

3 All public parks in Kuwait open from 8 am to 10 pm



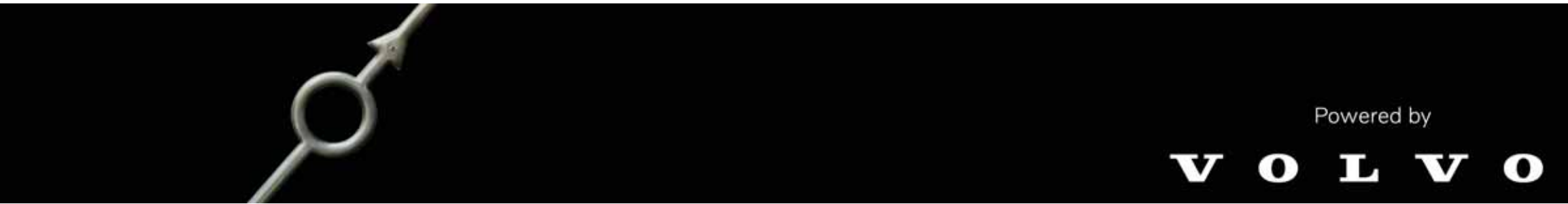
5 US spied on Merkel, European allies with Danish help: Media



12 Searching for Gertrude Bell, colonial 'mother' of modern Iraq



14 Bruce Lee, life of hardship inspire refugee's Tokyo Olympics dream



Kuwait resumes visa issuance for Pakistanis after 11 years

Family and business visas to open first, followed by work visas

conspiracy theories

Mosafer Insha'Allah?

By Badrya Darwish

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I had a miserable experience with the Kuwait Mosafer app returning home from a short trip to Jordan. At the Kuwait Airways counter, I was asked if I had the Mosafer app on my phone. I replied: "What's mosafer?" I have a negative PCR test report. I have a vaccine certificate from Kuwait. Plus health insurance. Plus my passport. Plus the flight ticket. So why do I need this Mosafer app?

And if I don't have it, what happens? The response from the man at the check-in counter: "Simply, you cannot return to Kuwait." At this moment, I freaked out. I told him, "OK I will download it", though I did not relish the idea that a silly app could prevent me from returning home. Anyway, I searched for the app and started downloading it. My companion did the same.

Then I looked behind me and saw a couple of young Kuwaiti men who also didn't know that the Mosafer app was required, and they started trying to download it and fill out the details. Some of the passengers were angry and yelling, but honestly it's not the fault of the people at the check-in counter. They were apologetic and nice and helpful, but noted that: "This is from your government and the civil aviation in Kuwait, and there's nothing we can do about it."

Several of us in the queue couldn't believe it, but we tried. We tried and tried and tried. But all our attempts failed because the program is not user-friendly, doesn't work properly and most of the time kept giving an error message when we tried to make it work. All of us in the queue wanting to come to Kuwait had negative PCR test results, our passports and everything required - except the Mosafer app.

I was forced to call my son in Kuwait and communicate with him about 20 times to get his help. Luckily my son is a tech guy. It took two and a half hours of back and forth with him on the phone and his expert IT skills to get the app to work. Even the Kuwait Airways staff at the airport had to talk to my son to help us and others get the app working properly.

I thank the KAC station manager in Jordan because he extended the check-in time, and we were finally able to make the flight in the last 15 minutes. But now my question - this Mosafer app is a nightmare. Many passengers returning to Kuwait have faced difficulties trying to get it to work. I heard it was even discussed in parliament, about how difficult the app is and why should we as citizens be barred from returning to our homeland because we cannot fill in the details on an app? I understand if I was deported or barred or exiled due to political issues. But for an app? I think not.

If there is a question about the PCR test or health concerns, let it be resolved at Kuwait airport when we arrive. This is our country and no one has the right to bar us from returning home. I hope that the parliament and ministry of health and civil aviation will take measures to fix this problem for good.

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Kuwait will resume issuing work and family visas for Pakistani nationals after an 11-year (unofficial) suspension, Pakistani Interior Minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad told reporters at a press conference yesterday. "I am glad to announce today that after 11 years, Kuwait is opening family and business visas for Pakistani nationals. Kuwait has also approved visas for oilfield workers, doctors and teachers, apart from visas to be issued for the construction, IT and technical sectors," he said.

According to Ahmad, the decision to lift the ban on visas on Pakistanis came after a meeting with Kuwait's Prime Minister HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah. "In the first phase, we are going to start with family and business visas, while work visas will

be issued in the second phase. Kuwait is very interested in construction and technical workers from our country. It took 11 years for this decision and we are very happy with this new development," he added.

For more than a decade, Kuwait has unofficially banned nationals from Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen from entering the country over security and political concerns. The blacklist includes trade, tourist and visit visas, as well as visas sponsored by spouses. There are around 94,000 Pakistanis in Kuwait, down from a peak of as many as 150,000 in 2009.

Pakistanis were stunned when the ban came into effect, as thousands of people including families of residents and residents who had traveled were impacted. In March 2017, the then Pakistani government had also

Continued on Page 2



KUWAIT: Pakistani Interior Minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad (left) speaks to reporters at the Pakistani Embassy yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwaiti breeds 'superworms' for superfood

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti businessman Jassem Buabbas has spent years breeding "superworms" for animal feed and now hopes the creatures will find their way into the diets of Gulf citizens. In a small, dark room outside Kuwait City, Buabbas places the worm-like larvae of the darkling beetle, famed for their high protein content, into a transparent box on a bed of bran and corn flour. In another, he puts the mature beetles for mating.

"My ambition is for worms to be a

successful food alternative for humans," he told AFP. Some Gulf states have a tradition of eating dried and baked locusts, which can appear in plague proportions. They are considered a delicacy by some, although consumption has fallen out of favor in modern times. While superworms - in high demand among owners of birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles - have not yet been approved for human consumption in Kuwait, Buabbas is hopeful that people will be willing to try them.

He aims to expand his business beyond the pet trade and get the invertebrates onto dinner plates, in what would be the first such restaurant in the Gulf. He is now experimenting with recipes before seeking permission from the Kuwaiti authorities. — AFP (See Page 11)



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti breeder Jassem Buabbas displays superworms at his farm in Kabb on May 20, 2021. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Key meeting to discuss allowing expats to return

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The National Assembly's health committee is scheduled to hold a crucial meeting with Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah on Sunday to discuss a number of issues, including the possibility of allowing expats to return to the country. The meeting

will focus on the status of expatriates and allowing them to return to the country, reopening the international airport to foreigners and related travel ban decisions.

Kuwait has imposed a ban on the entry of expats for the past three months to combat the spread of the coronavirus. As a result, a majority of expats in the country have decided not to travel, because they will not be allowed to return, while thousands of expats with valid residencies are stuck abroad. The meeting will also discuss the economic impact of closing the airport to the return of expats - except in very limited cases - especially losses to airlines and travel agents.

The committee will also discuss with the minister

the issue of vaccination amid increasing criticism of the ministry's COVID-19 vaccination program. The meeting will also discuss the pandemic situation in the country in the light of the number of new cases remaining almost constant despite stringent measures. The committee is also expected to ask the minister if he plans to propose re-imposing a partial curfew.

Meanwhile, the health minister yesterday briefed the Cabinet about the status of the coronavirus pandemic in the country and the number of new cases. The Cabinet also discussed the situation of the vaccination drive. The Cabinet however did not take any new decisions despite media reports that the government was contemplating allowing the entry of expats into the country.

China allows couples to have three children

BEIJING: China will allow couples to have three children after a census showed its population is rapidly ageing, state media said yesterday, further unwinding four decades of strict family planning controls in the world's most populous nation. In 2016 China relaxed its "one-child policy" - one of the world's strictest family planning regulations - allowing couples to have two children as concerns mounted over an ageing workforce and eco-

nomc stagnation.

But annual births have continued to plummet to a record low of 12 million in 2020, Beijing's National Bureau of Statistics said this month, as the cost of living rises and women increasingly make their own family planning choices. China's fertility rate stands at 1.3 - below the level needed to maintain a stable population, the figures revealed.

The slump threatens a demographic crisis which has alarmed President Xi Jinping's ruling Communist Party, risking a shortage of young workers to drive an economy experts say will have to support hundreds of millions of elderly by 2050. A meeting yesterday of the party's powerful

Continued on Page 2



YANTAI, China: Children play at a kindergarten in China's eastern Shandong province yesterday. — AFP

Local

Kuwait Crown Prince's Saudi Arabia visit historic: Ambassador

Sheikh Mishal receives chamber of commerce's chairman

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah along with an official accompanying delegation are due to travel to Saudi Arabia today on an official visit. His Highness the Crown Prince had received at Seif Palace yesterday chairman of Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) Mohammad Jassem Al-Saqer.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Ambassador to Saudi Arabia said yesterday that His Highness the Crown Prince's visit to Saudi Arabia is "historic" and reflective of the strong brotherly ties. Sheikh Ali Khaled Al-Sabah affirmed that the visit would contribute to further bolster relations. This is the first official visit

by His Highness Sheikh Mishal in his capacity as Crown Prince and it came at an invitation by Saudi Crown Prince Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Defense Mohammad bin Salman.

The Ambassador added His Highness Sheikh Mishal's choice of Saudi Arabia as the first country to visit in his current capacity reflected the strength of Kuwaiti-Saudi ties. He noted that the visit would display the deeply rooted relations linking the leaderships of both countries, saying that such fact will be beneficial for the people of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia also share social and traditional customs.

Through numerous challenges and mutual struggles, the Kuwaiti

and Saudi people managed to come through due to the strong collaboration, which highlighted ties. The relations were further solidified in 2018, when the then Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and the then Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubair signed an agreement to establish the joint Kuwaiti-Saudi coordination council, which was tasked to overview all aspects of cooperation amongst the two countries. The two countries signed, on December 24, 2019, an agreement affiliated with an accord for dividing the neutral zone and another one on partitioning the adjacent submerged zone. — KUNA



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets chairman of Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) Mohammad Jassem Al-Saqer. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Sabah meets his Pakistani counterpart Sheikh Rashid Ahmad. — KUNA photos

Interior Minister, Pakistani counterpart discuss cooperation

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Interior Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Sabah and his Pakistani counterpart Sheikh Rashid Ahmad on Sunday discussed some topics of common concern, and mechanisms of coordination and cooperation in all domains relating to security. The talks focused on sharing

information and expertise between the two ministries, and a number of regional and international issues, the ministry's security media and public relations department said in a statement. The Kuwaiti minister lauded the depth of relations between the two countries and their nations,

stressing the importance of such meetings in sharing views in several security issues that concern the two sides, it added. He also extolled the outstanding role of Pakistan's medical staff during combatting the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Meanwhile, the Pakistani minister expressed appreciation to

Kuwait for hospitality and care for Pakistan's community in Kuwait, affirming continued coordination and cooperation between the two sides. The Pakistani minister accompanied by a high-level delegation arrived in Kuwait earlier in the day on a two-day official visit. — KUNA

WHO chief hails agreement to boost organization

GENEVA: World Health Organization members agreed yesterday to strengthen the global body at the heart of the pandemic response and give it a more secure financial base from which to future health crisis. Many of the details of the concrete measures needed have been left to a future date, as members continue to debate how much power to cede to UN body.

But WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus hailed the resolution passed on the last day of the UN health agency's annual meeting of its 194 member states as "historic". "The world needs a stronger WHO at the center of the global health architecture," he said. A year and a half after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic that has killed more than 3.5 million people, member states agreed to strengthen the organization at the heart of the global response to the crisis.

The 14-page resolution adopted yesterday vowed among other things to remove the uncertainty around the organization's funding. Member states committed to "ensure the adequate, flexible, sustainable and predictable financing of WHO's program budget". Only about 16 percent of the agency's budget currently comes from regular membership fees. The rest comes coming from voluntary contributions which are heavily earmarked by countries for particular projects.

Tedros pointed out that even in the midst of the crisis, low and uncertain funding levels had meant programs were being planned "in a debilitating cycle of financial ebb and flow". "WHO cannot grow stronger without sustainable financing," he said in closing remarks to the 74th World Health Assembly, which has been held virtually over the past week. "We cannot pay people with praise."

With yesterday's resolution, countries also agreed to "strengthen WHO's capacity to rapidly

and appropriately assess disease outbreaks" of possible global concern. But they put off deciding most of the steps required, and some members are resisting moves to hand more power and independence to the WHO for fear it might encroach on their sovereignty.

They decided to create a new working group to study and streamline numerous recommendations presented by three independent panels, and create concrete proposals for next year's assembly to consider. The expert panels had painted a bleak picture, finding that countries and institutions had been woefully unprepared to deal with COVID-19. They called for a total overhaul of the global alarm system, and for a stronger, more independent WHO to help avert future pandemics.

Yesterday's resolution called on all countries to increase their ability to detect new threats and to communicate such threats effectively at home and abroad. To ensure all nations do their part, the resolution asked Tedros to consider creating a pilot project in which countries would submit their pandemic preparedness plans to regular peer reviews by other member states – just as they undergo reviews of their rights situations before the UN Human Rights Council.

The resolution stopped short of explicitly backing the experts' recommendation to hand the WHO broader powers to launch investigations or communicate about health threats without waiting for a green light from the countries concerned. The member states also decided to put off until November discussions about whether or not to move towards creating an international pandemic treaty.

Tedros urged countries to "seize the moment", insisting a treaty on pandemic preparedness would go a long way to "strengthen both WHO and global health security". "We need a generational commitment that outlives budgetary cycles, election cycles and media cycles," he said. "Other crises will demand our attention and distract us from the urgency of taking action," he warned. "If we make that mistake, we risk perpetuating the same cycle of panic and neglect that has led us to the point." — AFP

to be transferred to Pakistan to serve their sentences there. Unfortunately, only six agreed to be shifted to Pakistan. We are arranging their flight back home soon," Ahmad said.

Asked about the impact of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, Ahmad said peace in neighboring Afghanistan is peace for Pakistan too. "The Taliban have been deep-rooted in our provinces too, but the good news is that around 87 percent of the Afghan border has been fenced – for the first time in 70 years – to ensure peace and stability. The remaining fencing will be done in two months. We support the democratic process in Afghanistan, and are waiting to see the situation in the next few months or so," he said.



YANTAI, China: Children play at a kindergarten in Yantai in China's eastern Shandong province yesterday. — AFP

China allows couples to have...

Continued from Page 1

Politburo led by Xi announced a further loosening of the state's control over the size of families.

"To actively respond to the ageing population... a couple can have three children," state media Xinhua reported. The Politburo meeting promised "accompanying support measures" including improving maternity leave, universal childcare and lowering the costs of education, but without giving firm commitments.

The announcement was met with widespread ridicule on Chinese social media platform Weibo, tapping into a deep unease with long working hours, skyrocketing house prices and the rising burden to provide for ageing relatives that frames modern life. "For Chinese millennials one couple must support four grandparents as well as three kids? Can the country give a hero's award to each of them?" read one comment that gained over 3,000 likes.

Others said the policy could only be taken up by those with money. "The poor don't dare have kids, in two more generations there will only be rich people left," another user commented. A poll on Weibo shared by Xinhua asking readers their reaction to the news later appeared to have been deleted after over 25,000 responded that they would not consid-

er having three children.

China's gender balance has been skewed by decades of the one-child policy, and a traditional social preference for boys which prompted a generation of sex-selective abortions and abandoned baby girls. And for a younger generation of women with changing priorities amid the unrelenting pressures of urban life in China, there remains a widespread aversion to having children.

"I don't want to have even a single child," a 27-year-old single woman from Zhejiang province who gave her name only as Wendy told AFP. "Nobody around me wants to have kids." Most experts agree that the policy alone will not reverse China's declining fertility, though it sends a symbolic message after decades of the one-child limit that was often brutally enforced by forced abortions and sterilizations.

"Most families have a preference for few children now – akin to the rest of Northeast Asia," said Lauren Johnston, a China economics and demography researcher at SOAS University of London. "By the time of the next census will there be many third children? Probably few."

A third of Chinese are forecast to be elderly by 2050, heaping huge pressure on the state to provide pensions and healthcare. Ye Liu, lecturer in international development at King's College London, said the new policy was "unlikely to incentivize birth rates dramatically". "The government shifts the responsibility of ageing population to individual families without concrete financial and policy commitments." — AFP

Kuwait resumes visa issuance...

Continued from Page 1

announced the lifting of the ban by Kuwait during a visit by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to Kuwait. However, the decision was never implemented.

"I came under the direction of our Prime Minister Imran Khan, and in a kind gesture of goodwill, the Kuwaiti government allowed 72 prisoners

Kuwait parks reopen after months of closure



KUWAIT: Pictures from parks around Kuwait yesterday. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

KUWAIT: Public parks in Kuwait reopened yesterday after months of closure due to COVID-19 restrictions. The Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR) had said Sunday that public gardens would open every day from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm. The decision to reopen all public parks in all governorates was made based on guidelines from the Minister of State for Municipality Affairs and Minister of State for Housing and Architectural Development Shayi Al-Shayi, Deputy Director General of Agriculture sector at PAAAFR Ali Al-Farsi said. He added that such move was to open up recreational facilities for families and children after the end of the academic year, but is also with health precautionary measures that must be followed. — KUNA



Vaccination continues as Kuwait registers 1,095 new COVID cases

KUWAIT: People continued to receive jabs at the Jaber Causeway drive-through vaccination center yesterday as the Ministry of Health announced opening the facility earlier this week as part of efforts to speed up the vaccination process against COVID-19 in the country.

The Health Ministry had announced on Sunday recording 1,095 new COVID-19 cases in addition to seven deaths caused by the deadly virus in the previous 24 hours. MoH official spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said the caseload of contamination cases rose to 307,812 and the mortality toll settled at 1,771. Dr Sanad added that medical authorities recorded 1,180 recovery causes during the same duration, increasing the tally of cured patients to 292,701, noting that the proportion of recoveries was estimated at 95.9 percent.

