



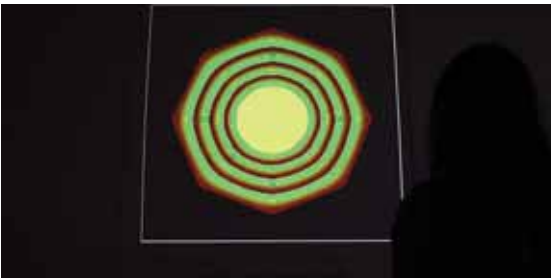
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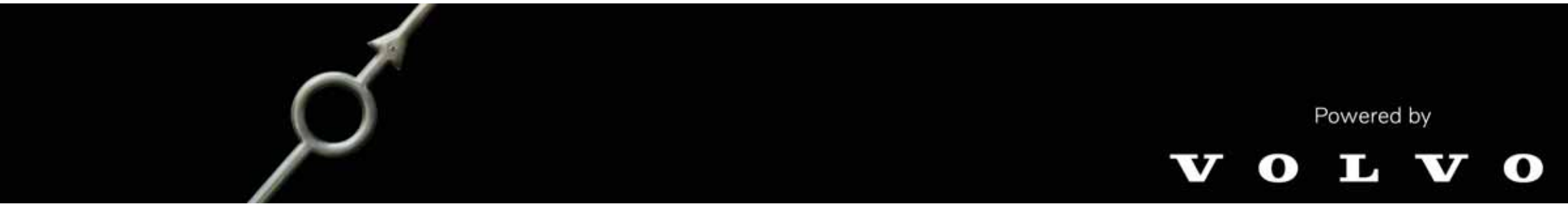
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G7 strikes 'historic' agreement over global corporate tax rate

Deal to tax multinational companies and squeeze havens



LONDON: Top officials pose for a family photo on the second day of the G7 finance ministers' meeting at Lancaster House yesterday. —AFP

LONDON: Finance ministers from wealthy G7 nations yesterday endorsed a global minimum corporate tax rate of at least 15 percent, rallying behind a US-backed plan targeting tech giants and other multinationals accused of not paying enough. US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen hailed the "unprecedented commitment", saying in a statement that a global minimum tax "would end the race to the bottom in corporate taxation".

Facebook even got behind the move despite the social media giant facing the prospect of having to pay more tax - while non-governmental organizations said it did not go far enough. Following the two-day gathering in London, the G7 said in a final communique that it will "commit to a global minimum tax of at least 15 percent on a country by country basis".

The G7 - comprising Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States - said it hoped to reach a final tax agreement at the July gathering of the expanded G20 finance ministers group. The G7 also committed to making companies carry out mandatory reporting regarding the climate impact of their investments.

It additionally said it will continue to support "the poorest and most vulnerable countries as they address health and economic challenges associated with COVID-19". Regarding the commitment on

taxation, Britain's Treasury noted that "the largest and most profitable multinationals will be required to pay tax in the countries where they operate - and not just where they have their headquarters".

Welcoming the move, Facebook's vice president of global affairs Nick Clegg tweeted that the company wanted "the international tax reform process to succeed and recognize this could mean... paying more tax, and in different places". British finance minister Rishi Sunak, who chaired the talks held in person after an easing of COVID-19 restrictions, expressed delight at "a historic agreement to reform the global tax system".

Sunak said the G7 had agreed to make the system "fit for the global digital age", as he thanked his counterparts for striking "a deal of historic significance". The landmark move comes as governments seek to repair finances battered during the pandemic by slashed tax receipts plus vast spending and borrowing. The London gathering has also prepared the ground for a summit of G7 leaders in Cornwall, southwest England, starting Friday, and which Biden is set to attend.

Momentum has grown behind the US-led plans to limit the ability of multinationals such as tech giants to game the tax system to boost profits, especially at a time when economies around the

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16 stranded Indian sailors return home

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: All 16 Indian sailors who were stranded onboard the ship MIV Ula in Kuwait for the past 14 months have reached their homeland safely. The sailors left Friday on a 'Vande Bharat' mission flight bound for New Delhi with tickets arranged by the Indian Embassy in Kuwait, a press release issued by the embassy said.

The sailors were stranded on the ship after it was detained at Kuwait's Shuaiba Port since February 2020 following a legal dispute between the ship's owner and the owner of its cargo. The sailors had gone on hunger strike over the prolonged crisis. All the other formalities including medical checkups and PCR tests were arranged by the embassy prior to the departure of the crewmembers in cooperation with the authorities in Kuwait, the release added.

Indian Ambassador Sibi George expressed his



KUWAIT: Sixteen Indian sailors who were stranded in Kuwait for the past 14 months are seen at Kuwait International Airport prior to their departure to India on Friday.

sincere gratitude to the Kuwaiti leadership and the concerned authorities in the country, including officials from the ministries of foreign affairs, communications and interior; Kuwait Port Authority and customs authorities for their cooperation and support.

The embassy's officers regularly coordinated with each of these departments to resolve the complex issues involved and ensure the crew's departure to India. The embassy will continue to remain in touch with the authorities to follow up on other issues involved, the release added.

Riyadh holds first concert since COVID

RIYADH: Hundreds gathered Thursday for the first concert in the Saudi capital since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to watch performances by Syrian diva Assala Nasri and Kuwaiti crooner Nabeel Shuaib. Before stiff rules were brought in a year ago to stem the spread of coronavirus, the ultra-conservative kingdom had started to ease decades-long restrictions on entertainment, as part of efforts to improve its image and attract tourists.

"This is the first concert to take place in Saudi for a very long time," said one spectator at the concert, held in a restaurant of a large Riyadh hotel. "We are delighted to come from Kuwait to attend the concert," said a Kuwaiti tourist. Saudi Arabia has officially recorded more than 454,000 coronavirus infections, including 7,408 deaths.

It was not the first concert - Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli sang in April at the ancient Saudi city of Hegra, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Saudi Arabia has hosted international musicians - from Janet



RIYADH: Kuwaiti singer Nabeel Shuaib is seen on large screens at a theatre hosting the first concert in the Saudi capital since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic late on June 3, 2021. — AFP

Jackson to 50 Cent and Korean pop group BTS - for concerts that were unimaginable in the conservative country just four years ago. The pandemic put a brake on the country's ambitious push to revamp its global image and draw tourists.

But Riyadh is now accelerating a nationwide vaccination drive as it moves to host sports and entertainment extravaganzas, all pandemic-hit sectors that are a bedrock of the "Vision 2030" program to diversify the oil-reliant economy. — AFP

Finland FA offers hijabs to players

VANTAA, Finland: Finland's football association has begun offering a free "sports hijab" to any player who wants one, in a move designed to attract a greater diversity of players into the sport. So far, the FA has distributed "dozens" of the headscarves, which are made out of technical, stretchy fabric, Heidi Pihlaja, head of development of women and girls' football, told AFP.

"In Finland, it's been really hard to get girls of immigrant backgrounds into football clubs," Pihlaja said. "So we wanted to start this initiative to welcome everyone, regardless of your religion and whether you want



VANTAA, Finland: Kamila Nuh (left) and Nasro Bahnaan Hulbade, both 13 years old, pose for photos at the beginning of a football training session at the MUP Stadium on June 1, 2021. — AFP

to use a scarf or not. It doesn't flap around as much as normal and you don't need to tuck it into your shirt," 13-year-old Nasro Bahnaan Hulbade told AFP during a training session at her club VJS in Vantaa, in the Finnish capital. "It's easier to run in it," said her teammate Kamila Nuh.

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'Sea snot' on Turkey's shores alarms residents

ISTANBUL: A thick, brown, bubbly foam dubbed "sea snot" has covered the shores of the Sea of Marmara, alarming Istanbul residents and threatening marine life. The naturally occurring mucilage was first documented in Turkey in 2007, when it was also seen in parts of the Aegean Sea near Greece. But this outbreak is the largest on record, blamed by experts on a combination of pollution and global warming, which speeds up the growth of algae responsible for the slimy sludge.

"Of course it affects our work," fisherman Mahsum Daga, 42, said as the viscous substances lapped rows of surrounding boats. "You know what it does to shellfish? When they open up, it prevents them from closing up again because it gets in the way."

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ISTANBUL: This aerial photograph taken on Friday shows mucilage in the Marmara Sea at a harbor on the shoreline. — AFP

Local

Kuwait Amir's envoy delivers letter to Yemen president

RIYADH: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's envoy, Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, delivered a letter from His Highness the Amir to Yemen's President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi in Riyadh yesterday. The letter discussed brotherly ties that bind the two nations and the latest regional and global developments.

Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmad Bin Mubarak had said earlier yesterday that a delegation from the Yemeni government held talks with the Saudi side to discuss the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. During the talks, both sides focused on security and Military issues and guarantees of the

return of the Yemeni government to Eden. In a statement for Eden Satellite Channel, the Minister said, "we positively discussed ways to create a suitable atmosphere to implement the Riyadh agreement signed by the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council in November 2019.

He pointed that the government was keen to boost the trust between all parties involved in the process of forming a government, but the escalations affected its performance and existence in the capital Eden. The government was able to work positively during the last months despite many commonalities with all parties including the transitional Council, he explained. The Minister highly evaluated "the sincere Saudi efforts to support the

Yemeni case."

Meanwhile, Kuwait Society for Relief said on Friday it completed handing out 6,000 food packs to people in Yemen across five governorates as part of a campaign, which has been ongoing for six years now. The food will go to displaced families and host communities of the impoverished in the governorates of Hadhramaut, Shabwah, Marib, Taiz and Al-Jawf. This year's campaign, which began in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, aims to distribute 24,000 food packs to a total 10 governorates, in coordination with four local humanitarian relief organizations, the charity's Yemen office deputy director Adel Baashen said. — AFP



RIYADH: Yemen's President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi reads a letter from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, delivered by Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. — KUNA

There are many reasons to study in the United States

By US Ambassador to Kuwait
Alina L Romanowski

To high school seniors in Kuwait: Congratulations! You are about to complete your exams and graduate during the most challenging time for students in many generations. You should be proud of how you persevered through all the adversity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents also deserve our appreciation for supporting their children's education during this very difficult period.

As you embark on the next chapter in your life,



US Ambassador Alina Romanowski

I encourage all students to choose a university in the United States. To any parents reading this, please think about allowing your daughters and sons to study in America.

Why choose America? The US offers a wide array of quality educational institutions situated in diverse geographic regions across the country. And there's "the American Dream" that you may have heard about through social media, movies, music, or Americans you've met.

I recall with fondness my own experiences at the University of Chicago. Like so many other universities in the United States, Chicago has a vibrant academic and cultural environment with inspiring professors and wide array of international students. There, my mind was opened to so many ways of thinking, of doing - and of dreaming.

For Kuwaiti students who are aware of those benefits but still have doubts, here are three key reasons why you should study in the United States: Safety, ease of application, and a support network that will help you during your time in America and throughout your career.

First, on safety. Currently, over one million international students are studying at US universities and colleges, far more than any other country. University and college campuses across the United

States have well-established measures to look after the safety and wellbeing of all students on campus, including international students. For female students, there are many excellent all-female colleges you can consider.

Second, applying to US universities is much simpler than you might think. You can use one application to apply to over 900 US colleges! It's called the Common Application, and at least one college in every state accepts it. Visit commonapp.org and begin filling out your application today!

Even the student visa application process is easier than you think. Once you have been admitted to a US college and receive your enrollment confirmation form (I-20), you can schedule a visa interview at ustraveldocs.com. Students can get an appointment within one week. Kuwaiti student visas are valid for five years, and if you need to renew the visa for any reason, you can do so without another interview. If you have any questions about visas, please email KuwaitNIV@state.gov and a visa officer will reply to you promptly.

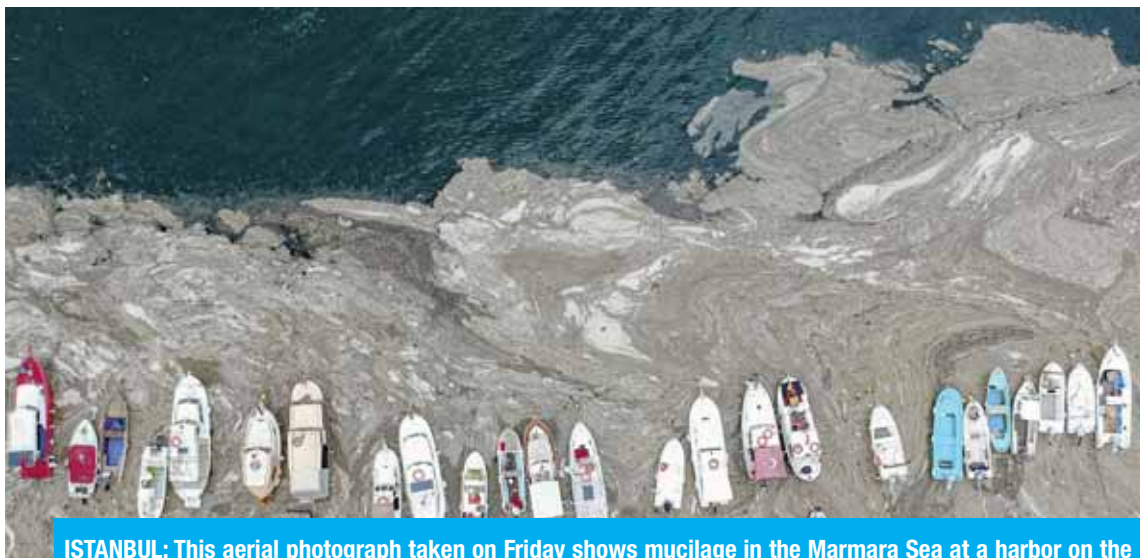
Third, you will have a support network that will help you through the entire process. The US Embassy's Education Adviser can help you pick the school that fits your personality, academic interests, and favorite location- you can email the

Adviser at KuwaitCity@EducationUSA.org. The National Union of Kuwaiti Students can give you advice about where to live and help you get settled in and will continue to be a resource throughout your entire time as a student.

Once you arrive on campus, you will have an international student adviser who will help you select courses and maintain your student status under US law. US universities offer special services for international students. And because the United States is home to over 3.5 million Muslims, Muslim students can easily find a university with a Muslim student community and nearby mosques to attend.

After you graduate, you have the option of working on your student visa for 1-3 years at a US company to gain practical work experience and launch your professional career. The connections you will make with talented classmates from around the world and US alumni from your university will benefit you throughout your life.

So, as you think about your next educational options, please contact the US Embassy's Education Adviser for a free consultation. We can help you find the school that fits all your needs! Congratulations again to the class of 2021, and I wish you all the best of luck.



ISTANBUL: This aerial photograph taken on Friday shows mucilage in the Marmara Sea at a harbor on the shoreline. — AFP

'Sea snot' on Turkey's shores...

Continued from Page 1

All the sea snails here are dead," Istanbul University biology professor Muharrem Balci said when the algae grow out of control in springtime, as they have done this year, they block out the sun and cause oxygen depletion for fish and marine life.

The "sea snot" results from a sort of nutrient overload for the algae, which feast on warm weather and water pollution that has grown progressively worse in the past 40 years, Balci said. "This mucilage is now covering the sea surface like a tent canvas," Balci told AFP. "After a while, this cover collapses to the bottom and covers the (sea floor's) ecosystem." This could poison the sea's mussels and creatures such as crabs. "It will smell like a rotten egg unless this process is halted," he said.

Cevahir Efe Akcelik, an environment engineer and secretary general of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects, said the foam could cover the sea all summer unless urgent measures are taken. "Studies show the mucilage is not only on the surface now but also goes 25 to 30 meters deep," he told AFP.

The Sea of Marmara, which stretches along Istanbul's southern coast from the Bosphorus to the Aegean Sea, is densely populated and home to numerous industrial sites. Balci said it also absorbs some of the waste that flows into the neighboring Black Sea from the polluted Danube River that cuts across eastern Europe. "This is an extra burden for the Sea of Marmara," said Balci, calling for a collective action plan for all of the sea's coastal cities.

Workers are trying to remove the sludge with nets, but their efforts have so far proven largely ineffective. Balci said a lasting solution requires proper marine supervision, as well as biological and chemical disposal systems for the sea's cities and industrial zones.

Ali Oztunc, a lawmaker for the main opposition CHP party, urged the government to impose tough penalties on waste disposal facilities that fail to follow the rules. "The Sea of Marmara is an inland sea but, unfortunately, it is becoming an inland desert because of the wrong environmental policies," he told AFP.

On Tuesday, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling coalition shot down a CHP proposal to set up a parliamentary committee to investigate the "sea snot". Oztunc also called on Erdogan's government to finally approve the 2015 Paris Agreement, which aims to limit temperature rises by cutting carbon emissions. "The government should approve the Paris Agreement without delay," Oztunc said. — AFP

consensus necessary to reform the international tax system". British charity Oxfam said the agreed minimum rate was not high enough. "It's about time that some of the world's most powerful economies force multinational corporations, including tech and pharma giants, to pay their fair share of tax," said Gabriela Bucher, executive director of Oxfam International.

"However, fixing a global minimum corporate tax rate of just 15 percent is far too low. It will do little to end the damaging race to the bottom on corporate tax and curtail the widespread use of tax havens." Ireland, which has expressed "significant reservations" about Biden's plan, has at 12.5 percent one of the lowest corporate tax rates in the world, prompting tech giants such as Facebook and Google to make the eurozone country their European base.

Yellen, holding a press conference following the G7 meet, identified Ireland and China as having concerns regarding a global minimum rate. "The post-pandemic world must be fairer in particular with regard to international taxation," she added. Proponents argue that a minimum tax is necessary to stem competition between countries over who can offer multinationals the lowest rate. They say that a "race to the bottom" saps precious revenues that could go to government priorities like hospitals and schools. — AFP

Omani mediators in Sanaa as truce talks intensify

SANAA: Omani officials, accompanied by senior Houthi figures, arrived yesterday in Sanaa to try to convince the rebels who control the capital to accept a ceasefire, Houthi sources said. Yemen has been devastated by civil war between the government - supported by a Saudi-led military coalition - and Iran-backed Houthi rebels since 2014, pushing the country to the brink of famine.

Diplomatic efforts to end the conflict have intensified in recent weeks. "An Omani delegation arrived (in Sanaa), accompanied by Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdul Salam and other (Houthi) officials," a rebel source told AFP on condition of anonymity. The Saudi-led coalition controls Yemen's airspace and since 2016 had prevented Abdul Salam and other rebel figures from returning to Sanaa.

The delegation's arrival, which would have required approval from Riyadh, demonstrates something of a step forward in negotiations. The Houthis have repeatedly demanded the re-opening of Sanaa airport before any ceasefire agreement. The source said the delegation was to meet with Houthi leader Abdulmalik Al-Houthi and update him on talks held in Muscat.

The aim of the Omani mediators seems to be "to convince the Houthis to accept a ceasefire and take part in peace negotiations", the source added. Abdul Salam, in remarks carried by Houthi-run Al-Masirah television, said: "We are working to advance arrangements on the humanitarian question as well as the peace process." The visit aims to "complement efforts" made in Oman, he added.

The sultanate of Oman, which borders both Yemen and Saudi Arabia, is a close US ally but at the same time has good relations with Iran. It has regularly played the role of mediator in regional conflicts. Muscat has hosted UN special envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths and US envoy Tim Lenderking in recent weeks, while Iran's Foreign

Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met with Abdul Salam in Oman in late April.

