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Kuwait, US share common vision on regional, international issues

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Local

Count your blessings



KAFFEKLATSCH

By Shakir Reshamwala

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After yet another year of coronavirus restrictions, including curfews, lockdowns, closures and travel curbs, Kuwait is beginning to return to some semblance of normalcy. Residents will start arriving to the country from August and schools are set to reopen in September, while commercial activities have gone back to their regular hours of operations. Of course, some precautionary health measures are still in place, like wearing masks, maintaining social distancing and a ban on large gatherings, which seem sensible to avoid reverting to the dark days of the pandemic. Unvaccinated people face ever-tightening restrictions in a bid to compel them to get their shots.

For the vaccinated, things are looking up. They can look forward to travel again, despite the hassles of vaccine passes, PCR tests and quarantines. Kids can finally dust off their uniforms and head back to school to meet their (now slightly grown up) friends, get into playground scraps and savor the feeling of learning in class instead of mindless Zoom sessions.

These have been trying times for everyone, but those stranded abroad for months due to travel bans have suffered the most. These residents can finally dream of returning to their families, jobs and homes. In the pre-COVID era, this used to be the time when everyone fled the country to escape the searing heat and debilitating humidity. Departure halls used to be full and flights packed.

So it's ironic that things are the other way round now. People are clamoring to return despite the scorching heatwave and blast furnace conditions in the country. For sure they will have to shell out a king's ransom to get back, but it may be a small price to pay to start attempting to piece together their shattered lives. As for the unvaccinated and those who have received unapproved jabs, their misery will likely continue for a while. May God grant them patience.

It's imperative that as we begin this new phase of our upended lives, we have to count our blessings. The pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the fleeting nature of our existence and the fragility of our relations. Millions of people have lost their loved ones, means of sustenance and even the hope to live.

We realized the true value of things that we often took for granted. So if you are healthy, surrounded by your family and have a job to do, cherish these moments. There are thousands of people in the world who would give up everything they have for these everyday joys, or to even breathe without assistance. Take in a deep breath and let that sink in.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A picture shows old buildings in Kuwait City, as skyscrapers are seen on the horizon. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Kuwait Army receives M1A2K tank in US



KUWAIT: A delegation of Kuwait's army attended an official ceremony to receive the M1A2K tank in the US, on behalf of Chief of Staff of the Kuwait Armed Forces yesterday.

The delegation was headed by assistant Commander of Land Forces Brigadier Abdullah Al-Jabaa and other senior officers, said the Ministry of Defense. The tank is the

newest and has the most recent technologies in the defense industry, and it will boost the fighting abilities of the Kuwaiti army, it added. — KUNA



Man hurt in Jleeb building fire

KUWAIT: One man was injured in a fire reported yesterday in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh. The blaze broke out in a three-storey building in the area, which was used to store construction material, Kuwait Fire Force said. The injured man was taken to hospital as firefighters extinguished the flames, KFF said, noting that an investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the fire.



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Pandemic leaves children orphaned

By Ben Garcia

A growing number of babies and children are being left orphaned or with only one parent as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. In Kuwait, the death of a foreign resident can be especially complicated for the young children left behind, if the other parent is also not in the country.

Children of residents lost to COVID suffer in Kuwait

Kuwait Times recently learned of two such cases. In one, a young pregnant woman died of the coronavirus while her husband is in the Philippines. The doctors were able to save her baby, who was delivered by C-section and is now in the ICU at Sabah Maternity Hospital. The baby's father, however, is stuck in Palawan, Philippines and it's unclear if or when he will be able to return to Kuwait and take custody of his newborn child.

Local

The end of a dream

John and Maria Rodriguez had lived and worked in Kuwait for about a decade. But when the pandemic hit and Maria got pregnant, the two decided it was time to move on. In order to move forward with plans to immigrate to Canada, however, John had to return to the Philippines. Both registered for the vaccine and John left in late May. Maria kept working despite being seven months pregnant. Then on June 23, John got a call from his wife. She'd passed out at work and was taken to hospital.

"During that day, we found out she was COVID-19 positive. I told her that we shall overcome this. She will be healed very soon and that she only has to take a break from her work," John recalled. "On June 24 she was okay but coughing. Then on June 25, she could barely speak and was experiencing breathing problems. We talked again on June 26, but I could hardly hear her voice. Then on June 27, she told me she will be taken to the ICU. There I was informed maybe in order to save the baby she will have a C-section. At that time, she was seven months pregnant. That was it - that was my last conversation with my wife," he told Kuwait Times.

"On July 9, I got a call from the hospital saying my wife had passed away. I do not have any other news about her, nor any information about what happened to my baby," John said. "I only communicated with one person from the hospital, but they weren't able to provide accurate information because the COVID ward in the hospital is isolated," John said.

"We had made a very clear plan for our future and wanted to immigrate to Canada for the future of our children, because there are lots of opportunities there for me since I am a diet chef. Canada communicated with me already and the status of my application was clear. I needed to fix the documents because I was given only till December to complete the paperwork. If I process it here, it will take about 56 weeks, but only 17 weeks in the Philippines, so we agreed I will go home for this. But little did I know she'd be gone and separated forever. It's hard for me to move on but I have to be strong for my two kids," he said.

Hurdles to returning

But returning to Kuwait remains a hurdle for John. "Immediately after I learned my wife died and my baby was in the ICU, I wanted to get back there, but I know it will only be possible after August 1, [when Kuwait allows foreign residents to return]," he said. John has taken only one dose of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine in the Philippines and cannot return until he gets two doses.

"My next jab will be at the end of August. If I can get it early, that would somehow help, so hopefully I can be with my baby, whom I named after my wife to honor her," he said. Meanwhile, the baby remains at the hospital. The baby's birth certificate cannot be issued except if the father applies, and the baby cannot be taken out of the hospital until John returns.

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Baby of Maria Teresa Rodriguez. Her mother who passed away due to coronavirus.



Maria Teresa Rodriguez

Single parent-children suffer

In another similar story, a single mom in Kuwait also died recently and left her child orphaned here. Thirty-eight-year-old Filipina Maricris died of the coronavirus on July 3. She had asthma and was unvaccinated. She was also the mother of a one-year-old child. The father abandoned the mother and child some time ago. When she got sick, she left her baby with her Bangladeshi landlord, but later asked a close friend, Jessie Oliva, to watch her child. As she got sicker and sicker, Maricris realized she might not survive, so she wrote a note that the custody of her child should go to her sister.

Jessie said they both contracted the coronavirus almost on the same day at a crowded place at the old Salmiya souq. "We were both tested positive for the virus. As advised by the doctors, we needed to self-isolate. After eight days, I was already cleared of the virus, but Maricris' condition deteriorated. She was

rushed to Mubarak Hospital for shortness of breath and died there after a month. During the early days of her battle with coronavirus at the hospital, we were still talking, but a few days prior to her death on July 3, I couldn't speak with her. Before she was rushed to the ICU, she was able to write her last words,

saying the baby must be returned to Manila and given to her sister. That was mentioned in the note written before she was taken to the ICU, where she died," Jessie said.

"At this time, the child is with me and I am taking care of her daily needs," said Jessie. "I have an appointment with the embassy this week to try and arrange her repatriation to the Philippines. Her grandmother is waiting for her there," she said. The embassy has informed Jessie they may repatriate Maricris' child next month.

The embassy has informed Jessie they may repatriate Maricris' child next month.

Local

WHO chief lauds Kuwait's support for the organization

KUWAIT: World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus has praised Kuwait's backing for the organization and vulnerable world countries in countering the coronavirus pandemic. "Thank you once again, Your Excellency, for Kuwait's strong support for WHO and global health, and thank you for your continuing solidarity with the most vulnerable across the world," Ghebreyesus said during a joint press conference with Kuwait Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah on the sidelines of his visit to Kuwait on Wednesday.

WHO chief noted that Kuwait is also one of the world's largest humanitarian donors and is WHO's seventh largest Member State contributor. We greatly value this support. "Last year, Kuwait was one of the first countries to respond to WHO's COVID-19 appeal, contributing \$60 million to WHO's Strategic and Preparedness Response Plan," he noted. He added over the years, Kuwait's support has enabled WHO to provide critical medicines for millions of people in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and many other countries.

Ghebreyesus said that he was delighted to be able to visit WHO's new office in Kuwait, which was opened last month. As he said, WHO will be looking forward to further strengthening the col-

laboration with Kuwait through its presence in the country. "WHO's mission is to promote health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable - and our new country office reflects our commitment to serving the people of Kuwait as we do in every country," said Ghebreyesus.

"I know that the pandemic has also affected you here in Kuwait, I offer my deep condolences to all Kuwaitis for the family, friends and colleagues you have lost, I offer my deep admiration and respect to your health workers for their tireless service and sacrifice," said the Director-General in regards to the situation in Kuwait. He affirmed the organization's commitment to support Kuwait to 'suppress' transmission, save lives, recover and rebuild. "I'm pleased to see that COVID-19 cases and test positivity rates are now declining after the recent peak in June. I urge you to continue, and not to let down your guard. As you know, the highly transmissible Delta variant is now wreaking havoc around the world," he stressed. WHO Director-General renewed his appreciation to the Kuwaiti government and the people for their warm welcome, and that he was honored for this visit.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel welcomed the WHO Director-General



KUWAIT: World Health Organization Director-General Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus (left) speaks during a joint press conference with Kuwait Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah in Kuwait on Wednesday. —KUNA

and his accompanying delegation in their first visit to Kuwait as part of the cooperation between Kuwait and the organization, and to discuss ways to boost collaboration. He praised the organization's vital efforts in supporting the international community in facing different health challenges, especially the latest COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier Wednesday, the WHO chief met with 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, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, and other officials. He also visited Kuwait Center for Coronavirus Vaccination Center and Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Hospital for COVID-19 patients, accompanied by a number of top Ministry of Health officials. —KUNA

Good news for thousands of Indians awaiting return to Kuwait

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George confirmed this week that Covishield, the vaccine manufactured in India for the prevention of COVID-19 is the same as Oxford/AstraZeneca and it has been approved by the Kuwait's health ministry.

"The Indian embassy has issued a press release clarifying that as per Kuwaiti Health Ministry officials, Covishield is an approved vaccine as it is the same as AstraZeneca, and no one, no one who holds a certificate of AstraZeneca will face difficulties on return," the ambassador stressed while addressing an open house at the embassy on Wednesday.

He said the issue related to QR code on the vaccination certificate has been raised with the concerned authorities both in India and in Kuwait and the problem is expected to be sorted out soon. The ambassador welcomed the decision by the Director General of Civil Aviation of Kuwait on easing of travel restrictions.

"It is a welcome decision as it allows entry of stranded Indians to Kuwait. However, it is not a direct entry, but through a third country without 14 days in those countries. It is also clarified that those doing PCR test on arrival need not go into quarantine if their PCR results are found to be negative," he said. He called on Indian nationals to wait for a few more days to get more clarity on the matter before booking tickets. In view of the evolving situation, the embassy has converted its team handling WhatsApp numbers and its 24x7 helpline numbers, as 'Rapid Response Team' for answering queries on travel guidelines and vaccination certification registration. "We keep updating the officers concerned on the new guidelines. In case, anyone gets stuck at airports for any reason, they may contact the 'Rapid Response Team' for assistance. Let me assure you we will extend all support," he said.

The Indian Community Support Group (ICSG), instituted by the Indian Embassy, Kuwait, will offer a financial assistance of Indian rupees 100,000 (approximately KD 410) to each of the families of the



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George addresses an open house at the embassy on Wednesday.

low-income domestic workers who died of COVID-19 in Kuwait, the ambassador said. The financial assistance will be sent to the legal heir of those with a monthly salary of less than KD 120.

The ambassador said 546 deaths of Indian nationals have been reported so far in Kuwait related to COVID-19 pandemic, of which at least hundred people belong to low-income group. "I thank ICSG for this noble decision. We will contact the next of kin and support them," he said. Expressing personal condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their loved ones due to COVID-19, he thanked doctors, nurses and other medical professionals for their continued support to many who are still facing difficulties due to the pandemic situation.

The decision by the India government to open a NEET exam center in Kuwait, the first center outside India, is a welcome news. "We are thankful to honorable Prime Minister of India and honorable Education Minister of India for taking this historic decision which help our students and parents," he added.

Cabinet mulls roadmap to hasten development project implementation

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Cabinet said on Wednesday it has reviewed a three-point "roadmap" which will hasten the implementation of development projects across the country. The draft plan, which aims to "support the national economy and meet the needs of comprehensive development," includes short-term goals (nine), which will be completed this summer, medium-term goals (five) and long-term goals (four), Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said after an extraordinary meeting at Seif Palace. The projects highlighted are in sustainable energy, the development of Failaka Island, environmental fuels, the beautification of Kuwait City, healthcare and Kuwait International Airport, amongst others. The Cabinet has tasked ministerial committees with the monitoring and implementation of the state-funded projects, which will offer the country revenues, and has sought to utilize the expertise and recommendations of consultants, specialists and civil society towards this goal. —KUNA

Traffic policeman prevents suicide attempt on Causeway

KUWAIT: A traffic policeman in Kuwait stopped a woman from jumping from the Jaber Causeway in an apparent suicide attempt. The Traffic Department posted a video yesterday showing a police officer stepping in and catching a woman who appeared to be trying to climb off the bridge, before he and other officers are seen attending to her in her car. The officer was on patrol on the Causeway when he approached the vehicle that had stopped on the side of the road, as seen in the video which is dated July 19. He checked on the driver then waited for the vehicle to move, but instead the woman walked out of the car and approached the railing, then he ran towards her and caught her while she had started climbing it.

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Local

Kuwait's Amir receives US State Secretary



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in the presence of His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. —Amiri Diwan photo

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday the visiting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the delegation accompanying him.

The reception took place in the presence of His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as Blinken conveyed to

His Highness the Amir greetings and appreciation of US President Joe Biden, as well as best wishes of progress and prosperity for the Kuwaiti people. In turn, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf expressed utmost appreciation for the US President and the friendly American people, as both countries are celebrating 60 years of historic ties, as well as

30 years of Kuwait's liberation.

During the reception, also attended by Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, bilateral ties and means to develop them on all levels, in addition to issues of mutual concern and latest regional developments, were discussed. —KUNA

Blinken tours Kuwait's parliament building

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem yesterday received visiting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the delegation accompanying him. According to Al-Dustour news network, the meeting saw the discussion of bilateral ties, as well as latest regional developments. MP Ahmad Al-Hamad and US Ambassador to the country Alina Romanowski attended the reception before the visiting delegation's tour of the parliament building. —KUNA



KUWAIT: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (right) and US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski (center) tour Kuwait's National Assembly with Parliament Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem (second right) in Kuwait City yesterday. —AFP



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken holds a gavel as he tours Kuwait's National Assembly with Parliament Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem.



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. —KUNA

Prime Minister meets US State Secretary

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received yesterday the visiting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the delegation accom-

panying him. Blinken was escorted by Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. —KUNA

Kuwait, US discuss bolstering bilateral relations

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and the US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken held talks yesterday at the Foreign Ministry's headquarters. Both sides discussed enhancing the bilateral, exceptional and strategic relations and stressed the deep and distinguished ties of the two friendly countries and their peoples. They also discussed the latest developments on the regional and international scenes, as well as reviewing issues of mutual concerns.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad and Blinken shared their views to boost cooperation in facing the coronavirus pandemic, developing health and education sectors, food security, and cybersecurity defense and artificial intellect. They both agreed on holding the fifth round of the strategic dialogue between the State of Kuwait and the United States during the last quarter of the current year. During the meeting, the Minister of Foreign Affairs praised the fruitful and successful bilateral cooperation be-



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. —KUNA

tween the two countries, and the common views on many important regional and international files.

Meanwhile, Blinken looked forward to keep the progressive collaborating layout between Kuwait and the US in all fields at all levels. He praised the bilateral relations connecting the two brotherly countries and the Kuwaiti efforts in consolidating and maintaining international peace and security in the region, stressing, in the same time, the US commitments to maintain the security, safety and stability of Kuwait. The visit of the US Secretary coincides with the 60th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries and 30th anniversary of Kuwait's liberation from the Iraqi invasion. —KUNA

Local

Kuwait, US share common vision on regional, int'l issues: Foreign Minister

KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah affirmed yesterday that Kuwait and United States share common vision in regards of regional and international issues. Sheikh Ahmad Nasser, in a joint press conference with the visiting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, said "We were honored this morning by meeting 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."

He recalled that this year marked the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two friendly countries, as well as the 30th anniversary of the liberation of Kuwait. Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Nasser expressed interest in the fifth round of the strategic dialogue between US and Kuwait to exchange experiences in COVID-19 regarding its control and all aspects related to vaccines. He referred to topics addressed with Blinken relating to artificial

intelligence and cybersecurity.

In the meantime, Sheikh Dr Ahmad affirmed Kuwait's firm support for the Arab and international resolutions that stipulates a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue. Sheikh Dr Ahmad spoke about Palestinian struggle that has lasted for 73 years so far, as well as expressing gratitude for the US administration's stance to stop the recent Zionist aggression on Gaza. In response to a question about the normalization with the Zionist entity, he indicated that normalization is a sovereign decision of states, and each state has its own sovereignty in this regard.

Great leadership

Meanwhile, Blinken said that Kuwait had shown great leadership in resolving regional crises. The American official pointed out that the US feels proud in its friendship with Kuwait, and its determination to strengthen the relationship on all levels. He praised Kuwait's efforts in backing peace and international security in the region, pointing out that



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah speaks during a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at Kuwait's foreign ministry headquarters in Kuwait City yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait is a vital partner in ending the war in Yemen. "We have appointed a special envoy to Yemen, Tim Lenderking, to lead our diplomatic affairs to end the war, and he is working hard. It is up to the Houthis to show good

intentions to end this war," he added. On the same matter, he expressed appreciation to Saudi Arabia's efforts in reaching that goal, and showed commitment to supporting Saudi's security. — KUNA

Blinken says nuclear talks with Iran 'cannot go on indefinitely'

KUWAIT: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday that nuclear talks with Iran "cannot go on indefinitely" but that Washington was "fully prepared" to continue negotiations. The US is indirectly involved in Iran's talks with world powers to revive a nuclear deal that gave Iran some relief from international sanctions in exchange for limits on its nuclear program. The deal was torpedoed in 2018 by then US president Donald Trump, who unilaterally withdrew from the agreement and imposed punishing sanctions.

"We're committed to diplomacy, but this process cannot go on indefinitely... we look to see what Iran is ready to do or not ready to do and remain fully prepared to return to Vienna to continue negotiations," Blinken said during a visit to Kuwait yesterday. "The ball remains in Iran's court."

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's government has been holding talks with major powers in Vienna since April on bringing Washington back into the agreement. But a deal now seems unlikely until after he hands over to President-elect Ebrahim Raisi early next month.

Raisi is an ultraconservative but has expressed support for the nuclear talks, arguing Iran needs an end to US sanctions. Iran's ultra-



KUWAIT: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks during a press conference with his Kuwaiti counterpart at Kuwait's foreign ministry headquarters in Kuwait City yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

conservative camp, which deeply distrusts the United States, has repeatedly criticised Rouhani over the 2015 deal.

'Guarantee national interests'

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said yesterday that experience has shown "trusting the West does not work", referring to the US withdrawal from the deal and its fallout. Raisi has said his government will support talks that "guarantee national interests", but will not allow negotiations for the sake of negotiations.

One of the major criticisms of the 2015 deal raised by Trump was its failure to address Iran's ballistic missile program or its alleged interference in regional affairs. But Tehran has always rejected bringing non-nuclear issues into the agreement, which is known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.—AFP

US 'committed' to relocating Afghan translators: Blinken

KUWAIT: Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday that Washington was "committed to helping" and "actively engaged" in planning for the relocation of Afghan interpreters and translators who worked for US forces.

In what the White House has dubbed Operation Allies Refuge, the interpreters and their families are likely to be taken first to US overseas military bases before resettlement in the United States or elsewhere.

Washington is still seeking third countries to host some of those evacuated while their cases, including detailed security checks, are finalized. There had been speculation that some could be housed at US facilities in Kuwait but there was no

such announcement during Blinken's lightning trip to the Gulf state.

"(The) US is committed to helping those who helped us during hard times in Afghanistan over the last 20 years — translators and interpreters," Blinken said during a press conference with his Kuwaiti counterpart. "We're actively engaged in that process (of) relocation planning."

