



7 Pulitzer Prize-winning Indian photog killed in Afghanistan



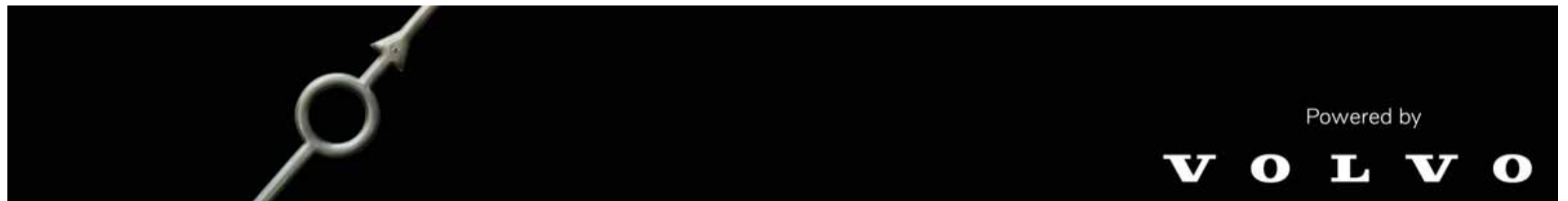
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Pilgrims arrive in Makkah for second pandemic hajj

Saudi Arabia allows businesses to remain open during prayers



MAKKAH: Pilgrims arrive at the Grand Mosque in this holy city at the start of the hajj season yesterday. —AFP

MAKKAH: Pilgrims began arriving in the holy city of Makkah yesterday for the second downsized hajj staged during the coronavirus pandemic, circling Islam's holiest site in masks and on distanced paths. The kingdom is allowing only 60,000 fully vaccinated residents to take part, seeking to repeat last year's success that saw no virus outbreak during the five-day ritual.

This year's hajj, with participants chosen through a lottery, is larger than the pared-down version staged in 2020 but drastically smaller than in normal times. After being loaded on buses and brought to Makkah's Grand Mosque, pilgrims began performing the "tawaf", the circumambulation of the Kaaba, a large cubic structure draped in golden-embroidered black cloth, towards which Muslims around the world pray. Many carried umbrellas to protect themselves from the scorching summer heat.

"Every three hours, 6,000 people enter to perform the tawaf of arrival," hajj ministry spokesman Hisham al-Saeed told AFP. "After each group leaves, a sterilization process is carried out at the sanctuary." The hajj, usually one of the world's largest annual religious gatherings with some 2.5 million people taking part in 2019, is one of the five pillars of Islam and must be undertaken by all Muslims with the means at least once in their lives.

It consists of a series of religious rites, formally starting today, which are completed over five days in Islam's holiest city and its surroundings in western Saudi Arabia. Among the chosen ones this year was Ameen, a 58-year-old Indian oil contractor based in the eastern city of Dammam, who was picked for the ritual along with his wife and three adult children. "We are overjoyed," said Ameen. "So many of our friends and relatives were rejected."

Like the other countries of the Gulf, Saudi Arabia is home to significant expatriate populations from South Asia, the Far East, Africa as well as the Middle East. "I feel like I won a lottery," Egyptian pharmacist Mohammed El Eter said after being selected. "This is a special, unforgettable moment in one's life. I thank God for granting me this chance, to be accepted among a lot of people who applied," the 31-year-old said.

Today, the pilgrims will move on to Mina, around five kilometers away from the Grand Mosque, ahead of the main rite at Mount Arafat, where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) delivered his final sermon. 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, according to the hajj ministry.

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News in brief

10 times more antibodies

HONG KONG: People who received BioNTech's coronavirus vaccine had ten times the amount of antibodies than those given China's Sinovac, a Hong Kong study has shown, adding to growing data on different jabs' effectiveness. The study adds to the growing body of evidence that vaccines using pioneering mRNA technology - such as BioNTech and Moderna - offer better protection against the coronavirus and its variants that those developed by more traditional methods such as using inactivated virus parts. — AFP

'Pandemic of unvaccinated'

WASHINGTON: US health authorities on Friday pleaded with COVID vaccine holdouts to roll up their sleeves and get their shots, as cases, hospitalizations and deaths surged, driven by the Delta variant. "There is a clear message that is coming through: This is becoming a pandemic of the unvaccinated," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Rochelle Walensky told reporters. — AFP

Life-saving potential in venom

BRISBANE: A group of Australia-based scientists are looking to venom from a deadly native spider to actually save lives, by halting the harmful effects of heart attacks. Researchers used venom from a type of funnel-web spider - among the world's deadliest species - in a drug they hope can soon be taken to human trials. University of Queensland scientist Nathan Palant said Friday the venom helped stop the body sending a "death signal" after a heart attack, which causes cells to die. — AFP

WhatsApp tests breaking free

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook-owned messaging service WhatsApp has announced the launch of a trial aimed at freeing its users from smartphones. In a blog post, Facebook engineers said the new feature would allow for the hugely popular service to be used on multiple "non-phone" devices without needing to connect to the smartphone app. — AFP

Kabul, Taliban negotiators meet in Qatar

DOHA: Representatives of the Afghan government and Taliban insurgents met in Doha for talks yesterday as violence raged in their country with foreign forces almost entirely withdrawn. The two sides have been meeting on and off for months in the Qatari capital, but the talks have lost momentum as the insurgents made battlefield gains.

Several high-ranking officials, including former Afghan former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, gathered in a luxury hotel yesterday after morning prayers. They were joined by negotiators from the Taliban's political office in Doha. Former president Hamid Karzai had also been due to travel to Doha but remained in Kabul, according to a source. US special envoy on Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad was present as the two sides began to meet, an AFP correspondent said.

One shot dead in Iran water shortage protests

TEHRAN: A demonstrator was shot dead during protests against water shortages in drought-hit Khuzestan in southwestern Iran, state media reported yesterday, with an official blaming the death on "opportunists and rioters". The demonstrator was killed in the Khuzestan province town of Shadegan, the official IRNA news agency said.

The province is Iran's main oil-producing region

Baby stars form pinwheel fireworks in nearby galaxies

PARIS: Imagine multicolored pinwheel fireworks, but on a galactic scale. That is exactly what images of baby stars that European astronomers released Friday look like. Taken from nearby galaxies by the European Southern Observatory's Very Large Telescope, images of the swirls of light have allowed astronomers to pinpoint the locations of young

stars with new precision, along with the warming gas crucial to their formation.

Scientists have long known that stars are born in clouds of gas, but what exactly what triggers star formation - and how galaxies as a whole fit in to the picture - remains largely unknown. "For the first time, we are resolving individual units of star formation over a wide range of locations and environments in a sample that well represents different types of galaxies," said Eric Emsellem, an ESO astronomer. "We can directly observe the gas that gives birth to stars, we see the young stars themselves, and we witness their evolution through various phases."

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DOHA: A delegation of Afghanistan's Taliban movement attends a session of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban yesterday. — AFP

and one of its wealthiest, but it has been hit by a persistent drought that has led to tensions since late March. "Last night (Friday), a number of Shadegan's people had gathered to protest water shortages due to the drought, during which opportunists and rioters shot dead one of the demonstrators," the county's acting governor, Omid Sabripour, told IRNA.

Sabripour said the perpetrators "sought to agitate the people by shooting in the air", and a "young Shadegan resident" was shot in the process. In separate comments to the ISNA news agency, Sabripour said the shooting was directed at both the demonstrators and security forces. He added that the victim was a "30-year-old passer-by" and that those responsible were identified. Some were arrested on Friday night, with a manhunt launched

for the others.

Iran has endured repeated droughts over the past decade, particularly in the south. Earlier this month, President Hassan Rouhani said the drought was "unprecedented", with average rainfall down 52 percent compared to the previous year. The Islamic republic has also experienced regular floods in recent years, made worse when torrential rain falls on sunbaked earth.

In other parts of the country, floods over the past three days have killed at least four people, with two others missing, Iranian Red Crescent Society spokesman Mohammad-Hassan Qosian told IRNA yesterday. Another person was killed by lightning. Khuzestan's governor on Friday dismissed videos of

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This image shows NGC 4303, a spiral galaxy, with a bar of stars and gas at its center, located approximately 55 million light-years from Earth in the constellation Virgo. — AFP

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Local

Zain recognizes most innovative teams in 'Company Program' competition

Company awards winners in INJAZ's annual event

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, awarded DRIVEMART (universities) and Kabeh (high schools) teams with the "Most Innovative Product/Service" award at the 15th annual INJAZ Company Program Competition 2021. The event was hosted by INJAZ Kuwait with wide participation of students from across the nation's high schools and universities.

Since last year, the competition has been held in a fully virtual format in line with health guidelines and to ensure the safety of students. The judging panel, which consisted of businesspeople and executives from private sector companies (including Zain), reviewed student presentations via video conferencing and selected the winners based on a number of certified academic standards.

INJAZ's annual Company Program provides university and high school students in Kuwait with a great training opportunity to learn how to establish and run their own real companies. Corporate volunteers from across the Kuwaiti private sector guide students through the most essential business skills, like developing a business idea, conducting feasibility studies, selling stocks, working as management teams, devising business plans, producing and selling products/services, and much more.

Zain's annual participation in this competition comes in line with the company's strategic partnership as an Innovation Partner of INJAZ Kuwait, and in line with its Corporate Sustainability and



Innovation strategy, which aims at contributing to the development of the youth and education sectors.

Zain continues its strategic partnership with INJAZ, through which the company seeks to support and inspire youth from across Kuwait's universities and schools. Through their partnership, Zain and INJAZ host a number of educational initiatives all year long to foster the energies of Kuwait's youth

and support them to further develop and prosper.

INJAZ Kuwait was founded in 2005, as a non-profit, non-governmental organization, driven by Kuwait's private sector. Through strategic partnerships with Kuwait's business and education sectors, and with the help of qualified and dedicated volunteers, INJAZ delivers educational programs on entrepreneurial and leadership skills aimed at

inspiring and educating future generations. INJAZ Kuwait is operated by INJAZ Al-Arab.

Since 2005, INJAZ-Kuwait reached over 70,000 students through over 6000 volunteers at over 200 schools and universities in Kuwait to provide students with knowledge and experience that will assist them in their personal and career development.

Kuwait Airways launch flights to Munich

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways Corporation (KAC) has launched its first commercial flight to Munich, Germany yesterday, the airline announced, noting that it will schedule flights to this destination two times a week: Thursdays and Saturdays. KAC had launched on July 10 its first commercial flight to Geneva, Switzerland, as it schedules two flights a week to this destination: on Mondays and Fridays. On July 8, the airline announced increasing weekly flights to London to three: on Saturdays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. KAC had resumed operations to the British capital in the middle of June at a rate of a single flight a week. It has also announced renewing operations to Paris, Malaga and Sarajevo.

On June 15, it announced starting three flights per week to Bodrum on Saturdays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. And on June 18, it began organizing three flights a week to Trabzon on Sundays, Mondays and Fridays, in addition to the regular flights to Istanbul. Moreover, the national carrier announced two flights per week to Tbilisi on Mondays and Fridays, in addition to several summer tourism destinations. The corporation has affirmed its readiness to restore full operations of commercial flights in line with approval of the health authorities and resumption of air navigation in other countries. KAC had relaunched its first commercial flight to Paris earlier this month. Flights to this destination will operate thrice weekly on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays.



Pilgrims arrive in Makkah for...

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The hajj ministry has said it is working on the "highest levels of health precautions" in light of the pandemic and the emergence of new variants. Pilgrims will be divided into groups of just 20 "to restrict any exposure to only those 20, limiting the spread of infection", ministry undersecretary Mohammad Al-Bijawi told official media.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has officially allowed businesses to remain open during the five daily Muslim prayers, a highly sensitive reform in a kingdom which is trying to shake off its austere image. "Stores and other commercial and economic activities will remain open throughout the working day and especially during (prayer) hours," the Federation of Saudi Chambers said in a statement late Friday.

Officially, the decision is part of the fight against the coronavirus pandemic and aims to avoid "gatherings and long queues in front of closed stores during prayer hours". However, it comes after a 2019 decree that said businesses could stay open 24 hours a day for an unspecified fee. The move, which triggered confusion over whether it included the Islamic prayer times, was

seen by some as a trial loosening of the rules.

Since then, some restaurants, supermarkets and other stores have stayed open, particularly in the capital Riyadh. Previously, after the pre-dawn Fajr prayer they were obliged to close during the day's other four prayers, putting workers out of action for a total of about two hours in the Islamic world's only mandatory prayer-time shutdown. The new rules remove restrictions which members of the advisory Shura Council had said cost the Saudi economy tens of billions of riyals a year.

Saudi Arabia has so far recorded more than 507,000 coronavirus infections, including over 8,000 deaths. Some 20 million vaccine doses have been administered in the country of over 34 million people. The hajj went ahead last year on the smallest scale in modern history. Authorities initially said only 1,000 pilgrims would be allowed, although local media said up to 10,000 eventually took part. But barring overseas pilgrims has caused deep disappointment among Muslims worldwide, who typically save for years to take part. The hajj ministry received anguished queries on Twitter from rejected applicants about the tightly-controlled government lottery. "I am profoundly saddened," Pakistani clothes merchant Zafar Ullah, 64, told AFP after Saudi Arabia announced it was barring international pilgrims. "I also wanted to go for hajj last year. I was desperately hoping to make it this year and even had got myself vaccinated along with my wife." — AFP

"There are many mysteries we want to unravel," Kathryn Kreckel from the University of Heidelberg, said in a statement. "Are stars more often born in specific regions of their host galaxies? If so, why? And after stars are born, how does their evolution influence the formation of new generations of stars?"

The news images - from 19 galaxies some five to 60 million light years from Earth - will help answer these questions, she said. MUSE collects spectra - like "bar codes" that allow astronomers to unveil the properties and nature of cosmic objects - at every single location within its field of view, thus providing much richer information than traditional instruments. The ESO is an intergovernmental astronomy organization in Europe and the world's most productive ground-based astronomical observatory. — AFP

One shot dead in Iran water...

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protests as fake. "Some seek to agitate the people and publish fake videos," Qasem Soleimani-Dashtaki told IRNA. Videos on social media apparently showed protests in several Khuzestan towns, including Susangerd, Mahshahr and Hamidiyeh as well as Shadegan. Farsi-language media based abroad said security forces had cracked down on protesters demonstrating against severe water shortages on Thursday, but domestic media played down the reports.

Kabul, Taliban negotiators...

Continued from Page 1

Afghanistan," she told AFP. The sides were meeting behind closed doors after a brief interaction with the media. The Taliban have capitalized on the last stages of the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops from Afghanistan to launch a series of lightning offensives across the country. "We are ready for dialogue, for talks and negotiations, and our priority is to solve the problems through dialogue," Taliban spokesman Muhammad Naeem told the Al Jazeera broadcaster ahead of yesterday's talks. "The other side must have a true and sincere will to end the problems."

Talks between the government and the Taliban side led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar began with Quranic recitations, Naeem tweeted yesterday. "As we pursue our greater goals, we have to go beyond the details," Baradar said in his opening remarks. For his part, Abdullah said: "We must denounce forcing our views upon each other and the people through unpeaceful means."

A key crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan partially reopened yesterday, days after the Taliban took control of the Afghan side of the border. A Pakistani border official, who did not want to be named,

Khuzestan MP Abdollah Izadpanah warned on Friday that "Khuzestan's insecurity means a lack of security for the whole country". He blamed the water shortages on "mistakes and unjustified decisions" such as the extraction of water from Khuzestan's rivers to other provinces, ISNA reported. On Friday, the government sent a delegation to Khuzestan to address the problem.

This month, rolling blackouts began in the capital Tehran and several other large cities, which officials blamed on the impact of the drought on hydroelectric power generation, as well as surging demand. Power cuts in the peak summer months are not uncommon in Iran, but the ongoing drought has intensified the situation. Khuzestan is home to a large Sunni Arab minority, which has frequently complained of marginalization in mainly Shiite Iran. — AFP

said small groups were being allowed into Chaman in Pakistan, while hundreds were heading into Spin Boldak in Afghanistan. Pakistani Noor Ali, who had been visiting Kabul, said it took him two attempts to reach the border in recent days because of fighting in Kandahar province. "I was scared, but the Taliban did not create any problems, they checked my documents and allowed me to go through," he told AFP after arriving in the nearby city of Quetta. An AFP journalist witnessed people crossing in both directions.

The Taliban have also tightened their grip on the north, with clashes continuing yesterday in the stronghold of warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum that borders Turkmenistan. Also yesterday, the French government flew out around 100 of its citizens and Afghans working for the embassy from the capital, as security deteriorated, a French diplomatic source said. Several other countries including India, China, Germany and Canada have flown out their citizens or told them to leave in recent days. There have been weeks of intensifying fighting across Afghanistan, with the Taliban pressing multiple offensives and overrunning dozens of districts.

As fighting raged over large swathes of Afghanistan, a war of words was also heating up between Kabul and Islamabad, after the Afghan vice president accused the Pakistani military of providing "close air support to Taliban in certain areas". Pakistan strongly denied the claim, with its foreign ministry saying the country "took necessary measures within its territory to safeguard our own troops and population". — AFP

Baby stars form pinwheel fireworks...

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Emsellem and his team used the Multi-Unit Spectroscopic Explorer (MUSE) in conjunction with the ESO's Very Large Telescope in Chile's Atacama Desert to trace the newborn stars as they illuminate and heat up surrounding gases. By combining MUSE images with data from an array of 66 radio telescopes, also in the Chilean desert, astronomers will gain insights into the stellar nurseries of our neighboring galaxies.

Local

Kuwait sees room for improvement in Asia-Gulf Arab cooperation

Kuwait's Foreign Minister meets Uzbek, Afghan presidents



TASHKENT: Participants in 'The International Conference on Central and South Asia Regional Connectivity, Challenges and Opportunities' pose for a group picture. —KUNA photos



Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev receives Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah.



Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani meets Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah.



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Kalam Abdul Momen.



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavusoglu.



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi.

TASHKENT: There remains huge potential for more cooperation between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the wider Asian region, Kuwait's foreign minister told pan-regional talks in Uzbekistan on Friday. Highlighting Kuwait's "storied relations" with the Central and South Asia region, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Nasser Al-Sabah said his country has been a major contributor towards development there, citing key projects worth \$4 billion in areas ranging from infrastructure to education. Remarks of Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Nasser, who doubles as Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, came at 'The International Conference on Central and South Asia

Regional Connectivity, Challenges and Opportunities', held in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan on July 15-16.

Improving cooperation between Gulf Arab states and Asian countries would yield remarkable "success" for both sides, the Kuwaiti top diplomat noted, pinpointing sectors such as trade and investment as of the most potential for growth. With COVID-induced challenges thrust upon the world, it would behoove both regions to work closer together to keep those hardships at bay, added the minister. Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has called for the two-day talks as part of efforts to establish

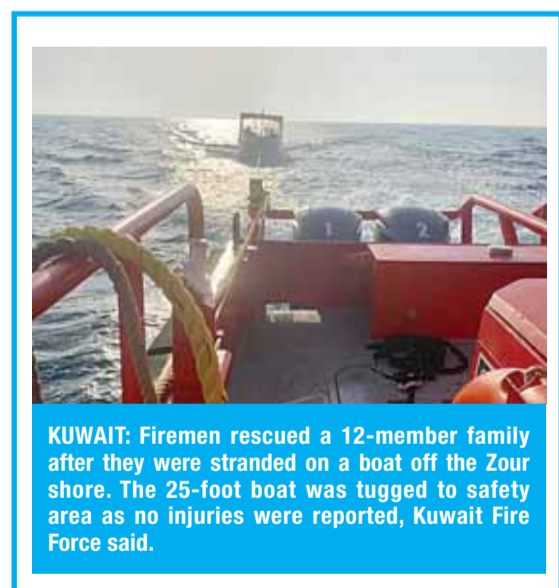
more trans-regional cooperation.