On Monday Griffiths urged rival Yemeni forces to "bridge the gap" to reach a ceasefire, following talks in Sanaa with Houthi officials. "There's an extraordinary amount of diplomatic consensus... there is a real diplomatic energy now, which hasn't always been the case," Griffiths said.

The effort to secure peace in Yemen comes after regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran restarted talks in April, holding their first high-level meeting since Riyadh cut diplomatic ties with Tehran in 2016. The UN says Yemen is suffering the world's worst humanitarian crisis as its years-long war rumbles on, with tens of thousands killed, millions displaced and two-thirds of its 30-million population dependent on aid.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council called on Houthi rebels to allow inspectors to visit a long-abandoned fuel tanker off Yemen "without further delay" Thursday. The 15-member council held a special meeting on FSO Safer at the request of Britain after the rebels said an agreement to allow the UN mission had "reached a dead end."

The 45-year-old fuel vessel FSO Safer has 1.1 million barrels of crude on board and has been abandoned near Yemen's western port of Hodeida since 2015. The UN says it threatens a catastrophic oil spill that would destroy Red Sea ecosystems, shut down the fishing industry and close Yemen's lifeline Hodeida port for six months.

Members urged the Houthis to "facilitate unconditional and safe access for UN experts to conduct a comprehensive and impartial assessment and initial repair mission without further delay," a statement said. UN inspectors were initially meant to assess the tanker last year but the mission has been repeatedly delayed over disagreements with the rebels.

The Houthis insist that the UN team conducts maintenance work but the world body says it must be allowed to assess the site first before carrying out any works. On Tuesday, the Houthi rebels said negotiations with the UN had reached an impasse after several days of talks. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs told the council meeting that the UN team "remains ready to deploy." — AFP

Finland FA offers hijabs...

Continued from Page 1

The girls have been playing for one and two years respectively, but said they were "happy and grateful" to find out from their parents about the free headscarves. Pihlaja said that cultural issues and cost - rather than the headscarves themselves - were often the main obstacles to girls and women from immigrant communities taking up the sport. But offering the hijabs has "a symbolic importance" to making the sport more accessible, she said.

Although the response has mainly been "really positive", the scheme has also received criticism "from people saying it demeans women or is bringing religion to the game". A 2018 Pew Research Centre comparison found that Finland housed the strongest anti-Muslim attitudes out of 15 countries, while the far-right Finns Party is predicted to make record gains in the country's local elections later this month.

"We support every woman's right to choose themselves whether they use a scarf or not," Pihlaja

said in response to the criticism. "Where they want to use it, we want to show that they are welcome and that the headscarf isn't an obstacle."

Yet although the FA's announcement prompted a flurry of negative comments on social media, the hijab scheme has not become a major talking point in the country of 5.5 million people, one of Europe's most homogenous nations, according to official statistics.

Finland's widespread anti-immigrant sentiment is currently less apparent in the footballing arena, where the men's national team - which comprises a number of foreign-background players - enjoys near-universal support. This month, Finland will make its debut appearance at the European Championships, while the country's women's team has also for the first time made the Euro 2021.

In another move to boost equality, Finland's FA in 2019 removed the word 'women' from the title of its top female competitive division, renaming it the "National League". It also announced equal pay and bonuses for male and female players in the national team. Wearing her VJS kit, the same color red as that of her beloved Liverpool, Kamila Nuh said she "loves" football and "I'm not planning on stopping any time soon." There still aren't that many female players in Finland, she admits, "but I want to be one of them." — AFP

G7 strikes 'historic' agreement over...

Continued from Page 1

world are reeling from the impact of the coronavirus outbreak, German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz yesterday said the commitment was "very good news for justice and fiscal solidarity". "Enterprises can no longer shy away from their fiscal obligations by cunningly transferring their profits to countries with opaque tax structures," he said, calling the move "bad news for tax havens".

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire called it a "historic step" in the fight against fiscal evasion. "It's a starting point and in the months ahead we will fight for this minimum tax to be the highest possible," Le Maire said in a video message on Twitter. Biden had called for a unified minimum corporate tax rate of 15 percent in negotiations with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and G20.

OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann called the G7 agreement "a landmark step toward the global

State departments pay great attention to Kuwait's marine environment



KUWAIT: An aerial view of Kuwait's coastline. —KUNA photos



Kuwait diving team members carrying out a cleanup campaign at a local island.

KUWAIT: Kuwait's marine environment enjoys great official attention, therefore, laws and executive regulations have been enacted that prohibit any encroachment against it. The World Environment Day, which was marked yesterday, focuses on taking urgent measures to revive the damaged ecosystems from forests to coasts, including Kuwait which gives attention to the environment as a whole, especially the marine environment.

Deputy Director-General for Technical Affairs at the Environment Public Authority (EPA) Dr Abdullah Al-Zaidan stressed the importance of preserving Kuwait's environment and raising community awareness on the necessity of preserving marine life. Zaidan noted that the EPA plays a vital role in protecting the marine environment from pollution and preserving its biodiversity, and applies the needed laws, in addition to following up on the implementation of the national plan for managing the marine environment.

He pointed out that the authority guarantees the protection of the marine biodiversity, as it is prohibited to hunt, kill, collect, harm and possess wild or marine species or harm their young. In



Kuwait diving team members lift neglected fishing nets.

the future, fishing licensing requirements will be changed to achieve the desired goal of preserving the marine environment, he added. He also stressed the keenness to implement international treaties related to biodiversity protection, as Kuwait ratified the CBD Convention for the Conservation of

Biodiversity in August 2002, which guarantees the preservation of biological diversity, whether in the terrestrial or marine environment.

Meanwhile, the head of the Environmental Volunteer Foundation's Kuwaiti diving team Waleed Al-Fadhel affirmed the team's keenness to cooper-



Kuwait diving team members help in lifting a sunken ship.

ate with various governmental and voluntary agencies to remove damage to the Kuwaiti marine environment, whether on the coast or in the sea. Since the team's establishment in 1986, the team has carried out several activities and programs aimed at protecting the marine environment from pollution, as it is the country's

main resource, he added. He also noted that the team recovered 768 boats and marine vessels weighing 11,000 tons, and removed harmful waste from coasts, harbors and islands, in cooperation with government agencies, weighing 3,711 tons, in addition to lifting neglected fishing nets weighing 241 tons. — KUNA

Kuwait reports 8 COVID deaths, 2,723 cases in two days

KUWAIT: Kuwait said 1,280 people tested positive for coronavirus while four related deaths were reported on Friday, while 1,443 people tested positive for coronavirus and four related deaths were reported on Thursday taking the total up to 314,569 and 1,787, respectively. The health ministry regis-

tered 1,156 recoveries on Friday and 1,087 on Thursday, raising the total of those to have overcome the disease to 298,485, ministry spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad told a press conference.

The number of people hospitalized with the virus stood at 14,297 as of Friday, with 151 of them in intensive care units; up from 14,177 total patients and 146 ICU patients on Thursday. Some 22,107 swab tests were conducted over the previous 48 hours, Dr Sanad said Friday, out of a total of 2.65 million. He went on to urge the public to abide by health precautions, mainly social distancing, in order to help limit the spread of the virus. — KUNA



Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad

Kuwait renews commitment to UNCAC

NEW YORK: The State of Kuwait renewed commitment to the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), said a senior Kuwaiti diplomat on Friday. Cooperation and joint action are the best means to counter this dangerous crime that jeopardizes safety of communities, especially recently on the backdrop of COVID-19, said Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, Kuwait's Permanent Delegate to the UN before the organization's 32nd General Assembly on anti-corruption. Terming UNCAC a "cornerstone" in the fight against corruption, yet the phenomenon, according to Otaibi, is still prevalent and becoming more complex due to advancing technology, making it a trans-border crime, branching out to terrorism financing, money laundering, arms dealing and drug trafficking. Corruption continues to drain countries' resources, especially developing ones, making it a major obstacle for those countries to accomplish the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, he said. Despite all precautionary measures, yet, no country is safe from this phenomenon, which causes global economy to lose \$2 trillion on an annual basis, he added. Good governance, less bureaucracy and improving performance of the state's public institutions are all key elements for fighting corruption; an endeavor the State of Kuwait been aiming for and pursuing on a national level through many laws and legislations that guarantee the rule of law and reinforce, as well as buoying the level of integrity, Otaibi carried on saying. He also referred to 'Nazaha'; Kuwait's anti-corruption body, established in line with articles five and six of UNCAC. UNCAC is the only legally binding international anti-corruption multilateral treaty, as it recognizes the importance of both preventive and punitive measures, addresses the cross-border nature of corruption with provisions on international cooperation and on the return of the proceeds of corruption. — KUNA



NEW YORK: Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, Kuwait's Permanent Delegate to the UN, speaks before the 32nd General Assembly on anti-corruption. — KUNA

Fire extinguished at Hawally mall



KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) on Thursday managed to extinguish a fire that broke out at the front view of a commercial mall in Hawally Governorate, with no casualties. Fire engines of Hawally, Salmiya and Shuhda took part in controlling the blaze at the mall located at the end of Tunis Street

overlooking the Third Ring Road, the KFF public relations and media department said in a press statement. No casualties were reported, it added, noting that some parked vehicles have been damaged by flames. Investigations are underway to reveal the cause of the incident, it pointed out. — KUNA



Local

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Kuwait, Oman Ministers discusses regional issues

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah called Omani Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Al-Busaidi on Friday. During the call, both sides discussed the strong and deep-rooted strong historic bilateral relations between the two countries and ways to enhance develop them in various fields. They also discussed the latest developments and events on the regional and international levels and ways to coordinate on them. — KUNA



Badr Al-Busaidi (left) and Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah

Kuwait's oil price up to \$71.39 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by 20 cents to \$71.39 per barrel Friday after being at \$71.19 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. The prices of the Brent crude and the West Texas Intermediate, globally, saw an increase with the first going up by 58 cents to \$71.89 per barrel, the same case with the latter, which also went up by 81 cents to \$69.62 pb. — KUNA



Photo of the Day



LONDON: Kuwaiti photographer Mohammad Murad won the second place of the 2021 Nature TTL Photographer Awards in the Urban Wildlife category for his photograph 'The Fox of Arabia'. The international competition witnessed the participation of nearly 8,000 photographs from different countries around the world. — KUNA

DHAMAN visits embassy of Sudan in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Health Assurance Hospitals Company (DHAMAN) conducted a visit to the embassy of the Republic of Sudan in Kuwait to discuss a number of mutual interest topics. During the meeting, the Ambassador of the Republic of Sudan to Kuwait Abdulmonem Alamin expressed appreciation to Kuwait for its efforts in providing integrated healthcare services to expatriates and all members of the populations. While noting the role of DHAMAN in employing Sudanese health professionals, the Ambassador added that Sudan is looking forward to play a bigger role in the healthcare sector.

Meanwhile, DHAMAN Acting CEO Dr Mohammad Al-Qenai said: This visit is part of our collaboration with various bodies, including embassies, to fully explain the role and objectives of DHAMAN to ensure overall alignment between all stakeholders, especially the beneficiaries from the Company's services.



Qenai noted: "As part of continuing the application of global standards in the healthcare sector, the Company pays great attention to overall alignment, accuracy, and progress in the mobilization phase of shifting beneficiaries from the Ministry of Health (MoH) to DHAMAN."

Throughout the visit, discussion included highlighting DHAMAN as the first public-private partnership (PPP) in Kuwait and the first company in the Gulf to provide its services based on the Healthcare Maintenance Organization (HMO)

model through establishing an integrated healthcare system that includes medical insurance programs, as well as building and operating a network of primary healthcare centers and hospitals that cover all areas in Kuwait.

The visit was also attended by the Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy Dr Mohammed Ali, as well as DHAMAN acting Medical Services Director Dr Fatema Bendhafari, HR Corporate Director Ahmad Bourisli and Corporate Director - Communication and PR Ali Al-Hamad.

VO positions Kuwait globally by unleashing young talents to the world

KUWAIT: VO, the first Kuwait-based integrated youth platform for incubating young talents, launched "It happened! And their dreams are fulfilled", a campaign that fosters Kuwait's global positioning on social media platforms by exposing young Kuwaiti talents to the international community.

The campaign's success was exemplified in its recent production of 'BRAVO', a song that crossed above 4 million views in three days and claimed number one on Kuwait's YouTube, GCC, Morocco, and currently hitting Egypt.

The inspiring story of VO fulfilling the dream of the Kuwaiti amateur singer, Haneen Hussain, who aspired to have the world recognize her talent and sing with her favorite Kuwaiti singers, Bader Shuaib and Abdulaziz Louis, grasped the attention of many Kuwaitis and infused hope in having their talents recognized.

"There are so many 'Haneens' in Kuwait who have the talent but don't know how to start. Kuwaiti youth currently need practical opportunities and proper guidance that would support their journey of doing. And, this is exactly what we are doing at VO. If you have a specific talent or passionate about a field, we help you fulfill your dream with the support of highly qualified experts, international entities, and those who are leading the field," stated Riham Al-Ayyar, CEO of VO.

The participating talents have praised VO and commended the platform's idea and efforts in providing them with concrete opportunities that helped them to practically achieve their dreams and follow their passion. Prominent celebrities such as Bader Al-Shuaibi stated, "When I was first introduced to the concept of VO, I was pleased to be finally collaborating with an entity that invests in Kuwaiti talents and fulfills its promises."

Officially launched in May, the campaign has already supported a number of Kuwaiti young talents in the fields of music, produc-

tion, and entertainment through practical collaborations that resulted in tangible impact across various platforms, including:

1) Building the capacity of a long list of actors, directors, and producers such as Mohammed Al-Fozan, Laila Al-Buloushi, and many others through substantial initiatives and collaborations that opened up opportunities for them to connect with prominent names in the field and directly work with them. Those names include Kuwaiti actor Osama Al-Buloushi, director Sadeq Behbehani, and producer Dr Meshari Al-Mutawa.

2) Fulfilling Humood Al-Bader and Mohammed Abdel-Razaq's dream and passion in moderating their first e-gaming competition to transform their talent to an entrepreneurial skill. VO is currently supporting them to represent Kuwait in international tournaments.

3) Supporting Fahad Al-Bishara in hosting his own social media show called Al-Morad.

"Unleashing Kuwaiti talents to the international community will support Kuwait's global positioning and economic diversification. We must recognize that oil and natural gas are not the only resources of Kuwait. The country possesses many talents and unique gifts that we can capitalize on, and this will only happen once we acknowledge the potential of Kuwaiti youth and practiVO, the integrated youth platform and Kuwait's first talent incubator, was founded in July 2020 as result of a fruitful collaboration between Sheikhha Ohoud Al-Sabah and Riham Al-Ayyar aiming to empower local talents and position them in the global market. The platform will provide an academic program for Kuwaiti youth to identify and nurture their talents, an all-inclusive studio to empower and express their ideas, and a 'smart' app to promote their creative productions on a seamless, high-tech and efficient digital platform.ally support them," stated Riha, Al-Ayyar, CEO of VO.

VO, the integrated youth platform and Kuwait's first talent incubator, was founded in July 2020 as result of a fruitful collaboration between Sheikhha Ohoud Al-Sabah and Riham Al-Ayyar aiming to empower local talents and position them in the global market. The platform will provide an academic program for Kuwaiti youth to identify and nurture their talents, an all-inclusive studios to empower and express their ideas, and a 'smart' app to promote their creative productions on a seamless, high-tech and efficient digital platform.



Haneen Hussain



Riham Al-Ayyar

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Bomb-sniffing rat retires

Church criticizes Austrian govt’s ‘Islam Map’

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HONG KONG: Political activist and barrister Chow Hang-tung speaks to the media after leaving Tsuen Wan police station a day after being arrested in Hong Kong yesterday the day after the annual vigil to mourn the victims of China's June 4 Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 which authorities banned and vowed to stamp out any protests on the anniversary. —AFP

HK democracy vigil leader released on bail

China blasts US, EU consulates in Hong Kong for Tiananmen candles

HONG KONG: One of the organisers of the annual vigil remembering Beijing’s deadly Tiananmen Square crackdown was released on bail yesterday after authorities prevented the sensitive commemoration from taking place on the massacre’s 32nd anniversary. Lawyer Chow Hang-tung, one of the few remaining prominent democracy activists not already in jail or in exile, was detained by police on Friday morning for publicising the banned June 4 vigil in Victoria Park where Hong Kongers traditionally come together every year. “I reject all the allegations,” Chow, vice-chair of a democracy group behind the vigil, said outside a Hong Kong police station after her release, accusing the financial hub’s police force of abusing its powers.

“The arrest yesterday is obviously an unjust preventive arrest with a blatant purpose of stopping myself from physically being in Victoria Park and to frighten other people from doing the same.” She was released on HK\$10,000 (\$1,300) cash bail and needs to report back to police on July 5. The 37-year-old activist wrote in a May 29 Facebook post that “lighting a candle is not a crime” and said she would light a candle in public on June 4 to commemorate the anniversary.

Chow said the Facebook post, her articles and media interviews were used by police as evidence against her. “They want to threaten the media by saying if you are doing more interviews on this sensitive topic, your interviewees will get arrested,” Chow said, adding that she would continue to speak up. While detained in the police station, Chow said she fasted for a day in commemoration of the anniversary of the crackdown in which hundreds were killed, by some estimates more than 1,000.

Soldiers marched into Beijing and opened fire on local residents and student protesters on June 4, 1989, crushing a week-long wave of demonstrations calling for political change and curbs to official corruption. On Friday, police cordoned off the city’s Victoria Park where huge crowds, often tens of thousands strong, have held candlelit vigils on each June 4 for three decades for those killed in Beijing.

Crowds have swelled in recent years as Hong Kongers chafe under Beijing’s increasingly assertive rule. However, this year’s vigil was banned at a time when Hong Kong authorities are carrying out a sweeping clampdown on dissent following huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago. The

park laid empty for the first time as police blocked access, but flashes of defiance still flickered across the city on Friday night as residents simultaneously turned their mobile phone lights or lit candles in multiple districts across the city to mark the date. Public commemorations of the June 4 crackdown are forbidden on the mainland.

Meanwhile, China yesterday berated the US and EU consulates in Hong Kong for displaying candles to commemorate the June 4 Tiananmen crackdown, slamming it as a “clumsy political show” to destabilise the city. Candles were seen lit in the windows of the US consulate building, which is next to the residence of Hong Kong’s Beijing-appointed leader Carrie Lam, and the European Union’s office on Friday night.

The missions also posted photographs of their candlelit Tiananmen memorials on social media. “Any attempt to exploit Hong Kong to carry out infiltration or sabotage activities against the mainland crosses the red line ... is absolutely intolerable,” a spokesperson for the Hong Kong office of China’s foreign ministry said. “We again urge the organs of relevant countries in Hong Kong to immediately ... stop meddling with Hong

Kong affairs and China’s internal affairs at large, and avoid playing with fire.”

For three decades in Hong Kong, huge crowds, often tens of thousands strong, have held candlelit vigils on June 4 for those killed in 1989 when tanks and troops crushed pro-democracy protests in Beijing. Crowds have swelled in recent years as Hong Kongers chafe under Beijing’s increasingly assertive rule.

However this year’s vigil was banned at a time when Hong Kong authorities are carrying out a sweeping clampdown on dissent following huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago. Flashes of defiance still flickered across the city Friday night as residents simultaneously turned their mobile phone lights or lit candles in multiple districts across the city to mark the date.