The number of patients under treatment at intensive care units stood at 144, while the total count of positively diagnosed cases that continue to receive medical treatment stood at 13,340 as of Sunday. He further mentioned that 9,227 swab tests were conducted during the same period, putting overall number of such examinations at 25,968,807, also noting that the proportion of the infections in contrast to the tests was estimated at 11.86 percent. — KUNA



KUWAIT: People receive the COVID-19 vaccine inside vehicles at the Jaber Causeway drive-through vaccination center on May 30, 2021. Kuwait inaugurated on Sunday the drive-through vaccination center to speed up nationwide inoculation. — Xinhua

Local

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Photo taken on May 28, 2021 shows buildings silhouetted at sunset at the beach in Kuwait City, Kuwait. —Xinhua

Kuwait continues support to Palestinians

CAIRO: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) affirmed on Sunday that Kuwait will always intensively back up Palestine in face of the Zionist aggression. KISR's emergency management director Yousef Al-Miraj made the affirmation to KUNA after a meeting with Egyptian Red Crescent (ERC) Executive Director Rami Al-Nadher to discuss boosting support in Gaza. He stressed on serving humanitarian calls towards affected people, adding that the KRCS discussed with both Egyptian and Palestinian Red Crescent societies means of meeting all needs of Palestinian people in the near future. Moreover, Miraj expressed his gratitude towards Kuwait Embassy in Egypt and the ERC for their huge efforts to deliver aid for Palestinians. Nadher has affirmed that Kuwait is a pioneer in humanitarian contributions. —AFP

GCC chief, Maltese FM discuss cooperation

JEDDAH: GCC Secretary General Nayef Al-Hajraf yesterday discussed with Maltese Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Evarist Bartolo means of boosting cooperation between the European country and the regional bloc. The GCC Secretariat General said in a statement the two sides, during the meeting held in Riyadh, explored the GCC-European relations, issues of joint interest and means of enhancing the mutual cooperation in fields of mutual interest. The GCC Secretary General and Minister Bartolo affirmed necessity of overhauling the mutual cooperation at various levels according to a memo inked by the two sides in 2017. The Gulf council, founded in 1981, comprises Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. The GCC, established in the shadow of a major war between Iran and Iraq at the time, aims to enhance cooperation among the member states at various levels. —KUNA

Inflation in Kuwait climbed 3.12 percent in April

KUWAIT: The consumer prices on annual basis grew by 3.12 percent in April, according to the State of Kuwait Central Statistical Bureau. The bureau, in its monthly report issued yesterday, said inflation rate dropped 0.17 percent in April, on monthly basis, due to decline in prices of some main groups that influence movement of the key indices. The consumer price index (CPI) for the clothing group rose 6.03 percent on yearly basis, while rates of housing services rose by 0.09 percent. Moreover, inflation rate in the furnishing equipment household increased by 4.07 percent. The KCSB said the health index rose 2.09 percent while rates of transport moved up by 4.23 percent. Communication rose by 4.36 percent, recreation and culture by 7.83 percent while education dropped by 15.46 percent. Restaurants and hotel climbed on yearly basis in April by 0.24 percent, services and miscellaneous goods by 4.9 percent. —KUNA

Kuwait's April crude oil exports to Japan down

TOKYO: Kuwait's crude oil exports to Japan in April declined 35.8 percent from a year earlier to 6.14 million barrels, or 205,000 barrels per day (bpd), down for the 13th straight month, government data showed yesterday. As Japan's fourth-biggest oil provider, Kuwait supplied 7.7 percent of the Asian nation's total crude imports, the Japanese Natural Resources

and Energy Agency said in a preliminary report. Japan's overall imports of crude oil fell 3.9 percent year-on-year to 2.65 million bpd, down for the 16th month in a row. Shipments from the Middle East accounted for 91.8 percent of the total, up 1.2 percentage points from the year before. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) returned to be Japan's top oil supplier, with imports from the country jumping 24.3 percent from a year earlier to 1.04 million bpd, followed by Saudi Arabia with 890,000 bpd, down 11.2 percent. Qatar ranked third with 253,000 bpd and Russia fifth with 85,000 bpd, respectively. Japan is the world's-third biggest oil consumer after China and the U.S. —KUNA

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KUWAIT: INS Tarkash of the Indian Navy arrived in Kuwait yesterday to carry emergency medical supplies to India. Meanwhile, IAF Aircraft C17J of the Indian Air Force landed in Kuwait yesterday to carry oxygen tanks and other medical supplies.



Hong Kong's 'Grandma Wong' arrested for solo Tiananmen protest

100 years after Tulsa race massacre, African Americans still feel outcast

Europe seeks answers over spying

US spied on Merkel, European allies with Danish help: Media

COPENHAGEN: France warned yesterday that alleged US spying on European allies using Danish underwater cables would be "extremely serious" if confirmed, as questions mounted over whether Denmark knew what the US was doing. In an investigative report on Sunday, Danish public broadcaster Danmarks Radio (DR) and other European media outlets said the US National Security Agency (NSA) had eavesdropped on Danish underwater Internet cables from 2012 to 2014 to spy on top politicians in Germany, Sweden, Norway and France.

The NSA was able to access text messages, telephone calls and Internet traffic including searches, chats and messaging services - including those of Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, then-foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and then-opposition leader Peer Steinbrück, DR said. "It is extremely serious," France's Europe Minister Clement Beaudou told France Info radio.

"We need to see if our partners in the EU, the Danes, have committed errors or faults in their cooperation with American services," he said. "Between allies, there must be trust, a minimal cooperation, so these potential facts are serious," said the minister. He said the facts must first "be verified" and then "conclusions drawn in terms of cooperation".

'Unacceptable'

Denmark's neighbors also demanded explanations. "It's unacceptable if countries which have close allied cooperation feel the need to spy on one another," Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg told public broadcaster NRK. She said Norway had asked Denmark "for all the information they have". Swedish Defense Minister Peter Hultqvist said he had been "in contact with Denmark's defense minister to ask if Danish platforms have been used to spy on Swedish politicians."

A German government spokesman said Monday that Berlin was "in contact with all relevant national and international interlocutors to get clarification". DR said the NSA had taken advantage of a surveillance collaboration with Denmark's military intelligence unit FE to eavesdrop. But it was unclear whether Denmark knew at the time that the US was using the cables to spy on Denmark's neighbors.

Contacted by AFP, Denmark's military intelligence unit refused to comment on the revelations. Defense Minister Trine Bramsen, who took over the defense portfolio in June 2019, has neither confirmed nor denied DR's report, telling AFP only that "systematic eavesdropping of close allies is unacceptable".

US eavesdropping on European leaders is, however, not new. In 2013, former NSA contractor Edward Snowden revealed thousands of classified documents exposing the vast US surveillance put in place after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Among other things, the documents showed the US government was spying on its own citizens and carrying out widespread tapping worldwide, including of Merkel's mobile phone.

However, if the Danish-US spying is confirmed, it went on during and after the 2013 Snowden affair. In 2014, following the Snowden scandal, a secret internal working group at FE began looking into whether the NSA had used the Danish-US spying collaboration - called XKeyscore - to spy on Denmark's allies, DR said. The group's report, code-named Operation Dunhammer, was presented to top FE management in May 2015. What happened after that is not yet known.

'New pieces of the puzzle'

Bramsen was however informed of the spying in August 2020, according to DR. Shortly after that, FE director Lars Findsen, his predecessor who was



BERLIN: This file photo taken on Oct 25, 2013 shows the US flag flying on top of the US embassy next to the German parliament. — AFP

in the post until 2015 Thomas Ahrenkiel, and three other FE employees were removed from their positions but no full explanation was made public. At the time, the government said an audit had raised suspicions that FE was conducting illegal surveillance between 2014 and 2020.

In November 2020, DR revealed that the US had used the Danish cables to spy on the Danish and European defence industries from 2012 to 2015. A month later, Denmark's justice ministry ordered a commission of inquiry into FE's operations. Its conclusions are due at the end of 2021. Snowden, who

now lives in Russia, called on Twitter for "full public disclosure" from Denmark and the US.

The latest revelations are "new pieces of the puzzle," Thomas Wegener Friis, an intelligence expert and professor at the University of Southern Denmark, told AFP. "It's exactly the same kind of scandal as the one with German services helping the Americans to spy a few years ago," he added. Denmark is one of the United States' closest European allies and sent troops to fight in Iraq. It is the only Nordic country that is both a member of NATO and the EU. — AFP

Turkey, Greece smooth relations after Ankara spat

ATHENS: Greece and Turkey yesterday smoothed over their most recent diplomatic spat by setting up a June meeting between their respective leaders, officials said. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis will meet Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a NATO summit in Brussels on June 14, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said after holding talks with his Turkish counterpart in Athens.

The talks in Athens between Dendias and Mevlut Cavusoglu were designed to "attempt a procedure of preliminary understanding" and "gradually normalize" relations, Dendias said. A "limited list" of economic partnerships had also been agreed, Dendias said, without elaborating. Cavusoglu said Turkey wanted

to pursue talks with Greece "without prerequisites and without terms", according to the official translation. The ministers did not take any questions from reporters.

Some Greek analysts say Erdogan favors talks with Greece ahead of a scheduled meeting at the NATO summit with US President Joe Biden, who appears less accommodating toward Ankara than his predecessor Donald Trump. "At this point in time, Turkey is seeking a rapprochement - but on its own terms," said Kostas Lavdas, professor of European politics at Athens' Panteion university. "Turkey has a positive stance because it needs to," Lavdas told state TV ERT, also pointing to an upcoming EU summit expected to discuss Turkish relations in late June.

Greek-Turkish relations last year went through several flare-ups over migration, regional energy exploration, a Turkish-Libya agreement disputed by Athens and Erdogan's persistent questioning of post-war treaties with Greece. On Sunday, Cavusoglu's description of the Muslim

minority living in northeastern Greece as "Turkish" while on a private visit to the area prompted an angry response from the Greek foreign ministry.

"The Muslim minority in Thrace has about 120,000 Greek inhabitants," the ministry said in a statement. "Turkey's constant attempts to distort this reality, as well as the allegations of non-protection of the rights of these citizens, or of discrimination, are unfounded and are rejected in their entirety," it added. The status of Greece's Muslim minority is one of several points of contention between the two NATO allies.

Relations also plunged last year during a face-off over energy deposits in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Greece has also accused Turkey of orchestrating an attempted incursion by thousands of asylum seekers last year. And Ankara's move last year to convert the revered Byzantine-era Hagia Sophia cathedral from a museum into a mosque also sparked fury from Athens.

Turkey has often claimed that Greece fails to protect the rights of its Muslim



ATHENS: Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu (left) speaks with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (center) and Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias before their meeting yesterday. — AFP

minority, many of whom are of Turkish descent and Turkish-speaking. Cavusoglu had also raised the issue with his Greek counterpart Nikos Dendias during a heated press conference in Ankara in April. In turn, Dendias said Turkey was "violating" international law and Greece's sovereign

rights, claiming that the Turkish air force had conducted hundreds of illegal flights over Greek soil. Athens and Ankara in January also revived informal talks on maritime zone differences, a process that had stalled since 2016, but without a breakthrough so far. — AFP

Global warming blamed for 1 in 3 heat deaths

PARIS: More than a third of summer heat-related fatalities are due to climate change, researchers said yesterday, warning of even higher death tolls as global temperatures climb. Previous research on how climate change affects human health has mostly projected future risks from heatwaves, droughts, wild fires and other extreme events made worse by global warming. How much worse depends on how quickly humanity curbs carbon emissions, which hit record levels in 2019 but dipped sharply during the pandemic.

But a new study by an international team of 70 experts is one of the first - and the largest - to look at health consequences that have already happened, the authors said. The findings, published in Nature Climate Change, were stark: Data from 732 locations in 43 countries spread across every inhabited continent revealed that, on average, 37 percent of all heat-related deaths can be attributed directly to global warming.

"Climate change is not something in the distant future," senior author Antonio Gasparrini, a professor of biostatistics and epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, told AFP. "We can already measure negative impacts on health, in addition to the known environmental and ecological effects." The authors said their methods - if extended worldwide - would add up to more than 100,000 heat-related deaths per year laid squarely at the feet of man-made climate change.

Differences across countries

That number could be an underestimate because two of the regions for which data was largely missing - south Asia and central Africa - are known to be especially vulnerable to extreme heat deaths. The 100,000 figure is consistent with a recent analysis from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluations (IHME), published in The Lancet.

The IHME calculated just over 300,000 heat-related deaths worldwide from all causes in 2019. If just over a third of those deaths are due to climate change, as Gasparrini's team reported, the global total would indeed be more than 100,000. India accounted for more than a third of the total in the IHME tally, and four of the five worst-hit countries were in south Asia and central Africa.

The share of heat-related deaths attributable to global warming in the new study varied widely from country to country. In the United States, Australia, France, Britain and Spain, for example, that percentage was roughly in line with the average across all countries, between 35 and 39 percent. For Mexico, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam and Chile, the figure rose above 40 percent.

And for half-a-dozen countries - Brazil, Peru, Colombia, the Philippines, Kuwait and Guatemala - the percentage of heat-related mortality caused by climate change was 60 percent or more. A complex methodology combining health data and temperature records from 1991 to 2018, coupled with climate modelling, allowed researchers to contrast the actual number of heat-related deaths with how many fewer deaths there would have been without manmade warming.

Adapt or die

The researchers found that it is not the increase in average summer temperature - up 1.5C since 1991 in the locations examined - that boosted death rates, but heatwaves: how long they last, nighttime temperatures, and humidity levels. Also crucial is the ability of the population to adapt. If 95 percent of the population has air conditioning, mortality will be lower. But if they don't, or if farmers must work outside in 45C (113F) heat to feed their families, the impacts can be catastrophic.

Even wealthy nations remain vulnerable: in 2003, a relentless heatwave in western Europe claimed 70,000 lives. Deadly heatwaves that might have occurred once a century before climate change kicked in could, by mid-century, happen far more frequently, scientists warn. The burgeoning field of attribution climate science measures by how much, for example, a typhoon's intensity, a drought's duration, or a storm surge's destruction has been amplified by global warming. But little research has tried to do the same for human health, notes Dan Mitchell, a researcher at the Cabot Institute for the Environment at the University of Bristol. — AFP

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International

100 years after Tulsa race massacre, African Americans still feel outcast

Police not only did not intervene but joined in the destruction

TULSA, United States: At the foot of modern buildings on an anonymous street, a few discreet metal plaques catch the eye. “Grier shoemaker,” “Earl real estate”—riveted to the ground, they bear the names of Black-owned businesses that once stood there before being destroyed during one of the worst racial massacres in the United States, in 1921.

A rare vestige of a neighborhood so prosperous it was called Black Wall Street, the plaques prove that the history of Greenwood—a historically Black neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma—is understood not by the monuments that currently stand, but the ones that are no longer there. On the eve of a visit from President Joe Biden, popular with African-American voters, who will attend today’s commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the massacre, and after a year marked by the Black Lives Matter movement, the killings resonate with current events more than ever.

Destroyed neighborhood

“They came over and destroyed Greenwood and burned everything down,” Bobby Eaton, 86, a neighborhood resident and former civil rights activist, told AFP. A century ago, in the southern US town, the arrest of a young Black man accused of assaulting a white woman sparked one of the worst outpourings of racial violence ever seen in the country. On May 31, 1921, after the arrest of Dick Rowland, hundreds of furious white people gathered outside the Tulsa courthouse, signaling to Black residents that a lynching—a common practice at the time and until as recently as the 1960s — was imminent.

A group of African-American World War I veterans, some of them armed, mobilized in an attempt to protect Rowland. Tensions spiked and shots were fired. Fewer in number, the African-American residents retreated to Greenwood, known at the time for its economic prosperity and many businesses. The next day, at dawn, white men looted and burned the buildings, chasing down and beating Black people living there. All day long, they ransacked Black Wall Street—police not only did not intervene but joined in the destruction—until nothing was left but ruins and ashes, killing up to

300 people in the process. The destruction left some 10,000 people homeless.

With a blue cap on his head and a T-shirt commemorating the massacre’s centennial pulled over his shirt, Eaton feels marked by this event that he never saw but heard so much about as a child in his father’s barber shop. “I learned a lot about the riots as a very young person, that has never left my memory,” he said.

‘Don’t own the land’

In his opinion, as with many others in the neighborhood, it was the African-American prosperity that sparked the destruction. “That caused a great amount of jealousy, and it’s still doing so. “That mentality that destroyed Greenwood to begin with, to a great extent still exists right here in Tulsa,” Eaton said. Even 100 years after the massacre, racial tensions remain high.

In the Black Wall Street Liquid Lounge—a coffee shop named, like many businesses in Greenwood, in homage to the neighborhood’s golden age—Kode Ransom, a 32-year-old African-American man, sports long dreadlocks and a big smile as he greets customers. A happy co-manager of the business, he has one regret: not owning the walks around him. “People hear ‘Black Wall Street,’ they think that it’s completely controlled by Black people. It’s actually not,” he said.

Ransom estimates that about 20 African-American-owned businesses exist in Greenwood, and they all pay rent. “We don’t own the land,” he said. An urban planning policy, called urban renewal, carried out by the Tulsa city council since the 1960s, has had the effect of driving out African-American owners whose houses or businesses, deemed dilapidated, were demolished to make way for new buildings. The construction of a seven-lane highway through the middle of the main street finished disfiguring the neighborhood. “At the time when Greenwood was Greenwood, you had 40 blocks, and now it’s all being condensed down to half of a street... and even on that half of a street it’s still not really just Black Wall Street,” said Ransom, sighing.

A few meters from the cafe, in the Greenwood Art



TULSA, United States: Three men walk down a road in the Greenwood district in Tulsa, Oklahoma. —AFP

Gallery, manager Queen Alexander, 31, arranges the exhibited paintings, which celebrate African-American culture. She also pays rent—and it’s about to go up by 30 percent. The opening of a large museum dedicated to the neighborhood’s history, the Greenwood Rising History Center, which will officially open tomorrow, has caused rent for the surrounding businesses to increase. One of her acquaintances, who had run a beauty salon in Greenwood for more than 40 years, was evicted. “She couldn’t afford the rent,” said Alexander.

