the bank's share of local financing increased generally to 10.7 percent approximately, while its share of retail finance grew to about 13.4 percent. "Of course, we had to allocate additional precautionary provisions to support the bank's financial position, and to bolster our ability to face any future repercussions of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, which is normal as a result of this unprecedented crisis; a first in our modern world," Al-Majed elaborated.

KFH offers 24/7 eservices during Eid holiday

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) continues to provide its banking services around the clock through a group of various technological and digital tools during Eid AlAdha holiday.

Most of the banking services are available in several channels around the clock, whether through the bank's website, KFH.com, or via the KFHOnline mobile application, or through the KFH Go electronic branches that are spread in many important locations, in addition to the KFH accounts on social media and many E-service channels as per the latest financial technology and digital platforms.

KFH Go branch is considered a new electronic channel that helps transfer normal customer transactions to an innovative automated branch, that provides capabilities that allow customers to benefit from highly efficient banking services. It includes more than 80 percent of the services

Achievements and successes

Al-Majed went on to highlight prominent achievements during the first half of this year, the most significant of which, was the bank's regional and international success in undertaking a \$500 million sukuk issuance at 3.95 percent annual profit rate. He added: "The total subscription requests exceeded \$1.3 billion (the issuance was over-subscribed by 2.6 fold the issued sukuk). This confirms Boubyan Bank's international and regional status and reputation, gained owing to its achievements over the past years across many levels." On the other hand, the crisis caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kuwait has revealed the strength of Boubyan Bank and how it continued with its quality customer service without compromising the high levels maintained over the past years. This helped the bank continue topping the pyramid of customer service in Kuwait, which was confirmed by being named the Best Islamic Bank in Customer Service for the eleventh year in a row since 2010 by Service Hero, the international consumer-driven customer satisfaction index.

Furthermore, as a part of the growth plans for our bank's branches across various areas of Kuwait to serve its customers, the bank inaugurated its new Mubarkiya Branch, designed and dedicated to serving both retail and corporate customers. Moreover, the bank inaugurated two new branches, the first in the Sabah Al-Ahmad area, making Boubyan the first bank with a presence in the area serving customers. This step came to keep up with the rapid urban development and population growth expected for this new city over the upcoming years. Additionally, the bank has opened a new branch at Egoila, thereby expanding the bank's presence to two branches in the area.

The bank continued supporting its human resources by announcing the acceptance of a new group of employees in GUST's MBA program, which was been launched over 10 years ago to support the bank's valued employees, making Boubyan the only bank supporting its employees in their journey to earn an MBA by providing them with moral and financial support. Since 2012, more than 100 male and female employees have earned

and business provided by the branches in their traditional sense, which makes KFH Go branches the preferred choice to many segments of customers, especially the youth. KFH GO branches include the XTM device that allows direct video call with service personnel, as well as automatic teller machines and cash deposit machines. The cash deposit machines receive 300 notes per transaction.

Moreover, Customers can perform a variety of interactive banking services through KFH Go's 10 branches located in various places in Kuwait, including Kuwait International Airport, such as: establishing "Murabaha" financing transactions, requesting credit and prepaid cards, updating data and phone numbers, activating bank cards, opening deposits and accounts, instant cheque printing, receiving gold biscuits (10 grams), opening (gold, savings, Al-Rabeh, electron) accounts, online gold purchase and sell, cardless withdrawals using QR code through mobile, or by using Civil ID or phone number, in addition to many other financing and banking services conducted quickly, easily and safely.

The electronic banking services at KFH are also characterized by their high efficiency in addition to ease and safety. This was evident in the number of electronic banking operations that KFH customers carried out via KFHonline, on the website or through the mobile application.

The e-banking transactions includes: opening an bank account online for citizens and residents to join become a KFH customer without having



Adel Al-Majed

	30 June 2021	30 June 2020	
Net Profit for the period	KD 21.3 million	KD 17.1 million	25.1%
Net Operating Income	KD 50.2 million	43.8 million	14.6%
Finance Portfolio	KD 5.2 billion	KD 4.6 billion	11.8%
Total Assets	KD 6.9 billion	KD 6.1 billion	13.3%
Depositors' accounts	KD 5.4 billion	KD 4.7 billion	14.8%

their MBA degrees from GUST within the framework of the joint program by Boubyan and GUST, which is managed through the Itqan Academy, the training arm of the bank. Additionally, the bank participated in several virtual career fairs organized by Kuwait's universities, where the bank promoted its most significant efforts towards supporting national cadres, whether through attracting them to work at the bank or by providing them with the necessary training and expertise after joining the bank.

The be aware campaign 'Diraya'

As a part of its corporate social responsibility, the bank provided its full support to CBK and KBA's campaign "Be Aware - Diraya" during the first half of this year to spread awareness about a broad range of banking matters amongst citizens and residents.

Furthermore, over the past months, the bank launched the biggest campaign in Kuwait to encourage and reward our vaccinated customers, with valuable prizes including trips to other countries abroad inclusive of all costs, in addition to valuable cash prizes to more than 20 winners. Customers may continue to register for the draw through the bank's App via Msa3ed, our chatbot, by typing "Yes for the vaccine", and then they will be registered in the campaign immediately. Similarly, the bank started a staff campaign last January to encourage employees to get vaccinated. This campaign was an instant success with the number of vaccinated employees jumping to more than 70 percent.

to visit the branch, local and telex financial transfers, opening deposits, adding beneficiaries, balance inquiry, cheque book request, requesting financing, opening an account, requesting Al-Kheir Card, and checking the PINs for credit and debit cards, activating new bank cards, reporting a lost credit/debit cards, checking the financing obligations and the number of installments, perusal of investment plans, receiving account balances and deposits summary, along with other wide range of digital services.