In the meantime, Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev received Sheikh Dr Ahmad in Tashkent on the sidelines of the conference. Deep-seated bilateral ties and means to boost them in various fields, in addition to regional and international latest developments were discussed. The Kuwaiti foreign minister held similar talks with Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani in a separate on Friday.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr Ahmad held separate meetings with Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriidin, Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul

Kalam Abdul Momen and Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavusoglu. The Kuwaiti top diplomat tackled with his counterparts the deep-rooted bilateral ties and means to boost them in various fields, in addition to regional and international latest developments.

Furthermore, Sheikh Dr Ahmad also met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the conference. The discussions dealt with the Kuwaiti-Chinese bilateral relations, ways of strengthening and developing them in various fields, and latest developments on the regional and international arenas. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Firemen rescued a 12-member family after they were stranded on a boat off the Zour shore. The 25-foot boat was tugged to safety area as no injuries were reported, Kuwait Fire Force said.

Ooredoo sponsors Kuwait Rescue Team

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, sponsors the Kuwait Rescue Team. The team was greeted by Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, the Chief Executive Officer and Ooredoo Team, who recognized and honored the team for their strenuous efforts in protecting the country and its people.

This hosting came to confirm Ooredoo's belief in youth and their unwavering role in the development, and prosperity of the State of Kuwait. It goes without saying that Ooredoo has always been one of the first companies in launching and supporting voluntary initiatives in various fields, particularly those that ignite the positive energies of young people and encourage them to participate in charitable activities that serve the country. The Kuwait Rescue Team is a group of volunteers work hand in



hand to preserve the land and coastal environments, support the governmental bodies in emergency cas- es and natural diseases, as well as protect the people and their property.

Kuwait stands with flood-hit European nations

KUWAIT: Kuwait expresses its solidarity and sympathy with Germany, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg over the destructive floods that hit several parts of these countries, leaving dozens injured, killed and displaced, the foreign ministry said yesterday. Kuwait also extended its condolences and sympathy to these countries' governments, their people and the families of the victims, wishing those injured a speedy recovery.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Embassy in Netherlands confirmed Friday that all Kuwaiti citizens currently in the Netherlands are safe, especially after the floods that swept the country. In a statement, the embassy said they contacted authorities in Netherlands and can confirm that no Kuwaitis were among the victims of the floods. Earlier, the embassy warned Kuwaiti citizens and students in Netherlands to take all the necessary measures and ensure their safety due to the floods. Likewise, Kuwait Embassy in Belgium confirmed that all Kuwaiti citizens currently in Belgium and Luxembourg are safe after the floods that swept the two countries. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Firemen closed 24 facilities during an inspection on safety measures upon orders of Kuwait Fire Force Director Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mikrad.



Local

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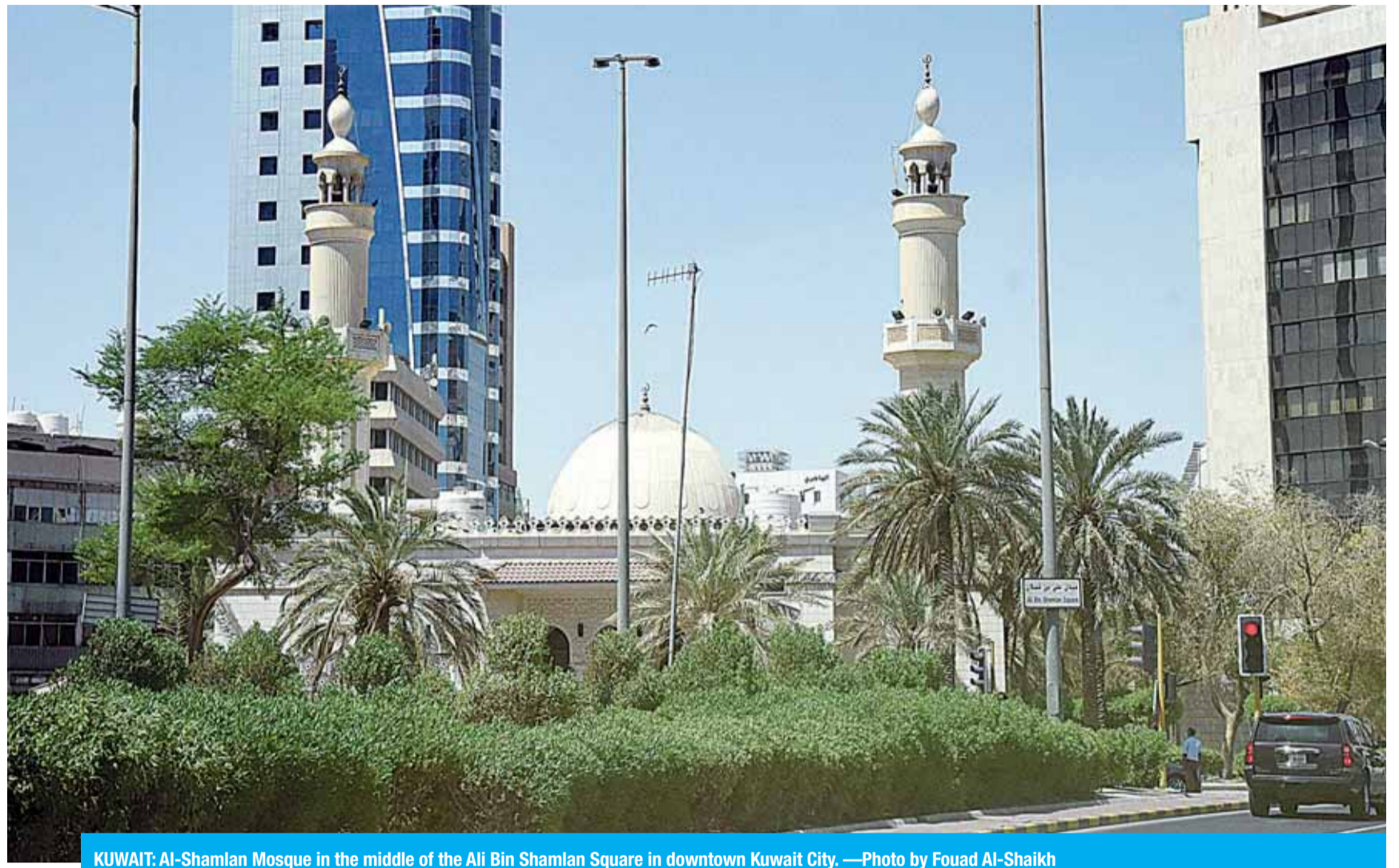
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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Al-Shamlan Mosque in the middle of the Ali Bin Shamlan Square in downtown Kuwait City. —Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

News in brief

Foreign Ministry
denies allegations

KUWAIT: Kuwait denied rumors on Friday circulating on social networks regarding an alleged Emirati group working at the European Parliament in Brussels against the State of Kuwait. In a statement, the Foreign Ministry stated that such fabricated information mentioned the name of an EU parliamentarian that does not exist. The Ministry stressed on the strong relation that holds both nations together, pointing out to the ongoing coordination between both diplomatic missions in Brussels. —KUNA

Charity funds
projects in Yemen

ADEN: Kuwait's Global Charity Association for Development fully funded 100 cataract surgeries for Yemenis in the governorate of Taiz as it witnessed the launch of an orphanage in the war-torn country. The local organization tasked with organizing the endeavors, Ramz Foundation for Development, said that the four-day campaign delivered 100 glaucoma and intraocular lens surgeries. Separately, the Kuwait-based foundation is covering the expenses of an orphanage home, which is so far tending to the needs of 20 children. —KUNA

Kuwait oil
price steady

KUWAIT: Kuwait oil price stood at \$73.50 per barrel Friday, the same price as in Thursday's trading, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said in a statement yesterday. In international markets, the Brent crude went up by \$12 cents to \$73.59 pb. The same with the West Texas intermediate crude that rose by \$16 cents, settling at \$71.81 pb. —KUNA

Indian ambassador's
message on the
occasion of Eid

KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George released the following statement on the occasion of Eid Al-Adha:

"On the occasion of Eid Al-Adha, I extend my sincere wishes and warm greetings to His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait; His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Crown Prince of the State of Kuwait; His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Prime Minister of the State of Kuwait; entire leadership, government and the friendly people of the State of Kuwait.

"I also extend my warm greetings to all my Indian brothers and sisters residing here in Kuwait and making

immense contribution towards the growth and development of the friendly country of Kuwait. Eid Al-Adha is a special occasion as we reaffirm our resolve to abide by the universal values of peace, prosperity, compassion, commitment to the welfare of society, spirit of sacrifice and universal brotherhood. This occasion is an important reminder for all of us that no matter who you are, we are all equals in humanity. In India, which has the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia, we celebrate this occasion with great fervor and enthusiasm. In complete consonance with India's age old beliefs and values, people from different religions and faiths come together on this special day to celebrate this occasion and to provide relief to those facing hunger, sickness and poverty.

"As we mark Eid Al-Adha this year, we are reminded of the thousands of people around the world who have lost lives and millions of people who lost their livelihoods on account of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and all those families battling challenges posed by this deadly infection. I remember our scientists, medical professionals, our doc-

tors, our nurses and thank them for their immense contribution in protecting the lives of millions. I also pray for our children who are facing many challenges and not been able to go to schools for over a year now. On this occasion of Eid Al-Adha, we all resolve once again to collectively work towards facing this unprecedented challenge of COVID-19 pandemic and comprehensively defeating it.

"Once again, Eid Mubarak to all Indian nationals and friends of India in Kuwait. May you all stay blessed and stay safe. May the spirit of community togetherness, principled service, and compassionate generosity bring good tidings to all those celebrating Eid Al-Adha."



Indian Ambassador
Sibi George

KPC CEO inspects
LNG facility

KUWAIT: Kuwait Petroleum Corporation Chief Executive Officer Hashem Hashem inspected yesterday Al-Zour oil complex of Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC), celebrating the arrival of the first shipment of LNG. KIPIC spokesperson Abdullah Al-Ajmi said the visit by Hashem, along with a number of KPC board members and senior executives of subsidiary oil companies, was intended to examine the significant accomplishment in the national oil sector. Hashem

and his companions, who were welcomed by KIPIC Acting CEO Walid Al-Badr, were briefed about the timetable of operating the terminal.

The officials proceeded to the port to examine the Qatari LNG tanker Al-Kharsaah that docked on Monday. The arrival of the gigantic tanker of a 213,000 cubic meter capacity, the second largest in the world, is a historic event marking kick-off of the first operational phase. Ajmi said. The cargo is the first shipment of several ones due in Kuwait according to an agreement between KPC's international marketing department and Qatargas, the world's largest liquefied natural gas company. Ajmi indicated that the terminal would receive 10 shipments in July and August this year. —KUNA

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Pulitzer Prize-winning Indian photographer killed in Afghanistan

Lebanon in freefall as France announces aid conference

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ERFTSTADT: Submerged cars and other vehicles are seen on the federal highway B265 in Erfstadt, western Germany, yesterday, after heavy rains hit parts of the country, causing widespread flooding and major damage. —AFP

Germany picks through rubble after deadly floods sweep western Europe

'It's all been a nightmare for 48 hours'

ERFTSTADT: Rescue workers scrambled yesterday to find survivors and victims of the devastation wreaked by the worst floods to hit western Europe in living memory, which have already left more than 150 people dead and dozens more missing.

Western Germany has suffered the most brutal impact of the deluge that also pummelled Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, leaving streets and homes submerged in muddy water and isolating entire communities.

With the death toll in Germany at 133, three days into the disaster, rescuers said far more bodies were likely to be found in sodden cellars and collapsed homes. "We have to assume we will find further victims," said Carolin Weitzel, mayor of Erfstadt, where a landslide was triggered by the floods.

In Germany's worst-hit states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate, residents who fled the deluge were gradually returning to their homes and scenes of desolation yesterday.

"Within minutes, a wave was in the house," baker Cornelia Schloesser told AFP of the torrents that arrived in the town of Schuld, carrying her century-old family business with them.

"It's all been a nightmare for 48 hours, we're

going round in circles here but we can't do anything," she said, surveying the heaps of twisted metal, broken glass and wood that have piled up at her former storefront.

In neighbouring Belgium, the death toll jumped to 24 with many people still missing.

Prime Minister Alexander de Croo was heading for the scene of what he has called "unprecedented" flood damage in the Meuse river basin. He has declared Tuesday a day of official mourning.

Luxembourg and the Netherlands were also hammered by heavy rains, inundating many areas and forcing thousands to be evacuated in the city of Maastricht.

'Immense' task

A burst dam in Germany's Heinsberg district 65 kilometres (40 miles) southwest of Duesseldorf overnight prompted the emergency evacuation of more than 700 residents.

In some affected areas, firefighters, local officials and soldiers, some driving tanks, have begun the colossal work of clearing the piles of debris clogging the streets. "The task is immense," said Tim Kurzbach, mayor of Solingen, a city in the

south of the Ruhr area.

The real scale of the disaster is only now becoming clear, with damaged buildings being assessed, some of which will have to be demolished, and efforts under way to restore gas, electricity and telephone services.

The disruption to communication networks has complicated efforts to assess the number still missing, and most roads in the submerged Ahr Valley are out of service.

More than 90 of the dead lived in its Ahrweiler district, including 12 residents of a home for the disabled who drowned in the rising waters.

Roger Lewentz, interior minister for Rhineland-Palatinate, told local media up to 60 people were believed to be missing. More than 600 were injured.

The government has said it is working to set up a special aid fund, with the cost of damage expected to reach several billion euros. Chancellor Angela Merkel, who returned Friday from a trip to Washington overshadowed by the disaster, vowed to provide "short and long-term support from the government" to stricken municipalities. Her spokesman said Friday she was in close contact with regional leaders about "a visit soon to the

scene of the catastrophe".

Focus on climate change

The devastating floods have put climate change back at the centre of Germany's election campaign ahead of a September 26 poll marking the end of Merkel's 16 years in power.

President Frank-Walter Steinmeier urged a more "determined" battle against global warming in light of the disaster, ahead of a visit to Erfstadt yesterday. Armin Laschet from Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, the frontrunner to succeed the veteran chancellor, spoke of "a disaster of historic proportions". News magazine Der Spiegel said the floods would put a spotlight on the candidates' response to climate change. "There will be affirmations in the coming days that it's not an issue for the campaign but of course it is," it said.

"People want to know how politicians will lead them through something like this."

German reinsurance giant Munich Re said nations would have to expect rising "frequency and intensity" of natural disasters due to climate change, calling for preventive action "which, in the final analysis, will be less costly". — AFP

Domestic politics tie Joe Biden's hands on Cuba

WASHINGTON: Hopes that President Joe Biden would ease draconian trade and travel restrictions with Cuba laid down by his predecessor are caught hostage to domestic politics and the vocal Cuban-American community opposed to Havana, analysts say. Biden was vice president when Barack Obama thawed relations with the Caribbean country in 2014, reopening diplomatic missions, cutting back a decades-old embargo, permitting US tourists to visit and imports from the communist-controlled island.

But the support inside the United States for last weekend's anti-government protests across Cuba, and the tight math surrounding Biden's Democrats' control of Congress, explain why he has not reversed the

extreme punitive measures against Havana put in place by president Donald Trump over the past four years.

Ahead of the presidential election last year, Biden said he would reverse Trump's policies. But pressed on Thursday about whether he would ease the US embargo, Biden demurred. "Cuba is unfortunately a failed state, and (is) repressing their citizens," he told reporters.

"There are a number of things that we would consider doing to help the people of Cuba, but it would require a different circumstance or a guarantee that they would not be taken advantage of by the government."

'Challenge the regime'

After he took office in January



HAVANA: Supporters of the Cuban Government participate in a demonstration in Havana, yesterday. — AFP

many Democrats pressed Biden hard to reverse Trump's policies. On March 2, 80 legislators urged swift action to "return to the diplomatic path charted by the Obama-Biden administration, and pursue an ultimate end to the nearly six-decade-long economic embargo."

They especially wanted him to

remove Trump's designation of Cuba as a sponsor of terrorism in January nine days before he stepped down. But the outbreak of protests in Cuba over social and political repression has shifted the equation, with Republicans taking advantage to accuse Democrats of supporting the Havana regime. — AFP

What do authorities say?

There is currently no sign that medical agencies will recommend a third dose for everyone who has already received two.

The European Medicines Agency and the European Centre for Disease Control says it is still too early to tell if a third dose is needed.

"There is not yet enough data from vaccination campaigns and ongoing studies to understand how long protection from the vaccines will last, also considering the spread of variants," they said in a joint statement.

Didier Houssin, director of the World Health Organization's emergency committee, said he didn't believe there was enough evidence to justify recommending a third dose at this point.

He also warned that talk of a third dose could "aggravate concerns over access to vaccines" at a time where most countries have only a tiny percentage of people fully inoculated. — AFP

Three doses better than two? Debate over third shot

NEW YORK: As the Delta variant spreads rapidly throughout the world, the prospect of a third "booster" shot is gaining interest even in nations where a large proportion of people are vaccinated. Experts say it is too soon to know for sure if countries will need to organise a third vaccine round later in the year. Some suggest that priority should be given to hundreds of millions in the global south who have not even gotten their first jab yet.

Why three?

Earlier this month, manufacturers Pfizer/BioNTech

Pakistan allows Afghans to cross into border town

CHAMAN: Pakistan yesterday partially reopened its southern crossing with Afghanistan, shut off since the Taliban seized control of the strategic border town on the other side.

Thousands of Afghans were left stranded in the Pakistani town of Chaman after militants captured Spin Boldak from Kabul's forces on Wednesday, part of a rapid offensive which has left the government facing crisis.

"We have opened the Chaman border... allowing crowds of up to 4,000 Afghans including women and children to cross over to Afghanistan to celebrate Eid al-Adha with their families, purely on humanitarian grounds," a border official, who did not want to be named, told AFP.

People would be allowed to cross until the evening, with the possibility the border would open again tomorrow, the official added.

Muhammad Tayyab, a local paramilitary official, said the decision was taken because of "relative calm on the other side", but said the crossing would remain closed to trade.

An AFP photographer said the gates were rushed by families as soon as they opened. Qudratullah, 30, who lives in neighbouring Kandahar province in Afghanistan was returning after taking his father to Karachi for a heart bypass three months ago.