Outside the bay windows of her gallery, Alexander

observes the gentrification at work. “You do see now white people walking their dogs, and riding their bikes, in neighborhoods that you would never have seen them before,” she said, noting the opening of a baseball field, a Starbucks and “a college that I probably couldn’t afford. For her, Greenwood without its African-American owners and historic buildings is no longer really Black Wall Street but “Greenwood district with some Black business leases.” And “if we all get evicted tomorrow, this is white Wall Street.” —AFP

News in brief

No unwanted mining

BRAZIL: Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro promised the Yanomami indigenous people in remarks released Sunday that there will be no mining on their land unless they want it. The right-wing president’s remarks come amid charges by the Yanomami that their lands are being seized and they themselves are coming under attack, from people doing mining illegally. “If you do not want mining, there will be no mining. There are indigenous brothers in other places, inside and outside the Amazon that do want mining, that want to cultivate the land, and we are going to respect their wishes,” Bolsonaro said in a video released Sunday of a meeting he held last week with Yanomami leaders. —AFP

39 dead in eastern DR Congo

BUNIA, DR Congo: At least 39 people have been killed in two new attacks in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, monitors said yesterday, as a local official blamed a notorious group linked to the Islamic State group. “At least 20 civilians were killed overnight in the village of Boga and at least 19 in the village of Tchabi,” in Irumu territory in Ituri province, the Kivu Security Tracker (KST) group said. A local civil society leader attributed the attacks to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) — a historically Ugandan Islamist group blamed for a string of massacres in the past 18 months. Two local officials reached in Boga by AFP said the assailants attacked a camp for displaced people. They said 36 bodies had been found so far in Boga, a figure that had yet to be independently confirmed. —AFP

French police detain fugitive

PARIS: Police in southwest France detained yesterday a former soldier who fled into a forest after firing on security forces in an incident that sparked a massive manhunt, officials said. The government’s top official in the Dordogne region, Frederic Perissat, told a press conference in Le Lardin-Saint-Lazare that the suspect was shot and wounded after exchanging fire with police, and had been taken into custody. Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said on Twitter that the man had been “neutralized” and praised the hundreds of security forces deployed since Sunday. Authorities had released earlier yesterday a picture of the suspect, Terry Dupin, describing the bearded 29-year-old as a “dangerous individual.” —AFP

Jet makes emergency landing

WARSAW: Polish police said yesterday they were investigating a fake bomb threat that forced a Ryanair passenger plane travelling from Dublin to Krakow to make an emergency landing in Berlin. “We were notified by the Krakow airport that an airport employee received a phone call saying an explosive device had been planted on the plane,” said regional police spokesman, Sebastian Glen. “German police checked and there was no device, no bomb threat at all. So we know this was a false alarm,” he told AFP. “The perpetrator has not been detained, but we are doing everything possible to establish their identity.” Glen added, saying the person faces eight years in prison. With 160 people on board, the flight arrived at the Berlin-Brandenburg airport shortly after 8:00 pm (1800 GMT) Sunday. —AFP

Democrat walk out scuppers Texas vote overhaul

AUSTIN, United States: Democrats in the Texas legislature used a dramatic walk-out late Sunday to torpedo Republican plans for a restrictive voting bill that President Joe Biden had decried as voter suppression and an “assault on democracy.” The law would—among other changes—make mail-in voting more difficult by requiring voters to give extra information, bar local officials from sending absentee ballot applications to anyone who did not request one, and end after-hours and drive-through voting.

Supporters say Senate Bill 7 is designed to make voting more secure, but critics say it aims to make it more cumbersome for ethnic-minority voters, who tend to vote Democrat. “Republicans came into the legislative session hell-bent on passing legislation that would rig our democracy for their team,” Democrat state representative Jessica Gonzalez tweeted after the walk-out. “Tonight, Texas Dems

drew a line in the sand and made it clear that we will fight day and night, every tactic available to us, for your right to vote.”

But the bill could yet make it into law. Texas Governor Greg Abbott said after its defeat that he would call a special session to get it through the legislature. At about 10.45 pm Sunday, as the bill was discussed on the floor of the State House, the Democratic members departed the chamber en masse, leaving the body short of the required 100 members in attendance to pass anything. Local media reported that House Democratic Caucus chair Chris Turner sparked the exodus by texting all members to say: “Take your key and leave the chamber discretely. Do not go to the gallery. Leave the building.”

The session was then adjourned, ending any hopes of the bill passing in this legislative term. However, Abbott, a Republican who backs the election changes, raised the possibility of a special session to push them through. “Election Integrity & Bail Reform were emergency items for this legislative session. They STILL must pass,” he tweeted. “They will be added to the special session agenda.” In a tweet, Texas House Republicans decried the walk-out.

“The Texas House Republican Caucus condemns

account. Elections for the president are held separately and not due until Muse’s five-year term expires in late 2022.

Voters as young as 15 — the legal age of adulthood in Somaliland—were tasked with choosing from nearly 250 candidates running for 82 parliamentary seats, and about 1,000 contesting 249 councilor posts. “This election was very competitive, and the turnout is amazing,” said Dahir Ahmed, a police officer guarding a polling station in Hargeisa. “People started getting in line before daybreak, enthusiastically waiting to cast their votes. Security is tight... We’re looking forward to a peaceful end of voting.”

Both elections were years overdue—the last parliamentary ballot was in 2005 — so this vote represents “an important moment for democracy in Somaliland,” said a UK-funded independent monitoring team. The national electoral commission conceded that delayed polls were a stubborn feature of past votes in Somaliland but that all “were conducted in a peaceful and inclusive manner, a very rare occurrence in this volatile Horn of Africa region.”

Somaliland’s orderly election and universal franchise stand in stark contrast to Somalia, which is barely held together by a weak central government in Mogadishu, and has not held a one-person, one-

and injuring another, before kidnapping the children from the Salihu Tanko Islamic school. One of the school’s officials, who asked not to be named, said the attackers initially took more than 100 children “but later sent back those they considered too small for them, those between four and 12 years old.”

The state government, in a series of tweets, said the attackers had released 11 of the pupils who were “too small and couldn’t walk” very far. In a later Twitter thread, the state added the governor Sani Bello had directed “security agencies to bring back (the) children as soon as possible”.

‘Bandits’

The kidnappings in northwest and central Nigeria are complicating challenges facing President Muhammadu Buhari’s security forces, who are battling a more than decade-long Islamist insurgency in the northeast. Armed gangs, known locally as bandits, are terrorizing inhabitants in northwest and central Nigeria by



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden walk across The Ellipse, near the White House, upon return to Washington, DC yesterday. —AFP

the actions of their colleagues in the Texas House who chose to vacate their Constitutional responsibility and leave millions of Texans without resolution on key issues in the final hours of the legislative session,” they said. Republicans say the bill is needed to head off election fraud, as claimed by Donald Trump in his repeated false assertions that he beat Biden last November and that the presidential election was stolen from him. —AFP



HARGEISA, Somalia: Supporters dance and chant during a rally of the ruling Kulmiye Party for Somaliland’s elections which was scheduled yesterday, in Hargeisa. —AFP

vote poll in 50 years. Mogadishu and the leaders of Somalia’s five semi-autonomous states this month agreed to hold long-overdue elections within 60 days, after a prior timetable collapsed because of violence. The promised vote is indirect, like in past elections, with special delegates chosen by clan leaders who pick lawmakers, who in turn choose the president. —AFP

looting villages, stealing cattle, and taking people hostage for ransom. Since December 2020, before the attack on Sunday, 730 children and students had been kidnapped.

Gangs have often targeted schools in remote areas, where pupils live in dormitories with little security protection, before taking their victims deep into nearby forests to negotiate. On April 20, gunmen stormed Greenfield University in northwestern Nigeria and kidnapped around 20 students, killing a member of the school’s staff in the attack. Five students were executed a few days later to force families and the government to pay a ransom. Fourteen were released on Saturday.

Nigeria has been plagued by kidnappings for years, with criminals largely targeting the wealthy and prominent. But more recently, the poor have also become victims. Earlier this month, hundreds of protesters partially blocked a motorway into the capital Abuja after a spate of kidnappings in the area. —AFP

Somaliland votes in long overdue elections

MOGADISHU, Somalia: Voters in the self-declared republic of Somaliland cast their ballots yesterday in elections that authorities say demonstrate the capacity for peaceful democratic elections in the troubled Horn of Africa. More than one million voters were registered for the parliamentary and council elections in the breakaway northwestern region, which declared independence from Somalia 30 years ago but lacks international recognition. Both votes were long overdue, and it was the first time national and local elections were held together, with long queues reported at some polling stations.

President Muse Bihi Abdi and the leaders of Somaliland’s two opposition parties called for an orderly vote as they cast their ballots in the capital Hargeisa. “Somaliland votes for peace. It is an honor for our people (and) the Horn of Africa at large,” Muse posted on his official Twitter

Scores of children abducted from Islamic seminary in Nigeria

KANO, Nigeria: Gunmen kidnapped scores of children from an Islamic seminary in central Nigeria, officials said, the latest mass abduction to hit Africa’s most populous nation. Some 200 children were at the school in Niger state on Sunday during the attack, the local government tweeted, adding “an unconfirmed number” were taken. The abduction came a day after 14 students from a university in northwestern Nigeria were freed after 40 days in captivity, one of a series of kidnappings to target colleges and schools since December.

Niger state police spokesman Wasiu Abiodun said the attackers arrived on motorbikes in and started shooting indiscriminately, killing one resident

International

Hong Kong's 'Grandma Wong' arrested for solo Tiananmen protest

Prosecutors seek up to life in prison for 'subversive' activists

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police have arrested an elderly democracy activist as she made a solo demonstration over China's deadly Tiananmen crackdown in a vivid illustration of the zero protest tolerance now wielded by authorities in the financial hub. Alexandra Wong, 65, was detained on Sunday on suspicion of taking part in an unlawful assembly as she walked towards Beijing's Liaison Office in Hong Kong. Wong-known locally as "Grandma Wong"—was a regular fixture of the huge democracy protests that swept Hong Kong in 2019.

She could often be seen waving a Union Jack flag, a symbol of her dissatisfaction with Beijing's rule since the city was handed to China by former colonial power Britain in 1997. Protest is now all but outlawed in Hong Kong. Authorities have used both the threat of the coronavirus and security concerns to ban demonstrations. A vigil planned for this Friday — the 32nd anniversary of Beijing's 1989 crackdown on democracy protests in Tiananmen Square — has been denied permission for the second year in a row.

Authorities have cited the coronavirus, although Hong Kong is currently celebrating no local transmission cases of unknown origin for the last month. Activists had also sought permission for a small Tiananmen-themed march on Sunday to the Liaison Office, which represents the central government in the city, but it was also denied permission. Wong turned up anyway that afternoon holding as sign that read "32, June 4, Tiananmen's lament" and a

yellow umbrella—the latter a symbol of Hong Kong's democracy movement.

The South China Morning Post said the pensioner started chanting slogans in a park before heading towards the Liaison Office by herself, while being followed and filmed by police. She was stopped twice. "I'm only by myself, just an old lady here. Why stop me?" the Post quoted Wong as telling officers. Soon afterwards she was arrested. Police confirmed a 65-year-old woman surnamed Wong had been arrested for "knowingly participating in an unauthorized assembly and attempting to incite others to join an unauthorized assembly."

Hong Kong's democracy movement has been crushed by a broad crackdown on dissent over the last year, including the imposition of a sweeping security law that criminalizes much dissent. In the middle of the 2019 protests Wong disappeared for more than a year. She resurfaced saying she had been detained by mainland authorities during a trip to Shenzhen, a neighboring city where she lived at the time.

'Subversive' activists

Dozens of leading Hong Kong democracy activists could face up to life in prison for organizing an unofficial primary election, prosecutors confirmed yesterday, in the most sweeping use yet of Beijing's strict new security law. Police charged the 47 activists with "subversion" after they organized a non-binding vote last year to choose candidates for an ultimately postponed local election. The defen-



HONG KONG: Alexandra Wong (right), an activist known as Grandma Wong, holds a British Union Jack flag outside the District Court in Hong Kong, as nine pro-democracy activists await their sentencing for charges of unauthorized assembly on China's National Day on October 1, 2019. — AFP

dants say they were simply taking part in opposition politics. But authorities accused them of a "vicious plot" to subvert the government by seeking a majority in the city's partially-elected legislature.

Yesterday the defendants appeared en masse for the first time in nearly three months at a hearing in which a judge granted a request by prosecutors to

have the case upgraded to the city's High Court. Offences heard in that court start at seven years imprisonment for those who are convicted. The maximum penalty under the new security law is life in prison. Beijing has moved to quash dissent in the semi-autonomous city after huge and sometimes violent pro-democracy demonstrations in 2019. —AFP

New Zealand, Australia play down differences on China

WELLINGTON: New Zealand and Australia downplayed policy differences on China yesterday, with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern denying Wellington was taking a soft stance on human rights to avoid offending its largest trading partner. Ardern's government has taken flak over its meek criticisms of China's rights record, while Australia's more outspoken position has drawn punitive trade measures from Beijing. The center-left New Zealand leader insisted the trans-Tasman allies were lock-step on attitudes towards China after holding talks with her Australian counterpart Scott Morrison in the South Island mountain retreat of Queenstown.

The pair issued a joint statement expressing "deep concern" at the erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong and the treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority in China's Xinjiang province. "You'll see that Australia and New Zealand have broadly been positioned in exactly the same place on these issues consistently," Ardern told reporters. "So I really push back on any suggestion that we are not taking a strong stance on these incredibly important issues." Ardern and Morrison also backed a push to



QUEENSTOWN, New Zealand: New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (center right) and her Australian counterpart Scott Morrison (center left) pay their respects after laying wreaths during a visit to the Arrowtown War Memorial in Queenstown yesterday. — AFP

further investigate the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, which remains a sensitive topic for China.

The New Zealand government declined to sign a statement from the Five Eyes intelligence network last year condemning developments in Hong Kong, and this month insisted on removing the word "genocide" from a parliamentary motion about the plight of the Uyghurs. Australia has fully backed the Five Eyes statements, sparking fiery rhetoric from Beijing along with import levies on a range of

Australian products. Morrison said he did not believe New Zealand was a weak link in the spy network, which also includes the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada. "Neither of us will ever trade our sovereignty or our values, we have stood side by side to defend those values," he said. Morrison said both Australia and New Zealand wanted a free and peaceful Indo-Pacific region and would work to ensure that goal was not threatened by rising China-US tensions. —AFP

Australian writer says 'tortured' in Chinese prison

SYDNEY: An Australian academic on trial in China for espionage has told supporters he has been tortured in detention and still does not know which country he is accused of spying for. Chinese-born Yang Jun said he was mistreated while being held at a secret detention site after being taken into custody more than two years ago. "The first six months... was a really bad period. They tortured me," he said in a message seen by AFP. "I've already been held in a place worse than prison for over two years now." The 56-year-old academic's trial began behind closed doors on Thursday, with the Australian ambassador in Beijing denied access.

Yang said that he can only eat with two teeth due to dental problems and was "tired and confused" during Thursday's hearing, in which he "didn't have the spirit to speak enough." "I only spoke for three? five minutes. My own defense was not so

good." Yang insisted he is "100 percent innocent" and said he had tried and failed to get records from his interrogation dismissed. "It's illegal. Torture," he said, accusing authorities of using a "hidden camera". "The interrogations I had been subjected to, where I was told I had to confess... Perhaps someone was taking revenge against me."

Yang also said he failed in a plea to be allowed to submit evidence and call witnesses in his own defense. Beijing has said the trial can lawfully be held in secret because it involves "state secrets" and has criticized Australia for "interference" at a time of deteriorating relations between the two nations. Yang, and who also goes under the pen name Yang Hengjun, also said he was still unclear who he was accused of spying for. "This isn't a crime of ideology. The charges are about espionage. But who did I work for? If this is a crime, and if I'm a



BEIJING: Australian Ambassador to China Graham Fletcher speaks to journalists outside the Beijing Second Intermediate People's Court ahead of the trial of Australian academic Yang Jun, also known as Yang Hengjun, on espionage charges in Beijing. — AFP

criminal, then who did I work for? I didn't work for Australia or the US," he said. "I'm only writing for people. Writing for rule of law, democracy, and freedom." Yang reportedly once worked in China's foreign affairs ministry in Hainan province—although this has been denied by Beijing. He is believed to have left mainland China

for Hong Kong in 1992 and then travelled to the United States five years later, where he worked for the Atlantic Council think tank. He later took up Australian citizenship—although Beijing does not recognize dual nationality—and wrote a series of spy novels and a popular Chinese-language blog. —AFP

Thousands of Rohingya protest on Bangladesh island

DHAKA: Several thousand Rohingya staged "unruly" protests yesterday against living conditions on a cyclone-prone island off Bangladesh where they were moved from vast camps on the mainland, police said. Since December, Bangladesh has shifted 18,000 out of a planned 100,000 refugees to the low-lying silt island of Bhasan Char from the Cox's Bazar region, where around 850,000 people live in squalid and cramped conditions. Most of them had fled a brutal military offensive in neighboring Myanmar in 2017 that UN investigators concluded was executed with "genocidal intent".

Yesterday's protest involved up to 4,000 people, police said, and coincided with an inspection visit by officials from the United Nations refugee

agency (UNHCR). "The Rohingya who are there became unruly the moment the UNHCR representatives landed (on the island) by helicopter today," local police chief Alamgir Hossain told AFP. "They broke the glass on warehouses by throwing rocks. They came at the police... Their demand is they don't want to live here." One Rohingya man confirmed to AFP that bricks were thrown and that police prevented them from entering a building where the UNHCR officials were present.

An international rights activist said police used batons to disperse the protesters. Quoting Rohingya sources, he said several protesters were injured. Police rejected the claim. A police spokesman said Rohingya protesters attacked officers, injuring several of them. They also damaged cars on the island, he said. A UNHCR spokesperson confirmed that a delegation from the refugee agency, including the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Operations and the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, visited Bhasan Char island, facilitated by the Government of Bangladesh. "The UNHCR delegation was able to meet with a large group of

refugees and to listen to the various issues that they raised, which the delegation will further discuss with the Bangladesh authorities," she said. She said the delegation has now arrived in Cox's Bazar and would visit the Rohingya refugee camps Tuesday, before returning to Dhaka to meet with senior government officials.