KFH has recently launched digital signature service in personal financing products through KFH mobile app or desktop from anywhere without having to visit the branch, instant card issuance within 3 minutes, Live FX Pricing, instant cross-border payments service at KFH-Turkey using Ripple's technology and digital Wallet service through smart mobiles and watches which provides advanced and smart digital payment methods according to highly developed security standards in cooperation with Samsung, Fitbit and Garmin.

Meanwhile, the call center continues to provide services around the clock to receive customer calls, listen to their enquiries and respond to them through a qualified and technically advanced staff. KFH provides the automated telephone service that works with the same efficiency and speed, to respond to transfers between accounts, inquire about financial operations, pay bills, and recharge Mobile phone cards, along with other services.

Business

Kamco Invest successfully exits Planet Pharmacies

60% stake held by private equity funds and co-investors

KUWAIT: Kamco Invest, a regional non-banking financial powerhouse with one of the largest AUMs in the region, announced that it has successfully exited the 60 percent stake in Planet Pharmacies LLC, held by Kamco Invest private equity funds and co-investors, to Gulf Pharmaceutical Industries ("Julphar") PJSC.

Since its establishment in 2007, Planet Pharmacies has experienced exponential growth with its operations expanding outside the UAE to reach Saudi Arabia and Oman. The company embarked on implementing its successful expansion strategy through acquiring a large retail chain of pharmacies, setting up new pharmacies across different cities, in addition to introducing the wholesale distribution rights of new agencies from regional and international pharmaceutical manufacturers. Despite unprecedented market conditions, the private equity team, in collaboration with the Investment Banking team at Kamco Invest, managed to successfully complete the exit on behalf of Kamco Invest funds and clients.

Ihsan Sancay, Executive Director of Private Equity at Kamco Invest said, "The exit from Planet Pharmacies, in such challenging market conditions, is a testament to our commitment and ability to grow our portfolio companies and to realize successful exits. Since initiating our joint venture with Julphar in 2007 to set up Planet Pharmacies, we played an instrumental role in expanding the company's operations and geographic footprint, both for the retail and distribution segments, establishing Planet Pharmacies as one of the premier pharmaceutical players in the region. Our focus now lies on exploring new investments and platforms, targeting companies that are well positioned to thrive in an ever-evolving business environment. This comes in addition to forging new partnerships that aim to expand our business ecosystem."

Abdullah Al-Sharekh, Managing Director of Markets and Investment Banking at Kamco Invest commented, "Successfully completing our role as a sell-side advisor marks another milestone and achievement despite the current market challenges. We are proud to be part of this successful transaction which portrays the value and growth potential of Planet Pharmacies. We look forward to successfully closing more transactions through our Mergers and Acquisitions Advisory team, who are always ready to achieve our clients' preset objectives and deliver the best possible outcome for all our valued clients."

Through its role, the private equity team assisted Planet Pharmacies to finalize the acquisitions since 2007, which in turn led to the enhancement of the company's value. The company carried out internal audit review exercises, enhanced internal controls, improved reporting and financial performance dashboards, in addition to implementing operational metrics that optimized Planet Pharmacies' capital structure to maximize shareholders' value, amongst other value creation initiatives. These steps aided in the effective consolidation of business operations to maintain sustainable revenue streams and expand the retail and distribution network.

Sameh Sarwat, Senior Vice President of Private Equity at Kamco Invest commented, "This is one of several exits that are currently being contemplated, which falls in line with our current strategy to monetize investments and distribute cash to investors. Our exit to Julphar reflects the success of our business model that is focused on partnering with reputable strategic players and working together on implementing bespoke value creation plans to maximize the value. We look forward to progressing further our current discussions with



potential partners, in order to provide our investors with off-market investments that offer attractive risk-adjusted returns."

Roshanak Bassiri-Gharb, Corporate Legal Director at Clyde & Co in Dubai added, "We are delighted to have worked alongside the in-house teams of Kamco Invest funds and co-investors on this strategic transaction. Acting as sole external counsel together with Partner Naji Hawayek and Associate Ghalya Rashid Ali, our effective collaboration enabled us to reach a successful outcome within a particularly short timeframe. We look forward to continuing to support the group's healthcare investment strategy across the UAE and the wider Middle East region." It is worth noting that Private Equity at Kamco Invest is comprised of seasoned professionals located in different countries, providing their local perspective on deals within their target regions.

Burgan Bank working hours during Eid holiday

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank announced yesterday that it will be officially closed during Eid Al-Adha holidays, starting from Monday 19 July until Saturday 24 July 2021. Burgan Bank will resume business on Sunday 25 July 2021. The Airport Branch will serve customers during the Eid holiday from 8:00 AM until 7:00 PM. On this occasion, Burgan Bank extends its best wishes and greetings to everyone.

To ensure that customers continue to enjoy their banking services during the holidays, Burgan Bank's online services will remain operational through its website www.burgan.com and mobile application. The call center and WhatsApp Service will also be available around-the-clock during the holidays.

Kamco Invest completes pre-listing private placement for JTC

KUWAIT: Kamco Invest, a regional non-banking financial powerhouse with one of the largest AUMs in the region, announced that it has successfully completed the pre-listing private placement for Jassim Transport & Stevedoring Co K.S.C.C. (JTC), a leading provider of ports and contracts logistics services as well as heavy equipment and power leasing in Kuwait and the GCC.