There were online calls for people to turn off the lights at home and place candles in their windows in commemoration. Public commemorations of June 4 are forbidden in mainland China and, until recently, semi-autonomous Hong Kong was the one place in China where large scale remembrance was still tolerated. —AFP



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International

Putin says wants to find ways with Biden to improve ties

We have no disagreements with the United States: Putin

SAINT PETERSBURG: Russian President Vladimir Putin said Friday he hoped to improve deeply damaged relations with the United States when he holds his first summit with US counterpart Joe Biden later this month. The face-to-face meeting in Geneva on June 16 comes amid the biggest crisis in ties between the two countries in years, with tensions high over a litany of issues including hacking allegations, human rights and claims of election meddling.

"We need to find ways to regularise these relations," Putin told the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum, adding that bilateral ties are currently at a "low level". Usually joined at the forum's main session by other world leaders, the Russian president was alone on the stage on Friday with a moderator and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, the emir of Qatar, participating via videolink.

"We have no disagreements with the United States," Putin said. "They only have one disagreement: they want to hold back our development, they talk about it publicly."

Speaking to Russia's Channel One television later in the day, Putin said he did not expect any breakthrough in Geneva but said it would be good to discuss topics of mutual interest. "I expect a positive result," said Putin, 68.

The two previously met in 2011, when Biden served as vice president and Putin was prime minister. Putin said he remembered that meeting, praising the 78-year-old US leader as a "very experienced" and "careful" politician.

Since taking office in January, Biden has

ramped up pressure on the Kremlin, and his comments likening Putin to a "killer" were met with fierce criticism in Moscow.

'That's nonsense'

The Biden administration imposed new sanctions over what US authorities say was Russia's role in the massive SolarWinds cyber attack and alleged meddling in the 2020 presidential election. Biden said he is also "looking" at possible retaliation after the White House linked Russia to a cyberattack against global meat processing giant JBS.

Putin said on Friday that those claims were "risible". "I've heard about some meat processing plant. That's nonsense," he said. "I think US security services should establish who this blackmailer is. Not Russia for sure," Putin added.

Washington has also harshly criticised Moscow for the near-death poisoning and subsequent imprisonment of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

Putin on Friday signed a law barring "extremist" groups from participating in parliamentary elections, with a court in Moscow holding a hearing next week as it considers whether to assign the label to Navalny's organisations.

Critics have denounced the law as the latest move to crack down on Russia's opposition ahead of elections in September for Russia's lower house State Duma. The diplomatic crisis with the United States has resulted in a mutual expulsion of diplomats, with Moscow prohibiting the US embassy from employing foreign nationals, practically halting its consular services.

Putin vaunted at the forum that the first line of



MOSCOW: This combination of file pictures created on June 4, 2021 shows then US vice-President Joe Biden (L) at a Drive-in event in Coconut Creek, Florida on October 29, 2020 and Russian President Vladimir Putin following his inauguration ceremony at the Kremlin in Moscow on May 7, 2018. —AFP

the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Germany has been completed, despite strong US opposition.

The United States and several European countries have deeply opposed the construction of the pipeline, arguing that it will increase European dependence on Russia for critical gas supplies and increase Moscow's geopolitical clout.

'Difficult point'

Putin also suggested that European nations should pay for Russian gas in euros, rather than dollars, part of a wider effort by Moscow to reduce its reliance on the dollar. Markus Ederer, the EU ambassador to Russia, said at the forum on Thursday that Moscow's relations with the

European Union were also at "the most difficult point" since the Cold War.

"If you listen to what Sergei Lavrov says, you can come to the conclusion that Russia doesn't value relations with the EU," the German diplomat added, referring to Russia's foreign minister. The Saint Petersburg International Forum, often referred to as Russian Davos, is the country's main showcase for investors and brings together business and political leaders.

It is one of the largest offline events held in Russia and the world since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, although the number of participants was restricted to 5,000, nearly four times fewer than when it was last held in 2019. —AFP

Syria Kurds hand IS relatives to Dutch authorities

QAMISHLI: Syrian Kurdish authorities yesterday handed four relatives of Islamic State group fighters, including three children, to a Dutch diplomatic delegation for repatriation, Kurdish and Dutch officials said. The group consisted of a Dutch woman and her two children as well as another 12-year-old girl, "a humanitarian case," whose mother had agreed to her repatriation following a request from the Dutch government, top Syrian Kurdish foreign affairs official Abdel Karim Omar said.

The four were handed over to a delegation led by The Hague's Syria envoy Emiel de Bont and senior foreign ministry official Dirk Jan Nieuwenhuis. De Bont said the delegation had "a clear and well-defined mandate to receive in the care of a mission, a small number of Dutch nationals up to now residing in the Roj detention facility", following a Dutch court ruling on the individuals' cases. "We are here then to serve the rule of law and to do what we can to assist the due legal process," he added.

Since the fall of IS's self-styled "caliphate" in March 2019, Syria's Kurds have repeatedly urged foreign countries to repatriate their nationals held in northeast Syria. At least 220 children with Dutch nationality remain in Syria or Turkey, 75 percent of whom are under the age of four and were born in the region to parents with Dutch citizenship.

At a press conference in the regional capital Qamishli, Kurdish official Omar reiterated calls for other countries to "meet their responsibilities by repatriating their citizens and cooperating with us on this situation", a major burden for authorities in the de facto autonomous region. About 75 boys and girls are living with their mothers in Kurdish-run camps in Syria, while a few are also in the jihadist-run north-western area of Idlib, according to Dutch authorities. There are some 30 Dutch women and 15 men in Kurdish-run camps.

Thorny issue

Anna Sophia Posthumus, spokeswoman for the Netherlands justice and security ministry, said the country did not have a "general policy" of repatriating people from war-torn regions. She said also there have only been one exception in 2019 with two minors. "We would prefer a tribunal in the region, have had discussions but it's still at a very starting, initial phase," she said. The question of repatriating Dutch nationals in areas formerly held by IS is a thorny issue in the Netherlands.

Prime Minister Mark Rutte's liberal VVD party has emphasised the security threat posed by such returns, while the centre-left D66 party, a likely potential partner as he seeks to build a coalition, supports bringing back children on humanitarian grounds.

VVD politician Ingrid Michon tweeted that "We do everything that's possible to keep Netherlands safe. Then we should not pick up these IS-goers from Syria. This is about our safety. Stop this." Far right-wing politician Geert Wilders said it was "unacceptable and unbearable" to repatriate women linked to IS fighters. "Those terror women have forfeited their right to ever set foot on Dutch soil," he tweeted. —AFP

Church criticizes Austrian govt's 'Islam Map'

VIENNA: The Austrian Catholic church on Friday became the latest religious group to criticize a government-backed online map of hundreds of Muslim organizations which sparked violence against the Muslim minority. The highly controversial map shows details of more than 600 Muslim associations—from youth groups to mosques—including details

on their location and photos of members. The map was first presented by a government-funded group monitoring Muslim extremism and by Austria's Integration Minister Susanne Raab, a member of conservative, anti-migration Austrian People's Party (OeVP), who called it a tool to "fight political Islam as a breeding ground for extremism."

Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, the head of the Austrian Catholic church, wrote in an op-ed Friday that it was "dangerous to give the impression that one of the religious community is under general suspicion", and asked why one of the country's many religious commu-

nities was singled out. Umit Vural, head of the Islamic Religious Community of Austria, described the map as a "massive security threat" to Muslims, while the Muslim Youth Austria organisation said several Muslims had already been attacked and a mosque has been defaced since that map went online in late May.

About a quarter of Austria's majority Catholic population voted for the Islamophobic far-right party, and far-right extremists in the past week have put up signs reading "Be careful! Political Islam is near you" on streets where the map showed Muslim organisations, calling on "fellow patri-

ots" to join them. The Council of Europe's Special Representative on Antisemitic and Anti-Muslim Hatred and Hate Crimes Daniel Hoeltgen urged the government to take down the map, while a range of representatives of other religious communities, including the president of the Conference of European Rabbis, Pinchas Goldschmidt, also rebuked it.

Verbal and physical attacks against Muslims have already been on the rise since an Austrian-born jihadist killed four in Vienna in early November, according to a group documenting Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism. —AFP

Peru peasant patrols banking on Castillo to bring change

CHOTA: Chewing on coca leaves and brandishing whips, 15 Peruvian peasants patrol the paths around an Andean hamlet in the dead of night, just like presidential candidate Pedro Castillo once did. The "peasant patrols" were created more than four decades ago in the Cajamarca region some 900 kilometers north of the capital Lima, initially to prevent the theft of livestock. But during Peru's armed conflict between 1980 and 2000, the patrols were also forced to fight off incursions by Maoist Shining Path guerrillas.

One patrolman in Cajamarca was Castillo, a rural schoolteacher who was born and raised in this region, and who will take on seasoned corruption-tainted politician Keiko Fujimori in Sunday's second round runoff. The patrolmen of rural Peru feel marginalized by elites ruling from the urban power centers, but socialist Castillo is one of their own.

They're pinning their hopes on him winning and providing more support to the rural poor. "We hope to elect a democratic government that views the whole population as equals," Aladino Burga, the president of the Chota Peasant Patrols in Cajamarca, told AFP.

"Castillo needs to win because we get screwed a lot in Peru. We want jobs for the poor, we want Peru to progress," added Dagoberto Vasquez, a hat seller who has led patrols around the hamlet of San Antonio de Iruca for decades. One thing the patrolmen are banking on is Castillo putting an end to the corruption that has gripped Peruvian politics for decades.

Former president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) is currently serving a 25-year jail sentence for crimes against humanity and corruption, while four more ex-presidents since his rule have also been accused of corruption. And Fujimori's daughter, Keiko, is herself being investigated for graft relating to illegal funding for her previous presidential campaigns in 2011 and 2016. "I'm convinced Castillo will win because he's a professor and won't get involved in corruption," said Vasquez, 82. "Because if he does get involved in that, we'll kick him out!"

Mexico mine collapse leaves 7 workers trapped

MUZQUIZ: Rescuers were trying Friday to free seven mine workers trapped after an accident in a coal-producing region in northern Mexico, authorities said.



LURIN: Peruvian police forces stand guard next to a fleet of trucks as they prepare to leave Lurin, near Lima, on their way to distribute voting material to voting stations ahead of the presidential election runoff. —AFP

Community policing

The 15 patrolmen, dressed in ponchos and rubber boots, some wearing high-topped hats like Castillo, and chewing the coca leaves that are popular in Andean communities for alleviating feelings of hunger and fatigue, perform daily nighttime rounds in Chota, a municipality at 2,300 meters above sea level.

The patrols are a form of voluntary community policing in rural areas with little police presence. During the 1980s, these patrols extended across almost all of rural Peru. An AFP team accompanied the 15 patrolmen one night through corn, alfalfa and vegetable plantations in Cuyumalca, the site of the first ever patrol in 1976.

At one point they stopped a man in his 60s who was walking in the dark with two horses, questioning him on where he lived and trying to find out if he really owned the animals. Unimpressed with his answers, they took him back to their shelter to spend the night. The next morning they would fill out a report and continue their investigations.

If he were found to be telling the truth he would be released, if not, he would be handed over to the

police. The patrolmen also stop suspicious vehicles to verify the occupants' identities and find out what they're up to.

'Betting on change'

"I feel fulfilled because we've brought peace, tranquility to the community. The people feel protected," Segundo Belizario Heredia Idrogo, 61, told AFP. He said the patrols "emerged as a response to the lack of state protection for the rights of people in rural areas." "We're betting on change and we're betting on Pedro Castillo. We hope Pedro Castillo won't betray Peruvians," said Heredia, who carried a wooden stick and a leather whip. "If he does, we'll be in the streets demanding more democracy and justice for Peru." "We're proud that Castillo was a patrolman," said Heredia, who has two patrolmen sons and like Castillo is a teacher.

There are 26,000 patrolmen amongst the population of 143,000 in the Chota province, but they complain of never having had support from the state, which they view as biased towards urban centers like the capital Lima. —AFP

security, labor and civil protection ministries to the area. "We are watching and in coordination with municipal and state authorities," he tweeted. "We hope that the rescue is favorable for the families and for everyone." Coahuila, the country's main coal-producing region, has seen a series of fatal mining accidents over the years. The worst was an explosion that claimed 65 lives at the Pasta de Conchos mine in 2006. The bodies of 63 of the miners are still at the site and the families have repeatedly appealed to the Mexican authorities to recover them. —AFP

International

Delhi, Mumbai ease lockdown as India COVID numbers fall

Markets and malls will operate on alternate days

NEW DELHI: Markets and shopping malls in New Delhi will be allowed to reopen from tomorrow in a further easing of the COVID-19 lockdown, the chief minister said as infections fall in major Indian cities after weeks of restrictions. Delhi Metro will also resume services at 50 percent capacity, the city's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said yesterday.

Markets and malls will operate on alternate days, with half of them open on any given day. Offices can also reopen at half capacity but Kejriwal urged people to still try to work from home.

The easing comes after Delhi allowed construction sites and factories to reopen last week. "They have been open for a week but the COVID-19 situation is still under control, and we have less than 500 fresh cases in the last 24 hours," Kejriwal said. "It is important to bring the economy back on track now that the COVID-19 situation improving. We pray that the situation remains the same."

The government of Maharashtra state, which includes India's economic powerhouse Mumbai, announced a five-level plan to ease restrictions depending on infection rates and hospital bed occupancy. In level-one areas-with infection rates below five percent

and hospital bed occupancy below 25 percent-all shops, restaurants and malls will be allowed to reopen.

But level-five districts-with infection rates over 20 percent-will remain under severe movement restrictions. Daily infections reported across India have dropped to about 120,000 from more than 400,000 in May, according to official statistics.

Deaths have also fallen, with 3,380 reported in the previous 24 hours, although this is widely seen as a major underestimate. At least 344,082 people in the country have lost their lives to the coronavirus, which is now surging in parts of rural India. Delhi reported about 400 new infections yesterday, down from about 25,000 daily cases when the lockdown was announced seven weeks earlier. The devastating surge was blamed on new virus variants and the government having allowed most activity to return to normal including mass religious and political gatherings.

India's vaccination programme meanwhile is making slow progress due to shortages, confusion and squabbling between the central government and state authorities. So far about 180 million people, only 14 percent of the population, have received one dose, and 45 million, or 3.4 percent, two shots. — AFP



NEW DELHI: People make their way through a wholesale food grain market during a lockdown imposed as a preventive measure to curb the spread of COVID-19 yesterday. — AFP

With homemade rifles, Myanmar groups take fight to junta

YANGON: At makeshift factories hidden in Myanmar's jungle, locals who have formed self-defence groups make rifles to take the fight to the military junta, but their homemade weapons don't always hit the mark.

Myanmar has been in chaos and its economy paralysed since the generals ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government in February, accusing it of fraud during 2020 elections. Several communities across Myanmar-especially in townships that have seen a high death toll at the hands of police-have formed local "defence forces".

At one workshop in Kayah state near the Thai border, an amateur gunsmith-pieces of wood strewn around him, the sounds of saws and hammering in the background-prepares to fit a trigger guard.

Another applies the final touches to the stock with a sander, before examining the finished product: a bolt-action rifle that would not look out of place in a WWI film. The performance of the homemade weapons is not always up to the exacting standards required in combat.

"One night, the military... shot at us with heavy

artillery," Ko John, a self-defence force member, told AFP. Junta soldiers then closed to within 200-300 feet (60-90 metres) of the group. "When we decided to shoot back at them, our guns did not fire as expected since they were homemade," he said.

"We called for support from our two snipers and we shot eight rounds at them but only six rounds were fired properly." As well as the rise of local self-defence forces, analysts believe hundreds of anti-coup protesters from Myanmar's towns and cities have trekked into insurgent-held areas to receive military training.

But part-time fighters know the odds are stacked against them in any confrontation with Myanmar's military-one of Southeast Asia's most battle-hardened and brutal. Ko John described being overwhelmed by superior numbers and weaponry during one recent encounter. "When we tried to capture the military camp, their helicopter arrived and the reinforcements from the helicopter shot down at us." Fighting has escalated in Kayah state in recent days, with locals accusing the military of using artillery shells that have landed in villages. After fleeing the clashes, Mar Ko, 36, and his family have been living in a makeshift shelter in the jungle for more than two weeks.

"The military shot at us with heavy weapons. That's why we ran from there and stay hiding here," he told AFP. "Now we are running out (of food) and we need rice, salt and oil... For the curry, we eat whatever we have like banana stem and jackfruit." — AFP



LONDON: Witness Uyghur teacher Qelbinur Sidik (L) gestures as she speaks on the first day of hearings at the "Uyghur Tribunal", a panel of UK-based lawyers and rights experts investigating alleged abuses against Uyghurs in China, in London. — AFP

'Uyghur Tribunal' hears allegations of rampant China abuses

LONDON: A London panel investigating the plight of Uyghurs in China on Friday heard witness testimony of torture and gang rapes, in a process slammed by Beijing as a mendacious smear. Witnesses described squalid conditions and brutality in camps in the northwestern Chinese region of Xinjiang, with one claiming a woman had died after undergoing forced sterilisation.

The nine UK-based jurors of the "Uyghur Tribunal", including lawyers and human rights experts, convened the first of two evidence sessions ahead of the intended publication of a report in December on whether China is guilty of genocide. "Allegations made against the PRC (People's Republic of China) are grave," tribunal chair Geoffrey Nice said at the opening of the first four-day session, adding that they included numerous breaches of the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

The tribunal is not affiliated with any government, and China has refused to participate, branding it a "machine producing lies". Beijing has slapped sanctions on Nice, a former UN war crimes prosecutor, and others involved. However, lawyers for the tribunal said the US and Australian governments had offered to provide relevant material, complementing thousands of pages of documentary evidence already compiled.

It was set up at the request of the World Uyghur Congress, the largest group representing exiled Uyghurs, which lobbies the international community to take action against China over alleged abuses in Xinjiang. But Nice and his colleagues have vowed that the panel's work will be "impartial" and led by evidence.

Cannot forget'

Qelbinur Sidik, an ethnic-Uzbek teacher from Xinjiang's capital Urumqi, said she was ordered by Communist Party bosses to teach Chinese in two fief and crowded "re-education" camps-one male and one female-for Uyghurs. The so-called students were made to wear shackles during hours-long classes, she told the

tribunal. "The police, the guards in the camp, they didn't see the male prisoners as human beings," Sidik said. "They enjoyed watching them being humiliated and their suffering was for them their joy."

Female prisoners were allegedly abused when they were taken for interrogation. "They were not only tortured but also raped, sometimes gang-raped," Sidik said. Forced sterilisation of Uyghur women was common and in one instance, a female prisoner died from the process, she added. Sidik said she was also subjected to forced sterilisation before she was given a visa to visit her daughter in the Netherlands and fled China.

"The things that I have witnessed and I experienced, I cannot forget even for a day," she said. "I am a woman myself, I have a daughter. I don't wish anyone to suffer like that." The tribunal also heard from Omir Bekali, a Kazakh national with Uyghur heritage, who was arrested when visiting family in Xinjiang on a visit from Kazakhstan.