After the first transfer on December 4 to the island in the Bay of Bengal, several Rohingya told AFP they were beaten and intimidated into agreeing to be relocated. Their claims have been echoed by rights groups. The Bangladesh government insists relocation is voluntary, that the island is safe and that its facilities are far better than those in the camps. Police told AFP at least 49 Rohingya, including women and children, have been arrested in recent weeks after fleeing the island and trying to return to Cox's Bazar. But Rohingya leaders say that scores, if not hundreds, of people from their community have escaped and have since returned to Cox's Bazar. One man told AFP on condition of anonymity that he left the island by swimming and then boarding a Bangladeshi fishing boat waiting for him, paying the owner \$300. —AFP

News in brief

Bangladesh arrests tiger poacher

DHAKA: Bangladesh police have arrested a notorious poacher wanted for 20 years and believed to have killed around 70 endangered Bengal tigers. Local police chief Saidur Rahman said that Habib Talukder—nicknamed "Tiger Habib"—lived next to the forest and would flee whenever officers raided the area. "Acting on a tip-off, we finally succeeded and sent him to jail," he told AFP. Talukder's hunting ground was the vast Sunderbans mangrove forest region straddling India and Bangladesh that is home to one of the world's largest populations of Bengal tigers. The cats' pelts, bones and even the flesh would be bought by black market traders who would sell them in China and elsewhere. —AFP

China limits travel in province

BEIJING: Chinese authorities imposed fresh travel limits, cancelled flights and tested thousands of residents in Guangdong yesterday after the Indian variant of the coronavirus was reported in the country's most populous province. Travellers leaving Guangzhou—the capital of the southern province home to 100 million people—must show negative COVID-19 test results from the past 72 hours, starting from 10:00 pm on Monday, the city said in an announcement late Sunday. —AFP

Singapore to vaccinate children

SINGAPORE: Singapore will start vaccinating schoolchildren against the coronavirus soon, the prime minister said yesterday, after officials warned that new strains were affecting youngsters more. The city-state recently tightened curbs following a slight uptick in cases, after months of reporting barely any local transmissions. This included closing schools amid signs that new variants, such as the one first detected in India, were affecting children in greater numbers. In a televised speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced school students aged 12 and over will be the next group to be inoculated. Health regulators approved the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for 12- to 15-year-olds this month. —AFP

NZ military called in after floods

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's military was deployed to evacuate hundreds of residents from flood-hit areas of the South Island yesterday as heavy rains washed away bridges and cut roads. Rivers burst their banks as a weather system dumped 400 millimeters (15.5 inches) of rain in two days, an amount meteorologists said exceeded the entire rainfall so far this year in some areas. Authorities issued a rare "red" weather warning and declared a state of emergency in the Canterbury region, one of the South Pacific nation's farming hubs. The New Zealand Defense Force said one of its helicopters rescued three people at Ashburton, near Christchurch, plucking one man from a tree and an elderly couple from the roof of a car. The defense force said soldiers, trucks and an ambulance were helping with the evacuation effort. —AFP

Business

TUESDAY, JUNE 1, 2021

Indian economy contracts record 7.3 %

Central bank projecting annual growth of 10.5 % • 230 million Indians fell into poverty

MUMBAI: India's economy contracted 7.3 percent in 2020-21, official data showed yesterday, its worst recession since independence as coronavirus lockdowns put millions out of work. Asia's third-largest economy grew by 1.6 percent between January and March - the fourth fiscal quarter - after exiting its first "technical recession" since 1947 following two successive quarters of contraction.

About 230 million Indians fell into poverty due to the pandemic last year, according to a study by Bangalore's Azim Premji University, which defined the poor as those living on less than 375 rupees (\$5) a day. An easing of restrictions towards the end of 2020 helped propel a tentative recovery in activity, but this may prove short-lived following an explosion in COVID-19 cases in April and May.

India's vicious second wave, which has killed 160,000 people in eight weeks, prompted further lockdowns and saw 7.3 million people lose their jobs in April alone, according to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy. That means more pain in a country where 90 percent of the workforce is in the informal sector with no social safety net, and where millions do not qualify for emergency government rations.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has so far refrained from announcing any fresh major stimulus measures in response. The government has faced growing criticism - including from Nobel prize-winning economists Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee - for focusing on loans to hard-hit businesses rather than direct cash handouts to vulnerable households.

In a recent report, British financial services firm Barclays pegged the economic cost of India's second wave at \$74 billion, or 2.4 percent of GDP.

But helped by output having slumped so much last year, the headline figures for the current fiscal year will still appear strong. India's central bank is projecting annual growth of 10.5 percent and the International Monetary Fund 12.5 percent, the fastest among major economies.

'Continuous uncertainty'

"We expect 10 percent GDP growth in FY22, with a slight downside bias," Upasna Bhardwaj, Senior Economist at Kotak Mahindra Bank, told AFP. But she warned that analysts would "have to revisit this expectation much more often, given it depends on the pace of vaccinations and the pace of restrictions". "While the situation this year is not as bad as the national lockdown last year, the economy is coming under a lot of stress due to localized restrictions, which we expect to continue into the rest of the year."

India's economy was in the throes of a prolonged slowdown even before COVID-19 struck, but the pandemic unraveled years of gains. Last year was expected to see an estimated 50 million Indians climb out of poverty. But instead it saw the poorest 20 percent of households lose their entire income in April and May as business ground to a halt.

The stringent months-long nationwide lockdown put around 100 million people out of work, according to a report by Azim Premji University, with around 15 percent unable to find jobs even by the end of the year. A former sous-chef at a top Mumbai hotel said he was put on unpaid leave last June and has yet to resume work. "The lockdowns are causing continuous uncertainty for all our jobs," Prateek, who declined to give his full name, told AFP. "We were told that we will get called



MUMBAI: Laborers work at a construction site yesterday. —AFP

back to work soon, but the lockdowns keep getting extended."

Experts say the second wave, which has burrowed into India's ill-equipped villages, could spark a fresh crisis among an impoverished population already reeling from last year's shutdown. "This time, unlike the last time, income destruction has been universal - both rural and urban India

has been affected," Arvind Singhal, Chairman of Technopak Advisors, told AFP. "The 200 million poorest families should be given cash directly. And that needs to be given right now, not later." India has recorded 28 million coronavirus cases so far and distributed 213 million doses of the COVID-19 jab, with its massive vaccination program facing delays and shortages. ^AFP

Climate talks resume amid pressure to act

PARIS: For the first time since 2019 and following a flurry of net-zero pledges from the world's largest emitters, UN climate negotiations resumed yesterday in a virtual format less than six months before the crunch COP26 summit. The talks, nominally hosted by the United Nations climate change program in the German city of Bonn, will all be online and informal, meaning that no decisions will be taken during the three-week discussions.

But with increasingly dire climate warnings from scientists, the pressure for progress to be made on a number of thorny issues is high. "We meet in the shadow of a global crisis, unprecedented in scope and scale," UN climate chief Patricia Espinosa said in opening remarks via video link. In 2018, countries agreed to many elements of the "rulebook" of the landmark Paris climate agreement signed three years earlier, governing how each nation implements its goals under the deal.

But several issues remain unresolved, including rules about transparency, carbon markets, and a unified timeframe for all countries to ratchet up their emissions cuts. At the last UN climate summit in December 2019, countries also failed to agree upon a universal system of reporting on spending on measures to combat and adapt to climate change. This year alone several large emitters including the US have committed to make their economies carbon neutral by mid-century.

Espinosa welcomed these pledges - which under Paris should increase in scope every five years. But she added: "Our current trajectory is not in line with the climate goals of the Paris agreement," which aims to limit global warming to below 2C. "It's time to get the job done." One of the thorniest debates during recent UN climate talks has been Article 6 of the Paris agreement, which deals with the trade of emissions cuts.

A major sticking point remains over rules to avoid double counting emissions reductions within both bilateral and international carbon markets. Some wealthy nations without the natural resources - forests, for instance - to mitigate their contribution to climate change have spent huge amounts on projects to preserve those habitats in other countries.

Currently both the buying and selling nations may count the project towards their domestic climate action, opening the door for the same cut to be counted twice. Teresa Anderson, climate policy coordinator for ActionAid International, said it was vital that negotiations don't "crank open loopholes that let big polluters carry on business-as-usual".

COVID-19 forced Britain and the UN to shelve talks originally scheduled for last year in the Scottish city of Glasgow until the end of 2021. As the pandemic continues to rage, particularly among developing nations most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, negotiators will need to achieve tangible progress during the three-week Bonn talks. —AFP

China factory activity nudges down on slower demand

BEIJING: Factory activity in China nudged down slightly in May on slower demand and higher raw material prices, while the services industry boomed over the Labor Day break, official data showed yesterday. The Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), a key gauge of China's manufacturing activity, was 51.0 - slightly down from 51.1 in April but above the mark separating growth from contraction, said the National Bureau of Statistics.

But there are risks ahead, analysts warned, including shortages of parts - especially semiconductors - and rising commodity prices. Although factory production has been "rising steadily", with overall activity exceeding the same periods in the past two years, demand growth has slowed, said NBS senior statistician Zhao Qinghe. The new

export order index fell, he said, "reflecting the decrease in foreign orders".

Capital Economics said in a recent note that there are "few signs" of easing, with freight rates still going up. Meanwhile, the purchasing prices of major raw materials remains high, said the NBS. On top of that, a fresh wave of COVID-19 in Asian countries and the resurgence in China's Guangdong province will also "hurt some small exporters in the region", said Betty Wang, senior China economist at ANZ Research.

Yesterday, the southern province reported 20 new local virus cases, most of them in the provincial capital of the manufacturing hub. Wang also said there is a need to keep an eye on the currency situation. Last week, the yuan hit a three-year high against the dollar. And Iris Pang, chief economist for Greater China at ING, said the risks include chip shortages.

In May, China's non-manufacturing PMI rose to 55.2, with a Labor Day holiday consumer boom supported by long-distance domestic travel and accommodation. "The consumer market is showing



NANTONG, China: This photo taken on May 26, 2021 shows a worker producing manufacturing machine at a factory in China's eastern Jiangsu province. —AFP

a positive recovery momentum," said Zhao from the NBS, adding that construction activity - another key factor - also went up. China's economy has largely rebounded from the coronavirus lockdowns last year, although the consumer recovery has been lagging behind that of industrial activity. —AFP

Sri Lanka questions burning ship crew after marine disaster

NEGOMBO, Sri Lanka: Sri Lankan criminal investigators began questioning the crew of a burning cargo ship yesterday, as the Singapore-registered carrier smoldered for a 12th straight day in one of the island's worst-ever marine ecological disasters. A fire broke out aboard the MV X-Press Pearl, which was carrying 25 tons of nitric acid and a huge amount of plastic raw materials, as it was about to enter Colombo harbor on May 20.

There were no visible flames aboard the vessel mid-yesterday, but smoke was rising from the rear section, its operator and officials said. Firefighters were still working at the site, they said, adding that the stricken ship was still too hot to be boarded. Detectives interviewed the vessel's skipper and chief engineer - both Russians - and its chief officer, an

Indian, at a hotel where they have been quarantined, police said.

"We have questioned three members of the crew so far and the investigations are ongoing," a police spokesman added. "Select seafarers have today been helping local police with their enquiries into the fire and are cooperating with investigators," the vessel's operators, X-Press Feeders, added in a statement. "We will respect this process and not publicly discuss operational details until the investigation has been completed."

The intense flames destroyed much of the cargo, some of which fell into the Indian Ocean. Tons of microplastic granules from its cargo of nearly 1,500 containers have inundated Sri Lanka's famed beaches, forcing a fishing ban and sparking fears of ecological devastation. The Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA) chief Dharshani Lahandapura said they were still assessing the ecological damage, but believed it was the "worst ever in my lifetime".

MEPA said the captain of the vessel had known about a nitric acid leak on May 11, long before the vessel entered Sri Lankan waters. Authorities are



COLOMBO: Members of the Sri Lankan navy remove debris washed ashore from the Singapore-registered container ship MV X-Press Pearl on a beach yesterday. —AFP

moving to sue the owners of the vessel and its crew and claim damages from insurers. The three-month-old ship was heading to Colombo from Gujarat, India. It had previously visited Qatar and Dubai and was due to go to Malaysia and Singapore after calling at Colombo. —AFP

Iran calls for tripling oil output

TEHRAN: Iran should almost triple its crude output as a "priority" to boost its political clout, its oil minister said yesterday, ahead of a meeting of major producing nations. As Iran gears up for presidential elections in June, Bijan Namdar Zanganeh called on "any incoming administration to make raising oil output to 6.5 million barrels (per day) its first priority".

Iran produced 2.3 million barrels per day in March, according to latest data from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Zanganeh's remarks, carried by the ministry's news agency SHANA, come a day before a meeting of the OPEC+ bloc made up of cartel members - among them Iran - and ten other oil exporters. The meeting could result in an output boost as demand recovers from a coronavirus-induced collapse last year.

Zanganeh, who has headed the oil ministry for almost 16 years in total, has said he plans to retire after President Hassan Rouhani leaves office in August. Iranians are set to vote on June 18 to choose a successor to Rouhani, who is constitutionally barred from running after two consecutive terms. Iran is also currently engaged in talks with world powers in Vienna as they try to revive a nuclear deal torpedoed by former US president Donald Trump in 2018.

Negotiations have been underway since April to return Washington to the agreement and lift sanctions on Tehran, while also bringing Iran back into compliance with nuclear commitments it dropped in response to US sanctions. Sanctions reimposed by Trump deprived Iran of the economic benefits the deal had promised, especially by blocking the Islamic republic's vital oil export lifeline and access to its funds abroad. Boosting Iran's oil output would amount to increasing the country's "security and political power", Zanganeh said. —AFP

Activists launch action against 'cookie terror'

VIENNA: A group of online privacy activists said yesterday it is taking action against hundreds of websites over their use of pop-up banners asking users to consent to "cookies", the files that track users' activity. The Vienna-based NOYB group (an acronym of "none of your business") said it would be presenting more than 500 draft complaints to companies over what it calls the "cookie banner terror" which has turned the internet into "a frustrating experience for users all over Europe".

NOYB says many of the consent pop-ups which have become almost ubiquitous on the internet do not conform to EU laws, including the landmark General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The group says the pop-

ups in question do not give the user the simple "yes or no" to data collection that the law requires. It says the banners are often designed in a way that make it "extremely complicated to click anything but the 'accept' button". The draft complaints are being lodged with companies in 33 countries, among them every European Economic Area (EEA) member state except Malta and Liechtenstein. NOYB says it will file the complaints to regulatory authorities in a month's time if the sites haven't taken action to make the cookie banners comply with the requirements of privacy laws and rectify what NOYB calls their "unfair" and "frustrating" design.

The founders of NOYB include Austrian activists Max Schrems, who has notched up a series of legal victories over online privacy, including scuppering major EU-US data exchange arrangements. "Frustrating people into clicking 'okay' is a clear violation of the GDPR's principles," Schrems said in a statement, adding: "Under the law, companies must facilitate users to express their choice and design systems fairly." —AFP

Business

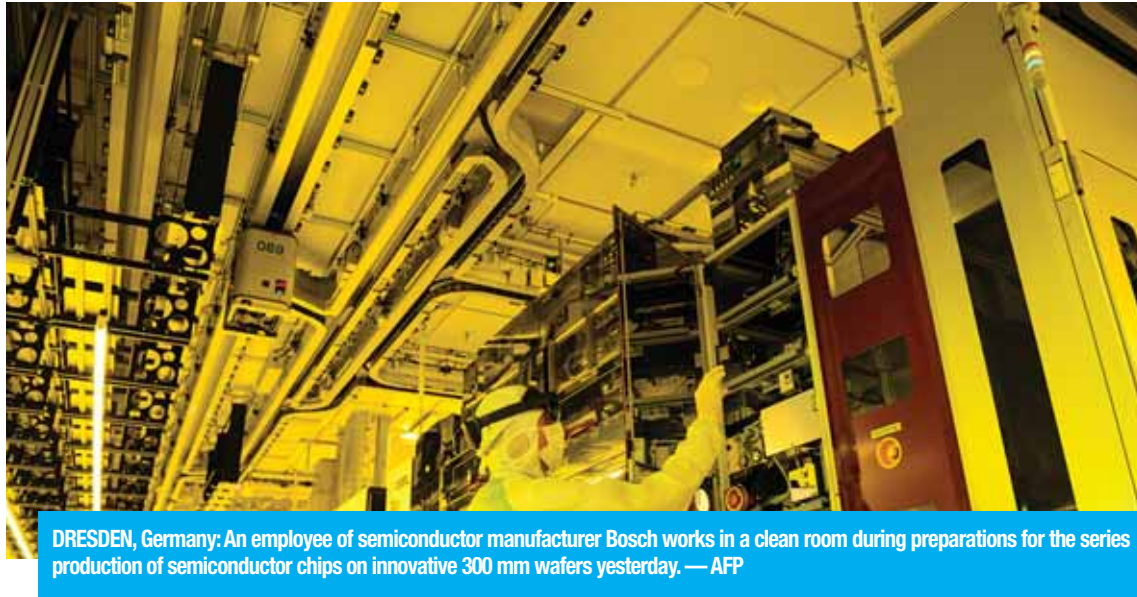
OECD sees higher world GDP growth but fears 'headwinds'

Most economies should return to their pre-pandemic levels next year

PARIS: The OECD raised its 2021 global GDP growth forecast yesterday, but warned that "too many headwinds persist" as not enough COVID vaccines are reaching emerging economies and markets worry about inflation. The world economy will expand by 5.8 percent this year, the highest since 1973 and up from a previous estimate of 5.6 percent, the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development said in a report.

Most economies should return to their 2019, pre-pandemic levels next year, the OECD said. This follows a massive global recession last year that was caused by lockdowns and travel curbs imposed by governments to slow the spread of COVID-19. "It is with some relief that we can see the economic outlook brightening, but with some discomfort that it is doing so in a very uneven way," OECD chief Laurence Boone said in the report.

The recovery is uneven so far, with the United States and China returning to pre-pandemic levels and forecast to have much stronger growth than other major economies such as Japan and Germany. While the US and South Korea are back to their pre-pandemic income levels, it could take an additional year for much of Europe and three to five years for Mexico and South Africa to catch up. The 38-nation organization, whose members account for 60 percent of global gross domestic product, applauded the rapid reaction of governments to prop up the economy. "Never in a crisis has policy support - be it health, with the record speed of vaccine development, monetary, fiscal or financial - been so swift and effective," Boone said. "Yet, too many



DRESDEN, Germany: An employee of semiconductor manufacturer Bosch works in a clean room during preparations for the series production of semiconductor chips on innovative 300 mm wafers yesterday. — AFP

headwinds persist," she warned.

Boone said it was "very disturbing" that not enough vaccines were reaching emerging and low-income economies. "This is exposing these economies to a fundamental threat because they have less policy capacity to support activity than advanced economies," she said. The warning comes as the emergence of more contagious coronavirus variants has raised concerns around

the world, with India battling a strain that has caused a surge in cases and deaths. "As long as the vast majority of the global population is not vaccinated, all of us remain vulnerable to the emergence of new variants," Boone said.

'Vigilance is needed'

New lockdowns would hurt confidence while com-

panies, which are saddled with more debt than before the pandemic, could go bankrupt, Boone said. The OECD's outgoing secretary general, Angel Gurría, called for a multilateral approach to put an end to the pandemic. "Effective vaccination programs in many countries has meant today's Economic Outlook is more promising than at any time since the start of this devastating pandemic," he said.