The private placement received excellent interest from institutional and individual qualified investors exceeding the targeted number of shareholders and placement amount. The issue targeted an offering of up to 60 million shares JTC shares at the price of 450 fils per share (total value of up to KD 27million) to qualified investors in order to increase the shareholder base as one of the prerequisites for listing on Boursa Kuwait. The subscription period commenced on 16th of June and ended on 8th of July 2021.

Kamco Invest's Investment Banking Equity Capital Markets team acted as the Lead Manager and Subscription Agent for the private placement and will assist JTC with the listing of its shares on Boursa Kuwait's Main Market.

Abdullah Al-Sharekh, Managing Director of Markets and Investment Banking at Kamco Invest, said, "We are proud to have assisted a valued client like JTC and its respective shareholders in successfully closing the private placement in preparation for listing on Boursa Kuwait. Our objective is to utilize our expertise, market knowledge, and resources to secure a favorable outcome for our clients both efficiently and within the targeted timeline."

Al-Sharekh added, "When it comes to our clients, we are committed to delivering our wide range of offerings to the highest standards to meet their unique strategic objectives and exceed their expectations. Our extensive track record, regional network, and multi-sector expertise allows the Company to successfully

lead and manage mandates across the region."

Mohamed Sherif El-Rafie, Executive Director of Equity Capital Markets at Kamco Invest, said, "This is another milestone for Kamco Invest's Investment Banking and mainly the Equity Capital Markets team. Our innovative online subscription platform, "Iktatib.com" made the subscription process

easy and seamless for investors, playing an important role in the success of the private placement." He added, "This successful transaction demonstrates the power of working with a professional client like JTC, coupled with a fair valuation of the offered shares and supported by a well-developed digital platform." Since its inception in 1998, Kamco Invest's Investment Banking service has been very active in the regional capital markets and has received recognitions from industry specialists and, most importantly, from clients. With this successful transaction, the Investment Banking teams would have acted as investment bankers to deals exceeding \$26.3 billion in equity capital markets, debt capital markets and mergers and acquisitions transactions.



Abdullah Al-Sharekh



Sherif El-Rafie



Stars

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

More than usual, you're probably craving solitude today, Aries. Although you may have committed to attending a party or get-together, now the idea may seem irritating. You may rather work on some tasks or projects, or you might want to go for a workout and release some of the tension you feel. The latter idea is good. If you exercise early, you might feel like going out later.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Although you're normally a sociable person who feels most comfortable in the company of others, Taurus, today you may prefer to be alone. You could feel a little under the weather, or you could be stressed from job-related worries. You probably need rest, but you might also benefit from taking a walk to work off some tension, get the endorphins going, and help you feel like yourself again.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

You tend to enjoy solitude, Gemini, but today you might feel more reclusive than usual. Friends could invite you out, but you aren't likely to accept the offer. You might even feel a little irritated. This is a great day to work out or throw yourself into your own projects. Your concentration is good and the physical activity will get relieve the stress.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

There might be tension in the air for no discernible reason today. Family members might seem preoccupied with problems they can't define. Your natural inclination could be to try to cheer them up, Cancer, but it probably won't work. Don't be annoyed if they don't respond. It isn't them. Blame the planets. This is a great day to jog, take a cardio class, or otherwise work off stress.



Leo (July 23-August 22)

Some mysterious telephone calls might come your way - wrong numbers or hang-ups. Other people might seem less communicative than usual, Leo, and you may be preoccupied. You might feel a bit more nervous than usual, but that should go away if you take a walk or get some other exercise. If you've been thinking about doing some writing, this is the day to start.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Confusion over money matters might arise, Virgo. You may need to check your records to shed light on past transactions. Don't worry. All should be well once you ascertain the facts. You might have some intense dreams tonight. Write them down. You will want to remember them later, because they might reveal a lot about your current situation. They may also inspire future projects.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

Someone close to you might seem more preoccupied than usual, Libra, and perhaps a bit difficult to deal with. Don't take this personally. It has little, if anything, to do with you. This person has troubles of their own that they don't want to share. You might be feeling a bit tense and jumpy, but again, this is nothing to worry about. Take a walk or work out at the gym.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

You might feel a bit tense, Scorpio, and you probably won't understand why. The reason? The planets. You might jump at unexpected noises or take offense where none is intended. Relations with others might be a little strained, necessitating some communication about how you're feeling. Try to work off the tension by taking a brisk walk or perhaps working out at the gym.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

You probably aren't going to feel like socializing even though friends want you to go out with them. Your patience could be worn a bit thin, Sagittarius, and you may get annoyed at incidents that normally wouldn't bother you. This isn't a good day for group activities or parties. It might be best to get a good workout and then rest. You will feel much better afterward.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Uptight is the mood for today. You might be the center of attention at some point. While you normally wouldn't mind, Capricorn, today it might make you nervous. When everyone looks at you and expects you to say something, say it. Keep it short and then withdraw. You aren't in the mood. Walk to the library and throw yourself into reading about subjects that interest you.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

Today you may want to be left alone with your thoughts. Relaxing with a good book could be at the top of your agenda, Aquarius, and you aren't likely to want to be interrupted. Noise and requests that don't usually bother you might irritate you, so it's best to spend some time alone and make the effort to be your usual considerate self when with others. Take a brisk walk to relieve the tension.



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

Money worries might have you more on edge than usual, Pisces. While you may be doing well, you could still be insecure enough to think that your funds might not stretch far enough. Consider the situation objectively. You will probably be relieved by what you find. Others' demands on your time might irritate you more than usual. The best way to relieve the tension is to work out or take a walk.