At one point in his testimony he put on chains to show the panel how he had been held in a camp for over seven months. "For the first four days and nights, I was tortured intensely," he said. "I was hung from the ceiling," Bekali explained, adding that he was beaten all over his body and on the soles of his feet. He said his father had been killed and his brother left disabled following torture. "My father died and my sister and brother were branded terrorists," he told the tribunal.

'Pseudo tribunal'

Rights groups say up to one million Uyghurs and people from other ethnic-Turkic minorities are detained in internment camps in Xinjiang. The allegations heard at the tribunal are consistent with many other accounts emanating from the camps, leading the US government to declare that a genocide is underway. But China insists they are for the educational improvement of Xinjiang residents, to deter extremism and boost incomes.

"This pseudo tribunal has nothing to do with the law. It is embezzling the name of a 'tribunal' to engage in anti-China politics," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said. "This so-called tribunal has also entangled a group of people whose opposition to China is their profession and livelihood," he added, noting the backing of the World Uyghur Congress. Dolkun Isa, the president of the Congress who was granted asylum in Germany, also addressed the panel. — AFP



SIEM REAP: File photo shows Magawa, an African giant pouched rat, wearing his gold medal received from PDSA for his work in detecting landmines, in Siem Reap. — AFP

Bomb-sniffing rat retires

PHNOM PENH: A giant African pouched rat called Magawa who spent years sniffing out landmines in the Cambodian countryside has stopped working and will enjoy a well-earned retirement eating bananas and peanuts, his employers told AFP.

Magawa, originally from Tanzania, was trained by the Belgian charity APOPO which says the rodent helped clear mines from 225,000 square metres of land in his five-year career, the equivalent of 42 football pitches. But after detecting 71 landmines and 38 items of unexploded ordnance "he is getting a bit tired", Michael Heiman, the charity's programme manager in Cambodia, told AFP yesterday.

"The best thing to do is to retire him." Millions of landmines were laid in Cambodia between 1975 and 1998, causing tens of thousands of casualties. APOPO trained Magawa in his native Tanzania to detect the chemical compound within explosives by rewarding

him with tasty treats-his favourites being bananas and peanuts.

He alerts de-miners by scratching the earth. Magawa can scurry across an area the size of a tennis court in just 30 minutes, something that would take four days using a conventional metal detector. He is big enough to be attached to a leash as he goes about his business but light enough not to set off mines.

In his autumn years, Magawa will spend more time doing what he loves, says Heiman-eating bananas and peanuts. In September last year the rodent won the animal equivalent of Britain's highest civilian honour for bravery because of his uncanny knack for uncovering landmines and unexploded ordnance. Magawa was the first rat to receive a PDSA medal in the 77 years of the awards, joining an illustrious band of brave canines and felines-and even a pigeon.

The group says 20 newly trained rats that recently arrived in Cambodia have just received their accreditation from the authorities to start landmine detection work. But it will be a tough challenge following in Magawa's footsteps. Magawa is a "very exceptional rat", Heiman said. "Obviously we are going to miss him in operations." — AFP

told AFP. "I won't take the vaccine because it has many side effects. People get sick after getting vaccines."

In other states, reports have emerged of people jumping into rivers or fleeing into forests just to escape mobile health teams. Hom Kumari, a health worker at Bhatau Jamalpur village in Uttar Pradesh, said some locals seemed impossible to convince. "What do we tell someone who says, 'If I'm destined to live, I will, even without the vaccine'?", she asked.

Health facilities are also few and far between and some people believe that going to a public hospital is more dangerous than staying away.

"People who went to hospital never came back," another villager in Nuran Khera, who gave his first name as Kuldip, told AFP. Kumar said that when his wife fell sick, a private clinic wanted 50,000 rupees (\$700) in advance to treat her. A doctor at a public hospital said to take her home. "My neighbours started saying she has corona. They were frightened," he added. "I took care of her and on the third day she was back on her feet."

Communication key

Coronavirus has also dealt the Indian economy a heavy blow, and villagers are often more worried about making ends meet, said community health specialist Rajib Dasgupta. "It's extremely difficult to communicate why vaccination is important until some of those distressed conditions are alleviated," Dasgupta told AFP. Experts say that India needs to apply the lessons learnt in its polio vaccination campaign in the 2000s of children under five.

The programme succeeded after trusted community leaders were involved to spread the message to parents that inoculation was safe. Using a similar approach, religious leaders in Uttar Pradesh were recently called in to encourage their followers to get vaccinated for coronavirus. Navneet Singh, who oversees immunisation efforts in Haryana's Jind district, says that face-to-face communication had helped ensure that nearly 70 percent of over-45s in Kalwa and neighbouring villages have received at least one shot. Kalwa health worker Sheela Devi said her "heart was pounding" when her name was included in the vaccination list, but she was reassured when she saw the local doctor getting the shot. — AFP

'Deaths after shots'

This fear pervades despite the sight of bodies dumped in rivers and hundreds of shallow graves suggesting that COVID-19 is raging in India's hinterland where 70 percent of the 1.3-billion population lives. In Nuran Khera village in Haryana, residents are reluctant to get inoculated even though they said many households reported having fever — and dozens of people dying. "Even after opening up a vaccine centre here, nobody is ready to take it," villager Rajesh Kumar, 45,

SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2021

Business

Facebook imposes 2-year Trump ban, revises rules for politicians

‘Ex-president deserved maximum punishment for violating platform rules’

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook on Friday banned former US president Donald Trump for two years, saying he deserved the maximum punishment for violating platform rules over a deadly attack by his supporters on the US Capitol. The punishment will be effective from January 7, when Trump was booted off the social media giant, and comes after Facebook's independent oversight board said the indefinite ban imposed initially should be reviewed.

“Given the gravity of the circumstances that led to Mr Trump's suspension, we believe his actions constituted a severe violation of our rules which merit the highest penalty available under the new enforcement protocols,” Facebook vice president of global affairs Nick Clegg said in a post. In updating its policies, Facebook also said it will no longer give politicians blanket immunity for deceptive or abusive content based on their comments being newsworthy.

At the end of Trump's two-year ban, Facebook will enlist experts to assess whether his activity on the platform still threatens public safety, according to Clegg. “If we determine that there is still a serious risk to public safety, we will extend the restriction for a set period of time and continue to re-evaluate until

that risk has receded,” Clegg said.

When Trump's suspension is lifted, he will face strict sanctions that could rapidly escalate to permanent removal for rule-breaking, according to Clegg. Last month, the independent oversight board said Facebook was justified in ousting Trump for his comments regarding the deadly January 6 rampage at the US Capitol but that the platform should not have applied an “indeterminate and standardless penalty of indefinite suspension.”

Trump denounces ‘insult’

Trump said in a statement the ban was an “insult” to voters, renewing his false claims that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him. “They shouldn't be allowed to get away with this censoring and silencing,” Trump said. Trump also took a jab at Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, who attended a White House dinner with the former president in 2019.

“Next time I'm in the White House there will be no more dinners, at his request, with Mark Zuckerberg and his wife,” Trump said. “It will be all business!” Zuckerberg has long maintained private companies should not be the arbiters of truth. “American democracy doesn't belong to Silicon Valley; it

belongs to the American people,” Clegg said in a podcast with Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution.

“And it's the legislators and politicians of this country who in the end have to govern the rules that prevail.” Some activists criticized Facebook for even opening the door to reinstating Trump.

Angelo Carusone of left-leaning watchdog Media Matters for America called Facebook's move dangerous, saying if Trump is reinstated, “the platform will remain a simmering cauldron of extremism, disinformation and violence.” Activists in a group that calls itself The Real Facebook Oversight Board said: “Facebook shouldn't have needed a \$130 million Oversight Board and a team of law professors to tell them dictators and authoritarians were running wild on their platform.”

White House press secretary Jen Psaki, when asked about the Facebook decision, said a social media platform which is disseminating information to millions of Americans, “has a responsibility to crack down on disinformation... whether it's about the election or even about the vaccine.” Trump was suspended from Facebook and Instagram after posting a video during the attack by his fired-up supporters challenging his elec-



In this file photo illustration taken on May 04, 2021, a phone screen displays a Facebook logo with the official portrait of former US President Donald Trump on the background in Arlington, Virginia. —AFP

tion loss, in which he told them: “We love you, you're very special.”

The oversight panel had called on Facebook to justify why his ban should be permanent. “The steps Facebook has committed to today will contribute to

greater clarity, consistency and transparency in the way the company moderates content, and promote public safety, defend human rights and respect freedom of expression,” the board said in a release. —AFP

Indonesian women take on plastic waste brick by brick

JAKARTA: Alarmed by the mountains of plastic waste leaching into Indonesia's waters, two best friends are taking on the environmental menace by turning crisp bags and shampoo packets into paving bricks.

Ovy Sabrina and Novita Tan launched Rebricks after their country drew headlines as the second-biggest producer of marine waste in the world, behind China. Indonesia has pledged to reduce plastic waste by some 75 percent over the next four years—a mammoth task in the Southeast Asian nation of nearly 270 million people.

The pair got their start two years ago visiting food stalls across the capital Jakarta on the hunt for discarded instant coffee sachets, dried noodle packs and shopping bags. Thanks to a viral social media campaign, the pair now receive reams of plastic waste packaging from donors across the country.

That rubbish flows in daily and is piled high at the little firm's Jakarta-area factory. “It shows how Indonesians have a strong awareness of recycling plastic waste, but they don't know where to do it,” 34-year-

old Sabrina said.

Rebricks staff mulch the packaging into tiny flakes that are then mixed with cement and sand and molded into building blocks. They make look like conventional bricks, but break one open and it is dotted with flecks of plastic.

Tons of trash

The two entrepreneurs say their method diverts waste that would have otherwise ended up in a landfill or the ocean—about four tons so far and counting. “Every day, we can stop about 88,000 pieces of plastic sachets from littering the environment,” Tan said, adding that the company has produced more than 100,000 bricks. Some Indonesian cities have banned single-use plastics, but waste recycling is still rare.

The problem was underscored in 2018 by the discovery of a dead sperm whale that washed ashore in a national park with nearly six kilograms (13 pounds) of plastic waste in its stomach. The Rebricks pair spent two years trying to perfect their method, and picked up hints from a building materials business run by



JAKARTA: Rebrick founder Novita Tan sorting packages of plastic waste sent by supporters, used to form bricks that use plastic mixed with cement and sand, at a brick-making factory in Jakarta. — AFP

Sabrina's family. Some Indonesian entrepreneurs are molding plastic waste into flower vases, umbrellas or purses. But the two women decided to focus on bricks so they could reach more customers. “If our approach was to sell expensive decorative goods, there would only be a few people buying our products,” Sabrina said.

The two women hope to expand

their company, which employs four people, and said they were in talks with a big consumer-goods firm about a possible collaboration.

Customer Andi Subagio said he had used the eco-bricks for repaving a restaurant walkway. “They're not as fragile as conventional bricks because of the plastic inside,” he said. “And it's about the same price.” — AFP

US hiring drops as reopening hits turbulence

WASHINGTON: The United States added 559,000 jobs last month as hard-hit sectors rehired workers laid off during the worst days of the pandemic, but analysts warned the virus was continuing to complicate the economy despite massive government stimulus.

The Labor Department data under-shot analysts' expectations for a lofty rebound in hiring enabled by accelerating COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, following the surprisingly weak employment gains in April. Even so, the jobs gains pushed the unemployment rate down to 5.8 percent from 6.1 percent in April.

Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said the report indicated unemployed Americans were staying away from workplaces as companies rehired, which she blamed on the persistent aftershocks from business restrictions meant to stop the virus from spreading. “Job growth remains surprisingly sluggish in an economy that is no longer facing capacity con-

straints,” she said in an analysis, adding, “Ongoing pandemic-related issues including childcare and health concerns are likely a constraint on job growth.”

That echoes widespread reports from businesses about the difficulty filling open positions. President Joe Biden acknowledged the bumpy recovery but said his bet on the \$1.9 trillion pandemic rescue measure he signed into law in March was paying off, helping the economy recover strongly from the mass layoffs that put tens of millions of people out of work as the pandemic began in March 2020.

“This is progress, historic progress” after “our worst crisis in 100 years,” Biden said of the data. He said the country was leading the world in recovering from the pandemic with two million jobs created in his first four months in office. “No other major economy in the world is going as fast,” he said.

Bars and restaurants rehire

The US economy still has a long road to travel before it can return to the record-low unemployment seen before the pandemic hit. The May data showed there are still 7.6 million jobs yet to be regained from February 2020. “We're going to hit some bumps along the way,” Biden said. “You can't reboot the world's largest economy like



A 'Now Hiring' sign is posted in front of an ice-cream shop in Los Angeles, California. —AFP

flipping on a light switch.”

Still, the report contained important evidence that people who wanted jobs were getting them, with 431,000 people leaving the ranks of the long-term unemployed, dropping the total to a still-high 3.8 million in May. Sectors that were badly damaged by pandemic business restrictions made up the bulk of the employment gains last month, with the leisure and hospitality sector adding 292,000 jobs, two-thirds of which were in businesses like bars and restaurants.

Accommodations added 35,000 jobs, and amusement, gambling and

recreation businesses added 58,000, but the leisure and hospitality sector overall remains short 2.5 million positions compared to February 2020, the report said.

Brian Deese, director of the White House National Economic Council, noted the jobs report was based on data for the week of May 12, and since then vaccinations have increased further as business restrictions eased. “Since that period, an additional 21 million adult age Americans have gotten fully vaccinated, and so we're making progress even since this snapshot in time,” Deese told reporters. —AFP

India warns Twitter to comply with new IT rules

NEW DELHI: India yesterday issued “one last notice” to Twitter to comply with new IT regulations that the social media giant says threaten privacy guarantees. Digital rights activists say New Delhi's latest rules could be used by the government to identify authors of critical posts on social media sites.

But the government argues they are needed to investigate national security offences and cases involving sexually explicit material.

India's electronics and IT ministry said yesterday it was “dismayed” over Twitter's “non-compliance” and flagged the May 26 deadline, when the new rules came into force. “The refusal to comply demonstrates Twitter's lack of commitment and efforts towards providing a safe experience for people of India on its platforms,” its notice said.

“Needless to state, such non-compliance will lead to unintended consequences including Twitter losing exemption from liability as an intermediary,” the ministry said. “As a gesture of goodwill, Twitter Inc is hereby given one last notice to immediately comply with the rules.” The regulations demand that social media companies give details of the “first originator” of posts deemed to undermine India's sovereignty, state security or public order.

Tech companies are also required to appoint a chief compliance officer for the rules and a “grievance redressal officer”, both based in India. New Delhi last week said most major social media sites had already shared details of their chief compliance officer, contact person and grievance officer, including Koo, ShareChat, Telegram, LinkedIn, Google, Facebook and WhatsApp.

The row between India and Twitter escalated in May after the tech firm marked a tweet from a ruling party spokesman as “manipulated media”. New Delhi accused Twitter and other US tech giants of “double standards” in taking down disputed content. Delhi police visited Twitter's office to serve a notice ordering it to join an official inquiry into the “manipulated media” label—a move the company described as “intimidation”. There was no immediate comment from Twitter on the latest notice from New Delhi yesterday. —AFP



Business

A first in the region, Ooredoo rolls out eSIM online purchasing process

Facility introduced in partnership with PACI and through 'Kuwait Mobile ID' app

KUWAIT: In continuation of the its ongoing digital change efforts to efficiently attain digital transformation, demonstrate flexibility and efficiency, and after witnessing exquisite results triggered by its collaboration with the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI), Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, is now the first telecom operator in the country and region to offer customers the ability to conduct a complete purchasing process of a new eSIM online and without any physical interaction or signature utilizing "Kuwait Mobile ID", a mobile application provided by the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) that provides users with a digital civil ID accredited for identification and digital signature for both government and private sector.

Ooredoo customers can now purchase and subscribe to a new eSIM prepaid or postpaid plan, or transfer from the traditional SIM to an eSIM utilizing the "Kuwait Mobile ID" and My Ooredoo applications.

Today, the availability of digital solutions and services has become a necessity in order for companies to



Abdulaziz Al-Babtain

improve the customer experience and increase productivity. Hence, since the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic; flexibility, mobility and digitization have been key factors for business continuity and customer satisfaction. Thus, Ooredoo Kuwait has overcome itself once again in taking major steps in deploying the most efficient features and technologies that not only improve the customer experience, but also enhance the country's economy and digital infrastructure that go in line with the Kuwait vision 2035 "New Kuwait".

The eSIM (Embedded SIM) is the equivalent of a digital or electronic version of the traditional SIM, which gives customers the opportunity to store multiple

SIMs in the smartphone and is activated by scanning the QR code from the phone's camera. Note that the eSIM is built into the phone and cannot be removed, and it only works with devices that support it.

Customers can activate the eSIM with simple easy steps: visit Ooredoo eShop, select the phone number, package and commitment, enter your civil ID number and verify it through the "Kuwait Mobile ID" app, choose the payment method and use the camera to scan the QR and follow the instructions on your screen.

Abdulaziz Al-Babtain, Chief Executive Officer, Ooredoo Kuwait, expressed his pride in this remarkable achievement and said: "This is only the tip of the iceberg; our long-term vision still holds unique plans that will continue sitting us apart from the competition game. The objective is building drivers of continues and sustainable change that will drastically enrich our customers' experience".

"It goes without saying that the customer comes first, thus, simplifying the process was critical, so we have used simpler language in notifications and texts,

we have also reduced the information required to fill out the form, however, our collaboration with the Public Authority for Civil Information enables us to extract the needed information directly from their database, which raises the level of security, as the service is designed according to the highest international security standards," Al-Babtain added.

"I take pride of all the experts of Ooredoo Kuwait, who have worked efficiently and effectively to make this vision become reality, which in result gave us the honor of being the first telecom operator in the country and region to offer this feature. I look forward to hit more milestones and raise the bar of competition in the future," Al-Babtain concluded.

It is noteworthy that early in 2021, Ooredoo, has officially announced the adaptation and utilization of "Kuwait Mobile ID" for secure authentication of identities at any of its branches, sales channels, online or through the My Ooredoo application. Such collaboration positioned Ooredoo Kuwait as the first telecom company in the country to adapt this application.



KFH wins 'Best Bank in Kuwait', 'Best Islamic Bank in Middle East'

KUWAIT: In another achievement added to its track record and list of awards it received, Kuwait Finance House (KFH) won four awards at the thirteenth edition of the EMEA Finance Middle East Banking Awards 2021. KFH was named the 'Best Bank in Kuwait', the 'Best Islamic Bank in the Middle East' and the 'Best Islamic Bank in Kuwait'. In addition, KFH- Bahrain won the "Best Islamic Bank in Bahrain" Award.

Regarded as one of the most prestigious Middle East banking awards, the EMEA Finance Awards aim to honor banking institutions for their financial performance, services quality standards and banking sector excellence. The illustrious finance magazine awards are based on robust criteria in selecting the best banks, such as the bank's market share, its products market growth, profitability, products and services innovations as well as the strategic quality of its operations.

The awards demonstrate the efficiency and excellence of KFH in offering high-quality innovative products through its advanced infrastructure despite the challenges in 2020. Coinciding with COVID-19, the awards reflect the importance of KFH's digital transformation strategy that emphasized the prudent management and proactive approach of the bank in adopting technology and innovation and focusing on reinforcing customer experience by delivering the most advanced banking solutions.