The US hopes to welcome the first group of Afghans granted asylum under a scheme to protect those who worked alongside coalition forces "very, very soon", Blinken said. Around 20,000 Afghans who worked as interpreters for the United States during its war in the country have applied for evacuation under the State Department program of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). Some estimates suggest the total number of prospective evacuees could be as high as 100,000 when family members are counted. Many of them fear retaliation by the Taliban, who are seeking to regain control of the government in Kabul after the departure of US troops before the end of August.

The Taliban have pressed a sweeping offensive across Afghanistan in recent months, capitalizing on the last stages of the US troop withdrawal, due to be completed by the end of August. Their offensive has raised fears of a potential humanitarian crisis. The insurgents have publicly stated that interpreters who worked with coalition forces have nothing to fear as the US and its allies complete their withdrawal. But some of those who worked alongside the foreign forces have questioned the Taliban's sincerity. The United Nations recently estimated half of Afghanistan's 39 million people are in need of aid, and called on the international community to maintain financial support for the country. — AFP



KUWAIT: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken waves before he boards his plane on his return to the United States from Kuwait International Airport in Kuwait City yesterday. — AFP



Virus batters hospitals in Senegal's capital

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HK radio host in first 'sedition' trial since China handover

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KUALA LUMPUR: This handout photo from Malaysia's Department of Information taken and released on July 26, 2021 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

Malaysia PM digs in after royal rebuke

Rival MPs claim Muhyiddin was misleading parliament

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's embattled leader defended his actions yesterday as he faced calls to quit after rare criticism from the king, who accused his government of misleading parliament over coronavirus laws.

Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin leads a scandal-plagued coalition that seized power last year without an election, but his government is on the verge of collapse after allies withdrew support. Parliament convened this week after a months-long suspension under a state of emergency—ostensibly to fight the virus, but which critics said was a gambit by Muhyiddin to cling to power.

On Monday, the law minister told the legislature the emergency would end on

August 1 and that several regulations enacted under it were being cancelled. But angry rival MPs claimed Muhyiddin was just seeking to dodge a vote that could test his support—and it was not clear the monarch had agreed to revoke the laws, as required under the constitution.

Yesterday the royal palace confirmed the king, Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah, had not given his consent, and said that he expressed his "great disappointment".

The announcement about cancelling the regulations was "inaccurate and confused the members of parliament", said a statement from the palace. It "did not just fail to respect the principles of the sovereignty of the law... but it undermined the functions

and powers of his majesty as head of state," it said.

It is unusual for Malaysia's constitutional monarch, who is widely revered in the Muslim-majority country, to speak out so forcefully against the government. Muhyiddin was accused of treason and faced calls from the opposition and some members of his own coalition to quit.

But his office released a statement outlining discussions between the government and the monarch over the regulations, and insisted there had been no need for a parliamentary vote on the laws.

"The government is of the view that all these actions taken are in order and in accordance with the provisions of the law

and the federal constitution," it said, adding people should "remain calm".

A key ally of Muhyiddin, Deputy Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob, also said the government still enjoyed the support of more than 110 MPs in the 222-seat lower house. Muhyiddin has faced mounting pressure in recent weeks with the biggest party in his coalition, the United Malays National Organisation, withdrawing support.

The regulations enacted under the emergency give authorities extra powers to punish virus rule breakers, as well as some other tools to fight the pandemic.

Even when the emergency ends, the country will remain under a strict lockdown as it faces a worsening outbreak. — AFP

International

Turkey courts Biden with Kabul airport offer after US forces leave

Hamid Karzai International Airport offers safest route for embassy staff

ANKARA: Turkey is offering to protect Kabul's strategic airport after US forces leave in what experts view as a high-risk bid to improve Ankara's strained ties with Washington. Keeping the air hub safe from advancing Taliban forces became a major issue after US President Joe Biden called an end to Washington's 20-year involvement by ordering all troops out of Afghanistan by the end of next month.

Hamid Karzai International Airport offers the safest route for embassy staff and humanitarian aid to reach the war-torn country. Its fall could leave Afghanistan largely cut off from the world. Ankara's surprise proposal gave Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a chance to build a rapport with Biden during their first meeting at a NATO summit in June.

The offer meets two of the Turkish leader's objectives: warm chilly ties with Western allies and avert an influx of refugees by keeping aid routes open. "Turkey has a vested interest in Afghanistan's stability," said Magdalena Kirchner, Afghanistan country director at German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Turkish officials play down the diplomatic aspects of the mission and stress the importance of relieving the suffering in Afghanistan. "Our objective is to make sure Afghanistan is not closed to the outside world, that it is not isolated," a Turkish diplomatic source said.

The United Nations this month said 18 million people—or half the Afghan population—needed assistance, while half of all children under the age of five suffered from acute malnutrition.

'Regain favour'

While Washington still views Turkey as an important ally in a volatile part of the world, relations have been bedevilled by disputes, including Ankara's acquisition of a Russian missile defence system. Washington sanctioned Ankara for the purchase last year. "The main factor behind the airport proposal... is Turkish-American relations: Ankara hopes to regain favour with Washington after a string of diplomatic crises," analyst Salim Cevik wrote in a paper for Germany's SWP think tank.

A security source in Ankara said Turkish personnel have been "operating the airport for the past six years" and would remain past August if an agreement with the US and other countries is reached.

In return, Ankara wants US funding and logistical support, the source added. The source said some of the discussions concerned the future operations of a US missile defence system currently protecting the airport from air attacks.

"Whatever is needed to operate it, the discussions are on it," the source said. "We've put it forward that we want to continue our work. We want no combatant duty. We repeat this several times." Ankara is also talking to the Taliban in the hope of finding an arrangement that could keep Turkish troops from turning into targets for the hardline Islamist movement. The Taliban has publicly called the idea of a Turkish military presence in Kabul "reprehensible".

"Turkish ambitions to remain engaged despite the US withdrawal appear genuine but carry risks for protection of its own forces, should violence es-

calate," Kirchner said. But Erdogan said he was willing to "see where these talks (with the Taliban) take us" and Turkish officials are striking a positive tone.

"In our discussions with the Taliban, they say: 'we trust you, we know you don't have a hidden agenda'," the Turkish diplomatic source said. Turkey has around 500 soldiers in Afghanistan as part of a NATO-led non-combat mission, whose withdrawal is nearly complete.

'Europeans are worried'

The UN refugee agency in 2020 counted 125,104 Afghan asylum-seekers in Turkey, which is already home to 3.6 million Syrian refugees. Their growing presence could become an emotive issue that the Turkish opposition is trying to exploit to keep Erdogan from extending his rule into a third

decade in an election set for 2023.

The main opposition party this month made waves by vowing to send Syrians "back home" and raising the issue of Afghan arrivals in Turkey. Erdogan struck a deal with the European Union in 2016 under which Turkey agreed to host migrants in exchange for billions of dollars in aid.

Ankara and Brussels are now working on updating the agreement and Afghanistan is already dominating discussions. "The Europeans are worried," the Turkish diplomatic source said. A total of 201,437 Afghan migrants were caught in Turkey in 2019. The coronavirus pandemic saw those numbers drop to 50,161 last year and around 29,000 so far this year. But both EU and Turkish officials agree those number are likely to climb after the US troops leave. — AFP



ALLENTOWN: US President Joe Biden disembarks from Air Force One upon arrival at Lehigh Valley International Airport in Allentown, Pennsylvania. — AFP

New attack near Niger's Mali border kills 18 civilians

NIAMEY: A fresh attack in western Niger near the border with Mali has left 18 civilians dead, a local elected official said yesterday. The attack Wednesday was in the village of Deye Koukou in the Banibangou area, where 14 civilians were killed Sunday—also by men aboard motorbikes, the official told AFP.

He did not elaborate on the circumstances of the attack, which occurred in an area where civilians are regularly targeted by suspected jihadists. Banibangou falls inside what is known as the three-borders region between Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, which for years has been the scene of bloody attacks by jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group.

In mid-March, an attack by suspected jihadists in the same district targeting a village market left 66 people dead. And on June 24, attacks on villages in Tondikiwindi, in a neighbouring district, killed 19 people.

Despite repeated efforts by the authorities to secure the region, the deadly attacks have continued, often carried out by gunmen on motorbikes who flee across the border into Mali after their raids.

A contingent of 1,200 Chadian soldiers is deployed in the three-borders region as part of a multinational force put together by the G5 Sahel group, which comprises Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. — AFP

Five Iraqi crew killed in helicopter crash

BAGHDAD: Five Iraqi troops were killed yesterday when their helicopter crashed on a "combat mission" north of Baghdad, the military said, as a security source confirmed it had been hit by ground fire.

The helicopter came down near Amerli in Sala-

heddin province, the military said, in an area where Iraqi troops have carried out repeated operations against suspected sleeper cells of the Islamic State group.

Video footage sent to journalists in Baghdad showed firefighters attempting to put out a blaze in the wreckage of the aircraft.

The security forces had launched an operation on Tuesday to "search and clear areas in the south of Kirkuk province", which borders Salaheddin, a statement on their Twitter account said.

The security source told AFP that the helicopter that came down was one of two that had been checking pylons carrying high-voltage power lines

in the area, a frequent target for holdout jihadists in recent months. As the two aircraft approached Amerli district, one of them took a "direct hit" which forced it down.

The Islamic State group lost its last territory in Iraq in 2017 after a bloody three-year campaign that put paid to its hopes of forging a transnational "caliphate" straddling the border with Syria.

But the jihadists retain sleeper cells in desert and mountain areas that they have used as launchpads for attacks in Iraq's cities. A July 19 suicide bombing claimed by the Sunni extremists killed 30 people in a street market in a Shiite district of Baghdad. — AFP

International

After power grab, Tunisia's Saied launches graft crackdown

Saied ask traders and wholesalers to lower prices

TUNIS: Tunisia's President Kais Saied accused 460 businessmen of embezzlement as he launched a crackdown on corruption, days after grabbing power in what his opponents have dubbed a "coup".

Saied, who suspended parliament for 30 days and seized all executive powers on Sunday, slammed the "bad economic choices" made in recent years, during a meeting with a leader of the employers' federation UTICA.

In his comments late Wednesday, the president singled out for criticism "those who plunder public money". Saied accused 460 businessmen of owing 13.5 billion dinars (\$4.9 billion) to the state, citing the findings of a commission of inquiry into graft under former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

"This money must be returned to the Tunisian people," he said, adding that he intends to offer the businessmen "judicial arbitration". In exchange for dropping proceedings, the reimbursed sums of money would be injected into less developed parts of Tunisia. Saied also asked traders and wholesalers to "lower prices" in a country where soaring inflation has eaten away at the purchasing power of consumers. He also called for a revival of phosphate production, one of the country's few natural resources often used for agricultural fertiliser.

Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG), a former flagship of the Tunisian economy, has seen its production collapse since the 2011 revolution due to a lack of investment and bouts of social unrest. Saied raised suspicions of corruption that surround the industry, referring to "people in parliament who protect themselves with parliamentary immunity". The president also announced the establishment of a crisis unit to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, supervised by a senior military officer. Tunisia is facing a new peak in the pandemic that has provoked the anger of the public in recent weeks.

The North African country of around 12 million people has one of the worst COVID death rates in the world, with 19,000 fatalities linked to the coronavirus. After months of political crisis, Saied seized power by invoking the constitution.

The move was denounced as a "coup d'etat" by his main opponents, the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party. — AFP



TUNIS: Tunisia's parliament speaker and Ennahdha party leader Rached Ghannouchi gives an interview with AFP at his office in the capital Tunis yesterday. — AFP

Floods kill 40 in north Afghanistan

JALALABAD: At least 40 people have been killed with 150 more missing in northern Afghanistan after flash floods ravaged an area northeast of the capital Kabul, officials said yesterday.

A rescue operation was underway to find the missing people after torrential rains overwhelmed Kamdesh district in Nuristan province—about 200 kilometres (120 miles) northeast of Kabul.

"About 40 people were killed last night due to flash floods," Saeedullah Nuristani, head of the provincial council, told AFP.

He said 150 people were still missing and nearly 80 houses had been destroyed after floods swept

through the area. Saeed Momand, a spokesman for Nuristan's governor, gave a slightly higher death toll, saying more than 60 people had been killed in the floods.

Torrential downpours and flash floods kill scores of people annually in Afghanistan.

Many poorly built homes—mostly in rural areas—are at risk of collapse during the rains in the impoverished country. Dozens of people were killed last year after flash floods swept through swaths of Parwan province. This year's flooding comes as Afghanistan has been rocked by a surge in fighting with the Taliban launching multiple offensives across the country.

The uptick in fighting also comes as Afghanistan is battling a third wave of COVID-19 that has overwhelmed the nation's ramshackle health care sector while other parts of the country have been hit by a punishing drought. — AFP

Syria's Daraa gripped by worst clashes in 3 years

BEIRUT: Gunmen yesterday killed eight Syrian regime fighters and captured 15 others during the fiercest clashes in the southern province of Daraa since it came under government control, a war monitor reported.

Russian-backed Syrian army and allied forces recaptured Daraa from rebels in 2018, a symbolic blow to the anti-government uprising born there in 2011. State institutions have returned, but the army still hasn't deployed across the whole province, and tit-for-tat bombings and assassinations between former opposition figures and regime forces have since become routine.

Tensions flared on Thursday, leading to what the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights called the "most violent and broadest clashes in Daraa since it came under regime control".

Fighting started when regime forces fired artillery shells towards the former opposition hub of Daraa al-Balad in tandem with a ground push, the Britain-based war monitor said. The pro-government al-Watan newspaper called it the "start of a military operation against hideouts of terrorists who thwarted a reconciliation deal".

Many former rebels stayed in Daraa instead of evacuating under a Moscow-brokered deal, either joining the army or remaining in control of parts of the province. Daraa al-Balad, a southern district of Daraa city, is among the areas controlled by former opposition forces.

In response to Thursday's shelling, gunmen launched a counterattack across many parts of Daraa's countryside, where they captured several regime positions. "Eight Syrian regime and allied militia fighters died during clashes across Daraa province in recent hours," the Observatory said.

"Gunmen also captured more than 15 members of the regime forces in Daraa's western and eastern countryside," it said. The war in Syria has killed nearly 500,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011. — AFP

8.2 magnitude earthquake strikes off Alaskan peninsula

WASHINGTON: An 8.2 magnitude earthquake struck off the Alaskan peninsula late Wednesday, the United States Geological Survey said, gener-

ating small waves but no major tsunami before all warnings were canceled.

The earthquake hit 56 miles (91 kilometers) southeast of the town of Perryville, the USGS said. The quake struck at 10:15 pm Wednesday (0615 GMT Thursday). Perryville is a small village about 500 miles from Anchorage, Alaska's biggest city.

The US government's National Tsunami Warning Center immediately issued an alert for south Alaska and the Alaskan peninsula but canceled all warnings about three hours later. The maximum wave height detected by the center was eight inches (21 centimeters) above tide level with small

tsunamis hitting at least six points off Alaska's coastline.

Tsunami warning sirens had been broadcast across Kodiak, an island with a population of about 6,000 people, along Alaska's coastline. Locals living close to sea level were told to evacuate to higher ground.

Small waves hit the coast of Kodiak, according to a broadcaster on local radio station KMXT. She said authorities had lifted evacuation orders, with no reports of any damage. "This is the largest earthquake to happen in the Alaska region since 1965," Michael West, state seismologist with the

Alaska Earthquake Center, told Alaska Public Media.

Alaska is part of the seismically active Pacific Ring of Fire. The state was hit by a 9.2-magnitude earthquake in March 1964, the strongest ever recorded in North America.

It devastated Anchorage and unleashed a tsunami that slammed the Gulf of Alaska, the US west coast, and Hawaii. More than 250 people were killed by the quake and the tsunami.

A 7.5 magnitude earthquake also caused tsunami waves in Alaska's southern coast in October, but no casualties were reported. — AFP

International

France's 1960s nuclear tests in Algeria still poison ties

'As long as the region is polluted, the danger will persist'

ALGIERS: More than 60 years since France started its nuclear tests in Algeria, their legacy continues to poison relations between the North African nation and its former colonial ruler. The issue has come to the fore again after President Emmanuel Macron said in French Polynesia on Tuesday that Paris owed "a debt" to the South Pacific territory over atomic tests there between 1966 and 1996.

The damage the mega-blasts did to people and nature in the former colonies remains a source of deep resentment, seen as proof of discriminatory colonial attitudes and disregard for local lives. "Diseases related to radioactivity are passed on as an inheritance, generation after generation," said Abderahmane Toumi, head of the Algerian victims' support group El Gheith El Kadem.

"As long as the region is polluted, the danger will persist," he said, citing severe health impacts from birth defects and cancers to miscarriages and sterility. France carried out its first successful atomic bomb test deep in the Algerian Sahara in 1960, making it the world's fourth nuclear power after the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain.

Today, as Algeria and France struggle to deal with their painful shared history, the identification and decontamination of radioactive sites remains one of the main disputes. In his landmark report on French colonial rule and the 1954-62 Algerian War, historian Benjamin Stora recommended continued joint work that looks into "the locations of nuclear tests in Algeria and their consequences".

France in the 1960s had a policy of burying all radioactive waste from the Algerian bomb tests in the desert sands, and for decades declined to reveal their locations.

'Radioactive fallout'

Algeria's former veterans affairs minister Tayeb Zitouni recently accused France of refusing to release topographical maps that would identify "burial sites of polluting, radioactive or chemical waste not discovered to date". "The French side has not technically conducted any initiative to clean up the sites, and France has not undertaken any humanitarian act to compensate the victims," said Zitouni. According to the Ministry of the Armed Forces in Paris, Algeria and France now "deal with the whole subject at the highest level of state".

"France has provided the Algerian authorities with the maps it has," said the ministry. Between 1960 and 1966, France conducted 17 atmospheric or underground nuclear tests near the town of Reggane, 1,200 kilometres (750 miles) from the capital Algiers, and in mountain

tunnels at a site then called In Ekker.

Eleven of them were conducted after the 1962 Evian Accords, which granted Algeria independence but included an article allowing France to use the sites until 1967. A radioactive cloud from a 1962 test sickened at least 30,000 Algerians, the country's official APS news agency estimated in 2012. French documents declassified in 2013 revealed significant radioactive fallout from West Africa to southern Europe. Algeria last month set up a national agency for the rehabilitation of former French nuclear test sites. In April, Algeria's army chief of staff, General Said Chengriha, asked his then French counterpart, General Francois Lecointre, for his support, including access to all the maps.

'We respect our dead'

Receiving the maps is "a right that the Algerian state strongly demands, without forgetting the question of compensation for the Algerian victims of the tests," stressed a senior army officer, General Bouzid Boufrioua, writing in the defence ministry magazine El Djeich.

"France must assume its historical responsibilities," he argued. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, however, ruled out any demands for compensation, telling Le Point weekly that "we respect our dead so much that financial compensation would be a belittlement. We are not a begging people."

France passed a law in 2010 which provided for a compensation procedure for "people suffering from illnesses resulting from exposure to radiation from nuclear tests carried out in the Algerian Sahara and in Polynesia between 1960 and 1998".

But out of 50 Algerians who have since launched claims, only one, a soldier from Algiers who was stationed at one of the sites, "has been able to obtain compensation", says the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN).

No resident of the remote desert region has been compensated, it said. In a study released a year ago, "Radioactivity Under the Sand", ICAN France urged Paris to hand Algeria a complete list of the burial sites and to facilitate their clean-up.

The 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons obliges states to provide adequate assistance to individuals affected by the use or testing of nuclear weapons. It was signed by 122 UN member states-but by none of the nuclear powers. France argued the treaty was "incompatible with a realistic and progressive approach to nuclear disarmament". —AFP

a little while later, the army "concluded that it was the same vehicle as before" and attempted to stop it by shouting and firing shots into the air.

When the vehicle did not stop, a soldier fired at its wheels. "We are looking into the claim that a Palestinian minor was killed as a result of the gunfire," the army said. "The incident is being reviewed by senior commanding officers. In addition, the military police has launched an investigation into the circumstances of the event."

On Saturday a 17-year-old Palestinian died from wounds he received the day before. Mohammed Munir al-Tamimi, who suffered gunshot wounds, died in hospital, the Palestinian health ministry said, a day after violence in the Palestinian village of Beita. Hundreds of Palestinians had gathered on Friday afternoon in Beita, a hot spot in recent months, to protest against the nearby wildcat Jewish settlement outpost of Eviatar.