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina Faso	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
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
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
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
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027

Sports

The new kids on their blocks at Tokyo Games

PARIS: While the Olympics emphasize their history, they also try to refresh the program to broaden the appeal, include sports that are popular in host nations and to reflect changing attitudes. The International Olympic Committee has said it wants to promote “youth-oriented sports” and make “gender equality a big focus for Tokyo”. The Games will include six sports that were not on the program in Rio as well as adding four fresh disciplines in existing sports and a string of mixed events in traditional sports.

Two of those incoming sports, baseball and softball, are hardly new to the Olympics. Baseball made its first appearance in 1904 in St Louis, softball in 1996. Both were dropped in 2008, victims of the constant battle to control the number of competitors at the Games. A change in approach by the IOC, aimed at increasing the number of sports from Tokyo onwards, eased the way for baseball and softball to return.

Overall, Tokyo will offer more sports as well as more chances to win gold, with a record 339 medal events. Yet, while the IOC predicts that a record 11,091 athletes will take part, some sports, particularly the newcomers, have small allocations. There will be just 18 BMX Freestyle competitors, 40 surfers and 16 four-member 3x3 basketball teams. Four sports make their Olympic debuts in Tokyo.

British sprint queen Asher-Smith has historical perspective

LONDON: Team GB's golden girl Dina Asher-Smith is chasing a sprint double at the Tokyo Olympics but says her background as a history student helps her put her achievements in perspective. Asher-Smith is Britain's best hope of victory on the track, with long-distance runner Mo Farah - a four-time gold medalist - failing even to qualify for the Games.

The 200m world champion is one of the favorites to win over the distance but faces stiff competition from rivals such as Gabrielle Thomas, Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and defending Olympic champion Elaine Thompson-Herah. Asher-Smith has a busy Games lined up - she is also entered in the 100m and the 4x100m relay.

The 25-year-old athlete, known for her infectious grin, told Harper's Bazaar that people used to think she “doesn't care”. “I do, of course,” she said. “But I studied history at university, so I spent every day learning about death tolls and wars and bad decisions. “I know I'm very fortunate that the most important thing in my life is running fast in a straight line - so I've always had the perspective of, ‘If it goes well, fab, and if not, then life goes on.’”

Asher-Smith's ability to keep a sense of perspective also helped when the Games were postponed last year. “When I heard, I went out and got a chocolate cake and a six-pack of Coca-Cola, and I had a lot of McDonald's apple pies,” she said. The sprinter has come a long way since she had to be bribed to run with the offer of an ice cream and is a self-confessed perfectionist. “I could easily be sitting there with videos, winding back my sessions and studying my technique, but that would mean I'd be overthinking as I ran,” she said. — AFP

Skateboarding

As part of the attempt to lure in a younger audience, skateboarding follows snowboarding, which was added to the Winter Olympic program in 1998. Reflecting the sport's roots, there will be park and street events. Park skateboarding will take place in a bowl and emphasize flow and tricks. The street competition will run over a course that include street obstacles such as stairs and rails.

Surfing

The wave riders will take the Olympic plunge at Tsurigasaki Beach, 100 km west of Tokyo on the Pacific coast. The event will open with 30-minute heats in which four or five surfers battle for peaks of promising waves and conclude with a series of two-competitor rounds. While competition is due to start on July 25 and run for four days, the dates are fluid to allow organizers to wait for better waves.

Sport climbing

Rope climbing was part of the gymnastics program at the first modern Olympics in Athens in 1896, it last appeared in 1932 and clambers back in a very different format and as a separate sport. The competition will be held on three specially built walls, two of 15m flanking one of 4.5m,

at the Aomi Urban Sports Park. The short wall is for bouldering, which involves climbing fixed routes. One higher wall is for speed climbing, a two-person race to the top. The other is for lead, in which climbers race the clock.

Karate

The Japanese sport making its Olympic debut, at the suggestion of the hosts, evolved on the island of Okinawa. There will be two competitions. In kata, individuals demonstrate their mastery of defensive and attacking moves they have chosen from the 102 recognized by the sport. Competitors are judged on “strength, speed, rhythm, balance and power of strikes and kicks; the solidity, clarity and force of movements; and the proper expression of the meaning of each technique with beautiful, flowing motion”. In kumite, the fighting discipline, athletes compete head-to-head in three weight classes. The venue is the Nippon Budokan, which was built for the 1964 games, where it was home to judo, and in 1970 hosted the first-ever World Karate Championships.

Cycling: Freestyle BMX

Trick cycling is also coming to the Olympics with BMX Freestyle joining BMX Racing, which has been part of the Games since 2008. The

sport will use the BMX park format. Riders have 60 seconds to perform acrobatics on obstacles such as walls and ramps known as boxes and spines. They are marked on difficulty, originality, execution, height and creativity.

Basketball: 3X3

Like skateboarding, basketball is taking it to the streets in Tokyo with the addition of men's and women's three-on-three competitions. The playground variation is played half court using one basket. Games end when one team reaches 21 points (there are no three pointers) or after 10 minutes.

Mixed team events

Several traditional sports are mixing up the genders with events in which both men and women compete. Swimming, athletics and triathlon are adding mixed relays. In all three, teams will be made up of two men and two women. In swimming they will compete in a 4x100m medley, in athletics in a 4x400m relay and triathlon in the shorter sprint format. There will be mixed pairs competitions in air pistol, air rifle and trap shooting and in archery. Judo will have a team event with three men and three women, from different weight classes, in each team. Table tennis is bringing in mixed doubles. — AFP

Sindhu eyes rare gold for India in wide-open event

NEW DELHI: India's badminton superstar PV Sindhu has her eye on gold at the Olympics but warned the road to the final in Tokyo will be tough in a wide-open women's singles featuring most of the world's top players. The 2016 Olympic silver medalist Sindhu, who turned 26 this month, won one of only two Indian medals in Rio. She is determined to go one better five years on and become just the second individual Olympic gold medalist for India in the history of the Games.

