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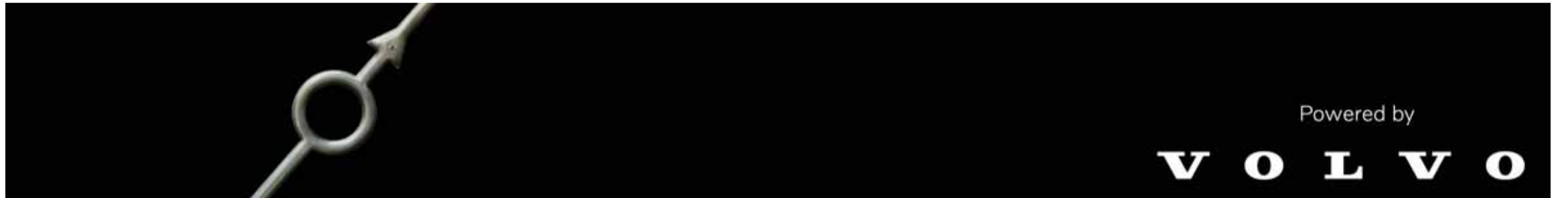
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16 Japan top medals table as Daley strikes Olympic gold



Most COVID curbs lifted, gatherings still banned

Shops can remain open after 8 pm • Children's activities to resume from Sept 1

Rashidi makes Kuwait proud



TOKYO: Kuwait's bronze medalist Abdullah Al-Rashidi celebrates on the podium with the national flag after the men's skeet final during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Asaka Shooting Range yesterday. — AFP

TOKYO: Kuwaiti shooter Abdullah Al-Rashidi won a bronze medal with a score of 46 in the Olympic men's skeet shooting competition yesterday. USA's Vincent Hancock took the gold medal with an Olympic record

score of 59, while Denmark's Jesper Hansen won silver with 55. Some 30 competitors took part in the event over two days at the Asaka Shooting range, with the top six advancing to the finals. — KUNA (See Page 3)

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The Cabinet yesterday decided to mostly return to pre-COVID-19 times, allowing all commercial activities to operate without restrictions as of today, after a significant decline in the number of new coronavirus cases.

Government Spokesman Tareq Al-Mazrem said all commercial activities will from today operate as per the decisions and regulations of the Municipality and ministry of commerce and industry, which was the case before the pandemic. This applies to malls, restaurants, cafes, commercial shops and others.

But the Cabinet continued to ban large gatherings including conferences, weddings and other social events, including gatherings at diwanis, according to Mazrem. He said people who are vaccinated are allowed to enter all places, but unvaccinated people can only enter pharmacies, cooperative societies, food markets, medical centers and hospitals.

The Cabinet also decided that all activities for children will reopen from September 1. "There has been a relative but comfortable stability in the number of cases and in people being admitted to hospitals" that prompted the decision to reopen the country, Mazrem said.

The health ministry has reported a steady decline in the number of new coronavirus cases for the past two weeks, with numbers dropping below 1,000 cases every day for the past five days. The number of coronavirus patients in hospitals and those in intensive care units has also dropped.

As for residents, Mazrem said expats who wish to return to the country must have been vaccinated with two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna or Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines or one dose of the Johnson & Johnson jab.

He said returnees must produce an electronic vacci-



nation certificate with a QR code, as authorities at the airport will not accept paper documents. Health authorities must be able to read the QR code of the vaccination certificates issued by the health ministries of other countries.

Residents with valid residencies will be allowed to return to the country as of August 1. The Cabinet also decided to resume direct flights to Morocco and Maldives, but direct aviation links with Egypt and other countries remain suspended, Mazrem said.

He however explained that regardless if direct flights are allowed or not, residents wishing to return must be fully vaccinated and can return from any country. Meanwhile, the interior ministry said yesterday it had arrested three nurses who were issuing vaccination certificates to unvaccinated people for money. Reports said they were charging some KD 250 per certificate.

News in brief

Lebanon picks Mikati as next PM

BEIRUT: Lebanese lawmakers yesterday tasked ex-premier and billionaire Najib Mikati with forming a government and ending one year of political deadlock that has crippled the economy. Mikati, seen by many as a symbol of Lebanon's corrupt oligarchy, will pick up where Saad Hariri left off earlier this month, after failing to broker a deal despite intense international pressure. — AFP (See Page 5)



Najib Mikati

Central Bank chief calls for reforms

KUWAIT: Kuwait needs urgent reforms to put its finances on a more sustainable footing, as monetary tools are not sufficient to address structural challenges, the governor of the Central Bank said yesterday. "There is an urgent need for economic reforms, and all parties, especially the executive and legislative authority, must

work to address all imbalances", Mohammad Al-Hashel told a conference. He didn't mention any specific measures but said reforms should aim to reduce Kuwait's dependence on oil.

The Central Bank last year introduced a wide range of stimulus measures to soften the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and record low oil prices, on the banking sector and the wider economy. These included the reduction of a key discount rate twice to a historic low, relaxing banks' liquidity requirements, bolstering banks' lending capacity by enhancing maximum credit limits and reducing risk weights. — Reuters (See Page 9)



KUWAIT: Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait Mohammad Al-Hashel speaks during a symposium to launch the 9th Financial Stability Report for 2020 at the bank's headquarters yesterday. — AFP

Abu Dhabi slashes setup costs

ABU DHABI: Abu Dhabi will slash the cost of establishing new businesses by "more than 90 percent" from today to increase the "competitiveness regionally and internationally" of the emirate, already a magnet for commerce. "Business setup fees in Abu Dhabi emirate have been reduced to AED1,000 (\$272) - a reduction of more than 90 percent," the Abu Dhabi Government Media Office said in a statement late Sunday. — AFP (See Page 8)

Tunisia president ousts govt amid political turmoil

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied sacked the defense minister yesterday, a day after ousting the prime minister and suspending parliament, plunging the young democracy into constitutional crisis in the midst of a pandemic. Street clashes erupted yesterday outside the army-barricaded parliament, after

Saied dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and ordered parliament closed for 30 days, a move the biggest political party Ennahdha decried as a "coup".

Saied declared on Sunday that he had "taken the necessary decisions to save Tunisia, the state and the Tunisian people," following street protests in multiple cities against the government's handling of the COVID pandemic.

The president, who under the constitution controls the armed forces, warned his opponents against taking up arms, threatening that if anyone "fires a single bullet, our forces will respond with a rain of bullets", yesterday, afternoon, a statement from the presidency announced the dismissals of Defense

Minister Ibrahim Bartaji and acting justice minister Hasna Ben Slimane, who is also the government spokeswoman. Soldiers from early yesterday blockaded the assembly in Tunis while Saied backers hurled stones, bottles and insults at supporters of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha, whose leader was barred entry to the complex.

Troops also surrounded the office of Mechichi, who was yet to officially react to the events rocking the North African country. Later in the afternoon, the protests died down. Saied's dramatic move - a decade on from Tunisia's 2011 revolution, often held up as the Arab Spring's sole success story - comes

Continued on Page 2

Iran daily cases exceed 30,000

TEHRAN: Iran's daily COVID caseload crossed the 30,000 mark for the first time yesterday, its health ministry said, marking a second record daily high within a week. In the past 24 hours, the Islamic republic registered a record 31,814 new infections to bring its total number of positive cases since the start of the pandemic to 3,723,246. It also recorded 322 additional coronavirus-related deaths, taking the total to 89,122. — AFP

Weightlifter Diaz wins first Olympic gold for Philippines

TOKYO: Weightlifter Hidilyn Diaz made history yesterday when she became the first athlete from the Philippines to win an Olympic gold medal. The 30-year-old Rio 2016 silver medalist from the

southern city of Zamboanga realized her dream in the women's 55kg class at the Tokyo International Forum, smashing her personal best to see off world record holder Liao Qiuyun of China who had to settle for silver.

With Liao setting a target of 223kg, just four kilograms shy of her own world record, Diaz was faced with a final clean and jerk of 127kg to win - fully 5kg more than she had ever achieved in competition. With a massive effort she hoisted the huge Olympic record weight and the tears of joy began

Continued on Page 2



Hidilyn Diaz

Local

Kuwait's Amir receives call from King Abdullah inquiring about his health

Sheikh Nawaf receives Municipal Council Chairman

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday received a phone call from King Abdullah II of Jordan, inquiring about his health. The Jordanian Monarch wished His Highness the Amir lasting wellbeing and the State of Kuwait further progress and prosperity. His Highness the Amir and King Abdullah discussed during the contact the solid brotherly relations between the two countries and peoples, means of boosting further these ties at various levels, issues of joint interest and latest developments on the regional and international arenas. His Highness the Amir expressed deep gratitude to King Abdullah for the gracious gesture and "this brotherly communication that depicts the historic and solid relations between the two countries and peoples." He also extended good wishes to the King and his country.

In other news, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Chairman of the Municipal Council Osama Humoud Al-Otaibi at Bayan Palace yesterday. Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir sent a cable of condolences yesterday to the Saudi King Salman

bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud over the death of the mother of Prince Musab bin Saud bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables.

In the meantime, His Highness the Amir sent cables of condolences to the UAE Supreme Council member and Ruler of Umm Al-Quwain, Sheikh Saud Bin Rashid Al-Mualla, and Sheikh Rashid bin Saud bin Rashid Al-Mualla, the Crown Prince of Umm Al-Quwain, on the death of Sheikh Maryam bint Ali bin Rashid Al-Mualla. His Highness the Crown Prince and His Highness the Prime Minister sent similar cables.

Separately, His Highness the Amir has cabled Mary Simon, Canada's Governor General, expressing deep congratulations on installing her as the nation's governor general. His Highness the Amir expressed good wishes to her and her nation. His Highness the Crown Prince and His Highness the Prime Minister addressed cables of identical content to Canada's Governor General. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Chairman of the Municipal Council Osama Humoud Al-Otaibi. — Amiri Diwan photo

After COVID jab, BioNTech eyes malaria vaccine

FRANKFURT: Germany's BioNTech, which developed a coronavirus vaccine with US giant Pfizer in record time, said yesterday it aimed to start trialing a malaria vaccine next year using the same breakthrough mRNA technology. If successful, the vaccine could be a crucial step in the fight against the mosquito-borne disease, which kills more than 400,000 people a year - mainly young children in Africa.

"We will do whatever it takes to develop a safe and effective mRNA-based malaria vaccine that will prevent the disease, reduce mortality and ensure a sustainable solution for the African continent and other regions affected by this disease," BioNTech CEO Ugur Sahin said in a statement.

The company said it will assess several vaccine candidates and begin clinical trials by the end of 2022. The project is backed by the World Health Organization, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the European Union. BioNTech said it was also looking at setting up an mRNA hub in Africa so that future vaccines

can be manufactured and distributed on the continent.

The planned malaria vaccine would use the same messenger RNA method that made its debut with the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, which was the first jab against COVID to be approved in the West in late 2020. The coronavirus jab developed by US rival Moderna also uses mRNA technology.

Scientists believe mRNA vaccines, which provoke an immune response by delivering genetic molecules containing the code for key parts of a pathogen into human cells, could be a game-changer against many diseases. They also take less time to develop than traditional vaccines. BioNTech's COVID-19 shot was developed and approved by regulators in less than a year.

"We are witnessing the start of a revolution in medical science, the revolution of messenger RNA," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said at yesterday's online launch event. "Eradicating malaria is now a realistic goal and now we know that it can be achieved already in this generation."

In a conference call with reporters, Sahin said he believed BioNTech's malaria efforts have "a high likelihood for success". The fight against malaria received a boost in April when researchers from Britain's Oxford University announced that their Matrix-M vaccine candidate had become the first to surpass the WHO's threshold of 75-percent efficacy, in a study on infants in Burkina Faso. A large-scale, final stage trial is ongoing. — AFP

government supports Ennahdha, called for "democratic legitimacy" to be restored. Since Saied was elected in 2019, he has been locked in a showdown with Mechichi and Ghannouchi, who is also house speaker. The rivalry has blocked ministerial appointments and diverted resources from tackling Tunisia's many economic and social problems.

In the chaotic scenes outside parliament yesterday, Ghannouchi admonished an army officer who was blocking access and who had declared the troops were "the protectors of the nation". Ghannouchi retorted that "the Tunisian people will never accept an authoritarian government, whatever your efforts". Saied said he would assume executive power "with the help" of a government whose new chief he would appoint himself. The president also lifted parliamentary immunity for lawmakers.

In the 10 years since Tunisia's popular revolution toppled dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia has had nine governments. Some of them have lasted only a few months, hindering the reforms needed to revamp the country's struggling economy and poor public services. Sunday's political drama began with mass protests against the government for its failures in tackling the pandemic.

"The people want the dissolution of parliament," the crowd chanted outside parliament in Tunis. Protests were also reported in several other cities. A senior Ennahdha official, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, alleged that the protests and subsequent celebrations, had all been choreographed by the president. After Saied's announcement, one jubilant supporter, Nahla, brandished a Tunisian flag and hailed the president's "courageous decisions". "This is the president we love!" she said. But one man, aged in his forties, watched on without enthusiasm and said: "These fools are celebrating the birth of a new dictator." — AFP

Tunisia president ousts govt amid...

Continued from Page 1

even though the constitution enshrines a parliamentary democracy.

"It is a coup d'etat against the revolution and against the constitution," said Ennahdha, the lead party in Tunisia's fractious ruling coalition charged, warning its members "will defend the revolution". The crisis follows months of deadlock between the president, the premier and Ennahdha chief Rached Ghannouchi, which has crippled the COVID response as deaths have surged to one of the world's highest per capita rates.

Tunisia has recently been overwhelmed by COVID-19 cases which have raised the death toll to more than 18,000 in a nation of 12 million. Police also shuttered the local bureau of Qatari-based Al Jazeera television, the network's Tunis director Lotfi Hajji said, warning that "what is happening is very dangerous, it is proof that freedom of the press is threatened".

The powerful Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) which played a key role in the 2011 uprising, said the president acted "in accordance" with the constitution to "prevent imminent danger and to restore the normal functioning" of the state. Saied's power-grab sparked jubilant rallies late Sunday by thousands of his supporters who flooded the streets of Tunis, waving the national flag and sounding their car horns as fireworks lit up the sky.

But the shock move was criticized abroad. Germany urged a rapid "return to constitutional order" while the foreign ministry in Turkey, where the



TUNIS: Tunisian security officers hold back protesters outside the parliament building yesterday following a move by the president to suspend the country's parliament and dismiss the prime minister. — AFP



KUWAIT: People watch the sunset at a beach on July 24, 2021. — Xinhua

Record-shattering heatwaves caused by pace of warming

PARIS: Heatwaves that obliterate temperature records as in western Canada last month and Siberia last year are caused by the rapid pace, rather than the amount, of global warming, researchers said yesterday. The findings, reported in Nature Climate Change, suggest that humanity is likely to see a lot more deadly scorches in the coming decades.

"Because we are in a period of very rapid warming, we need to prepare for more heat events that shatter previous records by large margins," head author Erich Fischer, a senior scientist at ETH Zurich and a lead author of the UN climate science assessment currently under review, told AFP.

The heatwave that ravaged British Columbia saw temperatures hit 49.6 degrees Celsius, more than five degrees above the hottest day recorded in Canada up to that point. Current rates of warming - about 0.2 degrees Celsius per decade - are likely to continue for at least another 10 to 20 years no matter how quickly humanity reduces the carbon pollution that drives global heating, the study warns.

But efforts to curb greenhouse gases over the next decade will pay off later. "The future probability

of record-shattering extremes depends on the emissions pathway that gets us to a given level of warming," Fischer said. Up to now, research on how global warming will affect heatwaves has focused mostly on how much temperatures have risen compared to some reference period rather than on how quickly.

That is, of course, critically important, and the science has shown without a doubt that a warmer world will produce more and hotter heatwaves. But not taking into account how quickly temperatures rise fails to capture a key part of the picture.

"Without climate change, one would expect record temperatures to become rarer the longer we measure," Fischer explained. Likewise, if average global temperatures stabilize - at, say, 1.5 degrees Celsius above mid-19th century levels, the aspirational target of the Paris Agreement - dramatic new records would progressively become less frequent.

Fischer compares it to track and field, where the longer a discipline exists, the harder it is to top a world record. The long and high jump records, for example, have stood for decades, or are only ever surpassed by a centimeter or two.

But if athletes start taking performance-enhancing drugs, as happened in US baseball during the late 1990s, records are suddenly broken often and by a lot. "The climate currently behaves like an athlete on steroids," Fischer said. At current rates of greenhouse gas emissions, the world is on track to continue warming at current rates to more than 3C by 2100. — AFP

Weightlifter Diaz wins first Olympic...

Continued from Page 1

to flow even before she dropped the bar to the floor after a triumphant effort. Liao took the silver, with Kazakhstan's Zulfiya Chinshanlo the bronze 10kg adrift of the top two.

"It's unbelievable, it's a dream, come true," Diaz told AFP moments after the Philippines Air Force woman shed more tears on the podium as she saluted her flag and sang the national anthem. "I want to say to the young generation in the Philippines, 'You can have this dream of gold too'. 'This is how I started and finally I was able to do it'."

Diaz was already assured a place in her country's sporting folklore, alongside the likes of boxing icon Manny Pacquiao, as the only woman from the sprawling archipelago ever to win an Olympic medal - her surprise silver five years ago breaking a 20-year medal drought for the Philippines. Diaz spent the last year and a half training in exile in Malaysia because of COVID restrictions, so dedicated was she to claim an unprecedented gold in her fourth and probably final Games.

"I'm looking forward to going back home to the Philippines to be with my family because I really miss them," she said, choking up once more with emotion. "I'm looking forward now to enjoy my life after so many sacrifices." Diaz's medal was just the 11th by the Philippines since they first took part in the Olympics in 1924, and now the only gold.

Diaz became just the second athlete from her country to win multiple Olympic medals, joining swimmer Teofilo Yldefonso who won bronze in the men's 200m breaststroke in 1928 and 1932. She became a national hero for her exploits in Rio and her profile soared when she won Asian Games gold in Jakarta in 2018. But on that occasion China were suspended by the International Weightlifting Federation for multiple doping violations.

China have been dominant since their return later in 2018 and have had it all their own way so far in Tokyo in the absence of fierce rivals North Korea. The first three weightlifting golds were all won by Chinese athletes - in the women's 49kg through Hou Zhihui on Saturday and men's winners Li Fabin (61kg) and Chen Lijun (67kg) on Sunday.

Liao was gracious in defeat as the Chinese gold rush in weightlifting was halted in stunning fashion. "I really respect Diaz as an opponent because she did the best she could, in fact better than that and that is the ultimate," Liao said. "She did a better job and it is nice for all the people that were supporting her."

Diaz, known as "Haidee", has a huge social media following in her home country which is set to grow. Internet platforms instantly turned her into the country's top trending topic on Twitter as news of her win spread, upstaging President Rodrigo Duterte's final State of the Nation address. "Congratulations, Sgt Hidilyn Diaz!" tweeted the Armed Forces of the Philippines where the weightlifter is enlisted. Vice President Leni Robredo said: "Big win for the Philippines!! Thank you for making us proud, Hidilyn." Duterte's spokesman, Harry Roque, congratulated Diaz "for bringing pride and glory to the Philippines". — AFP

Shooting federation congratulates Amir on Olympic achievement



TOKYO: Kuwait's Abdullah Al-Rashidi raises Kuwait's flag and the bronze medal he won in the men's skeet shooting final, while standing on the podium following the conclusion of the competition at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics yesterday. — Kuwait Olympic Committee photos



Abdullah Al-Rashidi poses with members of the Kuwaiti delegation following his victory.



Kuwait's Abdullah Al-Rashidi participates in the men's skeet shooting final at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics yesterday.



Kuwait's Abdullah Al-Rashidi poses with his bronze medal.



Kuwait's Abdullah Al-Rashidi raises his rifle after winning the bronze medal of the men's skeet shooting final at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics yesterday.



President of Kuwait Shooting Federation Duajj Al-Otaibi (right) poses with Kuwaiti skeet shooter Abdullah Al-Rashidi after the latter won a bronze medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics yesterday.

By Abdellatif Sharaa

TOKYO: President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations and Secretary General of Asian Shooting Confederation Duajj Khalaf Al-Otaibi congratulated 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 and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah after skeet shooter Abdullah Al-Rashidi won a bronze medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

Otaibi thanked His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince for their continued support of the shooting sport and shooters, adding that this will keep them motivated to make more achievements in the name of Kuwait. He also thanked Information Minister and State Minister for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi and Director General of the Public Authority for Sport Humoud Fulaiteh, adding "we will continue exerting efforts to represent Kuwait as it deserves". Otaibi said despite the difficulties Kuwait shooting faced, the Kuwait flag was hoisted high at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics following very strong competition. "I hope Kuwait shooting and the shooting club do not face future difficulties or any doubts about its legitimacy," he added.