The digital services offered by KFH witnessed big boom through launching a series of innovative digital banking solutions thanks to the continuous improvement in products and services offered by the bank and its keenness to keep up with innovations and developments in the global banking sector and to boost the banking industry in Kuwait. These solutions include, for example and not limited to, "opening bank account online" service for citizens and resi-

dents, digital signature service in personal financing products that includes the electronic handling of all paper documents for personal finance transactions and the electronic forms system that converts traditional banking forms into secure electronic ones. In addition, KFH was the first bank in the world to launch the service of instant card issuance without a prior request through over 100 ATMs.

In addition to its high reputation in offering innovative banking solutions, KFH employs all its capabilities and profound banking experience in providing the best banking services, complementing its leading role in supporting the economy and enhancing the vital role of the Kuwaiti banking sector as well as improving customers experience, making life easier for them by sparing them the necessity of visiting a branch and implementing fast and secure means to achieve their aspirations and enrich their life style."

As part of its developmental role, KFH focuses on supporting the financial inclusion that plays key factor in achieving the sustainable development goals through providing comprehensive series of products and services that suit all categories of customers based on the easiest innovative procedures to enable them to manage their money and savings in a secure and safe manner.

Thanks to the efforts it exerts to keep up with the latest developments in FinTech and digitization by using AI, KFH has achieved significant and well-deserved leaps in the digital banking services that would enable the bank to experience the digital banking future, maintain its leading position in digital solutions and deliver exclusive and developed service offerings that meet customer aspirations.

It is worth noting that the British financial magazine, EMEA Finance, covers dynamic financial markets in Europe, Middle East and Africa using specialized analysis made by team of experts.

'Repressive action'

Amnesty International on Friday condemned the moved, calling on Nigeria to "immediately reverse the unlawful suspension". "This repressive action is a clear attempt to censor dissent & stifle the civic space," Human Rights Watch researcher Anietie Ewang said.

Twitter said that the move was "deeply concerning". "We're investigating and will provide updates when we know more," the company said in a statement. Nigeria in 2019 had announced it would tighten regulations on social media to fight fake news and disinformation, sparking concerns over freedom of expression.

Twitter on Wednesday deleted a remark on the president's account after he referred to the country's civil war in a warning about recent unrest in the southeast. The 78-year-old president, a former general, referred to "those misbehaving" in recent violence in the southeast, where officials blame separatists for attacks on police and election offices. "Those of us in the fields for 30 months, who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand," the president had posted on Twitter.

Reacting to the government's decision to suspend the platform, the UK's deputy high commissioner in Nigeria Gill Atkinson said "any action taken by government must be measured, proportionate and not suppress basic freedoms." Several countries including China and Turkey have come under fire for putting restrictions on social media platforms such as Twitter.

In February Twitter condemned Myanmar for blocking access to its platform as part of a crackdown on social media, days after a coup that saw Aung San Suu Kyi and other civilian leaders jailed. — AFP

UK strikes post-Brexit trade deal with 3 European countries

LONDON: Britain announced Friday a free-trade agreement with three European countries-major fishing neighbor Norway as well as Iceland and Liechtenstein in its latest move to boost trade ties post-Brexit.

The deal, agreed in principle and which builds on "an economic relationship already worth £21.6 billion (\$30 billion, 25 billion euros)", will slash tariffs on British food products, International Trade Secretary Liz Truss said. Britain formally left the European Union in January 2020 after nearly five decades of membership, and quit its single market and customs union at the start of this year.

Since then, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has replicated or rolled over existing trade agreements with the bloc and several countries, vowing that they will be more advantageous than those negotiated by the EU. London is currently in advanced trade deal discussions with Australia and has held early talks with India, New Zealand and the United States.

Talks are also due to begin soon with Canada and Mexico. Trade between non-EU member Norway and Britain, separated by the North Sea and key fishing spots, amounted to £20.4 billion last year. Access to Britain's rich fishing waters was a major sticking point in post-Brexit talks with the EU. "Reduced import tariffs on shrimps, prawns and haddock will reduce costs for UK fish processing, helping support some 18,000 jobs in that industry in Scotland" and northern England, said Friday's statement.

The agreement also "significantly cuts tariffs as high as 277 percent" for exports of some British cheeses to Norway. "There are also tariff reductions and quotas on pork, poultry and other goods. UK wines and spirits including Scotch Whisky will also now be recognized in Norway and Iceland," the statement added. Exports to the three non-EU countries will meanwhile be done without the need for any paperwork.

"All documents, contracts and signatures can be electronic, allowing goods to move seamlessly across borders and saving businesses time and money," the statement said. Norway meanwhile stressed that the deal would not lead to an increased quotas for British beef and cheeses, reassuring the country's farmers as the center-right government trails in the polls ahead of legislative elections in September.



OSLO: (Left to right) Norway's Minister of Fisheries and Seafood Odd Emil Ingebrigtsen, Minister of Trade and Industry Iselin Nybo, Prime Minister Erna Solberg and Minister of Agriculture and Food Olaug Bollestad address a press conference on the status of free trade negotiations with the United Kingdom, Friday. — AFP

Britain is Norway's biggest trading partner after the EU, accounting for 22 percent of its exports, including natural gas and fish. Friday's agreement also calls for caps on the charges mobile operators are allowed to charge each other for international mobile roaming, and mutual recognition of professional qualifications, such as nurses, lawyers and vets.

Second-best option

Prior to Brexit, Britain, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein had signed a temporary agreement enabling them to continue to trade goods freely pending a broader, permanent agreement. Speaking to reporters in Oslo, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg hailed the new deal as "the biggest free trade agreement we've ever had." Solberg—a pro-European in a country that has twice rejected EU membership—noted nonetheless that "a free trade agreement will never be as good as the European Economic Area."

With Brexit, Britain also quit the EEA, which allows for the free movement of people, goods, services and capital between the EU, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. "A free trade agreement means more bureaucracy and added costs for businesses and citizens, and is less dynamic than what we have in the EEA," Solberg said. "The agreement doesn't eliminate all the obstacles to trade either. Some are not resolved," she added. The agreement must still be approved by the Norwegian parliament, where Solberg's government is in the minority. —AFP



DUBLIN: The sun sets behind the Burbo Bank Offshore Wind Farm in Liverpool Bay in the Irish Sea in north west England. Ireland's economy grew by nearly 8 percent in the first quarter of 2021, the country's statistics office said Friday. — AFP

Irish economy grows 7.8%, buoyed by multinationals

DUBLIN: Ireland's economy grew by nearly 8 percent in the first quarter of 2021, the country's statistics office said Friday, as multinational firms' revenues helped it continue to buck neighbors' pandemic downturns. Figures released by the Central Statistics Office showed gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 7.8 percent during the January through March period—an increase of 97.4 billion euros (\$118 billion).

The surge was fuelled by a robust 5.8 percent growth in exports over the period, despite Ireland being gripped by a coronavirus lockdown at the time. Many multinational firms, particularly US technology and pharmaceutical outfits, have established bases in Ireland to capitalize on its attractively low corporation tax regime. However, their figures have a warping effect on the economic statistics of Ireland—a nation of just five million people—and the finance ministry consistently notes GDP is not an accurate yardstick of growth. Ireland made headlines in March when it registered a GDP jump of 3.4 percent in

2020 thanks to the multinationals, defying the global downturn caused by the pandemic.

The CSO figures released Friday also showed Ireland was operating a trade surplus of more than 1.3 billion euros for goods with Britain in the first quarter of 2021. However merchandise imports from the UK dropped by 1.9 billion euros year-on-year, as Ireland's domestic economy was slowed by pandemic restrictions and new post-Brexit checks came into effect.

Finance minister Paschal Donohoe said the GDP growth revealed Friday was "exceptionally strong". "This was driven by a relatively small number of sectors with, in some cases, the increased activity generating limited domestic employment," he added in a statement. The finance ministry said much of the growth was driven by "contract manufacturing".

In this process, an overseas firm manufactures goods for an Irish incorporated company. When they are exported to a third nation they count as an Irish export despite having never been in the country. Donohoe said Ireland's vaccination program and people's efforts during lockdowns had allowed the government to lift gradually many restrictions, which has already "supported economic recovery in the second quarter". The non-essential retail sector opened in mid-May after a four and a half month hiatus, while the hospitality sector is due to restart trading outdoors on Monday. Around 5,000 people have died from coronavirus in Ireland. — AFP

Twitter restricted in Nigeria after government decree

ABUJA: Telecoms operators in Nigeria restricted Twitter yesterday, a day after the government announced its indefinite suspension for activities "capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence". International human rights groups have already condemned the move.

The suspension in Africa's most populous country came two days after the social media giant deleted a tweet from President Muhammadu Buhari's account for violating its rules. "The Federal Government has suspended, indefinitely, the operations of the microblogging and social networking service, Twitter, in Nigeria," ministry of information and culture spokesman Segun Adeyemi said in a statement on Friday.

The Association of Licensed Telecoms Operators of Nigeria (ALTON) confirmed its members had received formal instructions from the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), the industry regulator to suspend access to Twitter. It said in a statement that a robust assessment of the request had been made and that members had "acted in compliance".

"Network data show that access to the Twitter platform and backend servers is now restricted on leading networks MTN, Globacom, Airtel and 9mobile," the London-based internet monitor Netblocks wrote on its website yesterday.

Business

NBK Economic Report

Kuwait's real estate sales return to pre-COVID levels

Transaction volumes in residential sector up 144% y/y in 1Q21

KUWAIT: Real estate sales, previously depressed due to the pandemic and the national lockdown that brought sales to a historical low in 2Q20, have rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, averaging a monthly KD 280 million in 1Q21, up 26 percent y/y. The solid sales extended through April, which saw KD 250 million, and came despite ongoing weakness in the commercial and investment sectors, where levels have only partially recovered from their 2Q20 lows, largely due to the deterioration of business and labor market conditions in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, residential sector sales proved resilient, swiftly rebounding following the easing of lockdown measures in July, and gathering strength supported by pent-up demand and increased offerings in several emerging areas. It is also worth noting that overall sales, though decent, were likely affected in April by the start of the Holy month of Ramadan, usually a slower month for real estate trading. Looking ahead, we expect the residential activity to remain solid in the near to mid-term, backed by a strong demand base and somewhat limited supply, while the weakness in the commercial and investment sectors will likely take some time to subside as the overall economy continues to recover.

Residential sector

The strength in aggregate real estate sales since the rebound last summer stemmed mostly from elevated volumes in the residential sector. Sales averaged a monthly KD 215 million in 1Q21, stemming from a monthly average of 675 deals, up 25 percent and 148 percent y/y respectively. More recently in April, residential sales totaled KD 199 million from 748 transactions, contrasting sharply with the pre-pandemic average of 371 transactions per month in 2019. We believe the higher volume is being driven by pent-up demand after several months of non-trading in the lockdown months of 2Q20, coupled with solid fundamentals in the sector including its resilience to pandemic pressures. Robust fundamentals stem from limited supply and a growing national population, and are supported by good liquidity and minimal job losses for citizens during the pandemic, keeping demand stable. Moreover, as profitability in the investment sector comes under increasing pressure from vacancies and falling rents, there are signs of investors turning increasingly to the residential sector for investment opportunities. An additional driver is the increased offerings in the relatively more active and less saturated emerging areas such as the Sabah Al-Ahmad, Saad Al-Abdulla, and Jaber Al-Ahmad residential areas.

While yet to be confirmed, there are some indications that point to moderate price gains in some parts of the residential sector, which would have contributed to the higher sales levels seen in recent quarters. Though the strong activity and sales in the residential sector may ease in coming months as pent-up demand fades, we expect it to be stable in the near-to-medium term, as strong demand by nationals should persist.

Investment sector

Investment sector (i.e. apartment) sales amounted to a relatively weak KD 39 million in April, down 23 percent m/m, but still up significantly from the historical lows of April 2020 when the national lockdown was in effect. Still, Investment sector sales remained well below pre-pandemic levels, amid a marked decline in monthly volumes reflecting weaker demand and a decline in the expatriate population - who dominate demand for this type of property. This adds to the pre-existing weakness in the sector, which faced declining rents, lower prices, and rising vacancies prior to the pandemic, arising from a period of oversupply and slower economic growth.

Although the picture on rents is not fully clear (the rents component of the CPI has been unusually stable), anecdotal evidence points to lower rents or discounts being commonly offered to new or renewing tenants given prevailing softness in the market.

We expect a full recovery to take some time, especially in light of a relatively soft economic recovery, job nationalization efforts, and the recently proposed measures to address the demographic imbalance by imposing caps on the number foreign residents.

Commercial sector

Commercial sector sales amounted to just KD 12 million in April, doubling from a year earlier but still well down on its averages for both 2019 and even 2H20. Low volumes were a contributing factor, with 7 deals in April, compared to an average of 38 deals per month in 2019. The commercial sector - which normally comprises a minority share in total sales - was negatively affected by weak business activity extending beyond the lockdown, with reports of businesses struggling to pay rent, leading to rent reductions and deferred payments for some tenants, especially severely impacted retail tenants with high rents in malls. As the economy and the business environment picks up supported by progress on the vaccine front, a gradual recovery may get underway for the sector, but weakness may still take some time to subside. This is especially true given the large number of distressed SMEs and a considerable loss of expat jobs, which will could continue to weigh on demand for commercial space and prices in some areas.

Draft mortgage law

On a related note, the much anticipated draft mortgage law was recently approved by the government and passed to parliament for discussion.



Although a sign of progress, the law could take some time to be approved. The law aims to ease the rising pressure on the state-owned Kuwait Credit Bank (KCB) to provide housing loans to citizens, especially given the current liquidity constraints faced by the government. Although the details of the law are yet to be confirmed, some elements are apparent (though still subject to change). The loans of up to KD 70,000 will be sourced from commercial banks rather than the KCB, but with a shorter maturity of 30 years rather than the 58 years under the current arrangement, in effect nearly doubling the monthly installment to just under KD 200, a popular area of concern. The law also provides for repossession of the home in the event of default, though it is unclear whether the government will step in to mitigate this risk on homeowners. Further, all interest payments to banks generated from the loans are to be assumed by the government. It follows that the residential sector should receive a boost as easier access to financing lifts demand, though the supply side will need to be addressed if excessive price gains are to be mitigated.

EU, UK probe Facebook ad data use

BRUSSELS: The European Union and Britain launched parallel competition probes on Friday into whether Facebook uses data from advertisers to unfairly dominate the online classifieds market. The US social media behemoth sells classified advertising on its Marketplace service, but also gathers data from commercial advertising that may give it an unfair advantage—a charge the firm declared “without merit”. Investigators will also probe whether Facebook’s single user log-in allows it to unfairly use data gathered across its social media, dating app and advertising platforms.

The cases opened by the European Commission and Britain’s Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) are separate, but the regulators are working closely together. “Facebook collects vast troves of data on the activities of users of its social network and beyond,” EU vice-president and competition chief Margrethe Vestager said.

“We will look in detail at whether this data gives Facebook an undue competitive advantage in particular on the online classified ads sector, where people buy and sell goods every day, and where Facebook also competes with companies from which it collects data,” she said.

“In today’s digital economy, data should not be used in ways that distort competition.” A Facebook spokesperson responded in an email: “We will continue to cooperate fully with the investigations to demonstrate that they are without merit.”

“We are always developing new and better services to meet evolving demand from people who use Facebook. ‘Marketplace’ and ‘Dating’ offer people more choices and both products operate in a highly competitive environment with many large incumbents.”

Marketplace ads

The formal probe follows a preliminary investigation focused on Facebook’s Marketplace classifieds service—available to most of its three billion users. Companies advertising on Marketplace have to provide data to Facebook which the European Commission said led to concerns that the internet giant may distort competition. “Facebook could, for instance, receive precise information on users’ preferences from its competitors’ advertisement activities and use such data in order to adapt Facebook Marketplace,” it said.

The EU executive is also concerned about how Marketplace is integrated into Facebook’s core social network platform—“a form of tying which gives it an advantage in reaching customers and forecloses competing online classified ads services”. There is no deadline for the probe to be wrapped up, with the commission saying its duration depended on factors including the complexity of the case. —AFP

NBK announces winners of NBK mobile banking app prizes

KUWAIT: In an effort to increase its customers’ reliance on digital channels for their transactions and encourage them to use e-payment solutions, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) has launched a campaign that gives the chance to customers signing up to NBK Mobile Banking App or opting to NBK Push Notifications instead of SMS notifications to enter a draw on valuable prizes, in collaboration with Huawei.

The campaign lasting for three months until 10 July 2021 also gives chances to enter the draw for all customers who opted to NBK Push Notifications available for all NBK Mobile Banking users, since it

was first launched.

NBK announced Fatimeh Ali Melyouni, Shemali Ali Al Shemali and Phani Kumar Katurias the lucky winners, who expressed their great pleasure, not only with the prizes received, but also with the full-fledged banking experience combining advanced banking services and exclusive rewards.

The winners stated that NBK Mobile Banking meets all their needs, by enabling them to make all their transactions, anytime, anywhere. On this occasion, Hala Al-Shoaibi, Head of Digital Service Quality Management, National Bank of Kuwait said: “We are pleased with customers’ remarkable interest in using NBK Mobile Banking as well as all digital channels, thanks to the digital services and solutions regarded as the most advanced in Kuwait.”

“Our digital services are a key pillar of the full-fledged and integrated banking experience we are keen to provide to our customers, which is tailored to fit their needs and expectations,” added Al-Shoaibi.

NBK launches exquisite campaigns all year round, in line with NBK’s strategy to reward its customers through a variety of unique campaigns, draws and

which took place on 3rd May, 10th May, 17th May, 24th May & 31st May, 2021, under the supervision of the Ministry of

Commerce and Industry, underscores the Bank’s commitment to bolster digital channels, especially during the current

situation with COVID-19, to limit direct interaction wherever possible.

The winners are:

ABDULLAH MUHAMED SAED	AHMAD TAQI	ABBAS FADEL ALARYAN
ABDULLAH ALMEKHYAL	HUSSAIN ABDULAL	HASANEN ASGAR ALI
RAKAN ALBADER	MESHAL ALFAHAD	MOHAMAD L N ALAZEMI
MOUSA BOUSHAHRI	QASEM ABUOBAIDA	AMR AL MUHAREB
SALEM ALMASBAH	MUNTHER ALSHAREKH	SULIMAN ALENEZI

Miami, looking to be next crypto hotspot, hosts huge bitcoin event

MIAMI: Thousands of people have descended on Miami for a massive two-day bitcoin conference that opened Friday—a sign that the US city, in the midst of a tech boom, is hoping to become the next cryptocurrency hub.

“I don’t think there’s anything more important in my lifetime to work on” than bitcoin, given the flexibility it offers, billionaire entrepreneur Jack Dorsey, the co-founder of Twitter and payments firm Square, told a crowded auditorium.

“We don’t need the financial institutions that we have today. We have one that is thriving, that is sound, that is owned by the community, that is driven by the community,” said Dorsey, one of the keynote speakers at Bitcoin 2021. Dorsey tweeted Friday that Square was considering making a hardware wallet for safely storing bitcoin.

With 12,000 participants and all speaker sessions sold out, the Bitcoin 2021 trade show features exhibits from crypto mining companies, crypto traders and bitcoin exchange networks.