"But for millions around the world getting a job still remains a distant prospect. We urgently need to step up the production and equitable distribution of vaccines," said Gurría, who will be succeeded by Australian finance minister Mathias Cormann on Tuesday after 15 years on the job. Gurría expressed confidence, meanwhile, that negotiations to establish a global minimum corporate tax - championed by the United States - could be wrapped up by a G20 meeting in October.

Another risk to global GDP is how financial markets could react to concerns about inflation, the OECD said. Analysts have voiced concerns that rising inflation will prompt central banks to withdraw their easy-money policies to prevent the economy from overheating. The release of pent-up consumer demand and disruptions to supply chains due to the pandemic could fuel inflation, but the price increases will likely be temporary, the OECD said.

"What is of most concern, in our view, is the risk that financial markets fail to look through temporary price increases and relative price adjustments, pushing market interest rates and volatility higher," Boone said. "Vigilance is needed." — AFP

Italy faces 'formidable' post COVID challenge

ROME: Italy faces a "formidable" challenge as it tries to fix its long-ailing economy with the help of EU post-pandemic recovery funds, central bank governor Ignazio Visco warned yesterday. The eurozone's third-largest economy is due to receive a huge bonanza of loans and grants worth €191.5 billion (\$233.5 billion) over the 2021-2026 period, and its government has pledged a raft of reforms to put them to good use.

The EU-funded national recovery plan "must be part of a collective effort, aimed at overcoming Italy's structural weaknesses and the specific factors of the anemic economic growth of the last two decades," Visco said. "The opportunities Italy will be able to

offer future generations depend on the success of the reforms and measures of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan," the governor stressed. "It is a formidable challenge."

Visco, delivering his annual speech on the state of the economy, also warned that Italy could not afford to maintain the economic support measures introduced to soften the impact of the current recession. "A future built on public subsidies and incentives is unthinkable," he said, noting that public debt, standing at around 160 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), has reached the highest level since the end of World War I.

However, "the support measures for households and firms must be withdrawn gradually and only when the economic situation has been sufficiently consolidated and uncertainty significantly reduced," the governor said. Italy has long been the EU's growth laggard. As the first country in Europe to be hit by the coronavirus pandemic, gross domestic product plunged last year by almost 9 percent, triggering the worst slump in its postwar era.—AFP

German inflation hits highest mark in decade in May

BERLIN: Germany's annual inflation rate jumped in May to its highest level in a decade, preliminary data showed yesterday, driven by surging energy prices and one-off effects linked to the pandemic. Consumer prices in Europe's top economy rose by 2.5 percent year-on-year, the Destatis statistics agency said, as Germany mounts a recovery from the coronavirus outbreak. The last time that rate was reached was Sept 2011. Prices rose by 0.5 percent compared with April.

German inflation has ticked up steadily since the start of the year, partly because of the introduction of a carbon tax and the end of a six-month sales tax cut aimed at mitigating the economic damage from the

pandemic. The May spike was mainly driven by a 10-percent hike in energy prices year-on-year, Destatis said, up from nearly eight percent in April, when inflation grew 2.0 percent year-on-year.

Food prices were up 1.5 percent while the services sector marked a 2.2-percent hike. Using the European Central Bank's preferred yardstick, the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP), German inflation jumped 2.4 percent year-on-year - overshooting the ECB's inflation target of "close to, but below" 2.0 percent. ECB chief Christine Lagarde has repeatedly said that higher inflation in the eurozone lately was mostly the result of "temporary factors" linked to the pandemic and would not prompt the bank to tighten its ultra-loose monetary policy anytime soon. Analyst Elmar Voelker of LBBW bank said the fresh jump in inflation in May was "not a total surprise" and that the rate could clear the three-percent mark this summer to an extent that consumers feel it. He said the ECB would nevertheless "continue to point to the temporary nature of many price effects and very moderate core inflation, particularly in the euro area".—AFP



Lexus achieves cumulative global sales of 2 million electrified vehicles

KUWAIT: Lexus announced recently that the luxury brand eclipsed the milestone of 2 million global sales of electrified vehicles at the end of April 2021. The company has been a pioneer of electrification in the luxury market since the launch of the RX400h in 2005, and has continued to expand its lineup of electrified vehicles to meet the needs of its customers and society.

Based on a philosophy of "right time, right product, right place", Lexus aims to further develop its electrified product portfolio to make use of the diverse energy sources and infrastructure environments encountered around the world. Lexus now sells nine models of electrified vehicles, including HEVs and BEVs, in around 90 countries around the world.

In 2020, 33 percent of Lexus models sold globally

were electrified. Since 2005, the company's electrified vehicles have contributed to a cumulative reduction in CO2 emissions of approximately 19 million tons - equivalent to the combined CO2 output of 300,000 passenger cars each year for the past 15 years.

"We are proud to achieve this remarkable milestone, which represents another important step in tackling environmental challenges and realizing our goal of a carbon-neutral society where people can enjoy a happy, healthy and sustainable life, with freedom of mobility," commented Kei Fujita, Chief Representative, Middle East and Central Asia Representative Office, Toyota Motor Corporation.

"Lexus has the competitive expertise and know-how in the core technologies of electrification thanks to its experience in developing, producing, and improving major electrified components and many years of collecting feedback from markets around the world. I would like to thank our customers in the region for their loyal support as we continue to develop our electrification technologies in pursuit of our commitment to "environmental sustainability."

Under the "Lexus Electrified" vision announced in 2019, Lexus will evolve its electrification technology to realize enhanced vehicle performance characteristics and continue to provide customers with the fun and joy that the car brings. By 2025, the company will

introduce 20 new or improved models, including more than 10 Battery Electric Vehicles (BEVs), Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicles (PHEVs), and Hybrid Electric Vehicles (HEVs). The future expectation is that sales of electrified models will exceed those of the pure-petrol variety. In addition, by 2050, Lexus aims to achieve carbon neutrality throughout the entire vehicle lifecycle, from materials, parts, and vehicle manufacturing to logistics, driving, and disposal/recycling.

In order to further accelerate the spread of electric vehicles, Lexus plans to introduce the first PHEV in a mass-market model in 2021, as well as a completely new model dedicated to BEVs in 2022. By utilizing electrification technologies such as motors, inverters, and batteries that Lexus has cultivated over the years in the field of HEVs, the company aims to create new value and a driving experience unique to Lexus electrified vehicles. These will feature a high level of dynamic performance that appeals to all five senses and is unmatched by conventional cars.

Cumulative sales of electric vehicles from 2005 to the end of April 2021

By Market

US: 540,000 units
Europe: 480,000 units
China: 387,000 units
Japan: 401,000 units
East Asia: 138,000 units
Others: 74,000 units

By Model

RX: 518,000 units
ES: 384,000 units
CT: 372,000 units
NX: 285,000 units
UX/UXEV: 137,000 units
IS/LS/RC/LC and others: 324,000 units
Global: 2.02 million units



Business

solutions by stc adds Google products to its wide range of B2B offerings

KUWAIT: solutions by stc, the specialized business arm of Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, announced that it has added Google products, in partnership with iSolutions, to its existing range of offerings to aid B2B customers transition into the world of digital solutions. The new offering addition follows the global market shift towards online and cloud-based solutions that enable digital transformation by digitizing processes and enhancing productivity.

In its statement, solutions by stc mentioned that the diverse range of Google products, now offered by the Company, fall in line with its vision to provide B2B customers with a wealth of innovative products and services all under one roof. Considering that Google services are user friendly and come packed with a range of features, solutions by stc considers this addition to be a beneficial one for corporates and SMEs.

The Google services will be offered to interested customers at the same prices listed by Google, but with access to solutions by stc's dedicated support experts who will provide around the clock guidance on the most suitable packages. The team of experts will also provide customers with consultations and technical support to ensure a seamless user journey into the digital world. The partnership will begin with the launch of Google workspace plans and various packages that serve various sectors, followed by the addi-

tion of other products related to cloud solutions and digitization.

In terms of the newly added solutions under solutions by stc, the Google line offers an array of affordable services that cater to different market segments including education, financial services, government, and SMEs. Based on the customer's preferences, productivity applications like Gmail, Google Forms, Google Drive, Google Docs, Meet & Chat, as well as other applications considered essential will be added as part of the package.

Customers can also take advantage of Google's integrated product line which feature Jamboard, Chromecast, Meet hardware and the popular Chromebook. The Google cloud platform, which includes a suite of cloud computing services, works seamlessly with Google's devices and runs on the same infrastructure used by Google internally to manage its end-user products.

Now with the ongoing pandemic, most employees are working remotely and require access to essential applications to complete their daily tasks. Google Workspace is the perfect tool for SMEs, oil companies, government entities and other businesses that require applications that will assist them in resuming their workflow wherever they may be. This service offered by Google includes access to Gmail, the Google Calendar, the shared Drive, Google Docs, as well as other features that will allow employees to share information with one



another and complete their work efficiently and productively.

As for the education sector, Google Workspace for Education is an ideal tool to connect educators with students by utilizing the Google product line. This education suite is feature-packed, easy-to-use, and highly secure for schools that are implementing online learning. Both Google Workspace and Google Workspace for Education come with the Google cloud feature which allows online data storage to be shared internally within an organization.

solutions by stc commented that its partnership with iSolutions to offer the Google products line at cost will assist in streamlining the digitization process for its valued customers. The Company especially focused on providing a range of packages tailored to suit the needs of SMEs as they overcome the challenges that were created by the pandemic.

Additionally, 24/7 support services will be available to assist customers in set up procedures, or to answer any queries. By offering these

services, stc is not focusing on profitability, but rather providing its customers with the means to enable their digital transformation strategies all under one roof.

With the ongoing pandemic, businesses are taking advantage of cloud-based computing services and modern technology to resume their operations and mitigate the risks caused by the pandemic. Increased usage of collaboration tools, as well as new-to-market solutions, will ultimately change the dynamic of work environments pre-Covid. In line with its commitment to progressively enhance and expand its product line, solutions by stc will continue to introduce offerings that can integrate systems, enhance efficiency, amplify productivity, and ease the execution of daily tasks to achieve favorable outcomes for its diverse customer base.

ABK spotlights Central Bank's consumer protection guide

KUWAIT: Al Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) reiterated the importance of the latest in a series of educational topics that have formed part of the Central Bank of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association's year-long 'Let's Be Aware' programme, namely the Consumer Protection Guide. The Consumer Protection Guide, issued by the Central Bank of Kuwait, is in accordance with the principles of financial consumer protection approved by the Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors of the G20 countries in October 2011. The guide includes a set of principles complementing the various rules and guidelines issued by the Central Bank of Kuwait for protecting customers in their dealings with banks.



Ahmad Al-Tayyar

If a customer has a complaint against a financial services provider, a well-defined grievance process is detailed for them to follow. This starts by submitting a complaint to the provider through designated forms, which must be available in every bank branch. The service provider must respond to the complaint in writing within 15 business days.

Should the bank fail to respond within the allocated time frame, or if the customer is dissatisfied with the provider's response, the customer may submit a grievance letter to the Central Bank of Kuwait, accompanied by a copy of the bank's response. The Central Bank of Kuwait will evaluate the complaint and attempt to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

Ahmad Al-Tayyar, Area Manager - Retail Banking Division, stressed the importance of consumers being aware of their rights and knowing the process of ensuring they are heard if they have a concern: "The 'Let's be Aware' campaign has been an extremely informative and successful initiative. Protecting consumers and ensuring best practice across the banking industry is extremely important. ABK takes all complaints seriously and believes that every customer has the right to redress if they are dissatisfied with a product, service or outcome."

"It is therefore essential that customers know their rights and understand the correct procedure for filing a complaint. This campaign aims to do just that, by ensuring that customers are aware of the correct process to follow in case of a grievance," he added.

The 'Let's Be Aware' programme brings together regulators and financial services providers in Kuwait, spearheading a joint effort to raise consumer awareness of banking products and services. Each programme member takes the lead on a particular topic, such as effective bank card usage, guidance on borrowing, complaints and escalation methods, fraud management, cybersecurity protocols, and more.

Since the onset of the global crisis, the Central Bank of Kuwait, with the support of the Kuwait Banking Association, has helped mitigate the economic impact on the nation, and the latest initiative adds to the Central Bank's track record of ensuring financial and economic stability in Kuwait.

One month left to enter Gulf Bank's Al-Danah draw

KUWAIT: With just over a month left until the end of June, Gulf Bank is reminding everyone that the last chance to participate in the year's third quarterly Al-Danah account draw for the chance to win KD 100,000 is Wednesday, June 30. The quarterly draw is currently scheduled to take place on October 14, 2021 in the presence of representatives from both the Ministry of Commerce and Ernst & Young.

Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account offers account holders multiple services and features that are designed to encourage and reward clients for saving, with periodic draws worth valuable prizes. Gulf

NBK main sponsor of training program organized by IBS

KUWAIT: As part of its constant care to actively contribute to raise awareness and knowledge among the different segments of society, NBK announced its sponsorship for the training program organized by Kuwait Institute of Banking Studies (IBS), "Mastering New Challenges: Leading Change and Managing Performance", which will be held virtually on the 6th and 7th of June.

The program will host Prof. James J Dowd - Senior Lecturer and Executive Director at Harvard Business School, who will lecture on and discuss several important topics, including new concepts in business with direct impact on developing and

increasing productivity.

The lecturer will also highlight the effectiveness of management and leadership as key and essential factors for success in business, in addition to highlighting the contribution of effective management in getting the utmost benefit from the strengths of individuals and institutions.

The program also aims to motivate trainees to capture the greatest possible value from their business model, and focuses on effective leadership for innovation, learning, and creating ways to thrive in a changed competitive environment with a new business model.

The lecturer will use four Harvard Business School case studies to explore the challenges of managing complex organizations under heavy pressure to perform. Participants will gain insight and understanding of effective practices for organizational leadership - aligning the organization for strategy execution-and for personal leadership, enabling them to maximize their impact in their leadership roles.



James J Dowd

Prof James J Dowd has extensive experience in leadership development, organizational culture, change and individual commitment. He is also the chairperson of the faculty in leadership and change programs. He is the former Professor of Organizational Behavior at IMD - Switzerland, and co-authored the 1993 book Vision, Values and Courage: Leadership for Quality Management.

NBK's sponsorship of this program over the past years comes as part of its consistent sponsorship of the initiatives highlighting its approaches to achieve community development across various fields, including social and educational aspects, in an effort to serve the community and contribute to its development in a better way.

KFH announces winners of 'Win with Hesabi' draw

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) announced the winners of the 5th and 6th draws of "Win with Hesabi" campaign that offers three Jeep Wrangler Sport cars and cash prizes worth KD 250 for 10 winners each month. The draw was held at KFH Headquarters under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The winners are: Mishal Al-Mutairi, Wasmiyah Al-Anjari, Osama Rabea, Mohammad Al-Awadi, Manayer Al-Mutairi, Rahaf Al-Jumaili, Abdulwahab Al-Obaidan, Mariam Al-Dossari, Hatheel Al-Ajmi, Abdulrahman Al-Enzi, Ahmad Al-Ajmi, Awthab Al-Shammari, Nasser Al-Rashidi, Latifa Al-Usaimi, Abdulrahman Al-Azmi, Ibrahim Al-Shammari, Reem Al-Allaty, Mariam Al-Azmi, Eman Al-Mutairi, Shouk Al-Jabri.

This campaign comes as part of KFH continuing efforts to add value to Hesabi customers including advantages, dis-

HUAWEI WATCH FIT ELEGANT can help with SpO2

KUWAIT: It is important to keep an eye on your overall health and body's fitness levels. One key indicator is our blood oxygen saturation (SpO2), which is the amount of oxygen levels in our bloodstream. Those of us who are under extreme stress or who are physically very active are some key people who need to keep an eye on their SpO2 levels. An important indicator, measuring your blood oxygen saturation levels (SpO2) can be a bit complicated, but thanks to the HUAWEI WATCH FIT ELEGANT, which offers all-day SpO2 monitoring.

Blood Oxygen Saturation (SpO2) explained

What does Blood Oxygen Saturation levels (SpO2) exactly mean? One of the first measurements taken in any medical examination: it is simply defined as an estimate of the oxygen levels in a person's bloodstream. Ideally, your body needs to have SpO2 level between 90 and 100. It is

counts, prizes, and exclusive rewards. Once the social allowance is transferred to Hesabi program, customers enter the monthly draw on 10 prizes of KD 250 each, in addition to three special draws on Jeep Wrangler Sport cars.

KFH offers "Hesabi for Youth" with a variety of privileges as part of its continued endeavor to provide adequate customer care, innovate new products and services and fulfill the needs of all customers of various age categories and interests. Services and products are tailored to suit customers' needs and provide distinguished service as per global standards regarding quality, accuracy and speed.

Hesabi" program has been designed to meet the needs of youth and aspire for their active lifestyle. This program presents for youth many exclusive offers and a wide range of privileges including Hesabi ATM card with a unique design, eligibility to issue Hesabi prepaid card (as per credit regulations of KFH), distinguished offers and discounts etc.

KFH continues to launch marketing campaigns to reward youth customers. Hesabi for Youth represents the ambitions and expectations of youth category and copes with KFH aspirations to attract the largest portion of youth who represents the major part of Kuwaiti society. Also, the account represents KFH initiative to diversify banking services and products.

highly unlikely that a person's SpO2 level to go above the normal level without any external assistance such as supplemental oxygen. However, if the SpO2 level is below normal, the body cannot function properly. This condition is called hypoxemia and can cause serious health problems requiring immediate medical care.

How do I measure my SpO2 levels using the HUAWEI WATCH FIT ELEGANT?

Huawei's newly launched HUAWEI WATCH FIT ELEGANT comes with a continuous SpO2 monitoring feature, which you do not have to turn on manually, as it is set on by default. The latest smartwatch in the HUAWEI WATCH FIT series is capable of accurately measuring your SpO2 levels with a dedicated SpO2 sensor anytime and anywhere: Be it in your office, home, gym or even while you are out and about, you can always rely on your HUAWEI WATCH FIT ELEGANT to have you covered.

Thanks to the smart power saving algorithm, you are now able to monitor your SpO2 level 24/7. When the HUAWEI WATCH FIT ELEGANT detects an abnormal SpO2 level, it will send you an alert to notify you about your health situation, allowing you to consult professional medical advice on time. You can also check the changes in SpO2 levels throughout the day with the HUAWEI Health

aging a culture of saving locally, we are inviting all our clients to take an even more active approach to their financial affairs, and prioritize saving on a habitual basis with an Al-Danah savings account.