Rashidi's bronze medal win at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics should give his compatriots something to

be proud of, the country's Olympic committee chief said. Rashidi's performance proves what Kuwaiti athletes "are capable of" on a grand stage such as the Olympics, Sheikh Fahad Nasser Al-Sabah said. Though Rashidi is no stranger to success, his latest accomplishment was his first "under the national flag," making it even more "remarkable", added the official.

Meanwhile, Information Minister and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi hailed Rashidi's performance, describing the feat as "remarkable." "Abdullah Al-Rashidi's success proves the high caliber of Kuwaiti athletes on the international stage," he said in a press statement. The minister attributed his compatriot athletes' impressive performances to the overwhelming support they receive at home, chief among the supporters is His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. The bronze medal, the fourth claimed by a Kuwaiti shooter on an Olympic stage, is a testament to the athletes' growing presence on the international arena, added the minister, encouraging them not to rest on their laurels and strive for more success.

The Kuwaiti shooter has dedicated the feat to the Kuwaiti leadership and people, wishing his compatriot Olympic athletes the best of luck ahead of their remaining events. An Olympic veteran, Rashidi's decorated career has seen him claim two consecutive Olympic bronze medals in the men's skeet shooting competition.

BNK Automotive gifts Volvo to Kuwait's Olympic medalist

KUWAIT: BNK Automotive, the official dealer of Volvo in Kuwait, announced gifting a brand-new Volvo vehicle to Kuwait's skeet shooter Abdullah Al-Rashidi after he won a bronze medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics on Monday.

BNK Automotive President Bader Al-Kharafi congratulated Rashidi "on this great achievement that deserves all praise," announcing that the company would gift the car to Rashidi in recognition of his achievement.

Kuwait to unveil Jahra Medical City to raise health system capacity

KUWAIT: The finishing touch on the new medical facility Jahra Medical City is complete, Kuwaiti Health Minister Basel Al-Sabah announced yesterday. The facility in Jahra Governorate covers an area of 235,000 square meters, the minister said in a statement, adding it is designed in accordance with international standards and equipped with up-to-date medical devices. It will contribute to improving the quality of medical services in the country and raising health system capacity, he noted.

Currently, all medical, support and administrative departments have been transferred from the old Jahra hospital to the new facility, he said. The Jahra Medical City consists of four towers for the patient rooms with a capacity of up to 1,234 beds, outpatient clinics and a dental building, according to Abdullah Al-Sanad, spokesman of the ministry. It is considered a global medical facility and a great addition to the Kuwaiti health system, he added. — Xinhua



Local

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DHAMAN recognizes staff for campaign

KUWAIT: Health Assurance Hospitals Company (DHAMAN) announced the conclusion of its 'Move with DHAMAN' campaign. The campaign was aimed at promoting good health during and after the holy month of Ramadan as part of encouraging company staff to adopt a healthy and athletic lifestyle.



Ali Al-Hamad

DHAMAN Corporate Director of Public Relations and Corporate Communications Ali Al-Hamad said: "Considering that 'a healthy mind resides in a healthy body', a large number of employees participated in this campaign and sent their pictures showing their exercises for 10 continuous days. This is part of our efforts to raise community awareness about the importance of daily exercise in maintaining good overall health."

"DHAMAN launched this campaign to encourage staff to walk, exercise, run, jog or ride a bike for at least 10 consecutive days, and participants were requested to send daily photos of themselves exercising," Hamad added.

DHAMAN launched an extended and continuous program since the beginning of 2021 entitled "Move with DHAMAN". The program aims to encourage movement in all its physical forms, such as practicing all kinds of sports, movement at work and home, helping others, as well as mental activities such as thinking, creativity and arts of all kinds. The idea of the program is to encourage members of society to resume their lives as usual and spread the spirit of optimism and giving despite the COVID-19 pandemic. To encourage staff to participate, DHAMAN offered five prizes to randomly selected winners out of qualified participants.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Photo taken on July 25, 2021 shows the full moon in Kuwait City, Kuwait. — Xinhua

Kuwait Jet Ski team achieves top places in World Series



WARSAW: Kuwait National Jet Ski team participating in the Euro Jet Ski World Grand Prix in Poland. — KUNA photos



Kuwait's Mohammad Borbayea poses with his 1st place in Pro Runabout Grand Prix division trophy.

WARSAW: Kuwait National Jet Ski team yesterday achieved the 1st, 4th, and 16th places in the Euro Jet Ski World Grand Prix in Poland. Mohammad Borbayea achieved the 1st place in Pro Runabout Grand Prix division, Mohammad Al-Baz came in

4th, and Abdulrahman Al-Omar achieved the 16th spot in the same division. In a statement to the press, Director of the Jet Ski committee in Kuwait Sea Sport Club Hussain Dashti said yesterday that this tournament is considered the first round of the

World Championship." There are two more rounds for the Championship, one in the USA and the other in Thailand, and the Kuwaiti team is looking forward to achieve high ranks in this significant sporting event," he said. — KUNA

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Kuwait e-football team bags Second West Asian FIFA21 Championship

KUWAIT: Kuwait's national e-football team defeated its Saudi counterpart in the final match of the West Asian FIFA21 Championship. The Saudi team was the title holder and tops the rankings of the e-football championships, which makes it an outstanding achievement by Kuwait.

Chairman of the Board of Kuwait e-Sports Club Abdullah Musaed Al-Ali said he is proud of Kuwait players - Abdulrahman Bandar, Mishal Al-Failakawi, Ahmad Salem and Abdullah Al-Reesh - and their outstanding performance in all stages of the championship, especially against the Saudi Arabian Team. He said Kuwait e-Sports Club dedicates this win to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

He also thanked HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem and Information Minister, State Minister for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi for their continued support of youth. Ali appreciated the support of Public Authority for Sport Dr Humoud Fulaiteh Al-Shimmari, Director General of Public Authority for Youth Dr Mishal Al-Shaheen Al-Rabee and PAS Deputy Director General for Competitive Sports Dr Saqer Al-Mulla for their efforts and cooperation to motivate all participants to work for the success of e-Sports Club in representing Kuwait.

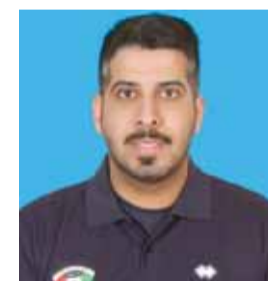
He said such championships are organized in the interest of positive social activities that revolve around competitions, mental stimulation and inter-



Abdullah Al-Ali



Abdulrahman Bandar



Mishal Al-Failakawi



Ahmad Salem



Abdullah Al-Reesh

active social communication, as e-Sports has multiple players online and provides an important domain for social interaction and mental stimulation. He said players plan and organize efforts and strategies to overcome challenges and obstacles presented in these games.

He thanked Abdullah Al-Rabee for his efforts and financial support in order to allow the club's participation and represent Kuwait in a way that reflects an honorable image of its youth, which was achieved by hoisting Kuwait's flag high.

Kuwait participates in UN's Food Systems Summit

KUWAIT: Kuwait Public Authority for Food and Nutrition (PAFN) announced yesterday that Kuwait is participating in UN's Food Systems Summit in Rome. PAFN Chairwoman of the Board Reem Al-Fulaij said in a statement to the press that the UN's summit targets scientific methods to enhance food systems. She stressed on the importance of this participation, and noting that Kuwait also took part yesterday in a conference ahead of the summit at the head-



quarters of Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO). "This conference paves the way for the high-level event set to be held in September," she said. "It also aims to launch a number of new commitments through cooperation and partnerships to reinforce food security in the world." — KUNA



Scottish climber dies on Pakistan's K2

Philippines' Duterte hails drug war but says 'long way' to go

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ULAANBAATAR: Wendy Sherman (L), US Deputy Secretary of State, poses for pictures with Chinbat Nomin, Mongolian Minister of Culture at the Choijin Lama Temple Museum in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia on July 24, 2021, during her visit to Mongolia from July 23 to 25. —AFP

Beijing urges US to stop 'demonising'

We urge US to change its highly misguided mindset

BEIJING: Rancour marked the start of today's talks between Beijing and the highest-level US envoy to visit under President Joe Biden's administration, as Beijing urged Washington to stop "demonising" China while the US made a "forceful" case against China's human rights violations.

Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's visit to the northern city of Tianjin is the first major meeting between the world's leading economies since March discussions in Anchorage between the countries' top diplomats collapsed into mudslinging. The preamble to Sherman's trip said she aimed to seek "guardrails" as ties deteriorate on a range of issues from cybersecurity and tech supremacy to human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. But the tone was set early in the day in statements published by Beijing.

"The hope may be that by demonising China, the US could somehow... blame China for its own structural problems," Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng told Sherman, in a readout issued by China's foreign ministry early yesterday. "We urge the United States to change its highly misguided mindset and dangerous policy," the statement quoted Xie as saying, adding that Washington views China as an "imagined enemy".

He claimed that Chinese people view the United States' "adversarial rhetoric as a thinly veiled attempt to contain and suppress China", in comments reminiscent of the fiery exchange between Washington and Beijing's top diplomats Antony Blinken and Yang Jiechi in Alaska in March. Sherman tweeted yesterday that she "spoke about the United States' commitment to healthy competition, protecting human rights and democratic values" with Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

The US State Department said Sherman had raised various concerns about China's violations of human rights in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet. "The Deputy Secretary and State Councilor Wang had a frank and open discussion about a range of issues, demonstrating the importance of maintaining open lines of communication between our two countries," the State Department said in a readout.

"They discussed ways to set terms for responsible management of the US-China relationship." Unlike Xie's characterisation of the talks, US officials told reporters Monday that the "candid" discussion was "professional" and "direct", despite no specific outcomes achieved.

"The Deputy Secretary was very forceful in making the Chinese understand the factual information we had

to support what we were talking about," US officials said, adding that Sherman had been "brutally honest" at times on issues such as China's alleged cyberhacking.

"We're looking for constructive ways to move forward on some of these issues... I don't think we were expecting any major breakthroughs."

The US side also raised media freedoms, as well as China's military actions in the Taiwan Strait and its claims in the South China Sea, according to the readout.

Beijing issued an exhaustive list of demands to the US, which included lifting sanctions on Chinese officials and visa restrictions on Chinese students as well as stopping the "suppression" of Chinese firms, foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian later told reporters.

Calls for a renewed probe into the origins of the coronavirus must end, Zhao added, in a sweeping warning to "stop stepping on red lines".

The visit is widely viewed as a preparatory step for an eventual meeting between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, as US-China ties continue their freefall with little sign of improvement.

Rocky start

A day before Sherman landed in China, Wang warned

to "teach the US a lesson" in treating other countries equally, foreshadowing a rocky start to talks.

"China will not accept any country's self-proclaimed superiority," he was quoted as saying in a foreign ministry statement Saturday.

John Kerry, the former secretary of state turned US climate envoy, is the only other senior official from the Biden administration to have visited China.

The two sides pledged to cooperate on climate change, despite their numerous differences. Biden has largely kept the hawkish stance on China of his predecessor Donald Trump as Washington has sought to build a united front of democratic allies against Beijing.

Last week, China and the United States traded sanctions over Beijing's repression of freedoms in Hong Kong, in the latest round of an ongoing tit-for-tat saga that has targeted individuals including former US commerce secretary Wilbur Ross.

Washington last week issued an advisory warning to businesses operating in Hong Kong over the city's deteriorating autonomy. The United States also rallied allies including NATO for a rare joint condemnation last week of alleged large-scale cyberattacks from China. —AFP

Crisis-hit Lebanon picks billionaire Najib Mikati as next PM

BEIRUT: Lebanese lawmakers yesterday tasked ex-premier and billionaire Najib Mikati with forming a government and ending one year of political deadlock that has crippled the economy. Mikati, seen by many as a symbol of Lebanon's corrupt oligarchy, will pick up where Saad Hariri left off earlier this month, after failing to broker a deal despite intense international pressure.

A new government would face the daunting task of steering Lebanon through one of the worst phases in its history, and to polls slated for next year amid unprecedented popular distrust. Mikati, a 65-year-old telecom mogul who was last in power in 2014, is the third PM-designate to be named since the caretaker government of Hassan Diab resigned in the wake of last August's monster port blast. He clinched more than 72 endorsements, with only one lawmaker voting in favour of veteran diplomat Nawaf Salam, according to the official National News Agency. A total of 42 lawmakers, including members of the president's Free Patriotic Movement, abstained from endorsing any candidate, NNA said.

Top parliamentary blocs, including Hariri's Future Movement and the powerful Shiite movement Hezbollah, named Mikati as their pick. Mikati will now have to start consultations with the president and political factions to set a cabinet lineup, while Diab stays on in a caretaker capacity. It could take months before an actual government is formed, but crisis-hit Lebanon, grappling with soaring poverty, a plummeting currency and shortages of basic items from medicine to fuel, can ill afford any delays.

'Magic wand'

Speaking to reporters after a meeting with Aoun, Mikati called his designation a "difficult step", appealing for the Lebanese people to support him. "If I didn't have the necessary guarantees from external powers... I would not have taken on" the job, he said, referring to foreign backing. "I don't have a magic wand and, alone, I can't make miracles happen," he said.

"Whomever has solutions should bring them to the table," Mikati, who started a career in politics in 1998, is considered to be Lebanon's richest man and one of the wealthiest in the Middle East, with a net worth of \$2.7 billion according to Forbes.

Many in Lebanon consider the businessman as



BAABDA: A handout picture provided by the Lebanese photo agency Dalati and Nohra shows Lebanon's Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri (L) and President Michel Aoun (C) meeting with two-time premier Najib Mikati at the presidential palace in Baabda, east of the capital Beirut yesterday. —AFP

emblematic of a corrupt ruling class targeted by a 2019 protest movement. A native of second city Tripoli, he is suspected of illicit enrichment in 2019, and lacks a wide popular base even in his hometown, which is Lebanon's poorest. On the eve of consultations, dozens of protesters gathered outside Mikati's Beirut home, accusing him of corruption and cronyism. But Lebanon's bickering politicians view Mikati as a consensus candidate who could be capable of easing a political impasse that has stymied efforts towards forming a government.

Following Mikati's designation, the Lebanese pound, officially pegged to the dollar at 1,507, gained some of its black market value after dropping to record lows in mid-July. It sold for less than 17,000 to the greenback yesterday, up from more than 20,000 last week.

International aid

Donors led by former colonial power France have pledged millions of dollars in humanitarian aid, but conditioned it on Lebanon installing a government capable of tackling corruption. But even as international pressure mounted, with threats of European Union sanctions against them, Lebanese politicians have failed to make any serious progress.

France this month said 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 of the conference coincides with the first anniversary of the port blast that killed more than 200 people, and which is widely blamed on decades of negligence by the country's ruling class. —AFP

World reacts to Tunisia's turmoil

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied's decision to suspend parliament and dismiss his prime minister sparked protests at home where the biggest political party decried it as a "coup". Foreign governments also voiced concern. Here are some reactions from countries around the world to Sunday's shock announcement.

Turkey

The foreign ministry said it was "deeply concerned" by the latest development in Tunisia and called for the restoration of "democratic legitimacy". "The preservation of Tunisia's democratic achievements, which is a success story in terms of the democratic process conducted in line with the expectations of people in the region, is of great importance for the region as well as for Tunisia," the ministry said.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, tweeted: "We reject the suspension of the democratic process and the disregard of the people's democratic will in friendly and brotherly Tunisia. We condemn initiatives that lack constitutional legitimacy and public support. We believe Tunisia democracy will emerge stronger from this process."

Germany

A spokeswoman for the foreign ministry, Maria Adebahr, told reporters that Germany hoped Tunisia would return "as soon as possible to constitutional order". "Democracy has taken roots in Tunisia since 2011", Adebahr said, referring to the year of the popular



TUNIS: A supporter of the country's Islamist Ennahda party is injured by a stone thrown at him during a protest outside the parliament building in the capital Tunis yesterday, following a move by the president to suspend the north African country's parliament and dismiss the Prime Minister. —AFP

revolution that toppled dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Germany was "very worried" she said, adding however: "We don't want to speak of a coup d'etat".

"It is important to return to constitutional order as quickly as possible," Adebahr said. "We will certainly try to discuss (the situation) with the Tunisian ambassador in Berlin, and our ambassador in Tunis is ready to engage in discussions."

Russia

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov, in brief comments, said Russia was monitoring developments in Tunisia. "We hope that nothing will threaten the stability and security of the people of that country," he told reporters at a daily phone briefing. —AFP

China reports 76 virus cases

BEIJING: China reported 76 new coronavirus cases yesterday, the highest daily rise since January, including 40 domestic transmissions prompting authorities to test millions in eastern Jiangsu province. Beijing has a zero-risk approach to the virus, which emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019. It locks down cities and performs mass testing whenever small clusters appear.

"Of the 40 domestic cases, 39 were from Jiangsu

province and one from Liaoning," the national health commission said in a statement Monday, adding there had been no new deaths. Tens of thousands of people are under lockdown in Jiangsu's provincial capital Nanjing as authorities test the city's 9.2 million residents for a second time after an outbreak linked to its airport last week.

"Health officials have found 57 positive cases after testing all residents in Nanjing during the first round," the local government said in a statement Sunday. Contact tracing also found five people who travelled through Nanjing airport and tested positive after arriving in neighbouring Anhui and three other provinces, sparking fears that the cluster could lead to a fresh nationwide outbreak. —AFP

International

Malaysia says emergency to end as parliament sits after virus shutdown

Lawmakers gather in 222-seat lower house wearing masks and separated by transparent screens

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's government will not extend a controversial coronavirus state of emergency beyond August 1, a minister said yesterday, as parliament convened after a months-long suspension that sparked widespread anger.

The king in January declared the country's first nationwide state of emergency in more than half a century to fight COVID-19, following the advice of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. It allowed the government to rule by decree and suspend parliament, prompting critics to accuse Muhyiddin of using the crisis to avoid a no-confidence vote and shore up his weak coalition.

Despite the emergency and a nationwide lockdown, the outbreak only worsened, fuelled by the highly infectious Delta variant. Malaysia's case-load breached the one million mark at the weekend, and there have been around 8,000 deaths.

Facing mounting public anger and pressure from the king, Muhyiddin agreed to reconvene the legislature for a five-day sitting before the state of emergency officially ends next month. However, the opposition has slammed the short session as a sham that will not truly test the embattled premier's support.

As lawmakers gathered in the 222-seat lower house later wearing masks and separated by transparent screens, Law Minister Takiyuddin

Hassan announced the government would not request an extension of the state of emergency. Muhyiddin also defended his handling of the pandemic in an address to the legislature, saying he understood "the public's anxiety amid the spike in COVID cases".

"The government is not sitting back and watching the public suffer — (we are) acting to save lives." Other ministers are due to brief MPs on matters related to the pandemic. But opposition lawmakers expressed anger at not being able to debate or vote on anything during the session, pointing out the king himself had called for important issues to be scrutinised.

"The prime minister has acted as a traitor for not adhering to the wishes of the king," opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim told the legislature. Muhyiddin, who seized power in March last year without an election after the collapse of a reformist government, has seen his administration riven by infighting.

The biggest party backing him, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), announced it was withdrawing support for his coalition earlier this month. But UMNO itself is split—some of its MPs still back Muhyiddin—and his position seems secure in the short term. —AFP



KUALA LUMPUR: This handout photo from Malaysia's Department of Information taken and released yesterday shows Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin delivering his address during a special session of the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) at the Parliament in Kuala Lumpur. —AFP

Massacres, war fuel ethnic fervour in Ethiopia's Amhara

BAHIR DAR: As he set off to vote in Ethiopia's national election, Tesfahun Sisay chose his outfit with purpose, pulling on a T-shirt emblazoned with a man's face and a Kalashnikov rifle. That man was Asaminew Tsige: revered by many in Amhara, Asaminew commanded the region's muscular security forces until two years ago, when he was accused of spearheading a local coup and shot dead by police.

"I like this man," said Tesfahun, gesturing to his T-shirt after voting in the June 21 election at a rural polling station outside Bahir Dar, the capital of Amhara. "I knew he was doing a good job. I felt this when I bought it, and I decided to wear it today."

Asaminew is an icon of Amhara nationalism—a movement that is fast gaining traction amid a spate of grisly massacres and as war in the neighbouring Tigray region inflames ethnic sentiment.

His image with a superimposed Kalashnikov—the standard-issue weapon slung over the shoulders of many in the region—symbolises the willingness of ethnic Amharas to defend their homeland and identity at whatever cost. The people of Amhara, Ethiopia's second largest region by population, have been caught up in cycles of ethnically motivated massacres in recent years.

As recently as April, around 100 people were slaughtered in Ataye, a town in Amhara surrounded by ethnic Oromo settlements. Such violence both within and beyond Amhara has spurred fears of widespread ethnic-based persecution, and warnings from Amhara political leaders of a genocide against their group. "I feel for my people, for the harassment they face. I feel their grievances. That worries me. I do not have peace of mind," said Asnakew Melkie, a 46-year-old farmer wrapped in a heavy blanket in the hillside village of Yohannes.