"I have to come back (to Pakistan) for a routine check-up of my father, but let's see if I am able to come back or not," he said. Muhammad Khan, 50, who works as a labourer in Quetta, said he had been waiting at the border trying to reach Afghanistan for the Muslim holiday Eid. — AFP

International

Syria's Assad takes oath after criticised re-election

Government forces control two-thirds of the country

DAMASCUS : President Bashar al-Assad took the oath of office for a fourth term in war-ravaged Syria yesterday, after taking 95 percent of the vote in a controversial election dismissed abroad. Assad was sworn in on the constitution and the Quran in the presence of more than 600 guests, including ministers, businessmen, academics and journalists, organisers said.

The elections "have proven the strength of popular legitimacy that the people have conferred on the state," 55-year-old Assad said, in his inauguration speech. They "have discredited the declarations of Western officials on the legitimacy of the state, the constitution and the homeland."

He called on "those who bet on the demise of the homeland" to return to its "embrace". "We tell each and every one of them, you are exploited by the enemies of our country against your own people, and the revolution with which they deceived you is an illusion," he said.

The vote extending Assad's grip on power was the second since the start of a decade-long civil war that has killed more than 500,000 people, displaced millions and battered the country's infrastructure. On the eve of the May 26 election, the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Italy said the poll was "neither free nor fair", and Syria's fragmented opposition has called it a "farce". With

his campaign slogan, "Hope through work", Assad cast himself as the sole viable architect of a reconstruction phase for the troubled country.

Economy new priority

In his speech yesterday, he outlined the priorities looking forward. "During more than 10 years of war, our concerns were many, and dominated by security and the unity of the homeland, but today these are mostly liberating those parts of the homeland that still need to be, and facing the repercussions of the war for the economy and people's livelihoods."

Government forces control two-thirds of the country, but several parts of the north remain beyond their control. Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate and allied rebels run the rebel bastion of Idlib in the northwest.

Kurdish-led forces control a large swathe of the east after expelling the Islamic State group from the region. And Turkey and its Syrian proxies hold a long strip of territory along the northern border. Assad takes his oath as the country faces a dire economic crisis.

More than 80 percent of the population live in poverty, and the Syrian pound has plunged in value against the dollar, causing skyrocketing inflation. In recent weeks, the government has hiked the price of unsubsidised petrol, bread, sugar and



DAMASCUS: Handout picture released by the official Facebook page of the Syrian Presidency shows President Bashar al-Assad arriving to the swearing-in ceremony for his fourth term, in the capital Damascus, yesterday. —AFP

rice, while power cuts can last up to 20 hours a day in areas it controls.

Nationwide, 12.4 million people struggle to find enough food each day, the World Food Programme says. The Damascus government has blamed the

country's economic woes on Western sanctions and a deepening crisis in neighbouring Lebanon. Assad was first elected by referendum in 2000 following the death of his father Hafez al-Assad, who had ruled Syria for 30 years. — AFP

COVID shatters hajj dreams of older pilgrims

RIYADH: Samia Ahmed saved up for 16 years, but like many older Muslims she fears that renewed COVID-19 curbs will prevent her from ever making the hajj pilgrimage. Saudi Arabia has for a second consecutive year confined the annual hajj to a limited number of residents, excluding the millions of foreigners who usually flock to Makkah for the rite that every able-bodied Muslim is obliged to perform at least once.

With her advancing age and declining health foremost in her mind, Ahmed, a 68-year-old Egyptian, cried for days when restrictions were announced last year, months after the coronavirus pandemic hit. "I had paid the travel agency and had really started to prepare everything," the retired civil servant said.

The hajj is widely seen as the high point in Muslim religious life, bringing the faithful together with millions of fellow believers to fulfil a spiritual obligation at Islam's holiest sites. Pilgrims will each walk round the Kaaba-Islam's focal point-seven times, spend a night on a plain between Mina and Arafat, and symbolically stone the devil by casting stones at three pillars, among other rites. "I would so much like to make the hajj before I die. I don't know if I'll be alive next year," she sobbed, clutching blue Muslim prayer beads.

'Going to meet God'

While the well-heeled can do the hajj in style, lodging at luxury hotels in Makkah, in poor countries the faithful wait for years and make heavy sacrifices to become one of some 2.5 million pilgrims who take part in a normal year. But in 2020, just months after the pandemic made large-scale events impossible, only 10,000 residents of Saudi Arabia were able to make the journey to Islam's holiest city, in the west of the kingdom.

This year the Gulf kingdom has expanded the pilgrimage to 60,000 residents who must be aged 18 to 65 years, vaccinated against the coronavirus and not suffering from any chronic disease. That excludes the likes of Ahmed, even though she paid 100,000 Egyptian pounds (nearly \$6,400, 5,500 euros) to secure her place.

"My chances are now slim, because they will choose younger and healthier pilgrims in the future," said the grandmother, who suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure. Amina Gaafar, a 58-year-old retired Egyptian social worker, has been saving for 30 years to "go to meet God", but with knee replacement surgery looming, her travelling days may be over.

"I'm finally ready financially, and now it's the coronavirus that's stopping me," she said, concerned that her hard-earned funds will be squandered on everyday expenses. "I'm afraid that one day I won't be able to perform the hajj at all, because of my poor health," she said through tears, wrapped in a long abaya dress, with her crutch leaning up against the wall.

Cairo travel agency owner Mohammed Essam says that two-thirds of those he books on hajj are over 60. This year many have expressed their "sadness, frustration and anger", he said. "In general, most pilgrims from around the world are elderly. People start thinking about the hajj when they have money saved up," he told AFP in his office, adorned with pictures of the Grand Mosque in Makkah. Worshipers from populous Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan make up a large portion of hajj participants, and many wait for years to get to the front of the queue for their chance to make the journey. — AFP

Lebanon in freefall as France announces aid conference

PARIS: Lebanon was hit by fresh protests Friday after premier-designate Saad Hariri failed to form a government, and as France prepares to host an aid conference on the first anniversary of the country's port blast. Hariri's exit Thursday comes amid a financial collapse branded by the World Bank as one of the planet's worst since the 19th century.

His departure leaves the country rudderless as Lebanon faces soaring poverty, a plummeting currency, angry protests and shortages of basic items from medicine to fuel. Protests on Friday flared in the northern port city of Tripoli over the deepening crisis, sparking clashes with the army that the Lebanese Red Cross said left at least 19 people wounded.

The army said young men lobbed a hand grenade towards its forces, wounding five soldiers, while 10 others were wounded by stones thrown by protesters. Tripoli, a port and Lebanon's second city, is the country's poorest and many residents live below the poverty line.

The protests came as the Lebanese pound, officially pegged at 1,507 to the dollar, plunged to new lows on the black market Friday, selling for more than 22,000 to the greenback. Earlier Friday, caretaker health minister Hamad Hassan said the government would scrap subsidies on medicines costing less than 12,000 Lebanese pounds (\$8 at the official rate) to shore up foreign currency reserves.

Angry Lebanese took to the streets of the capital Beirut and the southern city of Sidon, blocking roads with tyres and rubbish bins which they set on fire. Former colonial power France, which has spearheaded international efforts to lift Lebanon out of crisis, said Friday it would host an aid conference on August 4 to "respond to the needs of the Lebanese, whose situation is deteriorating every day". The date coincides with the first anniversary

Nigerian parents living through student abduction nightmare

CHIKUN: Judith is 14, sings in her church choir, dreams of becoming a lawyer and likes nothing more than offering her hairstyling skills to her neighbours. Sophie is one year younger, but already has her mind set on becoming a mechanical engineer despite her family gently pushing her to train as a nurse. The girls are just two of the more than 100 Nigerian children snatched from Bethel Baptist High School nearly two weeks ago, herded by gunmen into the forest after a kidnapping raid on their dormitories.

The July 5 attack in Nigeria's northwest Kaduna state was just the latest mass abduction at a school or college as kidnap gangs seeking quick ransoms zero in on soft targets of young students. Armed kidnappings for ransom along highways, and from homes and businesses now make almost daily newspaper headlines in Africa's most populous country.

But mass school abductions have soared this year, with almost 1,000 students kidnapped, according to UNICEF. Most are released after negotiations but many are still being held in forest hideouts like the Bethel pupils. The list of missing from Bethel makes heartbreaking reading: 121 names, the oldest 19, the youngest just 10. Most are under 15.

"I am a mother and I would not like anybody to take my child away from me for one day. Imagine the trauma," Hassana Ayuba, whose daughter Judith was taken, told AFP. "The children are harmless, the children did not offend anybody."

The attack has devastated the tightly-knit, religiously faithful community. At the school, parents hold daily hours-long prayers and vigils and call for President Muhammadu Buhari to help free the chil-



BEIRUT: Supporters of Lebanon's prime minister-designate Saad Hariri, who stepped down saying he was unable to form a government, hurl stones at a Lebanese armoured personnel carrier (unseen) in the capital Beirut. — AFP

of a monster explosion at Beirut port that killed more than 200 people and devastated swathes of the capital.

Political wrangling

World powers have pledged millions of dollars in humanitarian aid since the 2020 port blast, but conditioned it on Lebanon installing a government capable of tackling corruption. As international pressure mounted, with threats of European Union sanctions against them, Lebanese politicians continued to squabble, effectively thwarting efforts to form a government.

The French foreign ministry said Hariri's failure "confirms the political deadlock which Lebanese leaders have deliberately continued for months, even as Lebanon sinks into unprecedented economic and social crisis".

After nine months of deliberations with President Michel Aoun over a cabinet, Hariri threw in the towel on Thursday, accusing Aoun of seeking a "blocking third" of seats for his supporters-effectively a veto. "If I formed the government that Michel Aoun

wanted... I wouldn't have been able to run the country, because this isn't a cabinet I can work with," Hariri told Lebanon's Al-Jadeed TV after he stepped down.

Aoun, who has denied the accusations, will now have to call on parliament to pick a new premier-designate, who will be tasked with assembling another cabinet. That in turn will have to be approved by the president and political factions.

This takes the political process back to square one, prompting Lebanese media to warn of many more months of drift, a delay the country can ill afford. "With Hariri out, a worsening crisis is inevitable," French-language daily L'Orient-Le Jour said in a headline.

With cabinet and parliamentary seats distributed on confessional lines, negotiations will be further complicated by the exit of Hariri, a key figure among the country's Sunni Muslims. Media reports have circulated the name of former premier Najib Mikati, last in power in 2014, as a likely replacement. But Hariri has said he would not endorse Mikati's candidacy. — AFP



CHIKUN: The remaining wares of students of Bethel Baptist High School are seen inside the school premises as parent of abducted students pray for the return of their children whom were abducted by gunmen in the Chikun Local Government Area of Kaduna state, northwest Nigeria. —AFP

dren. Outside, in the school yard, parents have collected a pile of shoes and flipflops their kidnapped children left behind.

"When I heard and received a phone call at 1 am of that fateful day, I thought it was a joke," said Wobia Jibrailu Ibrahim, whose youngest daughter Sophie, not her real name, was taken. "I can't just imagine how somebody who is a parent can put these young children on foot and march them into the bush."

Early morning shock

Most of the children were sleeping in the school's separate dormitories for boys and girls when the gunmen smashed a hole in the outer wall, opening fire randomly as they raided inside. In many past school attacks, bandits struck in the night or early morning, marching children and students deep into forest hideouts where they negotiated for their release.

At Bethel, police said security guards were overpowered by the gunmen, who as usual, arrived in large numbers and heavily armed. Most Bethel parents rushed to school in the early morning when initial reports suggested 140 pupils were taken away.

In the confusion, some students who were away from the dorms taking exams were initially counted among those abducted. Police said 25 students and a female teacher were rescued as security forces gave chase.

Reverend Joseph Hayab, the head of the Christian Association of Nigeria local state chapter, told AFP kidnapers had been in touch with ransom demands. They used the abducted head boy's cellphone to contact the school. "We have told them there is no way we can afford such money in 50 years," Hayab said. Most of the children are very young, said the reverend, whose own son, Sunday Hayab, came face to face with a gunman at his Bethel dormitory before escaping. — AFP

International

WHO eyes China lab audits next in COVID origin probe

WHO chief proposed five priorities for next phase of investigation

WASHINGTON: The World Health Organization said on Friday that the second stage of an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 should include further studies in China and lab audits.

In a closed-door briefing to member states, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus proposed five priorities for the next phase of the investigation.

They included "audits of relevant laboratories and research institutions operating in the area of the initial human cases identified in December 2019", according to a copy of his opening statement provided by the WHO.

He also suggested investigators should focus on "studies prioritising geographic areas with the earliest indication of circulation of SARS CoV-2", the virus that causes COVID-19.

And he called for more studies of animal markets in and around the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the disease was first detected.

The UN health agency has been under intensifying pressure for a new, more in-depth investigation of how the disease that has killed over four million people around the world first emerged.

The WHO was only able to send a team of independent, international experts to Wuhan in January, more than a year after COVID-19 first surfaced there in late 2019, to help Chinese counterparts

probe the pandemic origins.

'Extremely unlikely'

They published a report in late March, but drew no firm conclusions about how the virus first jumped to humans. Instead they ranked several hypotheses according to how likely they believed they were, finding that it was most likely the virus jumped from bats to humans via an intermediate animal. An alternative theory involving the virus leaking from a laboratory was deemed "extremely unlikely".

The investigation faced criticism for lacking transparency and access, and for not evaluating the lab-leak theory more deeply. Long derided as a right-wing conspiracy theory, and vehemently rejected by Beijing, the idea that COVID-19 may have emerged from a lab leak has been gaining momentum.

According to information obtained by AFP, the WHO has now developed a protocol for evaluating laboratory safety and biological security to help ascertain whether the virus may have emerged due to a lab accident. The protocol, which the agency aims to use to investigate the COVID-19 origin as well as possible future outbreaks, provides measures for evaluating, among other things, the storage of virus samples and handling of waste.

'Premature'

Tedros, who has always maintained that all theories remained on the table, told journalists on Thursday that the push to rule out the possible link to a lab leak had been "premature". Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian rejected that, standing by the first mission's conclusion that a lab leak was "extremely unlikely", and warning that "this issue should not be politicised".

He also rejected Tedros's charge at Thursday's press conference that China had failed to share the raw data needed during the first phase of the investigation, insisting the visiting experts were given adequate access.

In his statement on Friday, Tedros thanked China and other countries "who wrote to me yesterday, and I agree that finding the origins of this virus is a scientific exercise that must be kept free from politics".

"We expect China to support this next phase of the scientific process by sharing all relevant data in a spirit of transparency," he said.

After the first mission went to China, Beijing has been pushing for the next phase to focus elsewhere.

Diplomatic sources who viewed the document circulated to missions earlier this week as a basis for Friday's briefing said China was the only country mentioned as a destination for the next mission.



(WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

'Essential'

Tedros highlighted that getting to the bottom of the mystery of where COVID-19 came from was "essential", for "understanding how the pandemic started and preventing future outbreaks."

The WHO chief also announced Friday the creation of a new permanent International Scientific Advisory Group for Origins of Novel Pathogens, or SAGO.

The new group, he said, would "play a vital role in the next phase" of the COVID origins studies, "as well as the origins of future new pathogens." —AFP

Pulitzer Prize-winning Indian photographer killed in Afghanistan

NEW DELHI: A Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer with Reuters news agency was killed Friday covering fighting between Afghan security forces and the Taliban near a border crossing with Pakistan, the media outlet reported, citing an army commander.

Afghan forces were fighting to retake Spin Boldak when Danish Siddiqui and a senior officer were killed in Taliban crossfire, the commander told Reuters. The agency reported Siddiqui, an Indian national, had been embedded with Afghan special forces in the former Taliban bastion of Kandahar this week.

"We are urgently seeking more information, working with authorities in the region," Reuters president Michael Friedenber and editor-in-chief Alessandra Galloni said in a statement. "Danish was an outstanding journalist, a devoted husband and father, and a much-loved colleague. Our thoughts are with his family at this terrible time."

Reuters said Siddiqui, 38, had earlier reported being wounded in the arm by shrapnel while covering the fighting. He was treated and had been recovering when Taliban fighters retreated from

the fighting in Spin Boldak.

The agency reported an unnamed Afghan commander told them Siddiqui had been talking to shopkeepers when the Taliban attacked again. It said it was unable to independently verify the details. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani expressed shock at Siddiqui's death, and said he was killed while covering "Taliban atrocities".

Conflict and refugees

Siddiqui was part of a team that shared the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for documenting the Rohingya refugee crisis. The agency said he had worked for them since 2010, covering the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Rohingya refugees crisis, the Hong Kong protests and Nepal earthquakes. The US State Department said it was "deeply saddened" by Siddiqui's death and hailed his work.

"Far too many journalists have been killed in Afghanistan. We continue to call for an end to the violence. A just and durable peace settlement is the only way forward in Afghanistan," a spokeswoman said. Afghanistan has long been one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.

In May, media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked it 122nd out of 180 countries on its latest World Press Freedom Index. Several journalists, including women, have been killed in targeted attacks since the Taliban and Washington signed a deal in February 2020 that paved the way for the withdrawal of foreign forces.

The diplomat, who was not identified, added in the same interview with South Korean cable network JTBC that Moon was in a "tug of war only with himself" since Japan has "no space to pay attention to Seoul-Tokyo relations" at the moment. The comments come as the two countries have reportedly been in talks over staging a top-level encounter during the Games to improve ties that have plunged to their worst level in years over historical disputes.

Following JTBC's report, the Japanese ambassador said it was his deputy Hirohisa Soma who had spoken the "highly inappropriate" words, though he did not confirm exactly what was said. "While it is true that such terms were used during the conversation it was not directed at President Moon,"

work together to find out the truth," Chinese public security minister Zhao Kezhi said in a statement after a phone call with his Pakistani counterpart.

Beijing has "sent technical experts in criminal investigation to Pakistan to assist in the investigation", he added. He called on Islamabad to strengthen security for Chinese nationals in the country. On Wednesday China urged Pakistan to "severely punish" those responsible for the bus explosion and called on authorities to "earnestly protect" Chinese nationals and projects.

Islamabad is Beijing's closest regional ally, but the security of Chinese workers in Pakistan has long been of concern. Large numbers of them are based in the country to supervise and build construction projects. Beijing has poured billions of dollars into Pakistan in recent years to boost the nation's infrastructure.

In April a suicide blast at a luxury hotel hosting the Chinese ambassador in southwest Balochistan killed four people and injured dozens. The ambassador was unhurt. —AFP

misinformation.

India implemented new rules in May to regulate social media companies, forcing them to disclose each month their efforts to police their platforms. "We maintain advanced capabilities to identify these accounts sending a high or abnormal rate of messages and banned two million accounts in India alone from May 15 to June 15 attempting this kind of abuse," WhatsApp said in its report released late Thursday.

The company said its "top focus" remains on preventing the spread of harmful and unwanted messages. WhatsApp has more than 400 million users in India, one of its top markets, but has often found itself facing criticism over the



HYDERABAD: Telangana State Photo Journalist Association (TSPJA) members pay tribute to Reuters journalist Danish Siddiqui, in Hyderabad yesterday a day after the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer with the Reuters news agency was killed covering fighting between Afghan security forces and the Taliban. —AFP

Prominent television anchors, reporters and freelancers have been shot dead in rush-hour traffic in Kabul and other cities, while scores have been threatened. Officials blame the Taliban for the murders, although some assassinations have been claimed by the jihadist Islamic State. Around 1,000 Afghan media workers have left their jobs, an Afghan journalists' safety committee said in May. "The threats and violence against journalists have a direct impact on the media and make their work especially difficult," RSF said. —AFP

Ambassador Koichi Aiboshi said in a statement. "I have sternly warned Deputy Chief Soma," he added. South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun called for punitive measures. Such remarks "seriously denigrate" efforts to restore ties and "appropriate action should be taken", he told Aiboshi during their meeting, according to the foreign ministry.