The clashes pitted Palestinians against Jewish soldiers and resulted in 320 Palestinians being wounded, according to the Red Crescent. And late Tuesday, a 41-year-old Palestinian was shot dead near Beita, the Palestinian health ministry said. All Jewish settlements in the West Bank are regarded as illegal by most of the international community. —AFP



TAMANRASSET: File photo taken on February 25, 2010 shows a man walks past a fence at the entrance of the former French nuclear bomb test site of Tena Fila mountain at Ain Ekra in Tamanrasset, 2000 kilometres south of Algiers. —AFP

EU pushes Iraq to stem migrant flights to Belarus

BRUSSELS: The European Union said yesterday it was pressing Iraq to help stem the flow of migrants to Belarus who are then smuggled across the border into Lithuania. Brussels says that about 2,700 migrants-most from Iraq-have crossed illegally into the Baltic state and EU member in recent months.

Officials suspect the influx is being orchestrated by the Belarusian regime in retaliation against EU sanctions, with flights ferrying migrants from Baghdad to Minsk. "We have been in contact with the Iraqi government in order to better control flights to Belarus and re-admit Iraqi nationals who want to return voluntarily or have no right to international protection," Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson wrote in a letter to EU ministers.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Wednesday that he had held talks with Iraq's foreign minister "on how to tackle increased number of Iraqi citizens irregularly crossing from Belarus into Lithuania".

"This is an issue of concern not only for one member state but for the entire EU. We count on Iraq's support," Borrell wrote on Twitter. Baghdad pledged earlier this month to investigate the alleged smuggling of people to Lithuania and has set up a joint committee with the EU to discuss migration matters.

A spokesman for the bloc said yesterday that "a large part" of those crossing into Lithuania did not appear eligible to claim asylum in the EU. Brussels has threatened to ratchet up sanctions that it has slapped on Belarus since last year over a crackdown on protests against a disputed elections.

The EU last month hit key sectors of the Belarusian economy after Minsk forced a European airliner to land in order to arrest a dissident journalist. —AFP

Palestinian boy shot by Zionist army dies

JERUSALEM: A Palestinian boy wounded by Zionist army fire in the occupied West Bank on Wednesday has died from his wounds, the Palestinian health ministry said. Mohamad al-Alami, 12, died in the town of Beit Omar, to the northwest of the flashpoint city of Hebron, after he was shot in the chest while travelling in a car with his father, the ministry said in a statement.

He is the second young Palestinian to die of wounds sustained by Israeli fire in days. In a statement, the Zionist army said soldiers had seen men get out of a vehicle near a military checkpoint and begin digging in the ground.

"Troops approached the scene with caution and upon examination found two bags, one of which contained the body of a newborn infant," it added. When a vehicle approached the same spot

International

China names 'Wolf Warrior' diplomat as new envoy to US

New ambassador vows to bring US-China ties 'back on track'

WASHINGTON: One of China's most prominent "Wolf Warrior" diplomats was on Wednesday announced as his nation's new ambassador to the United States. The hawkish Qin Gang, a close confidante of President Xi Jinping, has arrived in the US at a time of high tensions between Washington and Beijing, and is expected to deliver a combative message.

He gained prominence during two previous stints as foreign ministry spokesman, issuing barbed responses to foreign reporters and pioneering an aggressive style of defending China in the press and on social media dubbed "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy.

"As two big countries different in history, culture, social system and development stage, China and the United States are entering a new round of mutual exploration, understanding and adaptation, trying to find a way to get along with each other," Qin told reporters on his arrival.

The new envoy, who served as vice foreign minister from 2018-2021, vowed to bring US-China ties "back on track," according to a transcript released by the Chinese embassy. Qin tweeted from a new official account that he will begin a 14-day quarantine in residence and "get down to work soon".

The US-China relationship has rapidly deteriorated in recent years, with the two powers clashing on a wide range of issues including trade, human rights, cybersecurity and the origins of the

Covid-19 pandemic.

And while President Joe Biden has lowered the tone since taking office, he has largely maintained his predecessor Donald Trump's hawkish stance on China, describing it as the pre-eminent challenge to the United States.

Qin, who accompanied Xi on numerous overseas trips as the foreign ministry's protocol chief, is among the diplomats who have vigorously defended China in the face of increasing criticism on the world stage.

The 55-year-old, who began his career in diplomacy in 1988, is considered more hawkish than his predecessor in Washington, Cui Tiankai. Qin spent several years at the Chinese embassy in London, and is a fluent English speaker.

Beijing-based independent analyst Hua Po described Qin as "one of the backbone members" of the Wolf Warrior movement. Qin in February defended that style of diplomacy as a necessary response to "groundless slander" and "crazy attacks against China".

Chinese foreign ministry spokespeople and officials abroad have adopted a strident and indignant tone to loudly defend the Communist-led country and even promote conspiracy theories or openly insult foreign counterparts.

But President Xi recently urged top political leaders to help



BEIJING: File photo shows then director of the Foreign Ministry Information Department of China Qin Gang speaking during an event in Beijing. —AFP

cultivate a "reliable, admirable and respectable" international image to improve China's soft power. —AFP

Peru's new president Castillo promises constitution change

LIMA: Leftist Pedro Castillo was sworn in as Peru's fifth president in three years Wednesday on the 200th anniversary of the country's independence, promising an end to corruption and a new constitution. The 51-year-old rural schoolteacher, who has vowed to upend a quarter-century of neo-liberal government, enters the job with a lengthy to-do list: tame the coronavirus epidemic, reactivate a flagging economy and end years of political turmoil.

"I swear by the people of Peru for a country without corruption and for a new constitution," he declared before Congress, coming back to a campaign promise to change Peru's free market-friendly founding law.

The existing charter is a relic of ex-president Alberto Fujimori, serving jail time for corruption and crimes against humanity, and father of Castillo's main presidential rival, right-wing populist Keiko Fujimori.

Insisting Peru could not "remain a prisoner" of the 1993 constitution, Castillo said he would send a bill to parliament with a view to organizing a referendum on replacing it. Castillo's Free Peru party does not enjoy a majority in a fragmented congress, holding 37 of the 130 seats.

He was declared the election victor on July 19, more than six weeks after a runoff race against Fujimori, whose allegations of voter fraud then had to be reviewed by an electoral jury. For her part, Fujimori said on Twitter that her Popular Force party "will be a firm wall against the latent threat of a new communist constitution." —AFP



MANAVGAT: Dark smoke drifts over a hotel complex during a massive forest fire which engulfed a Mediterranean resort region on Turkey's southern coast near the town of Manavgat, yesterday. —AFP

Forest fire near Turkish resort kills three

ANKARA: Three people were reported dead yesterday and more than 100 injured as firefighters battled blazes engulfing a Mediterranean resort region on Turkey's southern coast.

Officials also launched an investigation into suspicions that the fires that broke out Wednesday in four locations to the east of the tourist hotspot Antalya were the result of arson. Turkey's disaster and emergencies office said three people were killed—including an 82-year-old who lived alone—and 122 injured by the fires. "Treatment of 58 of our citizens continues," it was quoted as saying by the Anadolu state news agency.

The fires affected a sparsely populated region about 75 kilometres (45 miles) east of Antalya—a resort especially popular with Russian and

other eastern European tourists.

But images on social media and Turkish TV showed residents jumping out of their cars and running for their lives through smoke-filled streets lit up by orange flames. At least 20 buildings housing 500 people were completely destroyed. The inferno broke out with temperatures approaching 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) and wind gusts of 50 kilometres (30 miles) an hour. But Antalya mayor Muhittin Bocek said he suspected foul play because the fires started in four locations at once. "This suggests an arson attack, but we do not have clear information about that at this stage," Bocek said on Wednesday.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said an investigation had already been launched. "All necessary support will be given to our citizens who have suffered from the fire," he said late Wednesday. Most of fires had been localised by Thursday morning but rescuers continued to search for people needing help.

They rescued 10 people yesterday who were stranded on a boat in a lake that was surrounded by burning forest. —AFP

International

Gordon Felt: 20 years honoring the heroes of Flight 93

'It was wreckage, it was raw, it was horrific for us'

SHANKSVILLE: Gordon Felt knows the old mining land in Pennsylvania where United Airlines Flight 93 crashed on September 11, 2001, by heart. He's been there about a hundred times since the attacks. His brother Edward was on the plane that went down in wooded hills outside Shanksville after passengers stopped hijackers from crashing it into a target in the US capital Washington, 155 miles (250 kilometers) away.

Felt, a teacher specializing in educating children with disabilities, has become a spokesman for the families of the 40 passengers and crew who died that day—“heroes” who averted an even greater tragedy.

The 57-year-old made it his mission to ensure that their memory was not eclipsed by the stories of the three other hijacked planes, which struck the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Edward was a 41-year-old engineer with two daughters when he died.

Felt sees himself as a “facilitator” and “a communicator,” while his brother was a “problem solver” and “more of the doer” among the siblings. As president of the victims' families association, Felt was key in building the Flight 93 memorial, a roughly 2,200-acre (890-hectare) park that follows the plane's final trajectory to a white marble wall with 40 engraved names.

Felt and other families first stood on the site at the end of September 2001, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation took them there after barring access for two weeks while it carried out a probe. They arrived by bus from a center set up by the Red Cross. On the journey through the countryside, locals stood at crossroads waving American flags in homage to them.

“That was really the first time that I think it hit a lot of us that

this is really huge. This is much bigger than just the loss of a brother,” Felt recalls.

'Horrific'

Felt visited the site with his mother, Edward's wife and his other brother. “We looked down on a crater with burned trees. It was wreckage, it was raw, it was horrific for us,” he says. Like the other families present, Gordon was asked to donate DNA samples to help identify the human remains found. All victims were eventually identified. Before leaving, they were asked if anyone would speak to journalists waiting outside. Felt volunteered, taking on the role of spokesperson, which he has continued to this day. On May 2, 2011, he was awakened to react on behalf of victims to the news that Osama bin Laden, who masterminded the attacks, had been killed in a US raid in Pakistan.

In September that year, he prevented photographers from following then-president Barack Obama to the precise spot where the plane crashed during the inauguration of the memorial. It is considered “sacred ground,” as only five percent of victims' remains were found. Only families of the dead can step on that spot.

To mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11 this year, Felt and those in charge of the memorial are planning a week of events. Felt is also preparing to dissolve the association. The memorial was completed in 2019 with the installation of a tower with 40 wind chimes, symbols of the “voices” of the departed. “We have reached our goal,” says Felt, without regret. On the contrary, he feels gratitude for his years of visits to Pennsylvania and to elected officials in Washington as he drove forward the memorial project.



SHANKSVILLE: 'Families of Flight 93' president Gordon Felt, 57, who lost his brother Edward Felt on Flight 93 during the September 11, 2001 attacks holds up his family visitor passes. —AFP

“I was angry. There was a really black hole I could have fallen into. This process has given me perspective, it's given me hope, it has given me purpose. “I chose not to be bitter,” he says. But the story is far from over. Much remains unknown about what occurred on Flight 93 in the 35 minutes between the start of the hijacking and the crash at 10:03 am. —AFP

Nigerian cleric held since 2015 regains freedom

KANO: Shiite Muslim leader Ibrahim Zakzaky and his wife detained for murder since 2015 in Nigeria have on Wednesday been discharged, lawyers said. The prominent cleric has been at loggerheads with the secular authorities for years because of his calls for an Iranian-style Islamic revolution in Nigeria, where Shiites make up a small minority.

Zakzaky, his wife Zeenah Ibrahim and 200 of their followers were arrested in a violent crackdown in the northern city of Zaria. A court in 2016 ordered the couple be released—but the authorities ignored the demand and filed charges against the cleric including the murder of a soldier.

“None of the 15 prosecution witnesses proved they committed the offence,” lawyer Sadau Garba told AFP after Wednesday's hearing, adding that the couple had been acquitted and “regained their freedom today.” Lead prosecutor Dari Bayero confirmed that the pair had been freed but said the state was planning to appeal. “The court ruled that none of the witnesses we presented in court gave convincing proof that the duo were guilty,” Bayero said.

“This doesn't mean they can't be re-arraigned... we are certainly going to file charges against the duo at appeal.” Amnesty international urged the Nigerian authorities to “immediately comply” with the court order. “If the government once again deliberately disregards the orders of its own courts, it will demon-

strate a flagrant-and dangerous-contempt for the rule of law,” the rights group said in a statement.

Troops launched a ferocious clampdown on Zakzaky's group, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), in December 2015, when members blocked the convoy of the army chief of staff during a religious procession. Rights groups said at the time that some 350 IMN members were killed during two days of clashes and later buried in mass graves. The army initially denied the events and said a soldier was killed by armed Shiites. Zakzaky's continued detention has led to street protests in the nation's capital Abuja, sparking violent clashes with security forces that have claimed dozens of lives. The Nigerian government officially outlawed the group in 2019.

Vindication

That same year, 100 of the detained members were released in two batches after a court acquitted them. And in February last year another court released 87 other IMN members for lack of evidence. After the announcement of Zakzaky's release, his lawyer said the cleric and his wife “now need to go home, have some rest and attend to their urgent medical needs.”

But he added they will “seek damages against the Kaduna state government for all the deprivations and the travails our client suffered.” A spokesman for the IMN, Ibrahim Musa, said the court's decision was “a victory for truth and justice against tyranny and impunity”.

“The false charges filed against them have finally been punctured for good after almost five years of excruciating illegal detention,” Musa said. “This judgement has not only vindicated them and all members of the Islamic movement in Nigeria, but it is certainly a victory for perseverance in the face of extreme persecution by the Nigerian government.” —AFP

6 French soldiers detained at E Guinea airport

MALABO: Six French soldiers were detained at the Bata airport in Equatorial Guinea yesterday morning while stopping to refuel their helicopter, according to the French military and local media. The six, who the army said were still awaiting authorisation to take off, were detained a day after a Paris court upheld the conviction of the central African country's Vice President Teodorin Obiang for accumulating luxury properties with illegally obtained funds.

“They landed on Wednesday at 2:15 pm (1315 GMT) because they were out of fuel. That is when a sequence of administrative nuisances began,” French army spokesman Pascal Ianni told AFP, adding that negotiations with local officials were underway.

Yesterday Equatorial Guinea's state radio TVGE reported that the helicopter had landed without authorisation. The reports also said that the six soldiers were questioned at the central police station in Bata.

“National authorities do not rule out that this incident could be a spy operation and provocation on the part of Paris,” TVGE reported. But Ianni said the landing had nothing to do with espionage. “This incident is similar to ones we have dealt with before. They hold the helicopter and its crew,” Ianni said. —AFP

International

‘Catastrophic’: Virus batters hospitals in Senegal’s capital

‘We’re receiving patients who are dying on the doorstep’

DAKAR: Emergency room doctor Babacar Diop, 30, keeps getting interrupted by the ringing of his mobile phone. Relatives of patients in the saturated emergency ward in Fann hospital, in Senegal’s seaside capital Dakar, are calling to ask after their loved ones.

“The situation is very catastrophic,” says Diop, who looks grim and fatigued at the beginning of a 12-hour night shift. Ambulances come and go bearing rasping and coughing patients-whom Diop more often than not has to turn away because of a lack of oxygen.

“We’re receiving patients who are dying on the doorstep,” he says. Senegal is in the grip of a third wave of COVID-19 infections, which is believed to be driven by the highly contagious Delta variant of the virus. In the West African country’s capital, emergency wards are at a breaking point and doctors are struggling to maintain control.

The Fann emergency ward has 16 beds hooked up to oxygen. They are all occupied. Diop says he’s turned away about 20 people in recent days. They went in search of spaces in other hospitals-or simply returned home.

The number of COVID-19 deaths is under-reported, the young doctor insists. “More sick people are dying at home than in the hospital,” he says. Patients lucky enough to be admitted to Fann sit or lie in silence, with oxygen masks strapped to their faces.

“This variant is a time bomb,” says Diop, adding that there is little option but to “turn to prayer”. Senegal, a nation of 16 million people, has recorded over 59,000 COVID-19 infections since the start of the pandemic, with more than 1,300 fatalities.

But official cases have risen rapidly, from a few dozen a day late last month to a daily peak of 1,700 in July. Authorities recorded between 600 and 750 cases a day this week.

‘Very worrying’

Macadou Mbodji, the coordinator of the COVID-19 resuscitation unit in Dakar’s Idrissa Pouye hospital, says more and more young people are being admitted. There is no shortage of oxygen because the hospital has its own manufacturing plant. But the nine beds in the resuscitation unit-reserved for the most severe cases-are full.

Doctors in hazmat suits fuss over patients as monitors whirr and beep. The ward has a mortality rate of about 33 percent. Thirty-nine-year-old Mbodji is calm and even jovial, but says the situation isn’t quite under control because “all our beds are occupied at the moment”.

Almost all of the intensive-care patients are unvaccinated, or have only received one dose, he says. Over 670,000 people have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine in



DAKAR: Health workers wearing personal protective gear are seen at the intensive care unit at the Idrissa Pouye de Grand Yoff Hospital, yesterday. —AFP

Senegal, whose immunisation campaign recently restarted after stuttering because of a lack of jabs.

The national director of public health institutions, Ousmane Dia, told AFP that COVID-19 wards across the country are at almost 100

percent-occupancy rate. In Dakar, he said that figure is 100 percent in intensive care units as well as wards set aside for patients with severe cases. “The situation is difficult and very worrying,” he said. “People need to go and get vaccinated.” —AFP

4bn anti-COVID shots injected worldwide

PARIS: More than 4 billion doses of anti-COVID vaccines have been administered around the world, eight months after the vaccination drive started, according to an AFP count yesterday. Global injections have slowed slightly: this fourth billion was reached in 30 days, while it took only 26 days to reach the previous one. The first and second billion were reached after about 140 and 40 days respectively.

Forty of the four billion shots have been administered in China (1.6 billion). India (451 million) and the United States (343 million) make up the trio of countries that have administered the most jabs. In terms of population among countries with more than one million people, the United Arab Emirates is the leader: 168 first and second doses administered per 100 inhabitants. Uruguay follows (137), then Bahrain (134).

The UAE is close to having 70 percent of its population fully vaccinated while Uruguay and Bahrain have both reached more than 60 percent. After this the leading countries are Qatar, Chile and Canada (129 shots per 100 inhabitants), Israel (128), Singapore (125), the United Kingdom, Mongolia and Denmark (124) and Belgium (121). —AFP

Killings of people with albinism rose during pandemic: UN expert

GENEVA: Killings of people with albinism have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations independent expert on albinism rights said yesterday. The increase came as some people who sank into poverty turned to witchcraft hoping to gain quick wealth during the crisis, Ikponwosa Ero, the UN’s first independent expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism, said in a statement.

“Despite progress on many fronts, I was deeply saddened at the notable increase in reported cases of people with albinism being killed or attacked because of the mistaken belief that using their body parts in potions can bring good luck and wealth,” she said. “Even more tragically, the majority of victims have been children.” UN experts report their findings to the global body but do not speak for it. Albinism is a rare, non-contagious, genetically inherited condition which occurs worldwide regardless of ethnicity or gender.

It most commonly results in the lack of melanin pigment in the hair, skin and eyes, causing vulnerability to sun ex-

posure. The physical appearance of persons with albinism is often the object of erroneous beliefs and myths influenced by superstition, which foster their marginalisation and social exclusion, according to the UN.

Dehumanisation of people with the condition leads to “horrific physical attacks”, says the UN rights office. “Because some believe that they are magical beings or ghosts, they mutilate or even kill them so their body parts can be used for witchcraft rituals. These attacks claim many lives and surviving victims and their families experience severe trauma,” it says.

Ero was appointed by the UN Human Rights Council in 2015 as the first independent expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism. She is leaving her post and will be succeeded on Sunday by Muluka Anne Miti-Drummond of Zambia.

The Human Rights Council passed a resolution earlier this month which condemned human rights violations committed through witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. “I have spent the last six years battling witchcraft-related attacks against people with albinism, and am gratified that there has been much progress on several continents, despite some setbacks during the pandemic,” said Ero.