Historical cradle

Ethiopia is divided into regions along ethnic and linguistic lines, and Amhara is one of the proudest and most powerful states in the diverse Horn of Africa nation of 110 million people. The Amharas consider themselves the architects of modern Ethiopia.

Tewodros II, one of Ethiopia's great emperors, and an ethnic Amhara, unified a swathe of provinces into a single centralised state in the 1800s, and his people dominated politics well into the 20th century.

His legacy is still rooted in the region today, where ethnic Amharas are the vast majority, but also across Ethiopia, where Amharic is the national language and sovereignty is fiercely defended.

"Ethiopia is our region. What is now deemed the Amhara region, we don't accept that," said Belete Molla, chairman of the National Movement for Amhara (NAMA), the region's main opposition party. He said the party—formed in 2018 — did not seek secession or disunity, but was born in response to strident nationalist movements taking shape in other regions, such as neighbouring Oromia, the country's largest.

"The Amhara people were the last to join political parties based on ethnic characteristics, to define themselves as Amhara," Belete said. But Amhara politicians like Belete are not without an ethnic agenda. Besides warning darkly of an "Amhara genocide", they are determined to reintegrate long-contested parts of western and southern Tigray into Amhara.

The Amharas say these fertile lands—known as Wolkait and Raya—were snatched three decades ago by Ethiopia's once Tigray-dominated government, and see redrawing these boundaries as righting a historic wrong. They got their chance in November, siding with federal troops as they chased Tigrayan forces into the mountains, and occupying western and southern parts of the region.

Since then, ethnic Amharas have been relocating to abandoned farms and homesteads in a state-backed campaign the United States has said involves acts of ethnic cleansing. —AFP

Philippines' Duterte hails drug war but says 'long way' to go

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte hailed his signature drug war policy yesterday, but lamented there was a "long way" to go in the controversial crackdown that has killed thousands of people. In his last State of the Nation address before stepping down next year, Duterte frequently went off script and struggled to follow the autocrat as he railed for nearly three hours against communists, child abusers and corrupt officials.

As expected, Duterte used the annual speech to boast about the government's performance in the past five years—including its handling of the coronavirus pandemic that has infected more than 1.5 million people and shattered the economy.

But the 76-year-old strongman also devoted large chunks of the rambling address to his "unyielding" anti-narcotics campaign that has officially killed more than 6,000 people. Rights groups put the figure in the tens of thousands and International Criminal Court prosecutors are seeking to investigate the campaign.

Duterte defended the crackdown, saying it had "led to the surrender of

millions of drug dependents and neutralisation, capture and prosecution of thousands of drug personalities". And it was not over.

"While we have made great strides in ending rebellion and insurgency in various parts of the country, we still have a long way in our fight against the proliferation of drugs," Duterte told the audience of lawmakers, diplomats and judges.

It was the sixth and last State of the Nation address for the populist leader, who is barred from seeking re-election next year. He has flagged a possible tilt for the vice-presidency. Hours before the speech, around 3,000 protesters marched along a major avenue demanding an "end" to Duterte's presidency.

The drug war, the pandemic and the possibility of the president's daughter succeeding him next year were key concerns. "We know how the Duterte administration ran the country in the last five years where there's hunger, there were deaths, killings, injustice, tyranny," said political satirist Mae Paner.

"It just has to stop now," Maristela

who fail to pay protection fees — called "vaccines" in these parts.

Armed to the teeth

On July 7, the powder keg exploded as it does every so often. In the early morning hours, shots rang out and members of the Cota 905 gang took to the streets ordering inhabitants to stay at home and cautioning police not to enter. Nobody knows quite what started it. From the hills overlooking the slum with its dirt roads and precarious homes, the gangsters, known locally as "malandros," fired at buildings, cars and pedestrians below, from trenches shielded by sand bags.

At the entrance to the slum, AFP was held up by a group of self-styled young "soldiers," mainly teenagers, armed to the teeth with assault rifles, machine guns, shiny new pistols, full magazines, hand grenades, binoculars and two-way radios, though dressed in civilian clothes. Others kept watch from the roofs or terraces of nearby buildings.

The youngsters confiscated AFP's recording equipment, returning it only after a thorough inspection and quite some negotiation. "We are not thieves..." insisted one. "We do not want the police here," he said, explaining the roadblock. "They commit acts of violence here... they should not come here."

A few meters away, a bloodied person, seemingly dead, lay prostrate in the

Life in the crossfire of Venezuela's slums

CARACAS: A Venezuelan soldier takes cover behind an armored vehicle. For 48 hours he has ducked flying bullets. He is not on a battlefield but rather in a suburb of Caracas, the capital of violence-ridden Venezuela which in his own words is "a country at war." The scene played out this month in the slum of Cota 905, which shares a name with the gang that runs it with impunity. It is one of several Caracas suburbs — all of them poor — lorded over by criminals who terrorize locals largely unhindered in a country in dire economic and political straits.

Amid the turmoil, the gangs have created parallel empires funded by drug trafficking, extortion and kidnapping. In Caracas, a city of some two million inhabitants, they run the slums with a heavy hand from their comparatively fancy houses in the wealthier, higher parts of the hilly neighborhoods.

The gangsters impose their own law: determine the cut-off time for parties, set visiting hours for outsiders, even resolve neighborly disputes. They execute people they accuse of being police informants and mete out harsh punishment for those

Macron backs UNESCO heritage bid of remote Polynesian islands

ATUONA: French President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday backed a bid by the Marquesas Islands to gain UNESCO world heritage status. Macron, the first head of state to visit the remote archipelago in French Polynesia, was greeted by a traditional ceremony of 600 dancers and musicians from its six islands.

He was the only person at the gather-

ing wearing a suit—with everybody else clad in costumes made of leaves from the local aiti plant—as he addressed a crowd from onboard a traditional Polynesian double-hulled canoe.

"This nature and this culture is our treasure," Macron said. "This is why I will fight alongside you for the Marquesas to get the Unesco classification." The UN cultural body awards



MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte leaves after the annual state of the nation address at the House of Representatives in Manila yesterday. —AFP

Abenojar, a nurse wearing a white PPE suit, said health workers had been treated as "sacrificial lambs" in the pandemic. "Many of us are not only getting sick, we are also dying," the 59-year-old told AFP.

During the speech Duterte urged people to get inoculated against COVID-19, warning another lockdown could be needed if the highly contagious Delta variant gets out of control. "The health and safety protocols we put in place have proven effective in slowing down the spread of the virus

but the best solution is still vaccination," Duterte said.

More than six million people have been fully vaccinated since the glacial vaccine roll-out began in March—about five percent of the country's population. On Friday the government sent millions of children back into lockdown and tightened other restrictions as hospitals prepare for a spike in cases.

But Duterte admitted "we cannot afford more lockdowns lest our economy bleed to the point of irreversible damage". —AFP



CARACAS: File photo shows Members of the Directorate of Strategic Intelligence (DIE) patrol one of the main streets of the Cota 905 neighborhood after three days of clashes with alleged members of a criminal gang in Caracas. —AFP

street. A passerby checked for signs of life with a few swift kicks. The body ended up lying there for 24 hours. Then, the police surrounded four of the slums, including Cota 905.

'The Art of War'

"We have to climb the hill to dislodge them from there... there will be deaths on both sides but we are stronger, we will win," said one police officer, a copy of

Sun Tzu's "The Art of War" on his patrol car's dashboard. A gangster and a policeman confronted each other on the two-way radio system, the officer using a nickname to call out to Cota 905 leader Carlos Luis Revete, for whom the government has offered a reward of \$500,000.

"Koki, where are you, you monster?" the officer asked, using the alias. The reply from the other end: "Damn police, we are going to kill you." —AFP

world heritage status to sites judged to be of special universal value to humanity.

Top heritage sites include the Great Wall of China, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, Machu Picchu in Peru and the Acropolis in Greece. Marquesas Islands authorities have been campaigning for years to get the archipelago's unique combination of "nature and culture" recognised.

"We may just be a group of small rocks in the Pacific, but we have riches that deserve to become part of the world's heritage," Polynesian culture min-

ister Heremoana Maamaatuaiahutapu said. Macron is on his first official trip to French Polynesia, mostly dedicated to discussing the French overseas territory's strategic role, the legacy of nuclear tests and rising seas due to global warming.

The trip is seen as a chance for Macron to highlight the extent of France's global footprint through its overseas territories, which extend from the Pacific to the Caribbean to Latin America and the Indian Ocean. The Pacific is of particular strategic importance in the context of China's rising power. —AFP

International

US general vows to continue air strikes supporting Afghan troops

Fighting continues on the outskirts of Kandahar city

KABUL: The United States will continue air strikes in support of Afghan forces fighting the Taliban, a top US general said Sunday, as the insurgents press on with offensives across the country. Since early May, violence has surged after the insurgents launched a sweeping assault just days after the US-led foreign forces began their final withdrawal.

The Taliban's deadly assault has seen the insurgents capture scores of districts, border crossings and encircle several provincial capitals. "The United States has increased air strikes in the support of Afghan forces over the last several days, and we are prepared to continue this heightened level of support in the coming weeks if the Taliban continue their attacks," General Kenneth McKenzie, head of the US Army Central Command, told reporters in Kabul.

McKenzie acknowledged that there were tough days ahead for the Afghan government, but insisted that the Taliban were nowhere close to victory. "The Taliban are attempting to create a sense of inevitability about their campaign. They are wrong," he said.

"Taliban victory is not inevitable," McKenzie's remarks came as Afghan officials in the southern province of Kandahar said fighting in the region had displaced about 22,000 families in the past month. "They have all moved from the volatile districts of the city to safer areas," Dost Mohammad Daryab, head of the provincial refugee department, told AFP.

On Sunday, fighting continued on the outskirts of Kandahar city. "The negligence of some security forces, especially the police, has made way for the Taliban to come that close," Lalai Dastageeri, deputy governor of Kandahar province, told AFP.

"We are now trying to organise our security forces." Local authorities had set up four camps for

the displaced people who are estimated to be about 154,000. Kandahar resident Hafiz Mohammad Akbar said his house had been taken over by the Taliban after he fled. "They forced us to leave... I am now living with my 20-member family in a compound with no toilet," said Akbar.

Fears of fighting to increase

Residents expressed concerns the fighting might increase in days ahead. "If they really want to fight, they should go to a desert and fight, not destroy the city," said Khan Mohammad, who moved to a camp with his family. "Even if they win, they can't rule a ghost town."

Kandahar, with its 650,000 inhabitants, is the second-largest city in Afghanistan after Kabul. The southern province was the epicentre of the Taliban's regime when they ruled Afghanistan between 1996 to 2001.

Ousted from power in a US-led invasion in 2001 after the September 11 attacks, the Taliban have spearheaded a deadly insurgency that continues to this day. Their latest offensive launched in early May has seen the group take control of half of the country's about 400 districts.

Earlier this week, the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff General Mark Milley said the Taliban appear to have "strategic momentum" on the battlefield. Global rights group Human Rights Watch said there were reports the Taliban were committing atrocities against civilians in areas they had captured, including in the town of Spin Boldak near the border with Pakistan they took earlier this month.

"Taliban leaders have denied responsibility for any abuses, but growing evidence of expulsions, arbitrary detentions, and killings in areas under their control are raising fears among the popula-



HERAT: A security personnel stops a vehicle at a check point in Herat, as a night curfew was imposed across 31 of the country's 34 provinces to curb surging violence unleashed by a sweeping Taliban offensive in recent months, the interior ministry said. —AFP

tion," said Patricia Grossman, associate Asia director at HRW said in a statement. The authorities meanwhile announced they had arrested four men they said belonged to the Taliban, accusing them of carrying out this week's rocket attack on Kabul.

"A Taliban commander, Momin, along with his three other men, have been arrested. They all belong to the Taliban group," ministry

spokesman Mirwais Stanikzai told reporters in a video message.

At least three rockets landed near the palace on Tuesday as President Ashraf Ghani and his top officials performed outdoor prayers to mark the start of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha. The attack was however claimed by the jihadist Islamic State group. —AFP

India begins flood clean-up as deadly monsoon rains ease

MUMBAI: Rescuers waded through waist-deep mud in western India yesterday to reach injured residents and start a massive clean-up after heavy monsoon rains triggered landslides and floods that killed 159 people. India's western coast was hit by severe rainstorms over several days, with a quarter of a million people evacuated from their homes in three states and power cut across vast areas.

Experts say climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of the annual deluge — which is critical to replenishing rivers and groundwater but also causes widespread death and destruction. "The focus has now shifted to evacuating the injured and restoring electricity as water levels recede," a National Disaster Relief Force

spokesperson told AFP.

"The rainfall has stopped in most places and water levels have receded. We are helping with clean-up, relief and restoration." In the worst-hit state Maharashtra, where the toll rose to 149 on Sunday, officials said search operations were halted in the hillside village of Taliye, southeast of Mumbai.

Some 53 bodies have been recovered in the village so far, with 17 people still missing, after a large landslide washed away people and homes on Thursday. In the neighbouring district of Satara, 29 people were killed in multiple landslides.

And in Chiplun, 24 hours of uninterrupted rain caused water levels to rise by nearly 20 feet (six metres) on Thursday. Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday described what happened in that district as "unimaginable".

"The water level reached the ceiling of my shop, there was so much water inside," a shopkeeper there told Indian news broadcaster NDTV. "We've seen floods before in 1965 and 2005, but this was worse than before," another resident added.

Neighbouring state Goa's Chief Minister



SANGLI: India's National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), personnel distribute food and relief materials to people in areas inundated with flood waters at Sangli district of Maharashtra. —AFP

Pramod Sawant said the floods were the worst since 1982. Further south in Karnataka state, nine people died in flooding and four others were missing, officials said. Authorities were trying to restore power supply to the affected districts. —AFP

Scottish climber dies on Pakistan's K2

ISLAMABAD: Scottish climber Rick Allen has died while attempting to summit Pakistan's K2, his expedition team said, the latest death on the world's second-highest peak. Allen was killed after being hit by an avalanche while attempting a new route on the mountain over the weekend. His body was recovered on Sunday evening.

"After consulting with his family and friends, the legend will be buried this morning under the foot of Mighty K2," Karakorum Expeditions wrote on Facebook yesterday. A charity that Allen was raising money for during the climb also confirmed his death.

"Rick died doing what he loved the most and lived his life with the courage of his convictions," tweeted Partners Relief & Development, adding that

two other climbers on the expedition survived the avalanche.

Allen's death comes a week after South Korea's Kim Hong-bin was killed after falling into a crevasse while descending from the nearby Broad Peak. With Pakistan's borders open and few other places to go due to the coronavirus pandemic, the country's summer climbing season is attracting a large number of alpinists.

The summer season follows history being made in northern Pakistan as a team of Nepali climbers became the first to summit K2 in the winter. But at least five other climbers died on K2's slopes while a sixth went missing during an ascent on a nearby peak.

Known as "the savage mountain", K2 has harsh conditions—winds can blow at more than 200 kilometres per hour (124 miles per hour) and temperatures can drop to minus 60 degrees Celsius (minus 76 Fahrenheit). Unlike the world's highest peak Mount Everest, which has been scaled by thousands of climbers young and old, K2 is much less travelled. —AFP



SKARDU: Rescued Austrian climber Stephan Keck who was on the same expedition with Scottish climber Rick Allen who died while attempting to summit Pakistan's K2, shows his picture on a mobile phone, in Skardu yesterday. —AFP

tracts for a set period and say their treatment is worse than that of permanent government staff, even as they have found themselves on the frontline of the fight against COVID-19.

They complain of a lack of job security, poor benefits and that very few are eventually offered permanent positions. We want "equal rights, to be a permanent doctor," said a medic at a government hospital that treats virus patients outside Kuala Lumpur. "We would definitely not be here if we were treated fairly... we should be appreciated for what we do," the doctor, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told reporters. The medic was among dozens who took part in the action at the hospital, which lasted around half an hour.

Local media reported that several hundred participated across the country, but some doctors complained

they were threatened by police and senior hospital staff in a bid to halt the protests. Those involved said senior doctors took over their duties before they walked out, to ensure that patient care was not jeopardised.

Malaysia is currently battling its most serious outbreak, driven by the highly contagious Delta variant. Officials have reported over one million cases and about 8,000 deaths. There are over 23,000 doctors on these contracts in Malaysia — about 45 percent of the total medical doctors in the public healthcare system, according to official estimates.

Last week, the government said it would extend junior doctors' contracts for up to four years in a bid to forestall the protests. But they stopped short of offering permanent jobs, and the organisers of Monday's walk-out criticised the move as "short-sighted". —AFP

(FBK), the websites of key allies and of Navalny's regional offices that disbanded earlier this year.

AFP journalists said Navalny's website was unavailable in Russia. "The night of the long knives," Volkov wrote in reference to a bloody purge of military and political rivals launched by Adolf Hitler in Germany. Volkov said the only website that was not blocked by the state censor was "Smart Voting", which is dedicated to a Navalny-proposed strategy to back candidates best placed to defeat Kremlin-linked politicians in elections. This tactic has seen the ruling United Russia party lose a number of seats in recent local elections. AFP has reached out to the Roskonnadzor media watchdog for comment. —AFP

Malaysian doctors stage walkout amid COVID outbreak

SUNGAI BULOH: Hundreds of junior doctors at state-run Malaysian hospitals staged walkouts yesterday demanding better conditions as the country faces its worst coronavirus outbreak yet.

Dressed in black and holding signs with slogans including "equal pay, equal rights, equal opportunity" and "we are your future specialists", they protested at medical facilities nationwide. The doctors are on con-

Russia blocks 49 Navalny-linked websites: Aide

MOSCOW: Russia's media regulator has blocked 49 websites linked to jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, his ally said yesterday, as pressure mounts on the movement of the opposition leader ahead of parliamentary elections in the autumn. Navalny, President Vladimir

Indonesia loosens COVID-19 curbs despite warnings

JAKARTA: Small shops, streetside restaurants and some shopping malls reopened in coronavirus-battered Indonesia yesterday after the government loosened a shutdown despite warnings it could unleash another COVID-19 wave. President Joko Widodo said Sunday that a partial lockdown imposed in early July would continue until August 2 even as the highly infectious Delta variant tears across the vast archipelago nation, which has overtaken India and Brazil to become the global pandemic epicentre.

But restrictions on many small businesses, including traditional markets and ubiquitous open-air eateries known as warungs, were loosened even in the worst-hit areas. "We're opening for dining in again," Syaifurrohman, a seafood eatery owner who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told AFP. "I hope Jakarta recovers quickly because this busy place is where we make a living."

Shopping malls and mosques in less affected parts of the Muslim majority nation also got the green light to open their doors to limited crowds and shorter hours. Offices were still under shutdown orders, although there have been widespread reports of employers flouting earlier lockdown rules.

Papua eyes lockdown

Tens of millions live hand to mouth in the nation of about 270 million, making the strict lockdowns seen in some countries next to impossible. But Widodo's government has been widely criticised over its handling of the pandemic and policies that critics say prioritised Southeast Asia's largest economy over public health.

The government announcement Sunday came just days after Indonesia saw its 24-hour death toll hit a record 1,566, and as the World Health Organization called on the country to impose tighter curbs. Widodo has pointed to falling daily infection and hospital occupancy rates as justification for the easing.

Official case rates are down, but testing rates have also declined and the number of positive results remains high—suggesting the virus was still spreading quickly. The Delta variant has been detected in about a dozen regions outside hard-hit Jakarta, densely populated Java and Bali, where hospitals have been jammed with COVID patients.

Authorities on the holiday island warned that oxygen supplies were running low. Impoverished Papua-wracked by decades of fighting between government forces and independence-seeking rebels—also sounded the alarm as its under-developed healthcare system reached breaking point.

The restive region, next to independent Papua New Guinea, said it was considering locking down its sea, air and land borders from August. Indonesia's vaccination levels remain far below the government's one-million-a-day target for July and only about six percent of the population has been fully inoculated.

The country has reported more than 3.1 million cases and 83,000 deaths since the pandemic began, but those official figures are widely believed to be a severe undercount due to low testing and tracing rates. —AFP

Business

TUESDAY, JULY 27, 2021

Abu Dhabi slashes business registration costs by 90%

Emirate seeks to boost its competitiveness regionally and internationally

ABU DHABI: Abu Dhabi will slash the cost of establishing new businesses by "more than 90 percent" from today to increase the "competitiveness regionally and internationally" of the emirate, already a magnet for commerce.

In recent weeks authorities have ramped up efforts to woo new business to Abu Dhabi, one of seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates. Corporate taxes are practically zero in the UAE as it seeks to diversify its previously oil-based economy. "Business setup fees in Abu Dhabi emirate have been reduced to AED1,000 (\$272) — a reduction of more than 90 per cent," the Abu Dhabi Government Media Office said in a statement late Sunday. The new tariff will see the scrapping of some fees that were previously payable to different public bodies and the reduction of others, and will come into force from July 27, it added.