Tokyo and Seoul are both major US allies, democracies and market economies, but relations between them are strained by ongoing disputes over compensation for Japan's early-20th century colonial rule over the Korean peninsula. At a press conference earlier this month, Japan's leader reportedly acknowledged "very difficult" relations because of wartime issues, but said it was up to South Korea to respond to these matters. —AFP



KOHIKISTAN: File photo shows rescue workers and onlookers gathered around a wreck after a bus plunged into a ravine following a bomb explosion, which killed 12 people including 9 Chinese workers, in Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on July 14, 2021. —AFP

spread of misinformation.

Dozens of people were lynched in India in 2018 following rumours spread on WhatsApp about gangs stealing children. The incidents prompted the messaging app to introduce a limit on bulk forward messaging in India.

WhatsApp and some Indian media firms have sought to challenge the new social media rules in court. Critics say the government is seeking to crush dissent but the government says it is attempting to make social media safer. Under the rules, social media platforms have to share details of the "first originator" of posts deemed to undermine India's sovereignty, state security or public order. WhatsApp says the rules violate India's privacy laws. —AFP

Inside a Myanmar clinic fighting a new COVID surge

KALAY: In a clinic in a remote Myanmar town, some of the few doctors still working after the coup emptied hospitals are battling to keep their COVID-19 patients alive as the virus resurges. Infections are spiking in Myanmar, with the State Administration Council — as the military junta calls itself — reporting more than 4,000 cases on Thursday, in a crisis made worse by shortages of critical medical equipment.

AFP footage from inside a clinic in the northwestern town of Kalay showed patients slumped in makeshift beds, oxygen canisters at their feet. One man gasped for breath, his head lolling as he struggled to respond to questions from a doctor. "The service to patients has collapsed," Dr Than Bil Luai, director of the Wesley Hospital, told AFP.

"There are many hospitals, surgery rooms, laboratories... but there aren't enough medical workers working." "This healthcare system has become useless." Myanmar's doctors have been at the forefront of a nationwide civil disobedience movement that has drawn in thousands of civil servants and crippled the economy.

Many stricken by the coronavirus are also avoiding military hospitals due to mistrust of the junta, with their loved ones instead joining long queues across the country to try their luck for oxygen cylinders. "Before the coup, prevention against COVID-19 was good and the government often released notices and announcements," said Ca Meng, who returned to Kalay from Yangon when her mother contracted the virus.

"But after the coup, we are afraid of everything and we didn't pay much attention to the COVID-19... but suddenly it came back," she said. "And now there is no prevention." This week the junta called for doctors and nurses to volunteer for the anti-COVID effort, admitting it was facing "difficulties" in controlling the surge. Dozens of blue oxygen cylinders waiting to be refilled stretched along a street in Kalay, a town of 130,000, with rugged hills to the east and west. An ambulance with "COVID-19" written across one window in yellow letters passed by the residents waiting alongside them, its siren blaring, two figures in white hazard suits hanging out of the door.

For those unable to leave home because of the sickness, volunteers are stepping up to help out. A volunteer with a local charity who gave his name as John said he queues regularly to fill up oxygen cylinders for those who can't leave home and helps out with grocery shopping.

"I get upset when there's no oxygen when the patient needs it," he said. "This third wave is quite different. I am a little bit afraid." On the edge of town a team unloaded a coffin into a cemetery of white Christian crosses standing out against the deep green of the hills. A figure in a white hazmat suit standing over the coffin read from a book as the bereaved sat down by the coffin and wept. "We have to take care of ourselves and our families," said Ca Meng, whose mother later died from the virus. "If not, it will be the extermination of our people." —AFP

S Korea summons Japan envoy over Moon comment

SEOUL: South Korea summoned the Japanese ambassador yesterday over "undiplomatic" remarks about President Moon Jae-in and the possibility of a summit during the upcoming Tokyo Olympics, according to Seoul's foreign ministry. A senior Japanese diplomat had reportedly ridiculed Moon's desire to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga.

China sends investigators to Pakistan

BEIJING: China yesterday said it has sent investigators to Pakistan to probe an explosion on a bus that killed 12 people including nine Chinese nationals, calling the blast a "terrorist attack". The bus was carrying around 40 Chinese engineers, surveyors and mechanical staff to a hydropower dam construction site in the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on Wednesday.

The other three people killed in the explosion were Pakistanis, while around 28 were injured. Islamabad previously blamed the blast on a mechanical failure that led to a gas leak, but China has called it a bombing. "China and Pakistan will

WhatsApp blocks 2 million Indian users over violations

NEW DELHI: WhatsApp blocked more than two million users in India in just one month for violating its rules, the US company disclosed in its first compliance report under India's controversial new social media rules. Most of the users were blocked for spam message abuses. The Facebook-owned firm has put a limit on mass forward messaging in a bid to counter

Business

SUNDAY, JULY 18, 2021

After conquering Earth, Bezos eyes a new frontier in space

With a fortune over \$200bn, Bezos remains one of the world's richest people

WASHINGTON: Jeff Bezos sets his sights on a new frontier in space in the coming days after building a gargantuan business empire which has in many ways conquered the Earth. His journey into space aboard a reusable rocket built by his firm Blue Origin comes just two weeks after he stepped aside as chief executive of Amazon, which grew from a garage startup into one of the world's most formidable businesses.

Bezos, 57, remains executive chair at the technology and e-commerce colossus he founded 27 years ago. But he is clearly looking to even loftier ambitions. With a fortune worth more than \$200 billion, Bezos has been at or near the top of the world's richest people, even after his divorce settlement.

He owns some 10 percent of Amazon, a behemoth with a presence in dozens of countries and some 1.3 million employees. But Bezos often points to his humble beginnings: born to a teenage mother in Albuquerque, New Mexico and adopted at the age of four by his Cuban immigrant stepfather.

Bezos was attracted by computer science when the IT industry was in its infancy and studied engineering at

Princeton University.

After graduating, he put his skills to work on Wall Street, where by 1990 he had risen to be a senior vice president at investment firm D.E. Shaw. But about four years later he surprised peers by leaving his high-paid position to open an online bookseller called Amazon.com, backed by money from his parents.

'Keep inventing'

In his parting letter to staff, Bezos said the company succeeded by following his mantra: "Keep inventing, and don't despair when at first the idea looks crazy." In public appearances, Bezos often recounts the early days at Amazon, when he packed orders himself and drove boxes to the post office.

Today, Amazon has a market value of more than \$1.8 trillion. It posted 2020 annual revenues of \$386 billion from operations in e-commerce, cloud computing, groceries, artificial intelligence, streaming media and more. "Bezos has been a transformational leader... in book selling, the retail market, cloud computing and home delivery," said Darrell West, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for

Technology Innovation.

"He was a pioneer who introduced many of the conveniences that people take for granted, such as going to an online store, ordering something, and having it delivered to your home the next day. The whole e-commerce sector owes many of its innovations to this individual."

Bezos "had an instinct for the right thing" in finding the next market, said Roger Kay, analyst at Endpoint Technologies Associates. Kay said Bezos deftly transitioned from books to other merchandise to an online marketplace, and successfully built the cloud infrastructure for the company which became the highly profitable Amazon Web Services.

Amazon outlasted its rivals by forgoing profits in its early years "and reinvesting everything into expanding," Kay said. "If you look at the trajectory now, it was all logical." Kay added. "You can say Bezos has been one of the best business architects of his time."

Bezos has been fascinated by space since watching the 1969 Apollo moon landing as a child and sees space as important to the future of the planet.



This file handout photo shows Jeff Bezos, founder of Blue Origin, at New Shepard's West Texas launch facility before the rocket's maiden voyage. — AFP

He has spoken about the possibility of humans living in space colonies, drawing ideas from science fiction writers as well as scientists. "We humans have to go to space if we are going to continue to have a thriving civilization," Bezos told a 2019 CBS News interview.

"We have become big as a population, as a species, and this planet is relatively small. We see it in things like climate change and pollution and heavy industry. We are in the process of destroying this planet... we have to preserve this planet." —AFP

Xiaomi grabs No 2 spot in smartphone market: Survey

WASHINGTON: Chinese electronics firm Xiaomi has overtaken Apple as the number two global smartphone maker in a sizzling market with consumers emerging from lockdowns, a new survey showed. The Canalys survey of second-quarter sales showed worldwide smartphone sales up 12 percent, with South Korea's Samsung holding its top position with a 19 percent market share.

Xiaomi meanwhile surged to the number two position for the first time ever with a 17 percent share as sales jumped 83 percent, according to Canalys. Apple dropped to the number three position with iPhone sales up just one percent, after getting a lift from last year's new models.

"Xiaomi is growing its overseas business rapidly," said Canalys research manager Ben Stanton, citing gains of 300 percent in Latin America, 150 percent in Africa and 50 percent in Western Europe.

"And as it grows, it evolves. It is now transforming its business model from challenger to incumbent... It is still largely skewed toward the mass market, however, and compared with Samsung and Apple, its average selling price is around 40 and 75



GURGAON, India: In this file photo, customers inspect smartphones made by Xiaomi at a Mi store in Gurgaon, India. — AFP

percent cheaper respectively."

Chinese makers Oppo and Vivo held fourth and fifth place in the global market, each with around 10 percent, according to the Canalys preliminary estimates. Canalys said the smartphone market is

extending gains as the global economy emerges from the coronavirus pandemic, lifting overall consumer spending. Xiaomi was recently removed from a US blacklist of Chinese firms subject to sanctions over national security concerns. —AFP

Yemenis build siege-defying highway to safety

TAEZ, Yemen: In Yemen's forbidding mountains, bulldozers paid for by local people are building a new road to serve as a lifeline between the besieged city of Ta'ez and the southern capital Aden. It is a much-needed alternative to a perilous route that has become virtually impassable, littered with axle-wrecking potholes, terrifying hairpin bends, sheer drops and carriageways so narrow that trucks struggle to proceed even in single file.

In the absence of any effective local authority, residents and businesspeople stepped in six months ago to raise cash to fund a new 182-kilometre (113-mile) alternative to the notoriously dangerous Hayjat Al-Abed route. Torrential rains that sparked a cascade of mud and rocks sounded the death knell for that road, which was the only route to Ta'ez not controlled by the Iran-backed Houthis, who are locked in a six-year conflict with the government.

Under the control of the internationally recognized government but besieged by the Houthis since 2015, Ta'ez, with a population of 600,000 people, is one of Yemen's most troubled cities, and it has been repeatedly bombed by the rebels. The new road to Aden, the government's temporary capital after it was forced to flee Sanaa at the start of the war, will ease the Houthi siege, allowing in much-needed supplies of food and medicine and shortening the journey time to the south.

The new road, which snakes through the valleys, is much straighter and less cliff-hanging than the nail-biting route it replaces, and is due to open within weeks. "We made this road in a time of war!" enthused Wael Al-Maamari, a technical officer on the project.

"We made this road without the state's help...



TAEZ, Yemen: This picture taken in the mountains near Yemen's third city of Ta'ez, shows the construction of a road that will serve as a lifeline between Ta'ez, besieged by Houthi rebels, and the southern city of Aden, the internationally recognized government's temporary capital. — AFP

It is funded and sponsored by community contributions, from charities, businessmen and other supporters."

Bright hopes

The relief road's engineers put ageing heavy equipment back to use to forge the new route. Their achievement is all the more striking because of the shortage of construction supplies due to the war raging across Yemen, which is in the grip of what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

"This road is really of great importance at all levels—educational, developmental, health and

tourism as well," project coordinator Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mohammadi said. "It will have a promising future and will alleviate much of the hardship of the citizens who suffer from the lack of this road." Mohammadi said the highway is 14 meters (15 yards) wide, enough "for trucks and all kinds of cars."

Despite the progress already made using the community's own resources, Mohammadi said extra funds are still needed if the job is to be finished properly. "We appeal to all philanthropists, charitable foundations and local, regional and international organizations to provide generous assistance to complete the road and surface it," he said. —AFP

CBK to hold inaugural symposium to unveil financial report 2020

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) is organizing an inaugural symposium unveiling the Financial Stability Report 2020, on 26 July 2021, at 10 am. The event planned promotes transparency and encourages informed public discourse on topics related to the Kuwaiti banking and financial sector.



Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel

The Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait, Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel, stated that this symposium aims to strengthen engagement amongst all stakeholders concerned with monetary stability and financial stability in the country. Additionally, it shall provide reliable data and statistics to interested parties, in line with best international practices and within CBK's concerted efforts to communicate with all publics.

Dr Al-Hashel added that the event shall examine global and regional economic and financial developments and their ramifications. Local financial stability drivers, including the ability to withstand shocks and to supply credit, in addition to supporting the national economy, shall be detailed. In light of the unprecedented events experienced worldwide resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, this year's report focuses on the efficiency and resilience of the banking system and its ability to successfully weather the first year of the crisis. The governor explained that the topics addressed in the report are organized in six chapters; the first sets the stage by examining global and regional economic developments, presenting key economic indicators to put into perspective the magnitude of the crisis. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the Kuwaiti financial system, highlighting key attributes and developments as the year progressed.

Chapter 3 examines key risks faced by the banking system, inspecting multiple angles of credit, liquidity, market, and operational risks faced by banks during the year and going forward. Chapter 4 exhibits the strength of local banks, analyzing both profitability and resilience to provide a robust assessment. Chapter 5 presents developments in local asset markets, namely, the real estate and equity markets and the potential risks to financial stability. Finally, chapter 6 examines payment and settlement systems, including the resilience of the payment infrastructure and the role e-payments played during the pandemic.

Due to the current health precautions taken in Kuwait, the event shall be livestreamed on zoom and will be available for playback on CBK's social media channels. CBK invites interested parties to register and attend the event through the link: <https://events.cbk.gov.kw>

Business

US sees surprise retail sales increase in June

American shoppers stepping up purchases as pandemic restrictions ease

NEW YORK: Against expectations, US retail sales rose in June, the Commerce Department said Friday, with shoppers stepping up purchases at department stores and electronics outlets as pandemic business restrictions ease. Sales rose 0.6 percent last month to \$621.3 billion, beating forecasts for a decline after they fell by a downwardly revised 1.7 percent in May, the data said.

Sales jumped the most at department stores, electronics and appliance retailers and clothing outlets, as well as at gas stations, likely a consequence of rising oil prices and an increase in domestic travel.

Motor vehicle and parts dealers, however, saw a two percent fall in sales amid soaring used car prices and a shortage of semiconductors that's forced some manufacturers to idle assembly lines.

"Core" retail sales excluding gas stations and the auto sector rose 1.1 percent. "To see core sales rising so strongly in June is a positive sign that consumers feel confident and are still cash-rich, in aggregate," said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics. Government stimulus payments combined with an easing of COVID-19 business restrictions has pushed retail sales higher in recent months, though the growth has been uneven.

Gas stations saw sales rise 2.5 percent, electronics and appliance stores 3.3 percent and general merchandise stores climbed 1.9 percent—within which department stores grew 5.9 percent. Food service and drinking places—comprising the bars and restaurants that were hardest hit by business restrictions meant to stop COVID-19—saw sales increase 2.3 percent last month.

On top of the decline in auto sales, furniture and home furnishing stores saw a decline of 3.6 percent, building materials and gardening equipment outlets lost 1.6 percent and sporting goods and hobby retailers lost 1.7 percent. Gregory Daco of Oxford Economics called the overall increase "modest" and said it reflected shifts in consumer preferences during the summer months.

"The great spending rotation saw households cut back on furniture, autos, sporting equipment and building material—categories that outperformed during the pandemic—while spending more freely at restaurants and bars, gas stations and electronic stores," he said. Shepherdson said it remains to be seen how Americans will choose to spend the massive \$2.3 trillion in savings they have accumulated during the pandemic, thanks in part to the stimulus measures, and whether it will keep retail sales moving



NEW YORK: People wait in line as the World's Largest Harry Potter store opens to the public in New York City. Against expectations, US retail sales rose in June, the Commerce Department said Friday with shoppers stepping up purchases at department stores and electronics outlets as pandemic business restrictions ease. — AFP

higher. "In the absence of any prior experience remotely like the current situation, this is impossible to forecast with confidence. But we continue to think

its implausible to argue that people will choose to hold all the cash and rely solely on regular income to finance all their spending," he said. — AFP

Editorial

Why embracing ESG is a business imperative for Kuwait's banks

By Ahmed Al-Kiswani and Aurélien Vincent

The national and regional drive for a more sustainable future is creating unprecedented opportunities for the country's financial sector. There are two ways for Kuwaiti banks to look at the environmental, social and governance (ESG) regulations and investment mandates sweeping the global financial services industry. One is to regard ESG as an external imposition. The other is to see it as a business opportunity, enabling the banks that embrace it to get ahead of the competition.

Consider in this context the drive by Kuwait to reduce the country's dependence on oil revenues and play a part in global efforts to combat climate change. Since 2017, Boursa Kuwait has been a member of the UN's Sustainable Stock Exchanges (SSE) global platform, which enables collaboration between investors, regulators, and policymakers to improve their performance on ESG issues and to encourage sustainable investment. The same year, the Kuwait Investment Authority became a founding member of "One Planet", a working group of sovereign wealth funds that promotes the integration of climate change risks and opportunities into large-scale, long-term asset management.

Let's not forget as well the Kuwaiti financial sector's growing awareness of the importance of good corporate governance. In 2019, the Central Bank of Kuwait authorized banks to appoint independent members incrementally to their boards of directors, with the minimum number rising from two to four by July 2022. Meanwhile, the central bank is leading by example on gender equality, with women representing more than half its total staff and increasingly filling managerial and executive positions.

This embrace of ESG is both timely and wise,

because the business case for ESG is now unstoppable. In 2020, ESG funds globally drew in around \$51 billion in net new investing money, more than double the previous year's figure. In addition, a survey of 4,900 funds worldwide by Morningstar found that between 2010 and 2020, 58.8 percent of sustainable funds across seven asset categories had outperformed their average, traditionally-focused peers. It is no surprise, then, that the world's leading financial firms are moving at pace into ESG. Goldman Sachs, for example, plans to spend around \$750bn over the next decade providing finance and advice to companies with a focus on ESG themes such as climate change and inclusive growth.

Kuwait, like other countries in the region with ambitious national programs to reduce their dependence on oil revenues, is well positioned to attract a significant share of this ESG capital. PwC Strategy estimates that "green finance", led by investment in renewable energy, could help unlock \$2 trillion in economic growth across the Middle East by 2030, and create more than 1 million new jobs.

Viewed in this context, the notion of ESG as an additional burden for Kuwaiti banks is incorrect. Straightforward commercial logic dictates that they will need to demonstrate their own ESG compliance in order to capture some of the huge foreign direct investment flowing into ESG-linked projects throughout the Middle East.

Effective implementation

The practical challenge is how Kuwaiti banks should integrate ESG into their operating and corporate governance models. Here, past experience is not an encouraging guide. In Kuwait, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the concept of ESG can be traced as far back as the 1980s, when public debate began about the region's over-dependence on oil revenues and the need for greater environmental sustainability. Yet it is fair to say that efforts in Kuwait to implement ESG across the public and private sectors have been piecemeal and have often petered out due to a lack of organizational focus and drive.