She said research on albinism had increased more than tenfold, leading to greater understanding of the condition and the issues around it. “While we have come very far in the fight against these heinous acts, the road ahead remains long and arduous,” Ero warned. —AFP

International

Friday, July 30, 2021

Thai hospitals short of beds as COVID cases soar: Ministry

Medics moving critical patients from emergency room once beds are vacated

BANGKOK: Thailand's health ministry sounded the alarm over Bangkok's dire lack of hospital beds and isolation facilities yesterday as COVID-19 cases and deaths soared to a new record. The Southeast Asian country is struggling to contain its latest outbreak fuelled by the highly contagious Delta variant, with infections and deaths skyrocketing and the healthcare system stretched thin.

Despite the hardest-hit provinces being placed under severe restrictions and a nighttime curfew, Thailand yesterday registered a new single-day record of 17,669 cases and 165 deaths. "I am speaking frankly—we do not have enough beds in hospitals," said Somsak Akkasilp, the health ministry's director general of the Department of Medical Services, in an uncharacteristically candid press conference.

"In big hospitals, all (intensive care units) are overoccupied. They have 10 beds for ICU but they have to handle 12 ICU cases," he said, adding that medics were moving critical patients from the emergency room once the beds are vacated.

Hospitals in the capital have the capacity to manage 1,000 new patients a day, but

Somsak said they were well past that number—with 4,000 new cases recorded yesterday in Bangkok alone. While authorities are starting to recommend home isolation for milder cases, there are issues with supplying medicine to them, said Somsak.

In addition, the city's isolation and quarantine facilities are getting filled, and metropolitan authorities are working with private hospitals to free up more beds. "But I have to speak frankly—no matter how much we increase it, it is not likely to be enough for this current outbreak," Somsak said.

"We do not know if the pandemic has reached its peak yet... We have to flatten the curve," he added. Thailand has reported more than 561,000 coronavirus cases and 4,562 deaths. The bulk of them were detected since the latest wave kicked off in April from an upscale Bangkok nightlife district frequented by the politically connected.

The administration of Premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha has come under vociferous criticism for its handling of the pandemic, from accusations of vaccine mismanagement to the lack of government compensation for affected sectors.



BANGKOK: Workers prepare mattresses and blankets for some 1,800 cardboard beds at a COVID-19 field hospital inside a warehouse at the Don Mueang International Airport in Bangkok. —AFP

Currently the kingdom is administering Sinovac, Sinopharm and AstraZeneca vaccines. But the mass vaccination campaign has been slow, with much of the population angered that the government has not procured

Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, which use newer mRNA technology.

The US embassy has donated 1.5 million doses of Pfizer vaccines to Thailand, which are expected to arrive today. —AFP

Sydney police call for military to enforce lockdown

SYDNEY: Police in Australia's largest city have requested military help to enforce a coronavirus lockdown as infections in Sydney reached a new record yesterday. Commissioner Mick Fuller said New South Wales police had asked for 300 Australian Defence Force personnel to be deployed "to boost its operational footprint".

The city of five million people is in its fifth week of a lockdown that is set to run until the end of August. Stay-at-home orders have failed to reduce new infections to zero, and compliance has been patchy. Sydney residents are only allowed to leave their homes for exercise, essential work, medical reasons, and to shop for necessities such as food.

But for weeks, parks and beach promenades have been filled with Sydneysiders drinking coffee and chatting with friends. Police have increasingly been doling out fines to those violating the restrictions and Fuller said those efforts would be stepped up in the coming days.

Last weekend thousands of people gathered in central Sydney to protest against the measures, and further demonstrations have been mooted. Police have also requested more powers to shut down businesses that they say are not abiding by rules on social distancing.

On Thursday state premier Gladys Berejiklian warned that



SYDNEY: A police officer stays guard outside an isolated residential building in Sydney's western suburb of Blacktown yesterday, after several COVID-19 cases were reported among the residents. —AFP

the outbreak—which began mid-June when a driver for an international flight crew contracted the virus—is "likely to get worse". Officials announced 239 new infections in Sydney, a record for this outbreak, which now totals 2,810 cases.

With under 14 percent of the Australian population vaccinated, many experts have warned that Sydney's lockdown could run for months more. Supplies of Pfizer-BioNTech shots are low and there has been widespread scepticism about the AstraZeneca jab, slowing the vaccine rollout. —AFP

Delta variant drives virus spread to three China provinces

BEIJING: China yesterday reported small coronavirus outbreaks driven by the Delta variant in three provinces as a cluster linked to an eastern airport spreads despite mass testing and a vaccination drive. The flare-up, which began after nine workers at the Nanjing airport tested positive on July 20, has seen 171 cases detected in Jiangsu province, while infections have spread to at least four other provinces.

It is geographically the largest spread for several months, challenging China's aggressive containment efforts which have relied on mass testing, lockdowns and swift contact tracing. The virus first emerged in the central city of Wuhan, but China has extolled its success in largely extinguishing the pandemic inside its borders, allowing the economy to rebound.

The new outbreak, coupled with cases seeping over the porous border with Myanmar, is threatening that record. Officials in Jiangsu have locked down hundreds of thousands of residents, Lu Jing, a member of the epidemic prevention taskforce, told reporters yesterday. —AFP

Taleban surge poses 'existential crisis' for Afghan government

Overall trend is clearly unfavorable for Kabul

WASHINGTON: The Afghan government faces an "existential crisis" after the Taleban doubled their attacks following the February 2020 US deal with the insurgents, a watchdog report said yesterday. The report said Taleban attacks on Afghan targets surged from 6,700 in the three months up to the Doha agreement to 13,242 in the September-November 2020 period.

Attacks have stayed above 10,000 in each subsequent three-month period, according to the report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). While the rise in attacks had long been clear, data had not previously been available to demonstrate how intense the rebels' offensive had become.

The United States agreed to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan in expectation the Taleban would negotiate a peace deal with the Kabul government. Since then the Taleban-government talks have stalled but the US has steadily pulled out troops to a level of only several hundred now, with an August 31 deadline for full withdrawal.

The SIGAR report makes clear that the Doha agreement, instead of propelling Taleban-Kabul talks, unleashed an offensive

that caught government forces unprepared and increased the number of civilian deaths. Over January-March of 2020, there were only 510 civilian deaths and 709 casualties, the report said, quoting data from the US-Nato joint force in Afghanistan.

After that the numbers surged, hitting 1,058 deaths and 1,959 injured in the third quarter that year and continuing at high levels. The latest data, for April and May this year, showed 705 civilian deaths and 1,330 casualties, the SIGAR report said.

"The overall trend is clearly unfavorable to the Afghan government, which could face an existential crisis if it isn't addressed and reversed," said the inspector general, John Sopko. He said the report offered a sobering picture that contrasted with "the pervasiveness of overoptimism" that characterized US-led efforts to rebuild and strengthen Afghanistan and the cost of hundreds of billions of dollars to the US government.

"The news coming out of Afghanistan this quarter has been bleak," the report said. Faced by a new Taleban offensive, it said, the Afghan government security force "appeared surprised and unready, and is now on its back foot."

"Particularly concerning was the speed



CHAMAN: In this picture taken on July 27, 2021, plainclothes security personnel guards as goods trucks prepare to make their way towards the Afghan border crossing point in Chaman, after a key crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan partially reopened days after the Taleban took control of the Afghan border town. — AFP

and ease with which the Taleban seemingly wrested control of districts in Afghanistan's

northern provinces, once a bastion of anti-Taleban sentiment." — AFP

HK radio host in first 'sedition' trial since China handover

HONG KONG: A pro-democracy Hong Kong radio host went on trial yesterday for sedition in the first use of the colonial-era law since the city's handover to China as authorities broaden their criminalisation of dissent. Tam Tak-chi, 48, is among a growing number of activists charged with sedition, a little-used decades-old law that prosecutors have dusted off in the last twelve months.

It is separate from the sweeping national security law that was imposed on Hong Kong last year, which has also been used to prosecute dissidents. Best known by his moniker "Fast Beat", online talk show host Tam faces eight sedition charges for slogans he either uttered or wrote between January and July last year.

He also faces other charges including inciting an unlawful assembly and disorderly conduct. At the opening of his trial yesterday, prosecutors read out those slogans, as

well as some pro-democracy speeches Tam gave, often littered with colourful Cantonese curse words.

The slogans included "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times", "Corrupt cops, all of your family go to hell", "Disband Hong Kong police, delay no more" and "Down with the Communist Party of China".

The trial is a watershed legal moment for Hong Kong because it will set a precedent for what political phrases and views are now deemed illegal as China looks to stamp out dissent following huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago.

On Tuesday, a Hong Kong court convicted a former waiter of terrorism and inciting secession in the first trial conducted under the new national security law. During that trial, judges ruled that the popular protest slogan "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times" was secessionist and therefore a national security crime. — AFP

China accuses BBC of 'fake news' over floods reporting

BEIJING: Beijing yesterday launched a scathing attack on the BBC, accusing it of broadcasting "fake news" and saying the organisation was "naturally unpopular" over its coverage of devastating floods in central China.

The broadside by the foreign ministry comes after the BBC called on Beijing to put a stop to the harassment of its journalists by nationalists who have accused foreign media of biased reporting. Days of heavy rain last week sparked record flooding in the central province of Henan that has claimed the lives of at least 99 people.

The BBC said its reporters covering the deluge had been subjected to online vitriol, while other outlets had been harassed on the ground in "attacks which continue to endanger foreign journalists". But Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian yesterday

called the broadcaster a "Fake News Broadcasting Company" that has "attacked and smeared China, seriously deviating from journalistic standards".

Zhao said the BBC deserved to be "unpopular with the Chinese public" and "there is no such thing as hatred without reason". The war of words erupted after a youth branch of China's ruling Communist Party on Tuesday posted comments online calling on its 1.6 million followers to track the movements of BBC reporters.

The comments by the Henan Communist Youth League spurred death threats against BBC correspondents from nationalistic internet users. A year's rain was dumped on the city of Zhengzhou in just three days last week, leaving 14 people dead and more than 500 commuters trapped when the city's subway system flooded during rush hour.

City and provincial officials have faced calls for accountability, with the wife of one of the subway victims telling local media she would sue the metro operator for negligence. But despite calls for transparency, foreign journalists have been met with increased hostility as sensitivity towards any negative portrayal of China mounts. — AFP

Friday|Times

LIFESTYLE

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From grey to green: World cities uprooting the urban jungle

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Participant Tasha Dougee poses for a portrait after being painted during the annual NYC Bodypainting Day at Union Square in New York. The annual self-titled event aims to promote acceptance and the 'use of the human form as an aesthetic versus personal identity'.—AFP
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This undated handout picture released by the National Gallery of Australia shows the historical group portrait of a Gujarati family. —AFP photos



This handout picture released by the National Gallery of Australia shows a portrait of Lala D Dayal, Maharaja Kishen Pershad Yamin, 1903, India, purchased in 2010.

AUSTRALIA TO RETURN ‘STOLEN’ ART TO INDIA



This undated handout picture released by the National Gallery of Australia shows the ‘Manorath’ portrait of donor and priests before Shri Nathji.



This undated handout picture released by the National Gallery of Australia shows a portrait from Udaipur in Rajasthan, India.

Australia will return 14 artworks to India, including at least six believed to have been stolen or illegally exported, the National Gallery announced yesterday. The Canberra gallery identified the works—which include sculptures, photographs and a scroll—as either stolen, looted or of unknown origin. The collection is composed largely of “religious and cultural artefacts” worth a total of about US\$2.2 million, including some dating back to the 12th century. Gallery director Nick Mitzevich told AFP the works were set to be returned to the Indian government within months. “It’s a relief that they can be returned to the Indian people, and it’s a resolution for the National Gallery to close a very difficult chapter of our history,” he said. Thirteen of the works are connected to alleged trafficker Subhash Kapoor, a former Manhattan art dealer who was the subject of a massive US federal investigation known as Operation Hidden

Idol. Kapoor, who is awaiting trial, denies all charges. The National Gallery of Australia has already returned several other works it acquired via Kapoor, including a US\$5 million bronze statue of the Hindu god Shiva that had been stolen from a Tamil Nadu temple. Mitzevich said it had introduced guidelines to assess any legal and ethical issues with works it holds, and was investigating three other sculptures from its Asia collection. “It’s very much a live issue with galleries around the world. And we want to make sure that we can resolve these issues in a timely manner,” he said. Many of the antiquities Kapoor dealt in dated back to the 11th and 12th centuries, when the Chola dynasty presided over a flourishing of Hindu art in Tamil Nadu. Since his arrest in 2011, the United States has also returned hundreds of artefacts. — AFP

'Better Call Saul' star Odenkirk stable after collapsing on set

US actor Bob Odenkirk was in a stable condition in hospital Wednesday after collapsing on the set of popular television drama "Better Call Saul," his representatives said. Odenkirk was rushed to hospital due to "a heart-related incident" while filming in New Mexico on Tuesday, according to a statement released to US media. "We can confirm Bob is in stable condition... He and his family would like to express gratitude for the incredible doctors and nurses looking after him," it added. Odenkirk, 58, was filming the final season of the show in which he plays luckless protagonist Jimmy McGill, a small-time lawyer and conman who transitions to an eventually prominent defense attorney under the name Saul Goodman.

The show is a spin-off of critically acclaimed "Breaking Bad," widely regarded as one of the greatest television series ever

made. In that show, Odenkirk plays the lawyer for schoolteacher turned drug dealer Walter White. Entertainment publication TMZ said Odenkirk "went down" on set and was "immediately surrounded by crew members who called an ambulance." "The Odenkirks would also like to thank everyone for the outpouring of well wishes and ask for their privacy at this time as Bob works on his recovery," the statement from his representatives said. Odenkirk has received four Emmy and Golden Globe nominations for best actor for "Better Call Saul" and has previously won two Emmys for writing on other productions. The sixth season of "Better Call Saul" is expected to premiere early next year. Social media was abuzz with concern for the actor, who has a huge cult following and has also appeared in dozens of films including the recently released action thriller "Nobody." — AFP



In this file photo actor Bob Odenkirk arrives for the 71st Emmy Awards at the Microsoft Theatre in Los Angeles. — AFP

Dominican music legend Johnny Ventura dies aged 81

Legendary Dominican singer and songwriter Johnny Ventura, considered one of the greatest exponents of merengue, has died from a heart attack at the age of 81, health officials said. Winner of six Latin Grammys over a 60-year career, Ventura shot to fame after forming his own merengue and salsa orchestra called the "combo show," considered one of the most significant bands in Dominican musical history. The Dominican Republic's president, Luis Abinader, declared three days of mourning following his death on Wednesday and said the singer would receive military honors.

The Dominican Ministry of Culture tweeted that it "deeply regrets the death of the great Dominican musician Johnny Ventura." "We join in the pain that overwhelms his family in these difficult times. His legacy will live on forever in his songs and Dominican culture." Ventura suffered a heart attack while having lunch in the northern city of Santiago de los Caballeros when he felt sudden chest pain and collapsed, the Clinica Union Medica, where he was treated, said in a report.

The music legend, who later pursued a career in politics and became the mayor of Santo Domingo, did not respond to resuscitation efforts, the center added. Dominican artists and politicians paid tributes to a musician known as "El Caballo Mayor" (Big Horse), who made more than 100 albums in a career spanning six decades. "For your music and

legacy, for your smile and example, and for dressing up every morning and teaching us all what merengue is !! Thank you Don Johnny !!", Dominican star Juan Luis Guerra wrote on Twitter. Dominican senator Hector Acosta tweeted: "A big piece of my life went with him. God be with you, Dad Ventura".

Former President Leonel Fernandez said on Twitter that he was shocked by Ventura's death, adding: "His artistic and patriotic legacy is a symbol of Dominicanity". Born Juan de Dios Ventura Soriano on March 8, 1940, in Santo Domingo, the merengue legend had been married for more than 50 years and had seven children. — AFP



Johnny Ventura

Zalika Souley, doyenne of African cinema, dies at 74

Zalika Souley, who won fame and money that did not last as the first sub-Saharan African woman to star on the silver screen, has died at the age of 74, her family said on Wednesday. "We are deeply saddened to announce the death of Hadja Zalika Souley on July 27, 2021 following a long illness," said a statement from her relatives. Souley, who was born in 1947 in the Niger capital Niamey, won a leading role in Moustapha Alassane's "The Return of an Adventurer" at the age of only 19.

In this 1966 African-style Western, Souley donned blue jeans, hat and pistol and, mounted a white horse, embarked on an adventure accompanied by young men drawing controversy in the newly independent former French colony for what critics saw as immodest behavior. For much of her career she collaborated with Niger's pioneering director Oumarou Ganda, taking a lead role in 1969's "Cabascabo", in which she played the lover of a veteran from the French Colonial army returning from Vietnam.

The film was screened in the International Critics' Week of that year's Cannes Film Festival. A year later she starred in Ganda's "The Polygamous Wazou", where, mad with jealousy, she targets the new third wife of her husband but mistakenly murders her maid of honor. The film won the first Yennenga Stallion award at the 1972 Ouagadougou Pan-African Film and Television Festival and the International Critics' Prize at the Dinard Francophone Film Festival the same year. — AFP



In this file photo creator Jon Favreau arrives for Disney+ World Premiere of "The Mandalorian" at El Capitan theatre in Hollywood. — AFP

Lucasfilm hires YouTube artist behind 'Star Wars' deepfake

A YouTuber famous for making "deepfakes" of scenes from iconic film and television shows including "Star Wars" has landed a job at Lucasfilm after wowing bosses at the Disney-owned company. The digital artist known only as "Shamook" is famous online for using cutting-edge technology to seamlessly map the faces of famous stars onto other actors' bodies. Popular videos created by the technical whiz include pasting Robert Pattinson's visage onto Christian Bale's Batman, and imagining a young Mel Gibson had returned in place of Tom Hardy in 2015's "Mad Max: Fury Road." But his work on the climactic scene of "The Mandalorian" season two appeared to particularly impress Lucasfilm.

The "Star Wars" TV series set five years after the 1983 film "Return of the Jedi" concluded with a surprise appearance from Mark Hamill, who was digitally de-aged to play a young Luke Skywalker once again. Many of Shamook's 90,000 followers felt his amateur reworking of the scene surpassed the official version now streaming on Disney+. Lucasfilm's visual effects team Industrial Light and Magic "is always on the lookout for talented artists and have in fact hired the artist that goes by the online persona 'Shamook'," a spokesman said in a statement sent to AFP. "Over the past several years ILM has been investing in both machine learning and A.I. as a means to produce compelling visual effects work and it's been terrific to see momentum building in this space as the technology advances."

Shamook first revealed the hire on YouTube, telling followers his new title was "Senior Facial Capture Artist." Disney is working on around 10 new "Star Wars" TV series, buoyed by the success of "The Mandalorian," which was nominated for a whopping 24 Emmys and introduced viewers around the world to the adorable fan favorite Baby Yoda. Several "Star Wars" films are in the works too, including "Rogue Squadron" from "Wonder Woman" director Patty Jenkins, and another currently being written by Taika Waititi ("Jojo Rabbit"). — AFP



An employee of the Cuban crocodile breeding center extracts eggs from a nest to transfer them to hatching chambers.



An employee of the Cuban crocodile breeding center holds a Cuban crocodile (*Crocodylus rhombifer*).



A group of Russian tourists feed Cuban crocodiles (*Crocodylus rhombifer*) at the breeding center of Cienaga de Zapata.

Dangerous attraction: Amorous pursuit imperils Cuban croc

Being too coveted a mating partner can have its downside for a species faced with extinction, as the Cuban crocodile has learned. Arduous pursuit by its amorous American counterpart has seen survival of the island species, its numbers already dwindling, further threatened by hybridization. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Cuban crocodile population has declined more than 80 percent over three generations. Known to scientists as *Crocodylus rhombifer*, the black-and-yellow freshwater reptile is listed as a “critically endangered” species.

Hybridization is one of the main threats to its survival, according to the IUCN, along with hunting for meat—in large part for tourist restaurant menus. Today, the scaly predator’s island-wide range has been largely limited to the Zapata Swamp some 150 kilometers (93 miles) southeast of Havana. But it is not alone. The American *Crocodylus acutus*, a fresh- and saltwater specimen, is also found here, and seems to enjoy the company of its Cuban counterpart—perhaps a little too much. Already at the Zapata natural reserve, one in two crocs is a hybrid, conservationists say.

Natural or not?