"The move will significantly enhance ease of doing business in the emirate and increase Abu Dhabi's competitiveness regionally and internationally," the statement said. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United Arab Emirates is among "jurisdictions with no or insignificant taxes".

However, the UAE yesterday welcomed the historic deal to overhaul the way multinational compa-

nies are taxed, saying it supports the global consensus to combat tax avoidance and profit shifting. More than 130 countries have already agreed to reforms on international taxation, including a minimum corporate rate of 15 percent.

"The UAE is fully committed to working collaboratively with the OECD and (inclusive framework) members to further advance the technical discussions to ensure a fair and sustainable outcome can be achieved," said the assistant under-secretary at the finance ministry, Saeed Rashid Al-Yateem, according to a statement carried by the official WAM news agency.

The UAE has recently launched a swathe of economic reforms. Since June 1 foreigners have been able to create businesses and retain control of all of the capital, once only possible in special free zones, compared to a maximum of 49 percent outside those zones previously.

Abu Dhabi and Dubai, one of the other seven emirates, have traditionally competed to host the regional offices of global businesses, attracting thousands of firms. In June the Dubai government announced a series of reforms, due to be enacted by mid-September, aimed at reducing the cost of doing business and stimulating economic growth. In recent months Saudi Arabia, the Arab world's



ABU DHABI: Abu Dhabi will slash the cost of establishing new businesses by "more than 90 percent" from today.

largest economy, has emerged as a competitor to the Emirates' pulling power as it seeks to break its own dependence on oil.

With a brand new business district in the capital

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia issued an ultimatum to foreign businesses in February that they must locate their regional headquarters there by 2024 or risk missing out on lucrative government contracts. — AFP

COVID woes and chip shortages keep Tata Motors in the red

MUMBAI: Losses at India's Tata Motors narrowed between April and June, boosted by a 108-percent jump in revenues, the company said yesterday, even as COVID-19 lockdowns and semi-conductor shortages hit its bottom line. Consolidated net losses at the owners of the Jaguar and Land Rover brands reduced by 47 percent to 44.50 billion rupees (\$598 million) in the quarter ending June 30, compared to 84.43 billion rupees in the same period last year.

Although a brutal new pandemic wave prompted temporary plant closures in April, the restrictions were less severe than the total shutdown imposed 12 months earlier. The auto giant's quarterly revenues more than doubled to 664.06 billion rupees year-on-year. Sales at its UK-based subsidiary Jaguar

Land Rover (JLR) jumped 68 percent year-on-year as the British luxury car brand pursued a steady recovery.

However, JLR said a global shortage of semi-conductor chips hit production, resulting in a pre-tax loss of £110 million in the quarter. Semi-conductor production cuts during the pandemic have caused a global shortage of the microchips—a crucial raw material in the electronics that are now a key component in cars. Earlier this month, Britain's largest car manufacturer said the shortages could lead to a halving of sales during the July-September quarter.

"Though the current environment continues to remain challenging, we will continue to adapt and manage elements that are within our control," JLR chief executive Thierry Bollore said in a statement following the results. "We remain encouraged by the sheer strength of the demand for our vehicles," he added. Tata Motors said yesterday that "semiconductor issues, commodity inflation and pandemic uncertainty will have an impact in the short term".

Tata Motors' electric vehicle business emerged



as a bright spot. The 1,715 units sold in the quarter were a five-fold jump and the highest ever. The company's shares closed 0.95 percent lower in Mumbai ahead of the earnings announcement. — AFP

Europe to boost battery production

PARIS: As electric car sales take off and petrol engines face being phased out by 2035, Europe is looking to develop its own battery production base. Far from being autonomous, Europe needs to accelerate domestic battery output as a national security issue as well as a boost for businesses and jobs.

Batteries that power electric cars and which weigh up to 600 kilograms (1,300 pounds), represent a considerable part of the vehicle's value. At the moment, they are mostly produced in Asia, with China, South Korea and Japan the leading manufacturers.

With a mid-July announcement that it intends to ban the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2035, the European Commission has set a timetable for the bloc's shift to electric cars. Many carmakers, having sensed which way the wind is blowing with governments, have now announced plans to shift towards electric vehicles.

Germany's Daimler was the latest,

announcing last week that from 2025 it will launch only electric vehicle platforms as it gears up for a full shift to electric cars from 2030. It is not only governments pushing the change, as the latest European data shows that electric cars doubled their market share in the second quarter of 2021.

Giga plans

If Europe is going to shift to electric cars, it will need lots of batteries. After years of slow progress, there are now plans to invest 40 billion euros (\$47 billion) in 38 European factories that could turn out 1,000 gigawatt hours of batteries per year, according to Transport & Environment, a non-governmental organization. With average battery capacity of 60 kilowatt hours, that would be enough to power 16.7 million vehicles, according to the group.

One initiative is Sweden's Northvolt, which already has a factory under construction that is to produce batteries with total capacity of 150 gigawatt hours by 2030.

Volkswagen is a major partner, and the German carmaker is seeking to build five other factories as well. Daimler, as part of its announcement this past week, said it would build eight battery factories worldwide for its Mercedes-Benz and Smart cars.



PARIS: Far from being autonomous, Europe needs to accelerate domestic battery output as a national security issue as well as a boost for businesses and jobs.

Stellantis, which includes 12 brands including Fiat, Chrysler, Jeep and Peugeot, plans to build five factories in Europe and North America.

Tesla expects to open its first European "gigafactory" near Berlin later this year, which it claims will be the world's largest battery cell production site with 250 gigawatt hours of capacity in 2030. EU Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic recently said the planned factories put the EU "well on track to achieve open strategic autonomy in this critical sector".

That view is not shared by Olivier

Montique, an automotive analyst at Fitch Solutions. He said the planned facilities "will make the bloc a significant player in the space, but will not enable it to meet anywhere close to all of its internal demand for EV batteries."

Montique said that is why automakers are still working with Asian battery makers. China's Envision AESC is partnering with Nissan and Renault to build factories in Britain and France. South Korean firms LG Chem and SKI have plants in Poland and Hungary, while China's CATL is building one in Germany. — AFP

Vietnam's economic hub imposes night curfew

HO CHI MINH CITY: More than 10 million residents of Ho Chi Minh City will be placed under a strict overnight curfew beginning yesterday, an unprecedented move to curb infections as Vietnam battles a rapid COVID-19 surge. After successfully containing limited coronavirus outbreaks last year, the communist country is now recording increasing infections and deaths fuelled by the highly contagious Delta variant.

Hardest-hit are the northern industrial centers

and Ho Chi Minh City in the south, which has registered more than 62,000 infections since April—making up the bulk of Vietnam's 101,000 cases.

Authorities have restricted movement in the once-bustling economic hub for more than two months, and imposed a lockdown in early July. Residents are allowed to leave home only for medical emergencies and food. But beginning Monday, an additional, strict stay-at-home order will be in effect from 6 pm to 6 am local time—though authorities refused to use the word "curfew". No end date was announced for the measure.

"Local law enforcement will need to step up patrols... and issue appropriate penalties for offenders, even detention in cases of resistance," said city mayor Nguyen Thanh Phong, according to state media.

Almost all public transport links with the city have already been suspended, while travellers origi-

nating from the city are required to stay in mandatory quarantine centers for at least two weeks.

Currently, more than a third of Vietnam's 100 million people are under a lockdown, including residents of its capital Hanoi in the north. Yesterday, the military drove through major boulevards across the city, spraying disinfectant as they went past historic buildings and Hoan Kiem Lake, a major tourist attraction. An army officer told AFP that military personnel will continue the disinfection campaign over the next three days.

Vietnam was one of the few economies that expanded last year due to its success in containing the virus during the first wave of the pandemic. But it has been slow to procure and administer vaccines, with just 4.7 million doses given so far. It is also developing its own inoculations and authorities say they hope to reach herd immunity by early 2022. — AFP

Coffee froths to new highs as Brazil frost hits crops

LONDON: Coffee prices surged this week to multi-year peaks, extending stellar gains this year after frost damaged crops in the world's biggest producer Brazil. The futures price for arabica coffee, one of the South American nation's top commodity exports, soared Friday to just over \$2 a pound, the highest level since 2014.

The commodity has rocketed by a blistering 60 percent since January. Lower quality robusta coffee, mainly grown in Asia, leapt to an October 2017 peak of \$1,993 per ton, capping a near 40-percent gain so far this year. "Several reasons explain the astronomical gains for coffee prices," Rabobank analyst Carlos Mera told AFP, citing mainly the devastating weather conditions in Brazil.

Mera also blamed soaring transportation costs and political unrest in number-three producer, Colombia. Brazil suffered a historic drought earlier this year. That was followed by damaging frosts this week at key plantations in Minas Gerais—a southeastern inland state that produces 70 percent of the nation's arabica beans. Sub-zero temperatures have "sparked defoliation of crops and even kill the youngest plants" that are crucial for future harvests, Mera said.

Arabica has also been heavily impacted because the crop has a biennial plant cycle, whereby low-yield production one year is followed by bumper output the following year.

'Long price crisis'

The market rallied "on freezing temperatures in Brazil growing areas last night", added Price Futures Group analyst Jack Scoville on Friday. "Freezing temperatures were reported in much of Minas Gerais and Parana and also in Sao Paulo. "It is not yet known how extensive the damage was but... a significant part of the crop got hurt. "It is flowering time for the next crop and the flowers were frozen and will drop off the trees," he added, noting, however, that the weather was now turning warmer. At the same time, world coffee demand is picking up this year as global economies reopen from the deadly coronavirus turmoil. That has stimulated demand for arabica which tends to be used in coffee shops and restaurants, unlike the lower grade robusta favored for making instant coffee granules. — AFP



In this file photo, a worker dries organic coffee beans produced at the Fortaleza Environmental Farm in Mococa, some 300km northeast of Sao Paulo. — AFP

Business

CBK's symposium analyzes Kuwait's resilience in the face of a dual crisis

'Financial Stability Report' presents an overview of major global and domestic economic developments

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) held a symposium launching the 9th Financial Stability Report for 2020 yesterday at the CBK headquarters as well as through online channels. The planned event intended to address the major economic developments at both domestic and international levels, and presented an overview on the financial sector in the State of Kuwait. The event hosted prominent economists as panelists and discussants from locally and globally renowned institutions.

Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel, Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait, inaugurated the event stating that the Financial Stability Report 2020 gave both a broad and focused examination of financial stability in Kuwait in a year of unprecedented challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted many countries to introduce preventive measures including partial and full lockdowns leading to a halt in economic activity, as constraints materialized on both supply and demand leading to unprecedented impact on both lives and livelihoods.

Dr Al-Hashel added that given the widespread and accelerated transmission, including multiple waves of the virus and consequent impact on the economy, the economic outlook was clouded to an unprecedented degree, exceeding levels seen during the Global Financial Crisis. This in turn led to frequent revisions of GDP projections by international economic bodies, including the International Monetary Fund. Such uncertainty made it difficult for the fiscal, monetary and economic policymakers to make effective decisions and develop plans to mitigate the crisis-induced repercussions, economic deterioration, and drastic job losses. The contraction in global GDP was unparalleled in scale and speed, estimated to be around 3.3 percent, five times worse than during the Global Financial Crisis. These effects were also reflected through job loss, with the US unemployment rate dramatically surging to 14.7 percent.



Dr Al-Hashel: Kuwait faced a dual crisis, where it needed increased medical and strategic spending to mitigate the lockdown implications and support vulnerable sectors of the economy while simultaneously grappling with an all-time high estimated budget deficit of KD 10.8 billion for 2020/2021, ie, 29 percent of GDP, attributable to the plunge in Kuwaiti crude oil prices.

entities, and was entrusted to provide its insights to address the coronavirus-induced economic and social impacts. The Committee presented proposals and measures, including:

- Support of the national workforce in the private sector by doubling the allowance extended to the national labor registered under the Third and Fifth Chapters for six months, i.e. 72,000 employees.
- Drafting a set of labor and rent laws, and supporting and guaranteeing financing to incentivize the banking sector to lend, based on which the Law No. 2 of 2021 on the Rescue of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) Impacted by the Repercussions of COVID-19 Crisis became issued on 18 April 2021.
- To this end, and in line with its sense of social responsibility, the CBK in collaboration with a number of banks took several initiatives, chief among them were the following:
 - Return to work protocols for the banking sector in collaboration with an international consultant to ensure the safety of banks' customers and staff.
 - KD 10 million fund placed at the disposal of the Cabinet.

A slew of measures

The governor mentioned that these measures build on decade-long efforts by the CBK to reinforce both monetary

percent. Moreover, banks remain flush with liquidity as reflected by the Net Stable Funding Ratio and Liquidity Coverage Ratio, at 115 percent and 184 percent respectively (against the required minimum of 100 percent), while the regulatory liquidity levels reached 27.5 percent against the required minimum of 18 percent. She concluded her statement by providing assurance that, unlike many countries that faced a liquidity crunch and required central bank intervention, the CBK, being the local monetary authority, opted to absorb rather than to inject surplus liquidity as is customary in times of crisis.

Haya B Al-Humaidi, CBK Manager of the Financial Stability Office, said that despite the unprecedented operating challenges, e.g., partial and total lockdowns, curfews, halt in economic activity and slump in real estate sector, which impacted banking customers and resulted in increased defaults, loan moratoriums and all-time low interest rates, banks still managed to register healthy net income attributable to shareholders, at KD 455 million. In addition, banks collectively maintained a higher capital adequacy ratio of 19 percent at year-end, and did not need to use their capital conservation buffers. They were able to continually operate and contribute to the domestic economy.

Pandemic, a true test

She added that the pandemic was a true test of the resilience of the banking sector. Despite the banking sector successfully navigating the first year of the crisis, the CBK continues to ensure that such achievements revolving around the integrity and resilience of the sector are sustained well into the future. Thus, the CBK conducts quarterly stress tests. Last year, the CBK, in cooperation with a global consulting firm, updated the stress-testing framework to fit the shifting economic landscape of the crisis. The new framework is highly dynamic and enables flexible scenario setting that incorporates macro and micro economic variables. This stress-testing tool enables the CBK to identify vulnerabilities of individual banks so that, if necessary, it can take corrective actions to address any potential issues.

Al-Humaidi further explained that the new stress testing framework involves three main phases, where phase one entails hypothetical sectoral shocks (eg defaults in loan portfolios, changes in interest rates, and a drop in stock prices and real estate prices). In phase two, the direct and subsequent impacts of shocks on the sector are measured. The direct impact involves higher credit and market risks resulting from deterioration in asset quality, and pressure on the interest margin. This is followed by a subsequent shock in the form of a liquidity crunch, which would result from expected deposit withdrawals and higher cost of funds, ultimately transforming into a solvency issue if not adequately addressed. Phase three involves analyzing the effect of the shocks on the sector's financial position and on the key indicators of financial soundness, allowing the CBK to take appropriate prudential action at a sectoral or individual bank level.

She added that the framework is based on three scenarios covering a period spanning three years. The first scenario hypothesizes a strong blow to a single sector in the real economy. The second consists of a wider multi-sectoral shock in the real economy on the country-level. The third scenario hypothesizes a wide-ranging global crisis. She concluded that the stress tests revealed the resilience of the Kuwaiti banking sector, which maintained a CAR higher than the BCBS minimum requirement of 8 percent - even under the harshest scenario.

In the last section of the presentation, the governor discussed the outlook amidst the unprecedented uncertainty that the crisis has caused globally. He stated that the economic turbulence that the world is experiencing, at its core, is an unfortunate health crisis, which should be remedied first and foremost.

He confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and should be addressed by expanding vaccine rollouts and guaranteeing equitable access to vaccines to achieve herd immunity. However, only 12 percent of the world population is fully vaccinated, and more efforts should be expended to ensure that more people are inoculated.

The cost to world authorities in ensuring that individuals and companies battle through the pandemic amounted to around \$20 trillion (24 percent of global GDP) through fiscal, monetary, and macro-prudential instruments. However, a significant portion of support was funded by borrowing, with world debt reaching an all-time high of \$289 trillion, i.e. 360 percent of the global GDP (an increase of \$30 trillion in 2020 alone). Asset purchase programs and massive liquidity injections have driven the strong recovery of stock markets. As per the IMF statements, the liquidity injected in 2020 by the central banks exceeded those injected over the last decade.

To explain the effect on the markets, the governor introduced a comparison with the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) during which the stock market recovered post the initial shock. For example, while MSCI took 1,890 days to return to its pre-crisis level during the GFC, it took only 196 days after the coronavirus economic shock to not only recover but to increase 88 percent from its lowest level recorded in March of last year. The direct financial support and pent up demand during the lockdown periods led to a strong rebound of personal consumption exceeding pre-crisis levels. These measures and actions identified certain vulnerabilities that represent a classic concern of dealing with a crisis, which is to risk planting the seeds of another crisis.

The governor shed light on the concerns of rising inflation and the importance of caution in setting the time for unwinding the support measures, particularly for other economies given the interconnectedness of the global markets. In this regard, the governor said that any swift and disorderly reduction of financial support by reducing subsidies, loan guarantees, or ceasing payment deferrals may lead to increased bankruptcies. In addition, any prompt action by the monetary authorities to mitigate the asset purchase programs and gradually increase the interest rates would tighten financial conditions and increase

from cross-border economic contagion. For example, if measures are not retracted in a country, the early tightening of monetary policy by a central bank in any of the major economies, such as the Federal Reserve, would lead to capital outflows in the emerging markets that may have been under pressure. Oil prices and geopolitical challenges are also potential concerns.

Dr Al-Hashel concluded that Kuwait has a small, but relatively open economy that will inevitably be impacted by developments in major economies, as well as highlighting the present structural imbalances that need deliberate remedies. He assured that CBK, so far, effectively deployed its monetary and macro-prudential instruments and tools to ensure monetary and financial stability despite the unprecedented pandemic-induced shocks. The CBK shall continue its close monitoring and early intervention to preserve these achievements. Monetary stability and financial stability on their own are, however, insufficient in ensuring a stable and sustained economy. There is an urgent need for immediate and decisive actions and the consolidated efforts of all stakeholders to adopt effective financial and structural reforms to maintain inclusive sustainable prosperity.

IMF intervention

The first discussant was Daniel Kanda, The IMF Mission Chief for Kuwait who joined via a video intervention. At the outset, Kanda thanked the governor and mentioned that the well-written 2020 Financial Stability Report provides valuable input to policymaking at this critical juncture of economic recovery. It provides an in-depth discussion of the impact of the pandemic on the financial sector, financial sector vulnerabilities and risks, and the performance of the banking sector, real estate and capital markets. He commended the skillful regulatory oversight of the Central Bank of Kuwait and the pre-crisis strong buffers with banks that remained well-capitalized and liquid during the pandemic. He also commended the CBK's close monitoring of financial sector developments and risks, and pre-emptive and proactive approach to assess and mitigate any unexpected shocks to financial sector resilience. Kanda concluded that credit risks remain given substantial uncertainty on the outlook, and the need to remain vigilant, as this challenge is not unique to Kuwait.

Maxim Rybnikov, EMEA Director, from Standard & Poor's (S&P) Sovereign Ratings Team participated via a video and mentioned that Kuwait banking sector risks compare favorably with peers not just regionally, but globally, and the Kuwaiti banking system has historically been well-regulated. He added that S&P regularly publishes banking industry country risk assessments, which rank banking sector risks on a scale of 1 to 10, with one being the strongest and 10 the weakest. Kuwait banking sector currently in group 4, on

Key CBK measures

- Adopted a slew of measures to bolster Kuwait's economy
- Cut discount rate to a historic low of 1.5%
- Released capital conservation buffers
- Placed KD 10 million fund at the disposal of the Cabinet
- Adopted prudential policies to support Kuwaiti banking system

Dual crisis

The governor added that Kuwait faced a dual crisis, where it needed increased medical and strategic spending to mitigate the lockdown implications and support vulnerable sectors of the economy, while simultaneously grappling with an all-time high estimated budget deficit of KD 10.8 billion for 2020/2021, ie, 29 percent of GDP, attributable to the plunge in Kuwaiti crude oil prices. Weakness in oil markets was best demonstrated by WTI future contracts, which fell in April 2020 into negative territory for the first time in history. This highlights Kuwait's heavy dependence on oil revenues and the deep-rooted financial, economic and structural imbalances that need to be addressed immediately.

The governor also explained the CBK's role and proactive measures taken since March 2020 to counter the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such measures included, but were not limited to, cutting the discount rate to a historic low of 1.5 percent and releasing the capital conservation buffers. This led to a reduction in financing costs and induced banks to lend more by increasing their maximum lending limits, thus empowering them to continue to fulfill their intermediation role in tighter economic conditions. The exceptional nature of this crisis emphasized the CBK's role as the government's financial advisor, which was showcased when CBK spearheaded efforts in the domestic economic recovery, implementing a slew of relief measures announced under the Council of Ministers Resolution No. 455, forming a Higher Steering Committee for Economic Stimulus chaired by the Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait. The mandate of said committee, included, among others, the implementation of stimulus for the local economy in the report produced by the economic team comprising various public and private

stability and financial stability by adopting prudential policies that enhance the resilience of the Kuwaiti banking system, which allowed it to enter the crisis from a position of strength.