Sindhu said that apart from Spain's Carolina Marin, who beat Sindhu to gold in 2016 but will not be able to defend her title because of injury, any one of the world's leading players could finish on the top step of the podium. “It's not going to be easy. There are other good players, like Tai Tzu(-ying), (Nozomi) Okuhara, Ratchanok (Intanon), (Akane) Yamaguchi, Chen Yu Fei,” Sindhu said. “You cannot expect easy wins or easy matches, because it's the Olympics and everybody is going to be prepared for it.”

The 2019 world champion said winning gold was on her mind “most of the time”. Snaring such a top prize would be particularly special for India, with the vast nation only ever winning one individual gold - shooter Abhinav Bindra in the 10m air rifle event at Beijing 2008. “I tell myself: ‘It's OK, I have to do well and not think about what's going to happen in the future and take one match at a time’,” Sindhu said.

New skills

Sindhu, who first caught the badminton world's attention when she broke into the top 20 aged 17 in September 2012, has been training under South Korean Park Tae-sang since 2019. At the All



PV Sindhu

England badminton championships in Birmingham - the last international competition ahead of the Games, which open on July 23 - she lost in the semi-final to Thailand's Pornpawee Chochuwong. She is now seventh in the women's rankings, which are led by Taiwan's Tai.

Many athletes' preparations for the Games have been badly hit by the coronavirus pandemic, but Sindhu said badminton players have been using the time to refine their techniques. “Every athlete would have learnt a new skill or new technique and that is going to be really very tricky,” said Sindhu, who has been training in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad.

“Playing freshly after a couple of months definitely is going to be different. Everybody might come with new strategies.” Sindhu said she had been working on her techniques and skills with Park, adding that “we have improved a bit”. “Definitely I am 100 percent right now. For me ranking does not matter because if you play well and win - automatically your ranking will go up,” said Sindhu. — AFP

Sports

Bucks surge late to beat Suns and pull level in NBA Finals

MILWAUKEE: Khris Middleton put Milwaukee on his back in the final minutes, scoring 10 of his 40 points down the stretch to rally the Bucks past Phoenix 109-103 on Wednesday to deadlock the NBA Finals. Greek star Giannis Antetokounmpo added 26 points, 14 rebounds and eight assists for the Bucks, who improved to an NBA-best 9-1 at home in the playoffs.

Milwaukee, which trailed by seven points early in the fourth quarter, closed the game on a 12-4 run in the last 2:07, with Middleton delivering 10 points in the span. "We just ran sets that enabled me to get to my spots," Middleton said. "Thankfully I hit some shots. That's what that one was about, finding a way to win a game it seemed like we weren't going to win to give us life and some momentum."

Milwaukee equalized at 2-2 in the best-of-seven championship series with game five Saturday in Phoenix and game six Tuesday at Milwaukee. "The only way we're going to win this series is to get one on the road," said Middleton. "It would be nice to get this next one." The Bucks, who dropped the first two games in Arizona, seek their first crown since 1971 while the Suns seek the first title in the club's 53-year history.

Phoenix's Devin Booker, coming off a playoffs-worst 10-point performance in a game three loss, scored 42 points in a losing cause. "It doesn't matter at all," Booker said. "The main objective is to win the game. Anything that goes on throughout the game it doesn't matter. It's really tough whenever you can't win a game, especially at this point in the season."

The Suns committed 17 turnovers to only five by the Bucks and allowed 17 offensive rebounds for Milwaukee. "Turnovers just crushed us," Suns coach Monty Williams said. "They got 19 more possessions. Over the course of the game when you just give it up that many times, the turnovers and offensive rebounding was

a bit of a hill for us to climb."

Phoenix's Jae Crowder made two free throws to put the Suns ahead but Middleton answered with back-to-back jumpers to put the Bucks up 101-99. "Tonight called for him to be aggressive with the jump shot," Milwaukee's Pat Connaughton said. "At the end of the game, we want him to have the ball. I'm thrilled he was able to show the world because we see it every single day."

'We wanted this bad'

Phoenix's Chris Paul, in the first finals of his 16-year career at age 36, went 5-of-13 from the floor and made his fourth of five turnovers to set up Middleton's fast break layup for a 103-99 Bucks edge with 27.2 seconds remaining. Middleton added four late free throws to seal the triumph. "I got to take care of the ball," Paul said. "We got 17 turnovers. We shoot the ball too well not to have those opportunities to score."

Antetokounmpo made a key block late on Deandre Ayton and his defensive work and rebounds helped the Bucks enjoy a 15-0 fast break points edge. "Giannis, that's what he has been doing all year. He's amazing," said Middleton. "He didn't have the dominant performance, but he did it with other things." Added Antetokounmpo: "We wanted this bad and we got it. We've got to keep taking steps forward."