"With an Al-Danah savings account, clients can take advantage of multiple chances to win exciting prizes, in addition to being rewarded for their loyalty throughout the year. With lots of time left to deposit or open an account, Al-Danah account holders are eligible to win our upcoming KD 100,000 quarterly prizes, the grand draw prize of KD 1,500,000, and the monthly draws of KD 1,000 each for ten lucky winners. We are wishing everyone the best of luck!"

Numerous Benefits

The Al-Danah account is the only account that rewards customers for their loyalty by providing loyalty chances. Loyalty chances are the total chances gained in the previous year, which are then transferred to the current year to reward customers for



Win with Hesabi



App, a great feature to help those interested in keeping closer tabs on their health.

Thanks to the 10 day battery life of the HUAWEI WATCH FIT ELEGANT and its wide range of fitness and health features, you are not only promised an accurate and reliable reading of your SpO2 levels but you also get to keep tabs on your heart rate by HUAWEI TruSeen(tm) 4.0, sleep quality with HUAWEI TruSleep(tm) 2.0 and stress levels by HUAWEI TruRelax™ anytime and anywhere. All displayed clearly on its vibrant HD display with its sleek stainless steel body ensuring you are always on top of your essential health levels.

their loyalty to the Bank. Accordingly, all chances gained by existing Al-Danah customers in 2020 have been transferred to the 2021 draws, and this will be repeated in 2022 onwards. Terms and conditions apply. It is also worth noting that all account draws are attended by a representative from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, with the quarterly and annual draws also reviewed by Ernst & Young.

Opening an Al-Danah account

To enter the upcoming draws, Gulf Bank customers can open an Al-Danah account today with only KD 200. To open an Al-Danah account, existing Gulf Bank customers can apply through Gulf Bank's online and mobile banking services, or book an appointment at their nearest branch by using the new "Visit Gulf Bank" app for a faster and more convenient branch visit. New customers can also open an Al-Danah account by visiting their nearest Gulf Bank branch or by scheduling an appointment through the app.



Kuwaiti businessman Jassem Buabbas displays superworms at his farm in Kabd.— AFP photos



A picture shows superworms at Jassem Buabbas' farm.



A picture shows superworms at Jassem Buabbas' farm in Kabd.



Kuwaiti businessman Jassem Buabbas displays Darkling beetles inside a special room at his farm in Kabd.

Kuwaiti breeder hopes superworms will become new superfood

Kuwaiti businessman Jassem Buabbas has spent years breeding "superworms" for animal feed and now hopes the creatures will find their way into the diets of Gulf citizens. In a small, dark room outside Kuwait City, Buabbas places the worm-like larvae of the darkling beetle, famed for their high protein content, into a transparent box on a bed of bran and corn-flour. In another, he puts the mature beetles for mating. "My ambition is for worms to be a successful food alternative for humans," he told AFP.

Insects are widely eaten around the globe, with an estimated 1,000 species appearing on the dinner plates of some two billion people in Africa, Asia and

Latin America. But apart from traditional diets, cricket pasta and mealworm smoothies have become the latest food trend in some world capitals, with edible insects being promoted as a sustainable alternative to regular protein sources.

Some Gulf states have a tradition of eating dried and baked locusts, which can appear in plague proportions. They are considered a delicacy by some, although consumption has fallen out of favour in modern times. While superworms-in high demand among owners of birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles-have not yet been approved for human consumption in Kuwait, Buabbas is hopeful that people will be willing to try them. He aims to expand his business beyond the

pet trade and get the invertebrates onto dinner plates, in what would be the first such restaurant in the Gulf.

He is now experimenting with recipes before seeking permission from the Kuwaiti authorities. "I have so far created three types of sauces... and colleagues of mine have tried and liked them," said Buabbas, who apart from breeding superworms works in the government sector. Regulation is catching up with the food trend-in May, the European Commission approved dried mealworms for human consumption after the 27-nation bloc's food watchdog said they were safe to eat. The decision was good news for the burgeoning insect farming industry in Europe.

Ever tried them?

Buabbas said a fascination with the secrets of superworms prompted him to travel to Thailand in 2018 to learn more about the animals which are a popular snack there. "At first, I was disgusted by them, but... then I got used to the worms, understanding their behavior and what poses a danger to them," he told AFP. He spends two hours with the creatures every day, feeding them oats, bran, potatoes and carrots, as well as tweaking humidity and temperature levels.

He usually produces between 3,000 and 6,000 worms every three months, and at times up to 10,000. The superworms take about 90 days to mature enough to be ready for sale—each weighing approximate-

ly a gram at six centimeters (two inches) long. They fetch \$3 for 25 larvae. Buabbas said the superworm business has been lucrative, with bird-breeder customers buying thousands of dollars worth at a time to feed their cardinals and nightingales.

Before borders closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, he would transport boxes of worms to other Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia. Buabbas markets his business on social media, while he works on superworm recipes that he says will incorporate elements of local cuisine. But when asked how they tasted, he said he didn't know. He's never tried them. — AFP



Kuwaiti businessman Jassem Buabbas displays Darkling beetles inside a special room at his farm in Kabd.



Kuwaiti businessman Jassem Buabbas displays worms at his farm in Kabd.



Kuwaiti businessman Jassem Buabbas displays Darkling beetles inside a special room at his farm in Kabd.

'A Quiet Place' makes N America box office noise as COVID curbs ease

Horror film "A Quiet Place: Part II" opened in North America this weekend to considerable fanfare and with numbers unlike any seen since the pandemic began, as COVID curbs began falling and theaters began filling up again. So after Hollywood's brutal year of dark screens and empty seats, movies are starting to come back. "The symbolic importance of this Memorial Day Weekend to the movie theater industry cannot be overstated," said Paul Dergarabedian, a senior analyst at Comscore. The numbers, he said, "tell an indisputable story about the resilience and continued relevance of the big screen experience."

The latest "Quiet Place"—a John Krasinski-directed sequel to the popular 2018 film about a young family trying to outwit horrific blind monsters with frighteningly keen hearing—is projected to take in

\$58.5 million for the four-day Memorial Day weekend, said industry watcher Exhibitor Relations. That pushed the combined gross for the weekend's top 12 films to \$78.1 million, up from \$18.8 million the previous weekend and from a flat-lining zero in the corresponding 2020 weekend.

"This bodes well for the future of the theatrical exhibition and is thus a huge relief for the movie industry at large," Dergarabedian said. In second place for



the weekend was Disney's live-action "Cruella" at \$27 million. The movie, with a snarling Emma Stone as the title baddie and Emma Thompson in a supporting role, has a ways to go to attain the box-office status of its 1961 precursor "One Hundred and One Dalmatians," but its opening weekend was seen as "promising," Variety said, given conditions. "Cruella" can also be streamed on the Disney+ channel.

There was a steep dropoff to third spot, which went to Lionsgate's horror film "Spiral," at \$3 million. The latest addition to the "Saw" franchise stars Chris Rock, Max Minghella and Samuel L. Jackson. In fourth, at \$2.8 million, was "Wrath of Man," from United Artists. The action thriller, directed by Guy Ritchie, stars Jason Statham as an armored truck driver who thwarts a robbery but then faces unwanted attention due to his troubled past. And in fifth was Disney's computer-animated fantasy "Raya and the Last Dragon," at \$2.4 million. Its mainly Asian-American cast includes the voices of Kelly Marie Tran as Raya, Awkwafina, Gemma Chan and Sandra Oh.

Rounding out the top films were:

"Godzilla vs. Kong" (\$1 million)
 "Dream Horse" (\$817,000)
 "Those Who Wish Me Dead" (\$641,000)
 "Mortal Kombat" (\$302,000) — AFP

'Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head' singer B.J. Thomas dies

US singer B.J. Thomas, known for his popular song "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head," has died at the age of 78, his agents announced. His death Saturday in Arlington, Texas came after a lung cancer diagnosis. Thomas won five Grammy Awards between 1977 and 1981, but he first came to public attention in 1966 with his rendition of the Hank Williams country standard "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." He followed that two years later with "Hooked on a Feeling," which hit the top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100.

But his greatest fame came with "Raindrops," part of the soundtrack of popular film "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman. The song, a sunny ode to optimism written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, brought him an Oscar and propelled him to the top of the US hit parade. It later provided background music in at

least a half-dozen other movies. "Few artists have left a more indelible mark on America's musical landscape than B.J. Thomas," his agents said on his fan site.

"With his smooth, rich voice and unerring song sense, Thomas's expansive career crossed multiple genres, including country, pop and gospel." Thomas struggled with drug and alcohol dependence in the 1970s, but reached a turning point when he became an evangelical Christian in 1976, the agents said. He turned to gospel music, and his album "Home Where I Belong," released that year, sold more than a million copies. Thomas had revealed in March that he was suffering from an advanced form of lung cancer. Near the end, he posted a statement to fans, saying, "All I am is just another guy. I've been very lucky. I've had a wonderful life." — AFP



A picture shows Ali Mansour, the care taker of the cemetery of the Protestant Christians in Baghdad, where British archaeologist, writer, diplomat and spy Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) is buried. — AFP photos



This file photo taken on April 4, 2016, shows Assyrian artefacts originally from Mosul, displayed at Iraq's National Museum in the capital Baghdad, established by British archaeologist, writer, diplomat and spy Gertrude Bell.



This file photo taken on March 13, 2004, shows an Iraqi woman walking past Iraq's National Museum in the capital Baghdad, established by British archaeologist, writer, diplomat and spy Gertrude Bell.

SEARCHING FOR GERTRUDE BELL, COLONIAL 'MOTHER' OF MODERN IRAQ

For someone credited with being an architect of the nation, the grave of British archaeologist, writer, diplomat and spy Gertrude Bell in the Iraqi capital Baghdad is hard to find. Down an alley in the heart of the capital, through a heavy locked gate into the Protestant cemetery, and then amid a confusing maze of gravestones, caretaker Ali Mansour leads the way. "Miss Bell", as the Iraqis call her, played a key role in

France played in dividing the region by creating new borders and nations reverberates in conflicts and politics today.

But the role Bell played in the formation of the nation—especially remarkable back then as a woman in a very male-dominated world—is largely unknown by most Iraqis. Scattered artificial flowers lie on her simple yellow-stone tomb. "Those who do come leave real ones, but I take them off quickly because they wilt in



Iraqi caretaker Ali Mansour, 77, places a flower on the grave of British archaeologist, writer, diplomat and spy Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) in the cemetery of the Protestant Christians in Baghdad.

forging modern Iraq a century ago.

She helped redraw the map of the Middle East as the Ottoman Empire was crumbling after defeat in World War I, based on intelligence she gathered during extensive travels with Bedouin tribes. The controversial role Britain and its rival

heat," said Mansour, the 77-year-old caretaker, who inherited his job from his stepfather, who got it from the British more than 60 years ago. Bell's role was key in expanding Iraq to include the vast northern regions of Kurdistan and Mosul, including valuable oil fields.

'Author' of Iraq's creation

The inscriptions on her gravestone are weathered and hard to read, but record that she died in 1926, at the age of 57. "I felt tremendously sad for this woman, who I feel had done so much for the country—not only in terms of being an author of its creation," said writer and historian Tamara Chalabi, a specialist on Bell. "She was in a sense a 'mother of Iraq' if you like, for better or worse." Fiercely intelligent and a masterful linguist fluent in Arabic and Farsi, the daring Bell carved out a unique place for herself in the macho world of British colonial administration.

She was instrumental in Faisal I becoming the ruler of the new Kingdom of Iraq, founded in 1921, under the grip of British forces. But her greatest pride was the construction of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, a treasure trove of priceless items from some of the most ancient civilizations.

When Chalabi, from an influential Iraqi family but who grew up in exile, returned to Iraq in 2005 after the US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein, she was surprised at how few knew about Bell. For Chalabi, it is "not only" because Bell was a woman that she has been largely forgotten. "I think there is a problem with the way history has been taught in Iraq... people don't have good sense of their heritage, so it goes beyond Gertrude," Chalabi told AFP.

"For me, it's a problem of Iraqi and Baghdadis' identity... when you talk about culture and heritage and history, it is a very monolithic story." In a country which will celebrate its centenary next year, the history books have been modified by revolutions, coups, dictatorships and regime changes—and schooling disrupted by years of devastating war. "I studied the modern history of my country between the ages of 12 and 15," said Heidi, a 23-



This picture shows a view of a list of names of the chiefs of Iraq's Antiquities and Heritage Authority inscribed on a door at its premises in the capital Baghdad, topped by Gertrude Bell who was director between 1922-1926.

year-old Iraqi student. "You had to learn dates, but Gertrude Bell's name was never mentioned."

'Interests of the Crown'

But there are critics too. For Ali Al-Nashmi, professor of history at Baghdad's Munstansariya University, Bell has faded from the country's story for a reason—her role benefitted Britain and "only served the interests of the Crown, not those of the Iraqis". In the West, on the other hand, Bell's role has been somewhat rehabilitated in popular memory in recent years, with several new biographies and histories written, and Werner Herzog's 2015 film "Queen of the Desert", in which



A picture shows the grave of British archaeologist, writer, diplomat and spy Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), with a plate mentioning the name of Tamara Chalabi.

Nicole Kidman played Bell.

Chalabi helped repair and clean Bell's grave, planting trees around it and attaching a small metal plaque beside it. "In recognition of Gertrude Bell's historic contribution to Iraq," it reads. To find a trace of Bell today, you have to go to the Iraq Museum. In his office, Laith Hussein, the director of Iraq's state board of antiquities and heritage, shows a wooden board on the wall inscribed with the names of his predecessors. Top of the list is Gertrude Bell, with her dates as director, 1922-1926.

"She has never been forgotten," Hussein said. "She established the Iraq Museum and contributed to the country's first archaeological structure." However, her statue, erected by Faisal I, disappeared during the looting of the museum amid the chaos that followed the US-led invasion of 2003. "We still have not found it," Hussein said. —AFP



Top Swiss ballet school fires director, halts classes

Switzerland's prestigious Rudra Bejart ballet school has fired its director and stage manager and suspended all classes for a year, after accusations of psychological abuse and over-training, according to a media report yesterday. The Bejart Ballet Lausanne Foundation, which runs the world-renowned school, announced the termination of long-time director Michel Gascard and stage manager Valerie Lacaze, his wife, on Friday, citing "serious shortcomings" in management. While it gave no details, Swiss public broadcaster RTS indicated on its website yesterday that they revolved around "abuse of power, nepotism and serious paedological dysfunction".

The foundation said that classes were being halted after it "learned about troubling information involving the management" of the school, "requiring it to react immediately." An audit conducted in

February had, according to the statement, revealed "serious shortcomings by the management team", and the board had decided to terminate their contracts. The school was fraught with psychological abuse and tyrannical over-training, according to a number of students who spoke with RTS anonymously.

One student described how she had found herself surrounded by teachers and other students who "humiliated and belittled" her, the president of the foundation's board, Solange Peters, told RTS. One teacher cited in the report had reportedly compared the scene to a "lynching". Classes have been cancelled for the next artistic season at the school, which was founded in 1992 by legendary French ballet choreographer Maurice Bejart and counts around 40 students aged 16 to 20 from all over the world.

The "board is aware of the consequences of such a decision," the foundation said in its statement. "Nevertheless, it is taking responsible steps to ensure that the school reopens its doors in the best possible conditions," it said. "The board will be working over the next few months to rebuild the school's management team, to create a teaching environment that respects the pedagogical values that guide its mission, and to strengthen its ties with the Bejart Ballet Lausanne." — AFP

Cannes 'can't wait' for film festival after 'horrible' year

The five-star palace hotels are in full swing, the sound of music drifts across the beach and after a 'horrible' year blighted by coronavirus, Cannes is buzzing again for its international film festival. "We can't wait," admits Pierrick Cizeron, chief executive at the Majestic hotel that overlooks the Mediterranean and the festival convention center. In 2020, the festival that draws stars from across the world, had to be cancelled because of the pandemic. With France under a partial lockdown in Spring, the 2021 edition has been delayed from the usual May date to July 6-17.



The festival pulled in 40,000 people a day pre-COVID—only about half that number are expected this year—and provided 20 percent of annual hotel turnover. "It's more than just the excitement, we are in the middle of recruiting 250 people for the season," says Yann Gillet, director of the luxury Martinez hotel, which was full for the late May bank holiday weekend. Last year's cancellation, he says, left staff

"heart-broken" at a hotel that usually fills with celebrities for the festival.

'Brad Pitt's room'

The movie extravaganza, "is a real driving force and punctuates our year," Gillet says. "Often clients come to see us and ask if it really was Brad Pitt's room." On the seventh floor of the Martinez, which was totally renovated in 2019, the final touches are being made to a double penthouse suite booked by Chopard jewels for the duration of the festival. The Riviera resort had lived well off tourism and conventions, but the hotels and restaurants that provided most of the local jobs have been shut for long periods and had to rely on government handouts to try to keep mounting debt under control.

Despite high hopes for the festival, the hotels, which had been shut since September-October, are far from fully booked. "We are only 10 percent full in June and 25 percent in July," says Cannes hotel union leader Christine Welter. "It's an unexpected opportunity for people to come to the festival because in normal times it would be complicated," with hotel rooms at a premium and all booked out. "And that's a good thing this year," she adds. "We have two-star hotels in the middle of town starting at 100 euros a night where normally there would be no rooms available during the festival." In previous years the cheapest hotel rooms that start at 40 euros a night could fetch 260 euros during the festival.

The authorities are trying to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible and health protocols are firmly in place, says Welter, as business builds up again. On the Croisette, that runs along the seafront, a flower delivery man zigzags through the crowd carrying a display in each hand. Out at sea, a speedboat pulls a parachute covered with advertising. In the expensive shop windows, handbags, dresses and shoes await visitors with money to spend. —AFP

Tarzan actor Joe Lara among 7 presumed dead in US plane crash

All seven passengers aboard a plane, including Tarzan actor Joe Lara and his diet guru wife, are presumed dead after it crashed in a lake near the US city of Nashville, authorities said. The small business jet crashed at around 11:00 am local time on Saturday, shortly after taking off from the Smyrna, Tennessee airport for Palm Beach, Florida, Rutherford County Fire & Rescue (RCFR) said on Facebook. The plane went down into Percy Priest Lake, about 12 miles (19 kilometers) south



of Nashville. The Federal Aviation Administration confirmed seven people had been aboard the plane, CNN reported. By Saturday night, operations had switched from search and rescue to recovery efforts, RCFR incident commander Captain Joshua Sanders told a press conference.