Mariam R Abdulsalam, CBK Deputy Manager of the Financial Stability Office, gave an overview on the development of the banking sector's financial position and key soundness indicators. She explained that the Financial Stability Report analyses the Kuwaiti banks on a consolidated basis. She pointed out that, unlike the previous crises during which banks needed support and sometimes propagated the initial shocks, banks played a vital role during the pandemic towards economic recovery. Thanks to the support by the prudential oversight over the last decade and the pre-emptive measures for liquidity and capital that increased the lending limits, the banking sector was able to continue to fulfill its intermediation role and extend credit to the various economic sectors during the crisis. Despite the pandemic-driven contraction in nominal GDP, the banking sector maintained a positive trajectory with total assets up 2.9 percent YOY, reaching KD 85.4 billion. Deposits witnessed an increase of 4.1 percent, even with the historically low discount rate, to reach an all-time high of KD 61.1 billion, of which 78.1 percent were sourced locally. The increase reflects individuals' confidence in local banks. The banking sector, on a consolidated basis, achieved a net increase of KD 2.5 billion in the credit portfolio at 4.8 percent, which is considered a good sign given the severe crisis, lack of consumer confidence, and overall material uncertainty.

Abdulsalam mentioned that the banking sector's Non-Performing Loans Ratio remained healthy at 2 percent. As provisions were utilized for write-offs, and coupled with the slight increase in non-performing loans, the coverage ratio declined, yet remained sturdy at 222



The Central Bank of Kuwait building

the borrowing costs, adversely affecting the ability of individuals and corporates to serve their debts. Similarly, if the regulatory authorities opt not to reduce the capital and liquidity requirements, some banks may curb the extension of credit in order to meet stricter regulatory requirements, and the resultant financial conditions would be tighter.

In addition, Dr Al-Hashel explained that there are other risks that could stem

par with banking systems of Ireland, Poland and Spain. Kuwait's banking sector risks are only one category higher in their view than those for Australia, France, Germany, UK and the US that are in group 3. Within the GCC, only Saudi Arabia ranks in group 4, with other banking systems ranking weaker.

The Financial Stability Report 2020 is available on CBK's website www.cbk.gov.kw

Business

Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait reports sharp improvement in H1 2021 results

Net profit reaches KD 15.1 million in major turnaround

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) yesterday reported a net profit of KD 15.1 million for the first half of 2021, compared to a loss of KD 4.6 million in the same period of 2020, a turnaround performance. The improvement in performance is attributed to an increase in Group Operating Profits to KD 40.3 million, from KD 36.4 million compared to the same period last year, a reduction in cost of funds, and a drop in provisions from KD 37.8 million in 2020 to KD21.6 million in the first half of 2021.

Total assets increased by 2 percent to reach KD 4.8 billion compared to the same period last year, while customer deposits grew by 4 percent to reach KD 3.3 billion. The bank's balance-sheet remains healthy with strong capital, liquidity and impaired loan coverage ratios. The Non-Performing Loan (NPL) ratio stood at 2.2 percent and NPL coverage at 286 percent. The



Georges Richani

Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) was 17.6 percent while Shareholders' Equity was KD 509 million.

Commenting on the results, Georges Richani, Group CEO of ABK said: "This is a very encouraging performance, considering the challenges faced over the last 18 months. We are making our way back to business as usual in Kuwait, and our ability to report a

net profit demonstrates the underlying strength of our business model and our agility as an organization in executing our plans. Among the many highlights of the

first half of this year are profitable performances in our Egypt subsidiary and UAE branches, a drop in our cost of funds and a reduction in our NPLs.

"We take the health and safety of our employees and clients very seriously, and recently held a 'vaccination drive' in the bank, and we now have 87 percent of our employees vaccinated. We will continue to encourage our employees to get vaccinated to ensure their safety and the safety of those around them. As Kuwait's vaccination program progresses and economic activity picks up, I am confident that we will continue to move forward on solid footing."

Customer behavior has changed significantly over the past year as both retail and corporate customers embraced digital banking. ABK invested heavily to meet this evolving customer need. One of the key milestones of the first half for the bank was the introduction

of ABKnet, a new online corporate banking service that makes it easy for businesses to manage payments, receivables, liquidity and the changing value of assets through one secure platform. The launch of the service underpins the Bank's commitment to staying abreast of cutting edge developments and providing best-in-class financial services.

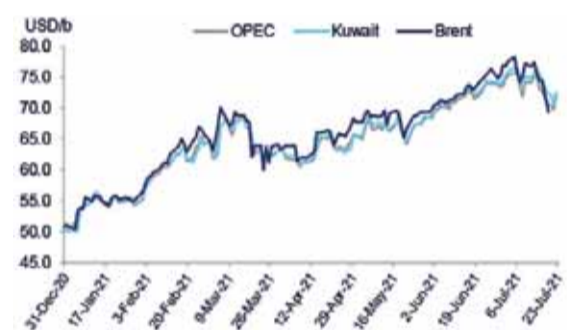
In addition, ABK has maintained strong investment grade ratings of A+ from Fitch and A2 from Moody's. These ratings capture ABK's robust capital structure and strong fundamentals, including its capital position, resilient earnings capacity, stable funding, and liquidity sources. ABK remains focused on raising consumer awareness of banking products and services, through undertaking educational initiatives and supporting the Central Bank of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association's year-long 'Let's Be Aware' program.

KAMCO Oil Market Monthly Report

Oil prices remain unfazed by fears of higher supply

KUWAIT: Crude oil prices remained elevated and well above the \$70/b mark after datapoints suggested sustained high demand in the near term despite fears of new COVID-19 variants and newer restrictions. Demand for gasoline and diesel remained robust in the US as an increasing number of industries came online.

This was evident from the elevated PMI numbers for July-2021 at 59.7, continuing the strong trend seen in June-2021. According to IHS Markit, the PMI for Europe reached 60.6 in July-2021, the highest in 21 years as a result of reopening of large parts of the economy, especially the services sector. Reports suggested that a bulk of the global economies are now expected to catch up with the US and China that witnessed strong growth earlier this year.



Nevertheless, the increase in production by OPEC producers during June-2021 and the agreement to gradually increase output slowed down the surge in oil prices. In addition, the unexpected increase in oil inventory in the US and a strong USD also made it difficult for oil to scale new multi-year highs. Moreover, oil demand remained uneven among product categories. An expected increase in jet fuel demand was further delayed as international travel restrictions continue to remain in place, whereas gasoline demand got a boost as domestic travel is expected to replace international travel despite higher prices. On the demand front, monthly data from IEA suggested that oil demand increased by 3.2 mb/d in June-2021 to 96.8 mb/d, 3 percent below pre-pandemic levels. The IEA expects demand to pick up further during Q3-2021 led by vaccination programs in developed countries. The agency expects demand to increase by 3.3 mb/d q-o-q during Q3-2021, which would be two to three times more than the normal seasonal increase in demand during the third quarter. For the full year, the agency expects oil demand to increase by 5.3 mb/d to reach 96.4 mb/d in 2021 and further to 99.5 mb/d in 2022.

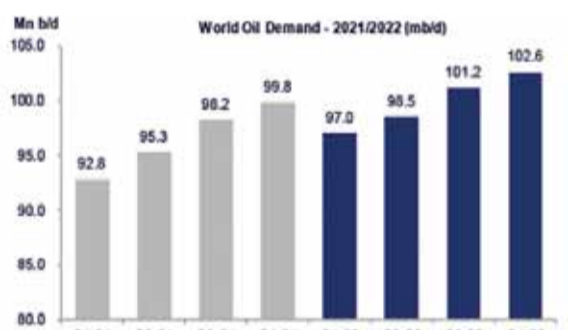
Meanwhile, OPEC published its initial forecast for 2022 oil market. The agency expects oil demand to grow by 3.3 mb/d and average at 99.86 mb/d in 2022, with the 100 mb/d mark expected to be reached by 2H-2022. OECD demand is expected to grow by 1.5 mb/d next year while non-OECD demand is expected to grow by 1.8 mb/d.

On the supply side, the restrained production in the US resulted in WTI-Brent spread reaching the highest levels since October-2020. According to reports, an increase in demand pushed inventories at Cushing to the lowest since March-2020. Crude oil inventory in the US declined for eight consecutive weeks only to increase last week by 2.1 mb/d. Total

inventory has dropped by 62.1 million barrels since April-2021 despite a steady increase in production since May-2021 to reach 11.4 mb/d for the week ended 16-July-2021. OPEC producers also reported a broad-based increase, adding 0.6 mb/d m-o-m in July-2021.

Oil prices

Crude oil prices witnessed one of the biggest single day declines on 19-July-2021 as market watchers feared the rise of the new variant of COVID-19 would derail the oil market recovery. The OPEC+ decision to increase production starting from August-2021 further added to the downward sentiments resulting in the biggest single-day decline in prices in four months. However, prices showed a swift recovery for the rest of the week on expectations that supply would remain restrained for the remainder of the year. The surge in crude oil demand as several economies re-open has resulted in speculations that oil exports from the US would be curbed and imports would increase to meet local demand. An announcement on similar lines was made by Russia's Energy Minister who said that the country may start the process of banning gasoline exports starting next week if fuel



prices in domestic exchanges stay at current levels. On the other hand, in China, the government is selling oil from its strategic reserve to keep a lid on local prices.

The surge in crude oil prices came despite news that the Delta variant of COVID-19 is now the dominant strain worldwide and Australia is going in for stricter lockdowns. Crude oil benchmarks averaged above the \$70/b mark in June-2021 for the first time in 26 months. Brent crude oil basket averaged at \$73/b, after increasing by 6.5 percent m-o-m during June-2021. The increase in OPEC crude and Kuwait crude grades was much stronger at 7.4 percent to average at \$71.9/b while Kuwait crude grade averaged at 72.5/b.

World oil demand

OPEC retained its world oil demand growth estimates for 2021 at 6.0 mb/d with total demand expected to reach 96.6 mb/d for the year. However, quarterly adjustments were made with Q1-2021 demand estimated to have been slower-than-expected in the key OECD countries. This was offset by higher-than-expected data for demand in the OECD Americas region during Q2-2021 that is expected to continue in Q3-2021. India's oil demand, which has remained under pressure due to the pandemic and higher prices, is expected to see a strong recovery by year end, according to the country's oil minister. In its monthly oil report, the IEA said that India's oil demand is expected to grow by 0.29 mb/d in 2021 to 4.82 mb/d, slightly below pre-pandemic demand of 4.99 mb/d in 2019. Next year, demand is expected to increase by another 256 tb/d to 5.08 mb/d. On the other hand, the crackdown on China's teapots relating to misuse of oil import quotas has resulted in a decline in oil imports to the lowest this year in June-2021. However, despite this,

Russia eyes free-trade zone on islands disputed by Japan

MOSCOW: Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin yesterday visited the disputed Kuril Islands and said authorities wanted to establish a free economic zone there, sparking a protest from Japan. The Kurils, which lie north of Japan's Hokkaido island, have been controlled by Moscow since they were seized by Soviet troops in the dying days of World War II.

The territorial dispute has kept the two countries from signing a peace accord that would formally end their wartime hostilities. During his visit to Iturup, the largest and northernmost island of the archipelago, Mishustin proposed exempting the islands from cus-

tom duty and reducing taxes for businesses. "This set of measures is unprecedented," Mishustin said.

"We may also think about exempting from taxpayer obligations those who work and invest here," Mishustin added. He added that the measures would be extended to the main activities on the island with some exemptions, such as the production of alcohol. "This special regime will help intensify economic activity here. I will report these proposals to the Russian president and a relevant decision will be made," Mishustin said. The Japanese foreign ministry issued a protest over Mishustin's visit to the Northern Territories, as they are known in Japan, and summoned the Russian ambassador.

In a post on Facebook, ambassador Mikhail Galuzin called the protest "unacceptable". The head of Russia's government "visits Russian regions as he sees fit," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists. "There is political will on Russia's part to develop good relations with Japan, we value our economic cooperation very much," Peskov added.

World oil supply

World liquids production is estimated to have increased by 1.1 percent during June-2021 to average at 94.49 mb/d, reflecting higher output from both OPEC as well as non-OPEC producers. Non-OPEC producers increased production by 0.52 mb/d to reach 68.46 mb/d led by higher production from OECD countries and a marginal increase in output by non-OECD producers. OPEC increased production by 0.59 mb/d to an average of 26.0 mb/d, resulting in a market share of 27.6 percent.

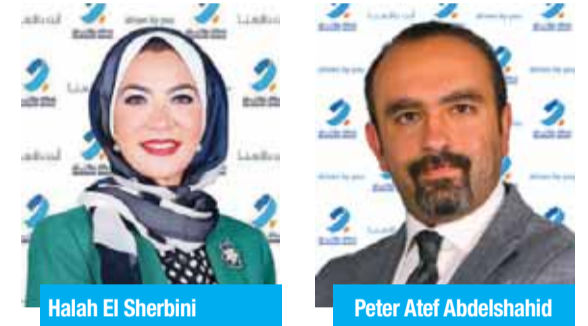
In its monthly report, OPEC lowered its forecast for 2021 non-OPEC liquids supply by 26 tb/d to a yearly growth of 0.81 mb/d to average at 63.76 mb/d. The decline in expectation mainly reflected a fall in supply from Indonesia (-19 tb/d), UK (-17 tb/d), Azerbaijan (-14 tb/d), Brazil (-13 tb/d) and Norway (-11 tb/d). These declines were partially offset by higher expected supply from Canada (+24 tb/d) and the US (+23 tb/d). In its latest Short Term Energy Outlook, the IEA said that US drilling activity will likely accelerate towards the end of the year if prices continue to remain elevated. Production is expected to reach 11.2 mb/d in Q3-2021 and gradually to 12.2 mb/d until Q4-2022.

OPEC oil production & spare capacity

OPEC crude oil production witnessed a broad-based recovery during June-2021 with almost all the producers reporting an increase in output during the month. Overall production increased by 586 tb/d to 26.0 mb/d, according to OPEC secondary sources. Data from Bloomberg showed a much stronger growth of 855 tb/d to an average of 26.5 mb/d. According to Bloomberg, this was the highest production rate from OPEC over the last fourteen months. Production growth during the month was mainly led by Saudi Arabia that increased production by 425 tb/d to an average of 8.9 mb/d. UAE, Iran and Kuwait also raised production collectively by close to 100 tb/d, whereas Angola reported a production growth of 36 tb/d. The increase in production in Saudi Arabia came as the Kingdom unwinds its voluntary cuts of 1 mb/d over the three months that ends in July-2021.

The speculation over OPEC+ agreement came to a rest after the producers agreed on new production allocations from May-2022 and decided to gradually increase production by 0.4 mb/d each month starting August-2021 until December-2021, adding 2 mb/d by the end of the year. The group also aims to fully phase out production cuts by September-2022. According to reports, the new output quotas would be applicable to several members from May-2022 including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Kuwait and Iraq.

According to reports, UAE's baseline production would be increased to 3.5 mb/d from May-2022 from the current 3.168 mb/d. Similarly, Saudi Arabia and Russia's base production would increase to 11.5 mb/d each from the current 11 mb/d, whereas Iraq and Kuwait's baselines would increase by 150 tb/d each. Nigeria's and Algeria's baseline productions are also expected to be revised and the overall OPEC+ production policy would be adjusted when Iran returns to the oil market when it reaches a deal on its nuclear programs.



Halah El Sherbini

Peter Atif Abdelshahid

Burgan Bank launches HR mobile app 'Burgani'

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank announced the launch of "Burgani", its HR mobile application as part of its strategic digital transformation initiative aiming to automate HR processes and boost employee's engagement. Burgan HR application is a new milestone that translates the bank's vision to maximize its stakeholder value by leveraging operational and technological capabilities and support internal corporate functions.

The application was developed through a robust collaboration between the HRD Group and the IT Group that helped design the application's features using advanced technological solutions. As Burgan Bank views its employees as the most important asset of the organization, the HRD Group works continuously on increasing HR capabilities and enhancing the means of communication and collaboration with the workforce.

The new platform that was conceived to automate most of the tasks in the human resources function, offers the employees a very convenient experience by simplifying and easing HR processes. Burgan HR application allows employees to request and access various HR related documents easily, which guarantees faster and more effective processes and increases productivity by reducing or eliminating paperwork. These more environmentally friendly processes also support Burgan's vision and strategy of a sustainable operating model at all business levels and in all areas. Burgan HR application also provides various other convenient and useful functions that will further contribute to saving the employees time and effort and help them focus on tasks that generate greater value for the organization. Employees can for instance have access through Burgan HR App to interactive learning on the go, HR news, announcements, surveys, job vacancies, as well as to other information related to their career path and team's structure.

Commenting on the App launch, the Group Chief Human Resources & Development Officer, Halah El Sherbini, said "As mobile technology is increasingly changing the way people connect and interact with each other and reshaping organizations operations, the dynamic HRD Group at Burgan Bank keeps focusing on enhancing our HR strategy around the digital domain that supports the success of both the bank and its employees. When employees are engaged, they are more motivated and eager to do their best to help achieving the bank's objectives". She added "We are extremely proud of reaching this new strategic milestone in the process of digital transformation, and we look forward to further achievements."

Peter Atif Abdelshahid, Senior Manager-HR projects, underlined the importance of using technological solution to enhance the bank's human capital performance, and stressed "Our Burgan human resources strategy is focused on boosting employees' engagement, and this HR mobile application represents a great addition to our employees' productivity and efficiency. It will help keep them connected, well informed and autonomous. Such evolution will also grant HR more insight into employees' trends, and allow us to respond with more accuracy and higher influence."

Burgan Bank revealed that the application will be smoothly deployed in phases to guarantee an uninterrupted fluid use. The development of the App will continue to add more practical features including additional functional HR processes such as learning and development, leave management automation, and attendance monitoring. Burgan keeps working towards optimizing the use of smart technologies to speed up the bank's digital transformation that supports its sustainability and development strategy.

CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced the most recent issues of CBK Bonds and related Tawarruq at a total value of KD 200 million for three months with a rate of return at 1.125 percent.



MOSCOW: Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin yesterday visited the disputed Kuril Islands and said authorities wanted to establish a free economic zone there, sparking a protest from Japan.

Lifestyle | Features



Erla Fridriksdottir, owner and manager of the King Eider company in Stykkisholmur, harvests eiderdown on Bjarneyjar island, Breidafjordur Bay, Iceland, on July 4, 2021.



11-year-old Bryndis Jonsdottir cuddles an eider duckling.



10-year-old Arnar Hrafnsson and his cousins dry the eiderdown in the open air. — AFP photos

Iceland, home to world's most expensive feather treasure

On a remote island in Breidafjordur Bay off the west coast of Iceland, a thousand-year-old harvest takes place - the hunt for elusive eiderdown, used to make some of the world's best duvets and quilts. The handpicked down sells for thousands of euros a kilo, catering to those looking for exclusive products. Every summer, nearly 400 Icelandic farmers comb through hollow surfaces in the rock, on the sand or in the tall grass to unearth a few handfuls of the grey feathers of this polar duck.

From May onwards, the eider comes to nest in sparsely populated marine landscapes around much of Iceland's coast where there is seaweed to feed its ducklings. "When there are eggs, we only take a part of the down. And when the eider has already left the nest, we take everything," Erla Fridriksdottir, head of King Eider, one of the country's main exporters, told AFP.

The eider, a sea duck from the sub-arctic oceans, leaves a trail behind consisting of a natural treasure: One of the warmest natural fibers on the planet, both light and highly insulating. The female, with her dark brown plumage with black stripes - similar to that of a mallard but slightly larger - releases the down from her breast and lines her nest with it to insulate it during incubation.



Fridriksdottir holds with two fingers one light and small feather of eiderdown at the King Eider company in Stykkisholmur, Iceland, on July 5, 2021.

Meticulous cleaning

About 60 nests are needed to produce one kilo of down - a quilt needs between 600 and 1,600 grams, depending on the quality chosen. Worldwide, the annual harvest of eiderdown is no more than four tons, three quarters of which comes from Iceland, by far the world's largest producer, ahead of Canada and other countries bordering the Arctic.

There are five Icelandic companies exporting eiderdown, according to the Eider Farming Association, but around 15 companies in total involved in some capacity in its production. On the island of Bjarneyjar, the tradition of searching for abandoned nests has been passed down for generations. The local practice is said to have started in Iceland as



A woman hand-cleans eiderdown feathers at the King Eider company.

Vikings from Norway settled on the island at the end of the 9th century.

Since 1847, the eider has been fully protected in Iceland, as hunting and picking its eggs are prohibited. But it still faces dangers, as predators such as seagulls, crows, eagles, minks and foxes eat the sea ducks or their eggs. "We feel that the ducks like to have their nests close to us, where we are staying," Jon Fridriksson, Erla's brother, told AFP, adding that it could be a strategy to keep predators at bay.