Only Stephen Curry with 40 points had scored more in the first three quarters of a finals game in the past 25 years than Booker's 38. But Booker picked up his fifth foul only 70 seconds into the fourth quarter and appeared to make a sixth, to bring expulsion, in denying Jrue Holiday on a breakthrough with just over 3:30 to play. But no foul was called. "I don't know, man. I don't know," Holiday said of the non-foul call. "Booker had an awesome night, but everything else was in our favor." Kareem Abdul-Jab-



MILWAUKEE: Jrue Holiday #21 of the Milwaukee Bucks is defended by Devin Booker #1 of the Phoenix Suns during the second half in Game Four of the NBA Finals at Fiserv Forum on Wednesday. — AFP

bar and Oscar Robertson, who sparked Milwaukee's championship run half a century ago, were among more than 16,000 fans in attendance. — AFP

Ogier chasing points at Estonia Rally

PARIS: From the heat, dust and rocks of the Safari Rally in Kenya, the World Rally Championship changes cadence as it headed north yesterday to the fast and furious roads of Estonia. Seven-time world champion Sebastien Ogier heads the standings in his Toyota going into the seventh rally of the 12-race season. The Frenchman, who is retiring at the end of the season, has won four of the previous six rallies this campaign but is wary about an Estonia rally which is made up of 24 high-speed special stages covering 324.16km.

"Rally Estonia is a challenging one to win, especially running first on the road, but I will do my best to keep scoring big points," said Ogier. "It's always a difficult challenge to be on the limit on such fast roads that we have in the north of Europe, but I think it's a challenge that every single driver enjoys."

Ogier is 34 points ahead of his teammate Elfyn Evans who won in Portugal but crashed out early in the last rally in Kenya. The other man to win a rally this season is Hyundai's Ott Tanak, the 2019 world cham-



TARTU, Estonia: Competitors pose next to their cars in front of the town hall yesterday ahead of the start of the WRC Rally Estonia. — AFP

pion, who is hoping to add his home race in Estonia to the Finland Rally he took back in February. He has won four times on his own roads, in 2014, 2018, 2019 and 2020, when the event joined the WRC calendar, but his chances look slim. The Hyundai cars are often faster than the Toyotas but they lack reliability.

Suspension problems while Tanak or his teammate Thierry Neuville were leading deprived Hyundais of potential victories in the last three rallies. "We have spent the short period since Safari Rally Kenya reviewing the issues we encountered in recent events,"

said Hyundai team principal Andrea Adamo. "There is only so much we can do in this time frame but we head to Estonia with our motivation levels high, and a determination to show what we can achieve."

While Tanak will be the favorite with home supporters, there will be plenty of encouragement also for Toyota's young Finn Kalle Rovanpera "I have always liked fast rallies like in Estonia," said the 20-year-old. "I have driven a lot in the Baltic countries and they offer the same type of roads, fast and smooth, as in Finland. It suits me very well." — AFP

Verstappen aiming for 'knockout' triumph at Silverstone

SILVERSTONE: Max Verstappen and his Red Bull team will seek a potentially decisive "knockout" triumph over defending champions Mercedes and home hero Lewis Hamilton in this weekend's British Grand Prix which features a new form of qualifying. After reeling off his first hat-trick of successive wins to move 32 points clear of seven-time champion Hamilton the 23-year-old Dutchman is in imperious form.

Red Bull are reveling in five straight victories to lead both championships after nine races. But he recognizes that Hamilton, 36, remains a formidable force, especially on home soil at Silverstone. The Briton has won a record seven times at the often windswept former war-time airfield in central England where a capacity crowd of 140,000 is expected on Sunday.

It will be the biggest attendance at a sports event in Britain since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. "I have great respect for Lewis and we are taking nothing for granted," said Verstappen. "We are taking each race one at a time, but, of course, I am hoping to come out of the race with 29 points." Normally it would be a maximum of 25 points for a victory and one for the fastest lap.

There are additional points on offer this weekend through 'The Sprint' which is being used for the first time as an alternative to the traditional qualifying. It will take place on Saturday afternoon and, like traditional qualifying, will decide the grid positions for Sunday's 52-lap race. The sprint is part of an experimental format aimed at attracting a younger audience with the top three awarded three, two and one point respectively. — AFP

Sports

'Another England': Football's reckoning on racial politics

LONDON: Britain's rightwing government has carved out an electoral advantage in ridiculing "woke" politics and campaigners for racial justice, but is now on the defensive against a unified and popular group. Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson's "culture wars" and ballot-box inroads have made life difficult for the Labour opposition party. One group, however, knows where it stands: England's multi-racial, youthful and idealistic football team. "They have made an appeal to the best aspects of Englishness and done so against the direction of play, during an era in which politicians mobilize our worst instincts and darkest fears," historian David Olusoga wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper.

"Twenty-six young men and their remarkable manager have again reminded us that there is another path, another form of English patriotism, another way of being together and - if enough of us want it - another England." Johnson and Home Secretary Priti Patel donned England shirts late on in the European Championship to trumpet their support for the team, after previously mocking its anti-racism stand.

Taking the knee before their games, an anti-racism gesture, was empty "gesture politics", according to Patel, who like Johnson initially refused to condemn England fans for jeering the players at the start of the tournament. Now, in the face of toxic racial abuse levelled at three black players after England's agonizing loss in the Euro2020 final against Italy on Sunday, the politicians profess disgust.

'Dog whistles'

But current and former players have accused them of hypocrisy and of fomenting the post-final hatred, prompting a rattled Johnson on Wednesday to promise tougher action against online abusers and social media platforms. Conservative lawmaker Sayeeda Warsi urged the prime minister to go further and "stop the culture wars", adding: "Dog whistles win votes but destroy nations." Hardline Brexiteer MP Steve Baker said Patel was wrong in her dismissal of taking the knee, following scornful criticism of the minister by current player Tyrone Mings. Conservative lord Daniel Finkelstein warned the government was falling on the wrong side of history, in an opinion piece for *The Times* headlined: "In Priti Patel v Tyrone Mings there's only one winner."