The conference was originally scheduled to take place in Los Angeles, but was moved due to tougher coronavirus restrictions in California. The line to get into the Mana Convention Center

in Miami’s trendy Wynwood neighborhood wrapped around the building. Everyone was in high spirits and there were no face masks to be seen. Beyond Dorsey, two of the other speakers were Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss, twin Harvard classmates of Mark Zuckerberg who sued him over claims he stole the idea for Facebook from them, and now run cryptocurrency exchange Gemini.

“We think bitcoin is gold 2.0,” Tyler said at a panel discussion. “When we get to Mars, what is the currency going to be in Mars? Dollars? No. Bitcoin.”

‘A movement’

So where does Miami fit into the picture? For David Abner, Gemini’s global head of business development, Miami is “centrally located, especially in the Americas, and there’s a lot of political support here.”

“I think they’ve spent time to understand it and think about the ramifications of bitcoin. And so they’re very supportive of the economy,” Abner told AFP, adding that cryptocurrency could revolutionize remittances sent back to Latin America. Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, who opened Bitcoin 2021, has become a bit of a celebrity in tech circles, for his intense efforts to turn the Magic City into a beachfront Silicon Valley. In February, the Republican mayor announced that the city would explore ways to do some of its financial transactions using cryptocurrency, including paying salaries to employees.

Earlier this week, venture capital firm Borderless Capital announced it was moving its

prizes, she mentioned. NBK Push Notifications enables NBK Mobile Banking App users to receive real-time alerts about account activities that include transaction details as an alternative for SMS notifications. The service allows customers to receive notifications 24/7, wherever they are, inside or outside Kuwait, as long as they are connected to the internet. NBK Push Notifications is a continuation of a number of services added to the NBK Mobile Banking App that are suitable for the fast-paced modern lifestyle, with dramatically increasing reliance on smartphones in daily life. These services also include NBK Geo Alerts, which allows customers to receive notifications about available offers and discounts on their smartphones at specific locations while shopping nearby.



Hala Al-Shoaibi

headquarters from Atlanta to Miami and launching a new \$25 million fund for local startups using blockchain technology. And the mayor announced the launch of MiamiCoin, a Miami-specific cryptocurrency that will allow investors to boost the city’s coffers while making money themselves. “This is not a moment. This is a movement,” Suarez said Friday.

‘A bit wary’

Since late last year, Miami has been attracting techies away from Silicon Valley and New York for a variety of reasons—thanks to Florida’s lack of state taxes and relatively lax coronavirus precautions, along with the city’s multicultural work force and proximity to Latin America. It’s not exactly clear how many have moved, but there are signs of growth — home prices are soaring, up nearly 35 percent in just a year, according to the Miami Association of Realtors.

But not everyone is happy. The Miami Herald warned in an editorial of the possible pitfalls of the city’s embrace of all things crypto. “Don’t get us wrong. We hope cryptocurrency—and the flashing neon welcome mat we’ve set out for the tech industry—elevate this city to new prosperity,” the paper said.

“Just don’t blame us for being a bit wary,” it said. “Because Miami has history, folks. We’ve been a smugglers’ paradise, the epicenter of the cocaine trade, a mecca for money laundering, ground zero for mortgage fraud...” “We worry about going through another boom-and-bust cycle or a wave that crashes and takes us all down with it. If we’re staking the city’s future on this, please, let’s not repeat the past.” —AFP

Business

Gulf Bank launches new initiative to support SMEs hit by pandemic

Bank expands services for SME segment to assist small companies

KUWAIT: In recognition of the importance of the small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector and in line with the strategic direction of the Central Bank of Kuwait, Gulf Bank has launched a new initiative to offer basic forms of assistance to SMEs. By adopting a more holistic approach, Gulf Bank aims to offer SMEs integrated solutions that go beyond financing, and engage with small businesses through partnerships with various sectors and specialized agencies.

It is worth-noting that Gulf Bank has issued financing conditions for individuals, SMEs, and other economic entities affected by the pandemic since the start of 2020, including the issuance of a draft guarantee law in April 2021 to rescue SMEs affected by the pandemic.

Regarding this initiative, the Assistant General Manager of Corporate Banking at Gulf Bank, Meshal Al-Wazzan, said: "We launched a digital platform to process requests from business owners



Meshal Al-Wazzan

who were affected by the pandemic, providing support to various companies through financing measures amounting to over KD 30 million. The Bank is currently looking forward to a more effective solution, and is awaiting the implementation of the draft law to rescue SMEs, through which the Kuwaiti government is set to guarantee 80 percent of

funding provided to businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. After fulfilling the legal requirements for consideration, the amount of financing provided to each applicant will be determined based on the customer's credit conditions, while ensuring due diligence to verify that the guar-

antee loan is deducted from public funds.

As part of Gulf Bank's strategic plan, the Corporate Banking Department is working to implement the digital transformation of all major operations and services provided to SMEs, which will be launching soon. Through these efforts and more, Gulf Bank aims to offer even more services that can support banking operations and contribute to the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises that are partnered with Gulf Bank.

Al-Wazzan added: "Gulf Bank is currently serving more than 7,000 companies through its business sector and across all branches. We currently offer companies the opportunity to conduct all their corporate banking transactions online, including collection and payment services, employee salary transfers, point-of-sale services, payment gateways and payment links, in addition to the ability to open all kinds of accounts, issue debit cards, and apply for SME financing solutions."

In an effort to further enhance its customer experience, Gulf Bank also launched a dedicated website through which SMEs can communicate with the Bank to inquire about commercial banking services and facilitate both financing and non-financing requests. For more information regarding the various services Gulf Bank provides to SMEs, the Bank has launched a dedicated website: <https://www.e-gulfbank.com/en/sme>

Companies can also apply for financing through Gulf Bank's dedicated SME website, indicating the company's basic information, financial history, and financing priorities. Upon entering the relevant company information, business owners can then direct the form and any relevant information to the designated email provided. Upon receiving the request, Gulf Bank will review the client's request and evaluate funding options accordingly. If economic viability is proven, the Bank will contact the SME for next steps.

How are robots redefining education?

By Pavel Makarevich

Technological advancements like robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) have transformed the workplace in the twenty-first century. It is challenging to manage our day-to-day activities without software, algorithms, or computers in today's era. The global education system has also gone through several changes over the years. Not long ago, someone who needed information or needed to write a paper had to visit the library. However, today, almost every piece of information is readily available and accessible, thanks to the Internet. Our educational methods are evolving, as are our tools; robots are increasingly becoming part of the classroom environment. Advanced technologies and globalization are pushing the education sector towards a sustainable and equitable future. Future growth in the education sector is achievable through the collaboration of humans and robots.



Pavel Makarevich

A classic example is an international school in India that introduced humanoid robots to teach students and work alongside teachers. Under this collaborative learning model, the robot took over the responsibility of providing knowledge-based content, which teachers used to achieve by spending 90 percent of their time on Google. This gave teachers plenty of time to concentrate on mentoring the students, offering emotional support and care that a machine cannot provide. The collaboration between humans and robots helped bridge the gap between efficient learning and comprehensive guidance. Several schools across the world have already started to test these robots in a classroom setting. Some experts have predicted that within 10 years, encountering robots in schools would be a common phenomenon worldwide.

The education sector presents an excellent potential for robotics and its implementation to make the most positive impact. Working with robots can improve educational programs' quality, act as an effective tool for STEAM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math), encourage spe-

cial education, and improve educational outcomes. It can also help enhance cognitive skills like critical thinking and problem-solving at a very early stage. Robots can be programmed to assess students' growth against personal goals and measure their success by tracking annual progress reports and targeted benchmarks. Teachers can gather valuable data about students with the help of robots and help them set their actionable learning goals.

One such famous humanoid robot is NAO, which caters to the needs of students and teachers in over 6000 academic institutes in more than 70 countries across the globe. It is employed as a teaching assistant where the teacher-student ratio is small. Its visual and intuitive interface simplifies content development, allowing personalized teaching activities on a one-to-one basis or a small group. NAO can easily create an empathetic link with the students and teachers with its human-like appearance and humanoid behaviors. The versatile nature of NAO allows academic institutions to expand their basic curriculum by introducing STEAM education and language learning to children at a very early stage. Pepper and NAO can also be effective tools in promoting IEP (Individualized Education Program) for students with determination. NAO's neutral expression can be therapeutic for special needs children and help boost their confidence and social skills. An Australian study revealed that when students engage with humanoid robots, it enhances their curiosity and enables critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills. Teachers have also observed that a student's coding skills automatically expand beyond the expected level as they directly interact with electrical and mechanical processes and procedures.

Another exciting aspect of robotics' demand is the assistance it offers by video interactions to home-schooled students or those who cannot attend a school. Double 3 is a two-wheeled self-driving video conferencing robot that revolutionizes how you learn remotely. By providing students and teaching staff a physical presence where they cannot be in person, Double 3 helps them feel more connected to their classroom.

Over 13000 humanoid robots have already been deployed in various schools and universities around the world. This number is projected to grow further in the coming years. The next step will be assessing how far robotics can be integrated into our educational system to ensure that it operates in sync with humans. As the technological world unveils innovations daily, it would be fair to conclude that the education sector will continue to benefit from robotics and AI.

Note: Pavel Makarevich is product manager, Proven Solutions

Memac Ogilvy names Till Hohmann as chief creative officer for MENA

DUBAI: Memac Ogilvy has named globally recognized creative Till Hohmann as its new Chief Creative Officer for the MENA region. Hohmann rejoins the agency, having served as its UAE Executive Creative Director from 2007 to 2010.

Hohmann will be responsible for uniting the group's five core capabilities under one modern creative offering. He will be dedicated to sustainable and innovative growth for major clients in Advertising, Brand, and Content; Experience; Public Relations; Healthcare; and Growth & Innovation, across the MENA region. Hohmann steps into the role following time with Geometry and his work transforming and launching the creative commerce company under VMLY&R COMMERCE as Chief Creative Officer for EMEA. He will oversee the creative product for Memac Ogilvy's 13 offices across 11 markets.

The announcement reaffirms Memac Ogilvy's commitment to being its client's most effective partner for growth, with creativity as the cornerstone of that offering.

During his previous tenure, Hohmann helped pioneer innovative, digital, brand, and social offerings, restructuring the agency's creative product and helping drive major growth in the midst of the global recession. Memac Ogilvy became one of the most successful agencies in the region during those years, being named Agency of the Year at Lynx 2010. Since then, Hohmann has matured into one of the world's top creative talents, earning numerous global accolades with Grey, JWT, WPP, VMLY&R Commerce, Munich based Serviceplan Campaign 1 GmbH, and more, in London, Berlin, Hamburg,



Till Hohmann

Singapore, and other markets.

"Till believes in the power of ideas shaped differently. Business-defining and change-driving ideas. The kind of ideas the Ogilvy Group is renowned for across the globe," said David Fox, Memac Ogilvy's Chief Executive Officer. "Since departing these shores more than a

decade ago, he has grown into one of the world's most notable creatives, delivering work for many sectors, and being recognized at the industry's most prestigious award shows worldwide. He is a proven leader and expert in achieving growth for clients not only financially, but responsibly, sustainably, and culturally."

The incoming Till Hohmann added, "The MENA region is one of most diverse, unique, and interesting in the world. The ambition of brands to do new things, lead their industries, and connect with their young, impassioned populations has always inspired me. I'm thrilled to be back. The work Memac Ogilvy is doing in the region, coupled with the Group's global mandate made this opportunity impossible to turn down. I look forward to working with our incredible suite of clients, as well as our burgeoning talent, under the leadership of Foxy." Hohmann replaces Juggi Ramakrishnan, who served as Chief Creative Officer for three years.

AUB congratulates Al-Hassad weekly draw winners

KUWAIT: In accordance with full preventive guidelines and measures set by health authorities, Ahli United Bank (AUB) held the weekly draw of 02 June 2021 of Al-Hassad Islamic account which is the very first draw account in Islamic banking in Kuwait and has won the "Best Savings Product in Kuwait 2019" by the prestigious Banker Middle East Magazine for the numerous unique features it provides. Al-Hassad Islamic account offers over 750 prizes, Over 12-month period and has reshaped the lives of thousands lucky winners.

The bank and announced 20 winners of KD 1,000 as follows: Mazhar Kasimbhai Piplodwala, Yousef Abdarhaman Al-Kandiri, Salha Salem Al-Azmi, Najat Mohamad Almujaibel, Kawkab Nema Allah Muqaddam, Kameelah Khalaf Al-Enezi, Bassam Zakwan Al-Kaaki, Latifah Nema Al-Shammari, Jehan Ali Qasem, Khaled Saleh Al-Fadhel, Mansour Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, Lubna Mostafa Shaqlousi, Rajaa Mohamad Al-Behaisi, Hasan Abdullah Al-Resheedi, Hamad Haider Akbar, Mohammad Saud Al-Raqwah, Majedah Jassem Al-Rejaib, Hasan Abdullaah Al-Rashidi, Hala Qasem Al-Mahasnah and Shareefah Abdullah Al-kandari.

The draws of Al-Hassad include several cash prizes, such as KD 100,000 each Eid and the grand quarterly draw of KD 250,000 prize which continues to be a key aspiration for customers who are wishing to fulfill their dreams. Al Hassad offers 20 weekly prizes of KD 1,000 for each winner. In addition to this attractive package of rewards, Al-Hassad Islamic account incorporates a Wakala contract for projected annual profits, making this account beneficial to all customer segments that are aspiring to build their short and long-term savings through a unique savings account with many advantages.

Furthermore, for the first time in Kuwait, the AUB Al-Hassad presents the "Privilege Draw", which is a quarterly draw of KD 25,000 exclusively for Al-Hassad customers who maintained their balances for more than one year and have not won a prize in the past five years.

For all draws, the clients are eligible for one draw chance for each KD 50 deposited in their Al-Hassad account. It is worth mentioning that Al-Hassad Islamic account has won the "Best Savings Product in Kuwait 2019" by the prestigious Banker Middle East Magazine for the numerous unique features it provides. Such features include the simplest and easiest program, highest number of winners, largest prize value, unique draws during Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha, loyalty multipliers, unique online account opening feature, transparent draws held during radio shows with live broadcast on the Bank's social media platforms.

Equities rebound as jobs data quash rate hike fears

NEW YORK: Equity markets moved higher while the dollar fell on Friday after tepid job US growth numbers assuaged fears of a rapid reduction in stimulus measures and interest rate hikes.

The start of a Group of Seven finance ministers meeting drew investors' attention as well, with Europeans optimistic the world's wealthiest countries will support US-backed plans for a global minimum corporate tax. US Labor Department data released before Wall Street trading began showed the world's largest economy added 559,000 jobs in May, below expectations for the second straight month but an improvement on April.

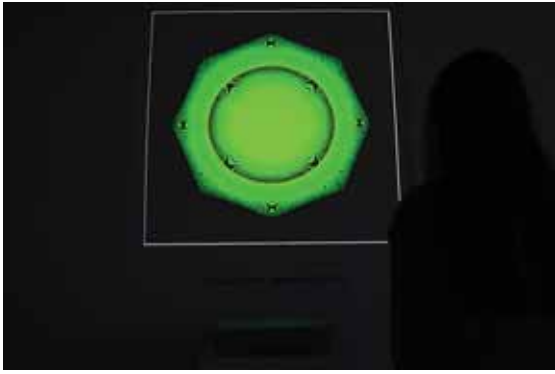
That was good news for equities, as investors have feared the roaring return of the US economy would push the Federal Reserve to "taper" stimulus measures sooner than markets have been expecting. "This employment report was not too hot, not too cold obviously and I think that the fact that we didn't see any big hike in the wages suggests that the Fed is not going to be in a hurry to accelerate any tapering debate sooner than anticipat-

ed," said Peter Cardillo of Spartan Capital Securities. The Dow ended up 0.5 percent while the tech-rich Nasdaq added 1.5 percent.

Before the closely-watched data was released, investors had been bracing for a jobs boom, after reports Thursday showed US private employers adding nearly one million positions in May and new unemployment benefit requests falling below 400,000 last week for the first time since the pandemic began. "The key takeaway from the report is that it shows there is still ample room for improvement, which is apt to register in the Fed's mind as a basis for sticking with its patient-minded policy approach," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

The highly accommodative monetary policies of the Fed and other central banks have been key drivers of the blockbuster rally in world equities after they cratered at the start of the pandemic. But there have been growing concerns on trading floors that too strong a rebound in the economy will set off a boom in inflation, forcing the Fed to begin to wind down its vast bond-buying program or even lift interest rates to prevent overheating.

CMC Markets analyst Michael Hewson said the jobs figure was "helping to support a view, that for all of the recent talk of a possible central bank retreat of support measures, that any such action was likely to be later rather than sooner." And US central bankers have remained adamant that it is too soon to pull back on the stimulus measures. —AFP



An NFT titled 'Quantum' by Kevin McCoy is on display during a press preview of the upcoming Natively Digital: A Curated NFT Sale at Sotheby's on Friday in New York City.



A woman looks at a NFT by Ryoji Ikeda titled "A Single Number That Has 10,000,086 Digits".



An NFT titled 'CryptoPunk 7523' by Larva Labs.



An NFT titled 'NGMI' by XCOPY. — AFP photos

Sotheby's selling first NFT that sparked a craze

The first non-fungible token (NFT) ever created, the origin of a craze that is sweeping the art market, has gone on sale at Sotheby's. "Quantum" is an octagon-shaped animation by New York artist Kevin McCoy. It became the first work to be associated with a NFT-type certificate of ownership in May 2014, three years before the term NFT was coined.

An NFT is a digital object such as a drawing, animation, piece of music, photo, or video with a certificate of authenticity created by blockchain technology. It cannot be forged or otherwise manipulated. Sotheby's has no pre-sale estimate for "Quantum", which had already reached \$140,000 on Friday, a day after it went on sale. The sale ends on June 10.

"In 10 years looking back, if in fact these are to grow, this piece can represent

and symbolize the start of something that is quite revolutionary and very impactful," said Max Moore, vice president of contemporary art at Sotheby's in New York. NFT exchanges happen in cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin on specialist sites. Traditional auction houses are seeking to capitalize on the new phenomenon.

"I fell in love with bitcoin in early 2013 and just got really interested in that world," said McCoy, a 54-year-old multimedia artist. He is a pioneer of NFTs that currently generate several hundred million dollars in transactions every month. McCoy even helped design his own platform for the exchange of certified digital objects: Monograph, which is no longer active.

"There was a lot of misunderstanding at the time," McCoy recalled, saying the mainstream art world struggled to under-

stand the cryptocurrency world, which had itself had little appreciation of art. He says the craze is only just beginning, but refuses to consider how huge it may become. "The Sotheby's thing is... a big test to see what happens as far as that goes. Honestly, I don't have any expectations," McCoy added.

The NFT boom is being fueled by early investors in cryptocurrencies who became millionaires. In March, Christie's sold an NFT for \$69.3 million. Sotheby's held its first NFT auction in April. During the "Quantum" sale it is also selling a virtual character called Alice who will be able to interact with her future owner using artificial intelligence. — AFP

A woman looks at a NFT by Mad Dog Jones titled "SHIFT/".



Chinese artist Ai Weiwei poses at his exhibition "Rapture" at the Cordoaria Nacional exhibition center in Lisbon on June 3, 2021.



Ai poses in front of one of his artworks that is made with Portuguese traditional "azulejo" tiles. — AFP photos

CHINA'S AI WEIWEI UNVEILS ART EXHIBIT IN ADOPTIVE PORTUGAL

Exiled Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei says the coronavirus pandemic, rather than slow him down, has spurred him on, as he prepared to open an exhibition of his art in Lisbon on Friday. "The pandemic time is tragic for the world... but for me personally I have had a very productive time," Ai, 63, told a news conference.