A "whole country" approach is essential for Kuwait to implement ESG effectively, one that engages the government, the private sector, NGOs and the wider public in a shared enterprise. Within the financial sector, banks should also avoid repeating the historic mistake of putting ESG in a silo. Externally, this transmits a message to potential investors (think Goldman Sachs) that the bank

treats sustainability as an optional add-on. Internally, employees are less likely to take ESG seriously if they see it as a niche department at the other end of head office from investor relations.

Banks should also be clear about what precisely they are trying to implement. Firstly, ESG for banks, as for any business, is about identifying, measuring and managing impacts. Next, the bank needs to assess what new ESG risks need to be added to the range of traditional risks such as impaired loans: for example, a credit-worthy loan to an oil services company may nonetheless expose the bank to an ESG-related downgrade by a ratings agency. Lastly, and most importantly, the bank should identify the business opportunities that may arise from pursuing an ESG agenda.

There are several reasons why Kuwaiti banks can successfully embrace ESG. For a start, their peers across the Middle East are engaged in the same transition, providing opportunities to learn from best practice. Egypt's financial services industry repays particularly close attention, given the government and central bank's drive to promote ESG across the sector there. In addition, our work with banking clients in Kuwait indicates that ESG is an increasingly important concern at senior management level, featuring regularly in board discussions. More generally, it matters that 62 percent of Kuwait's population is under the age of 30, since opinion polls worldwide consistently show that younger people care more about ESG issues.

Lastly, COVID-19 has made these conversations about ESG more urgent, because Kuwaitis want to build a better, more sustainable future for their country after the upheaval of the pandemic. In this transformational context, one of the biggest dangers of regarding ESG as merely a compliance issue is assuming it can be adopted at the stately pace of, say, Basel IV banking standards. Instead, action is needed now.

Take for example, the increasing number of construction sites across Kuwait where you can see ESG-related projects being built with capital from ESG investment funds that may well be managed by one of your competitors. Quite simply, if you don't act now to implement ESG, you are likely to hurt your bank's bottom line.

Note: Ahmed Al-Kiswani is PwC Middle East's financial services leader for Kuwait. Aurélien Vincent is a financial services partner for Strategy & Middle East, part of the PwC network.

Bailout of Portugal's struggling TAP airline faces EU probe

LISBON: The EU anti-trust authority opened an investigation Friday into Portugal's multi-billion-euro bailout of struggling national airline TAP, amid a legal campaign by low-cost carrier Ryanair to stop pandemic-linked state rescues. Last month, Portugal formally notified the European Commission of its 3.2-billion-euro (\$3.8 billion) bailout plan which includes 2,000 job losses, salary cuts and a reduction in the company's fleet.

The European Commission added that it was re-approving aid of 1.2 billion euros to TAP that was struck down by the EU's General court, following a lawsuit by Ryanair. The EU's lower court in May said the European Commission failed to make its case when approving the bailout, handing a rare victory to Ryanair.

The EU "today re-approves the rescue aid and further specifies the reasons for approving the aid," a statement said. Ryanair-Europe's biggest airline in terms of passenger numbers has also sought to undo the massive bailout of Lufthansa, Air France and other major EU airlines, mostly without success.

Ryanair has estimated the total state aid to airlines approved by Brussels since the beginning of the pandemic at more than 30 billion euros (\$36 billion), including 11 billion to Lufthansa, 10.6 billion to Air France-KLM, 3.5 billion to Alitalia and 1.3 billion to SAS. — AFP

Global stocks sag on concerns over COVID, growth

NEW YORK: Global stocks mostly fell Friday as worries about rising COVID-19 cases and their effect on global growth weighed on sentiment, pushing Wall Street into the red for the week. After data showed an unexpected rise in US retail sales, Wall Street pushed higher at the open. But markets soon tumbled into the red and losses grew as the day progressed.

Analysts pointed to profit taking as a factor in Friday's session and throughout the week following records earlier in the month. Investors are "continuing to trim winning positions" as they await more clarity on the course of the economy, said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

The broad-based S&P 500 ended down 0.8 percent at 4,327.16, taking its weekly losses to around one percent. The highly-contagious Delta variant has led to surging infection rates in many parts of the world, leading authorities to reimpose certain restrictions.

"COVID-19 concerns still linger and the economic outlook is not as bright as it was just a few weeks ago," said market analyst Edward Moya at trading platform Oanda. Major European bourses retreated, along with Tokyo, which closed one percent lower as investors worried over rising COVID-19 infections and the Bank of Japan trimmed its economic growth forecast for the current fiscal year. Hong Kong's leading index was flat as late profit-taking wiped out earlier gains ahead of a US warning about doing business in the territory.

In a long-awaited advisory that has already been denounced by China, the United States warned its business community of "growing risks" of operating in Hong Kong due to China's clampdown. The advisory acknowledged that Hong Kong, a former British colony handed back to China in 1997, "retains many economic distinctions" from the mainland, including stronger protections of intellectual property. But Washington pointed to a declining climate under a national security law enacted last year, including the arrest of one US citizen—John Clancey, a prominent human rights lawyer. — AFP

Richemont luxury sales surpass pre-pandemic levels

GENEVA: Swiss luxury goods group Richemont, which owns the jeweller Cartier, said Friday that sales had climbed above their pre-pandemic level thanks to customers in Asia, the Americas and Middle East. In its first quarter that ends on June 30, Richemont recorded sales equivalent to 4.3 billion euros (\$5.0 billion), a leap of 121 percent from the same period in 2020, which was marked by the coronavirus pandemic.

But sales were also 18 percent higher than in the comparable period of 2019, a company statement said, and surpassed an average analyst forecast compiled by the Swiss agency AWP of 4.1 billion euros. Particularly strong results were reported in the Asia-Pacific region, in the Americas and in the Middle East, notably in Dubai and Saudi Arabia where tourism provided an added boost, a statement said.

In Europe however, sales were 15 percent lower than in the group's first quarter in 2019, owing to a sharp downturn in tourism. A breakdown by sector showed that jewelry sales led the advance, up by 43 percent compared with the first quarter of 2019, followed by watches. Fashion sales declined meanwhile, in part owing to fewer travellers stopping at airport boutiques. On Monday, Swiss watchmaker Swatch Group had reported a jump of 54.4 percent in 2021 first-half sales. — AFP

Paytm's expected \$2.2bn IPO fuels India market

NEW DELHI: Digital payments pioneer Paytm on Friday took a major step towards launching India's biggest initial public offering, telling regulators that it would seek to sell \$2.2 billion in shares. The offering is the latest in a wave of IPOs in India, with food delivery firm Zomato this week raising \$1.3 billion.

Paytm is backed by the Ant Group of Chinese tycoon Jack Ma, which holds a nearly 30 percent stake, along with Masayoshi Son's Softbank Vision Fund, Berkshire Hathaway and other high-profile investors.

Founder and chief executive Vijay Shekhar Sharma, who has a net worth of \$2.3 billion according to Forbes, holds just under 10 percent of the company. As a part of the IPO, Paytm will issue fresh shares worth 83 billion rupees and sell an equal amount of shares through a sale offer, according to its prospectus filed with Indian regulators. Since 2010, Paytm has become a key digital payments enterprise in a country dominated by cash transactions.

It has benefited from the government's efforts to curb cash transactions—including the cancellation of nearly all banknotes in 2016 — and from the coronavirus pandemic.

Over 21 million Indian shop owners, vendors and other merchants accept payments of 10 rupees (13 US cents) to several thousand rupees using Paytm's QR code or mobile numbers. As of March 31, Paytm Payments Bank has 333 million customers, according to its regulatory filing.



The company said it undertook transactions worth more than four trillion rupees (\$54 billion) in 2020-21, making Paytm India's largest payments platform. But Paytm has made continual losses and is not sure if it will make a profit. It reported a net loss of 17 billion rupees last year, on revenues of 31.86 billion rupees.

"We expect to continue to incur net losses for the foreseeable future and we may not achieve or maintain profitability in the future," the prospectus warned. Paytm has reported negative cash flows for the last three years, primarily due to operational losses. Big-ticket tech issues are heating up India's IPO market. The share issue by Zomato, which has also never reported a profit—has seen a strong investor response and companies like Delhivery and Mobikwik expect to follow.

With a target of \$2.2 billion, Paytm would surpass Coal India's \$2 billion issue in 2010 to become India's biggest IPO and propel the country's primary market to its best year ever. Paytm's public offer is expected to launch in the coming months following approval from Indian regulators. — AFP

Business

NBK raises awareness about risks of dealing in virtual currencies

NBK supports CBK's 'Let's Be Aware' campaign

KUWAIT: In conjunction with raising awareness about the risks of virtual currencies, NBK provides suitable investment and saving channels for all our customers. National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is always keen to promote financial culture and raise awareness among different segments of society. In this context, and as part of its intensified efforts to support the activities of "Let's Be Aware" banking awareness campaign launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait, NBK uses all its social media platforms and communication channels to warn against the risks of dealing in virtual currencies and the grave losses that may be incurred as a result of such dealings.

Over the past days, the bank has published awareness content including messages and videos warning people from dealing in virtual currencies, as they are not subject to any regulators, and therefore, may expose

them to fraudulent activities. On this occasion, Abdul-Mohsen Al-Rushaid, Assistant General Manager of Communications Department at National Bank of Kuwait said: "We are keen to spread financial culture among different segments of society, as part of our support of the activities of the campaign launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait, which aims to raise customers' awareness of their rights, and the precautions that should be taken to protect their information, accounts and money."

"In conjunction with raising awareness about the



Abdul-Mohsen Al-Rushaid

risks of dealing in virtual currencies, we strive to provide various investment and saving channels that suit all our customers' segments," he added.

Al-Rushaid accentuated that NBK harnesses its huge capabilities in communicating with customers as well as all its digital channels, which the most popular among all Kuwaiti banks, to support the efforts of the Central Bank of Kuwait in protecting customers and the economy.

The campaign showed success in creating a tangible impact over the past period, including raising awareness about customers' rights, key precautions for protection from fraud, and awareness about the risk associated with "loan shark" schemes, and high-risk investments, he pointed out. It is worth mentioning that NBK is a key supporter and partner in all the initiatives and campaigns of the Central Bank of Kuwait aiming to raise financial

awareness and spread banking culture among all segments of society. As a leading financial institution in Kuwait and across the region, NBK frequently organizes various activities that contribute to raising awareness about all topics related to the banking sector. It also organizes various activities and training courses on combating fraud and financial crimes.

The Central Bank of Kuwait launched "Let's Be Aware" banking awareness campaign, in cooperation with Kuwaiti banks, as part of the efforts to spread financial culture and raise awareness among banks' customers of their rights and responsibilities and the best ways to benefit from banking services. The campaign also aims to promote the saving and investment culture, as well as other related topics, by publishing a variety of awareness material and information relevant to financial culture.

AUB congratulates Al-Hassad weekly draw winners

KUWAIT: Ahli United Bank (AUB) held the weekly draw of 14 July 2021 of Al-Hassad Islamic account Al-Hassad Islamic account, the first Islamic prizes account in Kuwait which offers over 750 prizes over a 12 month period and provides numerous features. Such features include the simplest and easiest savings program, highest number of winners, largest prize value, loyalty multipliers, and unique account opening feature online with all ease with instant deposit option.

The Bank announced 20 winners of KD 1,000 as follows: Lotfi Shawky Darwish, Tareq Abdulaziz Alabdulay, Wasmeiyah Saad Al-Mutairi, Wajihah Mohamad Al-Rashid, Wadhah Khadher Al-Dhafiri, Basema Hasan Al-Hassani, Mohammad Eissa Al-Kasabrah, Najwa Mohammad Al-Sherbeeni, Bader Mohammad Al-Otaibi, Shaker Mahmoud Khalifah,

Maryam Hamad Al-Mulla, Zayed Medad Al-Azemi, Adwan Abdullah Al-Mutari, Yasser Tin, Husain Ibraheem Hajai, Hassan Abdulsalam, Zilfa Zaid Al-Zaid Abdulla Ali Aburahmah, Mubarak Fahhad Abdullah And Lulwa Mohamed Al-Dakhil.

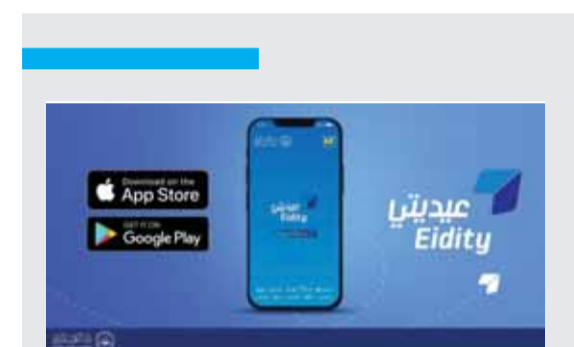
The draws of Al-Hassad include several cash prizes, such as KD 100,000 each Eid and the grand quarterly draw of KD 250,000 prize which continues to be a key aspiration for customers who are wishing to fulfill their dreams. Al-Hassad offers 20 weekly prizes of KD 1,000 for each winner. Furthermore, for the first time in Kuwait, the AUB Al-Hassad presents the "Privilege Draw", which is a quarterly draw of KD 25,000 exclusively for Al-Hassad customers who maintained their balances for more than one year and have not won a prize in the past five years. For all draws, the clients are eligible for one draw chance for each KD 50 deposited in their Al-Hassad account.

In addition to this attractive package of rewards, Al-Hassad Islamic account incorporates a Wakala contract for projected annual profits, making this account unique and attractive to all society segments that are aspiring to build their short and long-term savings through a unique savings account with many advantages.

ABK credit cardholders enjoy KD 5 coupon from Deliveroo for Eid

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) is offering all ABK credit cardholders a KD5 coupon from Deliveroo throughout Eid Al-Adha. To benefit from this offer, ABK customers need to enter the promotion code (ABK5) and pay with any ABK credit or prepaid card during Eid Al-Adha to get a KD 5 coupon per order from Deliveroo.

The promotion, which will run for a period of 5 days, from 19th July to 23rd July 2021, is valid only in Kuwait and through Deliveroo's mobile application. ABK continues to encourage its customers to use digital channels wherever possible, offering secure and reliable transactions as part of its overall 'Simpler Banking' strategy. The bank has also introduced a number of rewards and discounts throughout the year to encourage online spending.



CBK launches third update of 'Eidity' app

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) has developed a third update of the Eidity application for gifting Eidiyah (monetary gift) during the upcoming Eid Al-Adha season. The service is provided in collaboration with Kuwaiti banks and the Shared Electronic Banking Company (Knet).

The application, the first of its kind in the region, is offered within the CBK's strategy to encourage the adoption of technologies and digital services and drive to develop business models and electronic payment and transfer services and to provide flexible, swift, and secure services.

The app is designed for ease of use by customers of all ages to send and receive Eidiyah electronically without breach of regulatory or security requirements. The Eidiyah sum can be sent to any mobile number registered in the State of Kuwait, including to recipients who do not have bank accounts. The app includes newly added features; it enables users to track and monitor the status of the Eidiyah and confirm if the money has been delivered. There is also an option of sending a special note to the recipient, and both senders and recipients are eligible for more benefits, both monetary and in-kind. Full details can be obtained through downloading the app, available for iOS and Android platforms.

The CBK and Kuwaiti banks will provide detailed instructions through their social media accounts to ensure that customers can easily access and use it during the upcoming Eid holiday. Frequently asked questions in this regard shall also be answered on those platforms. Additionally, a unified customer service phone number (2255484) has been assigned by Knet to receive and answer all customer queries.

Malaysia's highland farmers fight for survival in pandemic

CAMERON HIGHLANDS, Malaysia: Vast tea plantations spread out over Malaysia's rugged highlands, where a network of greenhouses harvests fruit, vegetables and flowers and crops nestle in the hills.

At first glance, the scenes present a picture of idyllic rural life in the Cameron Highlands, a hill station in the tropical Southeast Asian nation established during British colonial rule. But the region's farmers are fighting for survival due to a worsening coronavirus outbreak that has decimated the vital tourism industry and caused labor shortages. "I have been farming for 40 years, and this pandemic is the worst crisis I have experienced," Chai Kok Lim, president of the Cameron Highlands Vegetable Farmers Organization, told AFP.

Malaysia's outbreak is driven by the Delta variant. To date, authorities have reported about 880,000 cases and more than 6,600 deaths. The government imposed a new nationwide lockdown at the start of June, dealing a fresh blow to the already struggling economy. The Cameron Bharat Plantation-over 600 acres (240 hectares) of tea estates sprawling over hills-is facing problems typical of the region's agricultural sector. Visitor numbers have dwindled to almost zero due to COVID-19 travel curbs, hammering revenues and forcing the plantation to close two shops for tourists.



Migrant workers walking through a vegetable farm in Cameron Highlands in Malaysia's Pahang state.— AFP

No workers, no tourists

Manager Francis Xavier said the plantation is also suffering from a shortage of migrant labor as travel restrictions mean he can't bring in new workers. He said that most Malaysians shun the tough, dirty work. "If we do not have sufficient labor, it will hurt our production schedule and affect our income," he said, adding the company needed to be ready for an upswing in demand when curbs lift and tourists return.

Vegetable, fruit and flower farmers in the highlands also complain of falling demand, problems finding workers and the rising cost of materials such as fertilizer. Parveen Kumar Mohan grows chrysanthemums,

which are commonly used in celebrations and religious ceremonies by Malaysia's sizeable ethnic Indian minority.

But the 31-year-old said he does not have enough workers to harvest the flowers. Even if the crop was harvested, he would not be able to sell the flowers because there is no demand for them. "Temples are closed and there are no tourists," he explained. Chai of the farmers' organization said that Malaysian consumers will ultimately be the ones impacted by the crisis. "If (there are) insufficient workers, we grow fewer vegetables and consumers will have to pay higher prices," he said.— AFP

US warns of 'growing risks' for business in blow to Hong Kong

HONG KONG: The United States on Friday warned its business community of growing risks of operating in Hong Kong due to China's clampdown, as an increasing number of Western companies consider abandoning the historic financial hub. The United States also imposed sanctions on seven more Chinese officials in Hong Kong as it vowed there would be a price for Beijing's imposition of a draconian security law a year ago. "Beijing has chipped away at Hong Kong's reputation of accountable, transparent governance and respect for individual freedoms and has broken its promise to leave Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy unchanged for 50 years," Secretary of

State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

"Today we send a clear message that the United States resolutely stands with Hong Kongers," Blinken said. In a long-awaited advisory that has already been denounced by China, US government agencies led by the State Department told businesses that they face "growing risks" in Hong Kong.

"As a result of these changes, they should be aware of potential reputational, regulatory, financial and, in certain instances, legal risks associated with their Hong Kong operations." The advisory acknowledged that Hong Kong, a former British colony handed back to China in 1997, "retains many economic distinctions" from the mainland including stronger protections of intellectual property.