England manager Gareth Southgate, in a pre-tournament letter to the nation, dwelt on patriotism and pride as he underlined the meaning that representing their nation held for all his players. "This is a special group. Humble, proud and liberated in being their true selves," he said. "It's their duty to continue to interact with the public on matters such as equality, inclusivity and racial injustice, while using the power of their voices to help put debates on the table, raise awareness and educate." After years of financial austerity followed by Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic, the footballers have given English people reason to smile, even if they ultimately came up just



MANCHESTER: Messages of support adorn a mural of England forward Marcus Rashford after it was defaced on July 13, 2021. —AFP

short of winning their first international tournament in 55 years.

Win or lose, there had been talk of Johnson honoring the squad with a Downing Street reception.

That talk has receded, with Number 10 anxious to avoid any public showdown with players who have united the country in sympathy and admiration - excepting the racist trolls online. —AFP

Ahly dare not underestimate outsiders Chiefs

JOHANNESBURG: A CAF Champions League season stacked with shocks will produce another tomorrow if first-time finalists Kaizer Chiefs Beat nine-time winners Al Ahly in Moroccan economic capital Casablanca. Many among the millions who support Egyptian and African giants Ahly believe the outcome is not in doubt at Stade Mohammed V, their only questions is the victory margin for the Mohamed el Shenawy-captained Cairo Red Devils.

Yet Chiefs were rank outsiders when the competition kicked off last November and the South African club have already defied massive odds to reach the final. Although they are two of the biggest names in African football, the teams have met just once, with Ahly winning 4-1 in the one-off 2002 CAF Super Cup match in Cairo.

Ahly reached the 2021 final by winning eight matches, drawing three and losing just one, away to shock Group A winners Simba in Tanzania at the mini-league stage. Winners of a record 21 CAF titles in four competitions, the Cairo club have scored 23 goals, including five from leading scorer Mohamed Sherif, and conceded just six en route to Casablanca.

They are guided by South African Pitso Mosimane, a childhood Chiefs' fan who will tie five-time Tunisian Faouzi Benzarti as the most successful African coaches in CAF club competitions if Ahly triumph. He chooses his team from a mix of Egyptian, Tunisian, Malian and Nigerian stars and, since replacing Swiss Rene Weiler last September, has won 36 of 50 matches in all competitions, drawn 10 and lost four. —AFP

Bach says virus rules 'working' ahead of Games

TOKYO: Olympics chief Thomas Bach said yesterday that Tokyo Games anti-virus rules "are working", as the Japanese capital recorded its highest number of new infections since January. With just over a week until Tokyo 2020 opens for events mostly behind closed doors, organizers insist they can be held safely as long as athletes, officials and journalists adhere to strict anti-virus regulations.

But an athlete in Japan tested positive for the virus along with five Olympic workers, mostly contractors, as Tokyo recorded 1,308 new cases. The news came as it emerged that eight staff at a Japanese hotel hosting Brazil's Olympic judo team had tested positive, and a staff member from Russia's rugby sevens team was hospitalized after a positive test.

Bach said a trip to the Olympic Village yesterday morning had convinced him that anti-virus rules are "in place, and they are working, and they are enforced". "We could see and convince ourselves that all the delegations are following the rules and are supporting the rules, because they know it is in their own interest to be safe," he said at a meeting with Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike. "It's in their interest and in solidarity with the people of Tokyo."

The capital is currently under a virus state of emergency, less strict than a blanket lockdown, which limits alcohol sales and curbs restaurant opening hours. The measures will continue throughout the Olympics. Tokyo 2020 said six people, including an athlete, several contractors and a Games staffer had tested positive for the virus on July 13 and 14. They gave no further details on the identity of the six people.

Hotel cluster

The cases underscore the challenges ahead for organizers, although they note that only a handful of cases have been detected so far among more than 8,000 people who have entered Japan since July 1. Bach said



TOKYO: International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach speaks during a meeting with Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike yesterday. —AFP

measures taken to deal with these positive cases mean "the risk for the other residents of the Olympic Village, and the risk for the Japanese people is zero". The cluster among staff at the hotel west of Tokyo where Brazil's Olympic judo team are staying was found during virus screenings carried out before around 30 members of their delegation arrived on Saturday. None of the infected staff came into contact with the athletes, local health and sports officials said. A family member of one of the infected hotel workers also tested positive, Hamamatsu officials added.

Separately, a staff member with the Russian rugby sevens team was hospitalized after testing positive, an official in their host town Munakata in western Japan told AFP. The team of 16 athletes and 10 staff members landed at a Tokyo airport on July 10, and has had no close contact with local officials or residents since then, he said. The rest of the team is now quarantined in their accommodation, but if they test negative on Thursday, they will be able to resume training as early as Friday, the official added. Kyodo news agency reported yesterday that organizers are considering having fewer than 1,000 VIPs and dignitaries at the opening ceremony in the 68,000-seat National Stadium. —AFP

Sports

Barca and Messi agree deal in principle: Media

BARCELONA: Barcelona have reached a deal on principle with Leo Messi for the Argentine veteran to remain with the Catalan club for another five years, but on a reduced wage, Spanish media reported on Wednesday. Messi, who earlier this month finally landed a major international trophy with Argentina when they beat rivals Brazil to win the Copa America, "will sign a five-season contract with a release clause of €600 million (\$709 million)," according to Catalan sports daily L'Esportiu.

"The player will reduce his wage by 50 percent. Now it just remains for the lawyers to look over the agreement and give it the OK. Once that happens (his) continuation will be official," said Madrid-based sports daily Marca which confirmed L'Esportiu's initial story. According to the latter, Messi, 34, will earn in the region of €20 million basic next season with the Catalan club, which he has led to ten league crowns as well as four Champions Leagues.