But gene mixing may not necessarily be a bad thing. “One has to remember that hybridization also plays a role in evolution, in the appearance of new species,” said Etiam



An adult Cuban crocodile (*Crocodylus rhombifer*) is seen at the breeding center of Cienaga de Zapata, Cuba. — AFP photos

Perez-Fleitas, an exotic species expert at the Zapata reserve. The question for scientists now is whether this particular mixing of the gene pool is good or bad. If the phenomenon is the result of human-induced stresses, it has to be stopped, explained Perez-Fleitas. But if it is natural, it might be best to leave well alone. As sometimes happens naturally, hybridization could result in a more resistant species, combining the aggression of the smaller Cuban crocodile and the adaptability of its more timid American cousin.

The American crocodile, listed as “vulnerable” by the IUCN, is native to countries of northern South America, the Caribbean, central America and the tip of Florida. “Our research is focused on finding out whether this is natural hybridization,” said Perez-Fleitas. In the meantime, a 2008 genetic study has allowed scientists to distinguish Cuban crocs from hybrids, and to exclude the latter from captive breeding programs.

No other like it

At the Zapata reserve, some 500 to 1,000 baby Cuban crocs are born into semi-captivity every year, of which about a hundred are

released into the wild. AFP visited the project on a day when workers were collecting eggs from croc nests to be placed in an incubator—which vastly improves their chances of hatching. It is a risky business, and five men with large sticks surrounded the nest mound as another dug for eggs, ready to repel a sudden toothy attack from the water or the tall grass nearby.

Each female lays about 20 to 40 eggs, which spend some 80 to 85 days incubating. Zapata reserve employee Jorge Luis Monero, 56, holds a young specimen measuring about half a meter in his arms, and insists its profile is reminiscent of the distinct elongated shape of the island of Cuba. “In the Americas, there is no other crocodile like the Cuban,” he said. But in spite of the animal’s uniqueness, Perez-Fleitas said preserving a pure breed is not necessarily the best option, and cautioned against deciding too hastily on the way forward. When dealing with a creature that can live up to 70 years in captivity, it is better to have “very long-term plans,” the specialist said. “Maybe in 100 years, it will be the hybrids that need protecting,” he added. — AFP

Ancient Peruvian Sun calendar declared UN heritage site

A 2,300-year-old solar observatory in Peru, a structure of 13 stone towers built atop a hill and used as a calendar, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site on Tuesday. The Chankillo observatory, built by an ancient civilization about two millennia before the ascent of another well-known Sun cult—the Inca empire—allowed for remarkably accurate astronomical observations, according to recent studies.



In this file photo aerial view of the Chankillo Solar Observatory near Casma, Peru.

The walled, hilltop ruins some 400 kilometers (250 miles) north of Lima had long puzzled scientists. Then in 2007, a study in the journal *Science* proposed the sequence of towers erected between 200 and 300 BC “marked the summer and winter solstices” and that Chankillo “was in part a solar observatory.”

Peruvian archaeologist Ivan Ghezzi, who co-authored that study with British colleague Clive Ruggles, told AFP the towers, erected “with great precision,” were placed to mark different positions of the Sun “and therefore mark exact dates.”

Their purpose was to time with astonishing accuracy the months, solstices and equinoxes—the planting and harvesting seasons and religious holidays. The structure works like a giant clock, marking the passage of time over the span of a year. “Chankillo is a masterpiece of ancient Peruvians. A masterpiece of architecture, a masterpiece of technology and astronomy. It is the cradle of astronomy in America,” Ghezzi told AFP on a visit to the site. It was also likely a place of Sun worship.

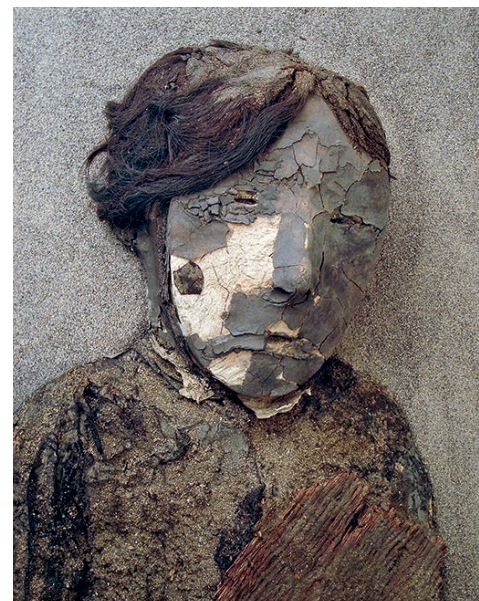
Sites to the east and west of the towers feature the remains of objects used for ritual sacrifices. The observatory and its ceremonial appendages were protected by fortress walls made of stone, mud and tree trunks. The complex spans some 5,000 hectares, but only about one percent has been studied, said Ghezzi. Last year, the coronavirus epidemic paralyzed archaeological excavations in Peru, as elsewhere, and abandoned many sites containing priceless pre-Columbian objects to the mercy of looters, who sell to the black market.

Chankillo was among the sites invaded; not by thieves but by nearby farmers who have long looked to expand their land and who capitalized on the lack of control to plant crops within the borders of the site. Peru has 12 other sites on the UNESCO World Heritage list, including the Inca citadel of Machu Picchu.

Chankillo was added to the list at the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee, held online and chaired from Fuzhou in China. It added four more sites in Latin America, including a tropical garden “living work of art” developed by landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx in Brazil, a modernistic church complex by engineer Eladio Dieste in Uruguay, the Chinchorro mummies of Chile and Mexico’s Tlaxcala cathedral. — AFP



In this file photo aerial view of the Chankillo Solar Observatory near Casma, Peru. — AFP photos



In these file photos handout pictures released by the Centro Gestion Chinchorro show mummies in Chinchorro, northern Chile.óAFP photos

Chile's ancient mummies added to UN heritage list

Chile's Chinchorro mummies, the oldest in the world to have been purposefully preserved by humans, were added to UNESCO's World Heritage List on Tuesday. The mummies, which were found in the north of Chile at the start of the 20th century, are more than 7,000 years old, meaning they pre-date the Egyptian mummies by two millennia. The United Nations' cultural organization announced on Twitter that it had added the “settlement and artificial mummification of the Chinchorro culture” to its prestigious list during a virtual meeting chaired by China.

“UNESCO is validating on an international level, through different experts, that the settlements and artificial mummification of the Chinchorro culture has exceptional value, that it has a global importance,” Chilean anthropologist Bernardo Arriaza told AFP. The Chinchorro were fishers and hunter gatherers more than 7,000 years ago in an area where the desert and Pacific Ocean meet in what is today the south of Peru and north of Chile.

So far, more than 300 mummies have been found, including red, black and bandaged ones. The mummification process consisted of

removing the organs, intestines and tissue. The skin was then ripped off the corpse and the body rebuilt using sticks and animal hair, while a thick head of black hair was sewn onto the scalp. Finally the mummies were painted red or black using earth, pigments, manganese and iron oxide. “These bodies are very finely made by specialists. There's a subtlety, a creativity by these first populations,” added Arriaza, who is the director of the Chinchorro Center at the Tarapaca University in the city of Arica.

Why the Chichorro culture mummified their dead remains a mystery. In 2005, Arriaza developed a theory that it could have been linked to high levels of arsenic poisoning in the water that could have produced premature births, miscarriages, underweight children and high infant mortality. He suggested the mummification was “an emotional response from parents faced with these painful losses, so they painted them, dressed them up and every day this technique became more elaborate.” — AFP



Apartment blocks with balconies covered with plants at a residential community in Chengdu in China's southwestern Sichuan province.

From grey to green: World cities uprooting the urban jungle

From lettuces farmed on New York's skyline to thick corridors of trees occupying once desolate Colombian roadsides, green initiatives are running wild in cities around the world. At a time when coronavirus lockdowns have amplified the need for nature in urban areas, AFP has gathered images and footage of projects optimizing precious city space. Replanting initiatives have sprouted up since the start of the

21st century as urban development goals have shifted and alarm about global warming has grown. And they've had an impact.

In nine cities in the world, thanks to planting schemes on walls and roofs, the temperature during the warmest month in so-called street canyons-flanked by high-rise buildings on either side-can be reduced by 3.6 to 11.3 degrees Celsius at

the hottest time of day, according to a report by the French Agency for Ecological Transition. Green spaces have also been shown to improve health and wellbeing, including by reducing stress, anxiety and depression, improving attention and focus, better physical health and managing post-traumatic stress disorder, said Stephanie Merchant of Bath University's department for health. "However, it's about where they are cre-



This photograph shows a view of the Supertrees at Gardens by the Bay in Singapore.— AFP photos



People walk on a bridge at a green corridor in Poblado neighborhood in Medellin, Colombia.



A view inside the Flower Dome at Gardens by the Bay in Singapore.

Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, July 30, 2021



Apartments with balconies covered with plants at a residential community in Chengdu.



A woman sitting on a balcony covered with plants at a residential community in Chengdu.

ated in relation to the needs of the local communities,” she added. So, are all urban replanting projects worthwhile?

For a scheme to be seen as “virtuous”, it must fulfil as many functions as possible, economist and urban planner Jean Haentjens, who co-authored the book “Eco-urbanisme” (“Eco-Urbanism”), told AFP. In addition to lowering the temperature, he said it should also preserve biodiversity, improve wellbeing, raise awareness, be appealing to residents and suitable for its social context.

Singapore’s otherworldly garden

The imposing “forest” of giant manmade trees constructed from reinforced concrete and steel, luxuriantly covered in real flora and fauna, is a Singapore landmark. Towering 25 to 50 meters (82 to 164 feet) over the city-state’s new business district, the 18 solar-powered supertrees light up the night sky, their canopies looking like flying saucers.

Vast glass greenhouses also showcase exotic plants from five continents, as well as plant life from tropical highlands up to 2,000 meters above sea level, complete with an artificial mountain and indoor waterfall. The Gardens by the Bay project, awarded the World Building of the Year in 2012, says the

idea was to create “a city in a garden”. But pointing to the construction and maintenance costs, Philippe Simay, a philosopher on cities and architecture, called it a “disneyisation” of nature. “Why make trees from concrete when you can have real ones?” he asked. It’s a great public relations effort, says Claire Doussard, a teacher in planning and development and a research fellow at the French National Centre for Scientific Research, highlighting its “technical know-how” and awareness-raising among the public about the threat of climate change.

Farming on a New York rooftop

With buildings all around, the Statue of Liberty in the distance and heavy traffic below, the Brooklyn Grange rooftop farm grows more than 45 tons of organic produce a year. It was launched about a decade ago by friends living in New York who wanted “a small sustainable farm that operated as a business”, co-founder Gwen Schantz said. In a built-up city, Simay noted, it had been found that such initiatives were “fighting effectively against heat islands” where heat-conducting concrete and asphalt make cities warmer than their surroundings.

Now covering three rooftops, totaling more than 22,000



A view inside the Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay in Singapore.



A view of the Oasis hotel (center) in Singapore.



People walking around the rain vortex at Jewel Changi Airport in Singapore.



View of the Oriental Avenue in downtown Medellin, Colombia.



The metro passes by a green corridor in Medellin, Colombia.



People visit the Brooklyn Grange rooftop farming company and sustainability center during an open day, in the New York City borough of Brooklyn.



A view inside the Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay in Singapore.

square meters (more than 236,000 square feet), the farm cultivates a wide variety of vegetables. But it has to limit the soil depth to about 30 centimeters (12 inches) and “irrigate the soil a little more frequently, because it dries out very quickly”, Schantz said. Doussard said that the logistics of rooftop farming, where water and soil must be hauled up and produce brought down, means: “These farms must be profitable because there are a lot of constraints.”

From living in Milan’s vertical forest...
By adorning two high-rise apartment buildings from top to bottom in more than 20,000 trees and plants, Italian architect Stefano Boeri said he’d wanted to make trees “an essential component of architecture” and create something that could “contribute to reducing pollution”. The Bosco Verticale (Vertical Forest) in the heart of Milan sees cherry, apple and olive trees spilling over balconies alongside beeches and larches, selected and positioned according to their resistance to wind and preference for sunlight or humidity.
The award-winning project opened in 2014 and, said Simay, is “an indisputable technical feat with an ecosystem function, a

large diversity of trees, plants, insects”. But, he added, concrete and steel were required to support it all, while setting it up was costly and energy-consuming. And the price that the luxury apartments go for is also often a talking point.

To vertical farming in Copenhagen
Bathed in purple light, produce like lettuce, herbs and kale sprout in layered racks from floor to ceiling inside a massive warehouse in a Copenhagen industrial zone. Little robots deliver trays of seeds from aisle to aisle at the vertical farm, opened by Danish start-up Nordic Harvest in December. Produce will be harvested 15 times a year despite never seeing soil or daylight — 20,000 specialised LED lightbulbs keep it illuminated around the clock. The need for constant lighting is one of the downsides for Simay, who also highlighted its overall costs.
But Nordic Harvest founder and chief executive Anders Riemann stresses the benefits of produce being grown close to consumers, freeing up agricultural land that can be turned back into forest. For Haentjens, it represents “an interesting route”, depending on the context. “But we can’t make it the model of tomorrow,” he said.





In this file photo taken People walk on a tree-lined lane in the Saudi capital Riyadh.



An aerial picture shows a park area in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

Riyadh’s mass tree planting
Today any greenery in Riyadh is almost lost in between the multi-lane highways and gigantic interchanges, but within nine years the city plans to have added 7.5 million trees. The reforestation is part of an \$11-billion green initiative that also includes creating 3,000 parks in the Saudi capital. It will require one million cubic meters (35 million cubic feet) of water daily, which will be recycled water from an irrigation network, the Riyadh Green website says.

But it will contribute towards reducing normal temperatures by one or two degrees Celsius and improve the quality of life with less air pollution and dust, according to project head Abdelaziz Al Moqbel. “Reintroducing trees in the desert is very virtuous, you gain in terms of cooling,” architect and urban planner Cedissia About said. But, she added, the big question would be whether phytosanitary products, which scare off birds and insects, are used when the aim is to boost biodiversity.

Medellin’s ‘green corridors’
Colombia’s second-biggest city has won plaudits and awards for its “green corridors”, an interconnected network that has transformed urban thoroughfares once lacking in nature and strewn with rubbish where drug addicts gathered. Now the 30 tree- and flower-filled corridors connect up with Medellin’s existing green spaces such as parks and gardens.
“There’s been a real reflection citywide on the species chosen, the habitability, the constraints,” Doussard said. The over-

all effect has reduced the temperature by two degrees Celsius and helped purify the air, according to a city authority video. Bees and birds have returned, residents are engaged and gardening jobs have been created, it added. “It’s one of the better examples (of urban replanting), driven by a policy which increases biodiversity, with a social dimension,” Simay said.

Chengdu’s apartment blocks turned jungle
It promised inhabitants of a Chinese megacity life in a vertical forest, with luxuriant plants and greenery on their balcony. “The air is good when you wake up in the morning, and the green trees are good for us elderly people,” said Lin Dengying, who lives in one of the eight towers making up Qiyi City Forest Garden in Chengdu which opened in 2018. Some parts look like a treehouse perched within a tropical forest, while other places look overrun by their own vegetation, like a jungle is invading and bursting off the terraces.
In September, the state-run Global Times newspaper reported that only about 10 families had moved into the more than 800 apartments due to what some residents said was an infestation of mosquitoes. It shows, said Doussard, the need not only to consider a project’s environmental impact, but also its “liveability”. — AFP



Stephan Brenneisen, Head of research unit Urban Ecology of Zurich University of Applied Sciences inspecting a wooden log on the green roof of St. Jakobshalle arena in Basel.



An aerial picture shows a bus driving on a tree-lined road in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

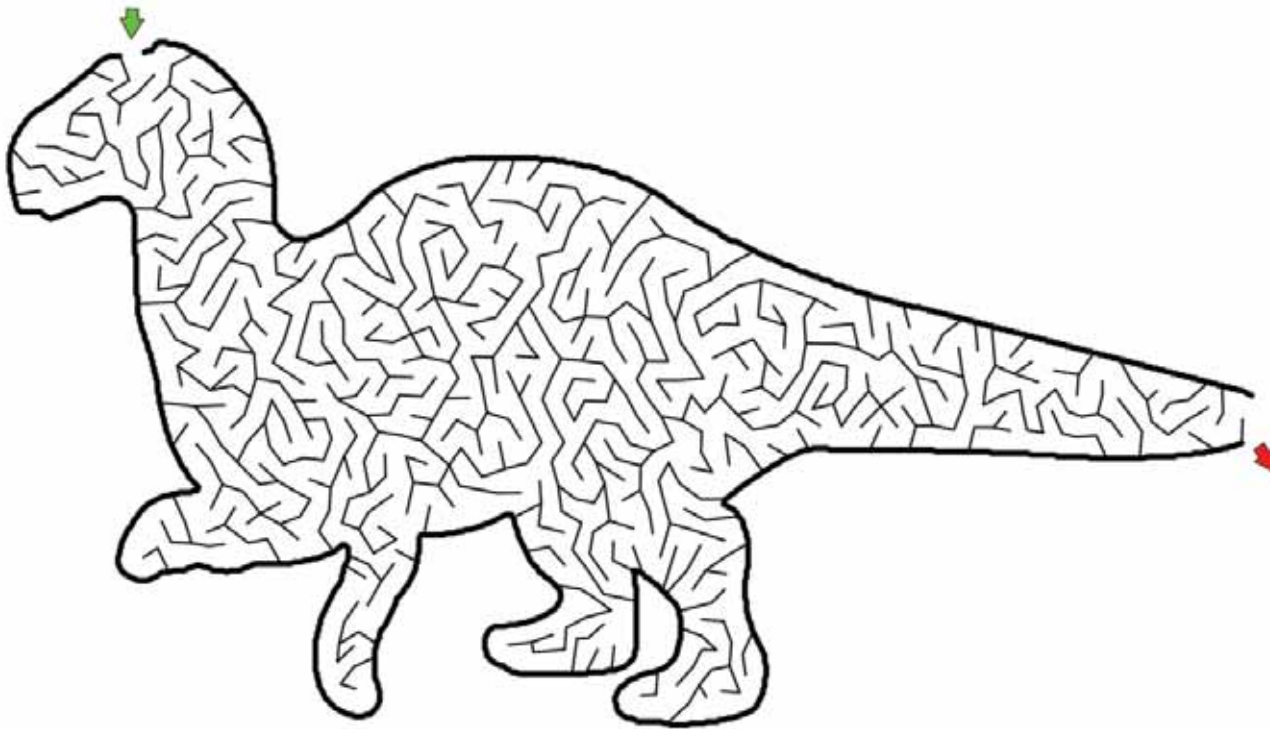


An aerial picture shows cars driving down a road next to a park area in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

Kids Page

Friday, July 30, 2021

Find the way



Word Scramble

Back to School Scramble



Everything was almost ready to start the new school year but the labels for the classroom got jumbled. Can you unscramble the letters to form the names of 24 things you might find in your classroom? Watch out, one of the objects is formed from two words.