But it pointed to a declining climate under the national security law including the arrest of one US citizen-John Clancey, a prominent human rights lawyer. China imposed the law in June 2020 after massive and sometimes destructive protests that demanded the preservation of fundamental rights promised to the city before the handover. Dozens of people have been

charged under the law including the media tycoon Jimmy Lai, former lawmakers and pro-democracy activists. The US advisory also warned of heightened risks to data privacy and less access to information, noting the closure of a leading newspaper, Apple Daily, which was a thorn in the side of authorities.

New sanctions

The advisory also highlighted that businesses were at greater risk of incurring US sanctions, which have been aimed in particular at banks that work with the police. In the latest sanctions, the United States blocked any US assets of seven deputy directors of the Liaison Office, which represents Beijing in Hong Kong.

The United States has already slapped sanctions on top officials including Hong Kong's pro-Beijing chief executive, Carrie Lam, who has admitted that she has struggled to use credit cards as a result. Xia Baolong, director of China's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, said earlier Friday that sanctions will anger China and backfire. "You would only lift a rock and drop it heavily on your own feet," Xia said in a speech.

In a statement after reports first emerged of the advisory, the office of the commissioner of the Chinese foreign ministry in Hong Kong said the United States was trying to "mislead" international businesses. "We believe that visionary people around the world will remain clear-eyed, see through the tricks of the US side, and make the right choice," it said.

Hong Kong emerged as one of the world's premier trading hubs thanks to its business-friendly policies, respect for rule of law and proximity to the vast Chinese market. Since the imposition of the security law, a growing number of international companies have announced plans either to leave or reduce staff in Hong Kong including VF Corp., the US apparel giant known for its Timberland and North Face brands. A survey in May by the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong found that 42 percent of its members were considering or planning a move out of the city.—AFP



HONG KONG: In this file photo, a Star Ferry crosses Victoria Harbor in Hong Kong. The US warned its business community of growing risks of operating in Hong Kong following a clampdown by China in the major financial hub.— AFP

AUB to offer services to customers during Eid Al-Adha holidays

KUWAIT: On the occasion of the blessed Eid Al-Adha, Ahli United Bank (AUB) congratulates and extends its warm wishes to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the government, the citizens of Kuwait and all residents across the country. May Allah the Almighty bless the nation with prosperity and joy during this holy time.

All AUB branches in Kuwait will be closed from Monday, July 19, 2021 till Thursday, July 22, 2021 and will resume work on Sunday, July 25, 2021. Noting it is scheduled that work at the Head office, Andalous Branch (Farwaniyah governorate), Jabriyah Branch (Hawally governorate), Boulevard Branch (Hawally governorate), Al-Ayoun Branch (Al-Jahra governorate), Al-Ahmedi Branch (Ahmedi governorate) and Sabah Al-Salem Branch (Mubarak Al-Kabeer governorate) will continue to serve customers on Sunday, July 18, 2021.

AUB has reconfirmed that during this period customers will be able to conduct their banking services through the Bank's electronic channels, including mobile and Internet banking (www.ahliunited.com.kw), and through the 24/7 telebanking 'Hayakom' service through 1812000. Furthermore, customers can also conduct their financial transactions through the Bank's ATMs which are conveniently located across Kuwait, in addition to the bank's Point of Sale (POS) transaction, the bank's Payment Gateway and other electronic services which offer easy and secure solutions to the valuable customers.

Lifestyle | Features



In this picture taken on June 9, 2021 taxidermist Jahangir Khan Jadoon holds a stuffed bird at his workshop in Lahore. — AFP photos



Jadoon works on a stuffed peacock.



Jadoon holds an artificial eye over a stuffed tiger cub.



Hafiz Mohammad Fahim shows his family's pet peacock, stuffed following its death after living with the family for seven years, in Lahore.

STUFFED WITH LOVE: BEREAVED PET OWNERS TURN TO TAXIDERMY IN PAKISTAN

Carefully preserving an animal takes patience and attention to detail - luxuries Pakistani Jahangir Khan Jadoon says he doesn't always have when a bereaved pet owner rushes into his workshop. "Sometimes an emotional customer will bring his dead pet with tears still in his eyes saying, 'I can't live even a night without him'," the taxidermist tells AFP from his studio near the eastern city of Lahore.

Surrounded by stuffed leopards, deer, parrots and cats, Jadoon sees his craft as both an art and a vital way to console those in pain. Some animals can take days to properly preserve while others take weeks, depending on the size and particulars of the animal. First the skin is carefully removed, washed, and then exposed to the sun. The animals are then stuffed and carefully sown back together while their eyes are replaced with glass balls.

But there are times, Jadoon admits, when he has only hours to bring comfort to a distraught client, making the delicate



Jadoon works on a stuffed bird at his workshop.

process all the more difficult. "Someone with a parrot or a cat will come and request us to preserve the pet as soon as possible. They say: 'do it now'. So in such cases we have to apply extra chemicals. Even then it can take hours," he adds.

Over the years, Jadoon has seen a wide range of species brought into his workshop, from rare leopards to a casowary bird that lived in a Pakistan zoo for

decades. "I learnt this skill from my forefathers. My grandfather started it in 1918 after a deer died in Lahore's zoo," Jadoon tells AFP, saying that he has also stuffed his fair share of animals that merely serve as decorations for fancy homes.

'Why is it not moving?'
A growing taste among elite Pakistanis for exotic pets - especially big cats seen

as symbols of wealth and power - has also spilled over into his work. "Most people prefer a cat or a dog, a parrot or a peacock as their pet. But nowadays, there's a new trend of raising lions," Jadoon says. He has helped establish a collection at a university museum, where those studying ecology and conservation can learn more about the delicate trade.

"This type of museum provides an

opportunity to the students," said Arshad Javid, who heads the Wildlife and Ecology Department at the University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences in Lahore. "They can see them here, they can identify the difference among the species." But dealing with a pet and their owners is a different matter and involves more than just a deep understanding of the art of taxidermy.

The act of preserving a pet can be cathartic for its owners but it is not always the panacea for coping with despair. Hafiz Mohammad Fahim decided to stuff his family's pet peacock following his sudden death after seven years of bringing joy to his children. The peacock now serves as a "memorial", even if his children are no longer able to interact with it. "My kids had an attachment with him," said Fahim. "Now they are sad and ask why it is not moving." — AFP



Jadoon and professor Arshad Javid (right) stand next to a stuffed lion at the Zoological Taxidermy Museum in Pattoki, Kasur district in Pakistan's Punjab province.

CLUBHOUSE IN A CONFLICT ZONE: AFGHANS CONFRONT TALEBAN ON AUDIO APP

As war rages across the countryside, young Afghans are plugging in their earphones and logging into audio-based app Clubhouse to argue with the Taliban and pitch counter-offensive tactics. Launched in the United States at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform acts as a giant conference call and first found popularity among American tech entrepreneurs as a forum for discussing start-ups and cryptocurrencies.

In a conflict zone, it can have the rare power of connecting ordinary citizens with militants waging fear and destruction. "Some say the Taliban have changed, but I wanted to hear from them, in their own voice, if they really have," 22-year-old Sodaba of Kabul told AFP. With the withdrawal of foreign and NATO forces all but complete, the Taliban have waged a broad offensive, snapping up territory and stirring fears of a military takeover.

Sodaba was particularly concerned



This photo illustration shows the Clubhouse app icon on a mobile phone screen in Kabul. — AFP

about whether the Islamic fundamentalist group still held "their strict beliefs, especially on women". "This is an interesting outlet that lets ordinary Afghans talk directly with the Taliban and government in real time," said Kabul-based political activist and author Fahim Kohdamani, who hosts political debates on the platform on a regular basis. "People are very worried about what comes next now that international troops are leaving Afghanistan."

Afghans in the country's urban centers have enjoyed a relative increase in social freedoms since the Taliban fell, but these gains are under threat as the militants advance on several provincial capitals. For women, the concerns are magnified - the Taliban imposed a harsh version of Islamic law during their rule in the 1990s which saw half the population confined to

their homes. "I saw they won't allow people they deemed opponents to talk, and even ridiculed one woman who asked about women's rights," Sodaba said.

Heated debates

Clubhouse allows users to dip into "rooms", either to listen or virtually put their hand up to speak in discussions, which according to the platform's guidelines cannot be recorded nor comments quoted. Some recent topics include the Taliban's view of the afterlife, how to have a happy relationship and Persian poetry. Many have wanted to weigh in on the reasons behind the quick fall of rural districts to the militants, with dozens waiting for their turn to speak.

"One of the good things about Clubhouse is that even people not so educated can come to hear or have their voices heard," said Kohdamani. In a country overshadowed by an insurgency, discussions about politics and the Taliban attract the most listeners. In a Taliban-run chatroom, the militants laud their humanitarian values, assuring Afghans they want unity.

With sometimes up to 100 listeners, things heat up fast as the group's supporters and opponents argue about war, human rights, and the role of women in society. "The Taliban called me rude and cut my mic, after I spoke the truth about them," Haanya Saheba Malik tweeted. "They want to put the women in chains and restrict their human rights." She later told AFP that she wants to report the Taliban to Clubhouse: "They openly declared those of us calling for human rights infidels and deserving of death."

Another chatroom critical of the group opened up soon after, inviting the Taliban to join a conversation they were not moderating. One of the group's activists signed in and was quickly bombarded by criticism. But some users are fearful of Taliban moderated conversations, saying the group is violating Clubhouse policies by recording conversations that can be used for future retribution. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid denied that threats were being made.

Spreading their message

For the Taliban, who have adopted an increasingly professional approach to public relations and social media, virtual chat rooms are a new way to disseminate their message. Nearly half of Afghanistan's 37 million residents have access to the Internet with 13 million using social media, according to the government's information technology ministry. While Facebook is by far the most popular platform, Clubhouse appears to be growing fast. "This is a good platform to talk to and find understanding with those who oppose us," Taliban spokesman Mujahid told AFP. —AFP



Malian photographer Diango Cisse, 76, known as the initiator of the postcard in Mali, looks through some of his postcards in his home in Bamako on June 26, 2021. — AFP photos

Picture of the past: Postcard king captured Mali before war

He may be one of Mali's most popular photographers, endowed with an eye for spectacular landscapes or a slice of life, whose images were then printed on postcards that sold by the thousand. To the public who snapped up his pictures, Diango Cisse's name remains almost unknown, although professional photographers and historians of the Sahel nation's past bow deeply to his skills.

Today, in his house in the capital Bamako, the frail 76-year-old plays down his achievements. "I am not a photographer," he insists. Formerly a high school art teacher, Cisse started taking pictures in 1973 after he purchased a camera from one of his students. "At first, it was the monuments of Bamako: the market, the post office, the statues," Cisse says.

But he soon expanded his range across the whole of Mali and even to neighboring countries. He captured sacred fishing rituals, portraits of young Malians decked in traditional robes and even photographed Libya's former leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, during a state visit. Tiemoko Dembele of the Maison Africaine de la Photographie says Cisse's photos taken in the 70s, 80s and 90s are an important legacy of Malian life since conflict has upended the country. "It is no

longer possible to travel as much as in his time," Dembele says.

Bygone era

Since 2012 a violent jihadist rebellion has tormented Mali, with roaming bands of armed men making movement risky and all but destroying the country's tourism industry. But before the conflict Cisse crisscrossed the vast and ethnically diverse nation with his camera, capturing images of the famous Bandiagara Escarpment that have become iconic.

He turned to a Frenchman whose speciality was making postcards and began selling them for 125 CFA francs (\$0.23) each. For years Cisse held a near-monopoly on postcards in Mali and his scenes of natural beauty and local customs lined hotel lobbies and were sold on city streets. His most successful picture - of a young Fulani girl at a wedding in the northern desert town of Timbuktu - sold 12,000 copies.

Mali's capital hosts Africa's biggest photography festival and is home to artistic legends like Malick Sidibe, who mentored Cisse. While his photos are considered an important historical record, Bamako-based art critic Chab Toure describes them as having "a very strong artistic intention". But the postcards, like the scenes they depict, are a relic of a bygone era and only a few can be found for sale in the gift shop of the national museum and in the central post office. The proceeds from Cisse's postcard business allowed him to build a large house in Bamako and in his retirement he runs a portrait studio. But barring one visit from a culture minister, Cisse says he has never received any recognition for his work from his peers or the government. —AFP

'I woke up and puked': Reinsve on newfound fame

If you blinked you will have missed Renate Reinsve's movie career until she became the undisputed breakout star of the Cannes film festival. At 33 the Norwegian actress was at an age many in her shoes start thinking about another career, and that they really should have listened to their parents. Until the premiere of "The Worst Person in the World" the highlight of Reinsve's time on the big screen amounted to just one minute 10 years ago.

That minute however was in Joachim Trier's "Oslo, August 31st", and the rising Nordic director could not get her out of his head. "I always wondered why the hell is Norwegian film so messed up that she hasn't had a star role yet?" Trier told AFP. "It's so stupid I thought let's make a movie with her." "No one has seen me in anything," Reinsve laughed hours after The Guardian compared her protean talent to that of Alicia Vikander and Lily James.

'A star is born'

It also declared that "she's just so good. A star is born", as review after review marveled at this "luminous", "sparkling", "dazzling" unknown. "It's a bit overwhelming for me," Reinsve admitted a few days later. "The other day I woke up and I puked. And today I woke up and I cried. This is my first lead. I've done a lot of theatre and some very small and not that great stuff in Norwegian films and TV," she laughed.

But Trier never doubted her. Although she had only one line in "Oslo, August 31st", the pair spent nine days shooting together because Trier wanted a "specific light situation and her part was going from night to early morning". "The irony is I really got to know her. We had a real movie experience over just one line," he said. The two became friends and finally Trier and co-writer Eskil Vogt - who has another film, "The Innocents" at Cannes - wrote "The Worst Person in the World" "specifically for Renate". "There is an awful lot of her in the character. She has had a big, big impact on this film," Trier told AFP.

Reinsve plays Julie a twentysomething ricocheting through relationships and trying to find herself through the men in her life until she finally sets her own course. The film industry bible Variety was so impressed by this melancholic mix of musical, rom-com and coming-of-age story that they said it "deserves to be a touchstone movie" for millennials. —AFP



A staff member walks through an interactive digital installation named "Rapidly Rotating Bouncing Sphere Caterpillar House" during a media preview of "teamLab Forest" at the BOSS E.ZO FUKUOKA entertainment building in Fukuoka on July 16, 2021. — AFP photos



A staff member sits at an interactive digital installation "Fire / Forest and Spiral of Resonating Lamps in the Forest" during a media preview of "teamLab: A Forest Where Gods Live" at the lobby of Mifuneyama Rakuken Hotel, Takeo Hot Springs in Saga prefecture on July 15, 2021.



Interactive digital installation "Typhoon Balls and Weightless Forest of Resonating Life".



"Shifting Valley, Living Creatures of Flowers, Symbiotic Lives".



"Catching and Collecting Forest".

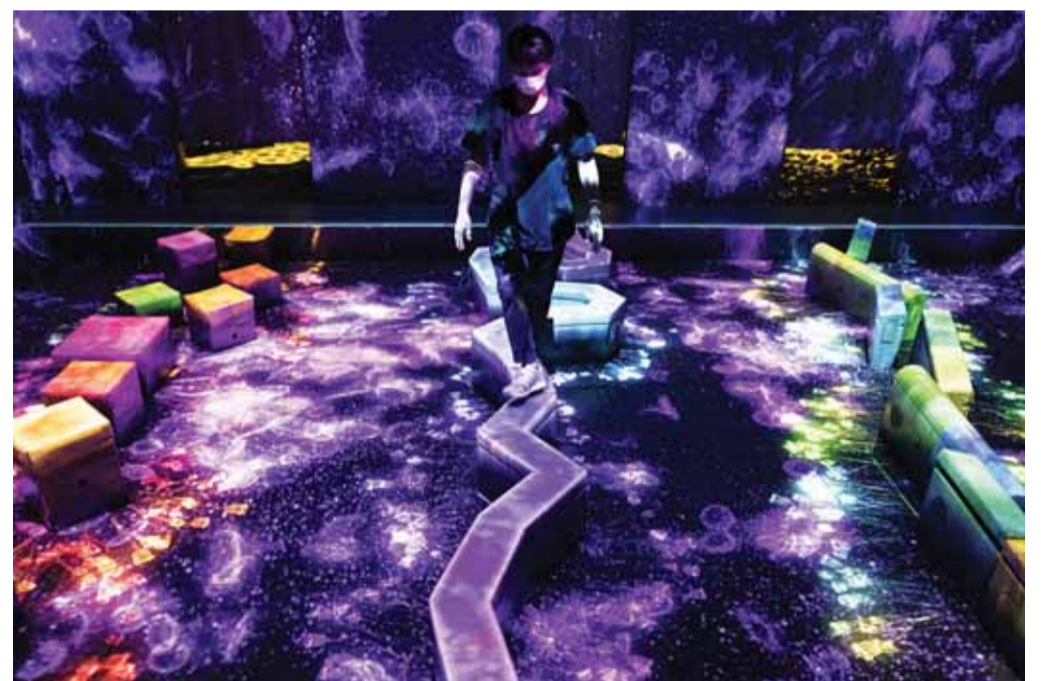
JAPAN FOREST LIGHTS UP IN DIGITAL ART SHOW

A cascading waterfall made entirely of light pours onto a rock while azalea trees are illuminated in a glowing ripple at a digital art show in a Japanese forest. Light installations featuring blooming flowers, giant koi carp and traditional calligraphy come to life after dark, creating an otherworldly ambiance at the exhibition that fuses nature and tech.

The show in the mountains of Kyushu in southern Japan is the latest offering from art collective teamLab. The group are internationally renowned for their mesmerizing displays combining projections, sound and carefully designed spaces. "Sometimes, people think digital art and nature are completely against each other," Takashi Kudo, a member of teamLab, told AFP at a media preview.

"But at the same time, we think digital and nature are quite easy to merge, because our 'paint' is light. So we don't destroy the nature itself, we don't paint on original trees or rocks... in the daytime it's going to disappear."

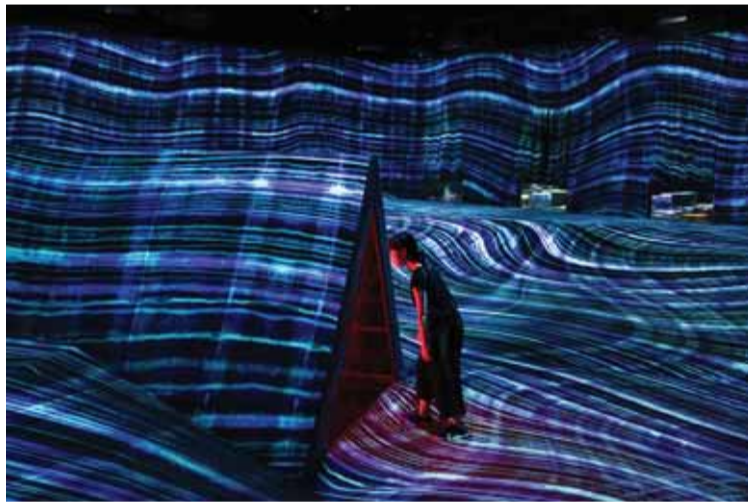
The exhibition, which opened on Friday and runs until Nov 7, is in a park whose boundaries blend into an ancient forest in the Saga region near Nagasaki. Sensors hidden in a thicket of azaleas detect when people walk past - sending a fleeting, firefly-like glow through the trees around them. On the surface of a pond, abstract lines of violet, yellow and green light combine as if reflecting a canopy of neon trees above.