Last season was a comparative disappointment as the club could only land the Spanish Cup and exited in the last 16 of the Champions League. Last summer Messi sought to leave Barca as a free agent via a clause in his contract before agreeing to see out

the final year as the club threatened to go to court. There had been speculation that Messi would sign on for two years and then potentially head to Major League Soccer, although friend and former Barca teammate Neymar has said he would love to team up with him again at Paris Saint Germain.

"Finally, both parties saw fit to extend their link for a longer period of time," reported Barcelona-based sports daily Sport. Another Barcelona sports paper Mundo Deportivo suggested the longer contract length was part of a quid pro quo taking into account a curtailed salary structure as Barcelona battle crippling debts. Several of the papers said an official announcement on the deal would follow within days.

With Barcelona laboring under debts of several hundred million euros, Spanish media made much earlier this year of the reported 555 million euros paid Messi over four seasons from Nov 2017 to the end of last month. National daily El Mundo splashed in January on what it termed "Messi's pharaonic contract which is ruining Barca" - that sum including image rights and a series of performance-related bonuses with the player reportedly earning a net €297 million. —AFP



Lionel Messi



Cristiano Ronaldo

'No sign' Ronaldo wants to leave Juve

MILAN: Cristiano Ronaldo has given no indication he wants to leave Juventus and is expected back in Turin later this month, club director Pavel Nedved said on Wednesday. "Cristiano is on holiday. We have no signal from his entourage that he wants to leave. We're waiting for him and he will return around July 25 as scheduled," Nedved said at the unveiling of the calendar for the 2021-2022 season.

The 36-year-old Portuguese international has one year left in his contract. His future had been in doubt after a difficult campaign during which Juventus lost their Serie A crown after nine years, exited the Champions League in the last 16 and only sealed fourth place and elite European football on the final day. Juventus open next season at Udinese with Massimiliano

Allegri fired up as he returns as coach two years after being sacked despite winning five consecutive league titles with the Turin club.

"There was a certain routine with (Allegri) for five years," said Nedved. "Then he went for two years to take a little holiday but now he's back with great motivation." Former Czech Republic international Nedved agreed that Juventus had probably celebrated more at finishing fourth at the end of last season than winning the 'Scudetto' in 2020 with Maurizio Sarri.

"I think it's true when Sarri says we didn't celebrate that Scudetto very much, because perhaps it came naturally as we had already won so much. We tried again with Andrea Pirlo (coach last season), but we ended in fourth. We celebrated that achievement after a complicated season perhaps more for the many sufferings."

Nedved confirmed that the club were interested in Sassuolo midfielder Manuel Locatelli after his performance with Italy in winning Euro 2020. "We left the boy quiet during the European Championship. He is a Sassuolo player and there will be time to address the issue." —AFP

Donnarumma joins PSG, Giroud heads to Milan

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain said on Wednesday that they had completed the signing of Italy's Euro 2020 goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma on a five-year deal. The 22-year-old, who saved two penalties in the Euro 2020 final and was named player of the tournament, heads to France on a free transfer from AC Milan. Donnarumma will be in competition with the experienced Keylor Navas for the goalkeeper's jersey.

"I am delighted to be part of this huge club," said Donnarumma in a statement released by PSG. "I feel ready to take on this new challenge and continue to grow here. With Paris, I want to win as much as possible and to bring joy to the supporters." During his six seasons with the Rossoneri, the Naples-born goalkeeper made 215 appearances in Serie A along with 16 in Europa League matches and 12 in the Italian Cup (including the 2016 and 2018 finals).

He is the third player to sign for PSG on a free transfer this summer following Spanish defender Sergio Ramos, who was out of contract at Real Madrid, and Dutch midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum from Liverpool. PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino will have the luxury of choosing between the two experienced shot-stoppers as he looks to lead the club to a long elusive European Cup.

Costa Rican international Navas, 34, joined two seasons ago from Real Madrid, where he won three consecutive Champions league titles but Donnarumma is just 22 and fresh from starring at Euro 2020. Rotating keepers is something PSG have tried before but not entirely successfully. Over recent seasons they have, at various times, juggled Salvatore Sirigu, Kevin Trapp, Alphonse Areola and Italian legend Gianluigi Buffon. French international Areola is due to return this season from a loan year at Fulham.

Navas shone in PSG's run to the Champions League final two seasons ago and also as they eliminated reigning champions Bayern Munich, in last season's quarters before a semi-final exit to Manchester City. While the Costa Rican is an excellent shot stopper he is less at ease in playing out from the back and coming off his line. He might have been pleased to former Real colleague and defensive mainstay Sergio Ramos arrive to play in front of him, but is the man for the future.

Meanwhile, AC Milan director Paolo Maldini confirmed on Wednesday that Chelsea's French center-forward Olivier Giroud was set to arrive in Italy while regretting the loss of goalkeeper Donnarumma to Paris Saint Germain. "Olivier should arrive in Milan tomorrow (Thursday)," Maldini said at the unveiling of the Serie A calendar for the 2021-2022 season.

The 34-year-old World Cup winner is reported to be set to sign a two-year contract worth three million euros per season with the Serie A runners-up, who open next season at Sampdoria. "He's a champion, not only with the national team, he's done great things with Chelsea, won the Champions League," continued Maldini. "He's a very reliable player and that's what we're looking for. We have a young team and we need players with this experience." —AFP



Gianluigi Donnarumma



Kuwait Times
Established 1961
THE LEADING INDEPENDENT DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

REGISTER TODAY

for the COVID-19 vaccine

Free for all residents of Kuwait. To register visit:

www.moh.gov.kw

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

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