The show at Lisbon's Cordoaria Nacional exhibition center brings together around 80 works by Ai, the artist once feted by Chinese authorities who helped design Beijing's Bird's Nest Olympic stadium. But the sculptor, photographer and filmmaker ran afoul of the state, especially when he criticized authorities over their handling of 2008 Sichuan earthquake, in which more than 87,000 people died.

He was detained for 81 days in 2011 and eventually left for Germany four years later, finally settling in Alentejo, in southern Portugal, in 2019. Speaking at a press preview of the show titled "Rapture", Ai said: "Welcome to my country, Portugal." "I feel comfortable here," Ai told AFP later. "It's not always easy to describe."

Curator Marcello Dantas said the exhi-

bition reveals two sides of Ai - "his cultural roots (and) the more activist side of his work." The show opens with one of Ai's most monumental works, his "Forever Bicycles" installation made up of hundreds of identical bicycles. The visitor goes on to take in other emblematic works such as "Snake Ceiling" commemorating children who died in school buildings during the Sichuan earthquake.

Another work, "Law of the Journey", depicts a rubber dinghy with dozens of refugees aboard. New works include a marble sculpture some 1.6 m high of a toilet paper roll, a reference to the rush on the basic necessity at the start of the coronavirus pandemic last year. The show runs until November 28. — AFP



Small pieces carved in wood are displayed.



Austrian avant garde writer Friederike Mayrocker dies at 96

Austrian writer and poet Friederike Mayrocker, regarded as "the great dame of experimental literature", died in Vienna on Friday at the age of 96, her publisher Suhrkamp said. "All of Vienna is mourning the doyenne of Austrian literature and our honorary citizen, Friederike Mayrocker", the city's mayor Michael Ludwig wrote on Twitter as tributes began pouring in.

Born in the Austrian capital on Dec 20, 1924, Mayrocker began writing at the age of 15. Forced to abandon her German

studies to help support her family, she became a teacher of English in various Vienna public schools in 1946, but dedicated herself to writing full-time from 1969. "I'm madly in love with language. I need books, I need silence. I don't like talking. What I have to say, I write," she said.

Mayrocker, the winner of many prestigious literary prizes - such as the Georg



Friederike Mayrocker

Trakl, Hoelderlin, Lasker-Schueler and Georg Buechner - published around 100 poems, text collages, novels, radio plays, libretti and children's books during her long career. The US Poetry Foundation compared her poems to "linguistic collages, mystical or hallucinatory montages of language and experience."

She herself described the writing process as "a magical state, as if I were on drugs" and said she often wept while working. She was associated with experimental German writers and artists of the "Wiener Gruppe" or Vienna Group, including poet Ernst Jandl, her long-term companion who died in 2000. "What I want is to disappear behind my biography. The important thing is the bibliography," she once said. — AFP



'Hamilton' creator celebrates immigrant roots with 'Heights'

Long before his mega smash-hit "Hamilton", Lin-Manuel Miranda dazzled Broadway with "In The Heights," a Latin pop and salsa-inspired musical celebrating the New York immigrant community that raised him. Warner Bros' big-screen version of Miranda's debut work finally arrives in US theaters Thursday - a rare foray by a major Hollywood studio into a lavish production that puts Latino stories, stars and filmmakers front and center.

"It's a big deal, and I think it's the beginning of a Latin wave that I hope opens a lot more doors for more movies like this," Mexican actor Melissa Barrera told AFP. "From the moment they started casting in the movie, I was like 'oh my gosh, because there aren't many movies that give us this platform, I know everyone is going to audition for this.'"

Barrera - who rose to fame in Mexico's "telenovela" soap operas - landed the key role of Vanessa, an aspiring designer hoping to trade the Washington Heights "barrio" at Manhattan's northern tip for the chic fashion world of downtown. Her love interest Usnavi (Anthony Ramos), a bodega owner, dreams of rebuilding his father's beach bar in the Dominican Republic, while their Puerto Rican friend Nina (Leslie Grace) has "escaped" to Stanford University but pines for home.

Miranda - who is of Puerto Rican descent, and has long advocated for his community in the entertainment world and beyond - wrote the first version of "In The Heights" as a young student at Wesleyan University. It reached Broadway in 2008, where it earned 13 Tony nominations, and set its creator on the path to "Hamilton" - the wildly popular story of the first US treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton and his fellow founding fathers, itself told through the lens of modern, multiethnic America.

In the film, Miranda takes the small role of neighborhood "piraguero" - a vendor of traditional ice desserts - and hands directing duties to Jon M Chu ("Crazy Rich Asians"). But Barrera admitted it was "intimidating" to collaborate with the "Hamilton" creator on the follow-up of sorts to a global smash hit. "The pressure comes along with 'I want to do this right, I want to do the best that I can to do good

by Jon and Lin... and the entire community." While 18.5 percent of the US population is Hispanic, Latino actors accounted for just 5.4 percent of lead roles in Hollywood last year, according to UCLA's "Hollywood Diversity Report."

'Struggle'

The film version of the tale is largely shot on the colorful streets of Washington Heights, blocks from where Miranda grew up. In keeping with its recurrent theme of encroaching gentrification, location scouts had to studiously ignore the area's Chipotle and Target chains, "recasting" several blocks with hand-painted signs and awnings to evoke a nostalgic, mom-and-pop shop feel.

Along with highlighting the food, music



Actor Carlos Miranda attends the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival (LALIFF) opening night world premiere screening of "7th & Union" at the TCL Chinese Theater in Hollywood, California on June 2, 2021.

and traditions of Miranda's youth, the film diverges from its stage predecessor by following Nina to protests supporting immigrant rights for the so-called "Dreamers". The film was shot and intended for release during Donald Trump's presidency, at a time when the citizenship pathway for undocumented young people brought to the United States as children was under attack.

The pandemic forced a postponement to the movie's release. Today, the passage of two immigration bills approved by the US House of Representatives remains uncertain in the evenly divided Senate. "It's a rarely told story - it's a rarely told struggle," said Grace, whose character Nina fails to fit in at her elite West Coast school.

That feeling of self-doubt is "a universal feeling that we all feel, both in terms of representation and in terms of 'Dreamers,'" she told AFP. "They're told that they're the worst... that they reflect a lot of things that they're not here to reflect. They come with an aspiration... a dream." "In The Heights" opens in US theaters and on HBO Max streaming from June 10. — AFP



(From left) Director Jon M Chu and actors Stephanie Beatriz, Melissa Barrera, Leslie Grace and Jimmy Smits attend the LALIFF special preview screening of "In The Heights". — AFP photos



Aerial view taken on May 27, 2021 shows Seville's Cathedral. — AFP photos



Aerial view taken on May 27, 2021 shows the Triana bridge in Sevilla.

PANDEMIC-RAVAGED SEVILLE HOPES FOR EURO TOURISM BOOST

Seville's pandemic-hit tourism sector is hoping to get a shot in the arm from UEFA's last-minute decision to name the southern Spanish city as a host for Euro 2020 matches. While thousands of football fans are set to flock to the city later this month, hotels, restaurants and bars warn the event won't be enough to make up for the collapse in business brought on by the health crisis.

"It is a first-class showcase," said Antonio Munoz, the city councillor in charge of tourism. "It is a draw to recover the appeal this city has always had to attract tourism." European football governing body UEFA in April picked Seville to replace Bilbao in northern Spain as a host city for the rescheduled football tournament.

Bilbao was dropped because it was unable to guarantee organizers it could host fans in the stadium for matches due to the strict virus measures in place in the region. Seville's 64,000-seat La Cartuja stadium is set to host all three of Spain's Group E games against Sweden, Poland and Slovakia, plus a last-16 match during the second half of June. Capacity at the venue will be limited to around 25 percent, or 16,000 people.

Seville city hall expects the matches will draw around 70,000 visitors, providing a direct economic impact of €61 million (\$75 million) in business. Antonio Luque, the head of the Seville Hospitality Association, said tourists will be greeted "with open

arms" but the money they will spend will pale in comparison to the income the sector has lost. Beyond the Euro, 2021 will be "complicated", added Luque, who does not expect hospitality sector revenues to return to pre-pandemic levels until 2023.

billion the previous year, as the pandemic put the brakes on travel around the world.

This drop in business led about one in five businesses to close their doors, according to the hospitality association. The fall in visitor numbers can be felt in the nar-

dral, chef Rafael Sanchez has recently reopened his tapas restaurant, Las Columnas, after a 15-month closure due to the pandemic. With nostalgia he recalls the European, American and Asian tourists who ate at his venue in the past. "I hope

give a forecast for reservations which will depend on the recovery of flights to the city. Seville airport currently operates 67 routes, two-thirds of the pre-pandemic amount.

"What matters is that Ryanair flights resume," said Diego Zanoletti, an Italian



Tourists ride a horse-drawn carriage in Sevilla.



Bullfighting placards are displayed at a souvenir shop.



A woman walks by a terrace bar at the Plaza del Salvador Square.

'It's dead'

Seville, with its sunny weather, flamenco dancing and historical landmarks such as its gothic Cathedral, is Spain's third most visited city. The tourism sector accounts for 18 percent of the city's economic output. But the hospitality sector's revenues plunged to €640 million in 2020 from €1.6

row streets of Seville's old Jewish quarter, the Santa Cruz neighborhood. "Here half of the businesses have closed. It's dead," Maria Menendez, who runs a tea shop in the neighborhood, said as she pointed to a boarded-up shop across the street. "The Euro is a boost that will last three days," she added.

A few steps from Seville's famous cathe-

they will all come at once, and that we can return to normality," said Sanchez.

'Lost year'

Just over half of Seville's hotels are currently open but city hall expects that by mid-June 70 percent of hotel beds will be available. The local hotel association was optimistic about the future, but declined to

who runs a bicycle rental shop. Like other business owners, he believes the Euro is "a positive thing but it remains a one-off event which will not make up for our lost year or what we will lose in 2021". — AFP

The Indian who took the Beatles home for tea

Ajit Singh, the Indian music shop owner who befriended the Beatles during their magical mystery trip in Rishikesh over half a century ago, has died aged 88. In February 1968 the Fab Four fetched up at Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram (retreat) in northern India, seeking spirituality, new experiences and refuge from Beatlemania back home.

Energized by their new surroundings overlooking the Ganges river, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr wrote much of their seminal "White Album" there. Turbaned, thin and with a croaky voice, Singh recalled in an interview with AFP in 2019 the band wandering into his musical instrument shop in nearby Dehradun one day.

He remembered hitting it off with the Liverpudlians, who had been pursued by a crowd outside, and "inviting them home for tea". Later he fixed Lennon's guitar and performed at Harrison's 25th birthday party. "They were very polite with me, they were not haughty or

something," he told AFP with twinkly eyes, in the shop that he still ran half a century later, the Pratap Music House. "I always said to people that they were good people."

Local journalist Raju Gusain, who has been at the forefront of restoring the run-down former ashram in recent years, said Singh thought Lennon was the most talented in the band. "Ajit Singh was a lovely chap," Gusain told AFP, confirming his death earlier this week, recalling how he loved to recount his old stories about the Beatles.

"He promised he would provide some photographs of Harrison's birthday bash, but he failed to locate them and used to make excuses," Gusain said. "He said he was not that organized and would find them one day and give me a call. We both used to laugh about that."

Singh was a highly accomplished musician in his own right, performing abroad and becoming one of the top-rated artists on All India Radio, according to The Times of India. He was one of very few people who could play the vichitra veena, a traditional string instrument that rests horizontally in front of the kneeling musician. "I used to tell Ajit... to pen down his experiences for posterity and write a book," the paper quoted life-long friend Mercy Phuntsog Nath as saying. "He would nod his head and say, 'I am writing'." — AFP



Tourists visit the ancient temple of Parthenon on Acropolis hill in Athens on Friday.



Tourists visit the Erechtheion on Acropolis hill. — AFP photos

ACROPOLIS MAKEOVER STIRS GREEK ANTIQUITY ROW

Controversy has engulfed an ambitious restoration project on the Acropolis, with critics accusing the Greek government of spoiling the country's priceless heritage. Most of the fire has been directed at a new concrete walkway unveiled in December, which main opposition leader Alexis Tsipras said constitutes "abuse" of Greece's most vaunted archaeological site.

A former member of the Acropolis restoration team, veteran architect Tasos Tanoulas, has called the new paths "foreign" and "stifling" to the 5th-century BCE monument. The wider restoration project - delivered in little more than a year - was done without the care needed to safeguard a monument that is for many emblematic of Greece, critics charge.

The government says it has taken all necessary precautions and that the attacks are politically motivated. Over 3.5 million people visited the Acropolis in 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic shut down travel. The culture ministry this week announced further improvements to the Acropolis for disabled visitors, which it said were carried out after consulting with leading associations for people with disabilities.

The ministry said signs in Braille and easier-to-read bold fonts would be installed, in addition to scaled models of the monuments, handrails and slope warnings. But risks remain.

Tripping over

When AFP toured the Acropolis this week, a woman tripped into a hollow in the middle of the new walkway, one of many designed to give a glimpse of the ancient rock beneath. Further up the path, a staffer swiftly swept soil into another hollow after a visitor group had walked past. It's a plateau with potholes. Potholes are the opposite of safe," noted tourist guide Smaragda Touloupa, who recently took her elderly parents on a visit to the site.

The Acropolis makeover, which cost around €1.5 billion (\$1.8 billion) and includes award-winning night lighting, a disabled elevator upgrade and better drainage, was funded by the Onassis Foundation. The culture ministry has rejected suggestions it was carried out without proper consultation and mainly aims at boosting visitor capacity.

Culture Minister Lina Mendoni said last month the Acropolis restorers are "experts of global renown" with over four decades of award-winning work on the site. "Nobody has questioned their work," Mendoni said. "We have entrusted them with the restoration of the Acropolis monuments. How can we doubt them over a (concrete) laying project?" she said. But Touloupa, who has written books on heritage management and has been guiding visitors to the Acropolis since 1998, said the project was decided within an inner circle of ministry experts, mainly archaeologists. "It's a completely technocratic approach," she said.

Even UNESCO found out about the Acropolis "interventions" from "third parties," Mechthild Rossler, director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, told AFP. As a signatory to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, Greece should give notice "before making any decisions that would be difficult to reverse", Rossler said.

'Minor' changes

Mendonis has insisted that the changes are "minor" and "fully reversible" and there was no obligation to inform UNESCO, whose experts are due to attend a conference in Athens in the autumn. Officials have said the makeover was needed as the old paths around the Acropolis monuments, designed five decades ago and last retopped in 2012, caused hundreds of accidents every year.

Project supervisor Manolis Korres, a respected architect involved with the restoration project since 1975, has said the concrete rests on a protective membrane that can be removed quickly if necessary. The ministry also stressed that sturdy paving was needed to allow heavy machinery to move slabs of masonry in ongoing restoration work.

Dig at metro project

Criticism has also been levelled at plans to remove a Byzantine-era highway found during construction of a new metro in Greece's second city Thessaloniki. Last month, dozens of experts said the move "jeopardizes the preservation of important remains" of the city's Late Antique and Byzantine past. In an open letter, they said the 6th-century BCE road "is one of the most spectacular finds from these periods anywhere in the world."

According to reports, Greece's top administrative court, the Council of State, in April narrowly approved the temporary removal of the antiquities. Its ruling has yet to be published. The €1.5-billion Thessaloniki subway project, which was scheduled to be completed by 2012, is now slated to be operational in 2023. The ministry did not respond to requests for comment for this story. — AFP



In this file photo taken on June 19, 2018, Ajit Singh, owner of the music shop who fixed John Lennon's guitar and performed at George Harrison's 25th birthday party when the Beatles stayed at an ashram in nearby Rishikesh 50 years ago in 1968, poses for a picture in Dehradun. — AFP

Sports

Photo of the day



Adrien Fourmaux (FRA) and Renaud Jamoul (BEL) seen performing during the World Rally Championship. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Olympic committee President hails Tennis Complex



KUWAIT: Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (left) and Sheikh Fahad Nasser Al-Sabah. —KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Olympic Committee President Sheikh Fahad Nasser Al-Sabah praised the Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah International Tennis Complex and its facilities comparable to the largest and most prestigious complexes in the world. In a press statement yesterday after his visit to the new headquarters of the Kuwait Tennis Federation, Sheikh Fahd Al-Sabah said that the great efforts of the Federation's Board of Directors resulted in the establishment of this important complex, which has become one of the most important Kuwaiti sports edifices. With such high standard complex, it has become easier for the Federation to host major continental and international tournaments, he added. Meanwhile, the head of the Kuwait Tennis Federation Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah affirmed that the establishment of this complex in partnership with the private sector embodies the federation's clear vision for the development of the game. Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber praised the continuous efforts made by the Kuwait Olympic Committee in overcoming all obstacles facing sports and athletes in light of the joint cooperation between sports bodies. —KUNA

History-chasing Serena into French Open second week after Sabalenka exit

PARIS: Serena Williams continued her quest for a record-equaling 24th Grand Slam title by reaching the French Open second week for the first time since 2018, after third seed Aryna Sabalenka's surprise loss left the veteran American as the highest-ranked player in her half of the draw.

In the men's third round, fifth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas and Daniil Medvedev beat big-serving Americans in John Isner and Reilly Opelka respectively. Three-time Roland Garros champion Williams came through a potentially tricky third-round tie with compatriot Danielle Collins, winning 6-4, 6-4. She will next face Kazakh 21st seed Elena Rybakina, with a possible quarter-final against old rival Victoria Azarenka up for grabs.

The 39-year-old Williams, still one short of Margaret Court's all-time record of most Grand Slam singles titles, thundered down five aces and struck 22 winners past Collins. "Today it was very difficult, but I played well, stayed concentrated. I'm very happy," said Williams, who fought back from 1-4 down in the second set.

The eighth seed had already seen yet another of her potential title rivals exit the tournament on Thursday, when world number one Ashleigh Barty hobbled out during the second round with a hip injury. After Naomi Osaka's shock withdrawal, Simona Halep failing to start the tournament through injury and early losses for Bianca Andreescu and Angelique Kerber, none of the players who have beaten Williams in Grand Slam finals since her last title in the 2017 Australian Open are still in the competition.

World number four Sabalenka, who was the highest-seeded women's player still in the tournament at the start of the day, was dumped out by Russia's Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova. The Belarusian, who has never reached a Grand Slam quarter-final, slumped to a 6-4, 2-6, 6-0 defeat. The 31st-seeded Pavlyuchenkova will next face Azarenka.

Former world number one Azarenka, who stunned Williams in their 23rd meeting in last year's US Open semi-finals, cruised past Madison Keys 6-2, 6-2 to reach the Roland Garros fourth round for the first time since making the last four in 2013.

Medvedev delights 'home' crowd

Men's fifth seed Tsitsipas came through the most serious test of his title credentials so far with a hard-fought victory over Isner in four sets in the night match. The 22-year-old Greek, who lost a dramatic semi-final last year to Novak Djokovic, bounced back from losing a tight first set to win 5-7, 6-3, 7-6 (7/3), 6-1.