IRCAH	_____	CRTOLUALCA	_____
FGAL	_____	RRAMEK	_____
BKOENOTO	_____	KACKCBAP	_____
CDLNARAE	_____	ROSSSICS	_____
REEARS	_____	CKALH	_____
LSARTPE	_____	OLCKC	_____
EGLU	_____	CATEEHR	_____
IRFLEAAMR	_____	MSOACPS	_____
CNLEPI	_____	ENDUSTT	_____
KSED	_____	GLEBO	_____
OASOCBEK	_____	NIBDRE	_____
TXOKBTOE	_____		_____

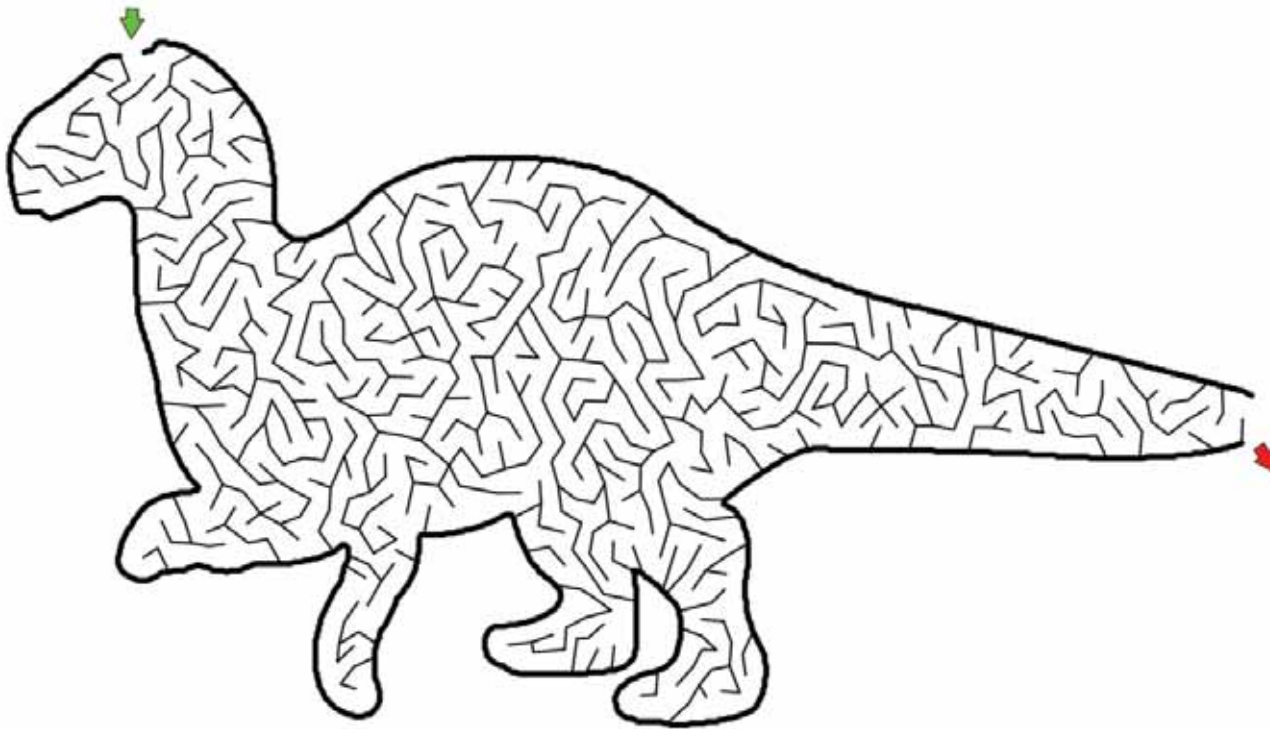
Join the dots



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OASOCBEK	_____	NIBDRE	_____
TXOKBTOE	_____		_____

Join the dots



FRIDAY, JULY 30, 2021

Business

31 KIB first organization in Kuwait to earn Corporate Ethics Mark**32** With market-trembling rules, China cracks down on big firms**33** US economy showing progress but 'not fully recovered': Fed

MACUNGIE, US: US President Joe Biden arrives to speak about American manufacturing and the American workforce after touring the Mack Trucks Lehigh Valley Operations Manufacturing Facility in Macungie, Pennsylvania.—AFP

Biden hails US infrastructure cash bonanza

Funding to fix roads, bridges and waterways and expand clean energy programs

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden announced Wednesday a deal with senators on a massive infrastructure package that would pump historic levels of federal funding into fixing US roads, bridges and waterways and expand clean energy programs. The bipartisan measure, including some \$550 billion in new spending, came together after two months of often-tense negotiations that Biden and his Democrats wanted to see concluded before Congress breaks for its August recess.

The deal will create millions of good jobs and make the US economy more robust, sustainable, resilient and just, the White House said in a statement. Biden called it “the most significant long-term investment in our infrastructure and competitiveness in nearly a century.”

“This deal signals to the world that our

democracy can function, deliver, and do big things,” he said, adding that the plan had the potential to “transform America and propel us into the future.” The deal will make the largest-ever federal investments in public transit and drinking and waste water infrastructure; the largest funding of passenger rail since the creation of Amtrak; and the largest investment in bridges since creation of the nation’s highway system. It also helps tackle the climate crisis by investing historic amounts in clean energy projects and electric vehicle infrastructure, such as electrification of thousands of school and transit buses nationwide and forming an authority to oversee creation of a clean electricity grid.

The bipartisan group negotiating the blueprint appears to have overcome a key hurdle:

how to pay for the huge spending outlay. The White House said revenue would come from redirecting unspent COVID emergency relief funds, boosting corporate fees and strengthening tax enforcement on cryptocurrencies. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said there would be a preliminary vote as early as Wednesday night to begin debate on the bill. “I believe we have the votes,” he told reporters on Capitol Hill. The deal needs the support of at least 10 Republicans for the required 60 votes in the 50-50 Senate. “I’ll be voting to begin debate on the bipartisan infrastructure package,” Republican Senator Kevin Cramer tweeted.

“While I can’t say I’ll vote for final passage, we need to keep this proposal moving forward and work to amend it if necessary. The bill would still need to clear the House of Represen-

tatives, where it could face resistance from progressive Democrats.

Some have warned they would not sign on unless Biden’s ambitious \$3.5 trillion budget package—including once-in-a-generation spending on health care, education, social welfare and climate action—also passes the Senate.

The bipartisan agreement was announced shortly after Biden traveled to the Pennsylvania factory of an iconic truckmaker where he called on Congress to pass tougher “Buy American” policies that would boost the US-made content in \$600 billion in government purchases. Biden said his administration was proposing legislation to update the 1933 Buy American Act to close loopholes and pressure businesses that provide items to the government to add more US-made inputs to their supply chains.—AFP

KIB first organization in Kuwait to earn Corporate Ethics Mark

Mark demonstrates bank's highest global ethical standards across all its transactions

KUWAIT: Becoming the first organization and the first bank in Kuwait to achieve this global milestone, Kuwait International Bank (KIB) announced that it had successfully obtained the Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply (CIPS) Corporate Ethics Mark. To earn the international CIPS Ethics Mark for the Bank, KIB's Procurement Department team managed to complete the Institute's specialized eLearning program on ethical procurement and supply practices, and pass a test. The Mark demonstrates the Bank's strict commitment to maintaining the highest global ethical standards across all its transactions.

Globally recognized as the largest and leading professional body for procurement and supply, CIPS represents more than 70,000 members from nearly 150 countries. It is also considered a center of global excellence in advancing the profession of procurement and supply chain management, having also developed a world-class eLearning program for all levels of procurement professionals. The CIPS ethics training and test provides quality education and guidance for organizations looking to enable its individuals and hone their skills and knowledge in the profession, ultimately demonstrating their commitment to sustainability and other activities such as eliminating fraud and corruption through ethical practice.

On his part, Vice Chairman and CEO at KIB, Rawad Jawad Bukhamseen said, "I would like to thank our Procurement Team for all their dedication in achieving this Global Award. We are very proud to be the first Bank in Kuwait to receive this award from the largest professional body in the world for procurement and



Rawad Jawad Bukhamseen



Jassem Al-Shatti



supply. This award demonstrates our commitment to maintaining world class procurement standards and ensuring ethical sourcing and management of suppliers."

Commenting on this partnership, CIPS MENA Managing Director Sam Achampong said: "We were very pleased with the commitment and focus KIB's team has shown throughout this program. Their eagerness to learn, explore, and expand their knowledge only proves their deep understanding and awareness on the importance of ethics, and how important a factor it can be in attracting investors and stakeholders, as well as employees who wish to work for ethical companies".

Procurement Head in Business Services Department at KIB, Jassem Al-Shatti, also noted that the criteria for earning the ethics mark was the successful completion of the CIPS ethics training and test by all of the bank's procurement employees. "The training has increased our understanding of ethics and corporate responsibility and demonstrates to our customers, partners and staff our commitment to ethical procurement. Furthermore, the CIPS ethics training and test have been signed off by the KIB Management as part of their sincere commitment to comply with ethical practices,

which, in turn, guarantees the continued use of the mark," added Al-Shatti.

Elaborating further, Al-Shatti also said that the training program helped raise further awareness among KIB's procurement staff on the impact of fraud and corruption within the supply chain. It also helped them stay up to date with new local and international legislations relating to malpractice in businesses - from bribery to human rights and environmental abuse.

In addition to publicly reinforcing an organization's assurance to ethical sourcing and supplier management, earning an ethics mark in the field of procurement and supply chain can achieve a whole other set of goals for that organization. According to CIPS, the Mark ensures that the company is aware of supply chain malpractice in their organization, and financial and reputational risks. It can also inspire confidence for key stakeholders and instill pride in staff members knowing that their firm is ethically oriented. Achieving the mark demonstrates a commitment to self-governance and accountability. Companies that achieve the ethics mark are included in the CIPS Corporate Ethics Register which includes various sectors and organizations around the globe.

Shell profits from oil recovery, rewards investors

LONDON: Royal Dutch Shell yesterday logged bumper second-quarter profits as oil prices recovered from COVID fallout, and rewarded investors with a buyback and dividend hike. Net profit hit \$3.4 billion (2.9 billion euros) in the three months to the end of June, the Anglo-Dutch energy major said in a results statement.

That contrasted sharply with a colossal loss of \$18.1 billion last time around, when it made massive asset writedowns due to the COVID-ravaged oil market. The performance was boosted by "higher realized oil prices, one-off favorable tax impacts, higher marketing margins and lower operating expenses", the group added. Shell had also rebounded into net profit in the prior three months. "This quarter we had another strong set of results," said chief executive Ben van Beurden.

"The resilience of our operations and unmatched cashflow show that we are delivering on our strategy. "The strength of

our performance means that we can step up shareholder distributions." Shell will target \$2.0 billion in share buybacks this year, and hiked its shareholder dividend to 24 cents per share.

"Patience has been the name of the game for Shell investors," said Hargreaves Lansdown analyst Susannah Streeter. "That stoicism was sorely tested, but is now being rewarded with a slap on the back of rising returns."

Revenues almost doubled in the second quarter to \$60.5 billion, while production declined slightly to 3.25 million barrels of oil equivalent per day.

Global oil demand is recovering but supply still remains constrained due to persistent efforts by OPEC producers to limit output. However, OPEC and its allies decided earlier this month to increase production.

OPEC+ nations agreed to pump an extra 400,000 barrels per day from August to meet rising demand as economies reopen. At the same time, markets are increasingly nervous that the spreading Delta virus variant could undermine recovery. Shell struck a cautious tone on Thursday over the outlook.

"As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there continues to be significant uncertainty surrounding how quickly macroeconomic conditions will recover, and the associated impacts on demand for oil, gas and related products," it said. —AFP

German unemployment rate drops in July

BERLIN: Germany's unemployment rate dropped to 5.7 percent in July, the federal labor agency said yesterday, as Europe's biggest economy rebounded in the summer after coronavirus restrictions were loosened in May.

Seasonally adjusted figures showed the number of unemployed people had dropped by a dramatic 91,000 this month, with the unemployment rate falling from 5.9 percent in June. "The situation in the jobs market is continuing to improve. Despite the beginning of the summer holidays, there has been another significant decrease in joblessness and underemployment," said Detlef Scheele, head of the BA federal labor agency. "The employment figures continue to grow, and businesses are now looking for more employees," he added, pointing to the 744,000 new jobs which were registered this month, 171,000 more than in July 2020. —AFP

Business

With market-trembling rules, China cracks down on big firms

Billions of dollars from Chinese and HK-listed stocks wiped out

BEIJING: With market-trembling new rules and investigations, Beijing's crackdown on its most prominent companies has seeped into nearly every aspect of modern life, wiping billions of dollars from Chinese and Hong Kong-listed stocks and bamboozling investment sages. From after-school tutoring to music streaming apps, and shopping to bike-sharing, stellar firms have been hit as Beijing tightens the leash on corporations, citing national security and antitrust concerns.

Whether motivated by the control reflexes of the Communist Party or to avoid market contortions hurting the pockets and safety of the Chinese public, few expect this to be the end of the crackdown. Here are some of the sectors caught in regulators' jaws so far.

Food delivery

Top food delivery app Meituan's shares have fallen about 15 percent from Friday after regulators suddenly announced new worker protection rules this week. Employers in China's booming food delivery sector, a lunchtime lifeline for millions of office workers, must now enforce minimum salary levels and "relax delivery time limits". Meituan and rival Alibaba-owned Ele.me have come under fire in recent months after local media exposed the dangerous routes taken by drivers on tight delivery deadlines. Hong Kong-listed Meituan's stocks had already taken a beating in April when regulators launched an antitrust probe of its lifestyle super-app, which also allows users to book entertainment, health and leisure services.

Education

Beijing also trotted out new rules on Saturday requiring tutoring companies to become non-profits and forbidding weekend classes, sending the valuations of private education stocks plunging. Analysts said the move made the companies virtually uninvestable. The gov-

ernment said the industry, worth \$260 billion in 2018 according to consultancy and research firm L.E.K. Consulting, had been "hijacked by capital". The founders of New Oriental and Gaotu Techedu almost instantly lost their billionaire statuses after the rules were announced. Their fortunes were built by capitalizing on China's hyper-competitive education system where parents try to give their children any advantage they can afford.

Ride-hailing

Market-leader Didi Chuxing was banned from Chinese app stores in early July, just days after raising \$4.4 billion in a New York IPO. The company had gone ahead with its debut despite pushback from Chinese authorities concerned that a listing could place Didi's user data in foreign hands.

Beijing eventually sent officials from seven government departments to the firm for on-site cybersecurity investigations. The company, whose stock has fallen around 40 percent since its Wall Street listing, could face a multibillion dollar fine or suspension of certain operations as a punishment, Bloomberg reported last week.

Cryptocurrency

Beijing has also squeezed out of its market miners and traders of bitcoin and other digital currencies, arresting more than a thousand people for laundering money using cryptocurrencies in June. China banned crypto trading in 2019 and multiple provinces have ordered energy-intensive crypto-mining outfits to shut down in recent months, citing concerns about spiking power consumption. Analysts say China fears cryptocurrency transactions could aid illicit investment and threaten government controls on capital outflows.

The crackdown also allows China room to introduce its own digital



Tencent's entertainment empire faced a new setback on Saturday after the State Administration for Market Regulation ruled that the company must give up its exclusive rights deals with music labels after violating antitrust laws.

currency, which can be monitored by the central government.

Online shopping

Jack Ma's e-commerce empire Alibaba was fined a record 18.2 billion yuan (\$2.8 billion) by antitrust authorities in April, after the government said it had "abused its dominant position in the market" by forbidding merchants to advertise wares on rival sites. A planned \$35 billion listing by its fintech arm Ant Financial was scrapped by authorities late last year, with Ant ordered to jettison its financial services and return to its roots as an online payment platform. —AFP

TotalEnergies back in profit as oil prices rebound

PARIS: TotalEnergies announced yesterday it had bounced back into profit in the second quarter thanks to the rise in global oil prices. The French firm, previously known as Total, posted a net profit of \$2.2 billion (1.9 billion euros) in the period from April through June. That compared with a loss of more than \$8 billion during the same period last year, which was mostly due to writing down the value of its assets in light of the drop in oil prices, which briefly turned negative as large parts of the global economy were shut due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The company said its adjusted net income, a measure that excludes exceptional items, rose to \$3.5 billion. That beat the 126 million registered last year, but also the \$2.9 billion recorded in the second quarter of 2019 before the pandemic hit.

The company announced it plans to step up payments to shareholders, including paying out a second interim dividend and dedicating to share buybacks up to 40 percent of additional cash flow from oil priced above \$60 per barrel. Shares in TotalEnergies rose 2.6 percent in morning trading, while the blue-chip CAC 40 index in Paris was up 0.8 percent overall. —AFP

New US jobless claims edge down

WASHINGTON: New applications for US unemployment benefits fell slightly in the latest week, while claims for pandemic aid fell sharply, the Labor Department reported yesterday. Despite coming in higher than analysts expected, the decline of 24,000 took initial claims to 400,000, seasonally adjusted, in the week ended July 24. However, the four-week average of new claims rose, according to the report.

The data show the continued need for jobless aid as the world's largest economy recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly two dozen states have called an early end to special unemployment programs provided by the federal government, and new applications for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance for freelance workers not usually eligible for regular benefits fell by nearly 15,000 in the week. But even as businesses have reopened and hiring picks up, the total tally of people receiving some form of aid, including the special pandemic programs, jumped to 13.2 million, not seasonally adjusted, in the week ended July 10. Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said seasonal adjustment issues in July are likely distorting the data. "Beyond weekly ups and downs, the trend in total filings should remain downward over coming weeks," she said in an analysis. "Overall, job growth should pick up and labor shortages should ease as near-term constraints — virus concerns, child-care issues and enhanced unemployment benefits — diminish," she said. "But rising virus cases could be a headwind for the labor market and the economy."

The US economy expanded 6.5 percent annualized in the second quarter, according to government data released yesterday, a far slower recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic than economists had expected. The gain reported by the Commerce Department meant the world's largest economy surpassed its pre-pandemic size, climbing above its level in the fourth quarter of 2019



New US jobless claims slow slightly in latest week, government data said yesterday. —AFP

to \$19.4 trillion. The pandemic caused a sharp downturn in the United States last year, with the economy ultimately shrinking 3.5 percent, its worst collapse since modern recordkeeping began in 1946. Massive government spending authorized by Congress as well as vaccinations that allow business activity to recover from COVID-19 are expected to propel the country out of its slump, with the IMF predicting seven percent growth this year. The rate in the April to June period represented a slight acceleration from the 6.3 percent growth seen in the first quarter, and was driven by increases in consumer spending, exports and local government spending, the report said. Growth was undercut by the end to a government program to give loans and grants to small businesses, as well as less federal government spending. The data also showed the personal consumption expenditure (PCE) price index rising 6.4 percent in the second quarter from 3.8 percent in the period before, confirming that inflation is spiking as demand returns from its depressed levels a year ago. —AFP

Business

US economy showing progress but 'not fully recovered': Fed

FOMC cautions 'risks to the economic outlook remain'

WASHINGTON: The US economic recovery is showing signs of progress, but the Federal Reserve said Wednesday it is not yet ready to end the easy money policies it implemented as the pandemic began last year. Widespread vaccinations have helped boost business activity and employment, though the sectors hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic "have shown improvement but have not fully recovered," the Fed's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) announced following its two-day meeting.

The US central bank cut its benchmark lending rate to zero at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and implemented a massive bond-buying program aimed at providing liquidity to help the world's largest economy weather the damage. The FOMC cautioned that "risks to the economic outlook remain" and again pledged to keep those policies in place until it sees "substantial further progress" on its maximum employment and inflation targets.

While the US economy has recovered millions of jobs and brought the unemployment rate down, it also has seen inflation surge. Fed Chair Jerome Powell again tried to tamp down concerns about the price spikes he described as mostly temporary and limited to certain sectors.

"The process of reopening the economy is un-



WASHINGTON: In this file photo, US Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell testifies before a Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee hearing, on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. — AFP

precedented, as was the shutdown at the onset of the pandemic," Powell said.

Inflation could be persistent

Central bankers met during an uncertain moment for the world's largest economy. The fast-spreading Delta variant of COVID-19 has prompted some parts of the United States to reimpose mask-wearing rules and sparked worries it

could undermine the recovery. Speaking to reporters after the policy meeting, Powell was alternately upbeat and cautious, but seemed untroubled by the impact of rising infections on the economy.

However he acknowledged that inflation has already risen well above the Fed's two-percent goal—the annual consumer price index (CPI) hit 5.4 percent in June, the highest since August 2008 — and recognized inflation could continue higher. "As the reopening continues, other constraints could continue to limit how quickly supply can adjust, raising the possibility that inflation could turn out to be higher and more persistent than we expect."

Powell said the price increases are not widespread and largely the result supply bottlenecks such as the semiconductor shortage that has hit the auto industry. "We think that some of it will fall away naturally as the process of reopening the economy moves through. It could take some time."

Still, the central bank will be ready to act if needed to bring prices under control. "If inflation expectations were to move up, we would use our tools to guide inflation back down to two percent," Powell said.

Taper timing

The central bank has committed to allowing in-

flation to exceed its two-percent target for some time to allow the economy to return to full employment in the wake of the COVID-19 damage. The economy is on track for a "very strong labor market" and "it shouldn't take that long in macroeconomic time to get there," Powell said. He said he wants to see more strong employment gains and it is too soon to talk about raising the Fed's benchmark borrowing rate.

But committee members are looking at when to take the first step to pare back its bond-buying program. The Fed currently is buying at least \$80 billion a month in Treasury debt and at least \$40 billion in agency mortgage-backed securities. Powell has pledged to give advance warning before making any changes to the asset purchases, but gave few hints on when that might happen.