"Balance Stepping Stones through the Invisible World".

And in an abandoned bath house, huge "megaliths" jut out of the ground, brightly illuminated to contrast with the darkness inside and out. Kudo says he hopes the exhibition, titled

"teamLab: A Forest Where Gods Live", will help people appreciate the beauty of the natural environment. "The leaves - it seems that they are only green, but for us, it's a screen." — AFP



A staff member walks through an interactive digital installation named "Beating Earth".



"Soft Terrain and Granular Topography".

Eiffel Tower reopens after COVID closure

The Eiffel Tower reopened to visitors on Friday after nine months of shutdown caused by the COVID pandemic, the landmark's longest closure since World War II. The lifts of the "Iron Lady" again whisked tourists to its 300-m summit and its majestic views of the French capital as a marching band played. "It's a gift to be here - We really love Paris," said Ila, who came from Hamburg, Germany, and waited more than two hours with her daughter Helena to be among the first to the top.

"Tourism is coming back to Paris and we can again share the happiness, with visitors from around the world, of this monument and Paris," said Jean-Francois Martins, head of the tower's operating company. Daily capacity is set to be restricted to 13,000 people, about half of the normal level, in order to respect social distancing.

And from Wednesday next week, visitors will need to show either proof of vaccination or a negative test, in line with recent government-imposed requirements as COVID cases again begin to climb.

"Obviously it's an additional operational complication, but it's manageable," Martins told AFP. Early reservations for tickets during the summer holiday period underline how the tourism industry in Paris has changed due to travel restrictions.

Martins said there was an "almost total absence" of British ticket holders, while only 15 percent were Americans and very few are from Asia. Half of visitors are expected to be French, while Italians and Spanish make up a higher proportion than usual. The long closure has caused havoc with the finances of the operating company, Sete, which runs the monument on behalf of Paris city authorities.

It is set to seek additional government

aid and a fresh €60-million cash injection to stay afloat, having seen its revenues fall by 75 percent to €25 million in 2020. The masterpiece by architect Gustave Eiffel has also been hit by problems linked to its latest paint job, the 20th time it has been repainted since its construction in 1889. Work was halted in February because of high levels of lead detected on the site, which poses a health risk to laborers. Tests are still underway and painting is set to resume only in the autumn, meaning a part of the facade is obscured by scaffolding and safety nets. — AFP



This picture taken on Friday in Paris shows the Eiffel Tower and its protective wall. — AFP

US rapper Biz Markie dies aged 57

American rapper, DJ and producer Biz Markie, who shot to fame with the 1989 hit "Just a Friend", died on Friday aged 57, his representatives said. He died with his wife by his side, Jenni Izumi of Biz Markie Inc told AFP in a statement. "Biz created a legacy of artistry that will forever be celebrated by his industry peers and his beloved fans whose lives he was able to touch through music, spanning over 35 years," the statement read. No cause of death was given for the rapper, whose real name was Marcel Hall, but he had experienced health issues in recent years related to type 2 diabetes, media reports said.

Known for songs often featuring amusing lyrics, including "Pickin' Boogers" from his 1988 debut album "Goin' Off," "Let Go My Eggo" and "Chinese Food," the New York-born Biz Markie earned the nickname the "Clown Prince of Hip-Hop". "Just a Friend," with its catchy off-key chorus, hit No. 9 on the Billboard Hot 100 and later was added to VH1's list of the 100 greatest hip-hop songs.

His death triggered an outpouring of tributes. Fellow rapper Q-Tip - whose for-

mer group A Tribe Called Quest was at the vanguard of art-house hip-hop in the 1980s and 1990s - tweeted: "This one hurts baad... im gonna miss u so so many memories." New York mayor Bill de Blasio tweeted his condolences, saying: "Biz Markie turned hip hop on its head and brought that New York sense of humor to audiences across the world. We're mourning a true son of Harlem tonight."



Having started out as a beatboxer in his teens, according to reports, he later showed off his prodigious and pioneering skill in a memorable cameo as a beatboxing alien in the film "Men In Black II" starring Will Smith. He also appeared on the small screen in recent years, as himself on popular TV shows "black-ish" and "Empire" and lending his voice to the cartoon Sponge Bob as well as being a recurring guest on children's show "Yo Gabba Gabba!"

More recently, he was known for his DJing, posting about appearances regularly on Twitter - including with several new rap stars such as Cordae. Posts dropped off in mid-2020, when he was reportedly hospitalized. — AFP

Sports

Photo of the day



Mansour Al Safran performs in Dubai. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

News in brief

Istanbul to host 2023 CL final

PARIS: UEFA announced Friday the 2023 Champions League final will be played in Istanbul, after the past two editions were relocated from the Turkish city to Portugal due to COVID-19 issues. The 2020 competition was disrupted heavily by the pandemic, and concluded with a 'Final Eight' tournament in Lisbon after it was forced to move away from Istanbul. Last season's final between Chelsea and Manchester City was again due to be held at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium, but the UK government's decision to put Turkey on its travel red list prompted UEFA to move it to Porto, Saint Petersburg, initially scheduled to host the 2021 showpiece, will instead stage next year's final, while Wembley will be the venue for the 2024 final. Munich, which was due to stage the 2023 final, will now host the 2025 edition. —AFP

PSG's Hakimi tests positive

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain wing-back Achraf Hakimi has tested positive for coronavirus and been put into isolation, a source close to the club said yesterday. Morocco's Hakimi, 22, made his Parisian debut in Wednesday's friendly win over third-tier Le Mans after joining from Inter Milan for 60 million euros (\$71 million) last week. He missed Saturday's pre-season draw with third-division Chambly and is set to be sidelined for next week's games with Augsburg and Genoa. PSG were hit hard by COVID-19 at the start of last season when several players tested positive and Neymar, Kylian Mbappe, Angel Di Maria and Leandro Paredes had to self-isolate after a holiday to Ibiza following the team's Champions League final loss to Bayern Munich. —AFP

Lewis powers West Indies past Australia in final of T20 series

GROS-ISLET, Saint Lucia: Opening batsman Evin Lewis was at his rampaging best with an innings of 79 in setting the West Indies on their way to a 16-run victory over Australia in the final T20 International of their five-match series at the Darren Sammy Stadium in St Lucia on Friday.

Lewis' punishing innings off just 34 balls, highlighted by nine sixes and four fours, lifted the home team to 199 for eight and earned him the "Man of the Match" as the Caribbean team also took the series by a convincing 4-1 margin.

Pacers Sheldon Cottrell and Andre Russell then claimed three wickets apiece while none of the tourists' top-order batsmen were able to sustain the effort deep into the innings and they were restricted to 183 for nine in reply despite being well on course halfway through the chase.

Mitchell Marsh, who posted three half-centuries in his previous four innings in the series and was by a long way the visitors' outstanding performer, looked set for another substantial contribution but fell for 30 off 15 balls to a sharp caught-and-bowled dismissal off the first delivery bowled by Russell in the match.

Despite being hampered by what appeared to be an ankle injury, Australian captain Aaron Finch sought to keep his team in the hunt. However when he fell for what proved a top-score of 34 to Hayden Walsh via an outstanding catch by Fabian Allen at long-on in the tenth over, the innings gradually ran out of steam.

"He changed the game for us with that catch," was stand-in captain Nicholas Pooran's assessment of that superb bit of work by the versatile Allen. "This is a wonderful achievement for the team. I am especially happy for Hayden Walsh. He works so hard on his game and we know that leg-spinners can often be champions in T20 cricket." Walsh, the Antiguan leg-spinner, was named "Man of the Series" for his haul of 12 wickets across the five matches, one short of the T20I series record of New Zealand spinner Ish Sodhi, also against Australia, earlier this year.

While he went wicketless, veteran player Chris Gayle made an invaluable contribution with the ball in conceding only nine runs through three overs of spin to frustrate



GROS-ISLET, Saint Lucia: West Indies players celebrate with the winning trophy at the end of the 5th and final T20I between Australia and West Indies at Darren Sammy Cricket Ground, Gros Islet, Saint Lucia, on Friday. —AFP

the best efforts of the Aussie middle-order to stay in the hunt for the challenging target.

"I thought we did extremely well in the second half of their innings to limit them below 200, given the start they had gotten," said Finch of his team's effort in the field. "Unfortunately we just haven't backed it up with the bat. There are some guys here with not a huge amount of international experience so it can be tough for them, but I don't want to be too critical of them."

Buoyed by this performance, which in some ways made amends for the preceding 3-2 series loss to South Africa in Grenada, West Indies can now look forward to another five-match series against Pakistan in the continuing countdown to their defense of the World T20 title in the United Arab Emirates in October-November. Before the Pakistan duel though the West Indies and Australia meet in three One-Day Internationals in Barbados starting next Tuesday. —AFP

bowled to dismiss opener Dawid Malan on his way to 3-30. Roy's rapid 32 kept England in the hunt before Livingstone, looking to establish himself in the England set-up, found his range with consecutive sixes off leg-spinner Khan. Livingstone needed just 17 balls for his fifty. Morgan then fell cheaply to leave England looking to Livingstone.

The Lancashire all-rounder went to his hundred in style with a six before Khan had him caught in the deep. England's tail now had too much to do and Afridi ended the match when he bowled Matt Parkinson with four balls left in the game. The series continues at Headingley today. —AFP

really good." Azam, fresh from a superb hundred in the third ODI at Edgbaston on Tuesday, faced just 49 balls as he and Rizwan took a toll of an experimental England attack. The skipper was in typically elegant form while hitting eight fours and three sixes before he was caught behind off David Willey.

Fast bowler Afridi took a brilliant caught and



NOTTINGHAM: Pakistan's Babar Azam runs during the T20 cricket match between England and Pakistan at Trent Bridge, Nottingham, England on Friday. —AFP

Azam leads Pakistan to T20 win over England despite Livingstone ton

NOTTINGHAM: Babar Azam led from the front as Pakistan beat England by 31 runs in the first Twenty20 international at Trent Bridge on Friday despite a blistering hundred from Liam Livingstone. Pakistan captain Azam made 85 and shared an opening stand of 150 with Mohammad Rizwan in a national record T20 total of 232-6. But Livingstone gave the hosts hope with a 42-ball century, England's quickest in a T20 international and the fifth fastest of all-time, hitting six fours and nine sixes on his way to three figures. Yet it wasn't enough to prevent Pakistan going 1-0 up in this three-match series, with England bowled out for 201 after player of the match Shaheen Shah Afridi and Shadab Khan took three wickets apiece.

"Everyone took part in today's win," said Azam following Pakistan's first victory of the tour after a 3-0 reverse in a one-day international series. "After mine and Rizwan's partnership all the batsmen came and performed their roles and we got a brilliant total."

"We want to carry on the momentum on to the next game and take the positives from today," he added. Meanwhile, England skipper Eoin Morgan praised Livingstone's innings by saying: "It was an incredible knock. The biggest compliment I could pay him is our changing room has watched some incredible knocks from (Jason) Roy or (Jos) Buttler or (Moeen) Ali and that knock was as good as any of them. He was incredible."

Livingstone and Morgan both missed the ODI series after all the originally selected squad had to self-isolate following a COVID outbreak in the England camp. "We've spent 10 days in isolation," said Livingstone. "It was nice to have that break and I came back in feeling really fresh. I didn't pick a bat up for 10 days then came back in yesterday (Thursday) and felt

WADA says 'very rare' to get positive test after skin contact

PARIS: The World Anti-Doping Agency said yesterday it would be "very rare" for an athlete to test positive for an illegal substance after contact with skin. WADA issued a statement ahead of a documentary by Germany's ARD television, days before the start of the Tokyo Olympics, that claims such an occurrence was proven in several cases in an experiment.

ARD, the German journalist Hajo Seppelt, who made key revelations in the Russian doping scandal in 2014, and Cologne University detected traces of various anabolic steroid on tested individuals for up to 14 days. WADA said: "This possibility is well known within the anti-doping community."

"It is considered to be a very rare occurrence based on the small number of such cases that have arisen historically, and its potential is scientifically limited to a very small number of prohibited substances that could be absorbed through the skin into someone's system," it added.

WADA said it would welcome a "peer-reviewed paper" of the research "to assess whether any new data has been brought to light" and said it was in contact with the documentary makers. ARD said a dozen men aged 18-40 were exposed to up to four anabolic steroids with brief contact on their palms, above their arms, the neck and arm.

They gave urine samples after one hour and after six hours. The examples given after 60 minutes from some of the participants revealed the presence of a steroid. Furthermore, traces of the substances were detected among all the men up to two weeks afterwards.

Cologne's anti-doping laboratory, which is certified by WADA, was responsible for analyzing and processing the results. "If these samples concerned athletes, in all likelihood, they would have ended up testing positive," the laboratory's director Mario Thevis says in the ARD documentary. "We would have then opened an investigation for an anti-doping violation which would have been penalised," he added.

WADA said one infraction does not lead to a sanction against an individual and added that "manipulation of athletes' samples as highlighted in the documentary is a criminal act". It said that within the principle of strict liability in anti-doping "there is flexibility for an athlete who can demonstrate that they were not at fault during the various stages of the process, including on first instance and appeal".

WADA said it welcomed the pledge by the experiment's authors to publish a peer-reviewed paper in a scientific journal "so that the results can be properly analyzed".

"With this information, WADA will be able to assess whether any new data has been brought to light," it said. "Athletes can continue to be confident that the system designed to protect them, which has been built and has evolved through input from all anti-doping stakeholders worldwide, will continue to include multiple safeguards and will be further adjusted as science advances." —AFP

Sports

Eyes on the goal: Women's football goes pro in Japan

TOKYO: As global interest in women's football approaches fever pitch, former champions Japan are eyeing a return to glory with the country's first professional league for female players. A decade since winning the 2011 Women's World Cup, Japan has fallen behind, even as the sport becomes more popular and lucrative elsewhere. But the new league's organizers hope it will bring prestige and fresh talent to Japanese clubs when it kicks off in September, tapping into

victory at the last World Cup by star winger Megan Rapinoe. The national team — nicknamed "Nadeshiko" after a pink flower that symbolizes femininity in Japan — won silver at the London 2012 Olympics but failed to qualify for Rio, and its chances of a medal this summer on home turf are slim. Okajima says Japan's clubs are finding it harder to keep up as teams in Europe and elsewhere go professional, meaning "the level of women's football is rapidly rising".

17s match in the United States. She hopes that will change as the league grows. "If we can show we're just as great as men's football teams... there will be more sponsors and supporters," she said.

'A dream and a goal'

Okajima hopes to raise the profile of the sport in Japan and attract new fans, especially women in their teens and twenties. Just 1,300 supporters on average turn up to games in the country's top semi-professional women's league, while a popular team in the US can draw a crowd of 20,000, she said.

And only 3.3 percent of registered Japanese players are women, with the number of female players staying roughly the same over the past 10 years. It's still common for female players in Japan to have a day job and train in the afternoon, while many teams don't have permanent grounds. "Women couldn't earn a living with football. But once it goes pro, becoming a footballer can be a dream and a goal for girls," said AS Elfen midfielder Emi Yamamoto. The 39-year-old spent several years at teams in Italy and the US, and says many others have done the same because they could not go pro in Japan. "If the league reaches the top level worldwide, everyone, including foreign players, will want to play here," she said.

'Social message upfront'

In another boost to players' international ambitions, a women's Asian Champions League is set to launch in 2023, the regional football governing body said earlier this year. Meanwhile the WE League, which is funded through sponsorship and subsidies, has another goal closer to home — to create more jobs for women in the male-dominated sports sector. The league's clubs are required to have at least one female coach, while half the staff and one decision-maker must be women. "It's a league that displays its social message upfront," Okajima said. The main challenge for the WE League might be launching in a pandemic.

Pre-season matches had to be held without spectators due to surging cases, but Okajima says the team is trying to drum up support online, reaching a deal with an online streaming platform to air their tournament. And goalkeeper Asano is confident that glory could once again beckon for the Japanese side. "The level of the Japan team will go up if the level of the league rises," she said. "That way, I think we will step closer to winning the World Cup again." — AFP



HANNO: This photo taken on March 31, 2021 shows Emi Yamamoto (front) and other players of Japan's women football team Chifure AS Elfen Saitama warming up during a training session in Hanno, Saitama prefecture. — AFP

growing enthusiasm across the region ahead of the 2023 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. "We had a sense of urgency, as we felt that Japan would be left behind globally if it didn't go pro now," said Kikuko Okajima, chair of the WE League — short for Women Empowerment.

"We're in the middle of a pandemic, but we decided not to delay the tournament and to launch the pro-league," she told AFP. Japan is currently 10th in the FIFA women's rankings, behind several European teams and the number-one US side, who were led to

But players at Chifure AS Elfen Saitama, one of the WE League's 11 inaugural clubs, see a bright future. Goalkeeper Natsumi Asano, 23, called the league's launch a "very important step". "I am hopeful, and I also feel responsible as a player" for the game's success, she told AFP as her teammates practiced headers and talked tactics at their training ground near Tokyo.

Female footballers aren't always recognized for their talents in Japan, Asano said, recalling her surprise when she was greeted with loud cheers at an under-

NBA's McGee, Johnson replace Love, Beal on US Olympic roster

LOS ANGELES: Denver Nuggets center JaVale McGee and San Antonio Spurs guard Keldon Johnson were named to the US Olympic men's basketball team Friday as replacements for Cleveland's Kevin Love and Washington's Bradley Beal. Beal had been ruled out for Tokyo on Thursday, a day after being placed into Covid-19 protocols, while Love withdrew from the team Friday, citing a right calf injury that nagged him during the 2020-21 NBA campaign.

"Our hearts truly break for Brad and Kevin, who did everything asked but for unfortunate and different reasons will be unable to join us in Tokyo," USA Basketball national team managing director Jerry Colangelo said. "Keldon has played well during our training camp and in the exhibition games in Las Vegas and being a member of the San Antonio Spurs he is familiar with the things coach Gregg Popovich wants this team to do. JaVale has been involved in our USA National Team program since 2009 and we believe he will offer a valuable inside presence."

The Americans, who suffered shock exhibition defeats to Nigeria and Australia, are set to open Olympic play on July 25 against France. McGee, a three-time NBA champion, averaged 7.3 points, 5.2 rebounds and 1.2 blocked shots a game for Denver and Cleveland this past NBA season. Johnson, who had been a member of the USA Selects squad that trains against the Olympians, played for the Americans in two exhibition games, averaging 5.5 points and 2.5 rebounds. He averaged 12.8 points and 6.0 rebounds for the Spurs under Popovich this past season. Three members of the US Olympic team — Milwaukee's Kris Middleton and Jrue Holiday and Phoenix's Devin Booker — are still playing in the NBA Finals. The US Olympic squad plays Spain in an exhibition game today in Las Vegas. — AFP

France forward Giroud completes AC Milan move

MILAN: Chelsea's France attacker Olivier Giroud has completed his move to AC Milan, the Italian club announced yesterday. The 34-year-old World Cup winner underwent a medical on Friday before signing with the Serie A runners-up who return to the Champions League next season after a seven-year absence. "AC Milan are delighted to announce the signing of Olivier Jonathan Giroud on a permanent transfer from Chelsea," the club said in a statement without giving details of the duration which Italian media reported is for two years. "The French striker will be wearing the number 9 jersey."