An excellent third-set tie-break was the key to securing a fourth-round match against Spanish 12th seed Pablo Carreno Busta, who eased past Steve Johnson 6-4, 6-4, 6-2. "I didn't have the best start I would say, but things started going my way in the second set. My head



PARIS: Serena Williams of the US serves the ball to Danielle Collins of the US during their women's singles third round tennis match on Day 6 of The Roland Garros 2021 French Open tennis tournament in Paris on Friday. —AFP

kind of cleared up and helped me to that important victory," said Tsitsipas whose win ended US men's hopes in the tournament.

Second seed Medvedev was adopted as the new home favourite by the French crowd as he eased to a straight-sets win over Opelka on Court Suzanne Lenglen. The two-time Grand Slam runner-up, who speaks French and lived in France as a youngster, impressed in a 6-4, 6-2, 6-4 success.

Medvedev had lost all four of his previous French Open matches before this week, but received generous support from the fans, with no French players in the third round for the first time in the Open era. The Russian will face Cristian Garin for a last-eight spot after the Chilean beat US player Marcos Giron 6-1, 5-7, 6-2, 6-2.

German sixth seed Alexander Zverev needed five sets to beat unheralded compatriot Oscar Otte in the first round before edging Russian qualifier Roman Safiullin in

three tight sets. He cruised to a 6-2, 7-5, 6-2 win over Laslo Djere on Friday, though, setting up a last-16 clash with former world number four Kei Nishikori.

"This is the main goal of my tennis career, to win Grand Slams, to reach the top of the rankings. I feel like the last year I'm on the right track again," said Zverev. Nishikori reached the fourth round when opponent Henri Laaksonen retired injured after dropping the first set.

The short outing would have been a relief for Japan's Nishikori, who spent more than eight hours on court over the first two rounds. In-form Norwegian youngster Casper Ruud was knocked out by Alejandro Davidovich Fokina in a marathon match which lasted more than four-and-a-half hours.

The Spaniard clinched victory in a dramatic final game, even including an underarm serve, on his fifth match point, winning 7-6 (7/3), 2-6, 7-6 (8/6), 0-6, 7-5 to secure a last-16 date with Argentina's Federico Delbonis. —AFP

Serena rival Rybakina thrives at French Open after border crossing

PARIS: When Elena Rybakina takes on Serena Williams for a place in the French Open quarter-finals today, she will be representing Kazakhstan but there will be envious glances cast from her native Russia. Rybakina was born in Moscow but switched allegiance to neighboring Kazakhstan in 2018 when she was struggling at 175 in the world.

Three years on, the 21-year-old is her adopted country's number one with a world ranking of 22. Ironically, had she stayed loyal she would also now be Russia's highest-ranked player, an honor currently claimed by number 30 Veronika Kudermetova.

Rybakina is the latest in a long line of players to have gone Kazakh in recent years. "The Kazakhstan Federation made me an offer and the decision was easier," she told WTA Insider in 2020. "I changed my citizenship to Kazakhstan because they believed in me and they offered. I was not so good when they offered. So they believed in me and they're helping me a lot."

Under the Kazakh flag, Rybakina has won two career titles and taken her personal earnings to over \$1.5 million. Few of the players reveal what kind of sweeteners were offered to entice them to cross the tennis border.

However, the long-standing president of the Kazakhstan Tennis Federation Bulat Utemuratov is estimated by Forbes to be worth \$3.5 billion. Currently, four of Kazakhstan's top five women are Russian-born. Number two Yulia Putintseva, ranked 43 but a former top 30, is also a Moscow native and is a three-time Grand Slam quarter-finalist.

'Rent-a-Russians'

In the men's, national number one Alexander Bublik is Russian-born. The 23-year-old, who is ranked at 37 in the world, switched in 2016. Bublik still lives in Russia. Kazakhstan's top three is rounded out by Russians — Mikhail Kukushkin from Volgograd and St. Petersburg native Dmitry Popko.

Kukushkin, now 33 and outside the top 100 having once been in the top 40, was one of the original 'Rent-a-Russians', having switched in 2008. "At that time I was around 150 in the world and I was struggling," he said.

"I was not in good shape in that moment, but I knew that I could play better, much better and I can get to the other level. But I didn't have any opportunity for that. Unfortunately in Russia nobody was interested in me. Kazakhstan came to me and they provided everything, practice conditions, coaches."

On the international team level, Kazakhstan's most successful singles player in the Billie Jean King Cup is Galina Voskoboeva from Moscow. In the Davis Cup, Kazakhstan competed in the World Group for the first time in 2011 and have reached the quarter-finals five times.

They will feature in the 2021 Davis Cup Finals in Madrid later this year having beaten the Netherlands in last year's qualifier where Bublik won both his singles rubbers. On Sunday, Rybakina will shrug off any lingering regrets when she attempts to reach the quarter-finals of a Grand Slam for the first time and halt Williams' push for a record-equaling 24th Slam. "She is a legend of the sport. I want to be with her on the court, to feel the power and everything," she said. —AFP



Elena Rybakina

GAZOO Racing celebrates victory in Portugal

LISBON: The GAZOO Racing (GR) World Rally Team is celebrating its third win and double-podium finish from four events so far in the 2021 FIA World Rally Championship after Elfyn Evans claimed victory recently at the Rally de Portugal in the No 33 Toyota Yaris WRC. Sebastien Ogier finished third in the No 1 Toyota Yaris WRC and continues to lead the drivers' championship. The result places him just two points in front of Evans, while the GR team has further extended Toyota's lead in the manufacturers' standings.

Evans drove a consistent and intelligent rally together with co-driver Scott Martin in the No 33 Toyota Yaris WRC, and was rewarded with the lead by the end of the third day. He claimed two further stage wins during the fourth and final morning, bringing his tally for the event to six, and ultimately sealed victory by 28.3 seconds. The result brings Evans the fourth win of his WRC career, and his third since joining GR at the start of 2020.

The FIA World Rally Championship will continue in Italy with Rally Italia Sardegna, which takes place from 3 - 6 June. The fifth event of the season features fast and narrow stages coated with fine, sandy gravel. Temperatures can often be high, increasing the stress on the cars and their tires and making for challenging conditions.



Sports

The Budapest exception: Packed stands at Euro 2020

BUDAPEST: Excitement is building in Budapest, the only Euro 2020 venue without COVID-19 attendance limits, with thronged stands expected for Hungary's first ever hosting of a major tournament despite concerns it could trigger a fourth wave of the virus.

Two of Hungary's group matches, versus title holders Portugal on June 15 and world champions France on June 19, will be played at the 68,000-capacity Puskas Arena. The new stadium, opened in 2019 but mostly empty since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, will also see France play Portugal on June 23 and a last-16 tie on June 27.

"Hungarians are really looking forward to hosting a tournament like this, and in a modern national stadium," said Gyorgy Szollosi, editor-in-chief of the Nemzeti Sport daily newspaper. "It is a liberation not only from the virus crisis but also from a half century of problems in Hungarian football," he told AFP.

Football fever

The last tranche of tickets made available to Hungary fans were snapped up within two hours of going on sale on UEFA's website in April. During Hungary's distant glory years in the 1950s and 1960s "there was no chance for the supporters to follow the team," said Szollosi.

"Then after the communist-era Iron Curtain was lifted in 1989 and the borders were opened Hungary didn't qualify for big tournaments," he said. When the Magyars finally made it to a European Championship in 2016 — their first major tournament since the 1986 World Cup — tens of thou-

sands of Hungarians followed their team to host nation France.

"After 500 days we can at last return to the stands," said a statement by the "Carpathian Brigade" ultras group that supports the national team, referring to Hungary's closed-doors games since the pandemic began.

The group organized matchday marches through cities like Marseille at Euro 2016, and promises "spectacular" ultra-choreography at the Hungary ties. Raucous home support could also help the team challenge its formidable Group F opponents, according to fans on the group's Facebook page. "We will be there," said many comments.

The Hungarian football federation (MLSZ) says fans will only be allowed to enter the Puskas Arena if they can prove they have been vaccinated with an "immunity certificate" while foreigners will have to show a negative PCR test. According to the government, Hungary's swift vaccine rollout, partly thanks to its use of Chinese and Russian vaccines alone among EU members, means the games will be safe.

With over half of the adult population having received a first vaccine dose Hungary is the "safest country in Europe" said Prime Minister Viktor Orban, whose favorite sport is football. "We have beaten the third wave," he said while announcing the lifting of most restrictions last month.

Calculated risk

But some government critics are alarmed at the prospect of full houses at Euro 2020. Hungary was hit with one of the highest death rates in the world



BUDAPEST: Hungarian fans wave their national flag behind a banner which reads "Orok igazsag (Eternal truth)" during the friendly football match Hungary v Cyprus in Budapest on Friday, in preparation for the UEFA European Championships. —AFP

in March and April, which threatened to overwhelm hospitals.

Although new infections have since dramatically fallen, Gabriella Lantos, a health expert with an opposition party, still says that packing fans into the Puskas Arena is "irresponsible", particularly as fan numbers will be restricted at other Euro 2020 ven-

ues. "We are still not yet at herd immunity in Hungary, while the appearance of the variant (identified for the first time in India) could spark a fourth wave," she told AFP. A year before a general election that is expected to be a tight race, Lantos says Orban wants "to make people forget about the pandemic and the deaths". —AFP

Spain and Portugal in lukewarm stalemate ahead of Euros

MADRID: Spain and Portugal both lacked firepower as they drew 0-0 in a friendly warm up for the European Championships at the Metropolitano in Madrid on Friday. The match was both an occasion to officially launch the two nations launching a joint bid to host the 2030 World Cup and for the hosts to test out a new-look defense.

Cristiano Ronaldo had a frustrating night on his first game in Madrid since leaving Real in 2018 and came close to scoring twice and set up a good chance Diogo Jota failed to take advantage of. Backed by Joao Felix, Ronaldo was largely neutralized by Barcelona pair Sergio Busquets and Thiago Alcantara in a tight home midfield in front of a remodeled defense.

"It was a very good test for us and I think we will all be ready for the European Championship," said Spain coach Luis Enrique. "In the first 60 minutes we managed to almost completely cancel out the reigning European champions, they almost didn't make three passes in a row."

Alvaro Morata came closest to scoring for Spain missing two clear chances and hitting the bar in stoppage time. "I think we made enough chances to score," said Luis Enrique. "I don't get angry when my players miss chances, I'm never going to reproach my players for not being able to take their chances."

Manchester City defender Aymeric Laporte made his debut after opting for Spain ahead of his native France. Luis Enrique praised Laporte and his center back partner Pau Torres. "I thought they were both exceptional, dominant, with character, putting pressure on the Portuguese strikers." Portugal coach Fernando Santos was less satisfied. "We can do better, I'll be talking with the lads and we have the quality to improve," he said. "They gave everything and it'll serve us well."

"We have the consistency to hope to win titles," he added. Some 14,743 masked fans attended at Atletico Madrid's 68,000-seat Wanda Metropolitano stadium. They

whistled when Luis Enrique's name was read out before kickoff and sung an anti-Morata chant when the striker hit the bar.

In the national team's first game with a home crowd at Madrid's Metropolitano, some spectators whistled his name when the line-ups were announced, but Luis Enrique said that "It doesn't affect me if they whistle or applaud me," said the coach. "It bothers me that they do that to my players."



MADRID: Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo (left) heads the ball next to Spain's defender Diego Llorente during the international friendly football match between Spain and Portugal at the Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid in preparation for the UEFA European Championships, on Friday. —AFP

Italy cruise past Czechs

A week before they kick off Euro 2020 in Rome, Italy crushed the Czech Republic 4-0 in Bologna on Friday, keeping an eighth straight clean sheet. Ciro Immobile, Nicolo Barella, Lorenzo Insigne and Domenico Berardi all scored for the hosts who will open the Euro against Turkey next Friday.

In the absence of Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Marco Verratti, who is nursing an injured knee, Jorginho, a Champions

League winner with Chelsea, and Barella quickly set the tempo for Italy. Italy's strikers Lorenzo Insigne and Ciro Immobile wasted early chances, before Immobile of Lazio broke the deadlock in the 3rd minute. Barella, who injected energy from midfield, added a second before half time. Immobile set up Insigne to score the third with a deflected shot. Berardi rounded off the party in style, much to the delight of the few thousand spectators in the venerable Dall'Ara Stadium.

They also warmly welcomed the debut of Sassuolo striker Giacomo Raspadori, the surprise pick on the 26-man squad, with 12 minutes left. While Italy's attack enjoyed itself, the defence maintained their defen-

sive solidity with an eighth consecutive clean sheet.

The Czechs, who open their Euro campaign against Scotland in Glasgow on June 14, started brightly before the home team took full control. The only real scare for Italy manager Roberto Mancini came when Leonardo Bonucci limped off in the first half after twisting his right knee, but the Juventus defender returned and finished the game. Italy are undefeated in 27 matches, since September 2018. —AFP



PORTO ALEGRE: Brazil's Neymar repeats a penalty kick to score against Ecuador during their South American qualification football match for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 at the Jose Pinheiro Borda stadium in Porto Alegre, Brazil, on Friday. —AFP

Retaken Neymar penalty helps Brazil maintain perfect start

PORTO ALEGRE: Star forward Neymar scored a retaken penalty as Brazil maintained their perfect start to South American World Cup qualifying with a 2-0 win over Ecuador on Friday. Richarlison had given Brazil the lead on 64 minutes and Neymar sealed the win deep into injury time, but only after another VAR farce.

Referee Alexis Herrera initially gave a free-kick against Gabriel Jesus after contact between him and Angelo Preciado in the Ecuador area five minutes from time. But after an interminable four-minute VAR review, he changed his mind and awarded a penalty.

Neymar stuttered in his run-up but Ecuador goalkeeper Alexander Dominguez wasn't fooled and easily saved his weak shot. Ecuador were then down the other end attacking when Herrera blew his whistle and brought the game back for

encroachment by Dominguez.

Neymar retook the penalty and this time sent Dominguez the wrong way. The slapstick ending could not mask a deserved victory for Brazil, who now top the qualification table by four points from unbeaten Argentina, with Ecuador third, two points further back.

Predictably, Brazil dominated the early possession with 75 percent of the ball in the first quarter of an hour. But it wasn't until 20 minutes that they first threatened with Richarlison millimeters away from turning home a whipped inswinging Neymar freekick.

Moments later Richarlison played Gabriel in on goal but Dominguez was out quickly to smother his poked effort. Ecuador were their usual physical selves but showed little of the attacking verve that had seen them score 13 goals in their previous three matches. —AFP

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Sport | Times

SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2021

Leonard scores 45 as Clippers win on road to force game seven

LOS ANGELES: Kawhi Leonard tied his postseason career high with 45 points as the Los Angeles Clippers beat the Dallas Mavericks 104-97 Friday to stave off elimination and force game seven in their Western Conference NBA series.

The Clippers kept their season alive by winning in front of an almost full house at Dallas' American Airlines Center, marking the first time in NBA history that the road team has won the first six games in a best-of-seven series.

Game seven is today at Staples Center arena in downtown Los Angeles where the Mavericks have won three games. "I didn't want to go home," said Leonard of facing elimination in front of 18,300 Dallas fans in the first-round of the playoffs.

Leonard becomes just the fourth player in playoff history with 45 points and 70 percent shooting while facing elimination, joining LeBron James, Wilt Chamberlain and Canadian Jamal Murray. "I had to insert myself into the game," Leonard said. "My teammates found me, I got some open looks, knocked them down and I just kept going from there."

Reggie Jackson added 25 and Paul George scored 20 points with 13 rebounds as the Clippers rallied from a seven-point deficit in the third quarter. Luka Doncic scored 29 points with 11 assists for the Mavericks, who are seeking to avenge a first-round playoff loss to the Clippers last season when they were ousted in six games. Tim Hardaway added 23 points for Dallas.

"(Kawhi) destroyed us. He had a hell of a game. That's what he does," Doncic said of Leonard. Doncic, who scored 42 points in a game five win, waited until late in the game on Friday to score a large portion of his points. The Mavericks shot just 29 percent from the field in the final quarter and 41 percent overall.

Leonard carried the Clippers on his back, shooting 18-of-25 from the floor and draining five of nine threes. The Clippers led 48-45 at the half but trailed 90-88 heading into the fourth. Los Angeles' Nicolas Batum made a dunk with just over five minutes left in the fourth to give them a 90-85 lead. That set the stage for Leonard to carry them to the finish.

Leonard drained back-to-back threes down the stretch as the Clippers seized a 99-90 lead with 100 seconds to go. Doncic said the Mavericks' winning record at Staples Center has them confident about game seven. "We all believe we can win game seven," he said.

'Pillars' of Lakers

LeBron James remains a "championship pillar" of the Los Angeles Lakers and the NBA club will pour all it can into making sure he and Anthony Davis are at full strength next season, general manager Rob Pelinka said Friday.

The Phoenix Suns ended the Lakers' NBA title defense in emphatic style on Thursday, leading wire-to-wire in a 113-100 victory to win their best-of-seven Western Conference first-round series in six games. It marked the first time in 15 playoff appearances that James — a four-time NBA champion — was eliminated in the first round.

Inevitably the series defeat, on the heels of a regular season in which James and Davis both battled injury and the Lakers had to play their way into the post-season proper as the seventh seed, sparked speculation as to how much longer the 36-year-old James will be the man to carry a franchise and whether he can still hope to match legendary Michael Jordan's six titles.

Pelinka, however, insisted that James and Davis together — if they're healthy — can return the Lakers to the summit. "Anthony Davis and LeBron James are championship pillars of this franchise for years to come," Pelinka said.

"I view the role of any organization, front office, coaching staff, is to be a role of support and we have to pour all we can resource-wise into helping LeBron finalize getting through the end of his high ankle sprain and then Anthony Davis, of course, the injuries he faced," Pelinka said. "We know that those guys are both two of the top two-way players in the world."

Davis limped through less than six scoreless minutes in game six against Phoenix before a groin



DALLAS: Kawhi Leonard #2 of the LA Clippers dunks during the game against the Dallas Mavericks during Round 1, Game 6 of the 2021 NBA Playoffs on Friday at the American Airlines Center in Dallas, Texas. — AFP

injury suffered in game four forced him to the sidelines. James scored 29 points, but was helpless in the face of an early onslaught from emerging Suns star Devin Booker, who scored 22 of his 47 points in the first quarter. It was the end of an 18-month run that James called "mentally, physically spiritually, emotionally draining."

The Lakers had only a couple of months after they clinched the club's 17th championship in the NBA's quarantine bubble in Florida before the new season began. Despite the quick turnaround the Lakers were 21-6 early in the season before injuries threw them into disarray.

'I motivate myself'

Davis missed almost two months with a calf strain. James sprained his right ankle in March and missed 26 regular-season games. He said after Thursday's game

that he was looking forward to a complete off-season, one that he indicated wouldn't include the Tokyo Olympics. "It's going to work wonders for me," he said. "I can get three months, to recalibrate, get my ankle back to 100 percent. Everything else feels extremely well."

And once he's rested, James added, he won't need to check the continuing exploits of "young guns" in the league like Booker, Donovan Mitchell, Ja Morant, Jayson Tatum and Luka Doncic to motivate himself. "I don't need motivation from anybody in this league," he said. "I motivate myself."

That's what Pelinka wants to hear as he mulls how to tweak the Lakers' roster to complement James and Davis and put the Lakers back at the top. "That has to be the goal every year," Pelinka said. "We have an insatiable desire and passion to bring banner No 18 here." — AFP






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