"There's a range of views on what timing will be appropriate," he said. "No decisions were made."

Many analysts had expected him to lay out a roadmap at the annual central banking conference in Jackson Hole, Wyoming in late August, but he declined to commit to that.

Diane Swonk of Grant Thornton noted the statement "suggests that committee members have decided to wait until at least September to make a decision on a tapering." —AFP

Global stocks boosted by bright earnings and Fed outlook

NEW YORK: World equity markets climbed yesterday as the COVID recovery brightened on upbeat corporate earnings and the Federal Reserve's latest economic outlook, dealers said. London stocks jumped 0.9 percent on a barrage of positive company results, including from COVID vaccine maker AstraZeneca, energy major Shell, bank giant Lloyds and defense firm BAE Systems.

Frankfurt added 0.4 percent and Paris won 0.7 percent, boosted respectively by the latest numbers from German carmaker Volkswagen and French oil titan TotalEnergies. "We are seeing modest gains so far. Earnings remain very promising," OANDA analyst Craig Erlam told AFP.

Markets won a shot in the arm as British pharmaceuticals giant AstraZeneca revealed its COVID vaccine generated \$1.2 billion (1.0 billion euros) in sales in the first half of the year. The news came one day after US drugmaker Pfizer lifted its annual revenue and profit projections on surging demand for its rival COVID-19 vaccine. The oil sector was energized by news that both Shell and Total rebounded back into profit in the second quarter of 2021, boosted by the crude market's recovery from virus turmoil.

Investors were meanwhile awaiting the latest

US tech earnings from online behemoth Amazon, which soared in popularity during the pandemic due to spiking demand from locked-down populations.

Recovery on track: Fed

Asian and European equities also advanced after the Fed acknowledged the US economic recovery was well on track-but added that it would not taper monetary policy just yet. The US central bank said the pandemic recovery was progressing well but it was still too early to take away the ultra-loose policies that have helped nurse the economy back to health. "The Fed gave a balanced performance on Wednesday that has just about satisfied the markets without getting investors too excited," noted Erlam.

"All things considered, the markets look in a decent position going into an uncertain period as a result of the Delta surge." The US central bank has said it will maintain its massive bond-buying and record low interest rate scheme for as long as it takes to tame unemployment and keep inflation running hot for an extended period.

Traders were cheered by progress in Washington on President Joe Biden's trillion-dollar infrastructure bill, which he has said could "transform America" and add to vast amounts of stimulus already pumped into the world's top economy. The developments overshadowed concerns about the spread of the Delta coronavirus variant that is sending infection rates spiking in several countries-including those with high vaccination rates-and forcing some governments to impose lockdowns or other containment measures. Back in Asia, Hong Kong was lifted after China sought to reassure investors over its latest regulatory crackdown. —AFP

Nokia beats expectations with strong second quarter

HELSINKI: Network equipment maker Nokia revised up its 2021 outlook yesterday as it posted an almost four-fold increase in profits for the second quarter. The Finnish telecoms giant announced a net profit of 344 million euros (\$408 million) for April-June, up from 94 million one year previously.

"We were expecting quite good results but these were still way better, a very strong second quarter," Atte Riikola, analyst at Inderes, told AFP. A 4.3 percent increase in revenue to 5.3 billion euros outstripped analysts' expectations of 5.15 billion according to FactSet. "Considering our robust start to 2021, we are revising upwards our full year outlook," CEO Pekka Lundmark said in a statement.

"We have executed faster than planned on our strategy in the first half," Lundmark added.

Nokia's projection for comparable operating margin in 2021 were increased to 10-12 percent, from 7-10 percent, while estimated full-year net sales were adjusted upwards by almost a billion euros to 21.7-22.7 billion. Yesterday's results come one year after Lundmark took the helm of the company, promising to turn around the fortunes of the group which was flagging in the tough three-way race to dominate the 5G infrastructure market, squaring off against Sweden's Ericsson and China's Huawei. Lundmark's restructuring program has involved streamlining Nokia's structure and announcing the loss of up to 10,000 jobs worldwide within two years, up to 11 percent of the workforce.

Nokia's share price rose 8.5 percent to 5.37 euros shortly after opening on the Helsinki stock

exchange, its highest value in over two years. "The trust in Nokia's turnaround is coming back and investors are believing in the story again, that's visible in the share price," Riikola said.

Lundmark has repeatedly pledged that Nokia will do "whatever it takes to win at 5G" and make up ground lost in the early stages of the rollout of the network infrastructure, when the company's technology was widely considered less competitive than that of Huawei and Ericsson. Nokia notably failed to gain a foothold in China, but this month was awarded a 4 percent share in a tender for China Mobile. "The China market is enormously competitive and we take this award as a testimony and proof that our technological competitiveness in 5G has significantly increased," Lundmark told reporters yesterday. "The geopolitical situation is quite helpful for Nokia," analyst Riikola told AFP, with rival Huawei facing sanctions in Europe and North America, and Sweden's Ericsson also facing reciprocal restrictions in China. —AFP



Classifieds

Friday, July 30, 2021

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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Very hot with light to moderate freshening at times north westerly wind with speed of 12 - 40 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear with a chance for rising dust over open areas.

BY NIGHT: Hot to rather hot with light to moderate north westerly wind to light variable wind with speed of 08 - 32 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

WEATHER WARNING			No Current Warnings	
STATION	MAX EXP	MIN REC	SFC. CHART 29/07/2021 0000 UTC	
KUWAIT CITY	47 °C	35 °C		
KUWAIT AIRPORT	47 °C	34 °C		
ABDALY	48 °C	29 °C		
JAHRRA	49 °C	35 °C		
SALMIYAH	45 °C	35 °C		
AHMADI	44 °C	36 °C		
WAFRA	48 °C	30 °C		
SALMY	47 °C	29 °C		
JAL ALIYAH	49 °C	31 °C		
MANAGISH	- °C	30 °C		

4 DAYS FORECAST						
DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	07/30	Very hot and some high clouds will appear	48 °C	34 °C	VRB-NW	08 - 35 km/h
Saturday	07/31	Very hot and Relatively humid over coastal areas	47 °C	35 °C	VRB-SE	08 - 30 km/h
Sunday	08/01	Very hot	48 °C	35 °C	VRB-NW	08 - 32 km/h
Monday	08/02	Very hot	48 °C	36 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 30 km/h

PRAYER TIMES	
Fajr	03:37
Sunrise	05:07
Zuhr	11:54
Asr	15:30
Sunset	18:42
Isha	20:09

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT	
MAX. Temp.	50 °C
MIN. Temp.	38 °C
MAX. RH	25 %
MIN. RH	07 %
MAX. Wind	N 53 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

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Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
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Shuwaikh	24814507
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UK Hillsborough stadium tragedy claims 97th victim

LONDON: The number of Liverpool fans unlawfully killed in the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster has risen to 97, after a coroner's ruling on the death of a man injured in the crush. Andrew Devine was badly hurt in the tragedy at the FA Cup semi-final on April 15, 1989 and died after 32 years from aspiration pneumonia. Liverpool coroner Andre Rebello said Devine's injuries were considered at a landmark inquest that concluded in 2016 where a jury partly blamed police failings for the deaths.

"The inquest was comprehensive and thorough and arose out of the same circumstances that caused the crush injuries to Andrew Devine, which were to prove fatal 32 years later," he said in the record of inquest, seen by AFP yesterday. "As such, it is proportionate, reasonable and sufficient for me to adopt the jury's findings and determination in full."

Devine, 55, was admitted to hospital on July 12 with aspiration pneumonia and fever, and died on Monday morning, the coroner recorded at an inquest hearing held in the city on Wednesday. The coroner said he was predisposed to the fatal condition, in which food, drink, vomit or saliva is inhaled into the lungs, because of the brain injury he suffered at the match which affected his swallow reflex. "I find that it is more likely than not that Andrew Devine was unlawfully killed, making him the 97th fatality from the events of April 15 1989," he added.

'Defied expectations'

Devine's family said in a statement released through Liverpool that they welcomed the ruling, calling him a "much-loved son, brother and uncle". "He has been supported by his family and a team of dedicated carers, all of whom devoted themselves to him," they added. The club said it was "deeply saddened" by Devine's death. "A lifelong Liverpool supporter, Andrew continued to attend matches at Anfield when possible despite suffering life-changing injuries at Hillsborough," a spokesman said. "In doing so he defied expectations that he would not survive for six months after the tragedy." Players and staff on Thursday observed a 97-second silence in memory of Devine at the club's pre-season training camp in Austria. Manager Jurgen Klopp called him "an incredible person". The Hillsborough disaster remains Britain's worst sporting tragedy and was caused during a crowd surge at one end of Sheffield Wednesday's ground hosting Liverpool supporters.

The 2016 inquest came after three decades of campaigning by families of the victims, and found police errors in opening an exit gate before kick-off caused the fatal crush. Police initially claimed that supporters had stormed the gate. The Sun newspaper is still shunned on Merseyside after it blamed fans, who were exonerated at the inquest. But South Yorkshire Police admitted after the hearing they got match policing "catastrophically wrong".

Match commander David Duckenfield was tried twice for gross



LIVERPOOL: In this file photo taken on April 15, 2019, people gather in front of the Hillsborough memorial outside Liverpool Football Club's main stand at Anfield to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster. —AFP

negligence manslaughter. A jury failed to reach a verdict in the first and he was cleared in a second trial in 2019. The case against two retired former officers and a lawyer who represented South Yorkshire Police collapsed earlier this year after the judge ruled there was no case to answer. —AFP

Hamilton, Verstappen resume title fight in Hungary heat and dust

BUDAPEST: Lewis Hamilton arrives in Budapest this weekend facing another high-pressure challenge on and off the track at the Hungarian Grand Prix where he hopes to clinch a 100th career victory. After reducing Max Verstappen's lead in the world championship to eight points at Silverstone, where he won for Mercedes after a controversial opening lap collision with the Dutchman for which he was given a 10-second penalty, the defending seven-time champion has an opportunity to regain the initiative in the title race.

The 36-year-old Briton has won a record eight times at the dusty, tight and twisty high down-force Hungaroring circuit where he completed a hat-trick last year and expects another close scrap on Sunday. By then, however, he may have had his British win overturned, or put in jeopardy, if Red Bull have their way at a stewards' hearing on Thursday and succeed in gaining a review of Hamilton's penalty. They say it was too lenient. Mercedes disagree. The British Grand Prix collision prompted a war of words led by Red Bull, but neither driver has become involved since the dust settled. Verstappen, who escaped without serious injury, distanced himself from the argument after saying that he felt Hamilton had been disrespectful to celebrate his victory while he lay in a nearby hospital. "I don't have much to say on all the media hype and, to be honest, I'm not interested in getting involved in any of that," he said. "I know what happened at Silverstone as I was in the car and obviously I feel a certain way about how my race ended. But now I'm just focusing on making sure we are the best we can be on track so we can stay ahead in the championship. The team can take care of the official side of things and anything that needs looking into after the crash, but my job is the same as always - to be the best I can and try to win on Sunday."

'I'm a little bruised'

He added: "I'm a little bruised, of course, but that's normal after such a big impact, but I'm training and feeling good." Verstappen added that he had completed a race distance test in the team's simulator without any adverse reaction ahead of the final round in his "battle of the generations"



MOGYOROD, Hungary: Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton arrives ahead of a press conference at the Hungaroring race track near Budapest yesterday ahead of the Formula One Hungarian Grand Prix. —AFP

with Hamilton ahead of the sport's European summer break. In the aftermath of his 51-G crash, it is likely that Verstappen will be bruised psychologically as much as physically and he knows now that Hamilton will not always back off when they are racing wheel to wheel. German Nico Rosberg, who beat Hamilton to win the 2016 title after a fierce season of intra-team rivalry at Mercedes including a collision in Spain that gifted Verstappen his maiden win for Red Bull, believes the title fight this year has become compelling viewing.

"It was an amazing battle and now as a pundit and as a fan it's so awesome. I'm personally excited now for the next race. How is the dynamic going to play out? Even just the next press conference on Thursday - I hope F1 put them in next to each other." Rosberg said the crash was a racing incident and, to him, no surprise and said the title race reminded him of previous battles between the generations. "It reminds me of Senna-Schumacher, Schumacher-Alonso and maybe Alonso-Vettel," he said. Both Mercedes and Red Bull were to yesterday attend a virtual hearing to decide if there should be a review. Red Bull will need to present significant new evidence. While the title contenders will arrive in Budapest on tenterhooks, Alpine's Fernando Alonso will relish the weekend for different reasons as he celebrates his 40th birthday back at the circuit where he gained his maiden F1 victory in 2003. —AFP

Warholm 'hungry' for Olympic tilt in 400m hurdles

TOKYO: Two-time 400m hurdles world champion Karsten Warholm says his run-in to the Olympics has left him "hungry" for more in an event that promises to be one of the most entertaining on the Tokyo track. The Norwegian smashed Kevin Young's world record at the Oslo Diamond League meeting earlier this month, running a startling 46.70 seconds, also winning in Monaco.

"My initial plan before starting the season was to do two competitions before coming to Tokyo, so I was able to go into this competition ready to give it my all, and also to be hungry, because if you have a lot of competitions, it's easy to get tired," said Warholm. "Right now, I didn't have many races before coming into Tokyo and there were two big races, so I feel confident and I still feel like I love to have a lot of races in me in this business."

While Warholm and American rival Rai Benjamin were chasing down Young's record dating from the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, there were similar upheavals in the women's 400m hurdles. Sydney McLaughlin became the first woman to dip below the 52-second mark when she clocked 51.90sec to win the US trials last month after a superb tactical race against reigning Olympic and world champion Dalilah Muhammad.

"I think it's fantastic," Warholm, 25, said of the ultra-competitive nature of the hurdles events for both sexes. "It's an event that has gone through a renaissance and in the women's I think the record has been broken a couple of times in the recent years." The Norwegian added: "As for the men's, it's been something that we've been talking a lot about and there have been some guys that have been running the time. I was able to track the new world record, so it was about time someone broke it, and I'm just happy to be him." —AFP

Djokovic says he's 'getting better' after cruising into Olympic semis

TOKYO: Novak Djokovic said he is "getting better and better" after easing into the Tokyo Olympics men's tennis semi-finals yesterday with a straight-sets thrashing of Japanese hope Kei Nishikori. The world number one, chasing a calendar Golden Slam, ended home interest in the tennis with a ruthless 6-2, 6-0 victory in only 70 minutes.

Djokovic has never won the Olympic singles title, with a bronze medal in 2008 his best result at the Games, but will face either Alexander Zverev or Jeremy Chardy in the last four. "I'm very happy, my best performance in the tournament," said the top seed. "Matches are not getting easier, but my level of tennis is getting better and better. I've done that many, many times in my career. I know that I'm (the) kind of player that the further the tournament goes, the better I'm feeling on the court."

The 34-year-old Serb, who has already captured the Australian Open, French Open and Wimbledon titles this season, was never in trouble against Nishikori, who made 16 unforced errors. The former world number four did save two match points in the final game, but Djokovic made no mistake on the next opportunity.

The quarter-final was played in cooler conditions than earlier in the tournament after Djokovic lobbied organizers to change the schedule, moving the day's start time from 11:00 am local time (0200 GMT) to 3:00 pm. It was also the second match on the center court at the Ariake Tennis Park, after the women's semi-final between Belinda Bencic and Elena Rybakina lasted almost three hours in the still suffocating heat.

"It was fantastic. Playing after five (pm) is completely differ-

ent," said Djokovic. "Obviously, there is a little bit of a breeze, but still very, very humid, you sweat a lot, but you don't have the heat, you don't have the sun that, in combination with the humidity, is just brutal."

Japanese disappointment

Djokovic was also in action later yesterday in the mixed doubles quarter-finals alongside Nina Stojanovic, facing Germany's Kevin Krawietz and Laura Siegemund. Nishikori, who has slipped to 69th in the world rankings after suffering from multiple injuries in recent years, was the last remaining medal chance for the hosts after Ena Shibahara and Ben McLachlan bowed out of the mixed doubles.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka, who lit the Olympic cauldron in Friday's opening ceremony, was knocked out in the third round earlier this week. "Both sets I didn't have good start, that was the bad thing I did today," said Nishikori. "I just tried to play the best guy on the tour today, and I was trying to be a little more aggressive and positive, but he was playing too good."

Nishikori believes that Djokovic has a real chance of winning the gold medal and then the US Open to make history by becoming the first man to win a Golden Slam - a feat only achieved by Steffi Graf in 1988. "The way he's played today, this week and last couple months, it's been amazing, so I'm sure he has a lot of a chance," he said. The men's singles semi-finals take place today. — AFP



TOKYO: Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates defeating Japan's Kei Nishikori during their Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games men's singles quarterfinal tennis match at the Ariake Tennis Park yesterday. —AFP

Stars frustrated on weather-hit day as Straka leads golf

KAWAGOE: Unheralded Austrian Sepp Straka was the surprise leader after a weather-interrupted first round of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics golf tournament yesterday as home favorite Hideki Matsuyama and British Open champion Collin Morikawa suffered frustrating starts.

World number 161 Straka took advantage of early benign conditions to set the pace with a bogey-free eight-under par 63 at Kasumigaseki Country Club. He leads by a stroke from Thailand's former Asian Tour Order of Merit winner Jazz Janewattanond. Matsuyama and Morikawa both finished at two-under par 69, either side of play being suspended for more than two hours in the afternoon because of a lightning storm. "Just simply I didn't play well today," lamented Matsuyama who has not played since the US Open in June because of testing positive for COVID-19. "Towards the end there was a little bit of a mental fatigue and my focus kind of faded away," he admitted. "So that's something that I need to put together."

World number three Morikawa is spearheading a powerful four-man USA team in a tournament that had some of the gloss taken off by the late COVID withdrawals of world number one Jon Rahm of Spain and American Bryson DeChambeau. World number four Justin Thomas, who has won four of his 14 PGA Tour titles in Asia, saw a series of putts lip out as he recorded 18 straight pars for a 71. —AFP

Support for South Korean Olympian after sexist abuse

TOKYO: A South Korean archer who has bagged two Olympic gold medals in Tokyo was flooded with messages of support from women yesterday after her short hair became a lightning rod for online abuse from men. Male commenters had said An San's choice of hairstyle suggested she was a feminist, some of them demanding she apologize and even that she give back her Olympic medals.

While South Korea is the world's 12th-largest economy and a leading technological power, it remains a male-dominated society with a poor record on women's rights. The outbreak of online misogyny comes as an anti-feminism backlash grows in the country, with companies accused of endorsing "extreme feminism" facing boycotts by men and issuing public apologies. An, 20, has won two gold medals in the women's team and mixed team archery. She scored 680 to top the women's individual qualification at the Tokyo Games, breaking an Olympic record that has stood since 1996. She is aiming for her third gold medal in Tokyo in the ongoing women's individual event. Many South Korean women, including well-known figures, came out to condemn the comments. "Even if you win an Olympic gold medal with your own skills and abilities, as long as sexism persists in our society, you get insulted and asked to be deprived of your medal just because you have short hair," tweeted Jang Hye-yeong, a woman lawmaker. "We are facing a strange day in which Korean archery is now the best in the world, but the national dignity is thrown to the ground because of sexism."

At least 6,000 photographs of women with short hair were posted on social media platforms to show support for An, according to local reports. Among women posting the images were actress Koo Hye-sun and lawmaker Ryu Ho-jeong - the country's youngest MP, who was once criticized for wearing a dress to parliament. The website of the Korea Archery Association - which did not immediately respond to AFP's request for comment



TOKYO: South Korea's An San competes in the women's individual eliminations at Yumenoshima Park Archery Field yesterday. —AFP

- was flooded by at least 1,500 messages in support of her. The men whose angry messages sparked the storm had further accused An of having used expressions with anti-male undertones. "We didn't train and feed you with tax money so that you can commit feminist acts," one of the men wrote on An's Instagram account. Young South Korean women have enjoyed unprecedented campaigning successes in recent years - fighting to legalise abortion and organising a widespread #MeToo movement, and taking action against spycam videos secretly filmed in public places, which led to the largest women's rights demonstrations in Korean history.