Once harvested, the down is dried in the open air so it doesn't mold. Then Fridriksdottir's employees begin the first stage of sterilizing and cleaning the down in a huge oven at a temperature of 120 degrees Celsius for eight hours. "When the down comes in here, it's



Pall Jonsson puts eiderdown in a spinning machine that slowly catapults all the brittle dirt out of it at the King Eider company.

mostly going to be full of grass, eggshells and all kinds of things from the ocean... and we put it in the oven to kill off any organism and it (the high temperature) also makes the grass brittle," Pall Jonsson, in charge of the machines at the workshop in the nearby town of Stykkisholmur, told AFP.

In a second step, rotating machines remove other dirt from the down by pressing it against a thin wire mesh. As a last touch, expert hands - which no technology has been able to replace for this process so far - do another thorough cleaning. Even for the most experienced, it takes four to five hours to clean out a kilo of down by hand. Finally, the down feathers are washed with water and disinfected, again by hand, before being wrung out and dried.

4,000-euro blankets

While world famous, eiderdown production is a drop in the bucket of the world's total down production, estimated at 175,000 tons per year, according to the International Down and Feather Bureau. According to Icelandic law, eiderdown must pass strict quality controls before being sold, ensuring cleanliness, smell, color and consistency.

"You have to be able to pick up a 40-50-gram package between two fingers and if it remains intact and does not fall out, then the down is of good quality," Asgeir Jonsson, one of the inspectors, explains. In addition to its rarity, the production of eiderdown - from its manual collection to its rigorous cleaning - helps explain its high price.

A simple duvet containing 800 grams of feathers is sold for about 640,000 Icelandic kronur (\$5,116). The customers "are often nature lovers and people who care about the environment," Fridriksdottir said. "It is the only one that is harvested, the other down is often a by-product of the food industry" added Fridriksdottir, whose small business mostly ships to Germany and Japan. — AFP



A skateboarder practices at Ariake Urban sports park ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, on July 21, 2021. — AFP photos

Skateboarders hope Olympic gold changes minds in 'strict' Japan

At the Tokyo park where skateboarding's first Olympic gold medalist, Yuto Horigome, learned to grind, ollie and kick-flip as a child, the sport is now banned. It's just one example of Japan's strict attitude to skateboarding, which fans say they hope will change following Horigome's victory on Sunday. The 22-year-old's top score in the street competition at Tokyo 2020 sparked an ecstatic reaction in Japanese media and praise from Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who said his tricks had "enchanted the world".

But teenage skaters in Tokyo told AFP there are not enough skate parks to practise in, and they are often ordered to put their boards away. After he landed three huge tricks in a row to beat American favourite Nyjah Huston, Horigome was asked about the Tokyo district where he grew up, not far from the Olympic skateboarding venue. He singled out Ojima-Komatsugawa Park, a green space with benches, steps and slopes, where a signboard now warns: "No skateboarding or riding of motorized vehicles."

Despite the ban, a lone 16-year-old turned up with his skateboard to celebrate Horigome's achievement on

Sunday. "I came here to train, as the victory rekindled my motivation," the high-school student, Taiki Taniyama, told AFP. "I'm so proud of him... I know it's hard, but I want to skateboard like him in the future," he smiled.

'Supposedly dangerous'

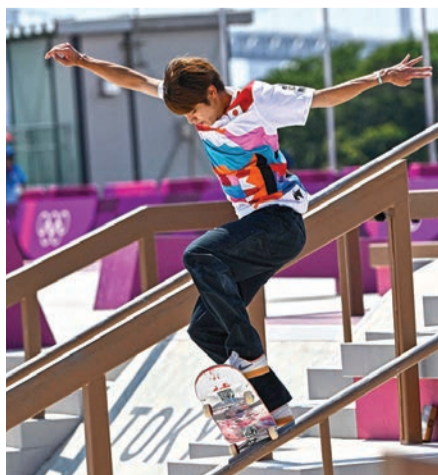
The homeboy's win made top news in Japan. The Mainichi and Yomiuri dailies issued extra editions full of photos and stories about the triumphant return home for Horigome, who is now based in the United States. "Congratulations for becoming the first gold medalist! You enchanted the world with a series of stunning tricks," Prime Minister Suga tweeted. And the Nikkan Daily daily hailed "A major step for skateboarding with Horigome's gold."

But teenage skaters in Tokyo's western suburbs told a different story. "Japan is quite strict when it comes to skate-

boarding," Yuma Nagase, 19, told AFP outside Komazawa Skate Park. "It would be great if it could be more relaxed after this win." The skate park is currently closed because of a virus state of emergency in the capital, which has also forced most Olympic events behind closed doors. There "aren't enough" dedicated skate parks in Japan, Nagase said. "For example, here, when we gather to have fun and skate, some security person would randomly come and complain that we are too loud, and ask us to stop."

Deo Suzuki, also 19, said he hoped the victory would help Japan change its views on the sport. "There are many places in Japan where skateboarding is banned, because it's supposedly dangerous. I hope it will get more open, and more skateparks will open," he said. After his win, Horigome said he became interested in skateboarding thanks to his father Ryota, who would take him to Ojima-Komatsugawa Park to skate.

Ryota told reporters his son's accomplishment had not yet sunk in. "This is too great a thing. It just does not feel real," he told reporters. "His biggest strength is that he skates and has more fun than anyone else." And the win may have already inspired Japan's future skateboarding stars. Japanese-Brazilian 14-year-old Ayumi Yamaguchi-Irisu, practicing outside Komazawa Skate Park with her younger brother under their mother's watch, called Horigome's feat "amazing". "I just started skateboarding. It made me want to try harder... I started practicing ollies today, and I've got the feeling that I succeeded after watching (Horigome) do it." - AFP



Japan's Yuto Horigome competes in the men's street final during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games on Sunday.

'Hooked': Blind Japanese skateboarder going by feel

Ryusei Ouchi has all the usual trappings of a skateboarder - the baggy T-shirt, the low-slung trousers, the flat-peak baseball hat. But he also skates with something else: A cane. The 21-year-old, who goes by Jido, has lost 95 percent of his sight because of a condition called retinitis pigmentosa. But that hasn't stopped him skateboarding, or following the sport that debuted at the Tokyo Olympics this week.

Ouchi is a regular at a skate park in Tokorozawa, north of Tokyo, where he confidently performs tricks. He lays down the board and pushes off with his cane out in front, swiping from side to side to feel out the obstacles. "Most people can see what it will be like just by looking at it," he told AFP. "But in my case, I have to first try it out. I try touching, I try riding."

He started skateboarding as a teenager, when a friend offered to let him try his board. "I tried skateboarding for the first time and then got hooked," he said. It wasn't easy to get into the sport, which involves regular tumbles and injuries even for those without a visual impairment. "People who can see get injured too, but the fact that I can't see has led to more injuries," said Ouchi, who is training as an acupuncturist. "I don't know there's an object there because I don't see it, and I'll run into it, collide and be injured."

'An amazing feeling'

To try to keep himself safe, especially at new venues, Ouchi does a careful survey of the site before he starts. "First I check the skatepark's environment by walking. If necessary, I touch it using my hands and feet. I then try to memorize the layout (of the park), and imagine it," he said. A lot of Ouchi's practice involves visualizing his skating and his tricks. "I just think about what I want to do," he said. "My skateboarding, whether it is a trick, the method or style, is just my imagination put into shape."

Despite his preparations, he's suffered injuries from bruises to fractures, but says it "doesn't matter how painful it is, how tough it is". "When I achieve (the move) I was aiming for, it's an amazing feeling." The skateboarder is following the sport's Olympic debut and said he was thrilled when Japan's Yuto Horigome had scooped the first-ever gold medal. "I found it really heroic," he said.



This picture taken on July 21, 2020 shows visually impaired skateboarder Ryusei Ouchi taking part in a practice session at the Haleo Skateboarding Park in Saitama in the Tokyo suburbs. — AFP photos

And Ouchi has his own skateboarding ambitions - he wants blind-skateboarding to be registered as a Paralympic sport. It's "a bit like a personal project," he said. "I think it is something like an order from God, to do my best to get it registered as a sport." — AFP



Ouchi reacts after a fall during a practice session.

Pollution turns Argentina lake bright pink

A lagoon in Argentina's southern Patagonia region has turned bright pink in a striking, but frightful phenomenon experts and activists blame on pollution by a chemical used to preserve prawns for export. The color is caused by sodium sulfite, an anti-bacterial product used in fish factories, whose waste is blamed for contaminating the Chubut river that feeds the Corfo lagoon and other water sources in the region, according to activists.

Residents have long complained of foul smells and other environmental issues around the river and lagoon. "Those who should be in control are the ones who authorize the poisoning of people," environmental activist Pablo Lada told AFP, blaming the government for the mess. The lagoon turned pink last week and remained the abnormal color yesterday, said Lada, who lives in the city of Trelew, not far from the lagoon and some 1,400 km south of Buenos Aires.

Environmental engineer and virologist Federico Restrepo told AFP the coloration was due to sodium sulfite in fish waste, which by law, should be treated before being dumped. The lagoon, which is not used for recreation, receives runoff from the Trelew industrial park and has turned the color of fuchsia before.

But residents of the area are fed up. In recent weeks, residents of Rawson, neighboring Trelew, blocked roads used



Aerial view of a lagoon that turned pink due to a chemical used to help shrimp conservation in fishing factories near Trelew, in the Patagonian province of Chubut, Argentina, on July 23, 2021. — AFP photos

by trucks carrying processed fish waste through their streets to treatment plants on the city's outskirts. "We get dozens of trucks daily, the residents are getting tired of it," said Lada. With Rawson off

limits due to the protest, provincial authorities granted authorization for factories to dump their waste instead in the Corfo lagoon.

"The reddish color does not cause

damage and will disappear in a few days," environmental control chief for Chubut province, Juan Micheloud, told AFP last week. Sebastian de la Vallina, planning secretary for the city of Trelew

disagreed: "It is not possible to minimize something so serious." Plants that process fish for export, mainly prawns and hake, generate thousands of jobs for Chubut province, home to some 600,000 people.



Dozens of foreign fishing companies operate in the area in waters under Argentina's Atlantic jurisdiction. "Fish processing generates work... it's true. But these are multi-million-dollar profit companies that don't want to pay freight to take the waste to a treatment plant that already exists in Puerto Madryn, 35 miles away, or build a plant closer," said Lada. — AFP



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, her husband Joachim Sauer, Bavaria's State Premier Markus Soeder and his wife Karin Soeder, arrive for the opening ceremony of the annual Bayreuth Festival featuring the music of German composer Richard Wagner on Sunday at the festival theatre (Richard-Wagner-Festspielhaus) in Bayreuth, southern Germany. — AFP

Lyniv becomes first woman conductor at Bayreuth Festival

Conductor Oksana Lyniv on Sunday became the first woman to hold the baton in the 145-year history of Germany's renowned Bayreuth opera festival, with Chancellor Angela Merkel in the audience. Lyniv, 43, from Ukraine, opened the festival dedicated to the works of Richard Wagner by conducting a new production of "The Flying Dutchman" directed by Dmitri Tcherniakov.

Merkel, a longtime Wagner fan, attended the premiere dressed in an orange jacket and a floor-length black skirt, along with her husband Joachim Sauer. Asked last week how she felt about her appearance at the festival, Lyniv told the Berliner Zeitung newspaper: "A score by Richard Wagner is a major professional challenge for any conductor. Gender is irrelevant."

But she also said she was grateful for the set-up of the Bayreuth theatre, which famously covers the orchestra with a hood to conceal it from the audience. "It won't be about what I'm wearing, how I'm conducting. It will just be about whether it's working or not, about the sound alone," she told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung.

After being cancelled last year due to COVID-19, the festival will play out in front of a smaller audience than usual, with only 911 people attending the opening performance. Audience members must be fully vaccinated or able to show a recent negative test result, and all must wear face masks. The famous Bayreuth festival chorus will also feature only in the form of recordings.

Wagner's musical and artistic legacy from the 19th century is infused with anti-Semitism, misogyny and proto-Nazi ideas of racial purity. His grandiose, nationalistic works were later embraced by the Third Reich, and Adolf Hitler called him his favorite composer. Nevertheless, in purely musical terms, Wagner's achievements are undeniable and his operas figure in the standard repertoire of houses around the world. — AFP

Almodovar, Campion to compete for top prize at Venice film festival

Films by Jane Campion, Pedro Almodovar and Paolo Sorrentino will compete among other international entries for the Venice Film Festival's top Golden Lion prize next month, organizers said. Twenty-one films will compete during the 78th edition of the high-profile competition to be held September 1-11, with Almodovar's "Madres Paralelas" (Parallel Mothers) starring Penelope Cruz opening the festival.

In the running is Campion, whose latest movie about a fraternal feud on a Montana ranch—"The Power of the Dog" starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Kirsten Dunst—comes after a hiatus from film since 2009. The directorial debut of US actress Maggie Gyllenhaal, "The Lost Daughter," based on a novel by Elena Ferrante, will also compete, alongside other US entries by directors Paul Schrader ("The Card Counter") and Ana Lily Amirpour ("Mona Lisa and the Blood Moon").

A record five films are from Italy, including Sorrentino's "E Stata la Mano di Dio" (It was the Hand of God), shot in Naples and starring the director's frequent collaborator, Toni Servillo. Back in the top competition this year is Mexico's Michel Franco with "Sundown" starring Tim Roth. The filmmaker won the festival's second most important award, the Grand Jury Prize, last year for his unsettling look at race and class and race in Mexico, "Nuevo Orden" (New Order).

Films from France, Argentina, Chile, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Ukraine and Venezuela will also feature in the main competition. South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, whose "Parasite" won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2020, will preside over the jury. — AFP

New Shyamalan horror flick 'Old' tops N America box office

New M Night Shyamalan horror-thriller "Old" aged to perfection at the top of the North American box office in its debut weekend, taking in an estimated \$16.5 million, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday. The movie, about a family that becomes trapped on a beach where they begin to age precipitously, stars Gael Garcia Bernal and Vicky Krieps, and beat out the weekend's second-highest moneymaker "Snake Eyes" by more than \$3 million.

Paramount's latest G I Joe installment, also in its debut weekend, took in an estimated \$13.4 million, recounting the origin story of its titular character Snake Eyes' involvement with the famed squad. In third place was Disney superhero flick "Black Widow" starring Scarlett Johansson, which earned an estimated \$11.6 million.

Last week's top earner, the Warner Bros live action/animated "Space Jam: A

New Legacy," fell to fourth with \$9.6 million. The movie sees NBA superstar LeBron James teaming up with Bugs Bunny and other Looney Tunes characters in a high-stakes basketball game against a rogue artificial-intelligence entity threatening his son. And in fifth was Universal's "F9: The Fast Saga," at \$4.6 million, bringing the five-week domestic total of the Vin Diesel/John Cena action thriller to more than \$160 million.

Rounding out the top 10 were: "Escape Room: Tournament of Champions" (\$3.4 million) "Boss Baby: Family Business" (\$2.7 million) "The Forever Purge" (\$2.3 million) "A Quiet Place: Part II" (\$1.3 million) "Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain" (\$830,000) — AFP



(From left) Luca Faustino Rodriguez, Aaron Pierre, M Night Shyamalan, Kylie Begley, Gael Garcia Bernal, Vicky Krieps, Rufus Sewell, Kailen Jude, Alex Wolff, Nolan River, Alexa Swinton, Mikaya Kenzie Fisher and Nikki Amuka-Bird attend the New York premiere of "Old" at Jazz at Lincoln Center on July 19, 2021 in New York City. — AFP

A DUMPSTER LID OR TWO WON'T STOP A COCKATOO FROM FEASTING

One of the key ways humans acquire new skills is by observing proficient individuals in action: think of a child learning by watching older siblings, or budding athletes emulating the techniques of established stars. Turns out the same is true of cockatoos, according to a study published Thursday in Science. A few members of the highly intelligent Australian bird species figured out how to pry open trash cans to forage for food, then rapidly spread the gospel to neighboring groups across the suburbs of Sydney until it became more common knowledge, the paper said.

Lead author Barbara Klump of the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior told AFP this phenomenon is known as "social learning," but it's usually hard to document in wild animals, either because the behaviors are rare, or there are other

possible explanations like genetics.

The idea for the new research came about when one member of the team, Richard Major of the Australian Museum, made a phone video of a sulphur-crested cockatoo using its beak and foot to lift the heavy lid of a bin, flip it over, and feast on leftover foods. "We were really intrigued because it's a novel foraging innovation, a novel way to access resources in a city," said Klump.

They realized they had a unique opportunity to systematically study the behavior, "because the birds are everywhere on the east coast of Australia, and the bins are exactly the same everywhere," creating uniform conditions scientists refer to as a "natural experiment". First, they needed to know if all cockatoos could open the wheeled trash cans.

They ran an online survey in which residents of the Greater Sydney and

Wollongong region were asked where they lived, if they'd seen the behavior before or not, and if so when. The results showed that prior to 2018, trash opening was happening only in three suburbs, but by the end of 2019, residents were reporting it in 44 suburbs. Further analysis of the data confirmed that the skills spread first to districts adjacent to the original suburbs, then further out over time - confirming the behavior wasn't popping up at random over the city.

Cockatoo subcultures

To understand the phenomenon better, the team went out to some of the suburbs on trash collection day and recorded the birds in action, finding that opening a can is a complex, multi-step task. Within groups, only around ten percent of cockatoos could open a lid, with the rest profiting from the efforts of the "pioneer".



A sulphur-crested cockatoo opens the lid of a household waste bin in Sydney on July 20, 2021. — AFP

The task comprised five stages: the initial pry, opening the lid more fully, holding it up, walking along the bin's edge towards the hinge to lift the lid higher, and the final flip. At each of these steps, the team observed variations, such as

whether a bird opened the lid at the handle or the rim, and whether it turned its head upside down in the process or not.

Intriguingly, the specific techniques the birds used differed by where they lived, and were more similar in neighboring suburbs than those far away. "That really shows us that there are these local subcultures, like local traditions of doing things," said Klump. Cultural differences have previously been seen in other animals, such as different regional dialects in whales and monkeys, or regional variations in birdsong.

The research adds to the long list of impressive feats the birds are capable of - which includes solving complex mechanical puzzles and inventing their own dance moves to music - and sheds light on how cockatoos have adapted to the demands of urban living. In addition to their big brains, cockatoos are highly social.

Each evening, huge flocks of 50 to 500 come to roost, before dispersing in small foraging parties of five or so during the day. Sometimes these smaller parties mix with other groups, which is probably where the knowledge transfer takes place, Klump said. "They actually pay attention to each other, learn from each other and pass this knowledge along... it's interesting how similar they are in these respects to us," she added. — AFP



'Every kid plays' - how Japan fell in love with baseball

TOKYO: Every spring and summer, baseball fever hits Japan. But it's not a professional league keeping people glued to their screens — it's high-school baseball, in a country where the sport borders on a religion. It's no surprise then that baseball is returning to the Olympics at Tokyo 2020. Every weekend, at diamonds across the country, children wince with concentration as they practice, cheered on not just by parents but also passers-by, watching just as intently.

More than a century after it was introduced to the country by an American English teacher, Japan has made baseball its own, with a playing style that prioritizes teamwork, and a positively fanatical fanbase. In Japan, "every kid plays baseball, every boy plays baseball", Itaru Kobayashi, a former player for the Chiba Lotte Marines, told AFP.

"Baseball was invented in the United States, but somehow we fell in love with it," said Kobayashi, now a sports management expert and a professor at Tokyo's J F Oberlin University. The game was introduced in 1872 by a teacher at Tokyo's Kaisei Academy. But it took off after a team from the Ichiko high school beat a group of foreign residents in 1896, sparking a frenzy of interest and further matches against American teams.

"These games had symbolic significance in Japan because the Japanese were behind in many aspects, like commerce and industry," said baseball expert Robert Whiting, who has spent decades in Japan. "The message was that if we can beat the Americans at their

own game, then surely we can surpass them in other fields," added Whiting, author of "Tokyo Junkie: 60 Years of Bright Lights and Back Alleys... and Baseball."

Koshien mania

By the 1930s, a professional league had developed, and half-a-million people lined Tokyo's streets in 1934 to welcome Babe Ruth and 14 other American baseball players on an all-star tour. After World War II, baseball became Japan's national pastime, with a particular reverence reserved for amateur play seen as untainted by money. The devotion persists to this day.

Fumihiko Kaneko, 31, arrived four hours early for a recent Sunday match in the Tokyo Big Six university league, despite already having tickets. He was thrilled at the chance to watch historic arch-rivals Keio and Waseda face off in the league, Japan's oldest. "I've been a baseball fan since I was very little," he told AFP. "Today's match has a history of 100 years!"