"We are no longer in an attempt to (look) for live victims at this point so we're now recovering as much as we can from the crash site," he said. On Sunday afternoon, RCFR said on Facebook that recovery operations had found "several components of the aircraft as well as human remains" in a debris field about half a mile wide. —AFP

Sports

Photo of the Day



Participants are seen performing during the Red Bull Ace of Dirt in India. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Zain continues to support World Champion Yousef Al-Abdulrazzaq



KUWAIT: Waleed Al-Khashti (right) with Yousef Al-Abdulrazzaq.



Yousef Al-Abdulrazzaq after winning last year's title.

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, proudly continues to sponsor Kuwaiti champion and Jet Ski world No 1 Yousef Al-Abdulrazzaq. The announcement comes as local, regional, and world sports gradually returns during the new season of 2021.

Zain expressed its excitement in continuing its support and encouragement of Abdulrazzaq, whom the company sponsored throughout his professional career for the past 13 years. During this time, Al-Abdulrazzaq has achieved a long list of accolades and international success, where the Kuwaiti champion faced the world's top pro racers from around the world and raised Kuwait's flag high.

During the year 2020, Kuwaiti champion Abdulrazzaq managed to take part in a limited number of competitions given the health situation imposed by the pandemic, which resulted in the halting of most sports activities around the world. Nevertheless, Abdulrazzaq was able to achieve the Gold medal and title of the UIM-ABP Grand Prix of

Kuwait, the first international competition of its kind to be held at the champion's homeland early last year.

Abdulrazzaq is currently preparing to compete in a number of local, regional, and international competitions as part of the current season, including the UIM Aquabike World Championship, the Thailand King's cup, the United Arab Emirates championship, the IJSBA World Finals, the Kuwait World Championship, and more.

During the past years, Abdulrazzaq - who is ranked world No. 1 - attained a long list of accolades in the most prestigious of championships, including the first-place title in the third round of the Runabout GPI title race during the UIM-ABP Aquabike Haier Grand Prix of Qingdao, China as part of the UIM-ABP Aquabike Class Pro World Championship in 2019.

The contest is considered the biggest championship for this sport in the world, and is organized by the Union Internationale Motonautique (UIM),

the world's governing body of powerboating. Abdulrazzaq topped the world championship's overall points rank, and have also achieved the first-place title in the second round in Italy, which both strengthened his world rank, certified by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

Zain's support to the Kuwaiti Champion for 13 years comes in line with the company's Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility strategy towards supporting Kuwaiti sports and athletes. Abdulrazzaq continues to raise the Kuwaiti flag high by achieving many internationally renowned titles year after year.

Zain's role not only concentrates on economic and business activities, but also extends to contribute significantly in various areas within the Kuwaiti society, including sports. The company has endless confidence in the competencies of Kuwaiti athletes and their capabilities in excelling in different fields, on both regional and international levels.

Brilliant Bernal wins 2021 Giro d'Italia

MILAN: Colombia's Egan Bernal won the 2021 Giro d'Italia on Sunday, the Ineos Grenadiers leader given a hero's welcome in front of Milan's Duomo cathedral at the end of the 21st stage time-trial. The 24-year-old Colombian won two individual stages and completed the 3,479km course 89 seconds ahead of Italy's Damiano Caruso while Briton Simon Yates was third.

The last day 30.3km individual time-trial was won by Bernal's teammate, the time-trial world champion Filippo Ganna, who also won the opening day time-trial. The Giro win marks a return to form for Bernal who flopped when the cards were stacked against him at the 2020 Tour de France. "The Maglia Rosa (leader's jersey) is special. It's the most beautiful race in the world's most beautiful place," Bernal said.

"I'll never forget this Giro, and the way I won it, with attacks and sprinting on the flat for bonus seconds against Remco Evenepoel. That is who I am and the cycling I like," said the champion. The climb specialist who grew up in the Andes took the overall lead on stage nine on a dirt track finish that would have suited this

former mountain biker.

He then staged an iconic finish-line triumph on stage 16, stripping off his outer clothing on a cold, rain sodden mountain to cross the finish line first in the pink jersey with his arms wide in acclamation. It was a similar scene in Milan Sunday as a broad smile swept away his stony-faced racing look as he raised his arms at the end of three hard weeks where he proved last year's failure was a blip.

"I was wracked with doubt, and I might not look like it, but now I'm just filled with joy," said the champion. Bernal was forced on to the back foot for a few days by a resurgent Yates, but was able to nurse a comfortable lead over the tense last few stages. For Ineos (formerly Team Sky) it was a third Giro victory after Tao Geoghegan Hart won it in 2020 and Chris Froome in 2018.

Italian job

The Giro was the perfect setting for a Bernal comeback given that the rider had made Italy his second home after first arriving in Europe from Colombia. Ineos leader Dave Brailsford said last season he needed to cut Bernal some slack after the strain of his failed Tour defense so that he could 'get the smile back on his face'.

As the Colombian national anthem blasted out across the Piazza Duomo, Bernal was grinning broadly. Over the whole three weeks Bernal and Ineos found plenty of fans along the route



MILAN: Team Ineos rider Colombia's Egan Bernal kisses the race's Trofeo Senza Fine (Endless Trophy) on the podium after winning the Giro d'Italia 2021 cycling race following the 21st and last stage on Sunday in Milan. — AFP

as Ganna, known to Italian fans as 'Top Ganna', was cheered on by roadside supporters, as was the tough road captain Gianni Moscon.

"Egan started it with a bang," said Ineos principal Brailsford after overseeing his 12th Grand Tour victory. "But the team finished it off, there's a moment where the winner always suffers and it's how you manage that that's important."

Another Italian, Bahrain-Victorious' Caruso, had never won a grand tour stage victory before but was thrust into the limelight when

team leader Mikel Landa pulled out injured. The 30-year-old Sicilian was given a rapturous reception in front of the Duomo and will be remembered as a journeyman who played his cards right when presented with an opportunity.

Yates said he was happy to be on the podium, but may regret not riding more aggressively in the first two weeks as his tactic of keeping his powder dry for the finale backfired due to Ineos's strength in depth and ability to protect Bernal on his weak days. — AFP

Audi hires driver 'dream team' for Dakar Rally hybrids

PARIS: Audi announced yesterday that it has hired two of the Dakar Rally's most successful drivers Stephane Peterhansel and Carlos Sainz for when it makes its debut on the race with a hybrid car. "It is no exaggeration to speak of a 'dream team'," said Julius Seebach, managing director of Audi Sport, in a statement.

Audi will enter three hybrid cars on which the power will be provided by electric powertrains although the battery will be augmented by a combustion engine. Swede Mattias Ekstrom will complete the trio. The 55-year-old Frenchman Peterhansel has won the race 14 times on bikes or in cars, including this year, while 59-year-old Spaniard Sainz has won three times, most recently in 2020, and also won two World Rally titles.

"Stephane is the most successful Dakar driver of all time in the history of the Dakar. Carlos is a multiple Dakar winner and World Rally champion," said Seebach. Both Peterhansel and Sainz drove for Mini last season. We want to be the first team to win the Dakar Rally with an electric powertrain," said Peterhansel. The 2022 edition of the Dakar will take place in Saudi Arabia from January 2 to 14. — AFP



CORDOBA: In this file photograph taken on January 20, 2018, Peugeot's Spanish driver Carlos Sainz (left) is congratulated by his teammate French driver Stephane Peterhansel, after winning the Dakar Rally 2018, at the end of the last stage in and around Cordoba province in Argentina. — AFP

News in brief

Kuwait SC wins athletics cup

KUWAIT: Kuwait SC won the 2020-2021 athletics association cup tournament, which concluded Sunday evening, bagging 88 points followed by Qadsia with 60 points. The tournament, which was organized by Kuwait Athletics Association at the Interior Ministry's playground, featured 14 teams. Head of the KAA Seyar Al-Enzi said the association is preparing Kuwait's national players to take part in several international championships, including Tokyo Olympics Games to be held this summer. He noted that the local tournament witnessed a new technical performance from players. — KUNA

Nepal team arrives in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Nepal national football team arrived in Kuwait Sunday to participate in the joint qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the 2023 Asian Cup in China in the second group, in preparation for the resumption of the group stage matches, hosted in Kuwait from June 3 to 15. Nepal's team is in fourth place in the group with three points, and it will open the group stage against Chinese Taipei, ranked fifth, on Thursday. Health precautionary measures will be applied to the competitions due to the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic. Measures such as movement of players, officials, organizers and all participants in the tournament will be restricted to the accommodation venues and assigned training facilities to ensure safety to all. — KUNA

China matches moved to Dubai

SHANGHAI: Several World Cup football qualifiers scheduled to be played in China were moved to Dubai yesterday over coronavirus infections in the Syria and Maldives teams, the Chinese Football Association said. Seven Group A fixtures involving China, Syria, Maldives, the Philippines and Guam are affected, playing further havoc with the already heavily disrupted Qatar 2022 World Cup qualifiers. The games were supposed to take place over the next fortnight in a secure "bubble" in the Chinese city of Suzhou. The AFC stopped short of confirming that Dubai will now stage the matches, saying in a statement they will take place at "a neutral venue, which will be decided and announced in the coming days". According to China's Titan Sports, the Maldives and Syria are in Dubai and were denied permission to depart for China. China are second in the group behind Syria and are fighting to keep their World Cup hopes alive. — AFP

Sports

Bruce Lee, life of hardship inspire refugee's Tokyo Olympics dream

SYDNEY: Asif Sultani has been fighting his way to the Olympics since he was seven years old, enduring persecution in Afghanistan and a grim journey to refuge in Australia. But the karate black belt is now within punching distance of a spot at the Tokyo Games. At 25, Sultani says he has seen "some of the darkest parts of humankind".

As he vies for a spot on the Refugee Olympic Team, he is spurred on by memories of his harrowing journey to Australia, on a rickety boat where he nearly lost his life. When the vessel broke down in the dark somewhere off Indonesia, panic gripped the more than 100 asylum seekers crammed onboard.

Others fought over the small number of life jackets, but Sultani never tried to find one for himself — he could not shift his gaze from a child playing as waves threatened to sink the boat. "(The child) didn't have any idea we were about to drown; it just reminded me of my own childhood," he told AFP in a dojo in Sydney's west.

Although the boat eventually kicked back to life and delivered Sultani to Australia, the child's vulnerability shook him deeply, fuelling his Olympic ambition of representing the tens of millions of forcibly displaced children around the world. "I have millions of reasons" to compete at the Games, he said.

He is now one of the 56 refugee athlete scholarship-holders competing for a place on the Refugee Olympic Team, which made its debut at the 2016 Rio Games. The team will be announced on June 8. "That inspired me, seeing that first Refugee Olympic Team in Rio, and I said, 'Finally, I can be part of that team, that not only represents myself but millions of other people around the world.'"



SYDNEY: This picture taken on May 11, 2021 shows Afghan-born refugee and karate competitor Asif Sultani training on the outskirts of Sydney as he competes for a place on the Refugee Olympic Team at the Tokyo Olympics in July. — AFP

Spat at, beaten

Sultani's nine-year journey to Australia started when his family fled Afghanistan because of war and the persecution of their Hazara community. On a "horrible" trip to Iran, which Sultani compares to a nightmare, they were robbed by gunmen and terrified of being kidnapped or killed at any moment. But any hope of a peaceful life in Iran was short-lived.

Spat at, beaten and bullied relentlessly, Sultani turned to martial arts to defend himself, training at an

Iranian studio. But as an undocumented refugee, he was kicked out of the gym within months. "I was heartbroken, and it was really, really hard for me because that's the only thing that I had," he said.

Without a gym or a trainer, he turned his backyard into a makeshift dojo and used classic Bruce Lee kung fu films for guidance — watching them repeatedly, and practising his best moves with friends. "He inspired me as a kid, you know, to never give up on my dream," Sultani said. But at 16, he was deported alone, back to

Afghanistan. Without his family and with conflict still raging, Sultani fled Afghanistan again, reaching Indonesia before boarding the boat to Australia.

'Born a refugee'

After his dangerous voyage, he would spend months in Australian immigration detention, where his commitment to training brought him support from the guards. One officer would arrive early in the morning to run with Sultani, and others would encourage him too. The difference from his early life was stark.

"When we're born, we don't have a choice — we're just born a refugee," he said. "People's support means everything to us because we've lost everything... I'm really grateful to this day to those officers that they actually encouraged me." After gaining refugee status, he settled in Maitland, north of Sydney, and began shaping his new life. Aged 18, it was the first time he could get an education, so he enrolled in school and found a dojo. With little money and no car, he would wake at 5am every morning and run to the dojo and back — clocking up 20 kilometers (12 miles) a day — before heading to school.

Since then, his commitment to the sport has only grown, and he credits karate with giving him the drive to overcome his life-threatening obstacles. "Martial arts is about respect; it's about discipline, about honor, loyalty, and resilience," he said. "It has been a big part of my life, and it did save my life as a child."

As he waits to hear if he has made the team for Tokyo, he eyes a goal beyond gold — to give refugee children a role model they can relate to. "That regardless of who they are or where they come from, they have the ability to achieve greatness." — AFP

Australia softball team to be first at Tokyo Olympics

SYDNEY: Australia's softball team flew out yesterday destined for Japan, where they will become the first overseas competitors to arrive for the coronavirus-plagued Tokyo Olympics. The arrival of the "Aussie Spirit" squad on Tuesday constitutes a milestone for the Tokyo 2020 Games, which were postponed for a year over the pandemic and remain dogged by virus fears.

The squad and support staff have undertaken a series of COVID-19 measures including vaccinations and rapid PCR testing 72 hours before their departure from Sydney. "We know it's going to be a bit of a long trip over, we know we're going to go through lots and lots of COVID testing," said player Jade Wall, as the facemask-wearing squad prepared to depart. "But look, we're all prepared for it, we want to do everything that we can to make sure that we're safe when we get there and we're safe while we're in Japan as well."

Despite opinion polls indicating public opposition to holding the Olympics this summer, organizers are adamant that they will go ahead. Softball Australia CEO David Pryles said it was a "huge" moment for the team, which had its Olympic preparations interrupted by the pandemic. "We haven't played together since February

2020, the final of Australia Pacific Cup in Sydney, so it was always imperative to go early to get the necessary games as a team," he told AFP.

They will be based in Ota City in Gunma prefecture, where they will live in a team "bubble" to minimize the risk of contracting coronavirus. Several parts of Japan, including Tokyo, are under a state of emergency until nearly a month before the July 23 opening ceremony to combat a fourth wave of infections.

'Lifelong dream'

Despite the virus risk, Pryles said all the players had been keen to travel to Japan and would receive extensive support on the ground. "The only reason why (they) would be leaving the hotel is to go to the ballpark and back. They will be having less daily contact with the public than they would in Australia," he said.

Softball has not appeared at the Games since 2008 and will not be played at Paris 2024, making Tokyo the only shot at Olympic glory for many players. "This is their lifelong dream... and I'm really proud of all their effort to get them this far," Pryles said. "These girls have sacrificed a lot."

Australia have medalled at every Olympic softball competition and are hoping to maintain their record. Wall said the team was "hungry" for success and not focused on the unusual conditions that lie ahead. "We know that we've got one goal in mind, and everyone's on board," she told reporters at Sydney airport. The team will play a series of warm-ups against Japanese opposition before reducing their squad to 15. They will open their campaign against the hosts on July 21. — AFP



CARTAGENA: In this file photo taken on December 03, 2019 Brazilian former footballer Juninho Paulista presents the Copa America trophy on the stage during the draw of the Copa America 2020 football tournament at the Convention Centre in Cartagena, Colombia. — AFP

Copa America in Argentina suspended over coronavirus surge

ASUNCION: Argentina's hosting of the Copa America football tournament has been suspended "in view of the current circumstances," CONMEBOL said on Sunday, as the country endures a record coronavirus surge. The South American football body, which last week stripped Colombia of co-hosting duties over deadly unrest, said it was considering other offers to hold the tournament.

"CONMEBOL informs that in view of the current circumstances it has decided to suspend the organization of the Copa America in Argentina," the governing body tweeted. "CONMEBOL is evaluating the offer of other countries that showed interest in hosting the continental tournament."

The Copa America was originally due to take place

last year, but was postponed for 12 months because of the coronavirus pandemic. An Argentine poll published on Friday found that most respondents were against holding the tournament as the country experiences its worst phase of the pandemic so far.

Less than two weeks before the Copa America's scheduled start, Argentina is under a nine-day lockdown and experiencing record daily infections. The Fernandez administration was hoping that the lockdown that began on May 22 would flatten the curve of infections ahead of the sports event.

Argentina had presented its "strict protocol" to CONMEBOL to host the tournament in its entirety, which involved preparing additional stadiums. On May 20 CONMEBOL rejected a plea by Colombia to further delay the June 13-July 10 tournament following a wave of protests and social unrest, coupled with an upsurge in COVID-19 cases.

It left Argentina as the sole host, but a survey conducted by pollsters Poliarquia among a representative sample of 1,274 city-dwelling adults, found that 70 percent believe the country should withdraw. Only 20 percent believed the championship should continue on Argentine soil, and 10 percent were undecided. — AFP

Tokyo Olympics fans may need vaccination or virus test: Report

TOKYO: Tokyo Olympics fans may have to be vaccinated or test negative for the coronavirus before being allowed into venues, a Japanese newspaper report said yesterday. Cheering, eating, high-fives and drinking alcohol would also be banned under controls now being considered, the Yomiuri Shimbun daily said, citing unnamed government officials.

Organizers are set to decide in June how many spectators — if any — will be allowed to attend the pandemic-postponed Games. Overseas fans are already barred, and the report warned domestic spec-

tators may be denied entrance or kicked out for breaking the rules. "The plan is to stop the spread of infections during Games time with strict countermeasures," the paper said.

Under the plan, spectators must be able to show a vaccination certificate or a negative test taken at their own expense less than a week before entering the venue. They must wear masks and fill in health-check sheets, and once inside must not cheer loudly or high-five each other.

Security guards would be stationed around venues monitoring behavior, the report said, with public viewing venues cancelled or scaled down. Japan's vaccine rollout has been moving slowly, with less than 2.5 percent of the population fully vaccinated so far.

Tokyo and other parts of the country are under a virus state of emergency which was extended on Friday until June 20, just over a month before the opening ceremony on July 23. The Yomiuri also published a new poll yesterday that shows 49 percent of people living in Tokyo want the Games to go ahead, while 48 percent want them cancelled.