Chelsea extended Giroud's contract last month for a year until June 2022, but he preferred a move away from Stamford Bridge after falling out of favor with just eight Premier League starts last season.

"To all the Blues, to my teammates, to all my coaches, to the whole club, a huge thank you for these special moments I'm starting a new journey with a light and happy heart," Giroud said on Twitter after his medical on Friday. "Our victories in the FA Cup,



LAS VEGAS: Maraiana Tolo #14 of the Australia Opals drives to the basket against Napheesa Collier #11 and Breanna Stewart #10 of the United States during an exhibition game at Michelob ULTRA Arena ahead of the Tokyo Olympic Games on Friday in Las Vegas, Nevada. — AFP

Aussie Opals edge US Olympic women's basketball champs

LOS ANGELES: Ezi Magbegor scored 17 points to lead the Australia Opals over the reigning champion US Olympic women's basketball team 70-67 on Friday in an exhibition game in Las Vegas. Rebecca Allen added 11 points and Stephanie Talbot contributed 10 for the Aussies, who played without their best player Liz Cambage. The 29-year-old center took herself off the Aussie roster Thursday after an incident in a scrimmage against Nigeria.

Europa League and Champions league have been magnificent."

At AC Milan, Giroud is expected to rotate with Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic, 39, who is recovering from knee surgery and remains uncertain for the start of the coming campaign. He joins compatriots Theo Hernandez and Mike Maignan, the new goalkeeper at the Rossoneri, who last won Serie A in 2011.

Giroud won Ligue 1 with Montpellier in 2012 before moving to England, spending six seasons in Arsenal before joining Chelsea in 2018. For the Gunners he scored 105 goals in 253 games, winning three FA Cups and three Community Shields.—AFP



MILAN: New AC Milan center-forward, France's Olivier Giroud waves upon his arrival at La Madonnina clinic in Milan on Friday to undergo a medical checkup.—AFP

Jamaica, Costa Rica rally to win Group C games in Gold Cup

LOS ANGELES: Junior Flemmings notched the winning goal as Jamaica came from behind to beat Guadeloupe 2-1 on Friday in Group C of the CONCACAF Gold Cup. Guadeloupe took the lead after just four minutes at the Exploria Stadium in Orlando, when Dimitri Ramothé's blast deflected off Jamaica defender Amari'i Bell and snuck past goalkeeper Andre Blake at the near post for an own goal.

The Reggae Boyz would find their leveler within 10 minutes, however, when Philadelphia Union striker Cory Burke hit a perfectly placed shot from the top of the area that handcuffed Guadeloupe goalkeeper Yohann Thuram-Ulien. Flemmings snapped the deadlock in the 87th minute, making a brilliant individual effort by outsmarting several defenders and firing a shot through Thuram-Ulien's legs. The group's other game also ended in a comeback 2-1 win, in this case for Costa Rica over Suriname. Gleofilo Vlijter opened the scoring in the 52nd minute with Suriname's first ever Gold Cup goal. But Costa Rica stormed back, scoring two goals in two minutes to take the lead. In



PHOENIX: Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks talks with Mike Budenholzer during practice and media availability as part of the 2021 NBA Finals on Friday at Footprint Center in Phoenix, Arizona.—AFP

Greek philosophy: Giannis stays humble in NBA Finals

PHOENIX: Giannis Antetokounmpo spoke more like a Greek philosopher than a Greek NBA star Friday but his wisdom about living in the moment might just help the Milwaukee Bucks win the NBA Finals. The Bucks rallied from 2-0 down to match the Phoenix Suns at 2-2 in the best-of-seven championship series entering last night's fifth game at Phoenix. Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo, a 26-year-old forward, says Milwaukee was resilient by not dwelling on defeat nor pondering their fate, but by battling back one day and even one play at a time.

"I feel like once you're living in the present and you're enjoying the specific moment, you get to enjoy that moment to the fullest," said Antetokounmpo. "Once you start thinking about the future, what's going to happen, you're kind of losing in between."

Tempted by ego and pride, Antetokounmpo has chosen humility, his words a modern version of sage advice such as classical Greek philosophers as Socrates, Plato or Aristotle might have offered. "From my experience, when I think about like, 'Oh, yeah, I did this, I'm so great,' ... usually the next day you're going to suck. Simple as that. The next few days you're going to be terrible," Antetokounmpo said.

"I figured out a mindset to have that when you focus on the past, that's your ego. When I focus on the future, it's my pride. 'Yeah, next game, I do this and this, I'm going to dominate.' That's your pride talking. I try to focus on the moment, in the present. That's humility. That's not setting no expectation. That's going out there, enjoying the game, competing at a high level. That's like a skill. I've tried to master it. It has been working so far, so I'm not going to stop."

After two 40-point performances and a magnificent block on Phoenix's Deandre Ayton, Antetokounmpo has much to be proud about, if he dwelled upon such things. "I appreciate the moment. Great moment. We got to move on," said Antetokounmpo. "At the end of the day that's in the past. Over with. I got to keep making winning plays. I got to keep competing. I got to keep finding ways to help my team be great."

Antetokounmpo notes the difference between boastful thoughts of future games and setting goals with specific steps to take in order to achieve them. "That's the objective. That's the plan. There are steps to it. You do little things. Being in the present allows you to do those things in order for you to get there," he said. "If you try to jump (skip steps), you're going to fall in the cliff. For me it's working. I'm enjoying my life. I enjoy the time with my family. It might not work for everybody. Some people might be thinking differently. You've got to invest in yourself. It's going to make you enjoy your life more. That's the objective, to enjoy every single moment you can. You're not going to be happy all the time, but it's to have joy."

In the Bucks' case, it has been knowing they can rally from 0-2 deficits such as they did in ousting Brooklyn in the second round and hope to do against the Suns. Only four times in NBA Finals history has a team lost the first two games then won the title.—AFP



ORLANDO: Suriname's goalkeeper Warner Hahn (right) and Costa Rica's Kendall Waston (left) jumps for the ball during the Concacaf Gold Cup football match between Costa Rica and Suriname at Exploria Stadium in Orlando, Florida, on Friday.—AFP

the 58th minute, Joel Campbell equalized with a powerful header and, just a minute later, captain Celso Borges netted after Suriname goalkeeper Warner Hahn lost control of the ball. — AFP

Sports

Chinese Paralympian survived 28 hours buried in quake rubble

SHANGHAI: Tang Xuemei was just a teenager when her school dormitory began shaking violently before the floor crumbled in a powerful earthquake, sending her spiraling into a dark void. But 13 years on from the trauma of losing part of her leg in a disaster that left nearly 90,000 people dead or missing, she is a Paralympic gold medalist and will again represent China in Tokyo in sitting volleyball. She will do so with a smile on her face and a resounding message for others with disabilities. "We are no worse than others," Tang, taking time out of training in Shanghai for the August-September Paralympics, told AFP in written remarks. "Even if we have such an unfortunate experience, we will still face it with a smile and work harder and bravely to pursue our dreams."

The 7.9-magnitude Sichuan earthquake of 2008 is seared into China's collective memory not only because so many people died but also because children and teenagers, including Tang, were prominent among the victims. An outpouring of grief soon turned to fury as it emerged that thousands of children were killed in 7,000 schools that collapsed, sparking allegations that corruption had led to shoddy building work. Now 27, Tang declined to answer questions about the fateful moment the quake brought her school down — the issue remains highly sensitive in China even today.

But in a recent interview with the official website of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), she described in detail the experience of running for her life and the dormitory floor disappearing beneath her feet. When she came to, the then 14-year-old found herself buried, her left leg pinned down by rubble. She would wait in eerily dark silence for 28 hours before she was rescued. "Between life and death, you only think of the people that matter to you the most," Tang told the IPC. "And thinking of my parents, I knew that I cannot die, I had to live."

Heart-wrenching decision

In her remarks to AFP, Tang states matter-of-factly that she had part of her leg amputated and that "the state provided help for the children affected by the earthquake". But her comments masked the heartache that came with that life-changing decision.

Surfing gives hope to Brazilians with disabilities

SANTOS: Doctors told Malu Mendes that she would never walk normally again, but now she is a world champion at riding waves. Miguel Almeida can barely see but has been able to sense the formation of waves since he was a child. Like many Brazilians, both have managed to overcome their physical disabilities thanks to surfing. They head to the beaches of Santos in mid-morning to enjoy the waves. The waters here off the coast of Sao Paulo state are calm and there are few imposing giants to surf, but it is the passion for the sport that pushes them into the water.

"I feel free, it's a great pleasure, an inexplicable sensation, there's a great connection with nature," said



SHANGHAI: This handout photo taken and released on July 12, 2021 by China's Sitting Volleyball Women's Team shows team member Tang Xuemei taking part in a training session in Shanghai. — AFP

Her parents begged doctors not to amputate, fearing what kind of future Tang would have as a disabled person. In the end, it was the teenage Tang who told them that if they did not sign the consent form, she would sign it herself because she feared she would die without the operation. But with her impairment, Tang became withdrawn, her path in life unclear. Tang picks up the story of what happened next and how it ultimately led her to where she is today — a gold medalist at London in 2012 and eyeing more success in Tokyo.

"I put on a prosthetic limb and the joy of standing up again alleviated my worries about the future," she told AFP. "Fortunately, I came across sitting volleyball

Mendes, 28, who suffers from cerebral palsy. The cheerful blonde with an infectious smile heard from a young age that she would always have problems with mobility, let alone balancing on a board being carried by powerful waves. Yet last year she became parasurf world champion. "I can speak with all the authority in the world, surfing cures," she said, beaming with pride. Mendes, the daughter of surfer Paulo Kid, attends the Surf Adaptado (Adapted Surfing) school that was inaugurated two years ago and caters for children and adults with problems such as autism or Down's Syndrome, as well as amputees or stroke victims.

'Creating happiness'

Run by Francisco Arana, a Brazilian surfing great, the school has given free tuition to 280 people with disabilities. Some supplement their therapy with surfing, while for others it is their therapy. "Surfing has an incredible power. You can do anything but you can't be healthy without happiness," said Arana. "That's our reason to exist, to create happiness through surfing."

The 64-year-old, who began surfing in 1968,

by chance after taking part in a competition for disabled children and teenagers.

Tang, who had always been sporty, was immediately struck by the confidence the young volleyball players exuded despite their disabilities. She would later go on to win a place on Shanghai's sitting volleyball team and honors followed with China, who should be serious title contenders again in Tokyo.

Tang is relishing the prospect of "winning glory for my country". But more than that, sitting volleyball gave her renewed self-worth and she sees the Paralympics as "a higher platform to realize more the value of life". "Sport can help us rehabilitate physically and mentally," she added. — AFP

launched a regular surf school in 1991 but soon came across students with disabilities that meant they could not use regular surf boards. So he created different boards. Some make sounds to help the blind while others have special velcro straps for paraplegics.

Demand increased so he opened the adapted surfing school. "With surfing we managed a much better evolution than with other therapies. I think it is due to the contact with nature," said Adriana de Souza, who has been giving classes to her autistic son Joao Vitor, 13, for the last seven years.

Initially, Joao Vitor was not very sociable and shied away from getting his hair wet. Now he speaks more fluently and mixes with others. "I love it, it's incredible!" said Joao Vitor, who was exempted from regular therapy by health care professionals to concentrate on surfing, the sea and the beach.

'Another opportunity'

Hamilton Fernandes plunges into the seawater under the admiring gaze of his wife. Four years ago, he suffered a stroke that affects the right side of his body and prevents him from climbing onto a board, something he fell in love with half a century ago.

Two years ago he got back in touch with Arana, an old comrade of the waves, and was soon out in the sea on an adapted board. He says surfing has improved his mobility by 90 percent. "I was in hospital and now I'm here, it's another opportunity," said the 63-year-old.

The athletic Almeida, 23, pushes the limits further from the shore than Joao Vitor and Fernandes. He contracted toxoplasmosis when he was eight months old and quickly lost most of his sight: his left eye retains five percent vision and his right eye 10 percent.

From the age of five, and encouraged by his cousin — professional surfer Deivid Silva — he threw himself into the sea, gradually overcoming the ocean's mighty challenges. "I have great awareness. Without sight my hearing improved a lot. I can visualize the wave as it forms," said Almeida.

He dreams of competing in the parasurf world championships in California in December. "Many people don't believe in people with disabilities, but through the school, we're showing that disability can overcome anything." — AFP

No Sun Yang, but China eager to atone for 'worst Olympic flop'

SHANGHAI: China are missing banned superstar Sun Yang but they will take a record contingent to Tokyo seeking a strong showing with their own Olympics just months away. The world's most populous country topped the medals table at Beijing 2008 but then slumped to third behind the United States and Britain at Rio 2016, their worst Olympic performance in two decades with 26 golds. The disappointment was summed up in a tweet by the state-run Xinhua news agency which said: "No gold for CHN gymnasts, Team China have suffered the worst Olympic flop at Rio 2016."

At the Tokyo Games, which were pushed back a year by the coronavirus and will finally open on July 23, China will have a giant squad of 777 athletes and staff, their largest contingent at an overseas Olympics. But if they are to improve on Rio, China will have to do it without their biggest star.

Controversial swimmer Sun, a triple Olympic gold medalist, was banned last month for more than four years after a second doping violation. In his absence, China does not have an internationally recognised big name, but the country will still anticipate hovering up gold medals in diving, table tennis and weightlifting.

Chinese media has branded its divers a "Dream Team" capable of carting off all eight golds in the sport. There are also high hopes for the women's volleyball side, led by star spiker Zhu Ting, and in the swimming pool with Zhang Yufei. Chinese media dubbed the 23-year-old Zhang "the new butterfly queen" after she soared at the national swimming championships in May, winning five gold medals and a silver.



RIO DE JANEIRO: This file photo taken on August 9, 2016 shows China's Zhang Yufei competing in a women's 200m butterfly heat during the swimming event at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games at the Olympic Aquatics Stadium in Rio de Janeiro. — AFP

Beijing Olympics loom

China's performances at the Olympics and place in the medals table are always a source of national pride, but there is added spice this time because of the fierce historical rivalry between China and Japan. Moreover, because of the year's delay to the Tokyo Olympics, there is just six months between the Summer Games in Japan and Winter Games in Beijing. The 2022 Olympics in the Chinese capital will come into sharp view immediately after Tokyo, especially when it comes to how organizers will deal with the coronavirus.

Sports blogger Ma Bowen is confident that China will come second in the medals table in Tokyo, behind the United States, partly because Chinese athletes will feel more at home in the familiar surroundings of Japan than they did in Rio.

"Because the Winter Olympics are right on our doorstep, China will want good results (in Tokyo) to drive everyone's enthusiasm for sport," added Ma, who has 800,000 followers on the Twitter-like Weibo. "After Chinese people feel the vibe in Tokyo, they will pay more attention to the Beijing Games." — AFP



SAO PAULO: Brazilian surfer's Miguel Almeida and Malu Mendes (left) ride waves during a training in the Adapted Surf School at Gonzaga Beach, in Santos, Sao Paulo, Brazil on June 2, 2021. — AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Khalidiya	24848075
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Kaifan	24849807
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shamiya	24848913
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Shuwaikh	24814507
Chest Hospital	24849400	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Nuzha	22526804
Adan Hospital	23940620	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Qadsiya	22515088
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Dasmah	22532265
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
		Shaab	22518752
		Qibla	22459381
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NOTICE
July 14, 2021

Mr. Calvin Mark Verghese, son of Mr. Benny Verghese, resident of 364 Little Nest 4th Cross, 8th Main Viveknagar, Bengaluru, Karnataka-560047 and Ms. Nerisha Vaz, daughter of Mr. John Cadestian Vaz, resident of F 5 St Anthony Residency, Voddlem Bhatt, Taleigao, Goa both Indian nationals presently residing in Kuwait, have given notice of intended marriage between them under the Foreign Marriage Act, 1969. If anyone has any objection to the proposed marriage, he/she may file the same with the undersigned according to the procedure laid down under the Act/Rule within thirty days from the date of publication of this notice. Communications in this regard can be made by Email (cw2.kuwait@mea.gov.in) / letters / telephonic calls (00965 - 22550171, 00965 - 22533125).

Kareem
(K.S Rathore) First Secretary (CA) and Marriage Officer, Embassy of India, Kuwait

Olympics chief urges Japan to support Games as COVID hits Village

TOKYO: IOC chief Thomas Bach urged the Japanese people to get behind the Tokyo Olympics yesterday as the first coronavirus case hit the Games Village, prompting fresh jitters about the health risks posed by the giant event.

Bach, who has faced scattered protests since arriving in Japan, appealed to the public to throw their support behind the athletes despite fears of a spike in cases as thousands of international visitors arrive. The International Olympic Committee president said he was "very well aware of the skepticism" surrounding the postponed 2020 Games, which have attracted low opinion-poll ratings for months.

"I appeal to the Japanese people to welcome these athletes here for the competition of their life," Bach said, insisting the Tokyo Olympics were safe, calling them the "most restrictive sports event... in the entire world".

"I would like once more to ask and to invite the Japanese people, humbly, to welcome and support the athletes from around the world," he added. Bach's plea comes just six days before the opening ceremony for the Games, which will take place in biosecure "bubble" conditions and largely without fans.

It also coincided with the first case in the Olympic Village, concerning an unnamed person who is now in isolation. However, Bach said just 15 people had tested positive out of 15,000 arrivals in July, citing it as proof that the strict anti-

coronavirus measures, including daily tests for athletes, are working.

He also held the door open to a possible return of fans if conditions improve, citing a communique issued after talks between the IOC, International Paralympic Committee, Tokyo 2020, Japanese government and Tokyo authority.

"We will keep monitoring the anti-COVID developments. And if the circumstances should change, then we do have another immediate five parties meeting to address this with the relevant anti COVID-19 measures," said Bach.

Athletes 'probably very worried'

Anti-Olympics protesters held up placards during Bach's visit to Hiroshima on Friday and about 30 demonstrators were blocked by police outside Saturday's IOC executive board meeting at a luxury hotel in Tokyo.

A welcome reception for Bach today will be attended by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and 40 guests, according to reports. But Bach said "we are just guests" at the event, which will take place while Tokyo remains under a state of emergency.

"We are the guests of the organizing committee for this invitation and we trust that the organizing committee will follow all the regulations and restrictions," he said. Earlier, Games chief Seiko Hashimoto tried to reassure athletes arriving in Japan, admit-



TOKYO: This picture shows the National Stadium, the main venue for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, lit up at dusk in Tokyo on Friday. — AF

ting they are "probably very worried". Several competitors have expressed concern over conditions at the Olympics, which are marked by ubiquitous temperature checks, hand sanitizer and daily testing. Organizers pledged full transparency about cases in the

Village, and urged people taking part in the Games to stick by the anti-coronavirus rules. "Athletes who are coming to Japan are probably very worried. I understand that," Hashimoto said. "That is the reason why we need to make full disclosure."

Prime minister Suga said he hoped the Olympics would bring excitement, even if they are taking place behind closed doors. "Even without spectators, I think it is important to bring excitement... to people in Japan and the world," he said on Nippon TV. — AFP

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