Japan's favorite baseball events though are the high school tournaments known as Koshien, after the stadium where they are held each spring and summer. Koshien games have sometimes claimed 50 percent of television viewers, and their sound on radios in ramen shops and local stores is as much a part of Japan's summer as the buzz of cicadas. "It's like the World Series and the Superbowl combined," said Whiting of the tournaments that air on national television for hours each day over a fortnight.

The fervor can have a darker side, and there are



TOKYO: This picture taken on May 30, 2021 shows members of the high school baseball team Ota Dreams huddled together after their baseball game against the Michiduka team at the Tamagawa Green Zone Baseball Field in Tokyo. — AFP

persistent concerns about the intensity of training and pressure on young players. "I don't really have fun memories of practicing baseball," said Takuya Honda, a worker at a recruitment company who

played for 12 years but never made it to Koshien. He eventually quit the sport, only recently taking it back up. "It doesn't matter if I make mistakes now... I finally enjoy playing baseball." — AFP

Norwegian Blummenfelt wins chaotic Olympic triathlon

TOKYO: Kristian Blummenfelt of Norway won the men's triathlon Olympic title yesterday in a race marred by a bizarre false start. The 27-year-old — the first Norwegian to medal in the triathlon — crossed the line in a time of 1hr 45min 4sec before raising the tape above his head and throwing himself to the ground in celebration.

Victory came as no surprise to Blummenfelt. "When I was standing on the pontoon ready to go," he responded as to when he thought he would win. Jack Yee of Britain took silver 11 seconds behind the winner whilst Hayden Wilde of New Zealand took bronze.

But the main talking point after the race was the chaotic start, which saw around two thirds of the 56 competitors dive into the water and set off on the swimming leg only to be hauled back. The farcical scenes were caused

by a media boat filming the competitors lined up before diving into the water for the 1.5 kilometer swimming leg.

The pilot of the boat carried on his trajectory oblivious to the fact the siren had gone for the start of the race. Whilst Yee and others who had been filmed were able to dive in to clear water the triathletes further along were blocked by the boat, which also reversed dangerously close to athletes already in the water.

Those able to had begun their race but were recalled once organizers realized the full extent of the disruption. "I saw the boat like going past the pontoon and I was like surprised that I had this start so quickly and I saw on my left side that there was the camera boat in front of mid-group," said Blummenfelt. "So when I swam the first 50 meters I was aware that this couldn't be right and I was keep-



TOKYO: Norway's Kristian Blummenfelt celebrates finishing first to win gold in the men's individual triathlon competition during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Odaiba Marine Park in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

ing a little bit steady and I looked at (it) as a positive thing, as I hadn't been swimming for 30 minutes. It was good practice."

Wilde for his part said it was "kind of good but kind of annoying." "It is what it is and you've just got to keep

composed, and sometimes that happens and you've just got to roll with the punches," he said. It was the first time since triathlon made its Olympic debut in Sydney in 2000 there had been a false start. "It's simply remarkable to see that," the announcers said. — AFP

Champions Fiji in 'tough day' as favorites unbeaten at rugby sevens

TOKYO: Defending champions Fiji set up a pool B decider with reigning silver medalists Britain after scraping past hosts Japan and outgunning Canada on the opening day of the Olympic men's rugby sevens at Tokyo Stadium yesterday.

Fellow sevens powerhouses New Zealand and South Africa, as well as the United States, also came through action unbeaten, but Japan went on to suffer a second loss to drastically slash their Cup hopes. After winning the inaugural sevens competition in Rio in 2016, beating Britain 43-7 in the final, Fiji came to Tokyo as hot favorites to nail down back-to-back gold.

But they made a shaky start at an empty stadium in hot, humid conditions, almost undone by two Fijian exports in the Japan side in their opening match. Tries by Fiji-born Lote Tuqiri and Kameli Soejima had given the host nation a 19-12 lead, with alarm

bells ringing that an upset mirroring Japan's stunning victory over New Zealand in the opening round of the Rio Games was on the cards.

But a late brace of tries by Waisea Nacuqu pushed Fiji back into the lead and an eventual 24-19 victory. The Fijians then laboured past Canada, who lost 24-0 to Britain, 28-14 to set up a pool decider with the British team today.

"It was a tough day at the office for us, a lot of mistakes," said Fiji's Meli Derenalagi. "But I know the boys will try to pull up their socks. It's the difference between the world stage and Olympic stage, teams bring out their best players to come and participate here. The boys are adapting to it and I'm sure we'll come out harder tomorrow. The boys are trying to give hope back to the people at home and put a smile on their faces."

Britain followed up on their win



TOKYO: Canada's Matt Mullins (left) and Connor Braid tackle Fiji's Josua Vakurunabili in the men's pool B rugby sevens match between Fiji and Canada during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Tokyo Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

over Canada by blanking Japan 34-0 and will head into the final pool game against the Fijians full of confidence. "Hopefully we can get a bit of revenge," said Britain's Stade Francais-bound Harry Glover in reference to the 2016 final against Fiji. South Africa,

bronze medalists in 2016, overcame the absence of coach Neil Powell — in isolation after a COVID-19 outbreak and dishing out advice by live laptop feed — to comfortably beat Ireland 33-14 before dispatching Kenya 14-5 in a hard-fought game. — AFP

Fraser-Pryce bids for sprinting immortality at Tokyo Olympics

TOKYO: Jamaican "Pocket Rocket" Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce is juggling being the fastest woman alive with motherhood as she bids for a third 100m Olympic gold — 13 years after her first triumph. The 34-year-old, who stands just 1.52 meters (5 feet) tall, is set for a mouthwatering clash in Tokyo with compatriot Elaine Thompson-Herah and Britain's 200m world champion Dina Asher-Smith.

US sprint star Sha'Carri Richardson was ruled out of the 100m in Japan after testing positive for marijuana at the US Olympic trials. Fraser-Pryce won the first of her two Olympic 100m titles in Beijing way back in 2008, becoming the first Jamaican to win the event after previous generations of sprinters including Merlene Ottey and Juliet Cuthbert came up short.

She won her first world championships title in 2009 before her career was disrupted by a six-month ban the following year after she tested positive for banned substance oxycodone, which she said was as a result of medication for toothache.

Fraser-Pryce retained her 100m Olympic crown in London in 2012 but failed in her hat-trick bid at

Rio in 2016, taking bronze behind Thompson-Herah. She subsequently took time out to have a baby but returned in style to win a fourth 100m world title in 2019, also taking gold in the 4x100m relay, which was her ninth world championships gold.

The Jamaican veteran comes to Tokyo in fine fettle after running a personal best of 10.63 seconds in "super spikes" in June to become the second-fastest woman of all time behind late US sprinter Florence Griffith Joyner, who timed 10.49sec. "(A time of) 10.6 has been a dream, a goal," she said. "I've been working so hard, been so patient and to see it finally unfold, I'm just ecstatic." American Carmelita Jeter, whose time of 10.64sec she beat, congratulated Fraser-Pryce on her performance.

Fastest woman alive

"You have come back from having a child and showed the world how talented and driven you are," Jeter tweeted. "You are officially the fastest woman alive. Keep motivating these young queens." Tokyo will be Fraser-Pryce's first Olympics as a mother — she gave birth to her son Zyon in 2017 — and says it has helped her put her life in perspective.

"It doesn't matter what happens on the field, my biggest accomplishment will always be my son and being able to come back to competition after having my son is also a big accomplishment," she told the BBC. "And giving other female athletes hope of whatever it is you want to do in life, you do not



TOKYO: Jamaica's flag bearers Ricardo Brown (left) and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce leads the delegation during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games opening ceremony's parade of athletes, at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo on July 23, 2021. — AFP

allow anybody to dictate what you do and when you stop. You can keep going."

Fraser-Pryce grew up in a deprived area of Jamaica's capital Kingston plagued by gang violence and has spoken about how she did not always have enough to eat. The sprinter has a degree in child and adolescent development and is passionate about improving children's lives. — AFP

Young track and field guns ready to shine in post-Bolt Olympic era

TOKYO: Usain Bolt may have hung up his spikes in 2017, but the Tokyo Olympics are the first summer Games in 17 years not to feature the incomparable Jamaican sprinter. In his absence, a raft of up-and-coming track and field stars headlined by Swedish pole vaulter Armand Duplantis, US sprinter Noah Lyles, and recent 400m hurdles world record setters Karsten Warholm and Sydney McLaughlin head to Japan looking to build their own legacy.

While a 20-year-old Bolt was a bit player in the 2004 Athens Olympics, eliminated in the first round of the 200m, he went on to win eight golds spanning the 2008, 2012 and 2016 Games. There is no doubt that the sport has struggled to fill his sizeable spikes.

So it is a tragedy that the 10 days of athletics starting in Tokyo on Friday will take place without spectators due to anti-COVID-19 measures, because they feature a group of young stars more than capable of taking up at least some of Bolt's mantle. Adding to the excitement, advances in running shoe technology have ushered in a bevy of middle- and long-distance specialists set on hunting world records whenever they take to the track.

Gold over new record

Duplantis has taken the men's pole vault into another stratosphere by setting not only a new world record of 6.18m indoors last year, but also vaulting 6.15m outdoors to finally improve by a centimetre Sergey Bubka's previous best set in 1994.

"Winning is the only goal really," the 21-year-old said when asked whether more records were the target in Tokyo. "In a dream world I would like to go and break the world record and do something very legendary at the Games. But it's my first Games, I just want to win, that's the only thing on my mind."

The 400m hurdles is set to be one of the stand-out track events for both men and women, after Norway's Warholm and American McLaughlin both posted new world records in the run-in to Tokyo. Both have close rivals breathing down their necks in the shape of American duo Rai Benjamin and reigning world and Olympic champion Dalilah Muhammad.

Trayvon Bromell is bidding to become the first US sprinter to win the Olympic men's 100m since Justin Gatlin in 2004 — and for once, there is no serious Jamaican threat. In contrast, in the women's event Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce is bidding to win gold for Jamaica for the third time.

Lyles is focusing on the 200m, although he will face stiff competition from compatriot Erriyon Knighton, whose 19.88sec in May at the age of just 17 broke two world 200m age-group bests previously held by Bolt.

Hassan tries for triple

Warholm's Norway teammate Jakob Ingebrigtsen, just 20, is now a genuine rival to the strong east African contingent with his fast finish after setting European records at 1500m and 5,000m and collecting continental titles.

"My goal is long term, I want to be able to win gold in major championships," he said. "Last season was not about winning but about running fast. This year is the other way around for Tokyo. I need to make sure I will be at my best in Tokyo." — AFP



Andino beats Florence in heavyweight US surfing match-up at Olympics

ICHINOMIYA: Kolohe Andino ousted fellow American John Florence in the third round of the surfing competition at the Tokyo Olympics yesterday, as Australia's Stephanie Gilmore suffered a shock exit in the women's event.

The heavyweight US pair were forced into an early showdown after Florence failed to qualify from his first-round heat and had to advance through the repechage. But Andino set the tone with a massive aerial maneuver as soon as the contest got under way, leaving two-time world champion Florence with too much work to do.

"I was paddling into that wave going, 'what am I doing?' This wave looks terrible," Andino said of his gargantuan first effort, which scored 8.50 from the judges. "It's nice that the judges rewarded it. John and I, our best surfing is aerial surfing, so it was going to be an air show no matter what."

Andino and Florence both underwent surgery just weeks before the Games, with Andino recovering from an ankle injury and Florence coming back from a

hurt knee. Surfing legend Kelly Slater — who has 11 world titles — was on standby to replace either one of them on the US team.

Florence, who said he felt "pretty close to normal" this week, accepted defeat with good grace. "I'd rather see each other go further, but that's what happens," he said. "You come to these events to surf against the best in the world, so I'm not bummed that we came up against each other. That's the challenge of being here."

Gilmore exit

In the women's competition, Australia's Stephanie Gilmore, who has seven world titles to her name, admitted she had been "too picky" after making an early exit. Gilmore was bundled out in the third round by unheralded South African Bianca Buitendag — seeded 17 out of 20 surfers.

Buitendag took the lead at Tsurigasaki Beach by jumping on the first big wave of the contest, and Gilmore was left to rue her decision to let her have it. "I looked at that wave and I thought, 'it doesn't look

that good', so I let her have it and she turned it into a seven. That was the most frustrating thing for me," said Gilmore, one of the favorites for the gold medal. "There were a lot of waves but maybe not a lot of good ones. But in saying that, I probably got too picky."

Gilmore was joined in an early exit by French world number two Johanne Defay, who lost to Portugal's Yolanda Hopkins. The two giant-killings opened up the field for American world number one Carissa Moore, who safely came through her contest against Peru's Sofia Mulanovich. "It was crazy to see some of the top seeds bow out early this morning," said Moore. "It just goes to show that these conditions are very tricky."

But Gilmore was left with nothing but regrets after failing in her bid to add the Olympic gold medal to her bulging collection of world titles. Buitendag, who needed to come through the repechage second round to reach the head-to-head knockout stage, was happy to throw caution to the wind.

"I had nothing to lose, absolutely no



CHIBA: USA's Kolohe Andino crides a wave during the men's Surfing third round at the Tsurigasaki Surfing Beach, in Chiba, yesterday during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. —AFP

pressure," said the 1.85-metre (six feet) South African. "I'm the underdog, coming in as the 17th seed for this event. So it

was a really comfortable spot to be in. It takes away all the nerves and pressure. It just seemed to go my way." —AFP

Bigger than Neymar? Brazilian surfer Medina eyes golden future

ICHINOMIYA: Brazilian surfer Gabriel Medina thinks he could be as big as football superstar Neymar in his home country if he wins Olympic gold, with the sport enjoying a popularity boom. Medina became the first Brazilian to win the world title in 2014, catapulting him into the national spotlight and igniting an unprecedented run of success for the country's surfers.

Medina, Italo Ferreira and Adriano de Souza have all claimed the world title since then, but Medina believes winning Olympic gold would send surfing's popularity into the stratosphere. "Probably, yeah," he said on Monday, when asked if winning the sport's first-ever gold medal would make him as popular as Neymar in Brazil. "A medal here means a lot to us because it's so

hard to be here. It's a lot of work and dedication, and they know that. And they like a winner."

Medina and Ferreira — the 2019 world champion — both booked their places in the quarter-finals yesterday, with Silvana Lima also progressing in the women's event. Brazil's phenomenal surfing success over the past decade has established the country as a global powerhouse, dubbed the "Brazilian Storm".

Medina said his 2014 world title was a life-changing experience, and sparked an interest among Brazilian fans usually more interested in football and volleyball. "After 2014, I feel like everyone started to watch and try to understand more about surfing," said Medina, who also won the world title in 2018. "Everywhere I go in Brazil, people recognize me as a surfer. It's crazy. Before 2014 was one life, and after that was a different life."

Ferreira, who learned to surf standing on the foam box his father sold fish from, believes a gold medal in Tokyo would cement Brazil's recent rise in world surfing. "It's special representing your country and having support from the Brazilian guys," he said. "To the



CHIBA: Brazil's Gabriel Medina rides a wave during a free training at the Tsurigasaki Surfing Beach, in Chiba, on July 23, 2021 during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. —AFP

surfers in Brazil, it's special because in the past, Australia and the USA has dominated surfing." —AFP

Djokovic, Osaka cruise at Olympics as women's seeds tumble

TOKYO: Novak Djokovic strolled into the third round of the Tokyo Olympics tennis tournament yesterday as Japanese star Naomi Osaka's path to gold opened up further after a host of leading women's seeds exited.

Djokovic smacked 14 aces in a 6-4, 6-3 win over Germany's 48th-ranked Jan-Lennard Struff and will play Spain's Alejandro Davidovich Fokina for a place in the quarter-finals. The world number one had led calls for organizers to push back start times to avoid the worst of the punishing heat after blazing sunshine brought the extreme weather policy into play in round one.

But a gentle breeze and slightly overcast skies at Ariake Tennis Park made for less brutal conditions on the third day of the Games. "I was struggling with certain things in the first round, but today was far more pleasant to play, just a higher level of tennis on my side," said Djokovic. "I'm very pleased with the way I felt on the court."

As Djokovic edges closer towards a Golden Grand Slam, after already snapping up the Australian Open, Roland Garros and Wimbledon titles this year, he appears unfazed by the rising pressure. "I think that once you reach the top spots in the rankings and start winning Slams, you're going to experience different kinds of expectations and pressure from yourself and people around,"

Golf idol Matsuyama looks to turn green jacket to Olympic gold

TOKYO: There will be no spectators at the Kasumigaseki Country Club next week, but golf-mad Japan will hang off Hideki Matsuyama's every drive, chip and putt as he attempts to add Tokyo Olympic gold to his Masters green jacket.

Asia's first US Masters champion is revered like a god in Japan and will have to cope with the extra pressure of carrying his nation's golden hopes when he tees off on Thursday. But he will relish teeing up on a Kasumigaseki Country Club course where he has enjoyed enormous success in the past, winning the first of his two Asia-Pacific Amateur Championships and a Japan Junior Championship.

Shigeki Maruyama, a three-time winner on the US PGA Tour and the Japan golf team's coach for the Olympics, believes the growth in the game sparked by Matsuyama winning at Augusta National would explode in Japan should he deliver a gold medal.

"The economic effect would be huge. We shouldn't put too much burden on his shoulders, but Hideki obviously grew to that level," said Matsuyama. "Everybody is proud of his accom-

plishment. Everybody in Japan will continue to have high expectations, although that's a big load for him. He gave us a big dream. That's what I think he did. Japan's experiencing a golf boom right now. Because of that, the number of junior golfers who want to become the next Hideki will increase for sure."

Matsuyama was asked recently what his aims were at Tokyo 2020. "Go there and win a gold medal," he replied. "That's my goal and I'll do my best to accomplish it. I still have an active role to play for probably another 10 to 15 years and I want to do my best to be an example and role model to all the kids and young golfers out there."

Sabalenka, Swiatek and Kvitova lose

The second seed is the highest-ranked player left in the women's draw following the shock first-round exit of world number one and Wimbledon champion Ashleigh Barty. Third seed Aryna Sabalenka was beaten by Donna Vekic in the second round yesterday.

"It definitely would mean a lot for me to win gold here, but I know it's a process," said Osaka, who next plays 2019 French Open runner-up Marketa Vondrousova. "I know that these are the best players in the world and I honestly haven't played in a while so I'm trying to take it one match at a time. But all in all I'm just really happy to be here."

Sabalenka lost 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7/3) to Vekic, while 2020 French Open champion Iga Swiatek was left in tears after going down in straight sets to Spain's Paula Badosa. Belgium's Alison Van Uytvanck knocked out Czech 10th seed Petra Kvitova in three sets as Sara Sorribes Tormo backed up her defeat



TOKYO: Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates after defeating Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff during their Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games men's singles second round tennis match at the Ariake Tennis Park in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

of Barty with a 6-1, 6-4 victory over Fiona Ferro.

Elina Svitolina was in danger of joining the exodus of top players, but the Ukrainian scrapped her way past Ajla Tomljanovic 4-6, 6-3, 6-4. French Open champion Barbora Krejickova beat Canadian teenager Leylah Fernandez 6-2, 6-4 and two-time Grand Slam winner Garbine Muguruza swatted China's Wang Qiang aside for the loss of just three games.

Alexander Zverev is a potential semi-final opponent for Djokovic. The German strolled past Colombia's Daniel Elahi Galan 6-2, 6-2 and second seed Daniil Medvedev thrashed Sumit Nagal 6-2, 6-1. Medvedev will play the volatile Fabio Fognini in round three, with Spanish sixth seed Pablo Carreno Busta getting the better of Marin Cilic 5-7, 6-4, 6-4. —AFP

where he won the Silver Cup for finishing as low amateur and placed in a tie for 27th overall behind winner Charl Schwartzel.

Matsuyama won a gold medal at the World University Games as he led Japan's team to victory. He then secured a second Asia-Pacific crown and placed 54th at the 2012 Masters, becoming the first amateur to make consecutive Masters cuts since Manny Zerman in 1991-92 and rising to amateur world number one.

After turning professional, Matsuyama shared 10th at the 2013 US Open and cracked the top 50 in the world rankings as a result. In 2014, he won the Jack Nicklaus-hosted Memorial Tournament, the first US PGA win by a Japanese golfer in six years.

In 2016 he became the first Japanese to win a World Golf Championships (WGC) individual event when he dominated a field containing 40 of the world's top 50 at the WGC-HSBC Champions in Shanghai to triumph by a record seven-stroke margin.

A year later, he finished runner-up at the US Open to Brooks Koepka and jumped to a career-high second in the world golf rankings. Also in 2017, Matsuyama won at Phoenix and gained a second WGC title in Akron, but that marked his last victory before an 87-start drought that ended with his green jacket — a first win in four years. A second at the Tokyo Olympics would be pure gold. —AFP



TOKYO: Japan's Momiji Nishiya competes in the skateboarding women's street final of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at Ariake Sports Park in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

Japan's Nishiya, 13, first women's Olympic skateboard champion

TOKYO: Japan's Momiji Nishiya became one of the youngest individual Olympic champions in history when she won the inaugural women's skateboarding gold at the age of 13 years and 330 days yesterday. Nishiya finished ahead of Brazil's Rayssa Leal — who at 13 years and 203 days could have become the youngest ever individual Olympic champion — and Japan's Funa Nakayama, 16.