A total of 25 percent said they wanted the Games to go ahead with a limited number of spectators, while 24 percent said they wanted them to be held with no fans. A new country-wide poll by the Nikkei newspaper found that 62 percent of respondents wanted the Games to be cancelled or postponed again, while 34 percent were in favor of them being held this summer. Organizers have repeatedly ruled out the Games being postponed again. — AFP



TOKYO: A red traffic light lights up on a street near the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building displaying a banner of Tokyo 2020 Olympics Games in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

Kuwait participates in 2021 Tour of Estonia

KUWAIT: Kuwait Professional Cycling Team launched its international activities with the 2021 Tour of Estonia. The team is headed by Secretary General of Kuwait

Cycling Club Abdullah Al-Shimmari, accompanied by a French instructor and his assistant. The performance of riders Abdulhadi Al-Ajmi and Sayyed Jaafar Al-Ali was very good, which is a step towards improvement as they prepare for the Asian and World Championships. The club officials thanked the Public Authority for Sport and its Director General Humoud Fulaiteh and his deputy Sager Al-Mulla, who are backing the athletes. The team received an invitation to participate in the Tour of Poland immediately after the Estonian championship. Such participations have a great effect on improving the performances of Kuwait's athletes.



KUWAIT: Members of the Kuwait Professional Cycling Team participating in the 2021 Tour of Estonia.

Sports

Osaka French Open crisis nears breaking point in power struggle

PARIS: Despite facing expulsion from the French Open over a controversial media boycott, Naomi Osaka and her closest allies remained defiant yesterday with no sign of a resolution to what is becoming a bitter power struggle within the sport.

The Japanese star has already been fined \$15,000 for not honoring media commitments following her opening round win at Roland Garros on Sunday. All four Grand Slams — the French, Australian and US Opens as well as Wimbledon — closed ranks to threaten her with potential suspension from future majors if she does not relent.

There is little indication that the 23-year-old, who claims press conferences are damaging for her mental health, intends to back down. “Anger is a lack of understanding. Change makes people uncomfortable,” she tweeted after hearing of her sanction.

Wim Fissette, the Belgian coach of the 23-year-old, said Osaka is “concerned with fundamental issues — she wants to bring about change”. “Naomi has the opportunity to use her status to address problems and to initiate things,” Fissette told German magazine Der Spiegel on Monday. “In the United States, athletes want more freedom in dealing with the press, so they are simply not threatened right away with punishment

if they don't feel well for a day.”

The crisis, which could come to a head tomorrow when Osaka plays her second round match, has sparked feverish reaction. Osaka's sister, Mari, wrote on Reddit: “Naomi mentioned to me before the tournament that a family member had come up to her and remarked that she's bad on clay. At every press conference she's told she has a bad record on clay.

‘Not OK mentally’

“When she lost in Rome, she was not OK mentally. She was completely shattered and I think everyone's remarks and opinions have gotten to her head and she herself believed that she was bad on clay.”

Mari, a former tour player, later posted a follow-up message after herself receiving criticism for the wording of her original statement. “My message has gone horribly wrong with people struggling for mental health. I hadn't realized that Naomi had a lot of shit to deal with and was fighting very honestly for the cause of mental health. Now people are reacting like ‘she can't stand criticism’. Sorry Naomi, I probably made it worse.”

US tennis legend Billie Jean King attempted to strike a conciliatory tone, claiming that the media,

while playing a crucial role in the sport “needs to respect certain boundaries”. Even the French Open official website came under fire for what was perceived as a direct criticism of Osaka when it tweeted photos of Rafael Nadal, Kei Nishikori, Aryna Sabalenka and Coco Gauff all smiling under the caption: “They understood the assignment”.

Former world doubles number one Rennae Stubbs described the post as “some serious shade”. “Making a player feel guilty & humiliating her is NOT a good look for a tennis fed,” Stubbs said. Media boycotts at sports tournaments are not new.

American football star Marshawn Lynch, who once threatened with a heavy fine if he skipped a Super Bowl press briefing, responded to 20 questions from reporters by replying: “I'm just here so I won't get fined.”

Grand Slam tennis has witnessed a number of high-profile defaults over the years. Novak Djokovic was disqualified from the US Open last year for hitting a line judge with a ball. John McEnroe was booted out of the 1990 Australian Open while Jeff Tarango was defaulted at Wimbledon in 1995 after a furious rant when he accused the umpire of being “one of the most corrupt officials in the game”. — AFP



PARIS: Japan's Naomi Osaka serves the ball to Romania's Patricia Maria Tig during their women's singles first round tennis match on Day 1 of The Roland Garros 2021 French Open tennis tournament in Paris on Sunday. — AFP



OS ANGELES: LeBron James #23 of the Los Angeles Lakers plays defense on Chris Paul #3 of the Phoenix Suns during Round 1, Game 4 of the 2021 NBA Playoffs on Sunday at STAPLES Center in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

Suns bounce back to even series, Lakers' Davis injured again

LOS ANGELES: Chris Paul overcame an injured shoulder and Jae Crowder busted out of a playoff slump Sunday as the Phoenix Suns took a 100-92 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers, who lost Anthony Davis to another injury.

Paul had 18 points and nine assists, while Crowder delivered 17 points as half a dozen players finished in double figures for the Suns, who clawed their way level at 2-2 in the Western Conference playoff series against the reigning NBA champions. Paul had to plead with the coaching staff to get into the game, but the move paid off as he had his best game of the first-round series after injuring his shoulder in game one. Paul said Suns coach Monty Williams was going to sit him, but Paul said he petitioned: “Give me a couple of minutes, see what I can do.” “He said, ‘Coach, let me start, and if you don't think I'm looking like I normally do, then take me out and we'll have to go in a different direction,” said Williams. “This is one of those situations that I had to trust the player.”

Crowder also had his best game so far, his 17 points the same number he scored in games two and three combined. He grabbed seven rebounds in front of a pandemic-limited crowd of 8,000 at the Staples Center. Heading into game four, Crowder had made just 7-of-27 shots and was 2-of-20 from three-point range. But all he wanted to talk about after the game was the play of Paul. “He's a big part of the puzzle. It's a little challenging when we don't have him doing things he normally does. It's definitely monumental that he's out there for our team,” said Crowder.

Devin Booker also scored 17 points, Deandre Ayton finished with 14 points and a team-high 17 rebounds, Cameron Payne netted 13 and Mikal Bridges tallied 11 for

the Suns, who can take their first lead of the series with a win in game five tonight. LeBron James scored a team-high 25 points and had 12 rebounds for the Lakers, who had to play half the game without eight-time NBA All-Star Davis. “For me, it's putting our team in position to be successful,” James said. “These shoulders were built for a reason, and if it takes a little more to put on top of it, I'm ready for the challenge.”

Davis fell hard and went to the locker room with an apparent left leg injury. He finished with just six points after leading Los Angeles in scoring in game three with 34. The Lakers said Davis, who missed 30 games in the regular season, had a strained groin and would be examined by team doctors yesterday to determine the extent of the injury. “I thought he was laboring a little bit even before the groin injury,” Lakers coach Frank Vogel said of Davis. “He was saying that his knee was sore, but there was no way that he was not going to play.”

Hawks rip Knicks

Trae Young scored 27 points to lead the Atlanta Hawks to a 113-96 victory over visiting New York on Sunday, pushing the Knicks to the brink of elimination. John Collins added 22 points, while Italy's Danilo Gallinari scored 21 off the bench and Clint Capela added 10 points and 15 rebounds for the Hawks.

Atlanta seized a 3-1 edge in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference playoff series with game five set for Wednesday in New York. Julius Randle led the Knicks with 23 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists, while RJ Barrett added 21 points for New York. Also, Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving combined for 81 points as the Brooklyn Nets routed the host Boston Celtics 141-126 in game four of their Eastern Conference series. Durant had 42 and Irving scored 39 as the Nets seized control in the second quarter to lead the series three games to one.

They can advance to their first conference semi-final since 2014 with a win tonight at home. In the late game, Kawhi Leonard had 29 points and 10 rebounds while Paul George scored 20 points as the Los Angeles Clippers cruised past the Dallas Mavericks 106-81 in game four to tie the series 2-2. — AFP



PARIS: Spain's Pablo Andujar (left) is congratulated by Austria's Dominic Thiem during their men's singles first round tennis match on Day 1 of The Roland Garros 2021 French Open tennis tournament in Paris on Sunday. — AFP

cial moment because I'm 35 and I don't know how long I'm going to play,” said Andujar. “I had to believe to be able to get this result.”

Austrian Thiem lost both the 2018 and 2019 French Open finals to 13-time champion Rafael Nadal, but did win his maiden Grand Slam title last year at the US Open. His form had been patchy this season, though, having lost to Lorenzo Sonego in Rome and Cameron Norrie in Lyon over the past two weeks. —AFP

Brazil's Helio Castroneves wins fourth career Indy 500

WASHINGTON: Brazil's Helio Castroneves won a record-tying fourth Indianapolis 500 on Sunday in front of 135,000 spectators, in what was the largest sporting event staged since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Castroneves — who also won in 2001, 2002 and 2009 — joined US legends AJ Foyt, Al Unser Sr and Rick Mears as four-time champions over 200 laps at the famed 2.5-mile (4km) Indianapolis Motor Speedway oval.

A sellout crowd — with capacity reduced to 40 percent as a Covid-19 safety precaution by local officials — watched Castroneves hold off Spain's Alex Palou over the final laps to take the victory at age 46. “I love Indianapolis,” Castroneves said. “The fans, they give me energy. This is absolutely incredible.”

Castroneves passed Palou on the first turn of the penultimate lap, then kept him at bay as they came upon slower cars on the final lap before taking the checkered flag to capture the fastest Indy 500 in history in 2hrs 37mins 19.3846secs. “Right now, I'm just excited,” said Castroneves. “I knew I was going to get a fight. I put the elbows out. It was incredible. I still got it, don't you think?”

A tearful Castroneves continued his “Spider-Man” tradition, established in his earlier triumphs, by climbing the safety fence along the outside of the front straightaway as spectators roared with delight. Once he descended, rivals and legends congratulated him, including iconic driver Mario Andretti, and Castroneves' crew shared a joyful embrace. Palou was

the runner-up by 0.4928 of a second with France's Simon Pagenaud third, edging Mexico's Pato O'Ward.

‘Old guys still got it’

Castroneves, who made his 21st Indy 500 start from the middle of the third row, celebrated his accomplishment as the latest in a series of wins by golden oldie sports champions that included 43-year-old Super Bowl champion quarterback Tom Brady and 50-year-old PGA Championship winner Phil Mickelson. “Tom Brady won the Super Bowl. Phil Mickelson won the PGA. The old guys still got it,” Castroneves said. “We're still kicking the young guys' butt. We'll teach them a lesson. We've still got it.”

Castroneves, who had raced at Indy for 20 years on the Roger Penske Racing team, won this time on a special one-off entry from upstart Meyer Shank Racing. “No one ever gave up. They gave me an incredible car and we did it,” said Castroneves. “It's not the end of it. It's the beginning.”

Hurts to finish second

Palou took the lead with 38 laps remaining with Castroneves just behind him, and the two exchanged the lead over the final laps as the tension mounted. Castroneves seized the lead with seven laps remaining but Palou passed the South American on the front straight with five laps to go, setting the stage for the last dramatic Castroneves pass. “I didn't let him past but once you get a good run, there's nothing you can do,” Palou said. “It hurts to finish second. But we'll be back stronger. It's only my sixth or seventh race on an oval.”

Palou, 28th last year in his Indy 500 debut, took his only IndyCar victory in this year's opener at Alabama. Palou took the lead in the IndyCar season points series with 248 to 212 for previous leader Scott Dixon, a six-time series champion from New Zealand who finished 17th after starting from the pole. —AFP



INDIANAPOLIS: Helio Castroneves enters turn four during the Indianapolis 500 auto race at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, on Sunday in Indianapolis. — AFP

Defending champion Swiatek starstruck before meeting Nadal

PARIS: She may be the reigning French Open champion, but Iga Swiatek said she had to “write some small topics” of conversation down before practicing with Rafael Nadal ahead of her title defense this week. The Pole, who celebrated her 20th birthday with a 6-0, 7-5 win over good friend Kaja Juvan in the first round yesterday, practiced with 13-time Roland Garros winner Nadal for the first time. “It was great. It wasn't a surprise because I had to prepare,” said Swiatek.

“Write some small topics, not to have awkward silence. But Rafa is really, really great. He's a really nice guy. Even though I am pretty introverted, it was really fun for me. Obviously I got to feel his forehand, which was great, and his top-spin. That was a whole new experience for me. It gave me a lot of positive energy. It was really a huge inspiration for me.”

It is the first time the world number nine has defended a WTA title, although she has won two more tournaments since her breakthrough in Paris seven months ago, including the prestigious Italian Open. “I tried to put it behind me and kind of use it in a positive way because I just know that I'm feeling good here,” said Swiatek, who was presented with flowers on court after the match for her birthday.

“Obviously it's different. It's more stressful a little bit. “But still, first rounds are always tricky, so I wouldn't say that the stress level was much, much higher. I had to basically just do little bit of more work mentally

to stay focused just on tennis.”

Swiatek will face Sweden's Rebecca Peterson in the second round. The first set was the eighth seed's third straight bagel after thumping Karolina Pliskova 6-0, 6-0 in the Rome final earlier this month, which saw her break into the world's top 10. Juvan put up much more of a fight in the second set, though, battling back from 3-1 down before missing two break points in the 11th game. But her resistance ended shortly afterwards, as Swiatek came back from 40-0 down in the next game and secured victory on her fourth match point in the sunshine on Court Philippe Chatrier. “In the second set it was really hard, she didn't give me any birthday gifts,” added Swiatek. “So I'm really happy I could win those important points.” — AFP



PARIS: Poland's Iga Swiatek returns the ball to Slovenia's Kaja Juvan during their women's singles first round tennis match on Day 2 of The Roland Garros 2021 French Open tennis tournament in Paris yesterday. — AFP

Thiem suffers ‘very tough’ first-round defeat at French Open

PARIS: Fourth seed Dominic Thiem blew a two-set lead and slipped to a “very tough” first-round loss at the French Open against Spanish veteran Pablo Andujar on Sunday. The 35-year-old Andujar staged a remarkable comeback to defeat the two-time Roland Garros runner-up 4-6, 5-7, 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 after almost four-and-a-half hours on Court Philippe Chatrier.

It is Thiem's first opening-round exit at Roland Garros and the first time he has failed to reach at least the quarter-finals of the tournament since 2015. “It does feel very tough, as I was used since 2016 to play very deep in this tournament,” said the 27-year-old. “But at the same time, the last first-round exit in a Grand Slam, US Open 2019, is not that long ago. So (I) was not like the big three who are never losing before the quarters. I mean, I had early losses before, but especially here where since 2015 I didn't have them, it feels weird and it feels very difficult.”

It is the first time in his 17-year career that Andujar has come from two sets behind to win. “It's a very spe-

Sport | Times

TUESDAY, JUNE 1, 2021

Zidane says he quit Real Madrid because of club's lack of 'faith'

MADRID: Zinedine Zidane resigned as Real Madrid coach because he felt the Spanish club no longer had any confidence in him, he wrote in an open letter yesterday. "I'm leaving because I feel the club no longer has the faith in me I need, and doesn't offer me the support to build something in the medium or long term," the Frenchman wrote in the letter published in the sports daily AS.

"I am a born winner and I was here to win trophies, but beyond this there are human beings, emotions, life and I have the feeling that these things have not been valued, that it has not been understood that this is also how the dynamic of a great club is maintained," he said. "But everything I built on a daily basis, what I brought to the relationship with the players...has been forgotten."

"I'm leaving, but I'm not jumping ship and I'm not tired of coaching," he added. Real had a disappointing season, finishing second in La Liga behind neighbors Atletico Madrid and losing to eventual winners Chelsea in the Champions League semi-finals.

It was the first time that the 13-time European champions had failed to win a trophy in 11 seasons. It is the second time that Zidane has resigned as Real Madrid coach. The 1998 World Cup winner first took the helm in January 2016 and guided Real an unprecedented hat-trick of Champions League titles as well as a La Liga title in 2017, before abruptly quitting on May 31, 2018. Less than a year later he returned after Julen Lopetegui and

Santiago Solari were sacked in quick succession.

'Hurt me'

In his letter, Zidane said he left the club in 2018 because it needed "a different voice to keep itself at the very top" but this time "things are different". "I want what we have achieved together to be respected. I would have liked in recent months my relationship with the club and with the president (Florentino Perez) to have been a little different from that of other coaches," Zidane said.

"I wasn't asking for privileges, of course not, but a little more memory," added Zidane. "It hurt me a great deal when I would read in the press, after a loss, that they were going to fire me if I did not win the next match."

"It hurt me and the entire team because these messages which were intentionally leaked to the media created negative interferences with the squad, they created doubts and misunderstandings," Zidane's contract with Real was set to expire in 2022 but he had repeatedly refused to confirm he would still be at the club next season.

'Always be grateful'

He has a history of making surprise announcements: as a player, he initially announced his retirement from international football in 2004 before coming back for the 2006 World Cup, after which he retired for good following his red card for headbutting Italy's Marco Materazzi as France lost the final. "Spending 20



MADRID: In this file photo taken on December 30, 2019 Real Madrid's French coach Zinedine Zidane (center) talks to his players during a public training session at the Ciudad Real Madrid training ground in Valdebebas, Madrid. — AFP

years in Madrid has been the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me in life and I know that I owe it exclusively to Florentino Perez who bet on me in 2001," Zidane said in the letter.

"I say it from the heart, I will always be grateful to the 'presi' for it. Always," he added. Zidane also had a message to Real fans, saying he wanted them to know that "we gave 100

percent". Zidane's resignation roiled an already turbulent coaching picture at the continent's elite clubs.

One of Zidane's former clubs, Juventus, has replaced Andrea Pirlo with Massimiliano Allegri. Antonio Conte, a former team-mate of Zidane's at Juventus, quit Inter Milan after leading them to the Serie A title.

Bundesliga champions Bayern

Munich have replaced Hansi Flick with Julian Nagelsmann. There is doubt about the future of Ronald Koeman who became coach at Barcelona last August, while Mauricio Pochettino, who took over at Paris Saint-Germain in January, is reportedly being courted by former employer Tottenham Hotspur and has also been linked with Madrid. — AFP

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