There have also been protests against the country's strict beauty standards - with campaigners sharing viral videos of themselves cropping their hair short and smashing up their make-up products. But it has also triggered a strong backlash in the country, and feminism is often framed as selfish, and anti-men. "It's been very disheartening to see women, including an olympic champion, being pressured to explain and even apologize about their own choices and bodies, when it really should be no one's business," women's rights activist Kwon Soo-hyun told AFP. —AFP



Dressel crowned sprint king as Chinese women smash record

TOKYO: US superstar Caeleb Dressel flew faster than Kyle Chalmers to add the Olympic 100m freestyle crown to his two world titles yesterday, as China's women sparked a huge upset with a new world record to win the 4x200m relay. American Dressel missed out on the sprint medals at Rio in 2016, but he has since exploded, winning an incredible 13 titles over the past two world championships to be an imposing force.

He was in front at the turn in Tokyo but had to dig deep to hold off a storming Chalmers and hit the wall in a new Olympic record time of 47.02sec. The Australian took silver in 47.08 ahead of Russia's Kliment Kolesnikov in 47.44. "It's been a really tough year, really hard. I'm really happy," said Dressel, in tears as he was connected via video link to his wife and family back home. "It's so fun going with Kyle, I mean every time we make it good."

It was his second gold of the Games after spearheading the US to the 4x100m relay title, but his first-ever individual Olympic crown. He will also swim the 50m freestyle and the 100m butterfly, and could feature in two other relays to keep his dream alive of a six gold medal haul. Chalmers was disappointed, but said he did all he could. "It's half a second faster than I was in Rio," he said. "I left everything in the pool. I gave everything I could. But you know, to win gold in 2016, come back and win silver, it is great."

In a major shock, neither the United States nor Australia won the women's 4x200m relay for the first time since the event was added to the Olympic program in 1996. Instead, China's Yang Junxuan, Zhang Yufei, Li Bingjie and Tang Muhan dominated, leading all the way to clock an incredible 7:40.33 ahead of the United States (7:40.73) and Australia (7:41.29). All three teams were under the previous world time

of 7:41.50 set by Australia in 2019.

Li held off a charging Katie Ledecky over the final leg to clinch the title. "These girls swam their lights out and I got in a position where I thought I could take on those ladies next to us," said Ledecky. "I wish I had another half second in me but I gave it my all."

More to give

Meanwhile, Zac Stubblety-Cook became the first Australian to win the Olympic 200m breaststroke crown in 64 years, upstaging Russian two-time world champion Anton Chupkov who came fourth. Arno Kamminga went out hard but was overpowered by Stubblety-Cook in the final 50m, touching in a new Olympic record time of 2:06.38 ahead of the Dutch ace and Finland's Matti Mattsson. "That was an experienced field but as I stepped through the heat and semi it was quite exciting to know that I had a little bit more to give," said Stubblety-Cook. "It's just an honor."

China's Zhang earlier was untouchable in the women's 200 butterfly, blasting to gold in the third fastest time ever, adding to the silver she won over 100m. The 23-year-old has been in hot form and hit the wall in a new Olympic record time of 2mins 03.86sec, well clear of American Regan Smith and team-mate Hali Flickinger.

The men's 800 freestyle was making its Olympic debut this year and American Robert Finke became the first winner, hauling in Italy's Gregorio Paltrinieri over the dying stages to post 7min 41.87sec. Ukrainian Mykhailo Romanchuk took bronze. In semi-final action, Emma McKeon topped the timesheets with a sizzling 52.32 leading into the women's 100m free final followed by Hong Kong's Siobhan Haughey and fellow Australian Cate Campbell.



TOKYO: USA's Caeleb Dressel celebrates winning to take gold in the final of the men's 100m freestyle swimming event during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Tokyo Aquatics Centre yesterday. —AFP

Russia's Evgeny Rylov was best into the men's 200m backstroke decider while South African Tatjana Schoenmaker was unstoppable in the women's 200m breaststroke. She swam the second fastest time in history (2:19.16) in the heats and posted 2:19.33 yesterday, putting Rikke Moller Pedersen's long-standing 2:19.11 world mark under threat. With Michael Phelps retired, the men's 200m medley will see a new champion for the first time since 2000, with China's Shun Wang quickest into today's showdown. —AFP

China's diving domination has rivals in awe

TOKYO: China's unrelenting domination of Olympic diving has rivals in Tokyo wondering not just how they can beat them, but also whether the country's approach is desirable or even healthy. China have more or less cleaned up in Olympic diving over the last 30 years and even though their hopes of winning all eight golds at the Tokyo Games have gone, they can still match the seven from Rio in 2016.

So far at the pandemic-delayed Games they have taken three out of four diving titles, with Britain springing a surprise by grabbing the other. Chinese divers competing in the Japanese capital have consistently talked about the hard work they put in and the support from the country's sports authorities, without going into much more detail.

But after winning the men's synchronized 3m springboard on Wednesday, Xie Siyi gave perhaps more insight than he intended when he talked about "very boring" training day after day and living with his team-mates in dormitories. In unusually blunt terms for China's often guarded athletes, Xie added: "Every day we go from the dormitory to the training center, then we go back to eat, then we go back to training, then we go back to sleep again."

On Tuesday, China easily won the women's 10m synchronized platform thanks to two teenagers: Chen Yuxi, 15, and Zhang Jiaqi, 17. Eden Cheng, who along with partner Lois Toulson finished seventh of eight for Britain, is slightly older at 18. Cheng believes China's success is down to the sheer number of hours that they train. But she has other considerations because she knows that her life will not always be diving. —AFP

Sunisa Lee wins all-around gold as Biles cheers

TOKYO: American teenager Sunisa Lee won the women's gymnastics all-around Olympic gold yesterday, succeeding defending champion Simone Biles who withdrew over concerns for her mental health. Lee, 18, won ahead of Rebeca Andrade, the first Brazilian woman to win an artistic gymnastics medal, with Russian women's team gold medalist Angelina Melnikova in the bronze medal position.

Her trek to the top of the podium in Tokyo has not been without enormous personal trauma - in 2019 her father was paralyzed from the chest down after a fall from a ladder and last year her aunt and uncle perished from COVID-19. She said: "The past two years with COVID have been crazy. There was one point I wanted to quit. To be here and to be an Olympic gold medalist is just crazy." The Olympic debutante was adding gold to the silver she won as part of the US women's team on Tuesday with a points tally of 57.433, 0.144 clear of Andrade, with Melnikova 0.099 away in third. The crown was dramatically left undefended when Biles dropped out of the in-running team competition on Tuesday and subsequently the all-around. In the normal course of events Biles would have been hot favorite to become the first back-to-back winner in over half a century.

Few would have bet against that outcome in a discipline where she is undefeated since 2013 - an era of domination that has delivered 19 world championship golds to go with her Brazilian quartet. But fate in the form of an attack of the "twisties" left Biles as a mere bystander, with the spotlight normally trained on her instead illuminating the face of her smiling compatriot. It was the fourth final in four days to go



TOKYO: USA's Sunisa Lee poses with her gold medal during the podium ceremony of the artistic gymnastics women's all-around final at the Ariake Gymnastics Centre yesterday. —AFP

down to the final rotation, with Lee's polished floor exercise earning 13.7 to go into provisional gold, with Andrade unable to dislodge her.

Andrade it was who led after the top six in qualifying had visited the vault, with the Brazilian devotee of Beyonce conjuring up an impressive one and a half twisted Cheng, and on the button on the landing too. And after a clean routine on the uneven bars she held a narrow 0.066 point cushion over the chasing group led by Lee.

But a strong beam routine pushed Lee into the lead going into the concluding floor exercise, with Andrade initially lying third but promoted into second after a tenth of a point was added to her difficulty rating following an inquiry. Lee had gold in her grasp after her floor routine with Andrade unable to prevent her becoming the fifth consecutive American winner of the all-around. —AFP

India badminton star Sindhu finds peace of mind amid expectations

TOKYO: India's badminton superstar P V Sindhu is carrying the hopes of her country's 1.3 billion people, but meditation is helping her stay calm in the eye of the storm. The 26-year-old world champion, who won silver at the 2016 Rio Games, would become only the second Indian ever to win an individual Olympic gold if she triumphs this week in Tokyo.

With Rio champion Carolina Marin of Spain absent with a serious knee injury, Sindhu has as good a chance as any in an open field. She booked her place in the quarter-finals with a 21-15, 21-13 win over Denmark's Mia Blichfeldt yesterday, then revealed her secret for shutting out external noise. "I meditate at times, so I think that keeps my mind calm and keeps me going," she said. "We see a lot of things happening on social media everywhere. Sometimes to let go of everything I just meditate for a bit."

Mental health has been in the spotlight at the Tokyo Games, with American gymnast Simone Biles pulling out of the team and all-around individual events to preserve her

wellbeing. Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka has also struggled with her mental health, taking two months away from the sport before returning in Tokyo.

Sindhu said she was "nobody to comment" on what others are going through, but explained how she navigates the expectations of the world's second-most populous country. "It's always there - the pressure, the responsibility," she said. "I'm sure a lot of people are expecting a lot, but for me, when I go out onto the court I just have to give my best. I shouldn't think about what people are thinking - If I think about that, that would add extra pressure."

Sindhu needed just 41 minutes to dispatch number 13 seed Blichfeldt and book her place in the last eight. "I'm not thinking about playing in the final," said Sindhu. "The important thing is what is tomorrow. I'm just focusing on that. Yes, I got a medal at the last Olympics, but this is a fresh start." In mixed doubles, China's Wang Yilu and Huang Dongping will play their compatriots Zheng Siwei and Huang Yaoping in Friday's final. —AFP



TOKYO: India's P V Sindhu hits a shot to Denmark's Mia Blichfeldt in their women's singles badminton round of 16 match during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Musashino Forest Sports Plaza yesterday. —AFP

How the 'twisties' derailed Simone Biles' Olympic record bid

TOKYO: When golfers get the yips they risk a missed putt - when Simone Biles gets the equivalent in gymnastics, she risks breaking her neck. The US superstar, 24, blamed "the twisties" for her dramatic exit from the team event at the Tokyo Games, where she was aiming to equal or even surpass the all-time women's gymnastics record of nine Olympic golds.

Biles exploded down the runway for her opening vault in the team final on Tuesday, launching her Tokyo odyssey with an Amanar at the Ariake Gymnastics Centre. The skill - a back handspring onto the vault then two-and-a-half twists in mid-air with a blind landing facing away from the apparatus - is not for the faint-hearted. It is a fiendishly daring and dangerous move but one she normally executes time and again with pinpoint perfection. On Tuesday, with her diminutive frame shouldering the crushing weight of expectation that comes with being one of the faces of the Games, the "twisties" struck. Losing her sense of spatial awareness, with the real danger of doing herself serious harm, Biles bailed out of the Amanar in mid-air, turning just one-and-a-half times and stumbling on landing.

Fellow gymnasts have described the condition that interrupts normal communications between brain and body. "You have absolutely no control over your body and what it does," US gymnast Aleah Finnegan explained on Twitter. The loss of form is complex, difficult to treat, and can be compounded by pressure, a French gymnastics coach told AFP. Any gymnast who falls victim to the twisties is "paralyzed by the fear of losing" and serious injury, he said.

Biles, with the razor-sharp mental vision gymnasts require to perform their gravity-defying routines clouded by doubt and fear, bravely took the decision to stand down from the remaining three elements to focus on her mental health. Instead, she assumed the role of cheerleader-in-chief as her teammates soldiered on to claim silver behind the Russians. —AFP

Irish rowers won't be bringing the house down

TOKYO: Paul O'Donovan partnered Fintan McCarthy to win Ireland's first ever rowing Olympic gold yesterday and said it is fortunate for their neighbors there are coronavirus protocols in place otherwise they "would knock down their apartment". O'Donovan and McCarthy triumphed in the men's lightweight double sculls, an event three-time world champion O'Donovan had taken silver in with his brother Gary in Rio in 2016.

O'Donovan said it was hard to compare the feelings he had in 2016 and now - "it is a long time ago and I would be hard pressed to remember them" - and celebrations would be muted, at least in Japan. Tokyo is under a coronavirus state of emergency with measures such as alcohol banned in bars and restaurants, which have to close by 8 pm. "There is not much celebrating to be done in Japan to be honest," said 27-year-old O'Donovan.

"We will have to be careful with the COVID you know, unfortunately. Otherwise, we would go all out and have massive parties. We would probably knock down the apartment but fortunately, for the Japanese and our neighbors, that won't be happening this year." McCarthy - who partnered O'Donovan when they won the 2019 world title, thereby qualifying for the Olympics - said their initial celebration would be to eat a proper meal.

"We will have a trip to the dining hall first," said McCarthy. "We have been waiting all week. It will be nice to go there and not keep an eye on what we are eating." Their celebrations might be restrained but the craic will be mighty back in Skibbereen, West Cork. "They will be wading through the porter in Skibbereen, it will be flowing down the streets," said O'Donovan.

'A great tune'

O'Donovan, who is training to be a doctor, cited Greek philosopher Heraclitus's saying "A man can never fall into the same river twice" when commenting before the Games on



TOKYO: (From left) Gold medalists Ireland's Fintan McCarthy and Paul O'Donovan pose in their boat following the lightweight men's double sculls final at the Sea Forest Waterway yesterday. —AFP

whether they could go one better than in Rio. However, he was pretty sotto voce when asked about the significance of the victory for him personally. "To be honest, you don't feel much about it at all, people ask 'has it sunk in yet?' but I don't think they ever do really," he said.

"There is a ceiling on how well and happy you can feel about this type of thing. It gives you a boost for sure, but alright, I mean you are not going to explode with excitement and happiness after, you know?" O'Donovan - whose brother Gary did travel to Tokyo as reserve - said his exertions had made singing the national anthem a tough challenge. "It was good. There is a great tune to it, I really enjoyed it," he said.

"But I was very hot and tired and stuff after the race, so I couldn't concentrate. I could barely get the words out myself. To see the flag being raised was beautiful." Even staying in contact with his family has been a burden for O'Donovan - McCarthy by contrast had already called his family as he went through doping control. "I just ignore everyone all the time," said O'Donovan. "I got a capacity to send two text messages per day no matter the circumstances. That's about it, I leave the phone in my pocket. They are not too happy at home, but that's how it is." —AFP



Olympic organizers defend virus measures as Japan cases surge

TOKYO: Japan hit a record number of new virus cases yesterday as Tokyo Olympics organizers defended their COVID-19 counter-measures and dismissed any link to the nationwide surge. Olympic organizers reported 24 new infections among Games participants, the highest yet, bringing the total number to 193, including athletes, media and Olympic employees and contractors.

Meanwhile nationwide infections topped 10,000 for the first time, Japanese media said, with Tokyo reporting a record 3,865 cases. Reports also said the government would expand a state of emergency to four more regions, and extend the emergency currently in place in Tokyo until Aug 31. International Olympic Committee spokesman Mark Adams said there was nothing to suggest a link between the Games and the rising figures in Japan. "As far as I'm aware there's not a single case of an infection spreading to the Tokyo population from the athletes or Olympic movement," he told reporters. "We have the most tested community probably anywhere... in the world, on top of that you have some of the toughest lockdown restrictions in the athlete's village," he added.

Organizers also insisted the Games is not putting additional pressure on Japan's medical system, as experts warn the rising number of cases could lead to a healthcare crisis. Only two people associated with the Games are in hospital, they said, and half of all those needing care are being looked after by their own medical teams. "Of 310,000 screening tests, the rate of positivity is 0.02 percent," Adams added. Of the Olympic participants reported positive, 109 are residents of Japan, with the rest coming from abroad.

Rising concern

The comments come with rising concern in Tokyo and beyond about a rapid rise in new infections, spurred by the more contagious Delta variant. Tokyo is already under a virus state of emergency that shortens restaurant and bar opening hours and bans them from selling alcohol, and three neighboring regions are now expected to impose the same measure.

But experts say the limits do not appear to be working, and have warned people not to drop their guard. "The current situation is the worst ever," a top government advisor on the virus warned, according to national broadcaster NHK. Shigeru Omi, a former top WHO official, said the government and Olympic organizers had the "responsibility to do everything they can... to prevent infections and a breakdown in medical services". And the chairman of the Tokyo Medical Association Haruo Ozaki urged the government to "send an effective, strong message", warning that emergency measures were no longer enough. Ozaki said infections among Olympians and among the Japanese population were "different issues", but said the Games were having an "indirect impact". "People find it hard to think about self-restraint when we're having this festival," he said.

Tokyo's Governor Yuriko Koike however insisted the Games was helping people heed calls to avoid non-essential outings. "It's significantly lifting the numbers of people staying at home" and watching on television, she told reporters. Japan has seen a comparatively small virus outbreak, with around 15,000 deaths despite avoiding harsh lockdowns, but only around a quarter of the population is fully vaccinated.



TOKYO: China's Chen Yuxi and China's Zhang Jiaqi compete in the women's synchronized 10m platform diving final event during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the Tokyo Aquatics Centre on Wednesday. —AFP

Strict measures have been imposed for the Games, including a ban on spectators at almost all events and regular testing for Olympic participants. Japanese media said Thursday the government would expand the state of emergency to three regions around Tokyo and Osaka, in western Japan. The emergency measures in place in Tokyo and southern Okinawa had been due to end August 22, but will now last until August 31 in the capital and other affected regions, they said. —AFP

Kuwaiti shooters, swimmer fail to advance

TOKYO: Kuwaiti shooters Abdurrahman Al-Faihan finished sixth with a score of 18 in the Olympic men's trap shooting competition yesterday. Czech shooter Jiri Liptak won the gold and David Kostelecky took the silver, while British Matthew Coward Holley was third. Some 29 competitors took part in the event over two days from Wednesday at the Asaka Shooting Range, with the top six advancing to the finals.

Faihan had secured a spot in the Men's Trap final in the Tokyo Olympic Games yesterday. Faihan finished in third position in the qualification round with a score of 123. At Asaka Shooting Range, 29 competitors shot 125 targets over two days from Wednesday, with the top six qualifying for the finals. Faihan finished qualifying in joint second place after hitting 123 out of 125 targets, and then ranked third following a shoot-off among four shooters. Talal Al-Rashidi failed to advance out of the qualifying round as he finished seventh with 122 targets after losing the shoot-off.

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti swimmer Abbas Qali, competing in the men's 100m butterfly at the Tokyo Olympics, finished fourth in his heat yesterday and missed the semifinals. Qali clocked 53.62 seconds, not enough to make the top 16 for the semifinals today at the Tokyo Aquatics Centre.

Olympic gold lifts spirits in virus-stricken Fiji

SUVA, Fiji: Overjoyed Fijians have brushed aside a strict virus curfew and poured onto the streets of Suva to celebrate Olympic rugby sevens gold in an explosion of song, dance and fireworks. Children cheered, car horns honked and one older lady's celebratory twerk went viral, after the Pacific nation's rugby heroes vanquished New Zealand 27-12 late on Wednesday to retain the title.

Fijians are obsessed with rugby. When the team won in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 - bagging the country's first Olympic medal of any hue - the celebrations included a national holiday and a commemorative FJ\$7 note (worth US\$3.36) issued by the central bank. During each match of this campaign, every home with a television tuned in, and living rooms were often packed with neighbors who did not have a TV.

A 6 pm curfew is currently in place, aimed at arresting the coronavirus outbreak which erupted in April and has claimed 218 lives with more than 19,000 active cases in isolation. But when the final whistle blew in Tokyo Stadium and the team ditched stuffy Olympic protocol to belt out a traditional polyphonic song from the podium, a nation erupted. More than three hours after the curfew began families poured from the houses to dance and sing, banging pots and pans and setting off fireworks.

"Curfew starts at 6pm in Fiji but this is at 9.30pm after Fiji won gold at the #Olympics. What curfew?! Celebrations have started and Fijian people have forgot-



TOKYO: New Zealand's Ngarohi McGarvey-Black (left) tackles Fiji's Vilimoni Botitu in the men's final rugby sevens match between New Zealand and Fiji at the Tokyo Stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

ten about the COVID just for tonight," tweeted Monish Nand, a former government official and now expatriate. Fiji sevens captain Jerry Tuwai dedicated the win to the "suffering" people back home. "They won't be thinking about the pandemic now, they'll be celebrating the gold medal," he said.

As Fiji's number-one sport, rugby sevens is considered a unifier in a country that had four coups between 1987 and 2006 due to ethnic and political differences. The latest success comes against a backdrop of renewed political and ethnic tension over proposed changes to native land laws and an increased security presence in the capital Suva. Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama said the latest victory "was worth more than gold", but there was no immediate word on another national holiday. —AFP



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