Nishiya starred in the tricks section to score 15.26 and give the hosts a clean-sweep of the street discipline as skateboarding makes its Olympic debut. Her performance mirrored that of Japan teammate Yuto Horigome, who won the men's title with a stunning sequence of tricks on Sunday.

"I'm so glad to become the youngest (Japanese gold medalist) at my first Olympics... tears came to my eyes," Nishiya told reporters after receiving her medal. Skaters each have two 45-second runs on the equipment and five shots at a one-off trick. Their best four scores out of the seven make up their final total.

"I was nervous on the first run but I was not nervous later," Nishiya said, adding that she wants to claim a second gold at the Paris Olympics in 2024. But first, to celebrate her victory, she will "go and eat at a beef barbecue restaurant".

Skateboarding is one of four sports making their debut in Tokyo, along with surfing, sport climbing and karate as part of an attempt to bring the Olympics to younger audiences. US diver Marjorie Gestring remains the youngest individual Olympic champion after winning the 3m springboard at the 1936 Berlin Games at 13 years and 268 days.

Philippine finalist Margielyn Didal, 22, missed out on a medal but said competing in Tokyo was a "really, really big achievement" for her. Having started skateboarding a decade ago in the streets of Cebu city, Didal burst onto the scene in 2018 with an Asian Games gold. Didal said she would call her parents, a carpenter and a street vendor, to hear their reaction. "I know that they're proud of me," she told reporters. —AFP



Ledecky bounces back to lead pack into 1500m free final



TOKYO: USA's Kathleen Ledecky (right) reacts after breaking the Olympic record next to second-placed China's Wang Jianjiahe after heat for the women's 1500m freestyle swimming event during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Tokyo Aquatics Centre in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

TOKYO: Ultra-fit Katie Ledecky powered through a major physical test yesterday, backing up from missing gold in the Olympic 400m freestyle to post the quickest time in the 200m heats and the fastest into the 1500m final. The American great was upset by arch-rival Ariarne Titmus over 400m, raced in the morning, after the Australian reeled her in to deny the 24-year-old back-to-back titles. It was a crushing blow, but she had little time to dwell on it during her eye-popping program in Japan.

Along with the 400m, Ledecky is swimming the 200m, 800m, 1500m, and possibly a relay, a huge task driven home by her schedule yesterday. She confidently handled the task with a controlled swim in her 200m heat, topping the timesheets in 1min 55.28sec. "I'll sleep well tonight, I'll tell you that," said Ledecky. "I was just happy how it went, happy it's over, and I got the job done."

Ledecky now has to navigate a 200m semi-final today before trying to recover for the 1500m final tomorrow. "I'm excited that after I get through tomorrow morning I get an evening off," said Ledecky. "I think that's all I need to get myself a little reset going into that next morning."

Titmus, who clocked the second fastest 200 in history last month, was fourth best into the semi-finals in 1:55.88, edged by fellow Australian Madison Wilson and Canada's Penny Oleksiak. But there was a scare for Italian veteran Federica Pellegrini, who still holds the world record she set in 2009. Now 32, she scraped through in 15th overall.

Titmus admitted it was tough after her morning exploits. "I had three hours back at the village, which was hard," said told reporters. "Tonight, I knew it was going to be semi-finals in the (Tuesday) morning, so there's a bit more room to move being top 16 going through. I just did what I thought I had to do and I'll go home and be back in the morning."

'Couldn't see'

While Titmus went home, Ledecky plunged back into the pool for the grueling 1500m, one of three new events on the Olympic swimming program this year, along with the men's 800 free, and the mixed 4x100 medley relay. She touched in an Olympic record 15:35.35, outside her own world record time of 15:20.48 but still the eighth fastest of all-time to ensure she is overwhelming favorite for tomorrow's final.

Elsewhere, Hungarian world record holder Kristof Milak, who crushed Michael Phelps' previous mark in 2019, cruised through the men's 200m butterfly heats in a table-topping 1:53.58 with the title seemingly his to lose. He has been on fire in 2021, with Taiwan's Wang Kuan-hung second fastest but nearly a second adrift. "I want to have a great final, win the gold and clock a time which leaves a mark," said Milak.

Japanese star Daiya Seto came ninth overall as he looks to make amends after sensationally failing to qualify for the 400m medley final as world champion. Despite that demoralizing result, he said his confidence was undented. "I still feel the plans I made to win the gold medal before the event aren't wrong but I couldn't see the other side of the pool in the last 100, otherwise I'd have done better," he said.

Hungarian great Katinka Hosszu, in her fifth Olympics, bounced back from losing her 400m medley crown to Japan's Yui Ohashi to comfortably make the 200 medley semis. Since winning in Rio she has been virtually untouchable in this event, claiming gold at the 2017 and 2019 world championships, and clocked 2:09.70 to be second fastest behind young American Kate Douglass (2:09.16). — AFP

Emotional Daley remembers late father after Olympic diving gold

TOKYO: Britain's Tom Daley paid tribute to his late father after he and Matty Lee narrowly edged out hot favorites China to win gold in the synchronised 10m platform diving at the Tokyo Olympics yesterday. Daley, 27, who revealed that he might have missed the Games after knee surgery, wiped away tears on the podium as he finally added gold to the bronzes he won at the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Games. China's Chen Aisen and Cao Yuan, both already twice Olympic gold medalists, were in pole position for another title until they made a mess of their fourth dive of six.

Daley, one of Britain's most recognizable athletes and a prominent voice on gay rights, and Lee took full advantage to deny the all-powerful Chinese their hopes of a golden sweep in diving in the Japanese capital. The Britons held their nerve on the last dive to win the final with 471.81 points, with the Chinese a narrow second on 470.58 and the Russians Aleksandr Bondar and Viktor Minibaev a distant third.

Lee, 23, who said that Daley had been his idol growing up, was left praying pool-side as the scores for China's last dive confirmed that the British pair had won. The thoughts of Daley, who is now at his fourth Olympics, quickly turned to his father, Rob. He died of cancer in 2011, aged 40.

"He never saw me win an Olympic medal, get married, have a child, teach me to drive, have a pint down the pub," Daley said. "My journey started in Plymouth (in Britain), back in 2001, when I went to a local diving pool and thought it was cool to see divers doing somersaults on the board. I decided that I wanted to try it and I pestered my dad to take me to the diving pool."

Daley, who admitted that he feared he had missed his best chance of gold at Rio five years ago, added that "I know he would have been extremely proud how I have become Olympic champion. It was always our dream growing up. "He took me to every training session, every competition, he was always there."

There were suggestions in the build-up to Tokyo that Daley might retire after these Games, but he played down that prospect. He still has the individual 10m platform to compete in at the Japanese capital.

'I did it'

Daley, who has grown up in the public eye after emerging as a prodigious talent as a teenager, said that his Games had been in jeopardy after having surgery in early June on his knee. "There was a chance I wasn't actually going to be here in the first place," said Daley.

Daley, who is married to Oscar-winning filmmaker Dustin Lance Black, hopes he and other victorious Olympians can help the younger generation who may be struggling with their sexual identity. Their young son, Robbie, was watching his dad grab gold on television, said Daley.

"I hope that it can give young kids hope and not feel so frightened and scared and alone," he added of his feat. "And to be able to see that whoever you are, no matter where you come from, you can become an Olympic champion — because I did it." Lee, who is at his first Olympics, called Daley an inspiration since childhood and now his best friend. "I remember running up to him and asking him for photos and signatures," said Lee. — AFP



TOKYO: Gold medalists Britain's Thomas Daley (left) and Britain's Matty Lee poses with their medals after winning the men's synchronized 10m platform diving final event during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Tokyo Aquatics Centre in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP



KUWAIT: (From left) USA's gold medalists Caeleb Dressel, Blake Pieroni, Bowen Becker and Zach Apple pose with their medals on the podium after the final of the men's 4x100m freestyle relay swimming event during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Tokyo Aquatics Center in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

One down, six to go at Olympics for US swim star Dressel

TOKYO: US swimming star Caeleb Dressel kicked off his bid for up to seven Olympic titles with his first gold medal of the Tokyo Games yesterday, spear-heading the United States to the 4x100m relay crown. The 24-year-old limbered up for his three individual events with a powerful 47.26sec opening leg to set up his team-mates, who brought it home in the third-fastest time ever.

Zach Apple touched in 3:08.97 after Dressel's start followed by sizzling swimmers from Blake Pieroni and Bowen Becker, with Italy (3:10.11) and Australia (3:10.22) in the minor placings. The United States, who have won 10 of the past 13 men's 4x100m relay golds, were competing without Michael Phelps for

the first time since the 2000 Sydney Olympics, and Dressel acknowledged they had a point to prove.

"It feels great," he said. "We knew we had a huge target on our back. It feels nice, I'd say we dominated that pretty well. We're never going to doubt ourselves, that's how Team USA works. We had a couple of people rule us out and we're never going to take that."

"Everyone did their job," he added. "It's a relay for a reason, there's four guys for a reason, it's certainly not just one guy." It was a perfect Tokyo bow for Dressel, who will tackle three individual events — the 50m and 100m freestyle and the 100m butterfly.

He is the two-time reigning world champion in all three and the 100m fly world record-holder. There are also a possible four relays on his card as he stands poised to cement an Olympic legacy that began when he earned two relay golds in Rio in 2016.

Phelp's dazzling eight golds in eight events at the 2008 Beijing Olympics eclipsed the record seven swimming golds won by Mark Spitz in Munich in 1972. American Matt Biondi won five golds, a silver and a bronze in Seoul in 1988. — AFP

Coach goes wild after Australia's Titmus claims freestyle gold

TOKYO: The coach of Australian swimmer Ariarne Titmus delivered one of the moments of the Olympics so far yesterday by launching into a spectacular celebration after his pupil clinched gold in the 400m freestyle. As Titmus touched the wall ahead of fierce American rival Katie Ledecky, her coach Dean Boxall turned feral, much to the delight of thousands on social media.

The roaring Boxall kicked the air and hammered his fists before finally ripping off his mask and thrusting against the barrier in front of him. At one point a Japanese girl working as a volunteer appears to make an attempt to restrain Boxall, but he remained undeterred.

Boxall later broke into tears as Titmus collected her gold medal on the podium at the Tokyo Aquatics Centre, with no fans present due to coronavirus restrictions. "I could see Dean on the other side bawling his eyes out," Titmus, 20, said. "I don't really feel the hype, it's more you guys. I just try to race the best I can and ignore everything else. I honestly thought I'd be more nervous coming into this but Dean said to me 'look, you know how to swim, this is just a big swimming race, you just have to do what you know how to do.'" — AFP

Classifieds

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Japan top medals table, Britain's Daley strikes gold

Kuwait's Rashidi brings home bronze; US, Australia battle in swimming

TOKYO: Japan topped the medals table at the Tokyo Olympics after the host nation won three golds yesterday and British diver Tom Daley was finally crowned an Olympic champion at his fourth Games in an emotional triumph.

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti shooter Abdullah Al-Rashidi won a bronze medal with a score of 46 in the Olympic men's skeet shooting competition. The US Vincent Hancock took the gold with an Olympic record score of 59 and Denmark's Jesper Hansen won silver with 55.

Heading the Japanese charge was 13-year-old skateboarder Momiji Nishiya who took gold a day after the host nation also won the men's title. "I'm so glad to become the youngest (Japanese gold medalist) at my first Olympics... tears came to my eyes," Nishiya said.

Shohei Ono, one of Japan's biggest judo stars, won his second straight Olympic title with a tense victory over Georgian world champion Lasha Shavdatuashvili at the Nippon Budokan, the spiritual home of the sport.

Japan's third gold, and eighth of the Games so far, came in a table tennis shock as mixed doubles pair Jun Mizutani and Mima Ito claimed their country's first ever Olympic title in the sport. China had won every Olympic table tennis gold medal since the 2004 Athens Games, but Xu Xin and Liu Shiwen blew a two-game lead in a thrilling final.

Tears flowed at the diving venue as Britain's Daley claimed a surprise first Olympic gold in the synchronized 10m platform event with Matty Lee. The 27-year-old Daley is hugely popular in Britain, where he has spent half of his life in the public eye and become an LGBT figurehead.

His Olympic journey began as a 14-year-old at the 2008 Beijing Games and he won bronzes at the 2012 and 2016 Rio Olympics, but a gold medal had

remained frustratingly elusive. However yesterday, Daley and Lee capitalized after a rare blunder by China's Chen Aisen and Cao Yuan to snatch gold.

Tribute to dad

A tearful Daley paid tribute to late father Rob, who died of cancer in 2011 at the age of 40. "He never saw me win an Olympic medal, get married, have a child, teach me to drive, have a pint down the pub," said Daley. "He took me to every training session, every competition, he was always there."

Elsewhere yesterday, the battle for supremacy between swimming super-powers Australia and the United States heated up. Ariarne Titmus landed the biggest blow for Australia with a pulsating victory over American great Katie Ledecky in the 400m freestyle.

Ledecky came to Japan on the back of winning four gold medals and a silver at Rio in 2016, but Titmus ousted her as world champion in 2019 and topped the timesheets this season. The Australian reeled in Ledecky over the final 50m and said afterwards: "To pull it off in the backend against someone who has an amazing second half of her race, I'm really proud of that."

The United States bounced back to claim an emphatic victory in the men's 4x100m freestyle relay. Zach Apple brought them home after Caleb Dressel led off, ensuring they touched in 3:08.97, ahead of Italy and Australia. Despite her setback, Ledecky was back in the pool in the evening to post the quickest time in the 200m heats and qualify fastest for the 1500m final.

False start farce

Britain's unstoppable Adam Peaty extended his dominance of the 100m breaststroke, powering to gold in 57.37sec ahead of Dutchman Arno Kamminga to retain his 2016 Olympic



TOKYO: USA's gold medalist Vincent Hancock (center), Denmark's silver medalist Jesper Hansen (left), and Kuwait's bronze medalist Abdullah Al-Rashidi pose on the podium after the men's skeet final during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Asaka Shooting Range in the Nerima district of Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

crown. Tom Pidcock won the mountain bike cross-country title for Britain's third gold of the day.

Day three's action got under way with chaotic scenes at the men's triathlon, eventually won by Norway's Kristian Blummenfelt. In a farcical false start, around two-thirds of the 56 competitors dived into the water and set

off on the swimming leg only to be hauled back. The bungled start was caused by a media boat filming the competitors before they dived in for the swimming leg.

Japan's tennis favorite Naomi Osaka eased into the third round of the women's singles with a 6-3, 6-2 win over Switzerland's Viktorija Golubic. In the

men's event, world number one Novak Djokovic beat Jan-Lennard Struff of Germany 6-4, 6-3 to stay on course for a first Olympic title. COVID-19 continued to stalk the Games however, with Dutch tennis players Jean-Julien Rojer and Wesley Koolhof pulling out of the men's doubles after Rojer tested positive for coronavirus. — AFP

Doncic hits 48 points in Olympic basketball debut to remember

TOKYO: NBA star Luka Doncic scored a sensational 48 points as Slovenia routed Argentina 118-100 in their first game of the Tokyo Olympics men's basketball tournament yesterday. On his Olympic debut, the 22-year-old Dallas Mavericks guard had 31 points in the first half and at one stage was on track to break the Olympic scoring record of 55 points set by Brazil's Oscar Schmidt in 1988. His final total still tied the second-highest total in men's basketball history at the Games. "It was very special," Doncic said. "Both for me and the whole team."

Argentina coach Sergio Hernandez said Doncic "killed us" with 15 points in a devastating three-minute spell. "I said it two years ago and I say it again: he's the best player in the world," Hernandez said. Ricky Rubio scored 20 points as world champions Spain made a solid start to their challenge by beating host nation Japan 88-77.

The experienced Minnesota Timberwolves guard hit 62 percent from the field as the bronze medalists from 2016 proved too strong for Japan and their NBA players Rui Hachimura and Yuta Watanabe. Hachimura, the Washington Wizards forward who was one of Japan's



SAITAMA: Slovenia's Luka Doncic shoots the ball as Argentina's Facundo Campazzo falls on the court in the men's preliminary round group C basketball match between Argentina and Slovenia during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Saitama Super Arena in Saitama yesterday. — AFP

flagbearers at the opening ceremony, grabbed 20 points and Toronto Raptors forward Watanabe contributed 19 points.

But Rubio got able support from Marc Gasol, who

scored 12 points, and Victor Claver, with 13 points, and Spain were never troubled. Japan are the next country to face Doncic and Slovenia in Group C on Thursday when Spain play Argentina. — AFP

Nagornyy's Russian 'typhoon' storms to gymnastics team gold

TOKYO: Nikita Nagornyy's Russian team stormed past defending champions Japan and superpower China to claim the coveted men's artistic gymnastics gold at the Tokyo Olympics yesterday with the last tumble on the floor. The Russians turned the tables on Japan, who had pipped them to the title in Rio in 2016. China had to settle for bronze.

"Do you remember the news about the typhoon (Tropical Storm Nepartak) this morning? Well, the typhoon has happened, we took the medal, so don't worry about the typhoon anymore," Nagornyy smiled. Nagornyy was joined by Artur Dalaloyan — the 2018 world all-around champion who was miraculously competing after recovering from surgery on a severed Achilles tendon in April. Also in the team winning Russia's first men's team gold since Atlanta in 1996 were David Belyavskiy and Denis Ablyazin.

And they swelled with pride on top of the podium as Tchaikovsky's concerto

No.1 filtered out through the sound system at the Ariake Gymnastics Centre. The Russian composer's music was chosen to play the role of super sub, as Russia's national anthem cannot be used because the country is under a doping suspension and its athletes are competing under a neutral banner.

The outcome of the first gold on offer at the gymnastics competition was in the balance right until the closing exercise. China were within less than a point of the Rio silver medalists going into the sixth rotation, with Japan, the early pacesetters, on course for third.

Almost snatches gold

But a brilliant last throw of the dice on the horizontal bar from Tokyo teenager Daiki Hashimoto, earning a high 15.100 points, propelled the Games' hosts back into at least second. With the temperature rising and pulses racing, Nagornyy chalked up his feet and hands and took to the floor to try to



TOKYO: Russia's Nikita Nagornyy competes in the rings event of the artistic gymnastics men's team final during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Ariake Gymnastics Center in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

get the Russian Olympic Committee team over the line.

And the reigning world all-around champion pulled it off superbly, his score of 14.666 securing the ROC a memorable win. "I just wanted them to publish the score as fast as possible," Nagornyy said. "I was concerned that the judges might want to give the host country the medal. I had planned three combinations, including one simpler program and one with my named elements. I'd decided to go with the simpler

program, but there was a mistake before the end so we decided to adjust."

Ablyazin, winning his sixth Olympic medal, added: "We all know that we needed to do well on the floor. We knew that if we did we would have a medal, we just didn't know which one. "I was worried when I stepped out of bounds because the floor exercise is everything. We won by a tenth and that's nothing."

They finished with a total of 262.500 points, with Japan on 262.397 and China on 261.894. — AFP



Tokyo Olympics medals table after yesterday's events (G = Gold, S = Silver, B = Bronze, T = Total):

	G	S	B	T
Japan	8	2	3	13
United States	7	3	4	14
China	6	5	7	18
Russian Olympic Committee	4	5	3	12
Great Britain	3	3	1	7
South Korea	3	0	4	7
Australia	2	1	3	6
Kosovo	2	0	0	2
Italy	1	4	4	9
France	1	2	2	5
Canada	1	2	1	4
Hungary	1	1	0	2
Tunisia	1	1	0	2
Croatia	1	0	1	2
Slovenia	1	0	1	2
Austria	1	0	0	1
Ecuador	1	0	0	1
Hong Kong	1	0	0	1
Iran	1	0	0	1
Norway	1	0	0	1
Philippines	1	0	0	1
Thailand	1	0	0	1
Uzbekistan	1	0	0	1
Netherlands	0	3	0	3
Taiwan	0	2	2	4
Brazil	0	2	1	3
Georgia	0	2	0	2
Czech Republic	0	1	1	2
Indonesia	0	1	1	2
Serbia	0	1	1	2
Spain	0	1	1	2
Switzerland	0	1	1	2
Belgium	0	1	0	1
Bulgaria	0	1	0	1
Colombia	0	1	0	1
Denmark	0	1	0	1
India	0	1	0	1
Jordan	0	1	0	1
Romania	0	1	0	1
Germany	0	0	3	3
Kazakhstan	0	0	3	3
Egypt	0	0	2	2
Mongolia	0	0	2	2
Turkey	0	0	2	2
Ukraine	0	0	2	2
Estonia	0	0	1	1
Ivory Coast	0	0	1	1
Kuwait	0	0	1	1
Mexico	0	0	1	1
New Zealand	0	0	1	1
Zionist entity	0	0	1	1